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BOOK 1 - Drawing Spiritual Energy

CHAPTER 1 - Midnight Song (1)

Southern Wan, the twenty-eighth year of Taiming, late spring.

The flowers of the imperial capital of Jinping were ready to wilt, but the fogs had yet to disperse.

Since the arrival of the Gold Imitation Technique created by the great master, the immortal Lin Chi, the Golden Hand, the fogs of the mortal world had become thicker year after year, more choking year after year.

But this was nothing to complain about.

The Moon Plated Gold created by the Gold Imitation Technique was a wonder bestowed by heaven. The strength of steam engines powered by Moon Plated Gold was endless. They could power great ships of a hundred chi in length. The Beiming Sea could be crossed with ease, and fast-moving great sharp-edged vehicles could level mountains and fill seas. Outside the walls to the south of the city, there were uncountable factories of all sizes. Machines thundered all day without rest, turning out top quality cotton yarn like running water. It was sold along the grand canal to Northern Li in the north, transported to Western Chu to the west; in the mountains of Southern Shu with its continuous cruel summer, neither gauze nor silk lacked for a market.

The livelihood of countless families, the old and the young, relied on Moon Plated Gold. Thirty li from the west of the city, Maze Station had been completed only the year before last, and already people and goods came and went. It was full of activity. The trains that drew in and spat out white steam were also popularly called Cloud Soaring Flood Dragons. Every day, morning and night, they rushed over the railways in their set patterns. In the morning they hauled goods, and at night they transported people.

Was this not a beneficence granted to the common people by the immortals?

The fogs of Jinping City couldn't be called fogs; they had to be called auspicious clouds.

After the new year, large numbers of fresh able-bodied laborers rushed toward the capital city like the tide. Maze Station overflowed every day. It was too expensive to find housing in the city. Even the dog kennels on the eastern bank of the Lingyang River couldn't be rented with half a string of copper coins per month, which was enough for a worker's rations.

The workers that came from other places had to pour into the shacks in the factory district to the south of the city, nearly putting together a proper town outside the city.

This year, Jinping City was especially busy, because it was the Grand Selection Year, which came once in ten years.

The immortal sect was going to choose disciples.

At present, Great Wan had only one place worthy of being called an "immortal sect." This was the state sect, Xuanyin, one of the four great sects of the day.

Each Grand Selection Year, Xuanyin would calculate an auspicious time and send an immortal envoy to Jinping to choose outstanding talents from the mortal world to enter the immortal path. Jinping City had been bustling since the New Year, and heroes of all kinds were making trouble—potential disciples had to burn incense in honor of deities and cultivate their bodies and minds; successful candidates from the provincial exams had to come to the capital to take part in the general examinations; martial arts academies took to the ring to compete with fists and feet; even the houses of ill-

repute weren't content to be still but had to add to the fun by voting for a Queen of Flowers.

Where there were many people, there was much business, and naturally there were also many places in the city hiring workers; anyone who had strength and was willing to try their luck could always find a bowl of food to eat. So while the state sect only chose among the scions of the upper ranks, leaving no part in the business for the common people, everyone still looked forward to the Grand Selection Year.

When the immortal envoy came down from the mountain, the year would be full of favorable weather and plentiful harvests.

And if the harvests weren't plentiful, that was still all right. To be able to come to the capital to look at the pleasure boats on the Lingyang River was also an experience. If you could add to that hearing from afar a couple of strains of singing with musical accompaniment, you could go home and say you had heard the voice of the Queen of Flowers, enough to spend half your life bragging.

On the first day of the fourth month, the blooming of the flowers was ending.

At the House of Overflowing Splendor, Jinping City's most highly-reputed pleasure house, the Flower Viewing Festival had also reached its end.

This truly was a splendid spectacle to mark the passing of spring. Rouge scattered throughout the city. A Flower Viewing Invitation for a private room could hardly be had for any riches.

That evening, the Marquis of Yongning was pestered to death by a group of "poetic celebrities" and dragged to Overflowing Splendor to bear witness to the newly-chosen Queen of Flowers taking her crown.

This year's Queen of Flowers was the famed courtesan Jiangli. The Marquis munched on melon seeds, taking a glance from time to time, feeling that this "famous flower" was nothing to write home about, with eyes and brows that turned down in an un festive look.

But with the crowd of rogues partying all night and everyone's faces plastered with three layers of white paste, you couldn't tell one from another. Watching their revelry made the Marquis's eyes hurt. When he saw Jiangli take to the stage with only a single musician, white-clothed and plain-faced, he didn't care what she sang; as long as it wasn't noisy, he would already feel some goodwill toward her.

It was said that she was singing a new song. No one knew where the musician had come from; she was quite skilled, able to command the scene while playing the qin on her own. Both the accompaniment and the singing were good. All the guests found it refreshing. When the song ended, gold and silver and ornaments fell like snowflakes, making the rising and falling stage let out steam wildly. The small building for a time seemed like the inside of a bamboo steamer.

In this way, the camellia crown of the Queen of Flowers fell on Miss Jiangli's head.

Wearing the camellia crown, Jiangli descended from the stage to thank the audience. When the big givers among the customers called her to drink a toast or sing an encore, she had to agree. Fortunately, there were many people, and quite a few audience members were of high rank. They wouldn't make too disgraceful a scene. After she had made a round of the audience, she just had time to breathe a sigh of relief and prepare to bow and make her exit before, all of a sudden, some idler called out: "Queen of Flowers, your victory today is half owed to that musician. I think she must be new. She's superior to your house's other musicians. Why

don't you ask her to step out? In the future, we'll all take good care of her."

Jiangli's musician had been veiled the whole time, hiding behind a cotton screen. She had only shown an edge of her skirt when leaving the stage. The mystery made people's hearts itch.

Jiangli froze. Then, with an apologetic smile, she said that her own musician had unluckily injured her hand, and the one playing today had been temporarily brought in from outside. It wasn't suitable for her to show her face in Overflowing Splendor. She asked the gentlemen to excuse her.

The gentlemen made a fuss and weren't having it: what was all this about "outside" and "inside"? There were so many nobles in the audience that even the top scorer in the general examinations would have to dismount his horse and bow; what was she, top courtesan for half a night, doing putting on airs?

Jiangli was "elegant and refined"—too refined; she had no long sleeves to wave and, inevitably, wasn't up to dealing with this situation. While she stood there, stiff and not knowing what to do, someone said, "I'm coming! Look all you like—if you dare."

This voice was deep and low but forced up to a high pitch, hanging suspended, making listeners break out in gooseflesh.

Everyone looked up. They saw that the musician Jiangli had tried to conceal was a frank and straightforward person, openly shouldering... *carrying* her qin as she walked downstairs.

Her face was heavily made up in the fashionable style for court women. Over a face full of white paste, she wore a half-sheer veil.

Reasonably speaking, if you could still tell anything about a person's features under all this makeup, her appearance ought to be nothing

to be ashamed of... but for some reason, there was something strange about her.

She was too tall and broad. Most of the ladies only came up to her shoulder. That big white face standing over the crowd of beauties was a little shocking. She was tall, and her build was large. The collarbones sitting openly on her “shapely shoulders” flared out so much that the sleeves on her upper arms were about to burst. Her big feet had pushed her embroidered shoes out into a pair of boats and shook the earth when they moved... and she was walking unnaturally, putting the arm and leg on one side forward at the same time.

This lady walked out and made a circle of the room, paying her respects, opening her mouth wide to exhibit her brilliant white teeth in all directions. The rouge on her lips was hastily applied. Some had accidentally rubbed onto her teeth. When this bloody maw opened, it seemed that she hadn't rinsed it after gnawing on a dead child. Looking too long could render you possessed by an evil spirit. It scared all the noble guests in the audience sober!

At this time, the Marquis of Yongning had unobtrusively left his seat.

As a young man, the Marquis had been acclaimed by women as the handsomest man in Jinping. He felt that these “famous flowers” were average-looking, and their so-called “arts” were sloppy and inferior. There was really nothing worth looking at. He would be better off going home and looking at himself in the mirror. He had come to Overflowing Splendor out of social obligation. He had said what he needed to say and didn't feel like watching these people disgrace themselves and make a fuss. Therefore he tidied his clothes and went downstairs, ready to go home. When he came downstairs, he had a direct encounter with the big-footed musician who was making her exit.

The Marquis normally wouldn't look a prostitute in the face, but since this lady's height was so abundant, if he didn't want to look her in the face, he would have to roll his eyes up.

He was startled by the heavily made up face that met his eyes and was just wondering where this fiend came from... But why did she seem a little familiar? Then the musician, who had been up to dealing with the scoundrels, abruptly looked alarmed, the half jin of white paste on her face nearly cracking open. Without a word, she turned and ran.

"Her" qin was left behind, and "her" shoes flew into the air. The dash made a big stir. It was like a wild horse equipped with a steam engine. The only thing missing was steam coming out of the tailbone!

The Marquis hadn't thought that the dainty House of Overflowing Splendor would be rearing this sort of mythical beast. After a moment's confusion, he realized something. He put a hand to his chest, his face turning ashen.

Around him, his household was perplexed, thinking that the master was once again having an attack of chest pain. They quickly stepped up to support him. "Master?"

Then the trembling Marquis trilled in a mumbling, altered pitch: "Get... get me that..."

The guards and servants were confused. "Get who?"

The Marquis took a deep breath and spoke from the diaphragm: "Get me that fiend!"

All of Overflowing Splendor went silent at the Marquis's yell. Soon, everyone had heard—Gentlemen, guess what? The "lady musician"

who just scared us to death without paying her dues? None other than the Viscount of Yongning in disguise!

A man dressed as a woman in a brothel, and he had run headfirst into his own father—how exciting!

Now, what sort of person was the Viscount of Yongning?

His full name was Xi Ping. It was said that in all of Jinping City, among the myriad wastrels, none could surpass him.

With this preposterous new trick, while all the wealthy people were scrabbling for one of Overflowing Splendor's Flower Viewing Invitations, the Viscount had taken the stage as one of the flowers himself. Anyone who heard would have to concede that he knew how to have fun.

At that moment, all the wealthy people gathered in Overflowing Splendor sobered up. Each of their necks grew two cun longer. They wished they could send their heads flying to observe the Viscount of Yongning fleeing by night in female garb.

The Viscount's flowing sleeves fluttered; the crush of his father's people turned him into a big moth. He tore his skirt, which was too narrow to spread his legs in, up to the knee. With his big feet bare, he flew out of Overflowing Splendor, running toward the northwest.

When he had just run past the pleasure boat ferry crossing, he met Wang Baochang, son of the War Ministry's assistant minister, head on. Xi Ping silently cursed his bad luck. Truly, enemies walked a narrow path.

It happened that this Young Lord Wang was a poor student and thought he was something special, a true talent. This "talent" had failed the military examination, leaving his parents to pay to find him a spot in the imperial guard. He often went to the brothels to show

off. When he had shown off to his satisfaction, he would get drunk. With two cups of wine in his belly, he couldn't find his way around and would try to display his "conquering heroic spirit" in front of everyone. Generally he would shout and snarl at the girls looking after him; when the wine went to his head, it wasn't unusual for him to get physical. So as soon as he appeared, the girls became apprehensive. He was given the title of "Big Dog Wang."

The Viscount and the talented Wang couldn't stand each other. They were always at odds.

Now, Wang Baochang was standing at the mouth of an alley about four chi wide. This fellow's figure was unusually valorous; he took up about half the mouth of the alley. Perhaps he was drunk. He held a ghastly pale decorative lantern in his hand, his blank eyes looking fixedly at Xi Ping. He didn't make way.

Just then, by coincidence, an evil wind swept by. A gas streetlamp at the mouth of the alley went out for some reason. It popped and released a thin stream of smoke. A wooden carving of a kingfisher hanging under the lamp, half-blackened by soot, waved ambiguously in the wind.

Xi Ping thought that he had already been put to the test. His own father had barely recognized him. Why should Big Dog Wang?

But to avoid trouble, he was still planning to hide his face. Therefore, he waved his water green long sleeve and swept it in a surge of fragrance over Wang Baochang's face. In a high-pitched voice, he gave an eerie wail: "Faithless rat, give me back my life—"

With a female ghost demanding his life in the middle of the night, Brother Big Dog might have been scared silly. He actually didn't react at first. Xi Ping took the opportunity to shoulder him aside. He ran past without a look back, heading straight for Prince Zhuang Manor.

Prince Zhuang was the present third prince, issue of the emperor and the Imperial Consort Lady Xi.

The Imperial Consort was the Marquis of Yongning's younger sister, Xi Ping's aunt.

Xi Ping had been Prince Zhuang's study companion for several years as a child. He didn't stand on any ceremony with his cousin. Whenever he suffered a setback, he would come running to take refuge. Anyway, the Marquis couldn't break down Prince Zhuang's gate in the middle of night to get him back.

After squeezing through the alley in one breath, Xi Ping found that the footsteps of his pursuers had vanished at some point. He looked back for a moment and saw that his father's henchmen weren't following. It seemed that they knew where he was heading, and that they couldn't follow him there, so they had simply called it a day.

So Xi Ping, pleased with himself, swept his hair, loosened as he ran, back over his shoulder. Humming a tune, he went happily toward Prince Zhuang Manor, trampling on the hem of his ruined skirt.

There was no moonlight on the night of the first of the month. Dust and steam mingled together and clung to each other inseparably.

The grey fumes climbed over Jinping's gold dust-stained footprints, spreading outward from the Lingyang River and mixing with the steam spurting out from the engines. It tightly covered all of Jinping.

As for the people from the Yongning Marquis Manor, they had heard that eerie wail from far away. The Marquis Manor's head servant had plenty of experience. With one look at Wang Baochang's face, he knew that his young master had been up to no good. He quickly stepped forward and said, "Forgive me, Young Master Wang. That

was my young master just now... He's drunk. If he has given any offense, the Marquis will order to him to pay you a visit and apologize tomorrow."

Wang Baochang was blank. He didn't answer.

He couldn't really have scared him out of his wits? The servant was nervous. He took another step forward. "Young Master..."

Just then, Wang Baochang stiffly turned his body, which had been knocked askew by Xi Ping. He was like a rusted piece of machinery. His staring eyes turned in a half circle. His pupils rolled up.

The servants from the Yongning Marquis Manor looked at each other in dismay, not knowing what this gentleman meant by pulling faces... Could it be that because their young master had just scared him, he was planning revenge himself by scaring them?

Before they could decide whether to cooperate and take fright, they saw Wang Baochang open his mouth and begin to wail a funeral lamentation: "Raise the casket, hang two mats, shelter it fully seven days—"

This description isn't meant to disparage the quality of Wang Baochang's singing. It's that the words he was wailing were in fact part of the "Soul Calling Melody" used during funerals by country folk in Ning'an, which neighbored Jinping.

His voice was hoarse and shrill, like a crow cawing in the night. It chilled its hearers to the bone.

As he sang, he walked forward stiffly.

"... the Great Way leads to Heaven... and sends you back... home...
uh... hrrk!"

He took a step forward with each word he sang. At “home,” his voice and footsteps both came to a sudden halt. He was “stuck” for a moment, standing bolt upright. Then, like a door without a frame, he fell flat on the ground.

A green jade tablet fell from him and rolled two chi away along the stone-paved street, making a string of crisp striking sounds.

He didn’t move again.

After a long moment, a brave servant went over to investigate. He reached out to push Wang Baochang by the shoulder and raised the lantern in his hand.

“Young Master Wang? What is this, Young... ah!”

The servant gave a brief scream, then plopped down on the ground. The glazed lantern shattered into bits.

He had no attention to spare for the broken object. As if his buttocks had grown feet, he skittered away in a panic—

He had touched an ice cold dead man. He was stone dead, even rigid. On the back of his neck, which was facing upward, there was even a big patch of livor mortis!

CHAPTER 2 - Midnight Song (2)

In a Grand Selection Year, at the foot of the imperial capital's walls, under the gazes of all, the son of a high court official had gone to see the kings of the underworld just like this, without a sound.

And the kings of the underworld had sent him back in the middle of the night to sing a little folk ditty, as auspicious as you could ask for, to add some color to the night on which the imperial capital selected a beauty!

By coincidence, a squad of city guards was patrolling the area. As soon as they saw Wang Baochang, they knew that something serious had happened. They immediately fended off the observers and notified Heaven's Design Pavilion.

This so-called Heaven's Design Pavilion was the state sect Xuanyin's outer sect.

The immortals of Xuanyin Mountain focused on cultivation and didn't often descend to the mortal world. All ordinary trifles were handled by Heaven's Design Pavilion, so Heaven's Design Pavilion's members were also known as "walkers in the mortal world."

A "walker in the mortal world" was a cultivator of the "open-eyed stage" who had set foot into the immortal sect. It was said that they could take spiritual energy into their bodies but hadn't truly established a foundation and entered the Way. In the mortal world, they were normally called "half-immortals." Because they dressed in blue when they were on official business, they were also popularly called "blue-clothed half-immortals."

Cultivators in the open-eyed stage lived a couple of hundred years and knew a variety of magical skills. They didn't make obeisance to the emperor. They supported the immortal sect, expelled evil and

kept to the Way. They were sent by the state sect to preserve the peace and safety of the country. Under normal circumstances, they weren't under the court's control; when it was convenient, they could even mobilize up to a thousand troops from the local garrisons.

Heaven's Design Pavilion's walkers in the mortal world came very quickly—in Jinping City, apart from the Heaven's Design Pavilion's head office, there were also seven stations to match the Seven Mansions of the Blue Dragon in the sky. It was said that they guarded Jinping's Dragon Vein. They were called Azure Dragon Towers.¹ Each night, there were people standing guard at the stations.

The Azure Dragon Heart Tower just happened to be near the pleasure boat ferry crossing. The guard captain on duty at the Heart Tower tonight was surnamed Zhao, named Yu. As soon as the walking dead Wang Baochang gave his hoarse cry, the bronze bells under the eaves of the Azure Dragon Tower began to thunder simultaneously, startling Captain Zhao from his meditation.

When Zhao Yu arrived at the ferry crossing with two subordinates, the city guards saw the dazzling sapphire blue robes from afar and made way one after another, respectfully calling out “Exalted.”

Zhao Yu kept his gaze focused straight ahead, striding toward the corpse. Before he could take a close look, he heard a heartrending wail from a hundred meters away.

The city guard officer keeping watch over the body quickly said from beside him, “Exalted, we've already dispersed the rubbernecks. This is the deceased's family.”

“Evil cultivators have many means. Before the body has been thoroughly investigated, don't let mortals come add to the trouble,”

Zhao Yu ordered lightly, then asked, “Who is the dead man?”

The officer responded: “The Ministry of War’s Assistant Minister Wang’s son.”

Hearing this, Zhao Yu paused slightly. His tone became somewhat more polite. “Explain all the details to his family and ask them to step aside and wait for now... I’ll go in person to offer my condolences to Assistant Minister Wang soon.”

The officer gave an affirmative, then turned to give his subordinate the order. Holding up a lantern himself, he slavishly followed after, offering up a green jade tablet wrapped in cloth. “Exalted, this fell from the deceased. There’s writing on it.”

A corner of the green jade tablet had broken off. All that was left on it was someone’s horoscope.

Before Zhao Yu could take a close look, a soldier from the city guard trotted over.

“Come here and report.” Zhao Yu raised his eyelids. “What is it?”

“E-Exalted.” Brought before a walker in the mortal world, this young soldier was about to forget how to speak. He babbled, “We’ve found his family... and his page boy. The kid says that his young master... Well, he says his young master was still drinking in company at Overflowing Splendor half a shichen ago, and there was nothing unusual about him. They still haven’t broken it up at Overflowing Splendor. Many people saw the deceased... They say he’d just had too much to drink earlier and wanted to go out for a walk, but after he went out, he didn’t come back.”

The officer pulled a long face. “Nonsense. Take the page boy in for close questioning. With the body this stiff, he must have been dead at least five or six shichen!”

The young soldier shivered and mumbled an affirmative.

“Not necessarily.” After listening to this, Zhao Yu had people turn Wang Baochang’s corpse over. He scrutinized it for a moment. He took out a thumb ring and put it on his thumb. The thumb ring was set with a crystal the size of a soybean. Captain Zhao lightly tapped four acupoints traveling up the corpse’s torso. Finally, his fingers abruptly pressed with force into the acupoint at the hollow of the corpse’s throat. Meanwhile, he held the crystal on the thumb ring between the corpse’s mouth and nose.

Wang Baochang’s corpse puffed twice. Like a coal stove burning low quality charcoal, black smoke spouted from the seven orifices of his face. All at once, it poured into the crystal on the thumb ring.

The surrounding city guards retreated in unison. The officer holding the lantern involuntarily craned his neck and did his best to hold his breath.

They saw that the crystal, which had been clear as ice, had turned into a bead of charcoal after sucking in the smoke. Looking closely, there was also some dim rust-liked red in it.

“The vigor has yet to disperse,” Zhao Yu asserted. “He just inhaled this breath. It’s still fresh.”

The city guards didn’t dare to speak. They could only exchange glances. They were all thinking that from his condition, this fellow didn’t seem very fresh.

Zhao Yu ordered: “Shave his hair.”

The city guard officer had gone overboard in currying favor. He just happened to be standing next to Zhao Yu now. Hearing the order,

he didn't dare to shirk. He had to brace himself and personally follow through.

When about half of the corpse's hair had been shaved, the officer gave a surprised "oh!" and jumped up off the ground—starting from the top of the head, the corpse's skin had turned bright red, as if a sheet of rouge had been stuck close to his scalp. The edge of the red was already drawing near to his hairline, about to spill over onto his face.

Zhao Yu weighed the jade tablet with the birth character written on it in his hand. His expression became slightly grim. "The dark veil. Someone has stolen him for an underworld marriage."

Xi Ping only heard of this the next morning.

The night before, he had gracefully "flown" into Prince Zhuang Manor. His Highness Prince Zhuang had been unhealthy from birth. He had dim sight disease. Startled in the middle of the night, he threw on his clothes and went to have a look, then nearly went blind altogether. He cursed "disgraceful" three times in a row and called servants to haul the Great Moth Xi away to be washed. The Viscount's heart was easy. When he was clean, he simply stayed on at Prince Zhuang Manor, planning to sleep till midday as usual.

But as soon as day broke, he was dragged out from under the covers by Prince Zhuang and taken to receive a guest.

Xi Ping was hastily cleaned up and shoved into the south study. In the south study, he met a walker in the mortal world who looked like a Bodhisattva. The "Bodhisattva" hurled a bomb directly into his face: Wang Baochang, who was strong as an ox, had keeled over and died the night before!

For a moment, Xi Ping forgot to close his opened fan. With the big words "Peerless Beauty" on the fan laying across his chest, he

became a wooden chicken of peerless beauty.

Beside him, Prince Zhuang coughed gently.

Out of habit, Xi Ping picked up a teacup, tested the temperature with the back of his hand, then passed it to him. Then he finally came around. His expression changed. “Our manor’s people found the body? What about my father? Was he also there at the time? Did he also see the dead man?”

In his youth, the Marquis had been called Great Wan’s Wei Jie. He was a Xishi² among men. He was always going around around having chest pains. If he had bumped into a corpse giving a funeral wail in the middle of the night, wouldn’t he have been scared into an attack?

The walker in the mortal world said, “In fact, he didn’t. Set your mind at ease. The Marquis was hanging back a step. He wasn’t with your manor’s guards.”

“I see.” Xi Ping wafted the “Peerless Beauty” fan twice, his heart falling back into his chest. “What did you just say, sir? What does it mean to be stolen for an underworld marriage?”

“It’s a means evil cultivators use to kill,” the walker in the mortal world patiently explained. “The evildoer will think of a way to get the victim to accept a dead person’s marriage proposal card. Then they collect a measure of his fresh blood and three of his hairs, and mix them with corpse grease, incense ash, cinnabar, and other such materials, turning it into a pigment, then write a ‘marriage contract’ on a human scalp that has been peeled off whole. Written on the proposal card will be the horoscope of the original owner of the scalp. The ‘auspicious date’ written on the ‘marriage contract’ will be the victim’s date of death. Before death, his words and actions will be just what is written in the ‘marriage contract.’ Even if you

were to make him slice off his own flesh and eat it, he would still comply. A person who has been stolen for an underworld marriage will stiffen before he dies. After death, he will start turning red from the top of the head. Within three shichen, the red stain will spread to the chin, like a bride's veil, so this appearance in death is also called the 'dark veil.'"

Having heard this, Xi Ping was startled. "No, wait a moment, that's... Exalted, are you saying that a ghost snatched Big Dog Wang up to be a groom... no, a bride? What kind of ghost has tastes that offensive to all of society... *hss!*"

Prince Zhuang had kicked him under the table, interrupting his heartless opining.

The walker in the mortal world who had come to pay his respects at Prince Zhuang Manor was Captain Zhao Yu himself.

Heaven's Design Pavilion had spent the night before searching the pleasure boat ferry crossing and had come up empty. That was why they had come to Xi Ping—he was the last living person to see Wang Baochang. Hearing that he had stayed the night at the third prince's manor, Captain Zhao had come in person to pay a visit.

Zhao Yu was rather self-possessed. He didn't take offense at Xi Ping's words, only asked, "May I ask whether you noticed anything strange at the pleasure boat ferry crossing last night?"

Xi Ping thought about it for a while. "No, I was the strangest thing at the ferry crossing."

Zhao Yu also asked, "Then are you aware of who might have had a grudge against the deceased?"

Xi Ping gave a "ha." Having been asked this, he warmed to his subject. He shut his fan. "There are plenty of those. With that Big...

that fellow Wang's popularity, if you go to either bank of the Lingyang River and ask around, nine people in ten would probably want to curse him to death..”

Seeing that he was becoming more disgraceful the more he talked, Prince Zhuang could only interrupt him once more. “He wasn't sternly disciplined as a child. He's been spoiled out of all seeming. Pardon me, Exalted.”

The Viscount of Yongning's “good name” was well known. Zhao Yu had heard of him before. Seeing him in person, he knew he wouldn't get anything useful out of him. He could only turn toward Prince Zhuang and say, “Evil cultivators have infiltrated Jinping in a Grand Selection Year and, with a corpse as a medium, conspired against the life of the son of a high court official. Their plans are sure to be of considerable scope. Heaven's Design Pavilion will do its best to chase down these evildoers. You and the others of high rank are asked to look after yourselves. Also, those who die stolen for an underworld marriage often have corpse poison on them. I heard that the Viscount made contact with the deceased last night. I have here a talisman to calm the mind and ward off evil. Please remember to soak it in water and consume it.”

Prince Zhuang waved a hand to order the servant who was about to step forward to retreat and took the talisman himself. Then he turned to instruct someone to bring out an ancient painting he had collected. He said to Zhao Yu, “By coincidence, I recently obtained this treasure. As a layman, I don't know how to store a famous artwork without doing it a disservice. I heard long ago that Heaven's Design Pavilion has an Exalted Zhao who is an expert. By a happy coincidence, I've encountered you today, so I can't do without being shameless enough to entrust it to you.”

Zhao Yu raised his eyebrows slightly. “Your Highness has heard of me?”

Prince Zhuang said, smiling, “When I was little, I studied painting with Mr. Tanghua of the Ning’an Zhao family. He mentioned you more than once, Exalted.”

Hearing this, Zhao Yu smiled. With his young man’s face, he involuntarily assumed the posture of an elder. Nodding, he said, “Tanghua is my third younger brother’s son.”

Xi Ping had woken early and hadn’t eaten yet. Prince Zhuang wouldn’t let him talk, so while his wicked mouth was resting, he had furtively snuck a pastry off the table next to him. Hearing this, he nearly choked on a lotus crisp. In spite of himself, he was filled with veneration toward the blue-clothed Exalted in front of him—Mr. Tanghua was so old he was senile; how old would his uncle have to be?

He sure could live!

Elevated as his lineage was, Prince Zhuang was still a mortal. Zhao Yu hadn’t meant to say anything to him; he had planned to leave after talking about official business. But he was pulled back to the mortal world by the name “Tanghua.” He remembered the little nephew he had played with when he had been mortal. His manner involuntarily became somewhat more cordial. He gave a pointer: “The immortal envoy will come to the capital soon. The chaos will only last a little while. Remember not to go out much in the next few days and not to accept anything with a horoscope written on it, or anything resembling a marriage proposal note. Punishing evil is our duty. There’s no need to thank me, Your Highness. The painting isn’t..”

Before he could finish, a servant came up holding out a wooden box with both hands. As soon as the box was opened, Zhao Yu’s refusal caught in his throat.

Xi Ping craned his neck and looked. He saw a scrap of painting in the box, only a half-chi square, all ragged. He thought, What the hell is this? An old dusting cloth that's been stewing in a dying vat?

But the walker in the mortal world Captain Zhao, seeing this "dusting cloth," had to use all his strength not to reveal a trace of the storm surging in his mind. Because he was holding back so much, his voice was a little tense. "The Mount Fu Mirage Drawing."

Prince Zhuang casually said, smiling, "My knowledge of painting and calligraphy is superficial. I only obtained this scrap of the painting, and I really can't tell whether it's real or fake. I've heard that you have a 'viewing wave,' Exalted, that can tell fake from real. Please appraise it."

The corner of Zhao Yu's eye twitched slightly. He silently extended a hand and twisted his fingers, putting on the thumb ring set with a crystal. As soon as the crystal came within an arm's length of the canvas, it let off a warm white light, impatient to declare that this painting couldn't be more genuine.

"It seems I wasn't taken in. That was nerve-racking. If it really had been fake, I would have humiliated myself in front of you." Having said this, Prince Zhuang ordered his servant to wrap the painting up. "Please don't stand on ceremony, Exalted. Mr. Tanghua was my teacher, and you are Mr. Tanghua's elder. It's proper to show respect to an elder."

The Mount Fu Mirage Drawing had been torn to pieces in the chaos of war. Zhao Yu had hunted high and low for over fifty years, and till now he had only found two surviving sections of the work. If he had encountered it elsewhere, he might have been beside himself with joy; he would have paid any price to get it.

But now, no matter how Prince Zhuang had obtained it, the reason Zhao Yu was shocked was that this ancient painting was the key to

whether he would be able to take a step forward and establish a foundation. Every cultivating half-immortal had such a “key.” This was a profound secret.

Why would Prince Zhuang give him this painting?

Was it coincidence, or...

This sickly young man’s smile was very pure. He seemed entirely unaware of the ancient painting’s value.

Zhao Yu was uneasy, but he really couldn’t refuse the scrap of the ancient painting. After dithering in silence for a long time, he tucked his “viewing wave,” which was slightly hot, into his palm. He cupped his hand respectfully and quietly said, “Such being the case, I thank Your Highness. If there is any errand you may have...”

“Oh,” Prince Zhuang interrupted him, “how could I dare? I only wanted to accumulate a bit of merit. We can all live safely in Jinping City through the blessings of the immortal sect and the protection of you Exalted.”

Zhao Yu gave him a profound look, took the painting, stood, and said goodbye. Prince Zhuang personally saw him to the door.

Xi Ping didn’t bother to think about what riddle these two were playing at. As soon as Exalted Zhao left, like a shameless dog, he slipped behind Prince Zhuang, planning to give him a back massage.

“Go away.” Prince Zhuang turned, his expression changing. The smile that seemed to have grown there was torn off. “I can’t endure your pounding.”

Xi Ping drew back his paws and poured tea for Prince Zhuang. “Thank you for sheltering me, san-ge. Have some tea, san-ge.”

Prince Zhuang put on a grim expression and glared at him.

Great Wan's imperial family's surname was Zhou. His Third Highness Prince Zhuang's given name was Ying. He looked as mild as jade. Adding in an air of sickliness, no matter how he glared, he didn't seem stern.

Anyway, Xi Ping grinned, not the least bit afraid of him.

Prince Zhuang questioned him: "What actually happened last night?"

"My birth sign has clashed with Tai Sui.³ I'm having a year of bad luck." Xi Ping plucked a piece of chilled lychee, peeled it, and tossed it into his mouth. "There's a girl at Overflowing Splendor, her musician had a bit of an accident right before going on stage. The song she was going to sing was written by me. I saw that she was in an awkward situation... Well, I also wanted to show off my skills, so I dressed up and accompanied her. But I was unlucky enough to run into my father. I mean, our old master, he's hardly a respectable person himself. Fine, the governors are allowed to set fires, while the commoners aren't even allowed to light lanterns. He sent his people to chase me down eight streets. I wore out the soles of my feet..."

Prince Zhuang said, angrily, "What a scandal!"

"Who said it wasn't?" Xi Ping slapped his thigh. "It's one thing to bump into each other. Awkward enough. Wouldn't it have been all right for the two of us to pretend not to know each other? But he just had to yell so loud, and now it's all over the city. Isn't he worried about the humiliation?!"

Prince Zhuang: "..."

His maternal uncle's family was hard to describe. His Third Highness's temples ached. He tapped on his wooden chair's armrest, making the servants bring warm water. He dissolved the talisman Captain Zhao had given them and forced Xi Ping to drink it.

"Oh, oh, oh, I'll do it myself... Hey... Damn, what is this taste? Was this talisman drawn on toilet paper?"

"Talk any more nonsense and I'll stuff your mouth with toilet paper," said Prince Zhuang.

Xi Ping quickly grabbed a handful of preserved fruit and stuffed his mouth full, leaving no room for toilet paper.

Prince Zhuang glared at him for a while. The rims of his eyes began to sting, but his gaze still couldn't pierce the brat's face, which was three chi thick. He could only say in exasperation, "Didn't you hear just now that the immortal envoy is about to arrive? Give it a rest for a few days, all right? For a few days, stay at home. If you don't want to study, then sleep. Don't go to those disreputable places."

Xi Ping spat out a pit. "What does the Grand Selection have to do with me..."

"You're the son of a noble family, too, and you're of suitable age. How could it not have to do with you?" Prince Zhuang became serious and called him by his courtesy name: "Shiyong, you're not a child anymore. You ought to give some thought for your future!"

"Noble families have golden thresholds and wooden thresholds, but ours is a 'water threshold' rented from the Dragon King Temple," Xi Ping said carelessly. "San-ge, don't make fun of my father. At his age, leave him some dignity."

The Marquis of Yongning's threshold being of "water" wasn't any kind of secret—during the reign of the previous emperor, Great Wan's noble houses had colluded. The present emperor's wife's relatives had brought about disaster, raising a stink in court. This emperor was a steely-hearted personage. After succeeding to the throne, he had silently endured for many years. Once he had brought order out of chaos, he had cut down his important relatives until flowers bloomed on their ancestral tombs; he had even nearly killed his own empress.

There were many noble ladies of high rank in the palace who suffered the fallout from their families. In this way, by happenstance, Lady Xi was able to shine.

Lady Xi came from a humble family, with a petty official for a father who had died young, leaving only a good-for-nothing older brother to head the family. Like a common green foxtail that had gotten mixed in with peonies in a garden, she had unexpectedly caught the sovereign's eye, then given birth to the astonishingly comely and talented third prince. She remained a favorite and rose to the position of Imperial Consort.

In three generations of the Xi family, man or woman, young or old, there was no one who wasn't beautiful, and no one who wasn't an empty head.

But while empty heads were useless, they were also harmless. This family didn't make trouble and didn't strive for power. They focused on spending their own money and didn't damage the country or bring calamity to the people. Placed at court, they were unusually pleasing to the eye. His Majesty, in order to nauseate an old political opponent, with a wave of the brush, had created the imperial consort's older brother as a do-nothing empty "Marquis of Yongning"—hoping that the family wouldn't forget their origins and would forever remain as they were.

A “decorative” noble house like theirs might spook the common people, but it wasn’t enough to fool Xuanyin Mountain into giving them a selection card. After all, Prince Zhuang was still young; he hadn’t supplanted his big brother the Crown Prince.

It could only happen if the family’s younger generation was unusually talented, with a good name that spread far and wide.

Though Young Master Xi’s “good name”... Eh, don’t mention it.

Xuanyin Mountain’s selection cards might be scattered throughout the streets of Jinping City, and one still wouldn’t come to him. Lately his mother had been looking out for a match for him.

“Don’t blame your own lack of talent on my uncle.”

Xi Ping sighed. “A dog father can’t rear a tiger cub. Having raised me, what face can the Marquis still have?”

For a time, Prince Zhuang actually had nothing to say.

Xi Ping waved a hand, pulled over a small porcelain dish, peeled two lychees, and put them in front of Prince Zhuang.

His qin playing was superb, and his fingers were very clever. None of the fruit’s peel stuck to the flesh; it was completely clean. “You’ll get inflammation if you eat too many of these things, san-ge. I’ve peeled two for you and put them there. Sweeten your mouth, don’t eat too much.”

When this brat was acting out, he really was disgraceful, but when he was good, he was truly good. Prince Zhuang’s furrowed brow softened.

Then Xi Ping came up with a new line: “Anyway, I don’t want to go. Xuanyin Mountain is so finicky, all ‘three improvements, three

abstinences,' don't do this, don't do that... Is that any way to live? It's better to die young than live forever like that."

Saying so, perhaps because he had eaten too many lychees, he burped on the spot.

Prince Zhuang's hand, reaching for the lychees, drew back once more. He was aggrieved and angry. "Bullshit. You have no sense of taboo! I... You... Get out, out, out."

Xi Ping nimbly stood up. "All right!"

"Wait, Xi Shiyong," Prince Zhuang called him to a halt. "If for nothing else, the capital has been turbulent lately, and there's even been a death. Don't go out to fool around so much, do you hear me?"

Xi Ping called out "At your command," while his feet took him gliding out of the south study—if he only ran fast enough, san-ge's earnest admonitions couldn't catch up to him.

CHAPTER 3 - Midnight Song (3)

Xi Ping was a bastard, hard-hearted and lacking in sentiment. At any rate, Wang Baochang's death didn't move him at all.

As he saw it, with Big Dog Wang's character, it wouldn't be a surprise for him to be beaten to death in the street any day. The surprising thing was that someone had used such a bizarre method to kill him, as if deliberately giving Jinping City something to talk about.

As for the warnings of Captain Zhao the walker in the mortal world and Prince Zhuang, he treated them as wind blowing past his ear—as a young man of eighteen or nineteen, he was full of vigor, without any reverence in his heart.

He returned to his guest room and slept until the sun was setting. Then this night owl woke up.

He stretched enormously, sat up, and ate three trays of crystal dumplings along with bird's nest porridge, filling up on liquid—his cousin was young, but he lived like an old man. The food in the prince's manor was all soup, dull to eat—so Xi Ping planned to go elsewhere to hunt for food.

The Viscount plucked a perfectly blooming rose in the garden and clumsily stepped on the tail of Prince Zhuang's big black cat. The big black cat bristled and retaliated.

These two fought a battle, which Xi Ping won.

Satisfied with himself, he stuck the flower into his lapel. Letting off a powerful sweet fragrance, he left the prince's manor and went to play around at the House of Overflowing Splendor once again.

When Prince Zhuang, Zhou Ying, heard a report of this from his servant, he was just playing weiqi with his assistant Wang Jian. Hearing the report, he wasn't in the least surprised. "He's run off again?"

He took the offended black cat and gently tapped the cat's head. "How about you? You're always getting bullied. Why don't you stay away from him? Are you stupid?"

The cat feared the strong but bullied the weak. It couldn't defeat Xi Ping, so it vented its anger on its owner. It batted at him with its paw. Fortunately, Prince Zhuang was used to dodging. His hand was uninjured, though a thread of his long sleeve came loose.

The young eunuch was frightened enough to drop to his knees with a thud.

But the black cat had no fear. It flailed its hind leg and kicked its owner, then ran off, hissing.

"It's no matter. You may leave." Prince Zhuang waved a hand. It was unclear whether he was cursing the cat or the man when he said, "Can I lower myself to argue with a little beast I myself spoiled?"

Wang Jian said, smiling, "The way Your Highness treats the Viscount is truly... no less than his own older brother would do."

"Older brother?" Prince Zhuang picked up a porcelain cup. "I think I'm like his father."

He held down a series of coughs with hot water. The heat brought a faint flush to his fingertips. He was like a weary snowman.

When the young eunuch had closed the door and departed, Prince Zhuang finally put down the porcelain cup and looked at Wang Jian.

Wang Jian understood. He took a piece of paper from his sleeve. He said, quietly, "This is the current list of selected disciples we've received, thirty people in all. Xuanyin's immortal envoy hasn't arrived yet. If the immortal envoy takes a liking to someone at the last moment, perhaps a name or two will be added. Normally, there won't be much of a change. As I see it, this is more or less the outcome of this year's Grand Selection."

Prince Zhuang took it and glanced at it. He picked up a brush and crossed off a few names. "Before the immortal envoy comes to Jinping, these people will either disgrace themselves or suffer ill health."

His tone was flat, as though his word was final.

"Very well," Wang Jian agreed, and waited for Prince Zhuang to tell him whom to recommend—while it was the immortal sect that chose disciples in the Grand Selection, who was in fact selected in the end depended on chess games at court.

But Prince Zhuang didn't go into this. He turned his face away and coughed a few times, then lightly said, "Let the Crown Prince's in-laws get word of this. I remember that my oldest brother has a brother-in-law of appropriate age this year."

Wang Jian paused. He couldn't resist giving Prince Zhuang a look.

The luminous pearl suspended in the study was as bright as a full moon. The light fell on Prince Zhuang like moonlight falling on snow.

Reflecting frost.

All the big families had people at Xuanyin and could "speak to Heaven." Even the emperor couldn't remove or demote people as he liked. When Emperor Taiming had calmed the disorder caused by his wife's relatives, he had in fact also made use of internal strife at

Xuanyin Mountain. After the business had passed, the great families at Xuanyin had been reshuffled. The Crown Prince's mother's Zhang family had been one of those shuffled out, and since then they had had no part in the immortal sect—the Zhang family's younger generations could no longer enter the Grand Selection's name list.

This Crown Prince, who was both the son of the official wife and the eldest son, was known for his benevolence and filial piety. He had been dragged down for years by his mother's family and had always acted with utmost caution. If he had the chance to plant his wife's family at Xuanyin Mountain, would his desires be aroused?

Would he meddle in Xuanyin's Grand Selection under the nose of a sovereign in the prime of life?

Wang Jian didn't dare to think any further. He agreed respectfully. Then, a little ingratiatingly, he said, "If the Crown Prince truly can't resist and steps in, we'll be able to control it. Perhaps we can get the Viscount in as well."

Without so much as looking up, Prince Zhuang said, "I asked. He says he doesn't want to go."

Wang Jian said, smiling, "Young people don't understand. They don't know the gravity of the future. And perhaps the Viscount is uncomfortable asking it of you..."

Prince Zhuang tossed down a piece with a clatter. He raised his eyelids and glanced at Wang Jian.

Wang Jian gave a start and hastily drew his front teeth back into his mouth.

"My hand slipped. No need to be nervous, Ziqian. When has that scoundrel ever shown any shame when he wanted something from me? If he says he doesn't want to go, he doesn't want to go."

Anyway, a cultivation sect isn't a clean place. I'm not desperate enough yet to hope he'll go test the waters in my stead."

Wang Jian quietly said, "We'll change the subject."

"No need," Prince Zhuang said. "Don't put away the board. We'll continue another day. Go about your business."

Wang Jian, keeping himself to himself, retreated and left. There was a trace of sweat at the corners of his brow. When he reached the courtyard, he looked up and saw the dim River of Stars. The night was oppressive. In spite of himself, he sighed: there were secret currents surging at court. In heaven and on earth, it never ceased.

Even Xi Ping, when he went out, felt that the atmosphere in Jinping wasn't right.

The Lingyang River passed through Jinping City from north to south, cutting the city in two: on the west bank was Guangyun Palace surrounded by the imperial city with its nine gates, as well as the gathering place of the high officials and noble lords; the east bank, however, was inhabited by the lower classes. A river separated the wealthy and the poor. On the river there were dinner parties, music and singing; it was always full of floating pleasure boats.

But this afternoon, the Lingyang River, which previously had been active until daybreak, was completely still. Even the steamships were quietly moored by the banks.

Without the clouds and mist produced by the pleasure boats, the view over the river was considerably clearer. You could see right to the east bank, where the city guardsmen were obviously more concentrated than usual. The out of town workers spending the night outdoors to save money were scared of getting into trouble; there was no one in sight.

Even the House of Overflowing Splendor had calmed down.

The Flower Viewing Festival had been just last night, but now, when Xi Ping made a circle of the main hall, all he heard anyone discussing was Wang Baochang, as if Big Dog Wang were the new Queen of Flowers.

There was also an individual who claimed to be well-informed, spraying spit as he described Wang Baochang's appearance in death, all "fangs sprouting from his mouth" and "red fur growing on his face"...just as if he had seen it with his own eyes. When he reached an exciting point, he waved his hands and stamped his feet, accidentally bumping the cup of wine in Young Master Xi's hand and spilling half of it.

Inadvertently caught in the crossfire, Xi Ping was about to flare up when he heard a bustle from the stairs.

"It's the Queen of Flowers!"

"Look, look, look, it's Jiangli! Jiangli has come out!"

Jiangli's hair was loosely tied back. She was the center of attention as she came downstairs. She glanced idly toward the main hall and knew at once that today was different from yesterday. There were no high ranking people who could push her to start her act. Her expression chilled at once—Jiangli had always accepted only distinguished guests. She wouldn't give the undistinguished ones so much as a look.

Reasonably speaking, those who hung up their shingle and did business only played with the rich, but no one was like Jiangli, whose face said right out "I'm a snob."

But then again, a base nature couldn't attain the noblest heights; there were quite a few people who bought what she was selling.

Xi Ping glimpsed her from afar with interest—ordinarily, Jiangli liked to wear plain-colored clothes. Today, with the camellia crown on her head, she had instead gone out of her way to choose a red dress, and the rouge was thick on her lips. She was bristling with arrogance, like an azalea that had cheated spring. The other fresh flowers, big and small, who ordinarily vied with each other, seemed to have reached an agreement; each one was dressed as though there had been a death in the family, once again setting her off outstandingly.

Only when she saw Xi Ping did a trace of a smile appear on Jiangli's face. "And I said you wouldn't come today. What's that splashed on your sleeve?"

She didn't so much as look at anyone else. She walked up, took Xi Ping, and left. "I washed and perfumed the clothes you changed out of yesterday. They didn't pass through anyone else's hands. Come, you can get changed."

Xi Ping originally hadn't been planning to take the clothes he had left behind at Overflowing Splendor. But feeling a pile of envious gazes fall on him, he wanted to show off in spite of himself. He waved the "Peerless Beauty" fan in satisfaction and actually followed the Queen of Flowers to her boudoir.

"You've taken the camellia crown, and now you've changed. Young lady, there's no comparison between yesterday and today." As soon as Xi Ping walked into Jiangli's room, he was nearly blinded by the glare. The hairpins, bracelets, rings, and pendants that the generous customers had tipped her with the night before were spread out in a heap on the cabinet. The old screen in the corner had been swapped out for one with an exquisitely embroidered peacock between two flowers. And on top of the screen was carelessly

draped a blue peacock cape hung full of pearls and jades, delivered in private by someone with more money than sense.

Jiangli washed cups and brewed tea in the outer room. She rolled her eyes. “Did you come to make fun of me, too?”

Hearing that she was in a peculiar temper once again, Xi Ping said curiously, “That’s unjust, beauty. Why would you say that?”

Jiangli spoke with a Ning’an accent. Ning’an was a hundred and fifty li from Jinping, but the accent was very different. There, people dragged out the ends of their words, very softly. Women sounded especially pleasant when they spoke. It was said that Ning’an had three treasures—“the steam cage bent bridge, the delicate iris peddlers, the plump water chestnuts among the lotuses.” Of these, the “delicate iris peddlers” were the flower-peddling girls who hawked their wares in the street. Each one’s voice and looks were touching; this was one of the place’s sights.

Jiangli’s speaking voice was extremely pleasant, but she never said anything nice. “They’ve all been saying that with ‘Mr. Yu Gan’ personally playing the qin last night, even a donkey could have gone up on stage with him and won the title with two donkey’s brays.”

“Mr. Yu Gan” was the pseudonym under which Xi Ping wrote ditties among the singing-girls and actresses. At first he had paid the beauties to sing his songs. Later, because these songs were different from the current melodies and sounded fresh, he had instead begun to be pursued. It had become the group of beauties asking him for songs.

The silly boy, hearing Jiangli’s words, paid no attention to the young lady’s happiness. He responded, thrilled, “Haha, they flatter me.”

Jiangli threw the teapot onto the table with a thump, her face turning red with anger. “Xi Shiyong!”

“Hey.” Xi Ping, having changed, came out from behind the screen, happily adjusting his outer robe, and perfunctorily consoled: “Don’t be mad. Who’s been talking bad about you? Tell me who they are, and when those chatterboxes ask me for songs again, I won’t let them have any until they’ve learned three donkey’s brays... Oh, what’s this?”

From an inner pocket of the clothes he had changed into, he took an exquisitely embroidered silk brocade bag and was about to open it.

“Don’t open it now,” Jiangli said, stopping him. “Look later.”

“What is it?”

“A gift to thank you.” Looking displeased, Jiangli set a teacup in front of him heavily. “I was afraid Mr. Yu Gan would also make me learn to bray like a donkey next time.”

“My pleasure.” Xi Ping put the small bag away, picked up the teacup, and sipped. He frowned and put the cup back down—the tea was too strongly brewed, and it had a slightly weird flavor.

“With me you can be pretty nice. If you were a little more careful with people in high positions, you wouldn’t end up with your musician falling through at the last minute without even a word of warning.”

“It’s not worth the effort.” Jiangli lowered her eyelids, looking like an arrogant cat. “My fate is bad, and luck is against me. It’s better that I stay away from people so I don’t pass my misfortune onto them.”

“Nonsense.” The Viscount was quite disapproving of these words and said in rebuttal, “If your luck was bad, how could you have met me?”

Jiangli: "..."

Because he was excessively sure of himself, this Viscount often gave people the strong impression that his rampant narcissism was entirely justified.

Jiangli had always thought she was contrary. No matter how many people admired her and flattered her, she thought it was annoying. Only this young master, who was even more proud and willful than she was, remained in her thoughts... and he had no heart; among the rouge and powder crowd, he was doted on by everyone. He had never taken her seriously.

Jiangli couldn't answer him. After a long time, she finally sighed. "I'm telling the truth—there was a murder at the pleasure boat ferry crossing last night, and the victim had just left Overflowing Splendor... Didn't you see that hardly anyone dared to come today? I've just taken the camellia crown, and this unlucky thing happens. Perhaps it's God's displeasure that I've aspired to something I'm unworthy of."

Xi Ping casually dropped a line of sweet talk: "You're joking. What is there in the world that our Queen of Flowers is unworthy of..."

Jiangli turned her gaze. "You."

His expression unchanging, Xi Ping finished: "...in fact, there is that."

Jiangli, her expression blank, watched him closely, suspecting for a moment that she had heard wrong. There couldn't be such a rotten man in the world.

Xi Ping looked back openly, his rottenness undisguised, interior and exterior coinciding.

His skin was thin and his bones were fine, his lower jaw sharp, but his features were so distinct they were oppressive, so dazzling they looked almost vicious. His was a naturally faithless and fickle face.

For a time, Jiangli couldn't speak. She could only raise her hand and point to the door. Shaking, she indicated for him to get lost.

Xi Ping thought that her menses must be coming up. Every other sentence she said was deliberately provocative. He wasn't interested in cheering her up. He stood and stuck his fan into his belt. He said, "You should stop dwelling on it so much. Throw your kettle away, even strong tea can't cover up the flavor of rust. Aren't you worried it'll upset your stomach? You should get one made of Moon Plated Gold. I'm going."

"Viscount." Just as he was about to leave, he heard Jiangli say behind him, quietly, "Aren't you even willing to play along?"

Xi Ping turned back and looked at her, confused.

Jiangli was half soaked in the shadow of the dim gas lamp. There was an unspeakable gloom in her expression. "Take care of me like other men, give me an illusion of happiness. I could refuse to see others in the future, dress myself and make myself up for you alone. Wouldn't that be good?"

"Oh, right!" Xi Ping suddenly "saw the light." "After all that talk, you want me to pay for you to buy back your freedom, right?"

Jiangli: "..."

"Why didn't you just say so? What's wrong with a little thing like that? But I've been spending ahead of my allowance, I don't have the money now, you know that. How about this, wait a couple months, and I'll save up." Saying so, he grumbled, "You're really

something. Why compete for the camellia crown if you want to buy back your freedom? Don't you know that the price doubles if you win the crown?"

Jiangli was so angry her lungs nearly burst. Gritting her teeth, she interrupted him: "I can free myself. I have no need to ask for your money!"

Surprised, Xi Ping said, "What are you after?"

"After what I want! I've saved up some security over the years..."

"I think you should forget about it. You want to call your odds and ends a 'security'?" Xi Ping waved a hand. Putting himself in her position, he advised her, "If I were you, I would make good money while I was young, then use it to take care of myself in my old age. Why waste time fixating on dead ends?"

"If you were willing to lie to me properly, I would cut out my own heart and give it to you, never mind my security!"

At this point, Xi Ping finally gave up his act.

He had experience. Having heard the opening notes, he knew what the tune was. It wasn't that he didn't understand what Jiangli was getting at.

But connections in pleasure houses were thinner than steam. Take money and sell your smiles, pay money to buy a good time, and everyone leaves with the business complete. However liquid the Yongning Marquis Manor's threshold was, he still wouldn't be allowed to marry a prostitute, and their family wasn't permitted to take concubines. What was he supposed to do with her? Anyway, there were too many beauties around him. He had seen enough of both the plump and slender ones. Because she had a good voice, Jiangli had managed to win a few extra songs from him. You really

couldn't say she was a novelty. There was no need to waste her time, so he had been patient and played dumb to try to pass the matter off.

But something had upset this girl today. As if she had eaten something funny, she just wouldn't stop!

"If you get what you want, you'll only be deceived." Xi Ping stopped smiling. "What benefit is there for you?"

Jiangli sadly asked, "What harm is there for you?"

"No harm, but no benefit either. What would I do with your heart?" Xi Ping spread his hands. "I have my own. It'd just be harming you without doing me any good..."

He thought that he was being kind and advising her from the best intentions, but before he could finish, Jiangli pushed him out.

Xi Ping was momentarily dispirited. Then he simply left Overflowing Splendor.

When he went out, a scrap of song floated down from Jiangli's room. Xi Ping stopped and listened for a while. He heard her singing a strange southern tune—it sang of the hopeless love of a witch from the Land of Turmoil, and how she sewed the man she loved into a human puppet. As she sewed, she vindicated herself with her thwarted love.

The south was a savage place. Many of the songs that came from there were ghastly. Jiangli was playing the qin quietly, emphasizing the ghastliness of the song. It made the listener feel unwell.

Xi Ping thought: I've been wasting my time giving her my advice.

Therefore he raised his head and shouted toward Jiangli's window: "Don't you have anything better to do?"

The peculiar music and singing came to a sudden halt. After a moment, a flowerpot flew out the window and sent the Viscount scrambling away.

"He's gone."

Jiangli hadn't been the one to throw the flowerpot. It had been a tiny, wizened old man whose back was so stooped he was almost a hunchback. He had at some point appeared in the boudoir of the Queen of Flowers, like a goblin grown out of the shadows.

Jiangli held down the strings and carelessly agreed.

"Young lady." The hunchback's voice was like a stringed instrument damaged by damp. "He doesn't walk our path. He isn't worth regretting."

"I know," Jiangli said with a bitter laugh. "And I'm not worthy of regretting him. You saw. He won't even take the time to go through the motions with me. There isn't a trace of affection there. Only..."

"Well?"

Jiangli hesitated a moment. "Only I remember that while his temperament is odious, actually, he's never bullied me. I feel sorry for harming him like this."

"Gentlemen regret the death of beasts, so they place the kitchen far away, but they don't become vegetarians," the hunchback said coldly. "There are no good people on the west bank of the Lingyang River, young lady. Think of your parents and your whole family, think of all the suffering you've endured!"

Jiangli pursed her lips and was silent.

The old hunchback lowered his voice: “The conflagration burns on, the cry of the cicada is without end.”

After a long moment, Jiangli said, almost inaudibly: “Better to die in frost than to forsake one's convictions... Fourth Uncle, I know.”

CHAPTER 4 - Midnight Song (4)

Prince Zhuang was a chronic invalid and went to sleep early. If Xi Ping went to the prince's manor now, he would have to get him out of bed again. Xi Ping didn't want to interrupt his san-ge's sleep two days in a row, and he supposed that the Marquis's anger would have dissipated by now, so he went back home.

Just as he turned into the south end of Dangui Lane, he met a carriage. Xi Ping saw the character "Dong" written on the carriage lantern hanging from it and knew it belonged to the house of Lord Dong, an official in the Office of Protocol.

The Dongs were a family of scholars and looked down on their good neighbor the "sycophantic" Marquis of Yongning, so while the two families both lived in Dangui Lane, there was ordinarily little communication between them. Xi Ping didn't feel it was worth his while to go over and make himself annoying. When he ran into them on his way, he gave a perfunctory greeting and let them pass. He hurriedly walked on without looking back.

He passed by like the wind. The person in the carriage must not have heard him clearly and wanted to ask who it was; he tapped lightly on the carriage door.

The old driver looked up and saw that Xi Ping had already hurried down a narrow lane and entered the Marquis manor by a side door, then unhurriedly answered, "Young Master, the one who just went by was..."

Before he could finish, he heard a roar fly out of the shut-up Marquis Manor's rear court—as soon as Xi Ping slipped in through the side door, his father's powerful shouts hit him right in the face: "Shut the gates! Hold him! Don't let him run!"

In response, a dozen burly fellows leapt up from either side. Some rushed at Xi Ping with ropes and some locked the gate, all of them surrounding and cutting him off.

Xi Ping had a wealth of experience. He dodged left and right, spotted an opening, and forced his way out of the encirclement, just like a vigorous weasel.

As he ran toward the inner courtyard, he cried out for show: “Lord Marquis, spare me! Spare me! I’m sorry!”

The Marquis of Yongning, having taken the upper hand, slipped up and let himself be taken in. “What are you sorry for?”

Xi Ping seized the subject and dumped the evil onto his dad’s head: “If I had known that you were a fan of Miss Qingke, no matter what, I’d never have gone on stage myself to help Jiangli compete against you!”

The Marquis had just spent half of last night kneeling in penitence to his wife for having gone to Overflowing Splendor, nearly bringing on an attack of rheumatism. Having this dirt splashed on him, his vision went dark—the wretched child had gone too far!

“Throw that unfilial son in the stables and break him to pieces!”

In the lane on the other side of the wall, the Dong manor’s carriage rumbled by. The old driver, hearing the domestic squabble in the Marquis Manor, said, “Ha, do you hear that? It’s the Marquis of Yongning’s house.”

But the “young master” in the carriage made no response. He kept tapping on the carriage door over and over.

The sound of the tapping was even and mechanical. Against the slightly damp wood, it made an eerie muffled sound.

Tap—tap-tap—

“Young master?”

Tap—tap-tap—

The driver realized that something was wrong and stopped the carriage. “Do you have any other instructions, young master? We’re nearly home.”

Tap!

The sound of tapping on the door came to an abrupt halt. There was silence all around, apart from the faint clamor still coming from the Yongning Marquis Manor nearby.

The driver turned slowly, seemed to hesitate for a moment, then put his hand on the carriage door. But before he could open it, the carriage door was pushed open from inside.

The driver’s seat had been unsteady. He fell down. Next, a big heap of white paper money flew out of the carriage door. Like a ghost come to demand a life, it threw itself at the first living being it came upon, coming right toward the driver and sticking all over his body.

The paper money was covered in bloody writing. The writing was a horoscope.

A powerful smell of blood rose to the sky. A hoarse mourning wail came from the carriage: “Raise the casket, hang two mats—”

The strange paper money bored continuously into the old driver’s flesh. Whatever place it touched began to fester.

It was as if the driver had developed a white rash all over his body. He rolled on the ground, screaming, but only got more paper money on himself as he rolled. Soon, one dark red flower after another bloomed on his festering flesh. The old driver began to leak like a rotten peach!

The quiet night of Dangu Lane was split by mournful cries. The decorative lanterns at the south end of the street lit up all in a row. The white steam took on a bloody tinge.

Xi Ping was just about to go over the wall into the inner courtyard when he heard the noise. Straddling the wall, he automatically turned to look.

At first, he didn't realize what the ball of white rolling around in the street was, only saw the paper money continuously flying out from the carriage, moving without a wind, nearly filling the whole street. He was bewildered: where had so many moths come from? It was a sickening sight.

Then he saw the white paper money assemble into a human shape with a head and legs. It stepped forward on its "legs," "walking" toward a place where there was a door.

The "paper money man" reached the door and slapped it lightly. As it tapped, the paper money fell from it with a rustle, silently sticking to the door and in the cracks between the door and the frame.

Tap—tap-tap—

More than one home had been startled by the scream in the night. The porter watching the side door soon opened it a crack and looked out in a way he thought was covert.

But even a crack the width of the pupil of an eye would have been enough to let the paper money slip in.

The first porter to open the door a crack saw the whiteness outside and thought that this was smoke spat out by an exploding streetlamp. He was about to call for help when a piece of paper money fell in through the crack of the opened door.

The porter looked down and got a clear look at what this was, then cursed “unlucky” and planned to kick it away. But the paper money flew up from the ground and came toward his face at lightning speed!

As if he had been splashed in the face with boiling oil, the porter yelled and fell backward. The door was opened at once from the outside, and more paper money rushed in to swallow the porter whole!

Xi Ping, who had watched the whole process of the paper money tricking a person into opening the door and then “eating” him, was stunned.

Just then, the paper money in the carriage at last ran out. The dim halo around the carriage lantern with the character “Dong” written on it lit the half open carriage door.

By that light, Xi Ping glanced inside, and all the bad words he had ever heard in his life instantly surged up in his mind.

He saw a man... a male corpse sitting inside the carriage, the rot and livor mortis stuck to his features like a mask. It was hard to tell at first who he was. And this blotchy face was at this moment turned toward Xi Ping!

The corpse seemed to sense his gaze. The dead eyes turned toward him. The corpse seemed to want to smile at him. The corners of the mouth trembled upward, and another piece of skin fell from the face. The corpse sang, wildly off key: “Shelter it... fully

seven days. The Great Way touches Heaven and sends you back home... do not linger... a lifetime's... joys and sorrows are like illusions... go to the West... go to the West..”

This scene categorically had nothing to do with this world. Xi Ping's brain ground to a standstill.

But just then, there was a knock at the side door of the Marquis Manor, too!

He saw the paper money like flying moths standing three chi high at his house's door, slaving over the fresh meat and living people inside. It was tapping at their door!

“Don't open the door! Outside there's... shit!” Xi Ping had cried out in his urgency, forgetting that he was still on top of the wall, and fell down headfirst.

“Young master!”

When he recovered, he was surrounded by a big crowd of people. The Marquis, who had just wanted to “break him to pieces,” was stroking his back, asking over and over, “Did you lose your balance? Where did you hit yourself? Did you hit your head? What did you see... Dad is here, don't be scared, don't be scared. Letai, get someone to see what's happened outside. Who is that making noise in the middle of the night and even knocking on the door?”

The butler Wu Letai had just given an affirmative when Xi Ping shook his head, dizzy from the fall, and jumped up.

He spared no time for explanations. He pushed the Marquis aside. One of his legs was still a little lame, so he limpingly climbed the wall. “Everyone... all of you... move aside, don't stand near the door! Don't look outside! Is there fire? Give it to me!”

As he spoke, he rolled up his sleeves and prepared to do battle with the forces of evil. "I'll burn you all down!"

"What are you doing? Didn't that fall knock any sense into you? Come down..." The Marquis was all at sea. He was about to order his wretched son to get down when he heard bells urgently ringing.

The Marquis of Yongning looked in the direction of the sound, surprised.

The sound of the bells came from Heaven's Design Pavilion's Azure Dragon Horn Tower!

Of the seven Azure Dragon Towers, the Horn Tower was the one in Dangui Lane.

Dangui Lane was near the foot of the imperial city. To avoid "shocking the higher-ups," none of the buildings here surpassed three stories, making the six-story tower at the north-east corner look unusually lofty. At night, when the residents of Dangui Lane looked up from their yards and saw which floor of the tower the moon had reached, they could make a rough estimate of the time.

The outer eaves of the Horn Tower were hung full of bronze bells 9.6 cun long, but these were different from ordinary bells to scare off birds. These bronze bells had no clappers. The bells were always moving without ringing.

The Marquis had lived in Dangui Lane for over twenty years, and this was his first time hearing the tongueless bells ring!

There were high and low bells, mixed together, like the murmur of conversation. Next, the top of the Horn Tower let out a dazzling white light, even brighter than Maze Station's beacon. It pierced the mist in the air and fell precisely on the spot where the screams were coming from.

The Horn Tower's response was even faster than the Heart Tower's last night at the pleasure boat ferry crossing.

No sooner had the bronze bells under the tower's eaves moved than three blue-clothed figures flew out following the white light. In a few hops they reached the south end of the street.

Right now, the south end of Dangui Lane was in chaos. There was hardly any place to stand. Several houses' side doors and back doors had already been pushed open by the paper money. The servants and guards were running like sheep driven by a hungry wolf. Some screamed, some chanted prayers, some threw lamp oil and torches directly onto the ground... Ominous flames soared. Four or five people had already fallen to the ground, entirely wrapped in paper money, their condition unknown.

A few blue-clothed people landed on surrounding courtyard walls and tall lampposts. Their leader's attire was a little different from the others' — he also wore a silver belt embroidered with a subtle crane design.

Because the Horn Tower was near the imperial city, it was an important place in the capital. Those who kept guard at the tower were all major figures within Heaven's Design Pavilion.

The person on duty at the Horn Tower tonight was Heaven's Design Pavilion's Assistant Commander Pang Jian, who oversaw matters in the capital.

Lord Pang was broad-shouldered and narrow-waisted, with thick eyebrows and big eyes. His face was weathered bronze. Even the sedate sapphire blue robe couldn't suppress the sense of wildness about him.

He didn't look like a cultivation sect's half-immortal. He looked more like a wandering chivalrous swordsman down on his luck.

After glancing at the ground covered in paper money, Pang Jian took out a whistle. The whistle was tiny, but the sound it made was deeper than a bugle's. It rumbled like thunder. Before the whistling had dispersed, another team of blue-clothed people came from the Horn Tower in response.

In the blink of an eye, six walkers in the mortal world had gathered in a small alley on the south side of Dangui Lane—it was said that at each Azure Dragon Tower, only seven people in all stood watch at night.

Xi Ping, ready to crawl along the inner courtyard wall to go burn paper, was astonished. He watched avidly as the blue-clothed people fell into formation, his eyes unable to follow the walkers in the mortal world, who were nearly blurs.

Pang Jian took out a flag around two chi long and threw it at the ground.

Crack. He must have been very strong. The wooden flagpole passed through the stone floor tile as if cutting through tofu and stood firm.

With that flag as the center and the six of them arrayed around it, an enormous “cyclone” rose from the ground and all at once swept in all the paper money around them.

As soon as the paper money was swept into the array, it caught fire. The papers flew away as if fighting for their lives, but after a long struggle, they were sucked up by the “cyclone” one after another. For a time, the sky was full of flying fiery butterflies. They danced wildly, then at last burned to ash and fell. The cyclone, which had started out colorless and formless, was enveloped in endless ash

and dust and became a smokestack reaching to the sky, making the atmosphere in Dangui Lane as foul as in the factory district to the south of the city.

In only one ke, all the paper money scattered in the street was burned away, and the great wind came to a stop. The wailing corpse in the carriage had at some point shut its mouth.

Thump. The corpse fell out and landed facedown in the dust and ashes covering the street.

This was a genuine article “ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”

The south street was completely silent. It was as if they had collectively been sucked into a grotesque nightmare. Apart from the Viscount squatting on the wall of the Marquis Manor, no one dared to show their heads, no one dared to make a sound.

There were only the extravagant decorative lanterns of Dangui Lane, bright as daylight, silvering the edges of the messy heaps of dismembered and rotting corpses on the ground.

Tonight the pleasure boats were silent. Jinping was still. From the opposite bank of the Lingyang River came the distant and muffled sound of a night watchman’s clapper.

The second watch of the night.

Pang Jian shot Xi Ping a glance and shoved him off the wall with a flick of his sleeve. “Whose dim-witted child is that, watching the fun?”

He was the first to jump down from above. He retrieved the array flag with a pinch—the little pale yellow flag had turned as black as coal, and there was one whole piece of paper money stuck to the flag.

Like a wary lion, Pang Jian drew close and sniffed the paper money. Then he snapped his fingers at it, and the last trembling piece of paper money also burned to ashes and fell from the flag.

Pang Jian put on a pair of gloves as thin as cicada's wings and turned over each of the people fallen on the ground one by one to inspect them. After a moment, he shook his head.

Never mind survivors, there were hardly any people on the ground with their organs intact. A faint touch and loose parts came off them.

“Call some people from the imperial guard to come help out, then go to the Heart Tower and have Zhao Yu come over here,” Pang Jian ordered as he stepped over the rotting flesh toward the corpse that had fallen out of the carriage. He turned the corpse over. “Male, around twenty... He's wearing a private seal, the carving on it says... ‘Dong Zhang.’ Who's that? Does anyone know him?”

“He's the eldest son of the Office of Protocol's Lord Dong by his wife, and nephew of the Virtuous Consort at the palace,” a walker in the mortal world came up to say quietly. “The Dong manor is one street over.”

“He's very young. A pity.” Pang Jian nodded, then added, “Come, someone go to the manor to break the news... Be a little careful, don't startle the family.”

Then he stood and pointed to the two remaining blue-clothesers. “You two, visit all the houses around here and notify them. Tell them the rebellious evildoers have been expelled. Give your condolences to those whose family members have been killed, but say that they can't touch the remains yet. We'll handle them. Ask while you're at it whether anyone noticed anything unusual.”

The imperial guardsmen came quickly and tightly surrounded the south half of Dangui Lane. Under Pang Jian's direction, they efficiently cleared the scene, removed the bodies, and exorcised the evil.

In hardly any time, Zhao Yu of the Azure Dragon Heart Tower also arrived.

“Commander, I heard that another person has been caught in an underworld marriage? That's...” Zhao Yu was startled by the ground covered in corpses. “How many dead?”

“Only this one died from being stolen for an underworld marriage.” Pang Jian pointed to Dong Zhang's corpse. “Apart from him, the carriage was also full of paper money soaked in corpse poison that flew at people as soon as it saw them and rotted their flesh where it touched. Fortunately, it's night, and there are few people in Dangui Lane. If this had been broad daylight in the east bank city center, I don't know how much trouble it would have caused.”

As he spoke, the imperial guards carefully disassembled the Dong manor's carriage. On the roof of the carriage was something drawn in fresh blood. It was unclear what it was. Staring too long at the lines that twisted like vipers caused dizziness and nausea.

“A bitter fleabane curse.” Pang Jian clasped his hands behind his back and looked at the still fresh blood. “My guess is it happened like this—the paper money was set off by the deceased... Dong Zhang before his death.”

Zhao Yu's expression was apprehensive. “But mortals can't draw curses.”

“Naturally,” Pang Jian said. “He was forced to draw it by the evil cultivator who performed the underworld marriage.”

“But, commander, making a person sing a song before dying can’t be compared to forcing him to draw a curse and murder people.”

“True.” Pang Jian nodded thoughtfully. “From this it seems that the evil cultivator who performed the underworld marriage must at least been in the established foundation stage. And the corpse used for writing the ‘netherworld marriage contract’ can’t be freshly dead, either. At the very least it has to be refined with secret arts for fifty years and more... How strange. Too much expense went into killing this man.”

Even fifty-year-old aged wine was hard to come by, never mind a corpse steeped for fifty years. Young Master Dong’s father probably wasn’t even fifty years old—who would pay such a high price to kill a frail young lordling?

With Dong Zhang’s physique, wouldn’t stabbing him once have killed him?

Could all this trouble really have been for the purpose of having him be his own mourner before dying and taking along a few drivers and servants?

“Commander.” Just then, one of the blue-clothesers who had gone to make inquiries returned and reported, “Imperial Duke Li’s manor went to bed early. The duke is elderly and couldn’t stand this in the middle of the night. The manor’s servants didn’t dare to alarm him. There were casualties at the manors of both Vice-President Sun of the Board of Rites and Lord Lu of the Imperial Court of Justice. I put together cleansing arrays for them and left behind calming talismans. The Yongning Marquis Manor didn’t open their door at the time, but their Viscount had just come home. He met the Dong manor’s carriage and just happened to witness the paper money killing people...”

Pang Jian and Zhao Yu spoke almost at the same time.

“That idiot straddling the wall just now?” said Pang Jian.

“From the Marquis of Yongning’s family?” said Zhao Yu.

Pang Jian looked at him. Zhao Yu hesitated for a moment, then thought that this business wasn’t hard to look into. It was no good covering it up. So he said, “The one at the pleasure boat ferry crossing last night, the last person he met before his death was also the Viscount of Yongning. I went to see him just this morning.”

“Go, notify them at the Marquis Manor,” Pang Jian said. “There’s serious business at hand. Ask the Viscount to come out and let us have a look.”

CHAPTER 5 - Midnight Song (5)

“I’m not drinking that, give me some wine.” Xi Ping pushed away the mind-calming decoction a page boy was offering him. When the paper money had come to knock at the door, he had been thinking about splashing lamp oil and engaging in a desperate struggle. Now the reaction had hit him, and he broke out in cold sweat all over.

He had only heard of Wang Baochang’s death at the pleasure boat ferry crossing, not seen it with his own eyes, but he had fully witnessed the sight of several living people being wrapped in paper money and turned into rotting flesh. However broad-minded he was, he still couldn’t avoid being shaken.

Now that both his body and mind had calmed down, Xi Ping was also puzzled — why him *again*?

Last night at the pleasure boat ferry crossing, you could have said it was coincidence. After all, the Flower Viewing Festival attracted attention; the pleasant and the repulsive had all come to play.

But now, what about this Young Master Dong from the Office of Protocol official’s family?

The corpse could have walked at any time, but instead it had chosen to cry out just after meeting him in Dangui Lane... Surely it couldn’t be that “Mr. Yu Gan”’s good name had spread down to the Nine Springs of the Underworld and even the walking corpses were lining up to sing for him and be judged?

Just then, a page boy came in to report in a flurry: “Lord Marquis, Heaven’s Design Pavilion’s Assistant Commander is at the door with his people!”

The Marquis of Yongning froze. Hesitating slightly, he said, “Ask them in.”

Then he reached out to give Xi Ping’s shoulder a shove. “Go in and see your mom and the old lady.”

Before Xi Ping could react, the page boy continued: “The Exalted said in particular that he... wants to see our young master.”

Summoned by name by a walker in the mortal world twice in one day. Xi Ping simply thought someone had buried a signal gun in his ancestral tomb. If not, where would all this smoke be coming from?⁴

It smelled a little off to have Heaven's Design Pavilion coming to the door for a second time.

Zhao Yu, whose manner had been quite cordial in the morning, acted like he didn’t know him. Strictly businesslike, he questioned him about where he had been, whom he had seen and spoken to, and ordered an imperial guard standing by to note all of it down regardless of importance, intending to find someone to corroborate all of it.

The silver-belted Commander Pang looked him over with eyes like knives, as if he wanted to cut open his organs and give them a close look.

Young Master Xi was a donkey; if he felt uncomfortable, he was sure to kick, especially since this Pang character had knocked him off the wall earlier—so he expressionlessly shot back a retaliatory look, looking directly into Commander Pang’s eyes like a provocation.

But when he glared, Pang Jian smiled.

This man, who looked like wasn't to be trifled with, in fact had a pair of smiling eyes. He asked, genially, "Were you well acquainted with the two victims?"

Xi Ping said, "I couldn't get away from Wang Sidu, but I wasn't very familiar with Dong Zirui."

"Lord Dong's son was elegant and refined, and studied at the Imperial College. He never had anything to do with this unworthy thing," the Marquis of Yongning put in a timely word. Then, pointing at Xi Ping, he added, "I was always saying that if this devil could have a part of that young man's talents, I would happily die a few years earlier, but now... Who could have guessed that the Dong family would meet with such a calamity! Everyone's been saying that their oldest son was almost certain to enter the immortal sect this year... Ah, isn't this a disaster for his parents?"

The devil Xi Ping lowered his eyelids and rolled his eyes under their cover.

The Dong family was upright and honest, and First Young Master Dong was a pinnacle of righteousness who had never fooled around... he had only kept a "beautiful confidante" outside the city.

Come to think of it, by coincidence, with the Grand Selection happening this year, this confidante had taken a chill from a passing wind at the start of the year and thoughtfully passed away.

It was said that Young Master Dong had been inconsolable on her account. He had worn a white jade hairpin in mourning for three full days.

Apart from the Marquis with his affectations, Xi Ping had never known another proper pampered beauty. At any rate, he couldn't understand how a grown person could catch a chill from a passing wind—Jinping's winters weren't cold, anyway.

In his opinion, another version sounded more credible: it was said that the confidante had been sent on her way by a bowl of abortifacient drugs.

But he could tell that his dad was trying to get him out of this, so he held his tongue and didn't rashly undercut him.

Zhao Yu calmly sighed and said in accordance with the Marquis of Yongning's words: "In fact, it's a pity."

But Pang Jian, as if he hadn't heard at all, was still staring at Xi Ping. He asked, "May I check your pulse, Viscount?"

As you like, Xi Ping thought, extending his arm. Do you want to check whether I'm pregnant?

Two heavily calloused fingers lightly touched his pulse. Next, a faint warm current flowed up his veins and throughout his body. Xi Ping gave a start.

The laughter lines at the corners of the Marquis of Yongning's eyes smoothed at once. He said, grimly, "Exalted, is there something wrong with my son?"

"Nothing." Pang Jian casually drew back his hand. "I suppose the young man likes to play around and often stays out late? He's a little low on vitality."

The Marquis's expression relaxed slightly, but he heard Pang Jian continue: "Though I'm only a dabbler. After all, the Viscount brushed shoulders with a carriage full of corpse poison today. For safety's sake, I'd like to invite him to spend the night at Heaven's Design Pavilion for a thorough inspection as insurance."

What did that mean?

An inspection or an investigation? Was he being invited or arrested?

The Marquis's face instantly froze over. "Last night at the pleasure boat ferry crossing, quite a few people encountered the corpse. As far as I can see, they're all right. My son is willful and mischievous, the honor is too..."

Xi Ping spoke almost at the same time: "All right, then, when are we going? Should I take a page boy?"

The Marquis: "..."

Several gazes fell on Xi Ping, sheltered behind the Marquis of Yongning. Xi Ping, like an idiot who didn't know good from bad, had no idea what "going to Heaven's Design Pavilion" meant; he casually said to the Marquis, "Dad, let me go, I've never been to Heaven's Design Pavilion."

"Troublemaker!" The Marquis turned his head and scolded, "Heaven's Design Pavilion is no place to fool around!"

"Why shouldn't I stay the night? It's not like I'll wet the bed."

The Marquis was so angry his mustache curled.

Then Xi Ping said, "If I close my eyes now, I can still see that dead... still see Dong-xiong batting his eyelashes at me, and I feel chilled all over. I'll certainly have nightmares tonight. So let the Exalted take me to Heaven's Design Pavilion to pick up some of the immortal aura and build up my courage. I'll take Haozhong with me. I promise I won't make trouble for the Exalted... Should I take my own bedroll, Exalted?"

Pang Jian smiled. "The head office has guest rooms."

Hearing this, Xi Ping didn't wait for the Marquis to speak. Without getting permission, he agreed at once: "All right, I'll go send someone to pack my things!"

And this was the sole scion of the Yongning Marquis Manor: from childhood, he had been impervious to any kind of persuasion or coercion.

Normally when the Marquis chased him with the discipline rod, he was willing to run around a little out of respect for his father and to give the old fellow some exercise. When he was really fixed on some idea, he didn't listen to anyone.

After he had agreed, Xi Ping didn't even look at the Marquis's face, which was black as the bottom of a pot. Swift as lightning, he sent someone to pack his things, then joyfully got into Heaven's Design Pavilion's carriage. Before leaving, he even heartlessly stuck his head out of the carriage and waved at the Marquis. "Dad, I'll be home to eat at noon tomorrow, leave me something good! His Third Highness has nothing but soup and porridge, I haven't been able to eat my fill all day!"

If there hadn't been outsiders present, the Marquis of Yongning's curses probably would have reverberated off the Lingyang River.

Hearing him mention Prince Zhuang, Pang Jian's gaze flickered. He said, smiling, "Not to worry, we won't starve you."

The walkers in the mortal world had come bearing fire and went like the wind, leaving behind only a series of armored imperial guardsmen closely surrounding Dangui Lane in case of further mishap.

On the south end of the street, all the houses sent brave servants to clean up the filth at their doorsteps. Quite a few people saw Heaven's Design Pavilion take Xi Ping away. But servants of great

houses all know when to pretend to be deaf and mute. They glanced over and immediately looked down without making a sound.

Later that night, the south end of the street was still. When occasionally an imperial guardsman's weapons and armor touched lightly, the *clank* sounded far off, startling many people out of sleep.

The middle-aged man waited until the courtyard was completely silent before taking out a wooden protection amulet.

He dipped a thin pin in water and wrote on the wooden amulet: *Horn Tower heard mourning wail, arrived in the blink of an eye, six people. Xi has been taken.*

His writing was crooked, like a child just starting to learn. The water didn't soak into the wooden amulet. When he had written the last stroke, he bit through his index finger and pressed a drop of blood to the wood. Instantly, both the water writing and the blood were absorbed by the wooden amulet, and its surface was left as bright and clean as before.

After a moment, the wooden amulet warmed slightly, and three words appeared on it out of nowhere. These were in exquisite regular script, evidently penned by another hand. This hand wrote: *According to plan.*

The unremarkable protection amulet in the servant's hand was actually an immortal tool that conveyed messages!

The middle-aged man closed his eyes and gently let out a breath. Then he wiped away the water droplets on the wooden amulet and wrote once more: *Brother 32 died for the cause as he wished.*

He paused, then used blood to send this sentence. Then, struggling to keep his finger from shaking, he wrote on the wooden amulet,

one stroke at a time: *The conflagration burns on, the cry of the cicada is without end.*

The wooden amulet was silent for a moment. Then the person on the other end responded: *Better to die in frost than to forsake one's convictions.*

Meanwhile, Xi Ping, taken by Heaven's Design Pavilion, was still quite at his ease.

He was at his ease everywhere, as though he had been born without the concept of reserve. In the carriage, he impudently sized up Pang Jian—it was said that Heaven's Design Pavilion's chief was in seclusion, and this Assistant Commander currently commanded the defense of the capital city and environs. He was a grand personage. There was normally no opportunity to get a look at him. Since he was here now, it would be a waste not to look.

Sitting upright, Pang Jian's back was as straight as a pole. The hands laying on his knees had prominent knuckles. The veins wrapped around his wrists coiled slightly. There were calluses on his fingertips and palms, and quite a few old scars unevenly pitting the backs of his hands. Next to him, Zhao Yu sat minding his own business. His manner toward him was very respectful. When Xi Ping remembered the true nature of this youthful-faced "Grandfather Zhao," he couldn't resist wondering: So how old is Assistant Commander Pang?

Pang Jian said, "Do you have something to ask?"

Xi Ping grinned familiarly at him. "I was thinking that you threw that little flag and stuck it right into the south street flagstones, but you only look a few years older than me. How did you train to do that?"

Pang Jian answered, "By being a few years older than you."

“How many years?” said Xi Ping.

Pang Jian unhurriedly answered, “Not many. Just another turn of the sixty-year cycle.”

Xi Ping: “...”

Excuse *me*, Grandfather Pang!

“But I’m curious—normally, when a person gets taken away by Heaven's Design Pavilion in the middle of the night, he’ll be a little nervous.” Pang Jian looked Xi Ping over. “Even the Marquis was troubled. But you don’t seem to have taken it to heart at all.”

“It’s just that our Marquis takes things too hard. Don’t take offense, Exalted.” Xi Ping crossed one leg over the other casually. “Two days in a row, I ran into someone who went and turned into a walking corpse. Can that be a coincidence? What happens if I really have picked up something unclean?”

Pang Jian hadn’t expected him to lay it out directly. His eyebrows lifted slightly.

Xi Ping continued: “It’s one thing if I could just quietly pop off like Big... like Wang Sidu, at worst I’d become a ghost the next day and go get revenge. But what if I end up like Dong-xiong today and drag other people in before I die? Our Lord Marquis may still be nimble, but there’s my old grandmother, who’s in her seventies. For safety’s sake, I’d rather sit in prison at Heaven's Design Pavilion.”

This was intolerable. Zhao Yu wanted to protect him on Prince Zhuang’s account, but hearing this, he couldn’t resist giving a cough.

Pang Jian, smiling, said, “It won’t come to that.”

Xi Ping looked around. Now that he was done babbling, he showed off his cleverness: "I know. On His Third Highness's account, you Exalted won't put me in an awkward position."

Pang Jian really did feel a trace of increased respect for him.

On his first sight of the Viscount of Yongning, he had thought he was an idiot wrapped in gold and silver. Hearing him drag Prince Zhuang in as insurance before leaving, he had seemed like a pampered rich boy getting up to little tricks. Having attracted a bit of malice, he then plopped down and openly displayed his shamelessness, erasing his previous foolish act and his little schemes in one fell stroke.

"Bold, unbridled, and clear-headed," Pang Jian inwardly appraised Xi Ping. "A naturally gifted scoundrel."

Heaven's Design Pavilion was quite polite to Xi Ping. They led him to a guest room and indeed did not starve him. They gave him a midnight snack and some mind-calming decoction.

The blue-clotheser who had led him in kindly told him, "As cultivators, our residence is a little plain compared to the Marquis Manor, but sleeping a night here can calm the mind and cure a hundred illnesses. There's no need to worry about having nightmares."

Xi Ping lined up his small white teeth and gave this Exalted a stupid smile. He thought, If there is anything the matter, then I *am* the "hundred illnesses."

But his conscience was clear. Even if he really did have some "illness," it had been brought on him by someone else. Why should the victim feel guilty? Therefore he magnanimously called over the page boy Haozhong, and the two young fellows polished off the midnight snack that could have fed three or four people.

Master and servant were both broad-minded. After eating and drinking their fill, they were soon both still, one in the inner room and one in the outer room.

The glazed gas lamps hanging from the ceiling seemed to know that they were asleep. They dimmed on their own.

Dozing off, Xi Ping felt that there seemed to be something around him, watching him. But his eyelids were too heavy. He really couldn't open them. He simply rolled over, letting those gazes enjoy the view as they liked.

Faint light came from the four walls, like a twilight glow. Then a strange "mural" seeped out of the wall—the drawing was of several monsters like big-eyed lamps. The eyes of the monsters in the "mural" could actually move. As their big eyes turned, their gazes fell together on Xi Ping.

Next, not only did their eyes move, the monsters' bodies also began to scurry over the walls, turning circles around Xi Ping.

All of a sudden, one of them seemed to smell something. It leapt from the wall onto the bed curtain, changing from a "mural" to "embroidery" on the curtain.

The sinister "embroidery" quickly climbed down the bed curtain to the quilt and onto Xi Ping's chest!

Just then, by chance, Xi Ping rolled over. Something he had dropped was chafing him. He dug around impatiently and pushed the thing aside, then curled back up under the quilt, coming right under the monster's fangs, as if trying to catch the monster's drool with his face.

The big-eyed monster, nose to nose with him, was almost embarrassed. It backed up a little and shyly sniffed around for a while, the anger on its face gradually changing to doubt. It gathered up its friends and crawled from the quilt onto the mattress. The monsters it had called over split up and searched inside the bed curtains. After a moment, one of the “big-eyed lamps” found the little silk brocade bag that Xi Ping had pushed to the edge of the bed.

The “big-eyed lamp” went over and sniffed, then recoiled as though it had smelled a pile of excrement; it shook its head hard a few times and scoffed toward Xi Ping, suspecting him of having produced it.

The monsters with eyes as big as dippers came close and surrounded the little silk brocade bag. They communicated silently for a moment, then finally decided that this thing, while its stench was unbearable, seemed to be harmless.

After examining Xi Ping from head to foot for half a shichen, the beasts’ bodies at last faded from the walls, quilt, and mattress. The strange murals and embroidery disappeared, and the faint light dimmed. Quiet was restored in the room.

CHAPTER 6 - Midnight Song (6)

Around first light, two figures landed in the rear court of Xi Ping's guest room. These were Pang Jian and Zhao Yu.

“After leaving the Imperial College yesterday, the deceased Dong Zhang left the city under the guise of an outing in the countryside. In reality, he went to visit a grave.” Zhao Yu briefly reported the matter of Young Master Dong keeping a mistress outside the city. “In the carriage he rode in before his death, the imperial guard discovered a proposal card on red paper. The horoscope written on it is the same as on the paper money he scattered—the horoscope of his mistress.”

“I see, a love affair's debt from the netherworld,” Pang Jian said coolly. “I'm afraid this Young Master Dong didn't go to visit a grave. With the Grand Selection at hand, he was worried that his ‘golden house outside the world’ would be discovered, and he went to get his affairs in order, right?”

Xuanyin Mountain valued cleverness in its disciples more than Kunlun and the other sects did, so in the Grand Selection, it didn't choose children whose intellects had yet to develop; the males had to be over sixteen, and the females over fifteen.

The immortal path was long, and commonplace worries were a great hindrance. The immortal sect stipulated that those who were selected could not be married.

But the Grand Selection came only once in ten years. This was too hard on the scions of Jinping's upper ranks—before each Grand Selection, nameless bastard children and their nameless mothers died in batches; Pang Jian was already used to it.

“Well... he must have visited the grave, too.” Zhao Yu sighed and quietly said, “The driver driving Dong Zhang’s carriage last night was his mistress’s father.”

Pang Jian frowned. “Do you mean the driver who was the first to die of the bitter fleabane curse when the carriage door opened?”

“That’s right,” Zhao Yu said. “If the driver hadn’t died, we would have had to take him to the Quell and thoroughly inspect him.”

“Does he have any surviving family members?”

“No, he was a widower, and this daughter was his only child. She died at the beginning of the year. He worked as a servant and had a taciturn disposition. Apart from driving, he had no other communication with people. We found nothing at his residence. There was a considerable amount of ashes from burned paper under the bed. He had clearly burned everything there was to burn... Commander, as I see it, this really is the customary style of evil cultivators.”

A bitter life, a solitary existence, no contact with others.

“I see,” said Pang Jian, unable to deny it. He approached the guest room and listened to the sounds within. “He’s sleeping pretty soundly. This kid can keep his cool.”

“If he can sleep peacefully under the noses of eight karma beasts, he may truly have nothing on his conscience,” Zhao Yu said. “The investigation shows that Dong Zhang’s death must be connected to the driver. Provided that the karma beasts also think there’s nothing wrong with the Viscount of Yongning, then perhaps he really...”

Pang Jian put his hands behind his back and looked at him calmly, his expression hard to read.

Zhao Yu weighed his gestures and looks and immediately changed tack. “Though it’s still too much of a coincidence to run into him twice. I think we should investigate the people he has daily contact with. They must all be Jinping City residents with known backgrounds. It won’t be hard.”

Hearing this, Pang Jian smiled, thinking that this Zhao was worthy of his family name; he didn’t let anything slip by.

Everything he had said seemed neutral, but actually he was quietly pushing the Viscount of Yongning out of the business, not forgetting to hint that Xi Ping’s family background was clean, so even if he had been pulled into some dirty business, he must be passive and innocent.

“Fine, you take the lead in the investigation, I won’t take part. Ah, I’m a country bumpkin, I can’t compare to all of you with your great families. I can’t make sense of all the relationships between those people in Dangu Lane.” Pang Jian looked at the pitch-dark guest room and said, meaningfully, “This pretty boy has some connections.”

Xi Ping, the pretty boy with connections, slept until full daylight.

He regularly went to bed late and didn’t get up until the morning was over; it had been a long time since he had had such a substantial sleep. His whole body had limbered up. He was just about to get out of bed and call for Haozhong to come and attend him when something rubbed against him uncomfortably.

Xi Ping vaguely felt around and pulled a small silk brocade bag out from under his butt. Only then did he remember that Jiangli had given him a present.

Last night had been too bizarre; he had forgotten about this detail.

Xi Ping quickly tore open the silk brocade bag and took out a piece of red jade. The color wasn't pure enough for blood jade. It was a bit big, without any decorative carvings on it. It looked like it cost less than the bag itself. But there was a faint, subtle fragrance permeating the jade, which was as sleek as soft skin. At a glance, this was something kept close by a woman year in, year out.

What did she mean by giving him a close possession? Any normal person could understand that. Xi Ping was a little fed up with this and was just about to toss it aside when he felt notches on the other side of the jade.

He casually turned the piece of jade over and saw the small line of writing on it: *Baishao of the Ning'an Chen family, Ding Chou year, 4th month, 9th day, Mao hour.*⁵

The Ning'an Chen family? Who was this?

There wasn't so much as a flower carved on the piece of jade. What kind of signature was this? Anyway, a signature would only be accompanied by a year and month, occasionally a day. No one would write in the time of day as well, not like a horoscope...

Wait, a horoscope!

With a start, Xi Ping's head cleared.

No... This wasn't a signature; it was a place of origin, given name and surname, and horoscope!

It was an old custom in Great Wan for young ladies to carry a "birthday jade" close to their bodies from childhood. When it came time to negotiate a marriage, after the matchmaking and betrothal gifts were done, the bride would give the groom her birthday jade.

The groom would accept the jade and give a pearl in return, fulfilling the perfect pair of pearl and jade.

In other words, a birthday jade with a horoscope carved on it was approximately equivalent to a marriage proposal.

He had heard that a birthday jade had also fallen off of Wang Baochang's body. And the instructions Exalted Zhao had given him earlier at Prince Zhuang Manor sounded in his ears—don't accept anything with a horoscope written on it, or anything resembling a marriage proposal note!

Xi Ping hurled the piece of jade to the foot of the bed, jumped up, and slapped himself all over, as though improving his circulation could protect him against turning into a walking corpse.

Overnight, he had nearly forgotten Dong Zhang's discontented rotting face. Now, with this suspicious birthday jade as a reminder, he once again recalled it.

He hadn't even had a chance to be a human's husband yet; was he going to be forced to be a ghost's husband? And they'd have to shave his head after he died!

Was this the tragic fate of all beauties?

No way, Xi Ping thought, he absolutely couldn't agree to this marriage!

Without even putting on his shoes, he prepared to charge out the door, planning to let out a shout and beg the blue-clothed Exalted to "beat apart the lovebirds."

Haozhong was putting away the bedding in the outer room when he watched dumbfounded as his young master shot out like a firecracker, scaring away the second half of his yawn.

“Young master, what...”

Then he saw the young master slap the guest room door and interrupt him with a raised hand, his expression imposing. In this pose, he pondered for a while. Then, as if sleepwalking, he turned and went back to his room.

When Xi Ping had reached the door, he had suddenly remembered that this jade had been given to him by Jiangli.

Jiangli wanting to hurt him... that didn't make sense.

First, he thought he was the most lovable man on earth. He absolutely didn't believe that a woman could stand to hurt him.

Second, he had treated Jiangli fairly, even worn chest-baring, open-backed female clothing in public and outshone all the discontented female ghosts of Jinping. What more did she want?

Taking the most extreme view, even if Jiangli hated him out of thwarted love, she could have put rat poison in his wine any time, enough to kill him eight times over. There was no need for her to arrange a posthumous marriage for him.

Xi Ping picked up the red jade with a towel. He was puzzled—if Jiangli didn't want to hurt him, then what was this thing?

Just then, Zhao Yu's voice came through the window. Xi Ping heard the Exalted ask Haozhong: “Is your young master up?”

This was Heaven's Design Pavilion, not his own home. He couldn't laze around in bed. So Xi Ping quickly put the jade away, hastily cleaned himself up, and went out to see Zhao Yu.

Exalted Zhao had accepted Prince Zhuang's ancient painting. In front of others, he avoided the suspicion of bias, but in private he treated Xi Ping much more kindly. First he said a lot of pleasant nonsense, all "keeping him at the head office was a mere formality, they didn't suspect of him anything" and so on. Then he gave him a small porcelain bottle. "I've heard that the Marquis has heart disease. It was unavoidable for us to disturb him last night. These heart pills were refined by an elder of mine in the sect. This medicine is mild. Ordinary people can use it. Take it to your father for me. Another day I'll pay a visit to apologize."

Xi Ping accepted the bottle and thanked him. Then Zhao Yu said, smiling, "You're very young, but you don't panic in the face of trouble and have a tranquil mind. You may have a great future ahead of you."

Xi Ping didn't take this flattery seriously, and further deduced that Exalted Zhao must have spied on him while he was sleeping last night—only when he was fast asleep did he have anything to do with the word "tranquil." So he asked, "Exalted, have I been cleared of suspicion?"

The laughter lines at the corners of Zhao Yu's mouth froze. He couldn't tell whether this wastrel was clever or stupid; he was very direct. So he said, "Your family background is clean. There was no suspicion to start with. It was as you said. We kept you here for a night only because we were worried you had crossed paths with evil cultivators without knowing it."

Xi Ping readily changed his wording: "So, Exalted, am I still clean? I haven't picked up anything dirty?"

Zhao Yu: "..."

"You... are fine for now." Captain Zhao was sophisticated, after all; he forced his calm Bodhisattva's face to remain in place and softly

said, “Go home now, don’t make your family worry.”

Squeezing the little porcelain bottle Exalted Zhao had given him, Xi Ping thought that the scrap of painting that looked like vegetable peelings his san-ge had given Zhao Yu must have been rare indeed if it could make a great walker in the mortal world wish to curry favor with him.

His wicked mind cranked away, considering the matter. He felt that the painting Prince Zhuang had given Exalted Zhao, instead of being a precious gift, was a honeyed handle over him. So he had to try to pressing his luck: “But, Exalted, I’m still scared. Isn’t there something you can give that can... keep me safe?”

Zhao Yu paused. The look in his eyes became slightly grim as he watched Xi Ping.

Xi Ping put on a convincing show of nervousness. “If I so much as think of the south street covered in paper money last night, I don’t dare to go home. Though I suppose it’s been cleaned up, what if there are still a few pieces in some nook or cranny, hiding in the cracks of a stone or a brick wall? Ah, why don’t I go to Prince Zhuang Manor again today to scrounge a meal...”

He was interrupted by Zhao Yu placing a fan in front of his eyes.

The ribs of the fan were quite plain and neat. When the fan was opened, there were auspicious cloud patterns at the corners, and in the center was drawn a monster with eyes that took up half its head —just the same as the “embroidery” and “mural” in Xi Ping’s room last night.

As soon as Xi Ping opened the fan, the monster on the paper moved on its own. It first dug with its front legs, like a dog or cat burying excrement, then dashed to the other side of the fan!

“What kind of magic weapon is this?”

“It’s not a magic weapon,” Zhao Yu said. “This is Heaven's Design Pavilion’s sacred karma beast. Tradition says that it’s a sacred beast that belonged to the Southern Sage. It abhors evil. It can pass through paper, silk, walls... any place apart from the ground where there is something written or drawn—if there isn’t anything drawn in a place, you can just scribble down a few words. When common evil objects encounter karma beasts, they burn up. If you meet with paper money like last night’s again, you can wave it away with the fan.”

Xi Ping gave a cry and put the fan away. “Then I won’t stand on ceremony. Thank you, Exalted!”

Zhao Yu had no more attention to spare for him. He only wanted to make the brat get lost. “If you remember anything else, you can send someone to let us know.”

When he said this, Xi Ping remembered the birthday jade he was carrying and was just about to mention it when a blue-clotheser charged over at a gallop. “*Huff*—Zhao-shixiong, is the commander here?”

Before Zhao Yu could answer, Pang Jian walked straight through the courtyard wall in response. “Well, what are you panicking about?”

Damn! The legendary walking through walls technique!

Xi Ping stared at Pang Jian, for a time forgetting how to speak—with this skill, he’d be able to get in wherever he wanted when he came home in the middle of the night; he wouldn’t be caught at the door and scolded by his father!

Then the blue-clotheser jumped off his horse and took out a gaudy paper card. “Commander, Zhao-shixiong, please look at this.”

“What is this?”

Xi Ping craned his neck and glanced at it. “A Flower Viewing Invitation from Overflowing Splendor?”

“Yes, it’s a ticket to a private room on the last day of the Flower Viewing Festival,” the blue-clothed half-immortal said. He rubbed the card open; it turned out that the card had two layers. When it was torn open, there was crooked, dark red bloody writing hidden on the back; written there was a horoscope!

“Let me see it.” Pang Jian narrowed his eyes, then turned and asked Xi Ping, “Did you touch one of these?”

“No.” Xi Ping shook his head. “I didn’t need a ticket. I got in on the strength of my face.”

“Oh, well, pardon my manners,” Pang Jian said with undisguised sarcasm. He looked away, his expression cooling. He ordered: “Bring me Overflowing Splendor’s boss, its madam, all the stewards, whoever wrote these invitations, and whoever bought the pen, ink, and paper. Throw them in the Quell and question them!”

Xi Ping stared blankly.

Every child in Great Wan knew about the “Quell.” Naughty children had all grown up hearing “If you don’t behave, I’ll have you shut up in the Quell.” It was said that this was the place where Heaven’s Design Pavilion kept evil cultivators. A hundred thousand evil monsters wailed there every night. If a mortal went in, they wouldn’t come out.

Was this... so serious?

But apart from him, none of the observers seemed to have any objections.

Zhao Yu asked, “Should we close down Overflowing Splendor?”

“Obviously! A filthy place that harbors evil practices like that should have been closed down long ago!” After this piece of misplaced blame, Pang Jian glanced at Xi Ping impatiently. “Viscount, if you haven’t received anything like this, please leave. Or is there something else?”

There was nothing else. Xi Ping made himself scarce. He picked up the page boy Haozhong and left.

It was only now that he realized that not just anyone could stay in Heaven's Design Pavilion’s “guest rooms.”

Without a prince for a cousin and an imperial consort for an aunt, however big your business, however wide your network, if you fell under suspicion of evil arts, you would soon end up in the Quell waiting to be interrogated.

So... it went without saying what would happen to a prostitute, as unmoored as wild grass.

In the blink of an eye, Xi Ping came to a decision. He had to conceal the jade.

Such a sensitive thing at such a sensitive time—if the Exalted learned of it, they would certainly throw her in the Quell. With Jiangli’s physique, could she survive that?

Anyway, he didn’t know what was going on with the birthday jade yet. He couldn’t kill her so negligently.

The bustle of the Flower Viewing Festival had been like a fire with oil thrown on it, dazzlingly luxuriant, but it had vanished as if blown away by a strong wind. The brothel from two nights ago became a rathole. It was all gone. The monkeys had scattered; even the silks at the door had faded.

It was said that none of the stewards escaped; all of them went to the Quell.

As for the girls in the house, because of their status, they couldn't precisely count as people, so they weren't sent to squat in prison; instead, like Outstanding Splendor's cats, dogs, and parrots, they were shut up in the house and not permitted to go out, to make it convenient to question them—this was what Haozhong went and found out after Xi Ping came home from Heaven's Design Pavilion.

Xi Ping asked, "What about Jiangli? Has she also been shut up in the house?"

"Miss Jiangli isn't there," Haozhong answered. "By coincidence, she left for the south of the city this morning."

"Why did she go to the south of the city?"

"She said she'd gone to Southern Sage Temple to burn incense and make a vow before, and it worked—she took the camellia crown, didn't she? So she went to fulfill her vow."

Xi Ping nearly split his sides laughing—Southern Sage Temple was over ten li south of Jinping. Legend said it was the spot where the state sect Xuanyin's founder had ascended to Heaven. Xuanyin had nearly written "men and women must not have direct contact" into the decrees of Heaven, and someone had actually gone to pray for the camellia crown at Southern Sage Temple!

Xi Ping said, "As if! If it had really worked, the old Southern Sage would have sent down a bolt of lightning to cook her! What was she thinking?"

Haozhong said, "Young master, why don't I go meet her on her way back? I can tell Miss Jiangli to find someplace to hide for now instead of going back. There's such a fuss at Overflowing Splendor..."

"Fine." Xi Ping hesitated, then nodded. "Here, if you see her, ask her for me about yesterday, why she gave me..."

At this point, he stopped talking. For a long moment, there was no follow-up.

Haozhong waited for a long time and couldn't resist asking, "What did she give you yesterday?"

"Forget it, don't worry about it, I'll go myself." Xi Ping glanced at the sky. If he went out now, he would certainly be able to come back before nightfall. So he stepped right into his riding boots. "Close the windows and doors for me. If my dad and the others ask, say I didn't sleep well at Heaven's Design Pavilion and I'm making it up."

"No, young master... Ah, young master!" Haozhong's small features twisted. Before he could protest, Xi Ping had run off.

A perfectly good Viscount; what a pity he had grown legs.

Though Xi Ping didn't believe that Jiangli wanted to hurt him, it was still hard not to get hung up on her giving him such a thing at a time like this: both Wang Baochang and Dong Zhang had only gone off after running into him, the tampered-with Flower Viewing Invitation just happened to come from Overflowing Splendor, and Jiangli, who had for no reason at all given him a birthday jade as a gift, just

happened to leave the city and avoid the investigation at Overflowing Splendor.

If this was all coincidence, then there were too many coincidences.

A normal person in his position, having seen Dong Zhang's death with his own eyes and been dragged into this strange business, would have handed the birthday jade over to Heaven's Design Pavilion by now.

But the Viscount was accomplished at courting disaster. He had never followed common sense.

He had decided to say nothing and go to Jiangli himself to have her explain the story behind the birthday jade.

Even if there was something the matter with this thing, if he could only get back before nightfall, he would still have time to go to Heaven's Design Pavilion to beg to be saved. If there was nothing wrong with the jade, and he pissed himself with fear because there was a horoscope written on it and got a young woman thrown into the Quell over it, could he still claim to have balls?

So, carrying a heavy weight of boldness and his own principles, Xi Ping left the city by the south gate.

On leaving the south gate, there was the grand canal. On the banks of the canal, apart from crude laborers' houses, there were factories shrouded in smoke, the machines inside them droning without regard for night and day. Near the banks there was a layer of green oil floating on the water, making a foul stink.

Along the river were peddlers selling mixed grain flatbreads. The vendors, more dead than alive, cried out "two for one." Workers naked to the waist squatted by the banks, eating amid the brackish reek from the dirty water.

The atmosphere was foul, but on the southern mountains' Sage's Road, there wasn't a speck of dirt.

This mountain road went to Southern Sage Temple and had a carved marble railing on both sides, the height of a man. Carved into the railing weren't auspicious animals or clouds, but inscriptions to eliminate dust and expel dirt. Inlaid along the bottom of the fence were jade stamp spiritual stones. Mixed with the rare sight of spring in the south of the city, it seemed like an immortal road that had accidentally ended up in the mortal world.

As soon as Xi Ping left by the city gate, he covered his nose. He puffed out his cheeks and chest, holding his breath until he had ridden quickly onto Sage's Road, when he opened his nostrils and breathed.

To go to Southern Sage Temple, you had to go and return by Sage's Road. Reckoning the time, Jiangli would be coming back now. He could meet her on the way. Jiangli's driver Lao Zhang was a hunchback, particularly hunched; you could see him from two li off. And the road wasn't busy now. He couldn't miss them.

But instead, Xi Ping rode all the way to Southern Sage Temple Mountain without seeing a shade of Jiangli.

The sun had begun to sink into the west by now. It wasn't New Year or a festival, and it wasn't the first or fifteenth of the month; there were hardly any worshippers at Southern Sage Temple. There were just a few coaches tied up at the post outside the temple. Xi Ping asked around; everyone said they hadn't seen Hunchbacked Zhang.

In spite of himself, he felt an apprehension: was that dog Haozhong dependable?

Just then, someone chimed in next to him: “The hunchbacked driver? I saw him. He didn’t stop at the post.”

Xi Ping looked around and saw an old man harnessing an ox cart near the teahouse, getting ready to wind up business.

As he worked, the old man muttered, “That man with a back even more bent than mine. When he finished making his purchase, he went south. I didn’t see him come back.”

“What did he buy?” said Xi Ping.

“Flowers.” The old man put his hands together and gestured toward Xi Ping, illustrating. “I brought a lot of white flowers today and thought I couldn’t sell all of them, but he bought them all up. Someone in the underworld has a guest today.”

Someone in the underworld...

Xi Ping froze. He looked south in the direction the old man was pointing—that was the direction of the south city’s Blissful Village.

The Blissful Village was a set of graves, done up quite properly, with someone to guard and take care of it daily, but it wasn’t a proper graveyard. Most of the names carved on the gravestones were false names—slave girls gone missing from beside the sons of the noble and wealthy, precious daughters who had lost their chastity and committed suicide, concubines kicked out of noble manors, batch after batch of “famous flowers” wilted on either side of a pleasure boat... These people, who couldn’t see the light of day, who couldn’t leave behind their names, all settled here when they had left the world of the living.

Jiangli had claimed to be going to Southern Sage Temple to fulfill a vow, but actually she had snuck off to the Blissful Village to visit a grave?

Xi Ping found out from the old flower seller that they hadn't come back, so he urged his horse toward the Blissful Village.

He felt no taboo about the dead, and there was nothing to be afraid of about the Blissful Village. Though it was a graveyard, it had long since become one of Jinping's destinations. Each year on Qing Ming and the Winter Clothing Festival, rich and idle young men would get together to go burn paper goods at the Blissful Village. This was known euphemistically as "paying homage to lovely souls." They didn't come empty-handed. Since they were already coming, they had to leave behind some eulogies, so the old pagoda trees and ancient cypresses were stuck full of nonsensical funeral orations, as if the trees had a skin condition. It was sickening enough to disperse any trace of ghostliness.

When Xi Ping reached the Blissful Village, perhaps because of the damp in the air, a fog rose in the woods. He pulled his horse to a stop. The horse snorted and continuously beat its two front hooves against the ground.

Animals were always unusually sensitive to places where bodies were buried. Xi Ping took no notice. He raised his voice and called for the grave guard. "Liu-ye, are you there?"

Liu-ye was the solitary old man who guarded the graves. He lived in a little cottage outside of the Blissful Village. Every month, he received twenty jin of grain and half a string of copper coins. In his spare time, he raised chickens and grew vegetables in his yard.

The chickens weren't there now. There was only the old man, on his own, bent and loosening the soil for his vegetables.

Perhaps because he was old, his digging movements were unusually heavy, like a machine ready to rust.

“Hey, old man, rest for a moment.” Xi Ping took a piece of silver from his pocket and flicked it, tossing it into Liu-ye’s little yard. “I want to ask you something. Has anyone come here today?”

Liu-ye stared at the silver bead fallen at his feet. He stopped digging and nodded slowly.

Xi Ping said, “A young woman with a hunchbacked driver, right? Did they leave?”

“Uh-huh.” Liu-ye may have been senile. It cost him an effort to speak. After a long time, he finally spat out the words, “Still here.”

“Fine... Oh, right, do you know who they came to pay their respects to?”

The old grave guard was hard of hearing. Xi Ping asked twice, but he didn’t hear him, only concentrated on digging.

“Tsk, old thing.” Xi Ping ran out of patience. Seeing that it was getting late, he didn’t waste any more time talking to the old man. He urged his horse on into the woods.

Strange to say, his horse had just been unwilling to go into the woods no matter what, but now, there was no need for its master’s urging. As soon as the reins loosened, it dashed in.

The fog became thicker and thicker. Soon there was no trace of the man and horse who had gone into the woods, as if they had been swallowed by the fog.

Then, the thick fog spilled over from the woods and surrounded the grave guard’s little cottage.

The solitary grave guard hit the reeking earth with his rake. With a *pop*, something fell off his face and into the hole in the earth. When

it fell, it rolled out...

It wasn't a bead of sweat. It was a clouded eyeball.

As before, the old man brandished his rake again and again, completely unaware.

CHAPTER 7 - Midnight Song (7)

“Shh—” Xi Ping quickly pulled his horse, which had suddenly gone mad, to a halt.

The wind raised by the horse knocked down the “husband’s funeral oration” on the ancient pagoda tree next to them. The ragged paper covered Xi Ping’s face, stinking. With one hand, he kept a tight hold on the horse; with the other, he tore away the rotting paper and saw the masterpiece on it. It said:

*Beauties fill the Blissful Village, lithe forms lying on display.
Next year when the moss grows green, all their suitors here will play.*

“Ugh!” said Xi Ping.

The horse shot forward another few zhang and nearly stepped on someone’s burial mound. It raised its front hooves high. With its big, fearful eyes staring, it whinnied.

Sadly, its master didn’t know its mind. He didn’t understand what it meant and even kicked it.

“Stupid thing, where are you running off to!”

The terrain of the Blissful Village wasn’t complicated. There was a paved road dug out around the graves where carriages could pass. Within were numerous little dirt roads made by the trampling of the “poets” who came to pay their respects to the beautiful souls.

Jiangli’s carriage wasn’t stopped outside, so it must have gone into the graveyard. If a carriage went in, it could only travel along the paved road. If he went along the paved road, he was sure to run into them. As Xi Ping thought this, he forced his horse into a trot, hitting and cursing.

But as they trotted, he noticed that something was wrong.

Was the Blissful Village... this big?

In Xi Ping's memory, the big road and little roads put together wouldn't take more than three ke to stroll around on foot. But he had trotted on horseback for ages without even coming to the end of the paved road—he couldn't even find the entrance where he had come in.

It was nearly dark, and the fog was growing thicker and thicker. Xi Ping had the impression that something had broken off the beginning and end of this paved road and turned it into an endless loop. Looking around, the weathered ancient pagoda trees and ancient cypresses all seemed to have come out of the same mold. Dense fog flowed between their branches. He could see nothing clearly past three chi away. Even the shapes of the trees were flickering shadows.

The third time he passed a branching path, Xi Ping stopped his horse and muttered, "I feel like I've seen this path before. What do you think?"

With its long face grim, the horse gave another sharp whinny.

Xi Ping thought about it. "Come on, let's go have a look... Hey, I said come on!"

He was bravely advancing, but his horse was desperately retreating; it absolutely refused to budge.

Xi Ping wrestled with it for a while and truly couldn't move the useless animal, so he had to tie the horse to a tree by the road and proclaim that at the New Year's feast at the Marquis Manor this year, there would be "a plate set aside for it" on the table.

Then he bundled up the hem of his robe and simply stepped in.

Xi Ping had heard rumors about the “ghost labyrinth.” If he ran around blindly here, he might be running forever. Instead, he was going to go in and see what kind of amorous ghost had coveted his handsome looks and trapped him here.

Xi Ping hadn't planned on saying out all night, and he hadn't brought a lantern. He only had a jadeite tinderbox—he usually used it to light his grandmother's pipe.

He shook the tinderbox and felt that it was nearly out of fuel. He depressed the spring. The Moon Plated Gold cogs turned the firesteel around for ages, like a donkey pulling a carriage, before finally warming up slightly. The flame wouldn't pop out. Xi Ping picked up a stick and tested it, but it was too wet to catch fire, so he tossed it aside and picked his way blindly toward the depths of the thicket.

He wasn't scared, and he didn't care about the big and small graves lined up on either side of the path.

The thicket covered the graves so thoroughly that they never saw the light of day, burying these people who had never seen the light of day while living. From birth to death, they seemed to have simply moved from one coffin to another, always silent, and in death they remained silent in boundlessly absurd lewdness. As Xi Ping walked, he tore down the amorous verses drooping like hanged ghosts, thinking that if these ghosts were the type to go haunting, they would long ago have gone to get their revenge. They wouldn't still be in the Blissful Village putting up with this bullshit.

Whoever had used the ghost labyrinth to lure him in probably had a grievance to report.

But all around it was still uncomfortably peaceful, and it was dark. He kept tripping. Cursing, Xi Ping groped around for a while. Then he felt he was being too irascible. It wasn't appropriate to spit out so many "lotuses" in front of the lovely souls. So he decided to whistle a little tune to calm his mind.

His thoughts went astray, and he began to whistle the Soul Calling Melody that Wang Baochang and Dong Zhang had sung before their deaths.

The Soul Calling Melody was passed from mouth to mouth among the common people. There were many versions. It had a general outline, but the concrete details had to be filled in by the mourners themselves.

As for Mr. Yu Gan's version of the Soul Calling Melody, never mind anything else about it, it won hands down over the others when it came to being sweet-sounding.

While Xi Ping was getting carried away with his own self-importance, all of a sudden, he found that there was an "echo" to his whistle.

He stopped at once, but the "echo" only stopped half a beat after him. Xi Ping's scalp bristled. He put a hand on the ornamental sword at his waist.

At the same time, the person imitating his whistle realized that they had been discovered. There was a rustling in the thicket. That person was burrowing into the depths of the forest!

Despite Xi Ping's immense boldness, his spine still went a little numb, and he instinctively wanted to run in the opposite direction.

But just then, he found that there was a sliver of lantern light piercing the fog not far ahead of him, and footsteps coming along

with the lamplight, in his direction.

On one hand, there was someone... or *something* in the graveyard thicket imitating his whistle, and on the other hand, there was a person carrying a lantern and walking slowly. Reasonably speaking, however you looked at it, the latter seemed a little more normal. This might be a visitor to the graveyard, trapped like he was. It might be Jiangli and her driver.

But in a flash, Xi Ping still turned away and burrowed into the thicket.

His ears and eyes were naturally more acute than normal. Because he had played all kinds of instruments since he was little, he was very sensitive to sounds. In a group of dozens of musicians playing together, he could tell who was playing the wrong note. When the person imitating his whistling had moved, he could tell from the sound of their movements that they were very small and had run off in a panic when discovered.

But on the other hand, he could roughly tell the height of the person carrying the lantern from how high the lantern was off the ground. Jiangli and the old grave guard weren't so tall, never mind the hunchbacked driver.

The paths in the woods weren't as even as the paved road. Even Xi Ping had twisted his ankle several times. Adding in the heavy fog, even with a lantern, how could this person's steps be so steady?

One was an unknown, the other at least sounded like they could be restrained with brute force. Xi Ping quickly considered it and decisively chose to go for the soft target.

He went into the woods at first to hide from the person carrying the lantern, but the person imitating his whistle thought that Xi Ping was chasing them and started to flee wildly. When a person was

nervous, their legs would often be faster than their mind. If someone chased them, they would instinctively run; and if they ran, another person would also instinctively go after them. By the time Xi Ping realized what he was doing, he had already gone in pursuit of the sound.

He was tall and long-legged and could be considered a very good runner, but after he had chased for a while, Xi Ping began to wonder what exactly he was chasing... This thing seemed to be only half the height of a man, but it ran faster than a dog!

In spite of himself, he became apprehensive. Just what kind of demon was he chasing?

All of a sudden, Xi Ping tripped over an old root sticking up from the ground and went sprawling. He just happened to catch the fleeing shape. He seized the opportunity to brandish his sword. When he touched a body, he made a quick grab, and the two of them fell to the ground together.

Then Xi Ping got a clear look at the “thing” he had grabbed. He was shaken—

This was actually a child... a human child!

He had grabbed a little boy with his hair in two childhood knots who, standing, might not even have come up to his waist. He had two perfectly round eyes like grapes. His eyes and brows were rather far apart; he had a natural expression of surprise and confusion.

Why would a child be running around an open graveyard in the middle of the night?

Just then, Xi Ping heard the sound of a horse’s hooves hitting the ground. Before he could look in that direction, the child he was

holding took a deep breath, as though about to scream.

Xi Ping held the child down and covered his mouth. Then he struggled to look out through a crack in the thick woods. Just then, a wind came and blew some of the fog away. Xi Ping squinted and saw a familiar carriage.

The driver's figure was indistinct. His back was bent nearly into a circle—a hunchback.

Lao Zhang?

If the driver was here, where was his master Jiangli? Was she in the carriage, or somewhere nearby?

The old driver's figure seemed to be wet from the fog. It mixed with the interlaced figures of trees in the woods, flickering, like a deformed spirit.

Before Xi Ping could get a close look, lamplight fell into his eyes. He immediately lowered his breathing and crouched closer to the ground—as he was chasing the strange child just now, he had gotten turned around in the thick woods and had accidentally circled around back to the path. The person holding the lantern was also coming here.

The heavy footsteps approached. The shape of the person carrying the lantern gradually appeared.

The newcomer, as Xi Ping had guessed, was a full eight chi tall, wrapped in a big grey cape. He calmly passed by the bushes where Xi Ping was hiding and walked toward Lao Zhang.

As soon as he came near, Lao Zhang's horse took fright. Its front hooves seemed to leave the ground by a chi. It whinnied without stopping. Lao Zhang exclaimed and grasped the reins with one

hand, forcing the horse to stay in place. The strength this must have taken was at least enough to lift several hundred jin, but it didn't occur to Xi Ping to wonder where the old man's strength came from —he had no attention to spare for Lao Zhang, anyway.

Curled up in the bushes, the arteries in his neck pumped fiercely, pushing all his blood out to his limbs—he had seen the face of the man carrying the lantern clearly.

The man had no skin!

The face and hands of the man carrying the lantern were red and white, blood vessels crawling over the naked flesh like spiderwebs. Xi Ping, downwind from him in the bushes, also smelled a choking scent of blood coming from him. He nearly threw up on the spot!

Watching this “demon” walk toward Jiangli's carriage, Xi Ping's spine instantly tensed.

Jiangli was only a frail girl, and her old driver could only count as half a person... What should he do?

Xi Ping grit his teeth and squeezed his sword with one hand. He focused, staring at the back of the man carrying the lantern. Though he had been lazy since childhood and sloppy in learning martial arts, at any rate he was a noble lordling who had picked up a bit of fancy footwork.

If that didn't work, he was also a young and vigorous man. He had height and strength!

He deepened his breathing, considering how likely he was to kill the “demon” in one stroke if he burst out and stabbed him.

But just as he was getting ready to pounce, Jiangli's old driver came forward quickly in greeting and called to the man carrying the

lantern, “Sir, you’re here at last!”

Xi Ping narrowly stopped himself and nearly choked on a breath.

What was going on? These two knew each other?

Somewhat impatient, the old driver hurriedly asked, “It’s nearly time, have Heaven’s Design Pavilion come yet?”

The man holding the lantern sighed. “Not yet. Don’t worry, the illusion array is already in place in the forest. As soon as a cultivator bursts in, the illusion bell will ring. Don’t lose heart until the very last.”

Xi Ping didn’t understand much of their conversation, but they seemed to be waiting for Heaven’s Design Pavilion... Why?

What kind of trouble had Jiangli gotten herself into?

Seeing that the driver was well acquainted with the man holding the lantern and not afraid of him, Xi Ping hesitated a little. He thought, Could it be that it’s only his appearance that’s suboptimal, and he’s actually a good person?

The old driver sighed and wailed over and over, and the man holding the lantern consoled him again: “We received word from 18. While 32 died for the cause, everything in Jinping is going smoothly, and our people are lying in wait at the Azure Dragon Towers. That little lord has already been taken to Heaven’s Design Pavilion. The thing your Miss 50 passed to Heaven’s Design Pavilion through him must have been delivered already. As long as they aren’t completely useless, they won’t miss the clues you dropped along the way. It’s only that those paper-pushers are scared to die, so they’re probably going in circles outside the forest now.”

Xi Ping was at a loss when it came to all these 18s, 32s, and Miss 50s, but he had an idea that the “little lord taken to Heaven’s Design Pavilion” seemed to be... Xi Ping himself.

“Something the young lady passed to Heaven’s Design Pavilion through him...” What thing?

Xi Ping felt around in his clothes and thought, Could it be the piece of jade?

But he hadn’t handed it over!

Xi Ping didn’t know what role had been arranged for him in all of this, but evidently he hadn’t gone along with the script.

He was a little bewildered for a time, not knowing whether he had done something bad from good intentions, or something good from bad intentions.

Lao Zhang said, distressed, “Thank you, sir... Ah, in fact, we knew from the start that however flawless the plan was, there would be some change. 32 went on ahead last night, and my young lady has already... has already prepared herself. If we can’t grab a lackey from Heaven’s Design Pavilion to serve as an offering, she’ll use her own flesh and blood to welcome the god.”

Xi Ping: “...”

No, wait up!

These two “good people” were talking about grabbing what? Doing what?

“Brother 32 was spirited, and Miss 50 is righteous. It really makes me ashamed of my own meaningless life.” The man holding the

lantern tapped his chest lightly with his fist and said heavily, "The conflagration burns on, the cry of the cicada is without end."

Lao Zhang restrained his sobs and quietly responded in code: "Better to die in frost than to forsake one's convictions."

"The time is nearly here. Tai Sui is about to arrive. I can delay no longer. I must go and join my companions in the array." As the man holding the lantern spoke, he looked up at the sky.

The fog was so thick it seemed to have solidified. Who knew what he saw... Perhaps the view from lidless eyes was unusually open and clear.

"Oh, right." After taking a few steps forward, the man holding the lantern remembered something. He turned to Lao Zhang and said, "My slave ran off somewhere. I just heard him whistling the Soul Calling Melody, somewhere over there. Now there's no sign of him. There was a hitch when that little thing was refined. I can't seem to tame him. If you see him, catch him for me. Don't let him run around and get in the way of major affairs."

Whistling... the Soul Calling Melody?

"Slave"...

"Refined"...

At these unpleasant-sounding words, Xi Ping realized something. Slowly, he lowered his gaze.

He saw the "child" whose mouth he was covering clinging to his arm with his little hands. Those hands felt strangely cold, and they were covered in coarse... wood grain and knots!

The “child” simply folded in half, then in half again. His wooden fingers retracted into his palm one by one, then began to curl up from the elbow with a creak, retracting all the way to the shoulder—in the blink of an eye, the “child” had turned from the neck down into a square wooden peg!

Xi Ping: “...”

The little monster took the opportunity to struggle. The wooden peg was very smooth. Xi Ping lost his hold and let him... it roll out of his hands.

It opened its mouth—this mouth was an awful thing. You could have shoved a living person’s head into it whole when it was opened. Inside were rows of closely packed sharp teeth like a bed of nails!

“The moon is dark, the wind is high; fitting conditions for a corpse to transform.” Just then, the man with the lantern’s voice floated over on the wind from not far away. “Tonight the ghosts of Jinping City walk. The marvel of the sight will all depend on the little lord from the Marquis Manor.”

The Marquis Manor’s young lord, on whom such “high hopes” were placed, lay not far away in a cluster of trees, having a staring contest with a head on top of a wooden peg.

The head took a deep breath and puckered its lips, ready to whistle!

CHAPTER 8 - Midnight Song (8)

Jinping City was under curfew; only Heaven's Design Pavilion's outside lights were brightly lit.

At this time, there were fully twenty-three carriages bearing family crests at the gates of the head office. The sons of noble families, young upstarts from court, descendants of past imperials... The idle rich and the pillars of state were all gathered together, anxiously crowding the courtyard.

Pang Jian stood in the shadows, impatiently observing the courtyard full of young talents.

Given these people's social standing, thirty to forty percent were probably on Xuanyin Mountain's list of top candidates. Looking at this scene, anyone who didn't know better would have thought that this year's Grand Selection had come early.

Now, the noble were as confused as the lowly, talking over each other, making Heaven's Design Pavilion's courtyard as noisy as a frog pond after the rain. There didn't seem to be anything noble about them. No one knew for sure how Dong Zhang and Wang Baochang had died, but they had all touched similar marriage proposal cards, and no one knew whether he would be the next to die.

"Commander," a blue-clotheser said, walking over quickly, "Prince Ning and his eldest son have also arrived!"

"Have Lao Zhao receive them, don't come to me," Pang Jian said. "I'm not familiar with that noble crowd, and I don't have a good memory for faces. Wouldn't it be awkward if I got someone's name wrong?"

A while later, another blue-clotheser came to report: “Commander, Lord Chai of the Imperial Academy, Lord Liang of the Court of Justice, Princess Xincheng’s husband, the Minister of Rites’ son, Duke Ying’s son...”

Pang Jian: “...”

Was this a shopping list?

The blue-clotheser said, quietly, “Too many are involved. We don’t have enough people at the head office.”

“No kidding.” Pang Jian turned around. Like flipping the page of a book, all the derision and cynicism were wiped clean from his face. It wore a stern gravity. He said, “Not only do we not have enough people, I see we don’t even have enough seats. We’ll have to borrow some chairs from the Phoenix’s Perch Pavilion.”

The blue-clotheser said, “Maybe we should... temporarily transfer everyone from the Azure Dragon Towers to the head office.”

Pang Jian looked into the blue-clotheser’s eyes and said, “The Azure Dragon Towers guard the Dragon Vein. Do you mean to say that these nitwits... these nobles are more important than the Dragon Vein?”

The blue-clotheser was stumped.

Zhao Yu, who had just finished making arrangements for Prince Ning, also came over. He quickly said, “Of course no one is as important as the Dragon Vein, but, commander, the Dragon Vein will always be there, but this is an urgent matter—during the attack in Dangui Lane last night, didn’t you yourself bring out everyone standing guard at the Horn Tower, commander?”

Pang Jian slowly said, “Last night was an emergency. With paper money controlled by a curse floating around, if it wasn’t taken care of at once, the outcome would have been hard to predict. Today, all the potential victims are already here, aren’t they? And the city is under curfew. No matter what happens, we’ll be able to stay in control of the situation. Don’t worry.”

Zhao Yu blurted out, “Of course we can control the situation, but we may not be able to save these people.”

Clearly there were members of the Zhao family among the “talents” in the courtyard.

After he had said this, Zhao Yu immediately noticed his urgency. He quickly relaxed his voice. “Commander, so many of the people here are excellent candidates for the Grand Selection. The evil cultivators behind this must want to spoil our sect’s Grand Selection, injure the sect’s saplings.”

Pang Jian glanced at the “saplings” putting down roots and thought, Who would bother?

An overwhelming majority of Heaven’s Design Pavilion’s walkers in the mortal world came from noble families and had entered the sect during the Grand Selection. But not Pang Jian.

The threshold for the Grand Selection was too high. He hadn’t managed such a successful reincarnation—he was one of the few cultivators of “unorthodox” origin in Heaven’s Design Pavilion.

Actually, strictly speaking, the only orthodox immortal sect in Great Wan was Xuanyin Mountain. All cultivators outside of Xuanyin counted as “evil* cultivators,” unless, soon after opening their spiritual eyes, they had the good fortune to be recommended to become a “disciple of record” by a person of consequence within the sect and be raised to an honorable position.

Assistant Commander Pang was precisely one of these disciples of record from among the common people.

He didn't care one bit whether these sons of the wealthy and aristocratic lived or died, so he wasn't worried. As he saw it, these good-for-nothings had nothing to recommend them apart from reincarnating well; it simply wasn't worth it to go to so much trouble to "murder" them. On behalf of the killer, he even regretted those corpses, perfectly preserved for decades. With Dong Zhang and Wang Baochang, it seemed more like the killer was hiding in the shadows, testing the response speed and methods of the Azure Dragon Towers. The early revelation of the funny business with the Flower Viewing Invitations was also too deliberate.

What scheme was this person using these good-for-nothings for?

"I know you're concerned," Pang Jian said, perfunctorily placating Zhao Yu as he considered, "but last night, I was the one standing guard at the Horn Tower, and Dangui Lane is under the Horn Tower's eaves. We could come and go quickly. It made sense to move everyone from the tower. I can't make the decision to remove everyone from all the city's Azure Dragon Towers. I would need instructions from the sect or the General Commander—shidi, why don't you go ask?"

Zhao Yu: "..."

The General Commander held his position without working. He had been in seclusion for eight years. As for asking for instructions from the sect... if he went on a round trip to Xuanyin Mountain, he might not even be in time for these people coming back on the seventh day after death.

Pang Wenchang wasn't making any sense!

Pang Jian continued: “Also, I don’t believe that this killer can perform an underworld marriage for so many people at once. If he really did have the skills, he would already...”

But before he could finish, without any warning, total silence fell over the noisy courtyard.

Inexplicably, everyone had shut their mouths at once.

Several breaths went by, and no one spoke to break the silence. The atmosphere suddenly changed.

Each of the walkers in the mortal world watching the courtyard put a hand to his weapon. The antsy old and young masters, as if fixed in place by a spell, were all frozen in the courtyard like bizarre waxworks.

Pang Jian’s expression instantly grew serious. He had just finished saying that the killer couldn’t perform an underworld marriage for so many people, and it had come back to hit him in the face.

But there were scores of people in this courtyard. What would it even mean to control this many corpses at once with an underworld marriage?

Could the killer be an almighty “ascended spirit” cultivator?

The immortal sects ranked cultivators in several grades. The fundamental stage was “open-eyed,” also called “open spiritual eyes.” All of Heaven’s Design Pavilion’s walkers in the mortal world were of this grade. Only once your spiritual eyes had opened and you had a sense for energy could you be formally considered as being on the immortal path. The vast majority of the disciples who entered the sect through the Grand Selection stopped at this stage.

After opening your spiritual eyes, you were only a “half-immortal.” Only once you had established your Way of the Heart and constructed your immortal spirit would you count as a true immortal. This was called established foundation. An immortal with an established foundation could live forever without growing old, ride the clouds and fly on mist. The protective magical devices carried by the wealthy and aristocratic were generally granted by established foundation immortals.

An “established foundation” cultivator was the highest rank a mortal might have the rare fortune or misfortune to meet.

Above the “established foundation” were those who had truly attained the highest heavens.

“Ascended spirit” immortals had entirely cast off their physical bodies and the need for sustenance. To take Xuanyin as an example, once you had an ascended spirit, you could found a lineage or a peak on your own.

For certain reasons, nearly all evil*cultivators were unable to pass the open-eyed stage. When one was occasionally lucky enough to succeed in establishing a foundation, they would often lose their mind early in the established foundation stage.

There was no such thing as an ascended spirit evil*cultivator!

All the blue-clothesers stared apprehensively at the frozen people, waiting for these “brides” turned corpses to rebel.

But... after one ke, when the legs of the blue-clotheser nearest to the “corpse brides” were about to go numb from standing still, the “walking corpses” had yet to show any sign of movement.

It was as if they had stopped midway into “becoming corpses” and then been refused by the groom’s side for their inadequacy. There

was no next step.

Pang Jian realized something. He looked up at the eaves.

Yes, he'd thought there was something missing. The evil-expelling bells under the eaves hadn't rung!

"Move aside." Pang Jian passed through a wall and strode into the courtyard. He poked one of the "walking corpses" with his sword.

The "walking corpse" fell over. His chest undulated evenly... he was still breathing!

Pang Jian half knelt and pushed aside the unconscious man's hair. He looked at the top of his head and said, "Paper!"

A walker in the mortal world immediately handed him a blank piece of talisman paper. Before he could get out cinnabar, Pang Jian had bitten through his fingertip. He quickly drew a fortune talisman. It was an immediate success.

The talisman trembled and caught fire, producing thin white smoke, which entered the "walking corpse"'s nostrils.

The "walking corpse" spasmed. His limbs twitched. A sound like thunder came from his belly!

After a moment, he turned face down and threw up a big puddle of green water with an overwhelming stench... In the filth was an insect the size of a fingernail that flew away as soon as it saw the light.

Pang Jian pointed at the insect and nailed it to the ground with a gust from his finger.

“Is this...” Zhao Yu stepped up and said in disbelief, “Is this a sleep paralysis imp? Aren’t sleep paralysis imps extinct?!”

Pang Jian held his nose, frowned, and said nothing.

An inexperienced blue-clotheser said, “Zhao-shixiong, what is a sleep paralysis imp?”

“A type of insect from the south that hasn’t been seen in many years,” Zhao Yu said. “If a person or animal mistakenly eats its eggs, they’ll mature in the host’s body after a couple of days. The insects release a particular kind of venom that causes paralysis. The host’s entire body will go rigid, and their breathing will become strained. They will seem like a walking corpse. This generally occurs in the middle of the night, so these people are usually asleep. The symptoms are very similar to sleep paralysis, so these insects are called sleep paralysis imps.”

The blue-clotheser was astonished. “Do you mean that all these people have this evil creature inside them? Why haven’t our evil-expelling bells rung?”

“Because this insect isn’t an evil creature. The venom disperses quickly and does the body no damage. At worst the host will think they’ve had a nightmare. If they’re sound sleepers, they won’t even wake up. The sleep paralysis imp stays in the body for around ten days, then crawls out of the nose without leaving a trace. Hundreds of years ago, the people of the south even treasured these insects and caught them to manufacture anesthetic. That’s how they drove the sleep paralysis imp to extinction. Strange...”

“It isn’t strange.” Pang Jian’s lower jaw, sharp as the edge of a knife, tensed as he interrupted Zhao Yu. “The imps are harmless, as long as you don’t encounter soul-driving spice.”

“Wow, what a big piece of human-shaped soul-driving spice.” This was what Xi Ping heard as someone lifted him by the scruff of the neck.

Xi Ping had slipped up and let the little monster get away. The little monster had been about to cry out and attract the skinless big monster. Then there was a sudden hum in Xi Ping’s ears; it was as though a transparent “shell” had covered the area for one zhang around.

Next, a clump of earth flew over and knocked the little monster precisely on the temple. The little thing fell to the ground without a sound.

All of this happened in an instant. Xi Ping didn’t even have a chance to blink before he was picked up.

One-handed.

The last time Xi Ping had been picked up one-handed, he had been the nominal age of six... His dad had managed to put on a show of “might,” then thrown out his back. Since then, he hadn’t picked him up again.

As soon as he caught up to what was happening, his fur bristled, and he leapt forward, throwing off that hand. His forehead bumped firmly against the invisible shell. He groaned.

Xi Ping was afraid of alerting those strange people. Ignoring the pain in his head, he quickly looked in the direction of the man holding the lantern and the old driver, but he found that the two of them seemed to have gone deaf and blind. They hadn’t heard anything of the noise he had made.

The man holding the lantern was still walking into the depths of the thick fog, and the old driver had his hands raised in a salute to send

him off, bowing respectfully, the top of his head not far from the ground.

“Hey, kid, take it easy a little,” the person who had lifted him one-handed said in distress. “This mustard seed cost me two white spirits—don’t worry, people outside the mustard seed can’t hear us.”

Xi Ping had the habits of a rich lordling. Seeing something nice, he blurted out, “Where did you buy it? Can you sell me one?”

The newcomer said in surprise, “A white spirit costs a hundred liang of gold, about nine hundred liang of silver. That’s nine hundred strings of copper coins! One mu of good farmland near the capital only costs one or two strings. It’s enough for a whole family to eat on for two or three years. The official salary of a high general of cavalry is less than five hundred liang of silver per year. If he doesn’t eat or drink for two years, he might save up for one white spirit. What family’s wastrel are you, young man? Does your dad know you talk so big?”

Xi Ping’s head was ringing from his bump. Listening to this accounting of thrift made his head hurt even worse—crucially, this guy’s accounting was wrong!

“Da-ge,” said Xi Ping, “one liang of gold is twelve liang of silver. How do you get a hundred liang of gold being nine hundred silver? Anyway, a mu of land near the capital can’t even be rented for less than twenty hundred liang of gold. You want to buy good farmland for a string of coppers or two... You must be buying it in your dreams.”

When the person heard this, he stared in terror. He looked up at the sky and reckoned on his fingers, then murmured, “Oh... One gold is twelve silver, and a string of copper coins has gone up from a

thousand to a thousand five-hundred... Is the land rent in Jinping so high now?"

Xi Ping: "..."

No, wait, how come he had to find out common sense things like this by observing celestial phenomena?

By the faint light leaking out from inside the carriage, Xi Ping saw the newcomer clearly.

This actually wasn't a burly fellow. His figure was about the same as Xi Ping's. He was a somewhat slovenly young man dressed in a shabby green gown, carrying a small wine pot.

He had phoenix eyes, thin lips, and a slightly hooked nose. His was a face with a stern and upright cast, but his manner and expression were very kind and gentle, as if he had never been angry in his life. When he blinked, faint laugh lines appeared at the corners of his eyes.

"It's hard to earn a livelihood." The green-gowned man sighed and said to Xi Ping, "Let's not talk about that anymore—when did you accidentally eat soul-driving spice?"

Xi Ping held his head and groaned out a single dubious syllable: "Huh?"

"Soul-driving spice is a rare type of fruit with a very mild scent. Only the sleep paralysis imps of the south can smell it." At Heaven's Design Pavilion's head office, Pang Jian narrowed his eyes slightly. "Imps that breathe in soul-driving spice will burrow into their host's blood vessels, and the harmless venom will become toxic. The toxicity will soon spread throughout the body, and the host will change from a fake corpse to a real corpse. Then the blood vessels will begin to burst open starting from the top of the head, turning

the scalp red. At death, the whole body will be rigid. The appearance in death is just as if they had been snatched for an underworld marriage. In the south, they also had an unknown secret art. They could use the juice of the same piece of soul-driving spice to draw a soul-driving spell on a mirror and control the imps inside the dead person's body, make the dead person perform the same movements as the person standing in front of the mirror—forget about the horoscope, it was all a cover. There never was any underworld marriage!”

Just as he'd said—how could anyone stand to use such carefully preserved corpses to kill good-for-nothings like this!

“But... why would they want to make us think it was an underworld marriage?” A blue-clotheser, ignoring the question of how their commander would know about an “unknown secret art,” said in confusion, “Was it just to get all these people to crowd in here and take a nap to give us a scare?”

“Sound the Azure Dragon Tower bells, activate the executioner's arrays. If I'm wrong, deduct my spiritual stones.” Pang Jian turned quickly. This time, he could “make the decision.” “It's because someone else should have been here tonight. Go to the Yongning Marquis Manor!”

It was no accident that the Viscount of Yongning had bumped into two walking corpses. If he was right, then the Viscount definitely had a piece of soul-driving spice on him.

And if that soul-driving spice had been at Heaven's Design Pavilion's head office tonight, after nightfall, the moment the sleep paralysis imps matured, there wouldn't have been a courtyard full of unconscious living idiots here—there would have been fresh corpses under someone's control!

Even the thought of this scene made his scalp go numb. With all the forces of evil dancing around, Heaven's Design Pavilion would have overreacted.

The majority of the walkers in the mortal world were in fact out and about pursuing evil cultivators. Apart from a few people at the head office, the only people guarding the capital were scattered among the seven Azure Dragon Towers. There weren't enough people at the head office; they would have had no choice but to bring in reinforcements from the Azure Dragon Towers, like last night.

This was a feint; it was likely that the killer's targets were the Azure Dragon Towers that guarded the Dragon Vein!

But something had gone wrong. The person who ought to have been here had pulled some trick that even the evil cultivators hadn't expected.

"Wait." Zhao Yu had also caught up. He quickly reckoned on his fingers. "The Viscount of Yongning doesn't seem to be in the city."

"How do you know?"

"When he left at midday, he took one the head office's consecrated karma beasts..."

"Lead the way!" said Pang Jian.

As he spoke, the earth of Jinping began to tremble faintly. Thick dark energy rose in the south, surging toward the sky.

CHAPTER 9 - Midnight Song (9)

“So...so these whatever imps, what are they usually in?”

“I think they would have been in wine.” Hearing Xi Ping ask about the insects instead of the soul-driving spice, he thought he hadn’t understood, so he patiently explained, “The soul-driving spice has a very faint scent, and the insect eggs are very small. They can be taken for sediment in unfiltered wine—but you must only have consumed the soul-driving spice, not the eggs, or else if the two had combined, they would have acted up by now.”

The breath caught in Xi Ping’s chest eased: that was all right. Because of the “heart disease” that didn’t impede him in eating or running around, the Marquis never touched a drop of wine when he was out of the house.

“How would I know?” He at last turned his attention to the soul-driving spice and laughed bitterly. “At Overflowing Splendor, I drink wine like I breathe air. If you asked which breath I took it in with, wouldn’t that..”

Just then, a wailing like the sound of a bugle horn sounded in the fog-covered woods, interrupting Xi Ping.

Wssh. Strong rain came down, breaking up the thick fog, like a hand wiping steam off glass.

Before Xi Ping could get accustomed to the suddenly clear view, his eyes met with an attack—he saw four...”people” carrying a coffin they had lifted out of some grave.

One of the people carrying the coffin was the man who had been carrying the lantern. In this crowd, he was actually rather put together. Among the other three, one had no facial features, only a

single crack in a ghastly white face that may have been an eye or a mouth; one was missing a shoulder, his head perched precariously on a triangular chest, like a flag on a pole; there was another one missing a big piece of his skull, the caved-in place covered with a rag, the pounding of the blood vessels in the brain making the thin cloth skip and hop.

The people carrying the coffin were facing directly toward Xi Ping, less than a hundred steps away!

Unexpectedly seeing these monsters head on, Xi Ping nearly missed a breath. He felt as if the sight had taken a decade off his lifespan.

“Evil* cultivators often lose their minds, and their external appearances are frequently bizarre. No need to be afraid.” The green-gowned man sipped a mouthful of the wine in the wine pot. Seeing Xi Ping trip over a tree root as he backed up and nearly sit down, he reached out to support him and raised the wine pot toward him. “I have wine. Do you want some?”

“Yes,” said Xi Ping.

The green-gowned man: “...”

He had only been being polite, figuring that now that the boy knew he had been dosed with something in his wine, he certainly wouldn't dare to consume something another person gave him at random. He hadn't thought he would really want it. But the words had been said, so he couldn't not give him the wine. He handed the wine pot over a little regretfully. “There's not much left, go easy.”

The young master had reached his present age without learning the words “go easy.” He took the wine pot and gulped a big mouthful, nearly draining it dry.

The wine was very strong. As soon as he put it in his mouth, the alcohol surged down his throat and swept through Xi Ping's organs, then decisively turned around and went back up to his head. In a few breaths, the burning feeling suddenly disappeared, and the rich wine flavor surged up.

Xi Ping exhaled a warm breath, emboldened once more.

Then he noticed that there was someone following the coffin.

This person was dressed in deep mourning, her face bloodlessly white.

It was Jiangli.

But... she didn't seem like Jiangli.

Xi Ping couldn't say at first what was different about her. The features were hers, and even her hairstyle was the same as usual. But somehow, she didn't look tender or sweet. Before, she had looked like a flower that ate the wind and drank the dew, but now, she had suddenly grown a warm, living human body that could spoil and stink; there was a coarse "humanity" about her.

"Someone you know?" the green-gowned man asked. "A lovely confidante?"

"She is lovely." Xi Ping's eyes didn't leave Jiangli for a moment. He was remembering how, in order to protect her, he hadn't even trusted his own page boy, but had gone to seek her himself, from the mortal world to the nether world. He thought he was a little ridiculous. Clenching his back molars, he laughed. "I'm no confidant of hers—I'm not worthy."

There was a thump as the demons put the big coffin on the ground. Jiangli and the coffin bearers walked around the coffin in a particular

tempo, each step falling precisely on the ground. The ground seemed to become a big drum. Each time they stepped, a dull thump came from the ground, each seeming heavier than the one before.

Xi Ping's oversensitive ears hurt from the pounding. He was about to cover them with his hands when, suddenly, he caught a faint sound... coming from the coffin.

He was instantly chilled all over. There was someone in the coffin beating time!

Next, an exceptionally clear female voice came in among the drumming. The singer whose voice had stunned the Lingyang River sang, so beautifully it made you tremble.

Once, a person had listened to Jiangli's songs to the point of addiction, then had thrown down his cup in a fright and left, saying, "This singing is inauspicious, there's bewitchment in the voice, and the singer has the look of a devil." Hearing this, Xi Ping had laughed, because most of Jiangli's songs were written by him. His family's works could be used as lucky charms; how could they be "inauspicious"?

The person who said these words must have been another idiot dazed by loveliness.

Now, at last, he knew who the real idiot was.

As she sang, a greenish light appeared above the coffin, floating in midair like a ghost light. The people surrounding the light had nothing human about them; they were like ghosts.

The singing, the footsteps, the knocking inside the coffin, and the shaking of the ground wove together, louder and louder. Xi Ping could hardly keep his footing. He had to drape himself over a tree

next to him. He turned to ask the green-gowned man, “Exalted, aren’t you going to do something?”

“Exalted?” The green-robed man had been considering how to get his wine pot back without seeming stingy. Hearing this, he raised his eyebrows. “Do you know who I am?”

I’m not stupid, Xi Ping thought—he had heard the man holding the lantern say that there was a trap in the woods specially set for Heaven’s Design Pavilion. This impoverished-seeming old brother had not only not fallen into the trap, he was instead watching avidly from the sidelines. Obviously he was more powerful than these terrifying-looking demons.

Anyway, in his capacity as human-shaped incense burner, instead of obediently lying on the incense table, he had followed the “leads” that these people had left for Heaven’s Design Pavilion and run off here, but they had no idea. Did that make sense? There had to be some master making trouble in the background.

Though this master couldn’t keep accounts, he could casually reference the salary of a high general of cavalry; he had evidently been to court. He might be a high official in Heaven’s Design Pavilion, or even...

The green-gowned man shook his head. “This is only a ceremony. There’s no point in interrupting. They’ve already offered themselves up.”

As he spoke, a long groan came from the north, like the roar of some enraged beast of prey. It came on a fierce wind, suppressing even the drumming that was ringing in Xi Ping’s ears.

Jiangli’s voice broke. Like torn silk, the exquisite voice turned into a hoarse shout; it hardly even sounded human.

This was Xi Ping's first time learning that sound could become a hammer. He felt the mingled noises bang against his chest and nearly crack his ribs open on the spot. His vision went dark. When he recovered, there was blood flowing from his nose.

But he didn't take the time to wipe it away. In that instant, inexplicable tremors crawled up his back. He felt that there was someone... no, *something* behind him, looking at him through the thin "mustard seed"!

The languid stance of the green-gowned man in front of him changed. Silently, he stuck up a finger toward Xi Ping. His suddenly sharp gaze went past Xi Ping, aimed behind him.

The blood from Xi Ping's nose dripped down to his mouth. He didn't dare to wipe it away at first. After a while, he heard extremely faint footsteps shuffle past and recede. He quickly turned his head but saw nothing at all, only a line of distinct, shallow footprints in the loose earth, unhurriedly walking toward Jiangli and the others.

The stride was neither big nor small, very steady, but... there was no one making the footprints!

Xi Ping had never believed in ghosts or gods. Now that he was seeing a ghost with his own eyes, the top of his head nearly burst off.

He looked again. The people next to the coffin were kneeling. The lid of the coffin that the knocking had been coming from flew up!

An evil wind rose inside the coffin and scattered in all directions. The lush foliage of the woods was swept by the wind, and the green leaves instantly dried and yellowed. They trembled and fell to the ground.

Jiangli didn't so much as blink. She efficiently brought down a knife and cut open her wrist.

It must have been a ruthless stroke; it cut nearly halfway through her wrist. The blood sprayed all over the coffin. The footsteps had reached the coffin now.

The people crouching on the ground called out, "Welcome, Tai Sui —"

Just then, Xi Ping heard a crisp sound, like a sharp weapon shattering a glass cup.

Next, four or five blue-robed figures descended from the sky. The one in the lead held a sword, slicing toward the coffin. Heaven's Design Pavilion's people had come at last!

Xi Ping was dazzled. He didn't even see who had come from Heaven's Design Pavilion, and he didn't know whether the footsteps or the sword stroke reached the coffin first. He only knew that the walkers in the mortal world and the demons had begun a chaotic fight.

The crash of metal on metal was fierce enough to send up sparks. Then there was a clatter, and the coffin in the middle burst apart. Among the wreckage, a man stood up!

The dear friend who had been trying to open the coffin lid earlier revealed his true face.

His figure was tall and broad. He was wearing dark brown grave clothes with a Five Blessings design,⁶ auspiciously planted in the center of the coffin. Some evil cultivators gathered back to back to defend him, confronting the walkers in the mortal world.

But Xi Ping didn't have attention to spare even for the risen corpse. His attention was all taken up by Jiangli—in the moment he had missed looking, her face like a lotus standing above the water had turned dry and wrinkled as an old woman's. Her spine had folded up, and most of her black hair had turned white. If not for the fact that the cast of her features remained in the bones of her face, he would hardly have dared to identify her!

“Move over!” A clear whistle came from the woods nearby as an acquaintance brushed over the treetops on a sword. Assistant Commander Pang had come in person!

Pang Jian mimed drawing a bow in empty air. The rain swirled and gathered in his hands, congealing into a “water arrow.” It shot straight toward the man in the coffin.

Jiangli stepped forward without giving it a thought and bodily blocked the water arrow. She opened her mouth and let out a sharp howl.

The green-gowned man had come up beside Xi Ping at some point. He slapped Xi Ping on the ear.

At his light slap, there was a buzz, and the sound of water burbled as it “flowed” from his right ear all the way to his left ear, rendering him temporarily deaf.

He couldn't hear Jiangli's voice, but he could feel the foliage around him shaking. The wheels of the carriage that was stopped at the roadside splintered out of nowhere. The horse fell to its knees, twitched a few times, and didn't move again!

The scream shook the sword out from under Pang Jian's feet, and he vaulted and landed on the ground like a swallow.

The noise of water only burbled in Xi Ping's ears for a moment, then soon exited by his left ear. His hearing was restored, but his mind was numb—what had he seen?

The delicate flower Jiangli had just sent Heaven's Design Pavilion's unfathomable commander staggering!

Pang Jian called out, "Form the array!"

Several swords were already woven together. The sword array of the blue-clothed men fell like thunder. Numerous sword strokes formed a net and came directly toward the man in the coffin wearing grave clothes.

But just then, the dead man opened his eyes.

His eyes were gold, his gaze arresting. He raised a hand, and a stinking wind rose out of nowhere. The blue-clothesers didn't even have time to draw breath before they were sent flying, swords and all, several zhang away.

Pang Jian's expression at last became grave.

The horrifying gold irises lowered. The golden-eyed man lightly flicked the dust off his grave clothes. His gaze, almost gentle, swept over the evil* cultivators around him. The stiff corners of his mouth turned upward in a faint smile.

He put one in mind of an unknowable divine image.

The skinless man who had carried the lantern was trembling all over. He mumbled, "Tai Sui... it's Tai Sui..."

The evil cultivators reacted half a beat late. One after another knelt at his feet, crying and laughing as if demented.

“Tai Sui!”

“Behold Tai Sui!”

“Tai Sui! Tai Sui has truly arrived!”

The man they were calling “Tai Sui” looked at Jiangli and extended a deathly pale hand toward her.

Jiangli was kneeling. She shuffled in front of him on her knees.

“Sister of the Chen family.” His voice was actually very soft, and it had a faint Ning’an accent. “Thank you. I know your story.”

Xi Ping froze.

Sister of the Chen family... Jiangli’s surname was Chen?

He inadvertently reached into his clothes to touch the birthday jade.

The jade said “Ning’an Chen family.” Could it be...

Just then, Tai Sui’s figure flickered slightly.

Jiangli was startled. She called, “Tai Sui?”

Tai Sui pressed a hand to the center of his brow and sighed. He looked up toward Pang Jian. “Commander Pang, Jinping’s dog. Your reputation is deserved. You truly are hard-hearted. Dozens of lives spread out before you won’t move you. It seems that the brothers and sisters lying in wait by the Azure Dragon Towers have died for the cause.”

Pang Jian gave a cold laugh. “Well said.”

Hearing this, the crowd of demons around the coffin looked distressed. Someone involuntarily cried out, “It can’t be! We haven’t received news of any mishap!”

Jiangli raised her head quickly. “Tai Sui, if they are unable to take the essence of the Dragon Vein, then you..”

Tai Sui looked at her with an almost compassionate gaze. “My body is only barely sustained by your ‘offerings.’”

“I’ve heard of someone who seized a body and presumed to use the veins of the earth to sew together body and soul. That person was struck down by heavenly lightning afterward. This is my first time seeing someone set his mind on the Dragon Vein. Your will is truly lofty, senior.” Pang Jian sighed in admiration and saluted. “There may be no need for heavenly lightning tonight. I think that walking corpse of yours can only be sustained for a short while by the lives of these monsters. Why go to the trouble? It’s so ugly. Why not take it off and..”

Before he could finish, there was a sudden flash of lightning that threw Tai Sui’s shadow behind him.

His shadow was a dragon’s!

The dragon shadow flowed at Tai Sui’s feet. Wherever it passed, birds and small insects that had no time to get out of the way were sucked dry and blown to sand. The shadow dragon threw back its head in a silent roar and launched itself toward the walkers in the mortal world!

Fortunately, while Pang Jian had been chatting, his nerves had been tensed. The moment the lightning flashed, he immediately tossed out a talisman.

But before the dragon shadow reached it, the talisman went to pieces.

Pang Jian shook his sleeve, and seven or eight talismans left his hand at once, tightly shielding his colleagues behind him.

“Indeed, this body of mine can only be sustained for a brief moment.” Tai Sui calmly rolled up the long sleeves the grave clothes. “But for you little ‘open-eyed’ ones, isn’t a moment enough?”

This time, Pang Jian couldn’t say a single word. He could hardly keep the feigned frivolity on his face.

His origins were humble. He had climbed up by himself step by step. While walkers in the mortal world could only be open-eyed, he had encountered more than one established foundation evil*cultivator in his life. Relying on his many years of experience and extensive travels, even if he couldn’t win from a weak position, he could still hold out until reinforcements came.

He had never before been brought, as at this moment, to the point of having no strength to fight back after a single exchange, as if he had become a powerless infant in front of a robust man eight chi tall.

And this was only a walking corpse... What boundary had this demon reached?

Tai Sui evidently didn’t take the group from Heaven’s Design Pavilion seriously. His golden eyes turned in Xi Ping’s direction. “And here is this friend with his vast magic powers. Have you seen enough?”

CHAPTER 10 - Midnight Song (10)

Xi Ping didn't know from boundaries. His mere mortal eyes hadn't even been able to understand which side had won in the exchange just now. He could only judge on the basis of his experience with street fights. He counted up the number of people: fine, Heaven's Design Pavilion had more people.

So he came to a conclusion: no need to be afraid, it's a done deal.

When the great demon turned and spoke in his direction, Xi Ping automatically thought he was speaking to him. Perfect, he just happened to have something to say to Jiangli. He wiped away the blood from his nose and raised his sword, acknowledging the description of "vast magic powers." He turned and asked the green-gowned man: "Exalted, where's the way out?"

The green-gowned man looked at him very strangely for a while, then patted him on the shoulder. "Come on, child, stand back a little. Hold on to the wine pot... Leave me a mouthful. Don't drink it all."

As he spoke, he gently shook his sleeve, sweeping Xi Ping backward.

It was as if Xi Ping instantly became weightless. When he came around, he had already flown into the thicket a zhang away and landed lightly as a feather.

Next, the night wind poured into his nose and mouth. Xi Ping smelled a rotting wood scent of mingled camphor and cedar. It was very heavy, as though it had been steeping in the earth for many years.

The transparent mustard seed had been removed.

The green-gowned man moved aside the dry branches blocking him and made his appearance. First he smiled at Tai Sui. Then he waved mildly at the crowd from Heaven's Design Pavilion. "Good work, everyone. Why don't you step back for now?"

When he waved his hand, Pang Jian and the others felt as though a big mountain had moved aside. The oppressive force of golden-eyed Tai Sui disappeared at once. From inertia, nearly all of them stumbled before finding their footing.

Pang Jian let out a breath and spoke respectfully: "May I ask if I'm speaking to the inner sect's immortal envoy? Which shixiong are you?"

"I'm not," the green-gowned man said, smiling. "I think you'll have to call me shishu."

Pang Jian was faintly startled—Xuanyin Mountain opened its doors once every ten years; for a cultivator, ten years might be only a brief stay in seclusion. Fussily sorting out class after class by generational ranking was too confusing, so, whether inner sect or outer, everyone addressed each other as though they were of the same generation. "Shixiong" or "shijie" was a broadly applicable honorific for any member of the sect with whom you weren't acquainted.

Only the ascended spirit peak masters who had the standing to found lineages and accept disciples could be addressed as "shishu."

But hadn't all the previous immortal envoys been established foundation disciples sent down by peak masters who wanted to take new disciples? The more slapdash ones might simply send an open-eyed stage disciple with a comparatively long service record.

Which peak master was this who had descended to the mortal world in person?

Before Pang Jian could consider it carefully, Tai Sui in his grave clothes raised his golden eyes again and looked at the immortal envoy. The dragon shadow at his feet grew increasingly fierce, as if it wanted to leap off the ground, open its mouth, and attack. But his tone was still as polite as before.

“I always knew that Xuanyin Mountain would fix their attention on me, but I didn’t expect that they could bear to send you out,” Tai Sui said. “It’s my honor, Zhi Jingzhai... General Zhi.”

As soon as these words left his mouth, everyone present went blank.

Pang Jian forgot to lower the hand he had just raised, and in the thicket, Xi Ping nearly dropped the wine pot.

The ignorant and incompetent Viscount Xi might at best be able to remember five regnal names of the current dynasty, and those not necessarily in the right order. But even he knew the weight of the name “Zhi Jingzhai.”

“Jingzhai” was a courtesy name. This General Zhi’s given name was “Xiu.”

Over two hundred years ago, in the reign of Renzong, there was a neighboring country to the south of Great Wan called He. The leader of its state sect Lancang Sword lost his mind and stirred up the flames of war. Southern He expanded north into the central plains, and Great Wan bore the brunt.

The Lancang Sword Sect had gone against tradition. Ignoring the separation between mortal and immortal, it sent several master cultivators to travel with the army and used secret arts to cut off

communication between Xuanyin Mountain and Jinping. The Southern He army cut its way irresistibly to Jinping overnight. The capital was overthrown in an instant.

At the time, Grand Marshal Zhi and the other high generals were all by the border, and none of the local garrisons could send help in time, while Xuanyin couldn't receive news. Inside Jinping City, there were only thirty thousand imperial guardsmen and Heaven's Design Pavilion's several dozen resident open-eye cultivators... and, by coincidence, the youngest son of the Zhi family, who was in the capital city recovering from an illness.

This young general took command in this crisis, requisitioned immortal tools from the palace and the homes of the aristocracy, coordinated with the city's inscriptions and arrays, and, a mortal himself, defended Jinping for a day and a night. He held out while people from Heaven's Design Pavilion, risking death, broke out of the encirclement and sent word to Xuanyin Mountain.

Later, the other great sects encircled Lancang, and the Lancang Sword Sect was annihilated. Five great sects became four great sects, and Southern He also came to the end of its road; the country was destroyed. Because the evil energy didn't disperse, the country withered for a hundred years, and the former location of Southern He was today's Land of Turmoil.

Zhi Xiu made his name in that battle and was afterward appointed high general of cavalry. He was Great Wan's military star.

Sadly, heaven is jealous of heroes. No sooner had General Zhi been appointed than he contracted a grave illness. That year wasn't Xuanyin Mountain's Grand Selection Year, but Xuanyin's Elder Zhang Jue⁷ couldn't stand to see his star fall. He made an exception, came down from the mountain himself, and took Zhi Xiu in to be his final disciple. Decades went by, his relatives in the

mortal world died one after another, and General Zhi remained hidden in the immortal sect. He didn't show himself again.

From Renzong to the present, six reigns had gone by. General Zhi wasn't present in the human world, but his illustrious military exploits became the subject of famous stories and legends. He was the idol worshipped by every youth in Great Wan. What little boy waving a wooden stick and playing at war in the streets hadn't fallen out with his little companions over wanting to be General Zhi?

And now this legend was actually before their eyes!

Alive!

And he still perfectly recalled what his annual salary as a high general had been!

"I haven't gone out in over a hundred years, yet Your Excellency still recognizes me," Zhi Xiu said, smiling. "Pardon my manners. May I ask what our connection is?"

"There is none, in fact," Tai Sui said to him, modestly. "In my humble travels through the human world in my youth, I had the good fortune to encounter you. A general's merits persist throughout the ages, and General Zhi's graceful bearing inspires admiration."

Zhi Xiu said politely, "You honor me."

With the immortal and the demon seemingly competing to outdo each other in politeness, the atmosphere was for a time as harmonious as though they were exchanging New Year's greetings.

Then Tai Sui made a friendly suggestion: "I have no desire to be your foe. It must have been a hard trip for you from Xuanyin Mountain to Jinping, General Zhi. Why don't we both step back tonight?"

Zhi Xiu saluted. “Thank you for your solicitude. It wasn’t hard, only what I ought to do for my sect.”

Tai Sui’s expression became increasingly mild. “I only need to borrow a small segment of the Dragon Vein. I guarantee that it can be restored as good as new afterward. There will be no harm to the nation’s destiny. Then we can each take our people and leave. Would that be all right?”

The smile on Zhi Xiu’s face seemed to hold the bygone spring air of Jinping City.

Then he said, “Ah, I’m afraid that won’t do.”

Before the others could understand what he meant, the dragon shadow on the ground had already raised its neck.

Almost simultaneously, countless water drops falling out of the sky gathered in Zhi Xiu’s palm and froze into an enormous ice sword that sliced directly toward the golden-eyed walking corpse.

Instantly, Tai Sui was ten steps away. All the dry branches within a hundred zhang radius took on frost from the stroke of that ice sword!

Tai Sui opened his hands. The dragon shadow at his feet roared silently. There was a crisp sound, and the ice sword in General Zhi’s hand shattered into countless pieces, cutting a strand of his hair.

The sudden wintry wind chilled Xi Ping to the marrow. “*Ah—atchoo!*”

His enormous sneeze drew everyone’s gazes to him.

When Jiangli and Pang Jian noticed him, they spoke simultaneously.

“So you’re here,” said Pang Jian.

“What are you doing here?!” Jiangli cried out in surprise.

Xi Ping patted the bits of grass and ice off himself and crawled out of the thicket.

He sniffled, then muttered, “Well, it’s a long story.”

“There’s no hurry to tell it,” Zhi Xiu’s voice came from very far away. He was speaking to Pang Jian. “Retreat a bit and look after these kids for me.”

At this point, both Zhi Xiu and Tai Sui’s movements were nothing that open-eyed cultivators could follow along with.

Wherever this immortal and demon passed, the fine spring rain froze into blades of ice. The blades of ice made from frozen rain were sharp enough to cut through iron as though it were mud. One hit a stone and bounced off, then cut apart the talisman-protected belt worn by one of the blue-clothesers!

The walkers in the mortal world and the evil cultivators were forced to gather and retreat to clear the stage for the mighty.

A blue-clotheser said excitedly behind Pang Jian, “Now that Zhi-shishu is here in person, there won’t be anything for us to do. Commander, all the evil cultivators who slipped through the net are here. Should we take this opportunity to capture them?”

As he spoke, he was about to raise his sword and get to it. Pang Jian nimbly held back the overexcited blue-clotheser and dragged his rash subordinate back. “Don’t get yourself killed, stay out of the way!”

His instruction to stay out of the way was silenced by a sky-shaking, earth-shattering dragon's roar. The dragon shadow roaming over the ground had assumed a physical shape. It had leapt off the ground like a pitch-black flame!

In the depths of the flame, the black dragon opened a pair of golden eyes that were staggeringly bright in the night, like two inextinguishable raging fires.

The ice blades filling the sky instantly vanished into nothing, like a drizzle encountering a conflagration.

All of Jinping City shook at the dragon's roar. Ominous bells rang in Southern Sage Temple.

Pang Jian made a grab in midair and "pulled" over the nearby Xi Ping. With his other hand, he pulled out a metal tool so long it looked very much like a hand cannon,⁸ but when the trigger of this "hand cannon" was pressed, what it shot out was a thick concentration of talismans.

The hand cannon shot quickly and soon formed a talisman net of layer upon layer. But these talismans were so weak they seemed to be made of air; they caught fire as soon as the wind touched them. The speed at which they flew out couldn't keep up with the speed at which they were destroyed.

Pang Jian, dazed, covered the sky with talismans as he shielded the rapid retreat of the others. They were several zhang away in a flash, and the front of his robe was already burnt and ragged, as though it had been soaked in acid from the factories!

The blue-clotheser who had nearly charged out almost went weak at the knees. He muttered, "What... what level of cultivation must this be?"

Another blue-clotheser said, dumbstruck, “Zhi-shishu is an ascended spirit peak master! Can this person be an ascended spirit cultivator?”

“Don’t talk nonsense! There’s no such thing as an ascended spirit evil*cultivator!”

Xi Ping finally struggled free of Commander Pang’s rough grip on his neck. “Listen, Exalted... *cough-cough*... stop discussing ascended spirits. I think if we stay to watch the fun any longer, we’ll be the ones ascending to heaven. If we can’t beat him, can we move away?”

Just then, the dragon shadow let out a peculiar low roar, as though beckoning to something. The mountain ridges around them cracked. Something seemed to burst out of the ground.

Zhi Xiu’s figure landed not far from the black dragon. The kind and gentle smile was gone from his face.

“General Zhi, though you are a rare genius, have you been an ascended spirit for even a hundred years? Naturally, I dared to come because I had something to rely on. I won’t conceal from you that I am a consummate ascended spirit. I am only a step away from shedding my skin. The distance between two major boundaries is like the distance between heaven and earth. You’re no match for me.” Tai Sui’s voice came from the black dragon. The dragon’s face was like an evil ghost’s, but he still spoke kindly.

The walkers in the mortal world who had just been arguing about whether there was such a thing as an ascended spirit evil cultivator were dumbfounded.

If you said that an ascended spirit cultivator had attained the highest heaven, then you could say that a cultivator who had shed

his skin was no longer human.

It was said that the mighty cultivators in the “shed skin” stage could call up thunder, cover midsummer with snow, turn the deep ocean into fertile fields. Many of the “deities” the common people offered sacrifices to at the beginning of each solar term were in fact elders of the shed skin stage.

“It isn’t that I can’t seize Jinping’s Dragon Vein by force. I’ve only gone by this roundabout method because I’m unwilling to harm innocent common people. I wanted to quietly pry open the Azure Dragon Towers, take a sliver of the Dragon Vein, and go. Why must you spoil my ingenious plan and compel me to seize it by force instead? If I remove Jinping’s Dragon Vein by force, the river will rise and the earth will shake. Immortals, it’s one thing if you care nothing for the millions of ordinary people in the city and outside of it, but what about the noble people on the west side of the Lingyang River and those in the inner courtyards of the palace? Do you care nothing for them, either?”

As he said this, the gigantic dragon’s head turned once more toward far off Pang Jian. “Commander Pang, let’s talk it over. For the sake of the big picture, please temporarily remove the seals on the seven Azure Dragon Towers and permit me to borrow a bit of the Dragon Vein, and none of us will disturb the people, all right?”

Pang Jian said, smiling coldly, “Even as a walking corpse Your Excellency doesn’t forget to concern himself with the country and the people. How truly admirable.”

Tai Sui ignored his fit of pique and responded levelly: “Cultivators value the world above all.”

Pang Jian was very repressed in Jinping City. All day he had to put on a decent act. Only in front of evil cultivators could he reveal a trace of his true obstinate and unruly nature. At once, he clapped

his hands and said, “How rare to see an evil cultivator like Your Excellency have such an open heart. Well said. Cultivators value the world above all. In that case, why don’t you commit suicide at once? If you’re no longer in the world to cause trouble, you’ll be benefiting mankind and saving the people. I’ll be sure to explain your meritorious deed to my sect and have them raise a memorial temple to you in the Blissful Village. Of course the common people of Jinping will be overwhelmed with gratitude and come every year to offer sacrifices. Wouldn’t that be to everyone’s satisfaction?”

The dragon’s head gave him a pitying look and didn’t sink to the level of arguing with this open-eyed ant and his empty rhetoric. Instead, the head turned calmly toward Zhi Xiu. “General Zhi, what do you think?”

“Today’s young walkers in the mortal world truly are sharp-tongued. My speech isn’t as skilled as his,” Zhi Xiu answered, also very calmly. “As for whether you can take the Dragon Vein today, why don’t you ask this?”

As he spoke, he swept out his hand, and a sword fell into his palm out of thin air.

A blue-clotheser cried out in surprise, “Zhaoting!”

“Zhaoting” — this was the peerless sword said to have fended off tens of thousands of Lancang monsters and the Southern He army in the past.

There wasn’t a single stick in Jinping that some child hadn’t picked up to play the part of Zhaoting!

The black dragon’s reaction to Zhaoting was considerable. Almost as soon as they met, a mournful dragon’s howl resounded throughout the world. The black clouds covering the sky over the Blissful Village suddenly thickened.

Pang Jian held down Xi Ping's head while he raised a hand and opened an unprepossessing black umbrella, shielding the two of them. The moment the umbrella opened, countless bolts of lightning crashed down.

Xi Ping felt a sharp pain in his ears and temporarily lost his hearing.

For a time, everything outside the umbrella, even the pouring rain, was swallowed by the lightning. Never mind the immortal and the demon, he couldn't even see Pang Jian right next to him.

Xi Ping felt that he had become a tiny ant amid a colossal flood, desperately huddling on a leaf that could capsize at any moment. All his ideas took flight, and for a moment he actually felt a bit lost.

The storm plowed through the whole Blissful Village. Zhi Xiu quickly planted Zhaoting in the ground, and the peculiar shaking of the ground stopped temporarily. But at the same time, he was entirely encircled by the black dragon!

Like a python, the black dragon wrestled with the keen sword energy all over Zhi Xiu, staring greedily at the green-gowned man and Zhaoting in his hand as though he wanted to swallow the man and the sword together.

Xi Ping, deafened and dazzled, managed to recover some of his senses and felt that the hand the insufferably arrogant Commander Pang was using to hold down his head was shaking!

Next, he heard a crisp sound. The canopy of the umbrella in Pang Jian's hand tore in half down the middle and its ribs broke.

Pang Jian had already been injured while facing Tai Sui earlier. Now he could hardly stand up. He stumbled.

Xi Ping quickly held him up, and Pang Jian fell on him, getting an unexpected noseful of the young master's rich clothing scent. Stifled, he turned his head away and sneezed.

The sneeze aggravated his internal injury. He followed it up by coughing up a mouthful of blood.

Xi Ping: "..."

What a disaster. He'd made Heaven's Design Pavilion's commander throw up blood!

As Xi Ping was wondering whether he should keep holding him up or, for Commander Pang's good, push him aside, he heard a voice as thin as gossamer. "Why... why are you here?"

Still supporting Pang Jian, Xi Ping looked in the direction of the voice and saw Jiangli in her mourning dress.

In the thunderstorm just now, both Heaven's Design Pavilion's half-immortals and the evil cultivators had found their own shelter. Jiangli had been pulled under a coffin board by her companions with missing parts.

As soon as the thunderstorm had passed, she had struggled up from under the coffin board.

She seemed to be choked and burned by some strange force. She absolutely had to understand.

"Why are you here...? How can you be here?" As if obsessed, Jiangli stared at Xi Ping with an unfocused gaze. "You... you shouldn't..."

Everyone was in a sorry state now. Only Xi Ping, shielded by Pang Jian, hadn't even lost a strand of hair. He shot back, ignorant and

undaunted, “Then where should I be? Divine lady going in disguise through the mortal world, why don’t you tell me how it should be?”

Because of her sudden aging, the bones around Jiangli’s eyes seemed to have collapsed, making the eye sockets bigger and deeper. Inside were two clouded eyes.

She muttered incoherently, “You were clearly taken by Heaven’s Design Pavilion. Why didn’t you give them the birthday jade? Why didn’t you stay at Heaven’s Design Pavilion tonight?”

After spending so long in the woods, even if he had been an idiot, Xi Ping would have understood—Jiangli must have put that soul-driving spice into ordinary food or drink and marinated him into a human incense burner without him knowing about it. He was a dissolute night owl to start with. He was sure to run into an unlucky devil infected with the insect eggs and kill him with the scent. The appearance of these corpses was very much like that of a victim who had been snatched to be a ghost’s wife. Everyone’s first impression being the strongest, they would decide that these people had been snatched for an underworld marriage.

Jiangli had counted on him being taken to Heaven’s Design Pavilion, then discovering the birthday jade in the silk brocade bag he was carrying. Thinking he was also a candidate to be a “bride,” he would have run in terror to hand over the stone, then hidden at Heaven’s Design Pavilion in like a turtle in its shell, seeking protection.

This way, the walkers in the mortal world would certainly have sent someone to investigate Jiangli. But to handle a mere singing girl, there certainly wouldn’t be more than one or two people. They would follow the leads the old driver had deliberately left and step right into the evil cultivators’ trap, then be captured by them to use as offerings—presumably in that instance, Jiangli wouldn’t have been the one to bleed.

Once night came, the “incense burner” mixed in among the insect egg hosts would have been able to kill all the cowards who had been sent running scared by the Flower Viewing Invitations to spend the night at Heaven’s Design Pavilion. When the time came, Jinping would have been full of walking corpses running around. There wouldn’t have been enough walkers in the mortal world, and they would have been flustered. Then there would have been an opportunity for the evil cultivators’ associates in the city to steal the Dragon Vein!

Pretty fucking well thought out, too, but couldn’t she have asked him before casting him as such a clown?

“Well, I haven’t asked *you* yet!” Xi Ping said angrily. “What were you thinking? That I would be so scared by a lousy rock that I wouldn’t dare to leave Heaven’s Design Pavilion and get you thrown in the Quell? Why did you cast me as some bleating, pants-wetting coward?! Is that me?”

Xi Ping’s anger had gone to his head. He even forgot to speak well of the dead and blurted out, “That’s Big Dog Wang!”

But Jiangli didn’t hear a word of it. She was in extreme despair now, and not because the plan had failed—she had been prepared to sacrifice herself; she hadn’t counted on being able to easily capture Heaven’s Design Pavilion’s half-immortals to stand in for her.

In all her life, all her hopes had come to nothing, and all her expectations had let her down. There was no exception. She had long ago acknowledged this as her fate.

The soul-driving spice and the insect eggs were both concealed at Overflowing Splendor. She hadn’t hesitated for a moment before giving Xi Ping the wine with soul-driving spice concealed in it. He was the last thing tying her to this world. Once any thought of him had been destroyed, she would be “perfect.”

Hearing that Xi Ping had been taken by Heaven's Design Pavilion "without a hitch," she had known that this was a surefire thing. She had only to wait before she, the worthless "toy," was once again thrown aside. Others were willing to coddle her on account of her beauty, but this cold-hearted young master didn't even care for that. What suspense could there be?

But this time, the "surefire" person hadn't thrown her away.

And he had made all their arrangements fall through at the last minute.

Just this once.

As if her fate was to have all her wishes contradicted... no matter what those wishes were.

Jiangli with her head of white hair screamed, still and sad: "But your feelings for me are clearly more ephemeral than dew!"

The wretch Xi Ping didn't understand a thing. He thought he hadn't explained himself to her, so he boldly and forcefully yelled back, "I don't love you, so that means I'm a coward? Are you some kind of proving ground for bravery?"

Pang Jian: "..."

In the sky the immortal and the demon were deadlocked. All of Jinping City might shake itself into a pile of ruins at any moment, and every single one of them would be dissolved into a fine powder. And these two still had the time to argue!

And they were arguing about something so irrelevant!

CHAPTER 11 - Midnight Song (11)

Tai Sui's human body separated from his dragon's body. With his ashen dead man's face that had yet to regain the nimbleness of life, he stood behind the dragon's body, soaked through by the rain. Amid the noisy rain, he said, "General Zhi, when you were mortal, you said that you fought for the common people of Great Wan. Now that you've gone to the immortal mountains, you've forgotten us, haven't you?"

General Zhi didn't respond. Zhaoting had begun to shake. A part of the black dragon fell to the ground and turned back into a "shadow." The "shadow" flowed toward Zhi Xiu like dirty water and wound around Zhaoting, which was joined with the earth.

At first, the black shadow touched the sword like cold water pouring onto fierce flames; it was vaporized at once. But as more and more black shadows poured off the dragon's body, the light coming from Zhaoting began to weaken.

Pang Jian was about to speak, but he was choked by the blood still in his throat. For a time, he couldn't speak, so he elbowed Xi Ping. Xi Ping somehow understood. He hadn't chewed out Jiangli to his satisfaction, so he turned and scolded the great demon: "Great Wan's common people belong to many families, but which family are you supposed to be part of? Do you carry your parents' names, or do you make do with the name of the skin you've stolen..."

Tai Sui didn't so much as turn his head. The black dragon's tail came crashing toward them.

He sighed. "General Zhi, you were the first to abandon us."

The black dragon wrapped around Zhaoting, then continued downward to pierce through the earth. Soon, an enormous dragon

shadow had spread over the ground like an oil spill.

Raging waves rose on the calm canal outside of Jinping City, as if an enormous dragon were sweeping past underwater, the big waves nearly capsizing the ten-zhang-high steam-powered cargo ships; the southern mountains' ridges cracked, and many ancient trees along the cliffs were pulled up, roots and all; on the Sage's Road, eternally untouched by dust, the inscriptions suddenly dimmed, and the snow-white stone blocks were splashed with mud from the rain; in Jinping, a crack appeared in the perfectly joined paving stones in Dangui Lane, like a snake, crawling from east to west, straight toward the imperial city, snapping the rich decorative carvings on the stones in two.

The Board of Astronomy's seismic golden toad spat out a copper bead, setting off alarm bells.

An earthquake!

When the dragon's tail came crashing toward them, Pang Jian was prepared. He seized Xi Ping with one hand and used his blood-stained other hand to draw a talisman on the ground. "Come on!"

The dragon's tail fell with a rumble, but the two of them had vanished into thin air.

Xi Ping had seen Commander Pang walk through walls. This time he personally experienced "burrowing into the earth."

He felt as if he had been turned into a sheet of paper, temporarily losing his senses, his whole body shrinking into a thin slice. In about the space of a breath, he was released once more. Xi Ping instinctively inhaled. The breath seemed to fill up his paper body and expand it once more.

And he was three zhang away, being pulled out of a gravestone by Pang Jian.

Amazing!

Xi Ping had no attention to spare for the fact that he had just nearly been pounded into the earth to join the beauties of the Blissful Village in their peaceful rest. He looked expectantly at Pang Jian, waiting for Commander Pang to instruct him to scold the demon again.

He wanted to have another go.

But when he looked, he found that Pang Jian's face was rather grave.

Zhaoting could no longer suppress the earth's tremors. A golden cord broke through the earth and surged toward the sky but was sucked midway into the black dragon's mouth. The golden cord was pulled toward Tai Sui and wavered on the hem of his robe, quickly forming line after line of celestial inscriptions incomprehensible to mortals.

Pang Jian coughed twice to clear his throat. "This looks bad."

"What's wrong?" said Xi Ping.

Pang Jian didn't answer. Actually, he didn't especially believe that a half-dead evil*cultivator could be a consummate ascended spirit, but regardless of whether he believed it, this demon could actually seize the Dragon Vein out from under Zhaoting.

His face grave, he looked in the direction of Jinping—somewhere, black smoke was rising. The sky above Jinping was clouding over.

Tai Sui had been completely wrong. Even if Jinping's earth dragon rolled over, the important personages of Dangui Lane would at most receive a fright. There were no tall buildings to crush people on the west side of the Lingyang River, and moreover every family had a big garden where they could go to avoid natural disasters, as well as well-trained servants and guards; what did they have to fear?

The only ones to die would be the people struggling to survive in the narrow alleys and factory shacks... This demon must not have seen any wealthy and high-ranking people; perhaps he was a rustic demon.

"Exalted, don't you think we ought to get a little further back?" The young master from Dangui Lane tugged at him. "All your subordinates have run off."

"You go with them." Pang Jian brushed away his hand and calmly pulled a long bow out from his femur. "I can't look after you. Go find a place to hide on your own."

Xi Ping froze, watching Commander Pang step forward raising his bow.

Xi Ping knew nothing about "ascended spirits," but he had already worked this much out from the blue-clothesers' reactions: in the fight between General Zhi and Tai Sui, even the Exalted of Heaven's Design Pavilion had to stay out of the way. It was the same way house cats and street mutts were best off not even watching dragon wars and tiger battles, and instead running as fast as they could; even accidentally making a sound would bring mortal danger; they could only burrow into the earth to save their lives.

But something had possessed the mutt Commander Pang. With a struggle, he approached the edge of the enormous dragon shadow and brazenly drew the long bow with no arrow notched. A whirlwind formed at the center of the empty bowstring. The veins on the back

of Pang Jian's hand popped up as he forced his ceaselessly shaking hand to remain stable. Scraps of leaves, fragments of rock, droplets of rain... everything was pulled in.

"A near-shed skin evil*cultivator" sounded too unbelievable. Even the immortal sect couldn't have expected it. If General Zhi had backup, it would have appeared by now. Heaven's Design Pavilion only had cultivators of the open-eyed stage. Pang Jian was well aware that in all of Jinping, apart from the immortal envoy, his own better than nothing cultivation was the highest.

"Time for a last-ditch effort," Pang Jian thought. "At worst I'll die in the line of duty. I'll see it through."

When the bow was fully drawn, a reddish-gold arrow appeared out of nowhere on the empty bowstring, with fletching like the legendary phoenix, so scorching it dazzled the eye.

But when this awesome arrow hit the churning black shadow, it was like a weak spark sinking into a deep pool; before Xi Ping could even open his eyes, it was annihilated.

Xi Ping didn't know what kind of bow this was, but he felt that the arrows it shot seemed to be a part of Commander Pang. As the arrow disappeared, Pang Jian staggered, the blood instantly draining clean out of his face. Only in his wild wolf's eyes was the blaze unextinguished. He stared steady as stone at the golden cord weaving inscriptions on Tai Sui's clothes and notched a second arrow.

Having lost Commander Pang's protection, Xi Ping knew he ought to turn and run as far as he could. But for some reason, he stared at Pang Jian's figure for a time without moving.

Amid the reeking wind and bloody rain, Xi Ping watched across a distance of several zhang as Pang Jian set about his futile task,

shooting arrows whose flames grew weaker and weaker to no avail.

A second arrow, a third, a fourth...

There was blood at the ghastly pale corners of Pang Jian's mouth, but the arrows fell with precise accuracy, closely pursuing the golden cord. Even if he had to move one step at time, he was still approaching.

The moment the sixteenth arrow fell into the black shadow, the golden cord actually paused for an instant. For just that instant, a segment of the golden cord "climbing" up the robe was pulled back by Zhaoting, and General Zhi and the demon were once again at a standstill.

Pang Jian couldn't hold out any longer. His legs went weak, and he went to his knees. Before his knees touched the ground, he was dragged backward over three chi from behind. A sharp wind like a chopper nearly scraped the soles of his shoes as it fell, cutting a deep gouge in the place where he had just been standing.

Pang Jian turned his head in astonishment and saw Xi Ping. He didn't even have the strength to speak now. He could only use his eyes to ask: What are you still doing here?!

Xi Ping truly had the makings of an arrogant and overweening person. Propping up Pang Jian with both hands, he cheered him on enthusiastically: "Exalted, shoot another one, that one just now worked, I think you can do it!"

Pang Jian: "..."

Easy enough for you to say! Go fuck yourself!

"Are you out of arrows?" As if by divine aid, Xi Ping understood Commander Pang's look. He got out a big branch from somewhere,

as long as the arm span of a grown man. All the little twigs on it had been pared away and a long string of rotting paper messily strung to it, all the lewd verses he had torn down in the Blissful Village—he had been pretty busy just now.

Then this mystical youth took a paper fan out of his clothes and strung it onto the big branch as well. “Use this as an arrow! That Exalted Zhao said this karma beast or whatever is the Southern Sage’s mythological animal and can expel evil. Try it! Hurry, hurry, while the wind is in the right direction!”

The karma beast that hated all evil, forced into coexistence with a pile of unspeakable material, showed an ominous glint in its enormous eyes, as if it wanted to expel this bastard Xi first of all.

Pang Jian managed to take a breath. “Kid, are you even human?!”

He put a hand on Xi Ping’s shoulder, holding himself up, and really did take the incredible “arrow.”

This time, Pang Jian didn’t shoot the branch at the great demon. He considered briefly, steadied his shaking hand as best he could, and shot the spear-like piece of wood into the air.

How could an ordinary thing like this branch approach an ascended spirit cultivator? It had hardly left the bowstring before it disintegrated. The papers on it also went to pieces and floated toward Tai Sui like snowflakes.

There wasn’t a trace of spiritual energy on these scraps of paper. Tai Sui didn’t so much as look at them.

But the next moment, he froze.

Slowly, Tai Sui tilted his head. His gaze fell on the hem of his robe.

A two-cun long karma beast passed from countless scraps of paper onto his robe—the grave clothes had designs on them. When the karma beast landed amid the inscriptions, it opened its mouth wide and bit them!

The little beast's body was immediately torn apart and disappeared into nothing. But it had bitten off a corner of the robe, and the dovetailing line of inscriptions immediately went askew.

Inscriptions required extensive knowledge and profound scholarship. The least error, and everything would go wrong. At this tiny tear, the inscriptions in golden cord collapsed instantly and were pulled in by Zhaoting!

The collapsed inscriptions swirled wildly. Tai Sui's robe seemed to become a pool of molten gold, lighting up the Blissful Village's night as though it were noon.

At the same time, General Zhi's voice rang in Xi Ping and Pang Jian's ears: "You two have some guts! Get back!"

General Zhi was evidently far away; how could his voice reach their ears? Before Xi Ping could understand it, Pang Jian, without any hesitation, grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and pulled him back into the gravestone.

The two of them had just hidden in the stone tablet when there was a furious dragon's roar. The scattered golden cord gathered into a big net, one end wrapped around Tai Sui, the other held to the ground by Zhaoting.

The torrential rain came to a halt, as abruptly as it had begun to pour, as though someone had shut a sluice gate.

There was sudden silence all around, all the different sounds ceasing at once. For a space, even time stopped.

In the dead silence of the Blissful Village's woods, you could have heard a pin drop.

The big golden net sudden drew in. The enormous dragon in the net struggled desperately, trying to throw the net off itself. Then a fierce flash of light fell from the sky onto Zhaoting, piercing through the dragon's body on its way.

Like a snake stabbed through the heart, the huge dragon immediately raised its head from the ground. The whole Blissful Village was nearly razed flat. The gravestone where Xi Ping and Pang Jian were hiding fell over with a crash. Xi Ping, nearly stifled to death, rolled out of the stone tablet and was on the point of being sent flying by the dragon's tail!

Just then, a ray of red light flew from Xi Ping and blocked the dragon's tail as it came toward him.

Amid the thundering, a woman's faint sigh sounded in his ears, just for a moment, like a hallucination.

Pang Jian took the opportunity to pull him back into the earth. At the same time, countless golden threads "grew" out of the ground. Following the light from Zhaoting, they passed through the black dragon and Tai Sui's human body, cutting them to pieces. A ray of bloody light flew from the body parts toward the horizon, but an unshakeable golden cord stuck to its tail. The next moment, the bloody light was pinned to the ground by Zhaoting, following after the golden cord.

A thick scent of blood spread explosively in all directions, nearly knocking out Xi Ping, who had just climbed out of the stone.

Dimly, he heard pattering. The rain that had stopped earlier was falling once again.

The rain washed away the scent of rotting wood, but it couldn't wash clean the stink of blood. Rumbling came from the ground, like thunder, but also like a dragon's roar, echoing the quivering of Zhaoting.

The quaking of the earth and shaking of the mountains stopped. The Dragon Vein had been placated by Zhaoting and returned to its original position.

After a long time, Xi Ping at last came around. He climbed up shakily and found that he had been covered in blood.

The dozen mu of the Blissful Village had all been soaked with blood coming out of nowhere, turning the rain into a red river, as if the beautiful souls whose homes had just been raided had returned to the human world to shed all the blood they hadn't had time to shed during their lives, creating a hellish lake of blood.

Xi Ping dizzily held onto a tree trunk to support himself and retched. He saw the normally perfectly turned out blue-clothesers each looking even more sorry than himself. A few couldn't even stand up. Far away, a few evil cultivators whose limbs hadn't been intact to start with had suffered even more damage; there wasn't a single one without parts missing. The dear friend who had originally been missing half of his skull was the most horrifying. There were no contents left on top of his neck; it was unclear whether he would be able to live.

Only Jiangli was missing.

Xi Ping held his buzzing ears and felt faintly anxious. He thought, Has she run off?

"Looking for your little confidante?" A wound-covered hand reached over and took the wine pot Xi Ping had kept tucked into his clothes

—the wine pot had gone through all the rolling and scrambling with him, but it hadn't broken.

Xi Ping blurted out, "She's not my..."

"All right, she's not." Zhi Xiu sighed. "Stop looking, she's at your feet."

Xi Ping looked down. His black boots were soaked through with blood. He looked as though he had just waded through a sea of bodies. There was nothing at his feet but mud.

He looked up at General Zhi in confusion.

Zhi Xiu didn't answer. He casually wiped the blood off the wine pot with his sleeve. With no thought for dirt, he drank the remaining wine in the pot.

Beside him, someone picked up in a hoarse voice: "You must not have noticed the 'life-swapping talisman' you're carrying."

Pang Jian limped over and saluted Zhi Xiu. "Shishu."

"No need to be so polite," Zhi Xiu said mildly. "Call some people to come clean up the aftermath."

Even a person as insolent as Pang Jian became somewhat more respectful when facing General Zhi, in spite of himself. He suppressed his wildness and responded with a proper, "Yes, shishu." He turned and took out his whistle, faced north and blew three times. Then he said another word to General Zhi and went to inspect his companions and the evil cultivators.

Xi Ping went after him and asked, "Exalted, what is a 'life-swapping talisman'?"

Perhaps owing to the life and death adventure they had just gone through, Pang Jian's manner toward Xi Ping had improved slightly. He answered, rather patiently, "A life-swapping talisman is a special type of talisman that doesn't require very high cultivation to draw. It only needs to be drawn on some item you've carried close over many years. If the person who takes the life-swapping talisman encounters mortal danger, the talisman's maker will take it on in your stead. That's why it's called life-swapping. Did she give you something?"

Xi Ping remembered something. He took out the birthday jade.

Its color, originally almost like blood jade, had at some point turned to mottled coral. It looked even cheaper. There was a crack down the middle of the words "Ning'an Chen family."

Jiangli's accent had never changed. Xi Ping knew that she came from Ning'an, and the great demon had called her "sister of the Chen family"...

Was this her birthday jade?

"It has the remnants of a spell." Pang Jian took the birthday jade from his hand and smelled it. "But this talisman is a type of protection talisman that does no harm, so the head office's karma beasts didn't take it for an evil item. When that evil cultivator's tail nearly turned you into a piece of flatbread just now and suddenly froze, that must have been the effect of the life-swapping talisman. She took that hit for you."

Xi Ping instinctively denied it: "Wait, no... Didn't she think I was going to give that thing to Heaven's Design Pavilion?"

"When the talisman's maker confers the talisman, she only needs to have the person receiving it drink a drop of her blood, and in the

future, even if the object that carries the life-swapping talisman is lost, the spell will still remain on you. It won't lose its effect."

Xi Ping was dazed.

Yes, when Jiangli had given him the silk brocade bag, she had in fact poured him a cup of odd-tasting tea. He had thought it was because the pot was rusty.

"Tsk." Pang Jian handed the jade ornament back to him. "Taking advantage of people with your pretty face."

Xi Ping took the piece of jade. "Exalted, don't you suspect me?"

Pang Jian gave him a strange look. It seemed to be ridiculing, yet without any malice. He was looking at Xi Ping, but Xi Ping wasn't the target.

"You? If some of your fellow sons of the rich and powerful had pushed each other into losing their heads and playing around with witchcraft and sorcery, then you would be rather suspect. But stupid things like worshipping evil gods and sacrificing yourself... Your sort doesn't usually have anything to do with that,"

Commander Pang said with a trace of mockery. "You don't have the makings."

In all his life Xi Ping had never done anything apart from eating and drinking except making merry. The worst things he had encountered had been household punishments from the Marquis.

Now, dressed in bloody clothes and standing in the ice-cold rain, squeezing the cracked piece of jade, he had been informed that Jiangli was dead.

His ears heard it, but his mind was muddled. Standing perfectly still in the sea of blood, he still unconsciously looked around, waiting for

Jiangli to appear so he could ask for an explanation—

Didn't she see him as just the same as Big Dog Wang's ilk?

Hadn't she decided that as soon as he found the horoscope on the jade, he would immediately hand it over without another thought?

Didn't she think he was not only faithless and heartless, but also a complete bastard?

Then why would she give him her only birthday stone? And swap her life for his when he ran into peril?

Hadn't she ever met a decent man in her life?

Xi Ping could make no sense of this no matter how much he thought about it. He was bewildered for a long time, then finally realized: he wouldn't be able to find Jiangli.

The immortal had said that she had turned into a pool of blood, becoming one with the many women like her in the Blissful Village.

He hadn't had a last look at her, only remembered the last words she had said in the mortal world. She had said: "But your feelings for me are clearly more ephemeral than dew!"

But her life, her fate, her hurried trample through existence—how could any of it be more substantial than dew?

It was only romance... Look at this stupid woman talking nonsense.

CHAPTER 12 - Midnight Song (Final)

The big black cat stretched, leapt up onto Prince Zhuang's knees, and idly stepped all over him. It didn't retract its claws and pulled out threads of silk all over his brocade robe, as well as getting cat hair everywhere.

Prince Zhuang had no temper where the cat was concerned. Not only did he never get annoyed, he sometimes even casually rubbed the cat's head and let it keep walking.

But this time, for once, he wasn't in the mood to play with the cat.

The chime clock struck three times, and there was a knock at the door from outside.

Prince Zhuang looked up at once. "Bai Ling, enter."

In answer, a piece of "paper" slipped through the crack in the door. The bolt didn't move at all.

When the "paper" came into the room, it shook and expanded, landing on the ground as a very skinny man. He was thin, with a long face and very proper features, but for no apparent reason, it was impossible to remember what he looked like. Even his eyes were slightly lighter than usual.

He entered the room without a sound, more light-footed than a cat.

So Bai Ling, the head of the Prince Zhuang Manor's secret guard, was a cultivator.

And the sort that hadn't taken the aboveboard path!

"Your Highness," said Bai Ling.

Prince Zhuang waved a hand. “No need to be so polite. How is it?”

Bai Ling answered, “The earthquake has stopped. There are executioner’s arrays concealed at the seven Azure Dragon Towers. Not a single one of the people who went to plunder the towers escaped. Around the fifth watch of the night, the assistant commander of Heaven’s Design Pavilion returned to the city with his people...”

Prince Zhuang listened impatiently as he detailed these things, then simply interrupted him: “What about that walking calamity Xi Shiyong?”

Bai Ling said, “All is well with the Viscount. Set your mind at ease, Your Highness. He returned with the immortal envoy’s carriage.”

Prince Zhuang exhaled, his expression relaxing almost imperceptibly.

The chiming clock kept moving forward. He raised a coarse pottery cup and drank a mouthful of water. Then he was once again the unflappable third prince. “Very well—what, did he really leave the city on his own?”

“The immortal envoy’s cultivation is too high. I didn’t dare to approach,” Bai Ling said. “I’m not aware of the details of what happened, but the Viscount was sent back in Heaven’s Design Pavilion’s carriage, and the blue-clothesers at the Yongning Marquis Manor politely dispersed. This must not be a bad thing.”

Prince Zhuang coldly instructed, “Tell the gatekeepers and the guards that if that brat dares to come again, no one is permitted to let him in. Tie him up and send him to the Marquis. He needs a few beatings, or he won’t learn.”

Laughter lines appeared at the corners of Bai Ling's eyes. "Ah."

Then Prince Zhuang continued: "Xuanyin's immortal envoy has come? In previous years, there was news of the immortal envoy months in advance. Whose family does this one belong to? Why has his identity been so strictly concealed?"

"He... Pardon my rudeness." Bai Ling stepped forward and said a name into Prince Zhuang's ear.

Hearing it, Prince Zhuang's eyebrows rose slightly. "Him?"

"Yes," Bai Ling said quietly. "An ascended spirit peak master coming down from the mountain in person happens hardly once in a hundred years. I don't know the reason. Perhaps it has to do with the mutiny of the evil cultivators."

Prince Zhuang patted the black cat, sending it off to play by itself. With his hands behind his back, he walked to the window.

In the courtyard, rain fell on the banana trees. The rainwater fell on the leaves in droplets of mud, as if all the smoke and dust floating over Jinping was falling. Perhaps after this cleaning, tomorrow the fogs would disperse.

The foul black clouds created by mortals in the end fell back upon the mortal world.

There was one thing that others didn't know, but of which the children of the imperial family were well aware—due to the incident of Lancang to the south, Great Wan's Dragon Vein had broken once. Xuanyin's Dignitary of Fate High Elder, the immortal Zhang Jue, had personally come to the mortal world to repair the Dragon Vein and restore the country's fortune. This was the only "shed skin" immortal of Xuanyin who had publicly shown in his face in the mortal world in thousands of years.

The repaired Dragon Vein wasn't as stable as the original one. It needed to be reinforced once every ten years. This was why Xuanyin Mountain sent down an immortal envoy, who incidentally presided over the Grand Selection. Reinforcing the Dragon Vein required a suitable time. It was always on a different day, so the date of the Grand Selection had also become mysterious.

When each Grand Selection Year came, the Dragon Vein would be unusually weak. This was also the reason the evil cultivators had chosen this time to take a risk.

Had "this individual" come down from the mountain this year because the evil cultivators scheming against the Dragon Vein were particularly powerful, or... was Xuanyin Mountain hinting that the imperial star was fading, that the sovereign had transgressed, or even that the Dragon Vein was unsteady?

"Tell Wang Zixian that we'll take no action at this time," Prince Zhuang said after deliberating silently for a moment. "An ascended spirit cultivator is an ascended spirit cultivator, after all. Let's not be too clever under this one's nose."

Bai Ling gave an affirmative, then said, "There is no clear information about this mutiny of the evil cultivators. The whole thing seems strange from beginning to end. I've heard that Heaven's Design Pavilion wasn't very polite to the young masters staying at their head office last night. I'm afraid there will be great changes to the Grand Selection roster. If the Viscount had the good fortune to make his name known to the immortal envoy, should..."

Prince Zhuang looked at him expressionlessly. Bai Ling immediately shut his mouth.

Prince Zhuang swept his long sleeve over the window lattice. A silver inscription flashed on the wooden window frame.

This was a third-class inscription. With this embedded in the wooden beam, the room was warm in winter and cool in summer with no need for coals or ice, and it could withstand the earth dragon rolling over three times. Even if outside the sky fell and the earth split, as long as it didn't reach the stage of the Azure Dragon Towers collapsing, the prince's manor would be invulnerable.

A half-immortal in the open-eyed stage couldn't create an inscription. These inscriptions had to come from the hand of an immortal of the established foundation stage or beyond—in other words, one a member Xuanyin Mountain's inner sect.

According to the rules, only a Prince of the Second Rank⁹ or better, or a renderer of extraordinary service receiving special honors, was entitled to use a third-class inscription.

When the immortal sect occasionally bestowed a couple of inscriptions, it was the greatest honor of a mortal's life.

But how distant the immortal sect was!

Even if you received a selection card and were permitted to enter the Latent Cultivation Temple to cultivate for a year, then were fortunate enough to open your spiritual eyes, those who could enter the inner sect were still vanishingly rare. Out of one class every ten years, it wasn't certain that the inner sect would choose even one person.

The black cat jumped onto the windowsill, stuck up its big tail, and let out a long "meow" at its owner, shamelessly raising its head and demanding to be pet. The cat's cry called Zhou Ying's mind back. He once again returned the jade-like mildness to his face and calmly said, "Mr. Tanghua's seventieth birthday is coming up. Prepare a generous gift and send someone to let Heaven's Design Pavilion's

Captain Zhao know. Tell him that the Viscount of Yongning is reckless and insolent, and we're afraid of offending the immortal envoy's eyes. If possible, could the Exalted please take a look, and, in case the immortal envoy should wish to make serious changes to the roster of chosen disciples, have the Viscount removed from the alternate list."

A selection card from Xuanyin Mountain could have all the children of nobility squabbling over it. This was Bai Ling's first time hearing of someone being removed from the list. He was dazed.

Prince Zhuang said, quietly, "In Jinping, no matter what disaster may come, I can ward it off for him. If he enters the immortal sect, my reach truly won't be long enough. I only have the one brother. If he had only..."

At this point, he realized that he had misspoken, starting from "only one brother" — where did that leave all the true offspring of imperial blood in the palace? Therefore he stopped speaking, swallowed the following phrase, "if he had only been born ten years later," only paused, then continued: "One understands one's own family. He has no natural talent, and the Marquis Manor isn't struggling to feed him. There's no need to seek this insupportable 'great good fortune.' My uncle understands perfectly. All you need to do is take care of it."

Early the next morning, news of the entrance of the immortal envoy into the capital had indeed exploded.

There was at once an explanation for all the activity the night before — this was General Zhi!

When General Zhi came down to the mortal world, never mind Southern Sage Temple's bells ringing and the Dragon Vein leaping, there would have been nothing surprising about the true dragons on the Nine Dragon Pillar turning into fried dough twists!

For a time, rumors in the streets spread like bamboo shoots after rain: there were those who said they had glimpsed auspicious clouds with their own eyes that night; there were those who said the immortal envoy's carriage had passed their door and old stakes that had been dry for decades had sprouted buds; there were also those who said they had met the immortal envoy in casual dress, and the breath of immortal air had cured their chronic diseases at once!

Locations where the immortal had been encountered included but were not limited to wonton stands, pastry stands, tea shops, wine shops, tofu businesses... Evidently General Zhi had not only cured all illnesses, he was also a glutton who had eaten his way through Jinping in a matter of days!

Amid all this teeming rumor, the inexplicable instability of the Dragon Vein was covered up, and Jinping City's curfew was lifted without any explanation. The peaceful singing and dancing in the city fell back into rhythm with the rumbling steam engines outside the city.

The singing corpse at the pleasure boat ferry crossing was said to have been drugged by an enemy, and the House of Overflowing Splendor, inextricably connected to the murder, was completely shut down. The bustle of the Flower Viewing Festival seemed to have been only fireworks.

It had begun with a river of red fire, but when the fire was done, there was only ash.

"Those who received the Flower Viewing Invitations didn't dare to speak of it after they left," Pang Jian said to Zhi Xiu, who was inspecting the list of provisional disciples. He deliberated for a moment, then asked, "Shishu, won't it harm your reputation to let these people talk nonsense and fill the world with rumor?"

Indeed, of those rumors about eating at a hundred restaurants, more than half had been created by Zhi Jingzhai himself.

“It’s better than them talking about the Dragon Vein being unstable, anyway. Never mind that it would put the common people in a panic, it would be bad for His Majesty, too,” Zhi Xiu said. “My reputation... What do I want with a reputation like a flawless jade? To drop it on the ground and listen to the crash?”

He held a small writing brush. As he spoke, he swept the shaft of the brush over each name on the list in turn. When he pointed at someone, that person’s face would automatically appear on the paper, along with a genealogical background and any history of wrongdoing.

Pang Jian glanced over and saw General Zhi’s brush shaft point at a “Zhao Wenhong.” Beside the name appeared a rather proper young man’s face. Under the picture appeared small writing, explaining that this person belonged to the main bloodline of the Ning’an Zhao family. It stated his age, who his parents were, which immortals belonged to which generation of the family, and so on.

Then there followed a final line: *Raped and insulted his younger half-sister by a concubine; she doesn’t dare to report it.*

Pang Jian: “...”

What the fuck was this?

General Zhi was a military man, but perhaps because he had spent many years cultivating, his temper was very mild. At a glance, he looked like an unremarkable scholar. This was completely at odds with both a legendary hero and an ascended spirit peak lord of the immortal sect.

Only now did Pang Jian realize why ascended spirit cultivators had “attained the highest heaven.”

Commander Pang had been in Heaven’s Design Pavilion for most of a century. Excluding the years he had been in other parts of the country on official work and had been unable to return in time, he had received five or six immortal envoys—late established foundation stage ones, as well consummate established foundations. He had never seen methods like this.

All the deeds, good and evil, in a mortal’s lifetime, no matter how private, no matter how “kept between heaven and earth and us,” became transparent in front of General Zhi, if he only wanted to know about them.

It was as if he were the “heaven” and “earth” that witnessed all.

Zhi Xiu casually struck off the name “Zhao Wenhong.” He asked, “Is there a member of the Zhao family in Heaven’s Design Pavilion?”

“There is,” said Pang Jian, giving up Zhao Yu. “I’ll let Zhao-shidi know and have him go home and deal with it.”

In less than the time it takes to drink a cup of tea, General Zhi had struck off nearly half the names on the list. “Is there a backup list?”

“Shishu.” Pang Jian, watching from the sidelines, had found the sight too shocking to behold. He couldn’t resist saying, “Don’t you think that we’re... sheltering wicked deeds like this?”

“Some of them really are disgraceful,” Zhi Xiu said very mildly, judging the matter as it stood. “I struck off all the ones who were unsuitable. Fortunately, they’re all the sons of the aristocracy. They won’t be hard to investigate or locate. Whoever deals with these things—have them handle it.”

As he spoke, he looked up. His long phoenix eyes were like a two calm lakes, reflecting the beautiful and the ugly without judgment, neither shocked nor angry. Looking into them for a while made you calm down along with him.

Pang Jian was silent for a moment. “Yes, my colleagues ought to have an alternate list ready. Allow me to go look, shishu.”

Soon, Zhao Yu presented the alternate name list. He didn’t dare to say much, only went home, dejected, to deal with his family’s unworthy descendant.

Zhi Xiu crossed out and pointed. Soon he had put together a final list of thirty people and gave it to Pang Jian. “No need to look further. These will do for this year.”

As soon as he spoke, a blue-clotheser came in and said, “Shishu, commander, those evil cultivators who launched a sneak attack against the Azure Dragon Towers all killed themselves after being captured. Of the ones at the Blissful Village, those that didn’t die on the scene couldn’t endure a single soul-searching. We only managed to get fragments in questioning. These people normally use immortal tools made of reincarnation wood to transmit messages. They don’t use their real names when they communicate. They call the evil god they worship Tai Sui. The situation has been handled and written up. Please take a look, shishu.”

Zhi Xiu said “good work” and took the report. He flipped through it carefully. “This was the result of my negligence. I didn’t expect that this evil*cultivator would be a consummate ascended spirit. I caused all of you alarm.”

Pang Jian asked, “Shishu, aren’t there very few evil*cultivators who can pass the established foundation pass? How could there be an ascended spirit evil*cultivator? Also...”

“Well?”

Pang Jian hesitated, wondering whether what he was going to say would be too arrogant, but the look in General Zhi’s eyes gave you the feeling that you could say anything in front of him, that he could pardon anything, so he couldn’t resist saying, “I think that that evil*cultivator was a little weak—of course, even if I had craned my neck until it broke, I still wouldn’t have been able to see the dust under his heels, but... I just think that he doesn’t... doesn’t quite match my idea of a near-shed skin.”

When he had spoken, he waited for Zhi Xiu to laugh, but General Zhi didn’t laugh. Seeming to take his words very seriously, he reflected for a moment, then nodded and said, “Indeed. There are many riddles about this person, and the sect’s information is currently limited. But all of you can set your minds at ease. This kind of evil*cultivator may not be encountered once in a thousand years, and their arrival is always preceded by great events. The sect will know ahead of time.”

Pang Jian could tell at once that Zhi Xiu didn’t want to say anything more about it. He knew that there were a great many taboos within the sect. What the elders didn’t tell you, you couldn’t casually inquire about. So he tactfully shut his mouth and didn’t ask again.

But Zhi Xiu scrutinized him, smiling, and said, “Wenchang, if I saw right in the Blissful Village woods that day, then your spiritual bones are already complete. You’ve fashioned your Way of the Heart, haven’t you? Since you’ve reached a consummate stage, do you want to go a step further?”

Pang Jian’s eyes opened wide. He licked his lips involuntarily.

Zhi Xiu said, “An established foundation cultivator has to enter the inner sect. While I don’t take disciples, I can still help you get a

reception order.”

Having crossed over to the established foundation, you would truly throw off the mortal world and live forever. No cultivator could be unmoved. This was what countless walkers in the mortal world longed for but couldn't attain.

Pang Jian was human, too.

But while he opened his mouth and an obvious struggle appeared on his face, he still swallowed his words. Meeting Zhi Xiu's mild gaze, he lowered his head. “Shishu, entering the inner sect... means I won't be a walker in the mortal world any longer.”

“Naturally,” Zhi Xiu said. “Those are the rules.”

Hearing this, Pang Jian didn't speak for a long moment. General Zhi seemed to have infinite patience and didn't rush him.

Finally, Pang Jian said, almost solemnly, “Thank you, shishu. When I entered Heaven's Design Pavilion, I didn't wish to go far along the path of cultivation. I only wanted to learn some skills and be a watchdog for the mortal world, to protect the peace. To ascend to the immortal sect and never again leave the mountains... I just think... I just think...”

Zhi Xiu laughed. “That it would be betraying something.”

At a loss, Pang Jian said, “Well... I mean... that is...”

“Don't be embarrassed.” Zhi Xiu waved a hand. A trace of longing appeared on his face. “You're a lot like an old friend of mine. Let's do this. I'll leave you the reception order, and when you want to enter the inner sect, send word to me.”

Pang Jian, confused and disoriented, thought, How could I do that?

So he became even more ill at ease.

Just then, fortunately, another blue-clotheser ran in. “Shishu, commander, there’s another thing. How should we handle that ‘earworm’?”

Pang Jian felt that his savior had arrived. He nearly wrenched his head off. “What ‘earworm’?”

“Ah,” said Zhi Xiu, pausing, “I’d forgotten about it. Is it still alive?”

After a moment, Pang Jian saw the little monster that had drawn Xi Ping into the depths of the Blissful Village.

At a glance, this little monster was an ordinary child, with a big head and thin neck, trembling as he was brought to Heaven’s Design Pavilion’s head office. From far away, he saw Zhi Xiu in his jade stamp-green robe and drew back desperately, like a frightened young animal.

Pang Jian pried open his mouth and looked into the little monster’s mouth full of sharp teeth like a bed of nails. He exclaimed in surprise. “This is an ‘earworm half-puppet’?”

Pregnant women were the most easily impacted by evil cultivators. In places where evil cultivators had stayed, children in the area were often born with deformities. Poor families couldn’t look after them, so they could only abandon them. There were evil cultivators who would collect these deformed child and use evil arts to turn them into a half-human half-puppet; they would extend their lifespans and keep them as slaves and pets. The euphemistic name for this was an ‘earworm’”¹⁰

“He seems to be a little scared of me.” Zhi Xiu didn’t approach. He said to Pang Jian, “Do you have a spiritual stone? Give him one to eat.”

Pang Jian gave an *all right* and took out a blue jade spiritual stone bead the size of a pinky fingernail. As soon as he took it out, the little monster grabbed impatiently it and swallowed it greedily.

“He’s starving. I wonder how long it’s been since he was fed.” Zhi Xiu sighed. “Earworm half-puppets aren’t living people. They can’t eat or drink and have to survive on spiritual stones—was this one created by one of the evil cultivators?”

“Yes,” the reporting blue-clotheser said, “his owner died in the Blissful Village woods.”

“He has to eat spiritual stones? Why not simply live off gold?” Pang Jian said in horror. “Anyway, he’s an evil cultivator’s thing. Let’s dispose of him.”

The little earworm hadn’t expected him to be even more ruthless. He ducked behind the blue-clotheser in fear.

“Wenchang, don’t tease him. A half-puppet may not have the intelligence of a normal child due to the arts used to create him, but he still understands some human speech,” General Zhi Xiu said. “Good and evil have nothing to do with an ignorant little thing like this. I’ll take him to the Latent Cultivation Temple and see whether one of the wealthy disciples would be willing to take him in.”

“On that subject,” Pang Jian said as though “suddenly remembering something” while he flipped through the list of remaining provisional disciples, “Huh? Why wasn’t that Xi Shiyong on the alternate list?”

“You mean that kid from the Blissful Village... the one as reckless as you?”

“He’s the Viscount of Yongning, nephew of the Imperial Consort in the palace. His full name is Xi Ping. Reasonably speaking, he ought to...” Affecting total carelessness, Pang Jian said, “Hey, that’s strange. Perhaps it’s because there aren’t many members of the Xi family, and my subordinates overlooked him.”

Zhi Xiu smiled. He knew that Pang Jian was doing this on purpose and didn’t expose his act. He casually wrote Xi Ping’s name on the paper, and Young Master Xi’s blooming face appeared.

Xi Ping’s “offenses” were simply too numerous to record: on such a month and day, acting in collusion with such and such individuals, beat up the son of the assistant minister of the War Ministry for the sake of an actress; on such a month and day, while drunk, scolded the madam of Fragrant Spring House until she cried; on such a month and day, fed such a person’s saddle horse a laxative; on such a month and day, bullied the cat at Prince Zhuang Manor and chased it up a tree...

Pang Jian: “...”

This brat was truly a hidden treasure. So diverting.

Zhi Xiu laughed and added Xi Ping’s name to the end of the list. “Let’s add him, then.”

CHAPTER 13 - The Dragon Bites Its Tail (1)

On the ninth day of the month, before the fourth watch of the night, Xi Ping woke with a start.

He forgot what he had been dreaming about as soon as he opened his eyes. He stared blankly at the birthday jade hanging on the bed curtain for a moment, saw “fourth month, ninth day” carved on the jade, and thought: Jiangli’s birthday.

He rolled over and wearily closed his eyes, blearily wondering what he should get her.

Lately the quality of southern pearl strings had been good, though they were rather big and looked ridiculous on thin people; a gold filigree enamel pocket watch with an inlaid peacock design was a little gaudy, but young women didn’t mind gaudiness; there were also Magu’s¹¹ birthday greetings crafts which, while the quality of the jade wasn’t the best, had carvings of the goddess that at a glance had quite a bit of Jiangli’s charm, and “birthday greetings” were both suited to the occasion and auspicious. He could...

Suddenly, Xi Ping opened his eyes again.

He had remembered. He couldn’t give her anything.

It turned out that this matter had been silently fermenting in his chest for several days and had only now swelled to a sufficient size to block his excessively open heart.

This was Xi Ping’s first time experiencing a parting in death. The impression may not have been deep, but the after-effects were lingering.

He draped on his clothes and got out of bed, then wrote half a stanza of a lament for a deceased wife... He couldn't force out a second half. Reading back over it, he felt involuntary sadness welling up, because his great work was truly rubbish, no better than the trees' "skin condition" in the Blissful Village.

The House of Overflowing Splendor had silently disappeared, and for a time, the Jinping social scene had dimmed. Xi Ping had suddenly decided that those places of feminine charms were all very boring. A couple of days ago, a drinking buddy of his had obtained a "steam carriage" that didn't need a horse to pull it and had asked him to come out for a drive, and he, disinterested, had refused.

During the day, he either listened to opera with his grandmother or posed for his mother's drawings, and at night he stayed in his grandmother's courtyard. When the old lady went to sleep, he read on his own.

Even though he was always knocked down within two pages, it was still reading.

In a little while, he was even planning to obey the Marquis, go to the "young masters' training camp" to make up for his deficiencies, then get married and have children, live a normal life.

But an immortal's light-hearted joke could rewrite a mortal's destiny.

Xuanyin Mountain's selection card arrived at the Marquis Manor when the Marquis was taking a day off.

In the first ke of chen hour,¹² apart from the old lady, who was getting on in years, the whole house was sleeping in. A white crane flew elegantly into the Marquis Manor and waited on the roof for a full ke until the sun rose, but it didn't see any living people.

It had its orders. There was nothing it could do. It had to trespass into the rear courtyard.

The old lady was watering the flowers. Startled by this auspicious vision, she thought she had reached the end of her lifespan and this immortal crane had come to carry her into the west. She was so scared she dropped her watering can.

Xi Ping heard his grandmother's servant girl cry out in alarm and thought a thief had broken into the house. Without even opening his eyes, he picked up a sword and ran out to fight. He looked around fiercely and couldn't find the thief. He was completely bewildered when a big bird handed him a wooden tablet... and a letter.

He couldn't tell what kind of wood the tablet was made of. Xi Ping yawned and drew in a chilling breath of costus root. The costus root scent put you in mind of soughing pines and bamboo forests that had been silent for hundreds of thousands of years amid cold morning mists. When a breath of it poured into his lungs, his head cleared.

On the front of the wooden tablet was carved a cluster of bamboo beside the character "journey." On the reverse side was a line of small writing: *Viscount of Yongning Xi Ping, on the fourth month, fifteenth day, to enter the Latent Cultivation Temple.*

One ke later, the dreaming Yongning Marquis Manor was boiling—there was red rain coming from the sky, how could they still sleep?!

The wastrel that their joke of a Marquis Manor had bred had actually received a selection card for Xuanyin Mountain's Grand Selection!

How wonderful! He hadn't even worked out how to be a man yet, and now he was qualified to become an immortal!

Even the Marquis was stunned. He checked the golden seals of Xuanyin and Heaven's Design Pavilion on the envelope several times before he dared to open it.

The contents of the letter were clear and concise. It only said that provisional disciple Xi Ping was to come at such a time to such a place to do obeisance to the sage at Heaven's Design Pavilion's altar, then travel to the Latent Cultivation Temple to cultivate for a period of one year.

Attached was a list of sect rules three chi long.

As for other trifles—for example, how they would travel, what to bring, what traveling clothes to wear—none of it was spoken of. Xuanyin's Grand Selection was confined to the circle of the children of nobility. Everyone understood the rules.

When the shock was over, the whole family looked at each other in dismay.

A selection card could make Jinping's wealthy and influential lose their minds, but when this unique family encountered pie falling out of the sky, once they had recovered, they didn't seem happy about it at all.

The Marquis read the letter several times and gravely gave a servant a quiet order to go notify Prince Zhuang.

The old lady, meanwhile, using a silk cushion to pick it up, found a brocade box suitable to hold the wooden tablet and muttered, confused, "The Xuanyin Immortal Sect... sent my baby a selection card?"

The Marquis of Yongning's wife Madam Cui frowned. "Our family never thought... But I've already sent someone to find a potential daughter-in-law, what am I supposed to say?"

The old lady asserted: “The immortal sect must have expanded its admissions this year.”

Madam Cui became more and more anxious. “Everything was going fine, why would the immortal sect expand its admissions? Is there going to be unrest in the country?”

Madam Cui was skilled at painting and calligraphy and had a quick imagination. She was the only person in the whole family who could coherently explain scenes of beauty—the rest could only act as “scenes of beauty,” shut their mouths, and let her explain. This was what she had once used to entrap the Marquis. But people with overly sensitive minds were often prone to melancholy and thinking of the worst outcomes whenever anything happened.

The old lady knew of this bad habit and quickly consoled her daughter-in-law: “No matter what, this is still a good thing.”

Then she lovingly patted Xi Ping on the head. “Your grandfather was a good-for-nothing. It took him eight years to pass the county examination, and half his life to pass the provincial examination. He spent the family’s money to become a petty official. If he found out that my baby was making so much of himself, I think he’d laugh so hard he’d pick up his teeth and climb out of the ancestral tomb!”

Xi Ping: “...”

Really, there was no need to disturb the old fellow.

The old lady sighed. “But the mountain is timeless. If you happen to get chosen to enter the inner sect while you’re at the Latent Cultivation Temple, by the time you’ve transformed and cast off your mortal body and come down from the mountain, your grandmother will long ago have rushed off to the next life. I won’t get to see my baby again.”

Madam Cui heard this new anxiety added to her old worry, and tears swam in her eyes.

The Marquis was thinking to himself, You two ladies are worrying over nothing. The inner sect... Does the inner sect accept scraps?

Then he heard Xi Ping say, categorically, "That's not possible. At most I'll stay at the Latent Cultivation Temple for a year then come home. Mom, if you want to look for a bride, then go ahead and keep looking. I'll get married when I get back. There won't be any delay."

Hearing this rubbish, the Marquis of Yongning immediately wanted to shake his mustache once more. But before he could express his anger, he was stifled by his mother and his wife speaking in unison: "God bless us, that would be wonderful."

He had no voice in this family. There was nothing the Marquis could do. He could only put all his strength into glaring at Xi Ping, feeling very oppressed.

Xi Ping could just as well have done without this. In fact, he didn't especially want to go, but it would have seemed pretty shameless to say that. He quickly got over it. While it sounded pretty miserable to be shut up in a mountain valley, luckily it was only for a year, and if he happened to do well, he might get into Heaven's Design Pavilion when he got back.

Heaven's Design Pavilion!

Even the most undistinguished teenage boy was still a teenage boy and could admire force. The image of Pang Jian's back as he drew the bow in the rainy night had branded a yearning into Xi Ping's mind. He didn't know what it would be like when he got to the Latent Cultivation Temple, but for now, at any rate, he was determined to work hard.

His unexpected selection threw off the whole family's relaxed pace.

The old lady and Madam Cui asked around and learned that when you went to the Latent Cultivation Temple for a year, you couldn't leave the mountain, you weren't allowed to contact your family, there were no servants to look after you, and even the luggage you could bring was limited. They both turned pale, feeling that their darling was being banished to penal servitude.

His grandmother and mother gave him repeated exhortations, and Xi Ping patiently accepted them all without question.

This was the result of the Marquis teaching by example since Xi Ping was little: even a beast knew to retract its claws when it returned to its den. If you had a temper to work off, you went and did it outside. Once you came home, you absolutely couldn't make your mother and wife mind your moods. So Xi Ping was used to being pulled this way and that by the two ladies.

But in spite of this, he still couldn't quite take it this time—Madam Cui may have thought that you had to abstain from food when you entered the immortal mountains; she did her best to feed him a year's worth of food in advance, three meals a day with six snacks. She fed Xi Ping so much his spine nearly grew a hump.

Xi Ping got serious indigestion. For several days in a row, there was always acid coming back up his throat. And at night he had one wild dream after another. He kept thinking there was someone humming that Soul Calling Melody into his ear.

When Xi Ping could barely stand it at home any longer, the day to set off had nearly come. Before leaving, he went to Prince Zhuang Manor to say goodbye to his san-ge.

Prince Zhuang seemed to know that he had been tormented by all kinds of exhortations, or perhaps the warming temperatures had sapped his vigor. He was unusually reticent, only told him in brief roughly who had been selected. Before Xi Ping left, he gave him a two-layered brocade box.

Normally, whenever Prince Zhuang obtained any good tea or good wine, he would always give him some to take back to the Marquis Manor. Xi Ping was used to this. He took it and left. The upshot was that when he got home and opened it, he took one look and was astonished: it turned out that this box didn't contain any tea or pastries; it was a "downgraded immortal tool!"

An "immortal tool"—this was a tool that only an immortal could use.

Immortal tools had different grades. A master could use a low-grade immortal tool, but the other way around didn't work. For example, even if an open-eyed half-immortal got hold of Xuanyin Mountain's greatest immortal implement, it would be like giving a saber to a baby. They couldn't make it work.

Mortals with their obstructed spiritual sense naturally couldn't command immortal tools, but after Moon Plated Gold had entered the mortal world, in recent decades, humanity's steam technology had improved by leaps and bounds and had in turn influenced the immortal sect. A toolmaking master had attempted to add mechanical works to some low level immortal tools, making them operate on the basis of spiritual stones with a supplement of kerosene, making "downgraded immortal tools" that mortals could also use.

Though there was still some dispute among the immortal sects over "downgraded immortal tools"—it was said that the conservative old Kunlun Sect had forbidden these things.

Xuanyin, however, was far more relaxed. After all, Lin Chi, the inventor of the “Gold Imitation Technique” and “downgraded immortal tools,” belonged to it.

But despite this, downgraded immortal tools were still very rare. For one thing, once the immortal tool was downgraded, its functions would become much simpler than in its original version; there would be many limits on its usefulness. But the mechanical workings inside were a complex technology, and the cost was extremely high. It was no easier to reequip a downgraded immortal tool than it was to forge a high level proper immortal tool. The masters who created these tools were all proud and arrogant and usually didn't feel like spending so much time for the sake of mortals.

Also, apart from burning kerosene, downgraded immortal tools also burned spiritual stones.

Among spiritual stones, the most inferior and most impure “green ore” stone still cost a liang of gold per stone.

The lowest grade “jade stamp” had a market price of ten liang of gold. You could exchange a bead of jade stamp the size of a finger pad for a good horse.

The middle grade “blue jade” was forty gold to buy—the Marquis of Yongning's entire year's salary, no more or less, was equal to one blue stone.

As for the highest grade “white spirit,” it wasn't worth mentioning. A “white spirit” bead that was up to quality standards cost a hundred gold, enough to buy a presentable house in the capital city, where land was extremely costly.

The spiritual stones burned by downgraded immortal tools couldn't have too many impurities; they had to be at least jade stamp stones.

The pickier ones even needed to burn blue jades, or else it would lessen the lifespan of the tool. Who could afford that?

In the two-layered brocade box Prince Zhuang had given him, the upper layer contained white jade boards edged with Moon Plated Gold, as well as a few little amulets for exorcism and protection.

The lower layer, meanwhile, was packed full of “blue jade” spiritual stone beads.

As soon as the box was opened, the spiritual energy became oppressive. All the air in the study cleared. It was enough power for a downgraded immortal tool to burn for several years.

Xi Ping was nearly blinded by the blue light. He blurted out, “Damn it, my san-ge hasn’t even had a daughter yet, and he’s already giving me her dowry?”

The Marquis glared at him.

“I thought it was food,” Xi Ping said. “If I had known it was this, I wouldn’t have taken it.”

The Marquis said, “This represents His Highness’s affection for you. He gave it to you, so take it. It’s a useful thing. Our family won’t be the ones to say that His Highness’s means are straitened.”

Saying so, the Marquis took out one of the white jade boards. “Take one of these boards and give the other one to your grandmother.”

“What is this?” Xi Ping picked up a white board and scrutinized it. The white jade was nearly flawless, and there was a small brocade carp engraved in Moon Plated Gold in the corner, looking extremely clever. “A chopping board...? Hey, wait, dad, can’t we just talk it over normally, why do you always have to start getting physical?! If I

dodge out of the way too quickly and you throw out your back, I'll be the unfilial one again.”

“This is called a proximal.”¹³ The Marquis withdrew his foot, which had had no effect, and lifted his chin to indicate for Xi Ping to put the jade board down.

He put a blue jade bead in the groove on the underside of each jade board. Soon after, a gentle fluorescence flashed over them.

The Marquis picked up a brush and demonstrated to Xi Ping how these were used. He wrote the character “Xi” on one jade board. Fluorescence rippled over the other jade board, and an identical character “Xi” appeared in the same place.

“As long as there are spiritual stones in both proximals, no matter how far apart they are, you can use them to communicate. The Latent Cultivation Temple doesn't allow disciples to write to their families, but it doesn't prohibit or intercept messages sent through immortal tools. It must be tacit permission for you to bring them,” the Marquis said. “Your mom and I are all right, but the old lady is getting on in years. She doesn't say it, but in fact she can't bear to see you leave. Even if you don't have anything to say, just don't forget to let her know you're safe and sound every day.”

“I see,” said Xi Ping.

The Marquis pressed down on the Moon Plated Gold brocade carp on the jade board, and the fish seemed to come alive. It flapped its tail energetically and moved over the jade board following the Marquis's finger. Wherever it moved, the handwriting there turned to steam and was wiped clean. “Sit here, and sit properly. I have a few more things to say to you.”

Xi Ping uncrossed his legs and sat up straight as the shaft of a pen, awaiting his father's admonitions.

The Marquis said, "I didn't expect you to receive a selection card, or else I would have said this to you before. All our ancestors have been mortal. You'll have no protection in the immortal sect. If you make trouble the same way you do in Jinping, no one will clean up after you."

Xi Ping said, protesting, "To hear you talk, you'd think I was a walking calamity."

"What else are you supposed to be?" said the Marquis.

Xi Ping was about to retort when he heard his dad say coldly, "The Xi family can't reach the immortal sect's threshold. You're going on account of the Her Ladyship the Imperial Consort and His Highness Prince Zhuang. Even if you try to get yourself killed, don't involve them!"

"...I see," said Xi Ping.

But at this point the Marquis remembered something, and his thoughts wandered a little as he looked out the window.

It was already very late. The swirling shadows of trees fell on that profile that had for a time been the most handsome in Jinping, turning the grey temples black once more and deepening the ravines at the corners of his eyes.

Time had never spared the feelings of mortals when it began to wear them down.

Out of nowhere, Xi Ping thought that the Marquis wasn't at all happy about him receiving a selection card, not the pure unease of his grandmother and mother, but a kind of... deeper anxiety.

Then he looked at the pair of white jade proximals and felt increasingly doubtful—since he was little, the Marquis had told him that there was separation between mortal and immortal, and he had to keep a respectful distance from the immortal families. So their family was different from other families: they always only made offerings to their ancestors, never burned incense or worshipped deities. There were no talisman papers, inscriptions, or anything like that in the house... So why did the Marquis himself seem so familiar with this downgraded immortal tool?

Just then, the Marquis came back to himself and added, “Whether it’s the immortals teaching at the Latent Cultivation Temple or your schoolmates, just don’t be in a hurry to offend any of them. We have no need for meteoric success, and we have no use for you currying favor with those ‘heavenly’ people. Have you got that? Also...”

The words “don’t enter the inner sect” came right up to the Marquis’s lips, but when he looked up and saw his wretched son, he swallowed them.

It was already good if one provisional disciple out of each class could enter the inner sect. There were so many imperial kinsmen who hadn’t measured up, so what connection could the inner sect have with their family’s great treasure? It would have seemed completely clueless to say these words, like exhorting a warty toad not to go marrying Chang’e.

“...tone down your frivolous nature when you’re at the Latent Cultivation Temple. Go in peace, and return in peace a year from now. Don’t make your mom and your grandmother worry.”

“Dad,” said Xi Ping, “if you can’t bear to let me go, just say so, don’t use them as cover. Your face gets thinner and thinner the older you get.”

The Marquis: "..."

Little whelp!

His father was too embarrassed to admit it and could only roll up his sleeves to fend off his unfilial son.

Early the next morning, Xi Ping was dressed by the servants for the last time. When he was dressed, he said goodbye to his grandmother and his parents and went to Heaven's Design Pavilion.

Four streets around Heaven's Design Pavilion were sealed off. Emperor Taiming came in person. In fur coat and ceremonial headgear, leading the three lords and nine ministers, he arrived at the start of chen hour at Heaven's Design Pavilion's altar.

The provisional disciples lined up and knelt to listen respectfully to the imperial address.

This year's imperial address was unusually short. His Majesty only said a few brief words along the lines of "cultivate your bodies and minds, protect the nation." He didn't seem at all as talkative as hearsay made him out to be.

It was said that the immortal envoy overseeing the Grand Selection came very late each time, and the higher his cultivation was, the more airs he put on, leaving everyone to wait around in vain, relying entirely on His Majesty to play for time. Each time, His Majesty was obliged to have a very long speech prepared, wanting nothing more than to become a stutterer so he could draw it out even longer.

This year, an ascended spirit peak master had come, and everyone had thought that they would have to wait until the sun began to set. But instead, General Zhi presented himself punctually at the first ke of chen hour.

Zhi Xiu didn't arrive flying on a sword, nor did an immortal crane lead the way for him. He had changed into a light grey gown with hidden inscriptions, absolutely proper, neither sumptuous nor shabby. If not for all of Heaven's Design Pavilion's half-immortals stationed in the capital rising to welcome him, looking from afar, you almost would have thought he was an ordinary person.

General Zhi had been cultivating in secret for centuries, but he still seemed to remember the role of a courtier of Great Wan. He politely saluted His Majesty and joined him in offering sacrifices to heaven and earth, giving ample consequence to the mortal world's sovereign.

At wu hour and two ke, thirty one carriages stopped at Heaven's Design Pavilion's gates. Part-time workers had already stowed the disciples' luggage. The carriages were drawn by a set of white horses, so white they reflected the light. Their eyes displayed the particular blue-green light of jade stamp spiritual stones... Likely they weren't living creatures but a kind of immortal tool.

Heaven's Design Pavilion's head office and the seven Azure Dragon Towers in the city tolled their bells three times. Emperor Taiming saw the immortal envoy to the eastern gate. General Zhi stepped on Zhaoting and went back to the immortal sect to report.

Then all the disciples bid farewell to the imperial father.

Xi Ping, mixed in among the crowd, joined them in saluting. He snuck a glance at the emperor.

In childhood, he had seen the emperor Zhou Kun at the palace. His memory of the "imperial countenance" was already blurred. Xi Ping only vaguely recalled that His Majesty had seemed as tall as Southern Sage Mountain, with very thick, large hands; he spoke very kindly toward children and often had treats.

Only now did he find that His Majesty wasn't as tall as a mountain; he wasn't even as tall as Xi Ping himself.

Emperor Taiming had the sun at his back; his expression was indistinct. He was weighed down by his ceremonial robes, so solemn he looked almost melancholy. On the coiled dragon column behind him were two dragons with faces of fury. Out of nowhere, it made Xi Ping remember the furious dragon in Tai Sui's shadow.

Now that the ceremony was over, the disciples, under the protection of Heaven's Design Pavilion, would proceed to the Latent Cultivation Temple.

CHAPTER 14 - The Dragon Bites Its Tail (2)

Pang Jian watched the new provisional disciples get into the carriages with a smile—the fourth prince, the ninth princess, the Prince Cixi's eldest son... Adding in a few imperial kinsmen, it meant that, out of thirty-one provisional disciples, those with the surname Zhou took up six places. But of the other great families of Xuanyin, there was only one member of the Lin family's main bloodline who had been selected, and a barely connected collateral relative of the Zhao family. The remainder were all... rather unexpected choices.

Was it that this year's set of sons of the noble and wealthy were unusually immoral and so had been struck off the name list at once, or had Zhi-shishu done this on purpose?

He couldn't say.

A blue-clotheser said into his ear, quietly, "Commander, which ones do you think have the potential to enter the inner sect?"

"Who are you asking? A country bumpkin like me couldn't even find the door to the inner sect," Pang Jian answered indifferently.

"Anyway, if it's not one of the Zhou, then it'll be the Lin."

The blue-clotheser said, "Then the remainders will be our future colleagues."

"Drop it." Pang Jian languidly kept pace. "The Latent Cultivation Temple isn't some kind of guaranteed path like a sewer, where you can open your spiritual eyes just by entering. Every year there are quite a few who manage nothing but eating enough to gain ten jin."

Xi Ping, placed at the end of the line of carriages, heard this and looked up. This brat's ears were amazing; across several zhang of

distance, he could still hear others whispering. He must have spent a lot of time eavesdropping. Xi Ping filtered out the other information and determined that the meals at the Latent Cultivation Temple were good. He was quite pleased and waved familiarly at Pang Jian.

Disbelief appeared at once on Pang Jian's face. He couldn't resist asking his colleague, "Do I seem like a friendly and approachable person?"

His subordinate misunderstood him and smoothly produced some flattery: "Naturally, commander, you've always been good-natured and amiable."

"Go to the medical hall later and get some pills for eye disease," Pang Jian said expressionlessly.

Just then, Zhao Yu came over in a hurry.

Even since a member of the Zhao family's main bloodline had been the first to be struck off the roster by General Zhi, even Zhao Yu had been dejected. He had been somewhat more subdued than usual lately. He didn't make eye contact with anyone. He came up in front of Pang Jian and quietly said, "Commander, the person standing guard was inattentive to his task. I just received a report that that earworm half-puppet has run away..."

"Let him run." Pang Jian didn't take it seriously. An ignorant little half-puppet was less dangerous than a stray dog, and given his condition, he came pretty cheap; this didn't amount to a financial loss.

"Well..." Zhao Yu hesitated, then quietly said, "After all, it's a thing that Zhi-shishu asked after by name."

"What would shishu want him for? He just couldn't stand to see the little thing starve to death. You..." For the sake of the Grand

Selection, Pang Jian had been busy with unnecessary rigmarole for several days. His focus was lacking now, and he nearly let some words of truth slip out.

He nearly blurted out the sentence, “You’d be better off disciplining your family’s youth rather than giving your opinion on this kind of trifle.” At the last moment, he held back.

“You... have no need to concern yourself with him. A half-puppet that lives off of spiritual stones won’t get far in the mortal world. It may be that one of these young masters or young mistresses has brought along some treat and lured him off.” Pang Jian dragged his words back and put on a show of decency, patting Zhao Yu on the shoulder. “I’m going to take the little whelps to school. I’ll start back as soon as I get there. For the next couple of days, you and the others will be responsible for Jinping.”

Then he puckered his lips and whistled. A sword appeared at his feet.

When Pang Jian flew up riding the sword, all the white horses drawing the carriages let out long whinnies in unison and began to move, sprinting along Zhengyang Street, which had been emptied.

Xi Ping stuck his head out the window and saw that the little alleys tucked away on either side of the street were full of people watching the fun. Quite a few commoners, seeing a blue-clothed half-immortal flying on a sword, bowed in excitement by the roadside as though witnessing the arrival of a god.

Commander Pang, naturally, was used to this sight. Sleeves fluttering in the wind, he kept his gaze fixed forward.

For a moment, envy arose even in the useless young master’s heart.

He couldn't resist thinking, In another year, will I also be able to wear the blue robe and go by in majestic flight?

Just then, the fleet of carriages passed by the Heyin Building—the Heyin Building was imperial property, the tallest restaurant in all of Jinping City, which stood at the western city gate; everyone who had come there was seeing off the disciples.

A private room's window was half-open, and a familiar face flashed by. It seemed to be Prince Zhuang.

But before Xi Ping could get a clear look, the fleet suddenly accelerated and left by the western gate like the wind.

Xi Ping wasn't sitting steadily. His back bumped against the body of the carriage, and a strong air current surged in through the window. The inscriptions on the window flashed and automatically sealed it. His ears buzzed, and he was pressed down into the carriage seat.

After a while, the pressure finally decreased a little. As soon as Xi Ping sat up, he heard Commander Pang say loudly, with a laugh, "Everyone hold on and sit tight. Better not open the windows and look down."

His words were too effective. No sooner had he spoken than nearly all the carriage windows were open, heads sticking out of them in unison.

Xi Ping was choked by the fierce countryside wind of mingled smoke and dust and couldn't quite catch his breath. He narrowed his eyes into slits, then found to his astonishment that the ground of Jinping was already far away from them. The houses, roads, tall buildings, and watercourses were all constantly shrinking... They were flying in the sky!

The eyes of the young man closest to him rolled up into his head. He fell straight back into the carriage in a faint.

Pang Jian, satisfied, veered aside on his sword and casually flew over beside the carriage to seal the window for the brother who had fainted. “Tsk, scared of heights *and* can’t follow directions.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Xi Ping’s head blown out of shape by the wind. Commander Pang’s gaze suddenly focused as he noticed something. He murmured, “So that’s where you’ve run off to.”

“Huh? What did you say?” With the fierce wind pouring into his ears, Xi Ping was thinking that flying through emptiness wasn’t a delightful experience at all. He shouted, “Exalted, aren’t you worried about your skin getting as chapped as a radish?”

Before Pang Jian could answer, Xi Ping felt something touch his foot. He looked down and saw the hem of a pink garment peeking out from under the seat.

A ghost in broad daylight!

Xi Ping, caught unawares, was startled. “Hey!”

The owner of the pink hem quickly curled inward. Xi Ping stepped on the hem and pulled the “ghost” right out.

There was a crash, and a whole box of blue jade spiritual stones rolled over the whole carriage. He had pulled a small child out from under the carriage seat.

Each of the small child’s little paws was clutching a blue jade, and his lips were tightly pressed together in an unnatural way.

Xi Ping: “...”

Had he accidentally taken someone else's luggage and brought along someone's kid? And why did this little thing look familiar?

Just then, a gust of wind came through the window and hit the small child in the chest. The child gave a cry and spat out two blue jades, revealing a mouthful of sharp teeth.

"It's you!" The familiar "bed of nails" teeth reminded Xi Ping. This child was the "little slave" that belonged to the skinless evil cultivator at the Blissful Village!

"Ho, rich man." At some point Pang Jian had come through the wall into his carriage. When he saw the blue jade pearls rolling over the floor like pebbles, his expression cooled almost imperceptibly.

As soon as the earworm half-puppet saw him, he was immediately too scared to move.

Pang Jian waved a hand. The scattered spiritual stones rolled back into the wooden box on their own and arranged themselves. He picked up the box and weighed it. He knew there had to be at least a hundred liang. Each and every one of the spiritual stone beads in the box was sparkling and clear, without a single blemish. All were first-class blue jade.

The price of this box of beads could be described as sky high.

"Quite a healthy patrimony." Pang Jian raised his eyelids and examined Xi Ping, his smile growing cold. "Is the Marquis of Yongning's salary so high?"

"Don't mention it. The Marquis's little income isn't even as much as we bring in managing the bit of land left by our forebears in the southern outskirts." Xi Ping seemed not to have heard the barb in Pang Jian's words. He smoothly closed the whistling window and

casually said, “Hey, sit down, Exalted. Would you like some pastries? I brought them from home. They’re still warm.”

Pang Jian’s expression warmed slightly. He politely turned down the kind offer. “I see, your family has your ancestors’ blessings.”

No one had farmed the earth in the southern outskirts for a long time. After Moon Plated Gold had come to the mortal world, all kinds of steam engine factories had grown up like spring bamboo shoots after rain, especially in the southern outskirts, which contained the canal docks. If you had a bit of land there, you could get rich on the rents alone. No wonder they were so liberal.

Pang Jian closed the box of spiritual stones and put it aside. “How much land does your family have? Can it stand up to this kind of expense?”

Xi Ping counted on his fingers. “Two or three hundred mu, I think. Who knows, I’m not sure of the exact number. The rents are trifling. Our Marquis primarily gets by on the strength of his looks.”

“Oh?”

“Have you heard of Cui Ji, Exalted?” said Xi Ping.

In fact, Pang Jian had heard of Cui Ji.

Cui Ji was Jiangnan’s greatest jeweler and occupied a huge compound of stillness amid noise in the most prosperous part of Jinping City. If a wealthy matriarch or young mistress went out without a couple of pieces by Cui Ji on her, she would be too embarrassed to talk to people.

When the name of a business was famous enough, even those who didn’t shop there would hear of it—for example, even the youngest child knew about the high quality Shaoxing wine at the Heyin

Building, even monks had heard of the osmanthus duck at the Phoenix's Perch Pavilion, and even a man like Commander Pang could recognize Cui Ji's little carp imprint, which had cut through the purse of every wealthy lady in Jinping.

Xi Ping picked and chose among the box of pastries. "My mom's surname is Cui. Cui Ji is my grandfather's business, and my mom owns thirty percent of the shares."

This was a long story: when Madam Cui had been a young mistress, she had gone with a sister for a trip in the countryside. On the way, their carriage had broken. The Marquis happened to run into them and kindly lend a hand. Young Mistress Cui was easily swayed by beauty. One look, and she was bewitched by his sexual charms.

The Marquis hadn't been a Marquis at the time, only an idle and pampered young man. Though in the eyes of Boss Cui, the Xi family amounted to paupers, in the eyes of the world, a petty official was still a government official, and his status was higher than a merchant's. The Xi family had only this one son; he couldn't marry into his bride's family.

Anyway, they weren't a good match.

But the young mistress didn't care. She insisted on marrying him, and no one could talk her out of it. Boss Cui was furious. Go ahead and marry him, he said, and when you've married your boy toy, you can forget about your father. So the young mistress had strictly obeyed her father's wishes: she had broken off her connection to the Cui family, turned her head away, and gotten married, not taking even the end of a thread with her.

But times change—later, the Xi family's young lady entered the palace and became a success. The unreliable boy toy, relying on favor shown to his sister, somehow managed to become the

Marquis of Yongning, and the mixed up Young Mistress Cui became the lady of the Marquis Manor.

How could you reject relatives from a noble family? So Boss Cui and Madam Cui's father-daughter relationship had naturally been renewed.

The boss carried on in impressive style. The Yongning Marquis Manor, and even the Imperial Consort in the palace, were all amply provided for, to the satisfaction of all.

Xi Ping gave a rough account of the Marquis's history of acquiring riches and commented, "Actually, I feel like it's more like my mom and my aunt got married, and my dad was just thrown in as a bonus."

Pang Jian: "..."

Having heard this, he didn't know what comment to make. Anyway, he was a little envious.

Xi Ping stuffed a preserved egg dumpling into his mouth and narrowed his eyes at Pang Jian as though in provocation. He gave a half-mocking laugh. "Exalted, what are you thinking? A family of nobodies like us, we rely entirely on the grace of the imperium. There are eight hundred pairs of eyes at the imperial censor's terrace watching us twelve shichen a day. We're faulted at every turn. When there's something we can't touch, we won't even dare to bend down to pick up a dropped copper coin. Do you think it's so easy being a sycophantic courtier?"

Pang Jian was dazed by his defiance.

Everyone who saw a walker in the mortal acted like they had seen a god, and even the nobility was polite, never mind that Pang Jian was famously hard to deal with. Since he had come into power at

Heaven's Design Pavilion, no one had given him any attitude. The feeling was novel. Commander Pang actually didn't get angry. He asked curiously, "Kid, do you know that even if you come back from the Latent Cultivation Temple, you'll be running errands under my command?"

"Not necessarily," said Xi Ping. "If I manage nothing but eating enough to gain ten jin, I'll probably be running errands for the imperial guard's young masters."

Pang Jian: "..."

For once he was speechless for a moment, then laughed in spite of himself. He remembered this whelp's conduct at the Blissful Village; indeed, he was a magic beast that feared neither heaven nor earth.

Pang Jian reached into his sleeve and pulled out a small gold leaf, which he gave to Xi Ping. "I misspoke. I'll give this to you as an apology."

"Thank you, Exalted." Xi Ping had always been direct when accepting gifts. He would take anything that anyone dared to give him. He had never put on a show of refusal. "What is it?"

"A dragon-taming chain. It answers to a drop of blood from its owner. It's used for taming beasts." Pang Jian indicated the half-puppet next to them with his chin. "This little thing eats spiritual stones, like eating gold without shitting it out. An ordinary person couldn't support him, but since you have the money, you can take him."

"Huh?" Xi Ping stared. Then his voice rose an octave in pitch. "No way, didn't this thing belong to an evil cultivator? And it bites! What would I want it for, to use it as a curse to kill my enemies?!"

The little half-puppet also appeared alarmed.

“If there had been a curse on the half-puppet, Heaven’s Design Pavilion would have taken care of it by now. No need for you to get involved. If you put the dragon-taming chain on him, he won’t be able to bite you anymore. He’ll do whatever you want him to.” Pang Jian leaned back. His body “melted” into the carriage wall, leaving only his features showing. He said, “Otherwise, there’ll be no one to wait on you at the Latent Cultivation Pavilion, young master. You’ll have to make your own bed.”

Xi Ping had wanted to refuse decisively. His mouth was already open. But when he heard these last sentences, he hesitated.

“Fine.” Pang Jian’s hand reached out from beneath his features. “If you don’t want him, give that back to me.”

Xi Ping quickly squeezed the gold leaf. With his face three chi thick, he saluted. “I don’t dare to refuse what an elder has bestowed. It would be impolite. I won’t stand on ceremony, Exalted.”

This little bastard.

Pang Jian pointed at him twice across empty space, then left through the wall.

As soon as he left, the little half-puppet immediately looked fierce and threw himself at Xi Ping, trying to snatch away the dragon-taming chain. But just as Commander Pang had said, the half-puppet only looked fierce; in fact, he had no more magic powers than an ordinary child. At any rate, Xi Ping could easily control him with one hand.

In desperation, the half-puppet opened his mouth and bit Xi Ping’s hand.

The mouthful of teeth like a bed of nails was truly sharp. Blood immediately began to seep out of Xi Ping's hand. Droplets of blood rubbed off on the gold leaf. The dragon-taming chain immediately grew. A pop, and it trembled in midair, separating the man and the puppet. Then it curled around the half-puppet's neck and turned into a neckband.

The little monster was immediately controlled. He backed up a few steps like a puppet on strings.

Xi Ping meanwhile had a strange feeling—the neckband... no, the little monster held by the neckband seemed to become a part of his body, like a cat's tail: when you weren't paying attention to it, it would move on its own; when you wanted to pay attention to it, you could control it at will.

Xi Ping tried out an order: "Can you walk two steps to the left?"

The little monster's expression was fierce and unwilling, but his feet unwillingly walked two steps to the left.

"To the right."

The little monster was as obedient as Xi Ping's own legs.

"Hah." Xi Ping was amused. Commander Pang had given him something good. "Now you'll behave? Bow to me."

"Do a handstand."

"Now dance."

The little monster was tormented into dizziness. Hatred appeared in his black bean eyes; he glared ferociously at Xi Ping.

Xi Ping had never been afraid of being glared at. He would get more and more worked up the angrier someone was. Licking his canine tooth, he played a dirty trick: “Stop, no more twisting—come on, let me hear you say ‘dad.’”

But this time, he didn’t have his way. The little monster opened his mouth, but only a brief exhalation came out, like a leaking tinderbox.

Xi Ping took a close look and saw that the little thing only had a short segment of tongue, curled up behind several rows of teeth. His throat and soft palate were also very deformed.

It seemed that... he couldn’t speak.

The little monster, controlled by the dragon-taming chain, was unable to fulfill his master’s orders and could only continue to make breathy sounds, weird and pitiful.

Xi Ping suddenly felt a little unwell. The half of a tongue had put him in mind of the dogs at the palace—there had to be solemn silence in the imperial city, and dogs weren’t allowed to bark, so all the dogs in the palace had to have a section of their throat cut out. Imperial Consort Xi had originally had a dog that had been friendly with Prince Zhuang since he was little. When Prince Zhuang set up his own household, he took it away from Guangyun Palace.

Every time that old dog tried to play with other dogs, it could only make breathy sounds like this. Slowly, it had lost interest in playing, and in a few months it quietly died.

On account of this, Prince Zhuang had suffered a major illness and had nearly died himself.

“Enough, stop.” Xi Ping stuck his head out the window. The wind blew so hard he couldn’t open his eyes, and he couldn’t clearly see where Pang Jian was. He could only yelled into the wind, “Exalted,

what was wrong with that evil cultivator? Why didn't he either not give it a mouth or give it a normal tongue? What's going on with this half-tongue? Can you fix this thing?"

Hardly had he finished speaking when something came flying at him and nearly hit him in the face.

Xi Ping caught it with both hands and saw that it was half of a thread-bound old manuscript. It was almost falling apart and had a sour smell.

He cried out in surprise, closed the window, and distastefully pinched the yellowing pages with his fingertips.

On the first page of the old manuscript were drawn several deformed babies. Underneath them was written: *Ten methods of creating a half-puppet.*

"What the hell..."

Xi Ping flipped through it, scanning quickly. But as he read, his tightly knitted brows sank, and his eyes opened wide in astonishment.

When he had read another ten pages or so, he shut the old manuscript without a word. His gaze fell on the half-puppet.

For some reason, the half-puppet that had originally been so angry his face was about to change shape froze briefly, then slowly calmed down.

Perhaps because... Xi Ping had looked at him the way you look at a person.

Xi Ping murmured, "So you aren't a puppet wrapped in human skin. You used to be human?"

The half-puppet was a little bewildered by his question. He stared back helplessly at Xi Ping for a moment, not knowing how he ought to respond. He could only hesitantly bare his mouthful of fierce teeth.

Xi Ping considered, then bent down and picked up the box full of spiritual stones. He took one out and gave it to him. “Here, you want to eat this?”

As soon as he saw the spiritual stone, the half-puppet forgot everything. He threw himself forward, snatched it out of Xi Ping’s hand, and swallowed it.

Xi Ping wanted to say something else, but just then, a long crane’s call passed through the skies. The carriage shook, and he had a sudden impression of becoming a hundred jin or more lighter.

He was shaken: they had arrived at the Latent Cultivation Temple!

Xi Ping had no more attention to spare for anything else. He casually stuffed the box of spiritual stones into his luggage and impatiently stuck his head out to admire the immortal mountain... not noticing how the half-puppet watched the box of spiritual stones closely, the black bean eyes sending out greedy beams.

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Author’s Note

They need to reach cultivation professional norms during this year-long project, or else they won’t be issued a diploma or be recommended for work.

CHAPTER 15 - The Dragon Bites Its Tail (3)

“...after the flying horses landed, they turned into white jade horses, and Commander Pang vanished without a trace. He must have gone to pay his respects to some immortal. There was a half-immortal at the gate to welcome the disciples, he introduced himself as Yang-shixiong, Yang Anli, Princess Xincheng’s son, a shixiong from the last Grand Selection class.

“Yang-shixiong is very polite. He looks a little like san-ge, though naturally he can’t compare with my san-ge.”

After night fell in Jinping, in the south study of Prince Zhuang Manor, Zhou Ying held a white jade board the same as the white jade proximals he had sent to the Marquis Manor—it turned out that these white jade proximals weren’t a pair; they were a set of three.

At this point, Xi Ping must have gotten settled in at the Latent Cultivation Temple and had begun to write his grandmother a lengthy letter; line after line of writing appeared quickly on the white jade board.

Next to him, Wang Jian was laying out the weiqi record as though nothing were the matter, pretending that there was nothing worth being shocked about in his lord spying on a letter Viscount Xi was writing home to the old lady.

Since her early years, Old Madam Xi had been a well-bred lady who didn’t leave the house. She had never pursued any studies. Everything Xi Ping wrote was in colloquial speech and included illustrations along with the text.

For example, he wrote: “In front of the temple gates, there are blue luan and white deer running around. A blue luan is a bird less than half a chi long, with a long tail like a cape.”

Underneath was a lifelike drawing of a blue luan... though the draftsmanship was a little rough, and it looked like a duck with a fan stuck to its butt.

The corners of Prince Zhuang's mouth turned upward.

“None of the footmen in the temple are human, they're scarecrows operated by spiritual stones. They're called 'straw children.' They can give directions, sweep the courtyards, beat a gong to tell time, and so on. You just need to stick the right talisman onto the back of the straw children's heads, and you can make them do tasks. When I've learned to make straw children, I'll definitely make you a bunch, a pair to rub your legs, two to fan you, and we can put together a theater troupe.”

Prince Zhuang laughed. “No wonder our grandmother favors him so much. This brat can flatter the old lady better than I can.”

Wang Jian humored him: “As the saying goes, everyone has his weaknesses and strengths. On the subject of striving for favor, Your Highness truly falls short.”

On the white jade proximal, Xi Ping finished flattering and went on to discuss the food at the Latent Cultivation Temple. Generally he was very satisfied and only said regretfully: “They only provide two meals a day, breakfast and dinner. The disciples don't get snacks.”

Having commented on the food, he went on to the residence: “The male and female disciples are separated here. In classes and daily life, they don't run into each other. Too bad, too bad! The female disciples live one to a courtyard, while the male disciples live two to four to a courtyard because the number is so much higher. I'm living in the Qiu courtyard along with two classmates.

“One is Chang-xiong, the eldest grandson of Royal Tutor Chang, with a face as round as a piece of flatbread. He’s friendly to everyone and very talkative. Less than two ke after he moved in, he’d already passed along eight bits of news, like an ascended trumpet.”

Prince Zhuang thought, You have the face to call someone else talkative? You’re the one who needs a slap on the mouth.

Wang Jian, seeing him for once in a good mood, tactfully went to refill his cup of water. He had just lifted the pot when he saw the smile on Prince Zhuang’s face cool, so he shot a furtive glance at the white jade board.

He saw that Xi Ping had written: “The other one, Yao-xiong, is a grand scribe’s son, the Crown Princess’s younger brother by a concubine. When this brother learned that he was going to be sharing a courtyard with me, he was so scared he ran to the outhouse seven times in one night, nearly excreted himself out into a noodle. I even felt conscience-stricken. In the future, I’ll have to get friendlier with him.”

Prince Zhuang’s fingers twisted on the white jade board. “The Crown Prince’s wife’s younger brother...”

Wang Jian quickly said, “Since the Marquis of Cheng’en’s Zhang family committed an offense, the Crown Prince has been increasingly subdued. The Crown Princess’s birth isn’t high, so her family, the Yao, have been even more cautious. The Second Young Master Yao who’s been sent to the Latent Cultivation Temple now has never been heard from in Jinping. He must not have a particularly flamboyant disposition.”

Prince Zhuang said, “Oh, I know. That bastard Xi Shiyong may be obnoxious at home, but there’s no need to worry about him being

bullied when he goes out... It'll be a good thing if he manages to hold out and not cause any trouble for me.”

Wang Jian said, smiling, “Set your mind at ease, Your Highness. Among the disciples who have entered the Latent Cultivation Temple this time, there are few direct descendants of the big families. Apart from His Fourth Highness and Her Ninth Highness, there's only one son of the Lin family. The Lin family is His Fourth Highness's mother's family, so presumably he wouldn't get into a dispute with him. Her Ninth Highness is young, and her disposition is frail. I don't think there's any suspense about which disciple the inner sect will choose this time. His Fourth Highness conducts himself properly. With him there to keep watch, the others won't be able to make any big waves. Anyway, his relationship with you in the mortal world has always been very good. Presumably he would look after the Viscount for you.”

“I wouldn't call it very good. Zhou Xi has known since he was little that he would enter the immortal sect and didn't associate with a mortal like me. He only kept from offending anyone for the sake of his mother.” Prince Zhuang smiled. “But, in fact, he truly isn't a rash person... hm?”

The white jade tablet was nearly filled with writing. Though the chatterbox Xi Ping hadn't yet fully expressed himself, he had to wind it up here. Having asked after the whole family's health, he added a line in the corner: “Heaven's Design Pavilion's Commander Pang and I have hit it off pretty well. He even gave me a half-human half-puppet little servant. It's a long story, I'll tell you in more detail tomorrow.”

“Pang? Pang Wenchang?” Prince Zhuang raised his eyebrows when he read the words “hit it off”—no wonder that when they had removed Xi Ping's name from the alternate name list, the Yongning Marquis Manor had still received a selection card. “Him?”

“This Lord Pang is noted for covering cruel intentions with a smile, being unmoved by force or persuasion, and deferring to no one. All the members of big families who have tried to curry favor with him could find no opening,” Wang Jian said. “As the Viscount has entered the Latent Cultivation Temple, when he returns in the future, it’s almost certain he’ll enter Heaven’s Design Pavilion. At this stage, if he’s hit it off with him... that isn’t a bad thing.”

Prince Zhuang continued to think it was a little strange. A lone wolf like Pang Jian didn’t sound like the type to give someone a “little servant.”

But on the other hand, the mighty assistant commander of Heaven’s Design Pavilion would have no more difficulty squeezing a handful of mortals to death than knocking over an anthill. He wouldn’t play any tricks on a young disciple... would he?

“Don’t forget to send Commander Pang a gift for the Dragon Boat Festival.”

Wang Jian agreed: “Of course.”

The little fish on the white jade proximal began to swim on its own, erasing Xi Ping’s words and drawings. The old lady began to write a response.

So Prince Zhuang put down the proximal and said to Wang Jian, “The diplomatic envoy from Chu came today.”

Wang Jian quickly sat up straight. “About the train business?”

“Yes, His Majesty has made up his mind to expand ground transport. A few Maze Stations within Great Wan’s borders won’t satisfy his appetite. He’s planning to connect to Chu’s Dongheng.” As Prince Zhuang spoke, the look in his eyes became cold once more. The illustrated white jade proximal seemed only able to dispel

the frost from his brow for a moment. “Dongheng’s Xiang family are unorthodox in their practices; they’ve actually fallen in with his plans.”

Wang Jian considered it. “What about water transport?”

Steam engines had blown the skies of Jinping full of smoke and dust, and they had also blown up the purses of water transport. A single grand canal, with so many noble families latched onto it sucking blood—how could they stand to give a share to the “Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon” that ran over the ground?

“Water transport? Ah, they nearly scraped the ground with their heads before the envoy had even left, saying that railroads ‘pierce mountains and go around forests, obstruct fengshui, harm the nation’s blessings.’ They all but brought in an immortal from Xuanyin Mountain to give a verdict.” Prince Zhuang smiled. “The water transport department’s Sun Yuqing sure is quite the genius.”

Wang Jian said, shaking his head, “The Sun family’s greed is bottomless. They can’t make up their minds. Before they curried favor with the Marquis of Cheng’en, and when the Marquis of Cheng’en fell, all they wanted was to plead their innocence of the connection before the Crown Prince.”

Before he had finished speaking, he saw a cold smile appear at the corners of Prince Zhuang’s eyes.

“Do you have some instructions you wish your student to carry out, Your Highness?”

Prince Zhuang pressed a hand to his lips, turned his head away, and coughed a few times. “When the railroad was first being laid from Jinping to Yuzhou, there was an instance of corrupt officials tricking the common people out of their farmland and selling them to the court at a high price. Do you remember?”

“I remember. Later a few people were easily taken care of, but as for the land, well, the court already had it, so naturally it couldn’t be returned,” Wang Jian said. “You mean...”

“To be sure, the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon is awe-inspiring, but the common people have lost farmland where they could settle down and make a living. How are they to live now? A pity.” Prince Zhuang sighed, as lightly as though blowing dust off fine porcelain. “Why don’t you drop a word to Lord Sun and let him know to stop thinking about bringing a complaint before the Southern Sage—not when there’s a ready-made ‘right way.’”

Wang Jian understood him. After giving an affirmative, he added, “But, Your Highness, His Majesty has always been hard-hearted. A handful of common people who have lost their land won’t necessarily stop him...”

“Why would I want to stop him? Whether he wants to expand the railways or the waterways, what connection does it have to a homebound invalid like me?” Prince Zhuang swept his sleeve wearily. “This is the Crown Prince’s business.”

“The Crown Prince? How could the Crown Prince wade into these muddy waters?”

“It’s out of his control.” Prince Zhuang toyed with his coarse pottery cup between his fingertips. His voice was almost inaudible. “After all... what does the Crown Prince have apart from his reputation for benevolence?”

At this point, he propped his head on his hand and inadvertently glanced at the white jade proximal next to him.

Old Lady Xi had already written a whole long-winded heap in enormous characters. Their old grandmother’s exhortations were

nothing more than these three: “Eat well, dress warm, don’t make trouble.” There was nothing new. Prince Zhuang read it and was about to avert his gaze when he saw the old lady write: “I don’t want any scarecrows, those are like monsters, they’d be terrifying if you caught sight of them at night. It would be better if the immortal sect taught you how to make pills and elixirs. Be sure to keep His Third Highness in mind.”

Prince Zhuang stared. For a moment, his eyelids trembled slightly, as if his eyes had been burned by the old lady’s writing. After a long while, he finally turned the proximal over and waved a hand at Wang Jian.

In the Latent Cultivation Temple, Xi Ping, finished exchanging letters with his grandmother, put away the white jade proximal and forced himself to lie down and go to sleep early.

The Latent Cultivation Temple was in the Xuanyin Mountain Range’s outermost valley. Green pines and cypresses formed rolling blue-green waves. There was no buzz of machinery, no clamor of gears. There wasn’t even a striking clock in the room. The disciples’ rooms only had a half-cun square hanging calendar block of blue-green jade; this was an unconventional immortal tool. Every night at midnight, the calendar block would automatically change the date, solar term, and the day’s weather.

It was too quiet in the mountains, so quiet Xi Ping couldn’t quite get to sleep in this new setting. He had wild dreams all night, once again hearing that Soul Calling Melody reverberating over and over in his ear, keening all night.

At mao hour, the calendar block on the wall suddenly threw out dazzling white light. Next, a thunderclap exploded in the small room, tremors shaking the beams.

Xi Ping was so shaken by this sudden clap of thunder that his three immortal souls left his seven mortal forms. He clambered up, felt up and down his body, made sure that he hadn't lost any parts in the lightning strike, then finally, still unsettled, looked at the calendar block.

The date on the calendar block had long ago changed to the sixteenth day of the fourth month. Under the words "clear and fresh, clouds drifting through the sky" had appeared another line of twinkling gold writing that silently urged him: "Make yourself presentable; at mao hour and three ke, morning class at the Qiankun Tower."

At this hour, the young master usually wouldn't even have gone to sleep yet.

And they wanted him to make himself presentable... It would be about the same as making a corpse presentable.

Xi Ping meditated profoundly in the direction of the calendar block for a while, then threw himself straight into bed and went back to sleep.

Unexpectedly, no sooner had his face touched the pillow than a strong light once again burst from the calendar block, and a second clap of thunder fell. It seemed to strike right at Xi Ping's head. Xi Ping's ears were more sensitive than other people's to start with; he was nearly deafened by this shaking. All his sleepiness vanished.

"Ah—" he yelled irritably, pounding the bed. "Come here, come here!"

After yelling, he stretched out his arms, closed his eyes, and leaned against the headboard, waiting for someone to dress him and do his hair.

But he waited for ages, and the clothes didn't automatically wrap themselves around his body. Xi Ping opened his eyes and impatiently and found that the inside of the room was silent. There was no Haozhong, and no maids; there was only the weird little half-puppet, squatting in a corner like a mushroom, watching him.

Only then did Xi Ping remember that this was the Latent Cultivation Temple. There were no more page boys.

The little half-puppet was lacking in intelligence. It wasn't that he couldn't understand human speech, but he didn't understand it very well—as Xi Ping saw it, his intellect was about on a level with his san-ge's lousy cat.

Pang Jian had clearly been talking nonsense. Never mind delicate tasks like dressing and doing hair, you couldn't even hope for this thing to make the bed or sweep the floor.

Xi Ping hadn't thought yet of how to deal with him. Grumpy about having to get up, he only tossed the little thing into the study. "Move, don't get in my way."

Getting dressed and cleaning up was all right, but fixing his own hair nearly killed him. Before he could get it right, he heard the voice of Chang Jun, who shared the courtyard with him. "Shiyong! Are you coming? We'll miss class! H-h-hurry up!"

Even the chatty Chang-xiong was stuttering. Xi Ping pulled out his pocket watch and glanced at it. He thought that they actually had plenty of time.

But Chang-xiong was in such a hurry he was about to burn down the door, so he had to shove his hair into its headpiece however he could, ignoring how many strands fell out; he wished he could take refuge in monastic life and shave it all off.

He'd just had time to copy down the map when his courtyard mate Chang Jun pulled him away.

“Did you bring a guide talisman?” said Chang Jun.

Xi Ping was bewildered: what would he need one for?

Before he could respond, Chang Jun quickly said, “No problem, I have a stack. If we mess up writing them, there are replacements. Let's go find a straw child. Our first time using a talisman, I'm afraid we won't get it right at once and have to try several times... Hey, over there!”

Xi Ping looked in the direction he was pointing. Several of their classmates were babbling as they surrounded a straw child.

“The morning class is in the Qiankun Tower. You have to write ‘Qiankun Tower’ in regular script, make it neat... Don't go out of the lines!”

“It's done, it's done, hurry, hurry! Stick it on! Stick it on!”

“Don't crowd the straw child. If you're blocking its way, how is it going to lead you? Spread out a little.”

Chang Jun pulled Xi Ping into the crowd. “Great, they've already found a straw child to lead the way. Let's follow them!”

Before he had finished speaking, the straw child with the guide talisman stuck on moved slowly—under everyone's gazes, this scarecrow walked in quick, mincing steps like a fine lady, as if afraid of stepping on an ant. It shifted sedately west along the path.

By the time its elegant steps reached the Qiankun Tower, they would be just in time to eat a New Year's reunion dinner.

Xi Ping: "..."

The disciples cried out and went to pieces. Only then did Xi Ping find that, apart from the map he was carrying, the others only held guide talismans.

Wonderful! They clearly couldn't even read a map for themselves, so how could they trust a so-called "immortal tool" so much?

"Don't rely on that." Xi Ping quickly glanced at the map and called upon his experience of getting chased all over Jinping by the Marquis carrying a discipline rod. "Come with me."

"May I ask what family you are from, brother?"

"Do you know the way to the Qiankun Tower, brother? Do you have an older relative who holds office at the Latent Cultivation Temple?"

"Could it be that you have some other immortal tool, brother?"

Xi Ping thought, All you have to do is follow me. None of you can find your way around, so what's with all this useless babble?

But it was only his first day here, and the Marquis's order not to make trouble was still sounding in his ear. He resisted the urge and allowed Chang Jun to chatter away behind him, introducing him to everyone.

All the disciples had perhaps heard of the "renowned" Viscount of Yongning. There was a weird silence; then they said, each in a different tone, "I've looked forward to meeting you."

But at the moment, these lost headless flies had no other choice. If there was a butt, they would fly after it. They stuck behind Xi Ping and crowded their way to the Qiankun Tower.

The Latent Cultivation Temple had been tranquil for ten years. Now that it had brought in this bunch, surprised groups of crows scattered in all directions and angrily dropped several loads of “sky dung,” fertilizing the invalids running the slowest at the back of the line.

When they could already see the Qiankun Tower’s name plate, Chang Jun screamed breathlessly, “Oh, oh no, the straw child is about to beat the gong!”

Everything in the Latent Cultivation Temple followed the ancient order: a chime at chen hour, a drum midway through shen hour, watches sounded at night, a thunderclap for mao hour first ke. For other important times—for example, mao hour third ke’s morning class—the straw children announced the time by beating a gong.

Sound carried well in the valley. The strike of a gong could spread throughout the area.

In the blink of an eye, Xi Ping had strode over and uncompromisingly snatched away the straw child’s hammer.

The straw child stood there and watched as a crowd of young men rushed by like a flash flood. It turned circles in confusion, picking at the edges of the gong.

When the hair-raising crowd charged into the Qiankun Tower, the immortal in charge had yet to arrive. The breath caught in Xi Ping’s throat eased at last.

He tucked away the hammer. As he looked around, he found an empty spot and sat down. Before his butt could touch the chair, the person sitting next to him stood and moved away as though avoiding a plague.

Xi Ping looked up. Oh, it was the Crown Prince’s little brother-in-law.

The little brother-in-law was named Yao Qi. His birth mother had died young, and his father's official wife didn't like him. Though he hadn't been abused, he also hadn't been well brought up. A decade and more earlier, Empress Zhang's bloodline had run into bad luck. The formerly illustrious Marquis of Cheng'en's Zhang family tree had fallen over and sent the monkeys fleeing. It had also scared Lord Yao out of his wits.

Though Lord Yao was only a little grand scribe, he had his sights set high. He felt that the Marquis of Cheng'en's head rolling three chi away was lesson to be learned from. Ever since his eldest daughter had married the Crown Prince, Lord Yao would review the story of the Zhang family's destruction every night before bed.

In the Marquis of Yongning's words, the Crown Princess's whole family was weird.

Yao Qi had been born into the weird Yao family. He looked as though he was trembling with fear, small and skinny as a girl not yet of age. He had already been scared half to death by being unexpectedly chosen to enter the Latent Cultivation Temple; when he had arrived and learned that he would be living in the same courtyard as the Xi family's son, his vision had gone black.

The Crown Prince was the heir, and Prince Zhuang had been sickly since birth. Neither of them would take part in the immortal selection. Emperor Taiming had only these two grown sons remaining in the mortal world. One, though he was the genuine eldest son of the official wife, was held back by his mother; the other was the son of the accommodating Imperial Consort who fully enjoyed the emperor's favor. Even if the two of them weren't interested in a struggle, others still wouldn't let them off.

The reason that the Crown Princess's family and Imperial Consort Xi's family hadn't fought like oil and water was that both families

were rather useless and didn't have any fight in them... but that didn't mean that they could live in harmony.

Yao Qi hadn't slept half of last night. He had certainly been imagining how the human fiend Xi Ping would persecute him. He had nearly spent the night in the outhouse. He had crawled to the Qiankun Tower first thing in the morning with all his guts empty, then saw this malevolent spirit once again floating toward him. Of course his reaction was a little outsized.

Perhaps he was too empty. When he clumsily stood up, he banged into the hard wooden chair with a hollow thump. Everyone was startled. All the private chatter among the provisional disciples suddenly quieted. Several gazes fell meaningfully on Yao Qi and Xi Ping.

Yao Qi wasn't used to being the center of attention. His face flushed at once. But Xi Ping had found his audience.

The Xi family's pampered son smiled carelessly and said, indecently, "It's too late, Ziming-xiong! You've slept a night in the same courtyard as me. Your purity is already gone."

Hearing this kind of ferocious talk, all of the disciples rocked the room with laughter. Little Young Master Yao didn't dare to believe that there could be such a shameless person in the world. He was dumbfounded, so ashamed he wanted to die.

"All right, all right." Just then, a handsome young man in a brocade gown came over to break it up. He pulled Xi Ping over and said, "Ziming is young, Shiyong, stop teasing him. Come sit here next to me. It's been some years since we've seen each other. We played together when we were little."

The young man was a little over twenty, with delicate features that bore a slight resemblance to Prince Zhuang's. This was the fourth

prince Zhou Xi, issue of the Lin family's Virtuous Consort.

Xi Ping had to show deference to His Fourth Highness, so he sat next to him. Before he could open his mouth to make small talk, he heard an equivocal voice coming from the back door: "Pretty exciting here."

These were the childish tones of a boy whose voice hadn't dropped yet but who insisted on drawling his words out lethargically like an elder. Perhaps to demonstrate his great age, it also held the tremor peculiar to old men. It sounded very unpleasant, like an old eunuch who had been castrated too young.

The whole Qiankun Tower went silent. Those who were laughing all hurriedly stuffed their protruding teeth back into their mouths. Zhou Xi pulled at Xi Ping.

"Don't look," Zhou Xi quietly warned him. "Immortal Luo doesn't like people looking directly at him."

Xi Ping was all at sea. He thought, Can "Immortal Luo" be an unmarried lady whom it would be indecorous to look at?

He listened to the advice and held back from raising his head. After a moment, he heard the sound of rustling beside him.

At the center of the Qiankun Tower were forty or fifty steps leading up to a platform. From the top, you could look down upon all of the disciples' hair whorls. Xi Ping glimpsed the edge of a wide sky blue sleeve passing by him. The cuff hung down almost to the ground.

This Immortal Luo, waving the "water sleeves" that seemed to belong to an opera costume, unhurriedly mounted the platform, then roared in a high voice: "Which bastard took the straw child's hammer? Hand it over!"

Xi Ping's butt was firmly glued to the chair. He thought, Haha, take a guess.

As soon as he had the thought, something heavy hit him in the ribs, and the hidden gong hammer tore apart the front of his clothes and flew out, nearly smacking Xi Ping on the chin.

To avoid the hammer, Xi Ping abruptly tilted his head up, so he saw Immortal Luo on the stone steps—this Immortal Luo turned out to be a boy who looked no older than eleven or twelve, with his features drooping in displeasure, the same height as the two straw children fanning him!

No wonder his sleeves trailed almost to the ground.

Immortal Luo raised his hand to catch the hammer. Then his cold gaze fell on Xi Ping. “Kid, what’s your name?”

Next to Xi Ping, His Fourth Highness’s eye twitched slightly. His expression showed that this was a sight too awful to behold.

CHAPTER 16 - The Dragon Bites Its Tail (4)

Xi Ping thought it over, decided that he was already here, and the immortal probably couldn't throw him out over a hammer, so he openly gave his full name. Next, he saluted, and directly acknowledged his wrongdoing: "Immortal, I'm sorry. I've spent all my life limited to Jinping. I've never seen such a unique gong. And the sect rules don't say you aren't allowed to take the straw children's hammers, so I borrowed it to have a look. I didn't expect that you would oversleep, too, and that I would almost make you miss morning class."

Immortal Luo: "..."

You're the one who overslept!

Zhou Xi's teeth hurt when he heard this. He had seen this Viscount of Yongning ten years earlier at lao-san's side. At the time, the kid had been only the size of a bean, but he had already been a handful. He could make the Royal Tutor lose his temper twice in one day. He hadn't thought that after all this time, the ill-fated connection would find him, and they would once again be classmates; it was simply like returning to the imperial library in a dream.

"Xi Shiyong." Drawing out his childish voice, Immortal Luo fiercely chewed over Xi Ping's name. "Interesting."

Then he waved his "water sleeves" and ignored Xi Ping. Looking down on all the disciples from on high, he said, "I am Luo Qingshi. I have cultivated at the Latent Cultivation Temple for a hundred fifty years. You are the fifteenth class of mortal disciples who have been brought before me. Many of you are useless and relied on the blessings of your ancestors to get in, and I presume that you know it. Let's be frank: for the road of cultivation, you must rely entirely on

yourselves. Just because you've entered the Latent Cultivation Temple, it doesn't mean you'll necessarily be able to open your spiritual eyes."

All the disciples' families had some connections. They all knew that they must not offend the Latent Cultivation Temple's "midget raksha."¹⁴ Now the Qiankun Tower was silent; no one wanted to stand out and catch his eye.

"On the first day of class, I'd like to get familiar with your faces." Luo Qingshi's eyelids drooped. His eyes roamed over the disciples and fell on Xi Ping. "Let's start with you—Xi-shidi."

No sooner had he spoken than Xi Ping felt an invisible hand grab the front of his clothes and yank him forward. His hip nearly hit the corner of the table. Xi Ping twisted his butt at the last moment and narrowly dodged the stone table corner. Before he could curse, he had already been dragged onto a small platform at the foot of the stone steps.

Next, his vision swirled, and he was taken to a narrow path only wide enough for one person to pass through.

Luo Qingshi's and his classmates' voices instantly became muted, as though they had been cut off by something.

Xi Ping had been pulled into a mustard seed by General Zhi before at the Blissful Village. With that experience, he knew that it had happened this time as well. He thought that mustard seeds really did resemble their owners: even Great Immortal Luo's mustard seed was more spacious than another's!

Luo Qingshi said, "This is called a 'spiritual sense mustard seed.' It can test whether your sense is naturally sharp or blunt. The so-called 'spiritual sense' is the third eye between your brows that can

distinguish between the clear and the turbid, observe matter and inspect energy. Today is my first time seeing all of you, so I'm going to use it to inform myself in order to be able to provide instruction according to your aptitude in the year to come.

“There are six forking paths inside the mustard seed. The first fork is a one in two choice, the second is one in four, and so on, until the final fork, which has sixty-four paths. You can only leave by one path—the path where the spiritual energy is strongest. If you go the wrong way, the spiritual energy will gradually thin out, and you'll come to a dead end and have to turn back to choose again. There are also a few wrong paths that you have to be careful of. The turbid energy in them is thick, and you might encounter anything. If anyone has a dull spiritual sense and bad luck...” At this point, Luo Qingshi gave a cold laugh. “Then let's hope you're blessed with long life. Those who can't get out within the burning of an incense stick are the ones with a naturally dull spiritual sense. You'll have to come to morning class a shichen earlier than the others.”

Xi Ping: “...”

A shichen earlier than even mao hour three ke—did he want to organize them to get up and crow?

“Straw child, light the...” said Luo Qingshi.

“Excuse me,” His Fourth Highness spoke up loudly, “Disciple Zhou Xi is confused about something and would like to ask shixiong for guidance.”

Luo Qingshi raised his eyelids and glanced at him. He said, ambiguously, “I see, the fourth prince... Your Highness, what are your instructions?”

“There's no need for that.” Zhou Xi straightened up and said, neither haughty nor humble, “Excuse me, Immortal, you just mentioned

‘spiritual energy’ and ‘turbid energy’ several times, and you said that we can only leave the mustard seed by finding the path with the strongest spiritual energy. But you haven’t yet instructed us on what ‘spiritual energy’ and ‘turbid energy’ are...”

Before he could finish, Luo Qingshi interrupted him in his young-old voice: “Young children don’t know how to speak and don’t know what ‘sweet’ and ‘bitter’ are, but they smile if they eat candy and cry if they lick medicine. You’re all people with given names, courtesy names, and positions in society. Are you telling me I need to teach you starting from how to dress yourselves and how to eat?”

Zhou Xi’s status was high. The Latent Cultivation Temple’s stewards were polite to him, and his fellow disciples all gave way to him somewhat. No one had yet been this rude to him. In spite of himself, his expression darkened.

“Light the incense stick!” said Luo Qingshi.

Xi Ping could hear what the people outside were saying, but he couldn’t see them.

But to the other disciples in the Latent Cultivation Temple, it looked as though Xi Ping were inside a transparent glazed ball. His feet were standing on emptiness three chi off the ground, suspended in midair.

Inside the mustard seed, space and dimension were folded in on themselves. They saw Xi Ping taking steps as though walking forward, his stride quite long, but he remained suspended in place the whole time without moving. Only the path inside the mustard seed changed constantly. Soon, he came to the first fork in the road.

All this spiritual energy and turbid energy sounded like nonsense. Xi Ping, at any rate, didn’t understand a word of it.

Since he wouldn't be able to work anything out by thinking it over based on nothing, it was better not to waste the mental effort, just put his head down and take a wild guess. If he guessed wrong, at worst he would go back.

So before Immortal Luo finished dragging the words "incense stick" out two li long, Xi Ping had already chosen the left hand path without any hesitation.

Seeing him so self-confident, the other disciples thought he had to know what he was doing. Only Zhou Xi, glancing at Luo Qingshi's malicious smile, thought: Xi Shiyong must have chosen wrong.

The midget demon was famous for his pettiness, and the spiritual sense mustard seed was entirely under his control. If he wanted to give someone a hard time, then likely the first wrong path would be the dangerous path with so-called "thick turbid energy."

Zhou Xi hesitated a moment and thought of Prince Zhuang. In fact, he suspected that his san-ge's hand and eye could reach to the Latent Cultivation Temple... Anyway, it was for the best if he and the Viscount of Yongning appeared to get along, so he wanted to say something to warn Xi Ping.

But circumstances changed faster than he expected inside the mustard seed. Before Zhou Xi could decide what to say, he saw Xi Ping stop in his tracks. Almost at the same time, the transparent mustard seed darkened without warning. Inside it, Xi Ping was swallowed by darkness!

Next, ear-splitting shouts came from the darkness. The disciples seated in the front row, taken by surprise, were so startled they nearly overturned the tables of the ones behind them.

Inside the mustard seed, Xi Ping only felt a horrifying chill hit him in the face. Before he could work out what was going on, a thick smell of blood surged up from the ground. In the darkness, a fierce, fanged head suddenly appeared, fully the size of a watermelon, its bloody maw open, wailing as it came toward him as if it wanted to take his head off in one bite!

On this narrow path, there was nowhere to dodge to either side!

The smile on Luo Qingshi's face became even more apparent. "I did tell you to be careful. Some people..."

The next moment, his words were interrupted by another bellow.

Xi Ping had a contrary disposition. When he was in a good mood and met someone he liked, he could perhaps occasionally let them have their way for once. When it came to a confrontation, he never gave way.

When he had been six years old, this kid had run into a vicious dog and had dared to pick up a stick and step forward—never mind now, when he was as tall as a house.

As soon as he saw there was no place to hide, Xi Ping simply shot forward a step and ran up against the evil head; he was knocked backward several steps.

The head had displayed its sharp teeth in an intention to bite him; how could Xi Ping agree to that? So he exerted all his strength and grabbed the lumpy skin of its cheeks!

The head's skin was ulcerated, all mottled with blood; it couldn't see anything clearly. This was the first time anyone had ever teasingly pinched its cheeks. It was dazed for a moment. Then, in a towering rage, it released a roar toward this great scoundrel.

Its roar seemed to be able to pour right into a person's brain. Getting roared at to his face, Xi Ping was dizzied by its voice for a time.

This time, Xi Ping didn't cover his ears with his hands. All he could do was open his mouth and absorb the ear-splitting roar, but he felt smothered and wanted to throw up.

So he simply let loose and returned the compliment—it was better to shout than to vomit, anyway.

These two huddled together and howled in pain for fully half a ke, with plenty of breath, the noise making the whole Qiankun Tower tremble. All the disciples were dumbfounded, not knowing what was happening inside.

Luo Qingshi was at the end of his rope. "Shut up, both of you!"

In answer to his voice, the head inside the mustard seed turned into a wisp of green smoke and vanished.

Xi Ping went forward from inertia and nearly hit the ground. His throat was parched. He coughed a couple times and found that he had returned to the very first forking path.

The mustard seed cleared once more, and Xi Ping reappeared before the eyes of the disciples.

Luo Qingshi shot a glance at the incense table and knew that this brat definitely wouldn't be able to get out of the mustard seed.

He sat down and closed his eyes. In a drawn voice, he "sang," "Half the incense stick has already burned, and Xi-shidi hasn't yet passed the first fork..."

Inside the mustard seed, Xi Ping refused to listen. He quickly turned toward the righthand fork.

His legs were long and he ran fast. Soon he saw the second fork.

Xi Ping stopped and looked down at his feet thoughtfully—with his superb hearing, he had heard that the tone of his footsteps sounded different on the different paths: when he had been walking on the wrong path, his footsteps had sounded slightly heavy, as if they had an echo; but on the correct path to the right, his footsteps clearly sounded a little “cleaner.”

There was no time to think it over. Xi Ping decided to give it another try. He closed his eyes and quickly took a step into each of the four paths. As expected, there was a slight difference in the weight of his footsteps in each of the four paths.

Xi Ping chose the one where the sound of his footsteps was lightest and charged in. After this, he followed the same pattern with the other forks—just as Luo Qingshi had said, the spiritual energy of the wrong paths became scarcer and scarcer, and the spiritual energy on the correct paths became thicker and thicker. The further he went, the easier it became to distinguish the difference in the weight of his footsteps.

The disciples had seen how he had chosen the most dangerous path when he had a fifty-fifty chance of being right and had tragically wasted half his time at the outset, so they’d thought that what would follow would be even more horrifying. They hadn’t expected that, like a runaway donkey, he would reach the end on one breath.

As if he had taken the wrong road at the beginning in order to amuse them!

But Luo Qingshi thought that Xi Ping was a goner. He hadn't even opened his eyes. His speech was slow, so he hadn't even finished his previous sentence when Xi Ping ran through the final forking path.

Totally unaware, he was still putting on his one-man show: "... it seems that he wants to come beat the gong at the Qiankun Tower at yin hour three ke tomorrow."

Right after he spoke, he heard someone respond from the platform: "Oh, I've come out. Do I still have to go?"

As if someone had stepped on his tail, Luo Qingshi jumped up. He saw Xi Ping standing outside the mustard seed, safe and sound.

Xi Ping was normally very active. Though he had just run a big, terrifying circle, after he got out, he stood there for only a moment before evening out his breathing. A strand of hair, not tied up properly in the morning, fell loose. He pushed it back carelessly. Not only did he not seem hard pressed, he even had a unique sort of unrestrained air.

Luo Qingshi's round eyes glared so hard that their shape distorted. He seemed to want to bring heavenly lightning down on Xi Ping's ancestral tomb. Just then, Zhou Xi put in another timely line: "Shixiong, there are a few more people in this class of disciples than in previous years. If each of us has to have his spiritual sense tested, I think we should hurry up."

Luo Qingshi pressed his lips together into a flat line. With a struggle, he restrained his temper, waved his sleeve, and swept Xi Ping back to his seat. He said, gritting his teeth, "Good. Good, Xi Shiyong. Interesting. No wonder you think pretty well of yourself."

Then he pointed bitterly to a straw child. "First-class spiritual sense, record it. Next—"

The disciples who had been watching the fun lowered their heads in unison. The atmosphere became as sorrowful as though they were a group of filial descendants mourning their deceased elders.

As soon as Luo Qingshi extended his hand, the straw child next to him turned around with a rustle and handed him the disciple name list. Xi Ping's name happened to be last on the list, so Luo Qingshi simply went back up the list starting from him. "Yao Qi, Yao Ziming."

While Yao Qi stepped up, trembling, Zhou Xi took the opportunity to say quietly to Xi Ping, "Immortal Luo is around the middle established foundation stage. Even Heaven's Design Pavilion has to view him as an elder when they meet. Shiyong, though he won't get into a serious fight with mortals like us who haven't opened our spiritual eyes yet, you still shouldn't use your natural talent to tease him."

Xi Ping understood the beginning of this, but he had no idea what His Highness meant by the last sentence and said, bewildered, "When did I tease him?"

Zhou Xi gave him an "as long as you understand" look and didn't speak to him again.

Just now, hearing Luo Qingshi announce "first-class spiritual sense," the way Zhou Xi looked at Xi Ping had changed—a natural "first-class spiritual sense" occurred in less than one in ten thousand people. They were the legendary people who could close their eyes when placing a bet and win a gamble. When it came to instinct, they might be even more accurate than ordinary half-immortals.

A person like this couldn't have chosen wrong at the first fork to begin with.

So Zhou Xi concluded: Xi Shiyong must have done it on purpose.

He had heard long ago that the Marquis of Yongning's son was brash and insolent. Zhou Xi glanced at Xi Ping's look of "fake innocence" and felt that seeing for himself was more useful than hearing—the man himself was even more arrogant than rumors made him out to be.

Meanwhile, Yao Qi had already gone into the spiritual sense mustard seed.

Perhaps because of his diarrhea the night before, Yao Qi's legs were shaking so hard it was visible from the outside of his robe. He was on edge as he walked, bent over, wishing to stick his belly to the ground and crawl. Each time he came to a fork, Yao Qi had to stop and mutter to himself for ages before finally making a decision. It was unclear whether he was casting a spell or praying for the protection of his ancestors.

But though he worked hard, his luck was truly poor.

He had just gone past the second fork when something happened inside the mustard seed; it went dark again.

If you said that Xi Ping had been punished by malice, then Yao Qi's bad luck was purely his own. Even Luo Qingshi hadn't thought that he would run into the black door.

Before Yao Qi could take a clear look to see what was happening, he instinctively turned and ran. But it was too late.

Soon, he was also swallowed up by a ball of black energy. Compared to Xi Ping's playful duet, this time, the sounds were far more tragic. First, an ominous sound of tearing silk came from the darkness, followed by a scream in an altered pitch interspersed with the sound of a sharp implement cutting through flesh... The

disciples in the front few rows simply couldn't sit still any longer. One after another, they shifted their seats back.

Only when an incense stick had completely burned down did the pitch-black mustard seed spit him out.

The black energy scattered. Little Young Master Yao hugged the ground. His back seemed to have been torn up by a wild beast. Several claw marks had rolled back the skin.

Yao Qi, on his last gasp, lay on the ground, his face lurid as incense paper. Under their eyes, he breathed in without breathing out.

All the private conversations in the Qiankun Tower instantly fell silent.

Luo Qingshi pinched his nose and distastefully waved a hand. Two straw children stepped forward at the same speed and lifted Yao Qi. They put an elixir pill into his mouth. The elixir truly was an immortal product; as soon as it entered his mouth, the wounds on Yao Qi's back rapidly healed, and color immediately returned to his face. By the time he was put onto a stone chair, he had slowly returned to consciousness and could sit upright.

But as soon as he opened his eyes, he heard Luo Qingshi announce: "For tomorrow's morning class, come to the Qiankun Tower a shichen early. Next."

Hearing this tragic news, Little Young Master Yao's eyes rolled up, and he fainted again.

Instantly, Xi Ping was surrounded by imploring gazes from all sides. For a time, he didn't know which way to look. All he could do was lower his head and quietly share the answer: "Your footsteps sound heavier on the wrong paths. There's an echo."

The disciples, willing to turn to anyone in a crisis, quickly noted it down. But Zhou Xi frowned and put in a word: “Don’t just listen to what someone else tells you. Everyone’s spiritual sense has a different degree of acuteness. It’s easy to go wrong if you put too much faith into someone else’s experience. If you’re really lost, when you get into the mustard seed, you can try clearing your mind of extraneous thoughts, closing your eyes, and walking forward. I think that it won’t be too hard to pass levels meant to test the spiritual senses of mortal disciples like us. As long as you don’t panic, you should all be able to get out.”

Xi Ping thought that he was making good sense, so he nodded and chimed in, “Yes, that’s true.”

Zhou Xi gave him an unfathomable look—the reason that the “spiritual sense” was called the “third eye” was that it was of chaos, above all the senses.

Only a half-immortal whose spiritual eyes had opened could transfer his spiritual sense to sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste. This was called “linking the spiritual sense.”

If he could already link his spiritual sense, what was he doing here? This Xi Shiyong was disrespectful toward his elders and got up to petty tricks; with his classmates, he blurted out boasts and intentionally misled them. He was a real piece of work.

Just as Zhou Xi had said, though Luo Qingshi looked peevish, in fact, he didn’t deliberately make it hard on the disciples. When the difference between spiritual and turbid inside the mustard seed was small and hard to distinguish, there were also few paths, so it was easy to muddle through. Later, though there were more and more paths, the spiritual energy also gradually thickened. As long as the disciples were focused enough, sixty to seventy percent of them could feel their way out with their eyes closed before the incense stick had finished burning.

Apart from Xi Ping, who had been the target of malice, and Yao Qi with his unusual “luck,” no one else ran into the circumstance of the mustard seed darkening. The vast majority of the wrong paths only came to dead ends; all you had to do was turn back.

Among them, the steadiest were the Lin family’s direct descendant Lin Zhenfeng and His Fourth Highness Zhou Xi.

Starting from when he was six, Zhou Xi would be blindfolded and given spiritual stones to determine their grade. He walked easily into the mustard seed and closed his eyes. At each fork, he reached out a hand and felt around for a moment, and in a few breaths he would choose a path. He went through all six forks only once, not having to retrace a single step. In less than a ke, he was out. Among the marveling of the disciples, he gave Luo Qingshi a leisurely salute.

But Luo Qingshi didn’t so much as raise his eyelids. He waved a hand at him. “Fine, come down.”

Zhou Xi thought nothing of it. Wearing the appropriate smile, he returned. But before he had sat back down, he heard Luo Qingshi say to the straw child next to him: “Second class spiritual sense.”

The smile on Zhou Xi’s face instantly froze.

Luo Qingshi said, “That’s everyone tested. Those who haven’t qualified...”

Zhou Xi spoke: “Please instruct me, shixiong. By what standards do you separate spiritual sense into grades? If I know where I have fallen short, in the future, I’ll be able to make up through hard work what I lack in natural talent.”

“What I tested was inborn spiritual sense. It doesn’t matter that you’ve all trained with spiritual stones since you were little,” Luo

Qingshi said impatiently. “But it’s good that you know you need to make up for your natural deficiencies with hard work. Continue in that manner.”

These words sounded like praise, but Zhou Xi felt unspeakably awkward.

As if he was afraid he didn’t feel awkward enough yet, Luo Qingshi, at this point, unable to resist, glanced at Xi Ping. “If you work hard for ten years or so, you’ll be able to make up for the inborn deficiency.”

Xi Ping: “...”

What did this person mean by sowing discord in broad daylight?

“I forgot to say, you have an allowance of spiritual stones at the Latent Cultivation Temple, three blue jades each month. Whether you clear your spiritual eyes later or control immortal tools, you’ll need to use spiritual stones. All of the Latent Cultivation Temple’s half-immortal stewards, as well as us instructors, have the right to apply rewards and penalties to your spiritual stone allowance.” Luo Qingshi shut the roster of disciples. “Each time you’re late for morning class, one spiritual stone will be deducted. Those of you who didn’t test up to standard for spiritual sense just now, I’ll see you tomorrow at yin hour three ke. Don’t be late.”

Then the sky blue figure flickered. Luo Qingshi’s voice lingered, but he himself had already arrived at the gate of the Qiankun Tower. He swaggered off.

Xi Ping was about to go talk to Zhou Xi, but he saw that His Fourth Highness had already turned away and gone to ask after Yao Qi’s health. He was close at hand, but he seemed to have suddenly gone deaf and didn’t hear Xi Ping calling him.

Xi Ping never put himself in a position to be snubbed. Sensing His Fourth Highness's sudden estrangement, he didn't ask for the reason but simply got up and left.

This Latent Cultivation Temple with all its finicky requirements—just three blue jades a month, and you could get them deducted over this or that.

“Some commodity.” Xi Ping didn't take it to heart. “I have plenty.”

On average, the white jade proximal burned one blue jade every seven or eight days. When the spiritual energy ran dry, the blue jade would turn into a cloudy grey stone. The first time Xi Ping changed the spiritual stone himself, he had no idea what he was doing; he fiddled around for ages before getting it right.

After he finished changing the spiritual stone, Xi Ping let out a breath. He grabbed another one from the box and tossed it to the half-puppet.

Supposedly the dragon-taming chain was meant to be operated with your “consciousness.” Xi Ping hadn't yet learned how to control this so-called “consciousness.” Each time he applied a drop of blood, he could get a reaction for about three or four days.

But apart from the first time he had accidentally rubbed blood on it, Xi Ping hadn't used the dragon-taming chain again—he had always thought that “observation” and “control” went both ways. If you “chained” someone, would you still be free? The last thing he needed.

As long as the half-puppet didn't bite him, he didn't care where the little thing went or what he did... He only hoped that, like the old manuscript said, the little monster could grow up and learn to understand human speech quickly and work for him.

Before, when there had been a reaction from the dragon-taming chain, Xi Ping still hadn't been able to feel the difference between the little monster being hungry or full after he ate the spiritual stone, never mind now, when the reaction had vanished. He didn't know how much he ought to feed him. But even the brocade carp on the proximal changed color when its spiritual stone had nearly been burned up; the little monster was a living being, so naturally there would be signs when he was hungry. If he didn't mention it, there was probably no need to feed him.

Xi Ping closed the box of spiritual stones and shoved it in the cabinet, then went to morning class... He had always had people to look after him. He wasn't in the habit of locking cabinet doors after himself.

The upshot was that, that night, as soon as he opened the door, Xi Ping felt himself step on something. He looked down and saw an empty wooden box... a familiar one.

Wait!

Xi Ping immediately had a bad feeling. He charged quickly into the room. He saw the half-puppet lying on the floor, his belly swollen half a chi high, totally unconscious, radiating faint blue light.

Next to him, the cabinet door was wide open. The box full of spiritual stones was gone!

CHAPTER 17 - The Dragon Bites Its Tail (5)

The well-intentioned Chang Jun had just returned to the Qiu courtyard supporting Yao Qi when he heard the door of the north rooms, which Xi Ping occupied, slam open.

Xi Ping had a roll of bedding tucked under his arm. Without a word, he rushed out the door.

Chang Jun called to stop him: “Shiyong, what are you doing? It’s nearly dark, the courtyard gate locks at xu hour...”

Xi Ping’s furious voice came with the wind: “Then—I’ll—die—out—here!”

In his rage, Xi Ping had a mind to find a big stone and smash the half-puppet to pieces—if he hadn’t known that the half-puppet had originally been human, he would have done it already.

Actually, when it came to killing a human in anger, he didn’t think he would be incapable of it, but the half-puppet wasn’t only seemingly human, he was also a little thing the size of a fingernail. Toward a little thing like this, which he could have squeezed to death with a little effort, no amount of anger could burst out.

This lousy thing. He didn’t know to make the bed, dress someone, do hair, or anything; apart from biting and rolling his eyes, he was also a glutton who had swallowed an entire box of blue jade in one go!

Swallowing gold? No, this was swallowing several luxury mansions in one go!

Pang Jian was so wicked it went all the way back to his ancestral tomb!

Xi Ping ran up along the mountain path, knocking a patrolling straw child into a spinning top. He charged directly toward Chengjing Hall midway up the mountain.

Chengjing Hall was where the Latent Cultivation Temple's stewards kept watch. When the disciples had a problem, they could go to Chengjing Hall to ask an open-eyed shixiong or shijie for help. The approximate location wasn't hard to find, but the little compound was tucked away amid a bamboo forest. Xi Ping was a stranger here. He saw the roof of Chengjing Hall from a distance, but he went around several times without being able to work out how to get in.

Overwhelmed with rage, he snatched up a straw child from the thicket, searched all over himself, and came up with a wrinkled guide talisman. He was just planning on "asking the way" when he heard a familiar voice behind him ask, "It's already dark, what... oh, it's you again?"

Xi Ping turned his head. A cool breeze swept over him. Next, the image of a sword at the green-gowned living legend's feet turned to countless shards of light, and he landed on the ground without disturbing a grain of dust.

"Are you a reincarnated cat? As soon as night falls, you start running around." Zhi Xiu fiddled with a bamboo leaf that had fallen on his shoulder. Then his eyes fell on the bedroll Xi Ping was holding. "What strong spiritual energy! What is this thing?"

One ke later, General Zhi was looking at the blue-jade-stuffed half-puppet on a little table in Chengjing Hall. He was silent.

On duty tonight at Chengjing Hall was an old half-immortal whose hair and beard were white. His name was Su Zhun. He was said to be in charge of the discipline hall at the Latent Cultivation Temple. Though he attended to punishments, Elder Su's appearance wasn't

fierce at all. He was always smiling. He looked more like a genial old uncle from next door.

Su Zhun inspected the half-puppet. He looked up and asked, “How many spiritual stones did you just say this half-puppet ate?”

“Around ten jin,” said Xi Ping.

This was Elder Su’s first time hearing someone discuss spiritual stones in terms of jin. For a moment, he couldn’t quite make sense of the number.

General Zhi said sincerely, “Last time outside of Jinping City, I wanted to ask you—kid, does your family have a private spiritual stone mine?”

“No, actually,” Xi Ping answered honestly. “We have some jade mines and agate mines.”

Zhi Xiu: “...”

Elder Su: “...”

Where had this sprout of a young master with his detachment from worldly affairs come from?!

“That’s not important,” the sprout of a young master continued to issue his infuriating views. “He’s eaten all of my spiritual stones, so what am I supposed to use? How am I going to...”

Xi Ping had nearly let the truth slip out: “How am I going to write letters home?” Luckily, he remembered at the last moment that, on the surface, the Latent Cultivation Temple didn’t allow disciples to contact their families. He forced his words into a different direction. “Anyway, that’s how it is... Exalted, is there a way to make him throw them up?”

“You’ve entered the sect, so call me shixiong,” Elder Su amiably corrected Xi Ping’s overly formal address toward himself. “A half-puppet doesn’t have a digestive system. Though we say they eat spiritual stones, it’s different from the way we who haven’t attained inedia digest food. He wouldn’t be able to throw them up. But I don’t think he’d be able to digest so many spiritual stones at once. If we break all of his arrays and block his spiritual pathways, we can cut open his belly and get some of them back.”

Xi Ping: “...”

The spiritual stones had already split the seams of the little half-puppet’s jarring pink jacket. Elder Su rolled up the ragged jacket a little, revealing his belly. Both sides of the half-puppet’s waist and his spine were made of special wood and Moon Plated Gold; ring after ring of arrays on them had been activated by the spiritual stones and were faintly visible. The skin of his belly, however, was human skin, distended by the spiritual stones inside. There was also a crooked scar sticking out on his belly, still rising and falling with every breath... letting the half-puppet’s warped and broken vitality leak out.

Elder Su put both hands in his sleeves and said to Xi Ping, as though humoring a child, “Go get shixiong that knife, Yingbi, hanging on the wall. I’ll cut him open for you, don’t worry, we’ll still be able to get some back.”

Xi Ping looked at the half-puppet, then looked at Su Zhun. “Exal... shixiong, doesn’t it say in the book that the lumber and Moon Plated Gold are equivalent to a human’s flesh and bones?”

Then wouldn’t this be the same as breaking his bones, cutting off his meridians, then disemboweling him?

Su Zhun nodded, the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes deepening. “Indeed.”

“No, wait...” Xi Ping’s expression twisted several times. Falling apart, he pointed to the half-puppet and said, “Will his appetite always be like this? If I planted him in the ground, would he even pick all of Xuanyin Mountain clean?”

Su Zhun had only been teasing him. Hearing him blab like this, daring even to make arrangements for the immortal mountain, he quickly said, “Hey, you can’t talk like that!”

General Zhi was still there!

Zhi Xiu smiled. “A grown half-puppet consumes about as many spiritual stones as a cultivator. He probably won’t eat you out of house and home... and jade mines. But this half-puppet’s luck has been bad. His original master probably didn’t feed him well, only gave him a bit of spiritual energy to sustain his life. He must have been starved over time, and that’s why he couldn’t resist swallowing your box of spiritual stones. If he isn’t starved in the future, he won’t eat like this again. Disciples have an allowance of three blue jades a month. Before opening your spiritual eyes, you won’t be able to use them up. If you give him one a month, that should be fine.”

“Three a month, and I still have to give him one?” said Xi Ping.

What do you mean I won’t be able to use them up?! The proximal goes through at least four a month!

“Indeed,” Elder Su said approvingly. “As I see it, this evil*cultivator’s handiwork is no good. This half-puppet is bad quality. The box of spiritual stones he swallowed is enough to exchange for a whole barracks full of true puppets. What would you want him for? There’s no need for so much trouble. Cut him open, take back the spiritual stones, then buy a new one.”

He beckoned, and the knife Yingbi hanging on the wall yieldingly fell into his hand.

Su Zhun rolled up his sleeves and moved the blade. "I'm old, my eyesight is no good. Let me see where to cut..."

"Wait, wait..." Seeing the knife Yingbi's cold light falling on the half-puppet's belly, Xi Ping instinctively reached out to block it.

"Shixiong, wait."

Elder Su said, "If we wait any longer, the spiritual stones will be all gone."

Hearing this, Xi Ping glared at the half-puppet, feeling that he got more annoying the more he saw of him.

But while he may have been annoying, Xi Ping couldn't have a child disemboweled like a piglet over some stuff.

So a breath caught in his throat. He couldn't spit it out or swallow it. After a long time, he swept his sleeves and fiercely said, "Forget about it!"

"What, forget about it?" Elder Su pretended to be surprised. "A hundred liang of blue jade, four or five thousand liang of gold, you don't want them?"

Xi Ping spent all his time hanging around the marketplace. He knew that in Jinping's southern outskirts, a single copper coin could buy a pair of mixed grain flatbreads the size of your hand, and he had heard that a string of copper coins was enough for anyone to live on for a month.

But while he wouldn't say anything as demented as "Why don't they eat meat if they don't have rice?", after all, he had never gone short.

In fact, in his mind, neither a hundred liang of blue jade nor a thousand liang of gold were as urgent as “When I run out of spiritual stones in a couple of days I won’t be able to write to my grandmother anymore.”

He regretted it, but it wasn’t bitter anguish; mostly it was irritation.

“I only said a few sentences to contradict Commander Pang that day... and it was about things he brought up! And he put this much effort into getting me in trouble! An old codger nearly a hundred years old, sinking to my level—he must have a lot of attention to spare!” Xi Ping peevishly pushed the half-puppet in front of Elder Su. “I’ll donate him to the temple, you can order him around like a straw child or put him on display. I don’t want him anymore, anyway.”

“That would be good.” Elder Su smiled. “This half-puppet has eaten so many spiritual stones at once. When he’s finished digesting, he’ll grow in intellect and size, and then maybe he won’t be so useless. Shidi, you aren’t donating a puppet, you’re donating a mountain of gold!”

Xi Ping: “...”

No way, that’s not fair!

For a time, he was caught in an impossible situation. Keeping this thing would be annoying, but if he donated it to the Latent Cultivation Temple, he would be a sucker.

What was all this rotten business? It was about to annoy him to death!

After a moment, Xi Ping stuffed the half-puppet under his arm and returned the way he had come.

Anger stoked up this useless Viscount's ambitions. He decided to work hard to improve himself. When he was powerful, he would stick Pang into a sack and beat him until he looked like a pig!

If he didn't get his revenge, then his name wasn't Xi.

Commander Pang wasn't on duty that night. He had some rare free time. He wiped his face, and his craggy countenance at once became average and unremarkable. He changed out of the sapphire blue robe, put on casual clothes, and went out to eat a late night snack. He went to the Phoenix's Perch Pavilion.

There was a wind on the Lingyang River, scattering quite a bit of the fog. As soon as Pang Jian sat down by the window, he sneezed twice in a row. He wiped his nose and looked up and just happened to see Cui Ji not far away.

Cui Ji was two hundred steps from the pleasure boat ferry crossing, its courtyard dense with ancient trees. There were no glazed tiles at the gate, and no big inscribed board. There was only an enclosing wall of dark grey stone, with snow-white gas lamps lighting the characters "Cui Ji" at the corner of the wall. Underneath was that commandingly wealthy little brocade carp imprint.

Those who had no property didn't even dare to look into that courtyard.

Pang Jian suddenly became thoughtful. He stretched his spiritual sense to its limit and felt a thread of enmity that referred to him by name floating over from the west—the direction of Xuanyin Mountain.

"Cursing me behind my back." Commander Pang knew at once who it was and laughed carelessly. "Little devil, one day you'll be thanking Grandpa Pang."

He had deliberately gone along with the tide and given the half-puppet to Xi Ping, and he had deliberately not warned Xi Ping to look after the spiritual stones.

Jade had to be polished to have value. Taking snacks to the Latent Cultivation Temple as though he were going on a spring outing—it was obvious the kid was planning to muddle through. If he hadn't made a bit of trouble for him, he may not even have opened his spiritual eyes a year later.

The osmanthus duck came. Pang Jian was just about to dig in when he heard a dispute downstairs.

He saw that a waiter was just driving off a teenage boy. "If you're not going to buy a whole duck, then you can buy half a duck—even half a young duck. Half a young duck is only two hundred coins, I'll speak to the manager and have them give you the duck's head for free. We've only heard of people who don't want the duck's head, never anyone who specifically bought the duck's head. Perhaps you could go somewhere else to ask about it?"

Though this boy was clean enough, his pant legs were already so short that they hung above his ankles. His impoverished appearance was at odds with the Phoenix's Perch Pavilion. The people around them, hearing that someone wanted to buy a duck's head, all laughed. Someone jeered: "Little brother, can you even grow a mustache? Isn't it a little early to be thinking about buying girls?"¹⁵

Pang Jian glanced over and saw that this "little brother" was actually a half-grown young woman.

The girl knew that she had revealed her unworldliness. Her face went red to the base of her neck. She straightened her neck and

stubbornly said, “My family eats duck’s heads. There aren’t many of us, we can’t eat half a duck, all right?”

The waiter squinted at her hanging pant legs and ragged cuffs. “Half a young duck won’t even fill our manager’s cat’s belly. What royal lineage do you belong to, with such an aristocratic appetite?”

The girl unconsciously put her hands behind her back.

The waiter said, “If it’s not on the menu, we don’t sell it. If you really want to eat it, you can find someone who’s buying a duck and doesn’t want to eat the head, and ‘buy in’ with them.”

Just then, a busybody knocked on his table, laden with the leavings of his meal, and said, “I have a duck’s head here. Who wants it? You’re welcome to it.”

The girl became furious in her embarrassment. She stamped her foot and loudly said, “The Phoenix’s Perch Pavilion won’t give you your money’s worth!”

“Hey, what are you saying...”

“The Phoenix’s Perch Pavilion is a big business, so it bullies its customers! It won’t give you your money’s worth!” Seeing the restaurant’s security guard walk over, the girl turned and ran. She bumped headfirst into a customer. The underbred urchin didn’t even apologize. As she ran, she called out, “They just said it themselves! Half a duck won’t even fill a cat’s belly!”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, sir.” The waiter quickly held up the customer that the girl had sent staggering. “I don’t know where that lunatic came from at this time of night.”

The customer dusted off his lapels in revulsion. “In my opinion, we ought to restore the ancient system, lock the city gates as soon as it

gets dark, don't let anyone in! How wonderful Jinping City is, letting that bunch of rustics from the southern outskirts trample all over it like this!"

As soon as he said this, echoes quickly sounded in the Phoenix's Perch Pavilion.

"That's right! I heard a couple days ago that the refugees want to bring a complaint against the emperor. They've gathered up in a big group in the southern outskirts outside the gate!"

"What do they want?"

"It's about that old business of the land expropriated to build the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon rails," an informed individual among the seated customers said. "All these years, I don't know why they've turned it up again... Ah, anyway, it's a pity. I went out of the city the other day, and I saw that crowd of refugees laying out their makeshift beds beside the canal with flies and mosquitoes buzzing around them. My heavens, looking from a distance, it was like a mass grave."

"I think there'll be a big fuss this time. I hear the Crown Prince in the palace has submitted a petition pleading for forgiveness for the people. It drove the emperor out of his mind with rage."

"What was he angry about?"

"He wants to spread the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon everywhere—lately someone came from the Chu to the west..."

The Phoenix's Perch Pavilion was an old establishment, not cheap, and the clientele were all somewhat wealthy—though they weren't major figures; even the butlers of major figures weren't so loose-lipped when they went out. Minor merchants and shopkeepers, managers of horses and carriages... and all that sort, what they liked

best was to gather together to discuss major state affairs based on hearsay to draw attention to the breadth of their information networks.

Pang Jian let it go in one ear and out the other, thinking of something else. He slowly poured himself a cup of wine, a little lost in thought.

Just then, there was a clamor in the street. Someone cried out: “Quick, look, shooting stars!”

Pang Jian looked in response to the voice. Several meteors flew across the sky toward the horizon.

In the Latent Cultivation Temple’s Chengjing Hall, General Zhi watched Xi Ping’s figure recede, puffing like a train, and couldn’t resist being amused. He took the cup of tea Elder Su gave him. “Pang Wenchang truly is wonderful.”

Elder Su said, “I brought up Wenchang myself, I know him, he’s very wild. If he looks down on a person, he’ll go through the motions to their face, then turn his head and forget what they look like. If he didn’t set store by him, he wouldn’t get up to these little tricks—which family does this young master come from?”

To look at these two, they were grandfather and grandson. When it came to positions within the sect, Su Zhun was only an open-eyed disciple of the outer sect who had to politely call Zhi Xiu “shishu.” But there was a certain relaxed ease to their conversation that made them seem instead like old friends of many years’ standing.

“An upstart family with no roots, a simple background. Recently he got drawn into a case. I thought he hit it off pretty well with Xiao Pang. Heaven’s Design Pavilion probably wants to reserve him in advance... He’s really something. The inner sect hasn’t even made its selections, and he already wants to pick,” Zhi Xiu said, smiling.

“So it was you who brought up that Xiao Pang. And here I was wondering why when I asked whether he wanted a reception order, his tone when he answered was exactly the same as your’s when you were young.”

Su Zhun’s expression was a little odd. “You asked him whether he wanted a reception order... Listen, little shishu, isn’t that going a little too far?”

Zhi Xiu was bewildered. “Huh?”

“Wenchang didn’t come up through the Latent Cultivation Temple, he opened his spiritual eyes because of an accident. I didn’t want his talent to go to waste and asked you to vouch for him with the inner sect in order to get him made a disciple of record and enter Heaven’s Design Pavilion.” Su Zhun didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “You just scribbled down a letter and then forgot all about it, but that child had your voucher mounted and took it everywhere with him, so grateful he gave over his whole life to Heaven’s Design Pavilion. Several times when his life was hanging by a thread and he was snatched back by his colleagues and delirious with fever, he would clutch your voucher and say, ‘I didn’t let General Zhi down.’ Honestly, you do test a person’s feelings.”

Zhi Xiu was a little embarrassed. “How could I know we had that connection...? He didn’t say anything, and I don’t go peeking at other people’s histories without a reason.”

“What,” said Su Zhun, glancing at him, “is the rumor true? Will Xuanyin Mountain’s Four Great Pities lose one of their pillars?”

“What rumor? What Four Great Pities?” said Zhi Xiu.

“The rumor that you’re finally going to take a disciple, little shishu—the Dignitary of Fate High Elder’s direct disciple, Peak Master of Flying Jade Peak. All the sect’s sword cultivators are crying to be

the head disciple of Flying Jade Peak. You're all right. After you took over Flying Jade Peak, you didn't open the mountain's seal, threw together a cottage for yourself at the foot of the mountain and lived there, never even brought up the subject of taking disciples. 'Little shishu doesn't take disciples' makes up one of Xuanyin's Four Great Pities, along with 'Master Lin doesn't make tools,' 'Peak Master Wen doesn't speak,' and 'Princess Duanrui doesn't go near colorful clothes.' Haven't you heard of them?"

"What are you talking about?" Zhi Xiu frowned. "Instruct them not to keep spreading these words around. I'm of no value, they can say what they like, but they shouldn't be disrespectful toward Duanrui-shijie."

Su Zhun asked, "What, are you really going to take a disciple? You don't want any of the sword cultivators with extraordinary gifts running all over the mountain, you want a blank piece of paper to teach from the very beginning?"

"I still don't understand heaven and earth for myself, how could I be qualified to expound wisdom and dispel doubts for others?" Zhi Xiu sipped his tea and waved a hand. "In a few days, Duanrui-shijie will be here to teach the disciples the *You Xuan Jing*."

"What? Princess Duanrui!" Su Zhun was startled and involuntarily sat up straight. "Apart from the established foundation shixiong in residence, the Latent Cultivation Temple only has us half-immortals to handle odd jobs. We're not significant enough to receive this forebear."

"I understand, I'll come ahead of time to await her arrival," Zhi Xiu said. "I was responsible for recruiting this class of disciples, it would be rude not to help entertain the guest of honor."

"Does the princess's Green Pool Peak have an eye on this class of new disciples?" Su Zhun said. "But I heard that she's been in

seclusion to achieve a consummate ascended spirit?”

Zhi Xiu’s gaze was slightly restrained. “Yes, she’s come out.”

“Well... She’s been in seclusion less than a hundred years, right? Isn’t this a little sudden?”

“She’s acting under the force of circumstance, nothing to be done about it.” Zhi Xiu shook his head. He wasn’t accustomed to talking about people behind their backs. He didn’t say much. After a moment of silence, he only said, “Mingyi, come to think of it now, it’s a good thing you were so insistent on not entering the inner sect back then. You spent nearly two hundred years expelling evil and keeping the Way in the mortal world, and found a quiet place to retire in your old age..”

Su Zhun said, smiling, “Don’t talk nonsense, what do you mean I wouldn’t enter the inner sect? It was the inner sect that didn’t want me. If the inner sect had given me so much as a glance, I’d have packed myself up and shipped myself over... Ah, but on that subject, if you aren’t planning on taking disciples, why did you oversee the Grand Selection? It’s been so many years since an ascended spirit peak master left the mountain. Do you know that because you oversaw the Grand Selection, Luo-shixiong is terrified that it’ll harm your image if these disciples don’t perform well, and he’s planning to work them to death so they all open their spiritual eyes?”

“Oh... there’s no need for that. I only received the sect’s orders to go handle an evil*cultivator, and while I was there I brought back the provisional disciples to save someone else a trip.” Zhi Xiu paused, then gave a rough description of the business of the evil*cultivator “Tai Sui” at the Blissful Village. “This person’s arrival was momentous. It disturbed the Sea of Stars. He had to be eliminated.”

After hearing this, Su Zhun was shocked. “What did you say? Tai Sui? Tai Sui really exists? And you’ve seen him!”

Zhi Xiu stared. “What, you know of him?”

“I’ve heard of this title,” Su Zhun said hesitantly. “But... it wasn’t a person.”

“If it’s not a person, what is it?”

“It’s a... a totem, a made-up evil god,” Su Zhun said. “The evil cultivators in the mortal world have scarce resources. They stick together. You know that.”

Zhi Xiu nodded.

“They practice all kinds of paths, and when they gather together, it’s to each other’s mutual benefit and assistance. There’s rarely a leader that everyone obeys, so they’ll often concoct a god like the Queen Mother of the West or Grand Duke Tai Sui and worship that god when they get together... It’s a ceremony. When you’ve worshipped the god, it indicates that everyone is on the same path. When I was at Heaven’s Design Pavilion, I caught a group of evil cultivators who worshipped ‘Tai Sui.’”

“The conflagration burns on, the cry of the cicada is without end,” said Zhi Xiu.

“Right, that was the line!” Su Zhun said. “‘Tai Sui’ is an image of a deity carved out of wood! What, did they bring that image to life?”

The two of them exchanged a look, both their expressions rather grave.

Su Zhun asked, “You said he disturbed the Sea of Stars. What does that mean?”

The Sea of Stars was an abyss among the Xuanyin mountain chain; it was said that you could glimpse fate there.

But fate was so abstruse. A person peeking at heaven could accidentally end up caught inside and die where there was no place to be buried, so Xuanyin Mountain had issued an order forbidding its disciples from entering. Apart from the Dignitary of Fate High Elder, even an ascended spirit peak master, if he hadn't been summoned, was only permitted to go into the Sea of Stars once every ten years, and each time he went in couldn't exceed half the burning of an incense stick, and he couldn't glimpse his own fate.

Zhi Xiu said, "It was the Sea of Stars that summoned Zhaoting and pointed me vaguely in the direction of the Dragon Vein. When I came down with Zhaoting, I saw that there was turbid energy and instability near Jinping... meaning that there were evildoers. The instability wasn't strong. We thought at the time it must be an established foundation cultivator of the middle or late stage, but since this person had disturbed the Sea of Stars, there had to be evil practices going on. For the sake of security, my shizun told me to go have a look."

"Even the Sea of Stars couldn't see how strong that evil cultivator was?"

"If it had, I certainly wouldn't have arrogantly gone ahead on my own. My life is of no consequence, but the millions of lives in Jinping are no joke." At this point, Zhi Xiu frowned again and said, "But 'half a step from shedding his skin' is too much. I've seen Duanrui-shijie, when instructing her own disciples, suppress her cultivation to the open-eyed level, and the established foundation disciples still didn't stand a chance against her—but that evil* cultivator was taken down by a sneak attack from Xiao Pang, a walker in the mortal world, along with a mortal child. But his cultivation was indeed of the late ascended spirit stage... The

feeling it gave me was a little like someone whose cultivation has been propped up by elixirs.”

“Elixirs are sand. They can prop a chicken coop or a pigsty up to the sky, but they can’t roof a building,” Su Zhun said. “If elixirs could push you up to an ascended spirit, how many peak masters would Xuanyin have?”

“I know that...” Zhi Xiu was just about to say something when, suddenly, the fragmentary ringing of bells sounded in tranquil Chengjing Hall.

In the small courtyard, all the idling straw children moved on their own without talismans to command them. They all turned to face the window and tilted their heads back to look at the sky.

Meteors like arrows pierced the tranquil night sky.

“Why would there be shooting stars in the southern sky out of nowhere?” Su Zhun murmured. “It’s an inauspicious omen.”

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Author’s Note

The purchasing power of the currency and conversion system are approximately like this:

One copper coin buys two pieces of bread (unleavened, no meat), enough for a meal if you add water; if they aren’t all sold, they’re discounted in the evening.

A string of copper coins is 1,500 copper coins=one liang of silver.
Twelve liang of silver=one liang of gold.

CHAPTER 18 - The Dragon Bites Its Tail (6)

When the first shooting star fell, A-Xiang had reached the pleasure boat ferry crossing. She brushed shoulders with an ice-hauling cart.

The chill offset the greater part of the hot sweat on her forehead. She breathed out a heavy sigh.

A-Xiang was the nominal age of fifteen. Her father had died when she was young. Back then her family had had a few mu of barren land, but they'd had absolutely no ability to work it. A widowed old man and his frail daughter-in-law bringing up a child could work themselves to death all year without digging up a handful of grains, and they couldn't afford to hire people, so when someone came to collect land to build a factory, her grandfather had sold their land.

For the first few years, it hadn't been so bad. Working at the factory brought money in faster than farming. But the good days didn't last. The year before last, the factory had suddenly said they didn't want anyone fifty or over, so the family had lost its livelihood at once.

The money from selling the land back then had gone faster and faster, and an illness of A-Xiang's mother used it all up.

They had no more money and no place to live. Only the grandfather and granddaughter remained, relying on each other for survival. Laborers, waiters—in order to earn a mouthful, she did everything alongside her grandfather. In the Grand Selection Year, by chance, grandfather and granddaughter had come to Jinping in search of food and were doing temporary work in a factory in the southern outskirts.

Lately, A-Xiang had amassed a little fortune.

At first, there had been people voicing their grievance outside the south city gate. It seemed they were saying that when the rails for the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon had been laid, their land had been coveted by corrupt officials. They had nowhere to turn, so they had come to the capital to demand justice. Later, perhaps because no one was paying attention to them or something, for the sake of making themselves look more impressive, these people began hiring others to complain with them.

This work was simple. You only had to take a form for filing suit and wait by the roadside. When you saw a beautiful carriage going past, you would lift the paper and recite the words along with everyone else, and get fifty coins a day—while at the docks, the strongest and most able laborers could earn around thirty.

Her grandfather didn't let her go. The old man always had his own mysterious reasons. He said, "If you bring a false grievance when you haven't been wronged, you'll be threatening your luck." A-Xiang hadn't listened to him. She thought that, in the countryside, people got hired as "filial descendants" to help mourn at funerals, and she had done that kind of unlucky work; what was wrong with helping people bring a grievance? It wasn't an offense against heaven. Anyway, her grandfather thought that if you bought Golden Tray lottery tickets on even-numbered days, you could win the grand prize. He had wasted all their lamp oil money on that scrap paper, and he hadn't gotten a single coin back for it.

Jinping had warmed up early this year. Before the Dragon Boat Festival, the summer heat had already come. The heat cooked A-Xiang's grandfather into an illness. He didn't eat a thing for two days, but his belly swelled up like a pregnant woman's. After that, A-Xiang brought the grievance for three days, earned a hundred and fifty coins, and remembered that her grandfather had said that when they had come to work in the city before, the food their master had rewarded them with had included a duck's head from the Phoenix's

Perch Pavilion, and he had never eaten anything better in his life. So, taking her money, she found the Phoenix's Perch Pavilion.

But it turned out that the best thing her grandfather had eaten in his life was a scrap they wouldn't sell on its own.

When A-Xiang closed her eyes, it was as if she could once again hear the laughter in the Phoenix's Perch Pavilion, like evil music.

"Little brother, stop running, aren't you hot?" Seeing her involuntarily following the ice cart, a stand owner selling cold drinks by the street saw an opening to solicit a customer. "Have a bowl of ice balls to cool off, even the immortals are satisfied customers!"

A-Xiang stopped in her tracks, turned, and saw the "ice balls" that the cold drinks stand was selling: the little balls rolled out of sticky rice flour were glistening and transparent, accompanied by all types of fruit and mint juices. Cold wafted off of them in the stifling night. She couldn't resist swallowing a mouthful of saliva.

Seeing that she was moved, the stand owner urged her: "Have a bowl to taste. Cools you down, and it's easy on the stomach, very pleasant!"

A-Xiang had been shaking her head, but when she heard "easy on the stomach," she hesitated. "How much for a bowl?"

A moment later, she was holding a pot full of ice balls; she had cheered back up—the well-meaning stand owner had heard that she wanted to buy it to take home to her grandfather and praised her for her filial piety, so he had served her the ice balls in a porcelain pot and told her to bring it back for a refill when they had eaten all of it.

Weren't these beautiful ice balls better than some lousy duck's head?

She thought: When I'm rich, I'll buy out all the tables at the Phoenix's Perch Pavilion, order a hundred whole ducks, then feed all the meat to the dogs.

A-Xiang was afraid of letting the crushed ice melt. She ran like mad the whole way, holding the porcelain pot.

She ran through the busy area in the east city, cleverly dodged the carriages passing through, hopped and skipped in long strides across holes dug out for street repairs, then whistled to a girl selling flowers by the street. When the girl realized what had happened and went to spit at her, there was nothing to spit at; A-Xiang had already run out of the south city gate.

Outside the city to the south, it was still stinking. The vendors selling mixed grain flatbreads were preparing to take down their stands, and the bread had been discounted to three for one coin.

"Uncle, I'm not buying any!" A-Xiang called excitedly. "I have good stuff to eat today!"

She was too good at running, like a little wild horse. She didn't rest for a single breath, running the whole way back to the factory. Water droplets beaded on the outside of the ice cold porcelain pot. A-Xiang wiped her wet hand clean against herself, then suddenly found that the atmosphere in the factory district was unusual. There were many people around... each one of them carrying a sword; they were soldiers.

What had happened?

There was an uproar, and several people were dragged out by the soldiers, who cursed and hit them. They were all people A-Xiang knew. Her eyes opened wide. She was about to step forward when someone next to her held her back. It was Uncle Salted Fish, who

usually liked to buy Gold Basin lottery tickets along with her grandfather.

Uncle Salted Fish had eyes many times larger than an ordinary person's, staring so hard they nearly came out of their sockets. He pulled A-Xiang aside and quietly said, "Don't go over there!"

A-Xiang said, "What's going on? Why are they arresting people?"

"They're saying those people bringing a grievance outside the south city gate are traitors, vilifying the court. They're going through the factories one by one to investigate... Hey, didn't you also go with them?"

A-Xiang was a half-grown child. All her ferocity was in her words. Hearing this, her heart began to beat wildly, *slam-slam*, her hands even colder than the pot of ice.

Just then, she saw two soldiers pulling someone out of the factory.

It was her grandpa!

The old man was sick. Held between two strapping soldiers, his feet dragged limply along the ground. He looked like a dying old dog.

Uncle Salted Fish had seen, too. He kept muttering, "Oh no, what a mess! What a mess! ... Hey, where are you going?"

A-Xiang, about to rush over, was dragged back by Uncle Salted Fish. "My grandpa! My grandpa didn't go, he's being wrongly accused!"

"The soldiers don't care whether the people they arrest are wrongly accused, better shut up and behave!" Uncle Salted Fish grabbed the girl. "Or else they'll take you along with him!"

Seeing another team of officers heading their way, Uncle Salted Fish was alarmed. Brooking no argument, he hid himself and A-Xiang inside a haystack.

The city guard soldiers' boots trampled over the muddy ground of the southern outskirts's factory district.

Shooting stars fell like rain.

“My lord.” A bailiff ran up in front of the capital overseer, wiped sweat from his forehead, and reported, “In the rabble-rousing outside the south city gate, over sixty of the disorderly individuals spreading the ‘man-eating Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon’ rumor have been arrested and are waiting to be tried, you...”

“Who are they waiting for? Go try them!” The capital overseer raised his eyelids irritably. “Who instigated them to vilify the court?! If they don’t tell you, beat them to death! The emperor issued an order in court today, requesting that we find the instigator behind this! If we don’t hand the instigator’s head over today, it’ll be our own heads we hand over tomorrow. Hurry up!”

The bailiff took to his heels and ran, startling an old crow into flight.

The inauspicious crow cawed, crying or laughing, and flew toward the west of the Lingyang River.

The black cat at Prince Zhuang Manor stared unblinking at the bird flying by, wiggling its butt excitedly as if about to pounce. Then the scruff of its neck was squeezed midway by an ice cold hand.

“Keep an eye on it, don’t let it put wild animals in its mouth. They’re filthy.” Prince Zhuang stuffed the cat into Bai Ling’s arms and sighed, half genuinely. “Hiring people to bring grievances outside the south city gate, this Lord Sun... Well, ready the carriage, I’ll go

to the palace to intercede with the Crown Prince—oh, yes, has there been a letter on the proximal today?”

Bai Ling responded, “Not yet.”

“He agreed to report that he was safe and sound every day, and he’s only been gone a few days when he forgets his duty.” Prince Zhuang called servants to help him change into court dress.

“Ungrateful scoundrel.”

Xi Ping the ungrateful scoundrel arrived back at the Qiu courtyard just as the gate was about to lock.

When he came into his room, he put the unconscious half-puppet aside. Then, holding onto hope, he searched through the nooks and crannies to see whether there were any “surviving” spiritual stones.

The upshot was that, never mind spiritual stones, this lousy half-puppet hadn’t even left him a single grain of “spiritual sand.”

After working hard to no avail, Xi Ping hated the half-puppet even more.

But when he had rolled up his sleeves and was about to take it up with the half-puppet, he found that in so short a time, the half-puppet had already grown a palm’s breadth. The little jacket and little pants had become too small.

Because he was growing too quickly, something cracked in the half-puppet’s body, whether bones or Moon Plated Gold. His legs twitched constantly.

Xi Ping carefully reached out to feel. Through the clothes, he could feel something chugging away inside the half-puppet’s body like a steam engine at high speed, as if about to blow up at any moment.

Fine. Never mind beating him up, he didn't even dare to touch him now.

"If he really does blow up," Xi Ping suddenly thought, "then won't my box of spiritual stones have gone to waste?"

He thought it over. Then, grimacing, he pricked his finger and stingily squeezed out a drop of blood to rub on the dragon-taming chain. The drop of blood was quickly absorbed, and Xi Ping once again had that unusual sensation, as though he had grown a tail. Only then did he uneasily wash up and go to sleep.

He was keeping an eye out to "watch" so in case something went wrong with his "tail" in the middle of the night, he would know in time.

When the dragon-taming chain absorbed its master's blood, the ice cold foil seemed to warm and encircle the half-puppet's neck, neither loose nor tight.

Xi Ping put out the light. In the dark, the half-puppet opened his bloodshot eyes and moved them with difficulty, looking in the direction of the bedroom.

It was only his body that couldn't move; actually, he had been conscious the whole time.

From the beginning of the half-puppet's blurry memories, he had always been a half-human monster. His original master had never fed him spiritual stones, only ground up three grains of green ore a month, dissolved it in water, and given it to him to drink, so he narrowly scraped by. So he didn't grow taller or more intelligent. He was ignorant and bewildered, with nothing in his head but hunger.

It was this that made his spiritual sense unusually acute, so he could locate places where spiritual energy was abundant for his

master, acting as a “spiritual energy hound.”

Once, his master had gotten drunk and hadn't properly put away the two liang of jade stamps in his wallet. The half-puppet, emboldened by hunger, truly hadn't been able to resist; he had gobbled up the two liang of jade stamps.

His master had flown into a rage on waking, cut off his spiritual pathways on the spot, broke apart the arrays on his bones, sliced open his belly, and removed the two green stamp stones. A cold blade cut through his skin, and two rough hands searched through his organs.

In order to make him “remember,” his master had left him lying there with his scant flesh and bones, exposed to the sun for three sweltering summer days... He was a monster who couldn't even die under those circumstances; so why could he feel pain the same as flesh and blood?

Fortunately, the half-puppet's intellect was incomplete; he couldn't even go mad.

Since then, he had indeed remembered. When he saw the color of jade stamp green, he felt as though he were being torn apart. Even the spring colors of Jiangnan made him fearful.

Humans and animals alike became too bold to fear death when they were starving. His original master had given him a forceful “warning” against jade stamps, but he hadn't taught him to fear blue jade.

Faced with a whole unlocked box of blue jade, the half-puppet hadn't been able to resist making the same old mistake.

When Xi Ping had carried him to Chengjing Hall, the half-puppet, with his intellect that was no better than a cat's or dog's,

understood that he had gotten himself into serious trouble. He was probably a goner this time.

Luckily, he didn't understand what regret was.

He had lived only to eat. Now that he had eaten his fill, it was all right if he was torn to pieces.

But... why hadn't he been torn to pieces?

The abundant spiritual energy in the blue jade scoured the half-puppet's long-stalled body. All of his rough and slipshod arrays were nourished. The half-puppet's body and intellect, like bamboo shoots welcoming spring rain, grew quickly. As his body grew taller as if breaking through a cocoon, many unclear things in his mind also suddenly became clear, so that when the half-puppet had the strength to open his eyes, he had worked out the whole story—someone had given up a hundred liang of blue jade to preserve his worthless, filthy life.

His radically changing flesh and bones tore apart bit by bit, then tore again before they could mend... This was a pain worse than death.

The half-puppet shook all over, bit another segment off his deformed tongue. His mouth filled with blood.

He was no longer aware of anything, only desperately struggling to live: his life belonged to that person.

When the final shooting star fell, the starry sky once again became silent. On this night, the land of dreams was desolate; there were people everywhere who couldn't sleep all night.

Outside of Jinping's south city gate, A-Xiang burst into her home. Uncle Salted Fish had said he was going to pull in connections for

her, see whether they could bribe a couple of city guards and get her grandfather released. A-Xiang's grandpa had been sick for days and hadn't been out of the house. The factory's barefoot doctor could give evidence. She was the one they should have arrested.

But the problem was, what would they use for a bribe?

A-Xiang turned the little shack she and her grandfather lived in upside down. Apart from a string of coins barely sufficient for grandfather and granddaughter to eat mixed grain bread for half a month, there was only a pile of expired Golden Tray lottery tickets. There were gold and silver, jewels and pearls, auspicious clouds and colorful phoenixes garishly drawn on the waste paper tickets. There were thirty-one of them, each one a broken dream.

Her grandfather had piled the Golden Tray lottery tickets into paper ingots and placed them on the simple incense altar. There was no divine image on the tablet; it was only an empty protection amulet. This was supposed to be the amulet of Grand Duke Tai Sui. Her grandfather couldn't clearly explain what the grand duke's history was. He had picked this thing up somewhere and joined others in worshipping it. Every time, before he bought a Golden Tray lottery ticket, he would piously come pay his respects. But perhaps Grand Duke Tai Sui didn't do double duty as a god of wealth. It hadn't worked even once.

A-Xiang had exhausted her strength and come to the end of the road. By a mysterious coincidence, she also put together a paper ingot for Grand Duke Tai Sui and, willing to try anything in a crisis, prayed to the amulet.

It was too hot, and A-Xiang was overheated. When she lowered her head, her nose began to drip blood. As A-Xiang rushed to wipe blood off the "amulet," she babbled, "Save my grandpa, Lord Tai Sui, I beg you, save my grandpa. If only you can save my grandpa, I'll give you my life..."

The amulet was made of some special wood. As if it were cotton, it greedily sucked up every drop of blood between her fingers.

Pang Jian strode into Heaven's Design Pavilion's head office and directly asked a subordinate, "What's going on with those evil cultivators' wooden amulets?"

"Commander, look." The blue-clotheser took out one of the reincarnation wood amulets they had seized from the evil cultivators. The ghastly pale wooden amulet was mottled with bloodstains, as if someone had awakened the evil spirit of the amulet. "When there was that meteor shower to the south earlier, it suddenly became like this."

A freight steamship thundered as it left the dock, raising huge, foul waves that rolled over a fly looking for food by the canal.

The beam of a lighthouse went by and fell on the bright green surface of the water. It swept over the struggling and dying little insect and pierced the thin mist.

In the Latent Cultivation Temple, Xi Ping frowned as he rolled over, sleeping uneasily. His ears were full of crying and murmuring voices.

Someone was begging him to save some "grandpa," someone was wailing, someone was shrieking miserably...

Amid the noise, he seemed to "dream" that in the next room, the half-puppet woke up, opened his eyes and stood, then went into his bedroom.

How annoying. Xi Ping covered his head with the quilt.

The half-puppet silently entered Xi Ping's room and saw that he had been practicing some martial art in his sleep; he had uncovered his

whole body and rolled up his quilt from the chest up, as if he had reached a dead end and wanted to hang himself with the brocade quilt.

The half-puppet squatted beside the bed for a while watching Xi Ping, then carefully reached out, wanting to dig him out of the quilt.

Suddenly, the half-puppet gave a start and took a big step back, his skinny back bending.

Xi Ping, who had been sleeping like a dead dog, had sat bolt upright in bed like a risen corpse!

He slowly unwrapped the brocade quilt wound around his neck. His eyes were as clear as if he hadn't been sleeping at all. He looked right at the half-puppet, then smiled strangely.

The hairs stood up on the back of the half-puppet's neck.

“Xi Ping” slowly twisted his neck, straightened his clothes and sleep-rumpled hair, then raised his hands in front of him and lovingly stroked and examined them. He sighed with deep feeling. “Truly the hands of someone raised in comfort and plenty.”

This was indeed Xi Ping's voice, but the pronunciation was completely different from his usual speech, so it made him sound like a different person. In the deep voice, there was a faint Ning'an accent!

“Xi Ping” stood up and walked a few steps. He extended a hand, and the half-puppet, as if strung up by invisible cords, hung in mid air, coming level with his line of sight.

“Little thing.” “Xi Ping” examined him for a moment, then laughed. “You've never had a chance to be a man. Don't pick up a man's

habit of getting up to tricks, huh? You know what to say and what not to say?”

The half-puppet opened his mouth and displayed his deformed teeth and throat.

“I see, you can’t speak. That’s great.” “Xi Ping”’s cold finger passed downward over the half-puppets lips. The half-puppet gave a fierce start—this finger passed precisely over the places where arrays were carved on his body, sharper than the knife that had once cut open his belly, and colder.

“Talkative puppets get chopped into firewood, shoved in the stove, and burned up.” “Xi Ping” put a finger to his lips. “Shh—”

Then he snapped his fingers, and the puppet, as if he had been given a heavy shove, staggered back into the study.

“Xi Ping” turned and went into the small courtyard behind the rooms, waved a hand to set up a prohibition, then sat cross-legged under an osmanthus tree.

Pale moonlight reflected off the clouds and swept over the ground. It passed through the prohibition that was invisible to the naked eye and fell on “Xi Ping,” casting his shadow.

This shadow didn’t have a human shape. It was a pitch-black dragon.

CHAPTER 19 - The Dragon Bites Its Tail (7)

At the beginning of yin hour, before first light, a lantern went on in the Qiu courtyard. Yao Qi got up in humiliation.

Because he hadn't been able to exit the spiritual sense mustard seed, he had to go to morning class a shichen in advance. As soon as he left his rooms, the mountain wind slammed the door shut behind him, and dew flew in his face, as if branding the word "stupid" onto it.

Yao Qi raised his sleeve and wiped the water off his face. The rims of his eyes were bright red.

Xi Ping, who normally couldn't be woken unless he was struck by lightning, was startled by the sound of the door closing.

He sat up in bewilderment, narrowed his eyes and looked out the window, watched Yao Ziming go out holding up the lantern, then confusedly stared at his hands for ages—he must have slept in a bad position; his fingers kept shaking.

As he stared blankly, he happened to look up and saw a human figure appear at his bedside.

Xi Ping was caught unawares and nearly bit his tongue—the half-puppet who had eaten a whole box of blue jade had shot up about two chi overnight. He looked like a teenager.

His little round face had changed shape. As if his scant human skin was insufficient, it was stuck tightly to his bones, so pale it was ashen. The little jacket and little pants no longer met, and his shoulders had torn the seams. He silently stared back at Xi Ping; it was unclear whether he was demanding a life or repayment.

“You fucking...” Xi Ping recovered and couldn’t resist swearing. “If you scare me to death, there won’t be any more spiritual stones for you to snatch!”

As if feeling his own inferiority, the half-puppet retreated into the shadows.

Xi Ping stared at this countenance that had taken years off his lifespan, spent a long time getting accustomed to it, then at last crossly said, “Come here, get to work—first put away my quilt.”

The half-puppet went over obediently and put away the bedding.

It seemed that not only his body had grown up, but his intellect, too. Having digested several thousand liang of gold, he at last knew what he was supposed to be doing.

Suddenly, a breath came out of the half-puppet’s throat. He picked a fresh leaf out of Xi Ping’s bedding.

Xi Ping’s pupils contracted almost imperceptibly.

The half-puppet pinched the leaf, his expression changing several times. At last he seemed to come to a decision. He turned and, as though going to a martyr’s death, raised the leaf in front of Xi Ping’s face.

But before he could raise his hand and gesture, the fickle young master kicked up a fuss out of nowhere. He burst out: “Where do you think the leaf came from? It’s because of you, you little money-waster, making me run up the mountain in the middle of the night!”

The half-puppet was stunned by his blustery temper.

“Anyway, you owe me a hundred liang of blue jade!” Xi Ping said impatiently. “If you can’t pay it all back, you’ll have to work for me.”

The half-puppet quickly reached out to grab him.

Wait, listen to me, you've been...

"Move, get out of my way!" Xi Ping angrily pushed him away. "I don't understand your flapping. How can a mute have so much to say?"

Impatient "ha"s came out of the half-puppet's throat.

Xi Ping's scarce patience was exhausted. He pinched the dragon-taming chain on the half-puppet's neck.

The teenager's throat was instantly clutched by the dragon-taming chain. His limbs locked up. He couldn't move a muscle.

Xi Ping said coldly, "I said move. Don't bother me."

Silver light flashed on the dragon-taming chain, then burrowed into the half-puppet's neck.

"Go pick up the clothes and shoes I took off last night."

The half-puppet was pulled by the dragon-taming chain. He mechanically picked up the brocade robe and boots Xi Ping had tossed aside.

Xi Ping glanced at him haughtily, then instructed him: "I don't want the clothes anymore. Wash them and put them on yourself. Take off those grave clothes, don't go out and humiliate me."

Then, the willful young master yawned and ignored the half-puppet. He strolled to the study, stretched, got out the white jade proximal, and started to write to his grandmother to report after the fact that he had been well yesterday.

When he had written a few words, he suddenly remembered something. He looked up. The half-puppet, already forced to the bedroom door, stopped in accordance with his thoughts.

“Oh, right, what’s your name?” Xi Ping seemed to be asking casually. Without waiting for an answer, he despotically made his own decision. “Forget it, a name chosen by an evil cultivator won’t be auspicious. Since you’re my house slave, your surname can be Xi from now on... Oh, your name can be Xi Yue.”

When the white jade proximal lit up, Prince Zhuang had just returned to his manor—he had spent half the night kneeling at the palace and was carried home on a guard’s back.

A page boy came up to bring him hot tea and pastries. He only picked up the cup and moistened his lips, then pushed the pastries aside without touching them.

Bai Ling appeared out of nowhere. He took out a small medicine bottle, emptied a pill onto a snow-white brocade handkerchief, and offered it to him.

A faint, refreshing scent came from the mouth of the bottle. It floated out the window, and a haitang tree at the window that had just put out buds sorrowfully flowered.

Prince Zhuang didn’t look well, but he seemed to be in a good mood. Smiling, he shook his head and said, “Spring Sunshine Pills are rare, keep it to use for yourself. This thing won’t make up for what’s wrong with me... There’s a letter on the proximal, bring it to me so I can read.”

Bai Ling held out the pill, not moving a muscle, his expression grim.

There was nothing Prince Zhuang could do. He had to take the pill and put it in his mouth. “Tsk, a paper man like you, why do you have the personality of a rock?”

The mutual affection between His Majesty and the Crown Prince was such that it would take more than one or two conflicting political views to whittle it away entirely—when the heads of the Zhang family had rolled, it still hadn’t spread to the Crown Prince’s Eastern Palace. If he went to intercede on someone’s behalf, full of affection and concern, His Majesty could use it as a step to come down.

Only if matters were forced to a new stage could the crack remain on the surface.

Anger and hatred were just like mutual affection; they had to be accumulated. There was no way to accomplish everything in one stroke. It had to be just enough at a time.

Also, His Majesty liked to see him having “profound sentiments.”

Bai Ling said, stiffly, “I am only a paper man. I don’t understand the ways of the world. But in the future, if Your Highness plans to injure himself to gain an enemy’s confidence again, I would like to be notified, so as not to end up at loose ends and unable to find any elixirs.”

Prince Zhuang pointed at him as if tolerating the black cat throwing a tantrum. He made to get up. “Never mind, I’ll get it myself.”

Only then did Bai Ling silently turn, pick up the white jade proximal, and bring it in front of him.

“God, why so long again?” Prince Zhuang scanned it briefly. He saw that on the proximal was another round of self-praise. Xi Ping had already been talking about his “first-class spiritual sense and

unsurpassed natural gifts” for several days in different styles. The reams of pointless nonsense made Prince Zhuang’s eyes hurt. “Fine, take it away, clearly there’s nothing serious... wait.”

His gaze came to a halt on a corner of the proximal. He saw Xi Ping write, winding up: “The little half-human page Commander Pang gave me is ugly, can’t speak or write, and is very clumsy, nowhere near as good as Haozhong. But in the Latent Cultivation Temple, I have to make do with him, so I’ve named him Xi Yue, in the hope that he can pick up some wits.”

Prince Zhuang’s somewhat pallid fingers stroked the writing on the proximal. “Xi Yue...”

If he remembered right, Xi Ping had originally had a brother younger than him by three years. When he had been nearly a year old, he hadn’t held out. When the child had died young, a name had already been chosen for him. His name had been Xi Yue.

Why would he give the half-puppet this name for no reason?

Weren’t all his servants named after instruments?

Was it... that he missed home?

Prince Zhuang frowned—no, that couldn’t be it. This cousin of his acted like he was a horse slipping its reins when he went traveling. If the Marquis of Yongning didn’t cut off his allowance, he couldn’t get that wild ass back to be tied up. He didn’t have any tender feelings like missing home.

The brat had always only reported the good and not the bad. No matter how much trouble he had gotten himself into, he would come back and act like nothing was the matter. He wouldn’t say a thing unless he had no way out. Something must have happened.

Prince Zhuang muttered to himself silently for a moment. “Didn’t Princess Xincheng recently go to stay at Southern Sage Temple for a few days?”

“Yes,” said Bai Ling, “she’s on the outs with her husband.”

“Go write a calling card,” Prince Zhuang said. “I’m going to the Southern Sage Temple to pray for blessings... to request the peace and safety of the country and harmony between my father and brother. On the way I’ll pay my respects to my aunt.”

In the Latent Cultivation Temple, apart from Yao Qi and the others who had been unlucky enough not to pass the spiritual sense mustard seed, the others didn’t have to go first thing in the morning to the Qiankun Tower to suffer—Elder Su had freed up some time to take them around to get familiar with the surroundings and to lecture on the sect rules.

The whole way there, Xi Ping listened to Chang Jun filling his ears with gossip; in this way, he learned that this kindly-looking old man was actually a remarkable figure.

“Elder Su was the previous General Commander of Heaven’s Design Pavilion. He’s experienced six reigns. He only went into retirement because he grew old. When the Lancang traitors surrounded Jinping and Heaven’s Design Pavilion’s elite were all thinking up ways to break out of the encirclement and get word to the sect, he was just starting out. He stayed back to guard the city with General Zhi, and they’re close friends to this day. I hear that his spiritual bones are already complete... That means that he’s in the consummate open-eyed stage, only a step away from an established foundation.”

Xi Ping, perhaps because he had woken up so early and wasn’t very alert, was absent-minded. He didn’t even listen very closely to what

Chang Jun was saying. He casually returned, “So why doesn’t he establish it?”

A voice behind him said, laughing, “You think you can establish a foundation just like that? For an established foundation, you first have to enter the inner sect.”

All the disciples hurried to step forward and salute. “Elder Su.”

Su Zhun wore a straw hat and held a bamboo cane, looking like an unprepossessing woodcutter.

He slowly walked up the stone steps. “An established foundation isn’t something that happens as naturally as water forming a channel. Sweeping your meridians and cleansing your marrow to complete your spiritual bones is only the requirement a human body needs to reach to establish a foundation. Apart from the spiritual bones, you must also find your ‘Way of the Heart.’ Me, though, I have no idea where to go looking for my Way of the Heart. I can’t enter the inner sect, so I suppose I’ll steep in the dust of the mortal world until I die a natural death.”

Zhou Xi followed up: “Elder, it must very hard to attain a Way of the Heart, right?”

“Naturally,” Su Zhun said, smiling. “Look at all living things. How many people spend every day with their heads down, struggling to survive? Those who know what they’re struggling toward and why they’re alive are few and far between. They may not know what they’re about from the beginning to the end of one year, so how are they going to find a Way of the Heart to last thousands of years from start to finish?”

Another disciple asked, “So, Elder, can you establish a foundation as long as you find a ‘Way of the Heart’?”

Su Zhun shook his head. “You have to proceed according to the rules. An outer sect disciple isn’t permitted to establish a foundation. First you need to have a reception order personally signed by the one of the ascended spirit peak masters to reach the status of inner sect disciple, register under the name of the peak master who issued the reception order, have the peak master assign you a ‘Hall of the Way’ on the immortal mountain... Look, we’ve reached the Yanhai Building. The Yanhai Building is the Latent Cultivation Temple’s library. When you have free time, you can come here to borrow ancient texts—though the valuable single extant copies have spells on them, so you can only read them inside the Yanhai Building. If you want to take them with you, you have to copy them out by hand.”

Xi Ping had absolutely no interest in the towering Yanhai Building. He took a casual glance, then looked away and asked Su Zhun, “Elder, do you have to be on the immortal mountain to establish a foundation? What about the evil cultivators outside, how do they establish one?”

His question was like a thunderclap. The disciples, all whispering to each other, suddenly became quiet. Asking in front of the elder in charge of the discipline hall how evil cultivators established a foundation—this Xi Shiyong really knew just what to say. On average, he offended an immortal three times a day.

Su Zhun was silent for a moment. He looked at him. “You’re asking me... about evil cultivators?”

Everyone was waiting for the kindly Elder Su to explode, but instead he raised his bamboo cane and pointed to a passing straw child. “Record this—Xi Shiyong, add a spiritual stone point for this month.”

Xi Ping: “...”

Add a what now?

“Your monthly allowance is three blues jades, distributed on the last day of each month. If you collect ten spiritual stone points, you can go to Chengjing Hall and add them up for an extra blue jade spiritual stone. But if you get points taken away, then your monthly allowance will be deducted.”

Su Zhun leaned on his bamboo stick and continued his leisurely walk forward. “I gave him a spiritual stone point because he raised a good question. I know you’re all avoiding mentioning ‘evil cultivators’ like a taboo. In the mortal world, if someone has bad luck several days in a row, they say they’ve ‘picked up evil energy,’ touched something belonging to an evil cultivator. When a contagious disease spreads, people say it’s ‘an evil wind entering the body,’ and there must have been an evil cultivator passing by who let out a poison fart upwind. But if you don’t have a thorough understanding of ‘evil,’ how will you know what is ‘just’? Just because you don’t breathe a word and keep your mouths clean, it won’t mean the evil cultivators don’t exist.”

Zhou Xi was the first to bow his head and frown. “I have received instruction.”

“No need to be reserved, Your Highness.” Su Zhun waved a hand. “The reason that the sect wants disciples to enter the inner sect to establish a foundation is that Xuanyin Mountain is nourished by a spiritual stone mine. The ‘Halls of the Way’ given to disciples to use to establish a foundation have walls full of spiritual stones. Inside, you can draw in the purest spiritual energy to ensure your spirit remains clear and unpolluted. Evil*cultivators are different from us. You know what the market prices for spiritual stones are outside. Without the support of a sect, an ordinary evil*cultivator certainly can’t afford them, so they often steal the world’s spiritual energy to use for themselves.”

“Elder, what is the world’s spiritual energy?”

“Flowers blooming, trees growing, all living things multiplying without end, all of it depends on the world’s spiritual energy,” Su Zhun said patiently. “An open-eyed cultivator can only take in spiritual energy and use it temporarily. The spiritual energy won’t stay inside their body long and will return to the world. But established foundation cultivators and onward are different. An established foundation cultivator already has a spiritual body. If they want to raise their cultivation, they must transmute the spiritual energy for their own use, keep the spiritual energy within their body. To give an example, suppose an early stage established foundation cultivator enters seclusion in the mortal world and doesn’t leave for ten years. Within a radius of ten or more li from them, the earth will be barren, the people living there will be plagued with disasters and illnesses, and if there unfortunately happens to be a pregnant woman in the area, the child will either be stillborn or deformed. This is called ‘pilfering heaven’s order.’ Our so-called ‘evil cultivators’ aren’t called so for their deeds. They’re cultivators who live by pilfering heaven’s order.”

All the disciples frequently talked about “evil cultivators,” but this was their first time hearing what an “evil*cultivator” actually was.

Xi Ping thought, I see, it turns out that established foundation cultivators are magic beasts that eat without shitting.

Zhou Xi blurted out, “Isn’t that bringing calamity on the people and the nation?”

Chang Jun suddenly saw the light: “No wonder Heaven’s Design Pavilion’s walkers in the mortal world can only be open-eyed cultivators!”

“Of course. Did you think that this enormous Xuanyin Sect couldn’t come up with a few powerful figures of the established foundation

stage and over?” Su Zhun said, smiling. “In the past, in order to end the great chaos, Kunlun to the north, Lancang to the south, Lingyun to the west, Xuanyin to the east, and Sanyue in the center, the five great sects, came together to establish a rule for immortal sects: cultivation is a temporary resting place, but the just path values the world over all and won’t pilfer heaven’s order for its own private use. Luckily, heaven has left us a means by bestowing on us spiritual stones from the ancient past. These things have pure spiritual energy. They save time in cultivation, and they don’t harm living beings. We cultivators of the just path can only use the spiritual energy in spiritual stones. In the open-eyed stage it’s all right, but if an established foundation cultivator or above wants to leave the mountain, they must first report their plans to the sect and take their own spiritual stones when they leave. Though they can take along a great quantity of spiritual stones in a mustard seed, it’s still suspect and unsuitable to stay too long in the mortal world, so walkers in the mortal world are all open-eyed half-immortals.”

Xi Ping’s focus was always different from that of others. “But then, if they encounter an established foundation or ascended spirit evil cultivator and get into a fight, won’t Heaven’s Design Pavilion get the worst of it?”

“There aren’t so many established foundation evil cultivators. Ways of the Heart are already rare. The vast majority of people, even if they grow up in the mountains among spiritual stone mines, will only get as far as the open-eyed stage. If they’re lucky and forge a Way of the Heart, then cultivate by means of pilfering heaven’s order, there will be a great quantity of impurities and turbid matter remaining in their bodies. Those who can cross the barrier of the established foundation are rare. Even if your will is stauncher than the average person’s, at most you’ll reach the middle established foundation stage before becoming obsessed with distracting thoughts and throwing your mind into chaos.”

Xi Ping, having heard this much, began to feel doubtful: since established foundation cultivators were so rare, then didn't that mean that the vast majority of "evil*cultivators" in the world were actually only half-immortals?

Since half-immortals couldn't keep hold of spiritual energy, then of course they also couldn't harm the environment.

Even Xuanyin Mountain's outer sect half-immortals could walk through the mortal world as they pleased, so why did half-immortal evil cultivators have to be wiped out? Couldn't you wait until they had established a foundation and lived up to their crime to kill them? If you were worried they would harm heaven's order, why not offer them amnesty in the immortal sect and lead them onto the just path?

Also...if most of them reached the middle established foundation stage and lost their minds, then what was going on with the ascended spirit "Tai Sui"?

Before he could ask, Elder Su had already begun enumerating the forty-eight sect rules of Xuanyin.

A pile of "do not"s poured into Xi Ping's left ear, and a bucket of "must"s seeped into his right ear. In sum, it was this: hard work and plain living, surviving off grass, studying hard night and day, and no fun!

Having heard this, he felt that his limbs were hollow; there was nothing left to live for.

After Elder Su finished reciting the sect rules in one breath, he exhaled gently, as if exhaling ten years of pent up frustration. A holy light shone in the old man's smile; deeply satisfied, he took the black-faced disciples to visit the Latent Cultivation Temple's Songchuang Great Hall, Chengjing Hall, the discipline hall, and

other such places. They roamed in a big circle. When the sun had begun to sink, Elder Su, despite still not having expressed himself to the full, at last let them go eat.

But Xi Ping, who had always been the most eager to eat, lingered for a while without leaving. When the others had scattered, he followed Elder Su into the Yanhai Building like a shadow.

Elder Su removed his straw hat, and Xi Ping attentively came over to brush off the moisture and fallen leaves and hang it up.

“Is there something else?” Su Zhun said, smiling. “I’m a stingy old man. I’ll only give one spiritual stone point, no more. Why don’t you go find someone else?”

“I didn’t come to beg,” Xi Ping said. “Elder, there’s something I’m extremely curious about, and I wanted to ask you.”

“Oh?”

Xi Ping said, “You said that all evil*cultivators go mad after establishing a foundation, but before I came to the Latent Cultivation Temple, I met an evil*cultivator who claimed he was in the late ascended spirit stage, a near-shed skin. So, what, was he just blowing hot air?”

Su Zhun knew at once whom he was asking about. “At a certain level, an evil cultivator becomes a calamity. The inner sect will certainly send someone very powerful to deal with them. For you, the right thing to do is to focus on cultivating and working toward opening your spiritual eyes while you’re at the Latent Cultivation Temple. That first hand experience is your good fortune. Don’t ask too many questions about it.”

Xi Ping wouldn’t let it go. He followed up, “But what if something slipped through the net?”

“There’s an abyss in the inner sect called the Sea of Stars that can glimpse the designs of heaven,” Su Zhun said, smiling. “Haven’t you heard the saying, ‘the net of heaven is wide, but nothing slips through’?”

“But, Elder Su, that’s wrong. How come ‘the net of heaven’ didn’t say anything even when Southern He was marching north?”

Su Zhun: “...”

Elder Su had built up great power and influence in Heaven’s Design Pavilion. After many years, he was once again reliving the awkwardness of being struck dumb by a kid knocking over a pot. After choking for a while he at last tactfully said, “The Lancang Sword Sect... was one of the five great sects at the time. They weren’t evil*cultivators.”

Xi Ping was sometimes unreasonable and deliberately misunderstood what others were saying, but he did understand the implications here.

When Elder Su said this, he got it at once—the great sects operated independently as friendly rivals, coexisting in harmony. Of course the “net of heaven” wouldn’t catch one for the other, because they were all “heaven.”

Evil cultivators relied on pilfering heaven’s order to cultivate, and each one had to be put to death; why would they harm others without benefiting themselves in this way? Because they had no spiritual stones.

The spiritual stones were all in the hands of “heaven.”

“Using a cultivation method that harms the people and the nation” and “not part of a righteous sect” were in fact the same thing, but

the former gave a little more courage to your convictions.

But this had always been the case. It was none of his business.

As soon as this thought arose, Xi Ping tossed it aside. He asked, “I don’t care about the rest, but... Elder, did that evil*cultivator really die?”

“Naturally.” Elder Su pulled a slim volume from a small bookcase and gave it to him. “I’m not opposed to you understanding evil cultivators. If you wish to enter Heaven’s Design Pavilion in the future, it would be a good thing for you to read up.”

Then Elder Su patted him on the shoulder, took a book for himself, and left.

Xi Ping fixed his eyes on the book. There were three words written on the cover of the little volume: *Evil Cultivator Record*.

This was a product of Heaven’s Design Pavilion. It contained text and illustrations, describing the most heinous evildoers Heaven’s Design Pavilion had captured over the last five hundred years. Xi Ping scanned through it and saw that apart from a few open-eyed cultivators who had managed to preserve a human exterior, the others looked anything but human.

He even thought he had opened up some third-rate storybook about ghosts.

In the last five-hundred years, evil*cultivators who had been able to reach the middle established foundation stage could be counted on one hand. There were no ascended spirit cultivators among them.

According to what Elder Su had said, if that Tai Sui wasn’t dead, the inner sect would certainly be able to detect him.

But...

The night before, Xi Ping had linked himself to the dragon-taming chain with blood, which amounted to leaving behind a bit of his awareness in the half-puppet. Then he had “dreamed” that the half-puppet had seen “him” stand up after going to sleep as if possessed and go into the rear court!

All the details in the “dream” had been too clear. He had been still scared witless when he woke up.

But what had confirmed for him that it hadn’t been a dream had been the leaf that the half-puppet had found in his bed.

No matter what wretched things the half-puppet had done, Xi Ping had decided to forgive him—the little monster was really something. After being held by the neck and threatened, he still didn’t care and wanted to warn him... He was just a little dim.

If the thing that had possessed him the night before was still around, wouldn’t the two of them be done for?

So he had deliberately lost his temper a few times and interrupted the half-puppet, not daring to listen.

Calm down... He couldn’t act out of the ordinary.

This was Xi Ping’s repeated inward command to himself. He put *Evil Cultivator Record* back, then, seeming careless, flipped at random through a few other books, not one word in them making it into his eyes. He was considering using the dragon-taming chain to “observe” himself again tonight.

If worse came to worst, he would tell the Latent Cultivation Temple’s stewards and have them take him to see General Zhi.

But when he was about to leave the Yanhai Building, Xi Ping froze.

He couldn't even blink!

Xi Ping watched helplessly as "he" turned around and retrieved *Evil Cultivator Record*, brought it before his eyes, and opened it again.

Into his ears... no, inside his head, there spoke a soft voice that made his scalp go numb: "Don't put it away. I wasn't finished reading yet.

"You've found me out so soon. Sometimes luck really is against me."

CHAPTER 20 - The Dragon Bites Its Tail (8)

Xi Ping went numb all over.

Just then, there were footsteps behind him. Someone called, “Shiyong, why haven’t you gone to the dining hall yet?”

The newcomer was one of the Latent Cultivation Temple’s stewards, Princess Xincheng’s son Yang Anli.

Yang Anli had just finished being pestered by His Fourth Highness, whom he didn’t know very well, saying “cousin” this and “cousin” that while asking him about the trick to opening your spiritual eyes.

But what kind of trick could there be for this? The publicly accepted method among immortal sects was precisely Luo Qingshi’s idiotic one—steep in a pile of spiritual stones every day training your spiritual sense. As long as you calmed your mind and worked hard enough, even if your natural endowments were a little limited, in a year or two you would still be able to “train” your spiritual eyes open. Apart from that, though there were all kinds of ways to open your spiritual eyes, in summary they all amounted to the words “by lucky chance.” There was no way to learn from others.

Yang Anli had just muddled through somehow, then turned his head and saw Xi Ping and remembered that he had just had word from his mother. Princess Xincheng had praised Prince Zhuang to the heavens, all “high notions of his duty,” “profound feelings and affections,” leaving Yang Anli all at sea, not knowing what kind of magic potion His Third Highness had been feeding his mother.

The Latent Cultivation Temple was nominally cut off from the world, but the stewards couldn’t be out of touch with reality. They guarded the barrier between the mortal and immortal year round, each one keeping his attention fixed in all directions. Yang Anli had been

watching the changes at court in recent years from the sidelines, and he thought that His Third Highness, laying low and biding his time, wasn't as profoundly affectionate and harmless as he seemed. As for whether he wanted to make friends with Prince Zhuang, he hadn't yet made up his mind. But there was no harm in establishing friendly relations with the Viscount of Yongning. So he called an amiable greeting: "The Latent Cultivation Temple is austere. How about it, are you adjusting to it?"

I absolutely am not! I've been possessed!

Xi Ping's heart strove to act in place of his mouth and jump out of his chest to cry for help; it beat so hard his ribs hurt.

But his face wouldn't be controlled. On its own, it produced a smile and answered in slightly painstaking Jinping formal language: "My thanks, shixiong. Hello, Your Fourth Highness. The immortal mountains' spiritual energy is dense, far better than the foul atmosphere of Jinping. How could I not adjust?"

Xi Ping, "spoken for," was beside himself with rage: I don't drawl like that even when I sing!

Zhou Xi returned the greeting with a false smile. He had just seen Xi Ping talking to Elder Su from afar and had thought, So this Xi Shiyong isn't arrogant and rude, he's just a master of treating people according to their positions: he sees that Luo Qingshi is indifferent to everything, so he deliberately enrages him to attract attention; Su Zhun is a veteran walker in the mortal world, so he suits himself to his fancy and follows the old thing around asking for stories about Heaven's Design Pavilion expelling evil.

Just the type to come from a poor and humble family, full of indecent schemes, of common stock with that Imperial Consort Xi.

“It’s good that you’ve adjusted. His Third Highness was uneasy and asked me to look after you.” Yang Anli was fifteen or sixteen years older than Xi Ping and his class, almost a generation apart in mortal terms. He had nothing to say to him. After briefly asking after Xi Ping’s well-being, he picked up a few books and left with Zhou Xi.

Xi Ping would have loved nothing more than to kneel and clutch Yang-shixiong’s leg, but his body politely retreated a few steps to make way, and he stood by watching as the two of them left.

The Yanhai Building fell silent, and Xi Ping lost hope.

His memory for voices was perfect, especially given this person’s particular Ning’an accent. No matter what, he sounded like that great demon Jiangli and the others had dug up out of the coffin.

But hadn’t the great demon been cut up by Zhaoting?

Hadn’t that unhelpful Elder Su just said “the net of heaven is wide, but nothing slips through”?!

Xi Ping’s “traitor” hand lifted and stroked his face and chin, making Xi Ping break out in gooseflesh.

That voice sounded in his head again: “Good, there are no more outsiders now. We can chat.”

Xi Ping didn’t want to chat with him at all, and he started racking his brain to bring up all the Ning’an curse words he knew.

“If you call my name in your mind, you can talk to me. Do you still remember me, kid?” the voice said. “You may address me as... ‘Tai Sui.’”

Though he had been prepared, hearing these words, Xi Ping’s heart thumped against his ribs: Xuanyin Mountain’s unreliable heavenly

net really had let something slip.

There was only one ke left before evening class. In the enormous Yanhai Building, there was no help anywhere. He had been trapped in his own body by a great demon who had somehow come back from the dead, and all he could still control was his heartbeat... and the hairs standing up on the back of his neck.

Xi Ping had to force himself to calm down.

No parents would name their child “Tai Sui.” This had to be a pseudonym. In that case, it didn’t matter what form of address he used, it just had to be addressed directly to him to work.

This person wanted to be called “Tai Sui,” so he wouldn’t call him that. Xi Ping thought: Who do you think you are? Aren’t you worried you’ll lose your tongue if you talk so big?

So he tried calling to him in his mind: “This... Exalted? Immortal? Senior Demon?”

“You little devil. You seem reckless, but you’re rather clever.” As expected, Tai Sui had “heard” him. Laughing, he said, “There’s no need for ‘Exalted’ or anything like that. Those are exclusive forms of address for the righteous sects. I don’t like them.”

Fine, then it’s “demon.”

Xi Ping addressed him accordingly: “Senior Demon, you honor me with your presence. Please don’t hesitate to give me any instructions you may have. My, what’s-it... my natural endowments are dull, I couldn’t open my spiritual eyes even if you drilled a hole in my skull, so there really isn’t much I can do, but I’ll certainly spare no pains to carry out your wishes.”

“Don’t be scared, child,” Tai Sui said kindly. “I don’t eat human hearts.”

“Then what would you like to eat?” Xi Ping said.

Tai Sui was entertained. “That day at the Blissful Village, I was wounded by Zhaoting and nearly destroyed... That couldn’t have been done without your contribution.”

Xi Ping’s words came quickly: “You flatter me! I didn’t even know I could enter the Latent Cultivation Temple then. As a mortal, what could I understand? I was purely following along after Heaven’s Design Pavilion’s people and making a fuss. Ancestors above, I had no ill intentions toward you. I won’t conceal from you, I’ve been turning it over in my mind recently, and I keep thinking I shouldn’t have jumped into the battle without regard for the circumstances. Is Heaven’s Design Pavilion necessarily made up of good people? That assistant commander of theirs isn’t a nice person at all! How fortunate that your ill luck has turned to good, and danger turned into an auspicious circumstance...”

The great demon interrupted his nonsense: “You want to find out why I didn’t die, right?”

Xi Ping didn’t even stumble. “Absolutely not. Do I need to find out? It must be because heaven has eyes.”

Eyes that let the net of heaven leak.

Tai Sui said, “By coincidence, I entered the Latent Cultivation Temple with you. Though the Latent Cultivation Temple is part of the outer sect, it is near Xuanyin Mountain, and there’s a foundation of spiritual stones in the valley. The spiritual energy is plentiful. They plotted against me, so I’m using their spiritual stones to restore my vitality. That isn’t going too far, is it?”

“Perfectly reasonable,” said Xi Ping.

“Don’t worry, I won’t keep following you. In a year, you’ll either enter Xuanyin’s inner sect or return to the mortal world. Xuanyin Mountain has been established for millennia. It has a few old devils who would be hard to deal with. I’m not about to go looking for trouble there without a reason. There’s no benefit for me in the mortal world, so naturally I won’t follow you there. You and I are limited to one year together. You behave, don’t inquire about my history, and don’t make a sound, and I won’t seize your body for no reason. While I’m borrowing you to stay at the Latent Cultivation Temple, I won’t only teach you to fear. Naturally I’ll instruct you, make sure you open your spiritual eyes before all your classmates, how about that?”

Xi Ping said, “Then I’ve run into great luck. Senior Demon, if you can teach me a few moves so I can give Heaven’s Design Pavilion’s Pang a good beating, I’ll burn incense for you every day.”

Tai Sui laughed quietly, raised Xi Ping’s hand, and put *Evil Cultivator Record* back into the bookcase.

“I’ll return your body to you. Clever children know when not to get up to little tricks, right?”

No sooner had he spoken than Xi Ping felt as though he had missed a step while dreaming and fallen from a great height into reality. He clenched his fists tightly and seemed to spasm all over.

The demon possessing him said, “Hurry up, take care not to be late for evening class.”

Xi Ping complied and exited the Yanhai Building, his expression normal. As he walked, he kept asking questions nonstop.

For example: “What level of cultivation does Pang Jian have?”, “How many odds and ends are there in that junk seller’s bag of

tricks of his?”, “How long do I have to train before I can beat Pang Jian’s dog’s head in?”, and so on... If it is said that there are three thousand paths to entering the Way—the way of the sword, the way of medicine, the way of toolmaking—then perhaps in the future Xi Ping would enter the “way of beating up Pang Jian”—he was especially persistent about this.

Tai Sui didn’t like “clever people,” but he was quite tolerant toward idiots. He answered every question good-naturedly.

“Commander Pang is in the consummate open-eyed stage, his spiritual bones already complete. No one below an established foundation could match him.”

“Heaven’s Design Pavilion is rich in immortal tools. Commander Pang holds the real power, he can use all of them at will.”

“Haha.”

Just as he had finished listening to Xi Ping’s “lofty aspirations” and couldn’t help laughing, Xi Ping came to the Qiankun Tower’s gate. Luo Qingshi came out to meet him.

In the blink of an eye, before the tail end of Xi Ping cursing Pang Jian had faded from his mind, he pulled the tinderbox out without warning and was about to throw it at Luo Qingshi.

Xi Ping’s line of thought was very clear: calling for help definitely wouldn’t work. If he called for help and people came, the great demon would take over his voice to smooth it over.

But attacking his shixiong was different. When Elder Su had been reciting the sect rules, he had said that the Latent Cultivation Temple prohibited fighting, and disrespect toward elders was a serious offense. If he made an unsuccessful attempt to light Tall Luo

on fire with his tinderbox, that ridiculous crime would definitely qualify to get him taken to the discipline hall for a soul-searching.

Time to risk it all!

This was a great demon half a step from being an evil god; it had taken the genius General Zhi to control him. So what about a little ant like him? Ants could only survive by risking it all.

In both timing and movement, Xi Ping's action of lighting the tinderbox was absolutely what was least expected.

But before the tinderbox could leave the front of his clothes, he once again lost his body.

Xi Ping heard Tai Sui give a cold laugh. Next, acute pain that came from his bones and meridians wrapped up his whole body.

At a certain degree of bodily pain, the brain would become blank. Reasonably speaking, under this kind of torture, a mortal body should have fainted already. But his stolen body had lost that function.

Xi Ping's hand gently put the tinderbox back and patted him on the chest. Then he straightened his sleeve and executed a faultless salute toward Immortal Luo with a smile on his face. "Hello, Luo-shixiong."

Luo Qingshi gave him a glance, passed by him, and didn't notice anything.

In the midst of torture, Xi Ping found a trace of clarity. "Senior, Jiangli... Miss... Miss Chen traded... her life for mine..."

Tai Sui narrowed his eyes slightly. The fierce fire burning Xi Ping suddenly receded.

Xi Ping's body relaxed, and cold sweat streamed from him. He nearly lost consciousness. The insistent burning pain still remained in the cracks of his bones.

Dazed, he allowed Tai Sui to move his legs and take him inside the Qiankun Tower. The noisy greetings around him, "himself" answering... and whatever Immortal Luo said—not a word of it made it into Xi Ping's ears.

Not until the straw child at the door banged the gong did Xi Ping give a start and come back to himself.

A delicate scent flooded the Qiankun Tower. Breathing it in, his body and mind eased. At last the burning pain Xi Ping felt eased slightly.

Tai Sui said almost gently, "Just a little punishment to prevent future great offenses. Do you know what you should do now?"

Xi Ping, like a small animal scared out of its wits by a sudden beating, didn't make a sound. Then, his body gave a shake, and he regained control over it.

This time he kept his mouth tightly shut and didn't dare to make any other attempts.

"I'm glad you understand," Tai Sui said gently. "Now pay attention to your... 'honorable' shixiong's instruction."

There were all kinds of spiritual stones piled up on the platform, the glow lighting up the inside of the Qiankun Tower like midday. Outside were mixed bird calls; egrets, cranes, peacocks, and larks all gathered outside the Qiankun Tower. The long feathers of the immortal blue luan swept past, leaving behind a tiny rainbow.

Immortal Luo watched from on high, letting off a faint green glow as though about to sprout buds.

At a closer look, it turned out that he was sitting on a chair made of jade stamp stones.

“Ha,” Tai Sui laughed.

The cultivators of the mortal world could fight to the death over a few liang of jade stamp spiritual stones. Here, they were only low grade impure stones that no one liked using. A mere established foundation cultivator dared to sit right on top of them.

Perhaps Immortal Luo sensed the gaze full of hatred. He shuddered for no reason. He looked around in total incomprehension for a moment. Perhaps thinking the jade stamp chair was a little cold, he stood up.

Luo Qingshi cleared his throat and drawled, “To be able to come to the Latent Cultivation Temple, you presumably have some family resources. White spirits, blue jades, green stamps, you’ve seen them all, so I won’t waste words. Who knows what use spiritual stones have apart from powering your downgraded trash?”

Zhou Xi said, “After we cultivators open our spiritual eyes, we can take spiritual energy from spiritual stones to sweep our meridians and cleanse our marrow. After we reach the established foundation stage, we can convert the spiritual energy in the spiritual stones for our own use and avoid harming heaven’s order.”

“No need to talk about what comes after establishing a foundation. You’re far away from that,” Luo Qingshi said impatiently, eyelids drooping. “Some idiots here may have breathed in too much dust and have completely blocked senses, with no ability to distinguish spiritual from turbid. It would be an insult to the stones to give them

to you. For the next few days, I want to give you all an airing out before Chengjing Hall issues your monthly allowance.”

At this point, he waved his sleeve, and a roll of white paper and a set of writing materials appeared in front of each disciple.

“There’s a picture hidden on each paper, drawn with secret ink with spiritual stone fragments mixed in. Your ordinary mortal eyes can’t see the brushstrokes. Today, I want you to follow the spiritual energy on the paper and copy out the hidden drawing with brush and ink. It doesn’t matter what method you use... Where are you looking at? It’s no use looking at others. The picture hidden on each paper is different. Finish drawing within two incense sticks. Whoever takes first place will have an extra blue jade for this month as a reward.”

All the disciples buzzed—in a whole day, Elder Su had only given two or three people a “spiritual stone point” as a reward, and here was Immortal Luo giving a whole blue jade away as a raffle prize!

Before the happiness could appear on their faces, Luo Qingshi raised his eyelids and said, sternly, “What are you so happy about? Anyone who can’t draw a thing within two incense sticks will have two blue jades deducted, to spare the spiritual stones from being polluted by idiocy! What are you all staring at me for? Is there a picture of my face? Pick up your brushes!”

The disciples didn’t dare to waste any more time. Each one quickly bent his head over a page. There were some who held the paper up to the light, some who lay on the table like rats and sniffed, and one who tried licking the paper to taste it.

Only Zhou Xi smoothed a hand over the paper—there was a grey ornamental ring on his right thumb, the style so old-fashioned it was almost shabby, with a slight protrusion. The thumb ring gently rubbed the surface of the paper. Zhou Xi muttered slightly to himself, calmly picked up his brush, and began to copy the drawing

right away. Among the crowd of disciples wishing to stuff themselves into the papers, he seemed unusually composed.

Xi Ping seemed not to have recovered from the earlier torture. He was staring blankly at the paper in front of him with his head down. Suddenly he found a faint pattern appearing on the paper... The pattern became clearer and clearer, the whole drawing reaching his eyes.

Whether by coincidence or predestination, the paper that had been issued to Xi Ping had a drawing of a dragon on it.

Wait, hadn't Long-legged Luo just said that the naked eye couldn't see the drawings on these papers...?

"A mortal's weak spiritual sense is above the five senses. Because of me, you can already link your spiritual sense... which means concentrating your spiritual sense in your ordinary senses," Tai Sui explained dully. "No need to be astonished."

Xi Ping froze. So last time, when he had been able to hear the difference in his footsteps inside the spiritual sense mustard seed, it had also been because of this, and nothing to do with his outstanding natural endowments?

Just then, a grim childish voice sounded beside his table: "Are you staring so helplessly at the paper to read its fortune? Will that tell you what's drawn there?"

Xi Ping felt his muscles tense. It was the demon warning him. All he could do was pick up the brush without showing a trace of oddity and slowly copy out the picture.

When he was done drawing the lines, he found that the dragon on the paper had become even clearer. There was a picturesque alternation of light and shadow on it.

Xi Ping didn't know what it would be appropriate to draw, so he diluted his ink with water and also drew the varying shades. Before his last stroke had left the page, a hand reached over and yanked away his drawing.

At the same time, His Fourth Highness spoke in a solemn voice: "Shixiong, I've finished drawing."

No sooner had he spoken than Zhou Xi noticed the sketch in Luo Qingshi's hand. The zealous smile on his face instantly took on half a pot of cold water and cooled.

Luo Qingshi reached out a hand without so much as looking up. The paper in front of Zhou Xi also floated over beside his hand.

There was a beauty drawn on His Fourth Highness's paper. But Luo Qingshi only took a glance at the drawing, then casually tossed it aside. Without any comment, he said to Xi Ping: "You, hold out your hand."

Xi Ping's heart rate galloped. He'd been found out!

The all-saving Luo-shixiong had found out there was something different about him!

CHAPTER 21 - The Dragon Bites Its Tail (9)

Tai Sui sneered quietly: “A mere established foundation.”

Xi Ping’s heart sank at once.

Luo Qingshi felt his pulse for ages, raised his eyes, then spoke slowly: “Xi Shiyong. Interesting.”

Xi Ping nearly strained his eyes staring at him, waiting for his next enlightening remark.

But after saying this, Hard-working Luo withdrew his hand, straightened up haughtily, nodded enigmatically...

And left.

Xi Ping: “...”

Wait, no... “Interesting,” and then what? What the hell was interesting?!

Xi Ping had originally thought that with Luo Qingshi’s physique already being so determinedly unusual, he had to have hidden depths. But it turned out that his “hidden depths” were just a pretense of mysticism.

And the only line he had to pretend with was the word “interesting.” It wasn’t even an ancient saying!

Totally oblivious to the gaffe he had committed in front of a disciple, Luo Qingshi mounted the platform and extended a hand. A clear and glistening blue jade rolled onto Xi Ping’s table.

The venerable old fellow proudly raised his sharp little chin. “That’s yours. May you open your spiritual eyes soon.”

With this extra blue jade, if he was careful using it, the white jade proximal could hold out until the end of the month when the spiritual stones were issued. If he had gotten it the day before, Xi Ping could have shown all his gums in a smile. But now, he was in absolutely no mood to think about a trifle like whether he had enough spiritual stones.

Face grim, Xi Ping woodenly thanked Immortal Luo as if he had just wished him an early death.

“If you’re finished drawing, you can leave.” Luo Qingshi sat on the jade stamp chair and accepted tea from a straw child. “What are you still doing here showing off?”

“Shixiong.” Zhou Xi couldn’t hold back. He asked, “I finished practically at the same time as Xi-xiong. Could you point out in what way my drawing is inferior to his?”

Luo Qingshi glanced at Zhou Xi out of the corner of his eye. “On your papers, the drawings were made with high, medium, and low grade spiritual stone powder, and there was some inferior material mixed in. I didn’t count on you, who haven’t opened your spiritual eyes, to use your mortal eyes to see all four layers and draw them. But with the Hundred-year Rhino Horn Ring guiding you, Your Fourth Highness, shouldn’t you be able to see more clearly than another?”

Zhou Xi’s expression changed slightly. He involuntarily pressed the ring on his thumb into the palm of his hand.

“Testing your spiritual sense is to determine what you came out of your mother’s womb with, so that you understand your own abilities. It isn’t so you can rush to demonstrate to me in the short term that

my ‘average talent’ assessment was wrong,” Luo Qingshi said, not sparing his feelings. “Your Highness, even if I admit I was wrong ten times, will you be able to open your spiritual eyes on that account? If you could, I’d abandon my dignity and get on my knees to kowtow to you.”

His Fourth Highness was noble and refined, with a habit of putting on the “unposturing” posture of a high-ranked man’s respect for worthy men beneath him, and of course others all played along and acted as the “worthy men beneath him.” How could he ever have received this kind of treatment? For a time, his face went ghastly white.

Luo Qingshi wasn’t finished yet. “I advise some of you to concentrate more on your own cultivation. You can start forming cliques when you return from the Latent Cultivation Temple to the mortal world and join one of the outer sects. What’s the point of currying favor everywhere now? Perhaps someone else will rise straight to the inner sect. As mortal and immortal are separate, he’ll have no connection with you.”

Xi Ping: “...”

Because His Fourth Highness had stepped in on Xi Ping’s behalf on the first day, Luo Qingshi seemed to have his eyes fixed on them. He was always publicly inciting antagonism. If the Queen Mother of the Western Heavens had had his mouth, she would long ago have talked the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl into breaking up; would there be any need to have Qi Xi every year?

Zhou Xi was clever enough. Of course he knew that Luo Qingshi was doing it on purpose, but knowing was one thing. Could he fail to be incited? The road to entering the inner sect was a single-plank bridge. What His Fourth Highness saw as a done deal for himself, how could he allow others to cast covetous glances upon?

Never mind this Viscount of Yongning, who was nearly a “family scandal.”

As soon as Xi Ping met Zhou Xi’s eyes, he knew that the friendship between them had died young before it could have a chance to “grow to adulthood,” and the death had been tragic. For a time he simply felt mentally and physically exhausted—if only Mighty Luo could transfer some of his skill in sowing discord to his cultivation, he wouldn’t be so sloppy and incompetent as to only be able to say “interesting.”

It was Xi Ping’s first time becoming the object of envy and hatred. If he hadn’t had an “unspeakable problem,” he would have fanned his tail feathers in satisfaction... but as soon as he thought that the reason he could be envied and hated by His Fourth Highness just happened to be because this “unspeakable problem” had helped him cheat, he couldn’t manage a smile.

He ignored the verbal dispute between Luo Qingshi and Zhou Xi. He slowly put away his things and stood up. The pain of the fierce fire burning him still seemed to be in his veins. When Xi Ping remembered that torture, he felt lingering fear.

Then, just as he had come to the gate of the Qiankun Tower, stifled sobs came to his ears.

Xi Ping turned his head and looked, thinking, Is it that bad? Even I’m not crying.

He looked around without finding where the sobbing was coming from, but he heard intermittent prayers mixed in with the sobs, something like “beg your blessing”...

It seemed to be a girl’s voice.

The voice wasn't coming from around him... it seemed to be coming from the space between his brows!

Xi Ping pressed a hand to the center of his brow, closed his eyes, and concentrated his scattered mind there. Some blurry images suddenly appeared before his eyes... Blackened walls, alleys pressed between crude shacks, ground littered with garbage and metal scraps, moss thriving and spreading in greasy dirt...

However you looked at it, it looked like Jinping's southern outskirts.

Xi Ping stopped in his tracks and concentrated all his focus on seeing that blurry image. As his mind focused, the image became considerably clearer.

He saw a teenage girl, taking turn after turn through the narrow alleys at lightning speed.

It was hard to say how old she was. She didn't seem short, but she was so skinny that she was a bundle of sticks holding up a head, with wispy childish hair on that head that made her look like a little girl. Though her appearance was shabby, there wasn't a stitch out of place on her female garb; apart from being a little ill-fitting, her clothes could be called respectable.

There was a wooden amulet hanging around the girl's neck. No matter how she ran, the amulet remained fixed in the center of the image. So with reference to the amulet, the people and the background shook fiercely.

The shaking made Xi Ping dizzy. When he opened his eyes, the filthy southern outskirts vanished, and he was still among the ethereal mountains.

"Senior." Xi Ping hesitated a moment, then tried asking in a stiff but polite voice, "Excuse me, did you 'see' that?"

Tai Sui gave a “yes.”

Xi Ping asked, “Who is she? A real person?”

“A pitiful person who’s come to the end of the line,” Tai Sui said lightly. “The reincarnation wood is my associated material. She spilled blood upon the reincarnation wood consecrated to my name, swore to offer up body and soul. That is why I awakened.”

Xi Ping: “...”

Damn it, so it was because of her!

To start with, hearing someone cry—especially hearing a young girl cry—he’d figured he had to ask. But hearing the demon say this, Xi Ping no longer had any thought of asking.

“Whatever, let her die if she likes,” Xi Ping thought, calmly kicking away a stone. “So young, and her mind has gone so far to the bad. There’s no remedy. She’d better hurry up and reincarnate again.”

But while he could open or close his eyes, could choose to look at the immortal mountain and ignore the mundane world, he couldn’t close his ears. The girl’s broken babbling lingered in them constantly.

Xi Ping returned from the Qiankun Tower to the Qiu courtyard. The whole way, he heard her rattling on, unbearably annoying. So he said irritably, “Senior, excuse me, aren’t you planning on tossing out some magic power to help her?”

Tai Sui asked in turn: “You have a state ceremony on the first day of every year, where the emperor goes in person to pray at Southern Sage Temple; has the Southern Sage ever tossed out some magic power?”

“If you don’t want to help, then why keep listening to her?”

“I wish to help, but I am unable to. You’ll have to put up with it,” Tai Sui said. “It was her blood that woke me. If she calls for help in her heart, I must listen whether I want to or not.”

Xi Ping spent a full ke internally raining curses upon this evil cultivator who had proclaimed himself “Grand Duke Tai Sui” and the silly girl who would believe anything. He cursed until he couldn’t remember any more words, and the noise in his ears still hadn’t stopped.

Xi Ping completely ran out of temper. What was this girl trying to do, release his soul from suffering by reciting scripture?

The noise disturbed him so much he couldn’t get anything done. There was nothing he could do about it. He had to close his eyes, focus on the center of his brow, and see what the hell her problem was.

A-Xiang had braided her hair and changed to female clothes—this was her only decent dress, sewn by her mother stitch by stitch on her deathbed. She had said she wanted to leave it behind for her to wear when she was married.

But A-Xiang had grown for a long time without reaching the age where she could get married. The dress she couldn’t fill out hung emptily on her. She looked like a child who had sneakily put on a grown-up’s clothing.

Her mind was full of fear. As if to build up her courage, she had hung the Tai Sui amulet on her chest and taken it with her. A-Xiang gripped the wooden amulet and hesitated in front of Rat Alley, trembling, inwardly praying for the god to bless and protect her over and over.

But bless and protect her in what way?

A-Xiang couldn't say it.

Rat Alley was a dim alley squeezed out by some irregular shacks, gloomy and damp. The light of day was kept out of the dim alley by the eaves of ramshackle buildings and the bed sheets drying on bamboo poles, making it look like a rathole from far away and giving it its name. Every evening, aged and sallow women in disheveled clothing dragged their seemingly cumbersome bodies in twos and threes out of the "hole" to solicit customers. The customers, meanwhile, were mostly workers who did heavy labor at the docks and in the factories. They looked no more respectable than the women.

Her grandfather had already been under arrest for one day. Uncle Salted Fish had said, if they wanted to get in with the city guard, it would take at least twenty liang of silver... and he couldn't guarantee they could get him out.

Twenty liang!

If she and her grandfather worked night and day, didn't eat or drink for three years, they still couldn't save that much. Where was she supposed to get it?

Carpenters took old furniture, pawn shops took valuables, and Rat Alley took women.

A-Xiang owned nothing but the bare necessities. She had come to the end of the road. All she could think of was Rat Alley.

A hand reached over and grabbed her by the shoulder. A-Xiang was startled and struggled like a frightened bird hearing a bowstring twang. She saw that the newcomer was a middle-aged man with

protruding knuckles, slightly deformed, blind in one eye, but dressed in a rather respectable-looking robe—in the factories of the southern outskirts, only the foremen who didn't have to do hard labor themselves wore robes like this.

“I haven't seen you before, little sister.” As if appraising some object, he looked A-Xiang up and down. His gaze was like a clinging insect. “How much?”

Before, Xi Ping had felt that there was something strange here. Now he finally understood what kind of place this girl had gone to. Hearing her shakily name a price, he frowned. “She was begging the Grand Duke to bless and protect her in smoothly selling herself for twenty liang? Why twenty? That's too cheap.”

“Twenty? You?” Hearing her, the man at the mouth of Rat Alley was surprised. “Damn, are you a princess from Guangyun Palace, or the empress herself?”

A-Xiang couldn't speak. Her hands and feet were frozen, but her face seemed about to burst into flame. She wanted to throw up a little. Under the hem of her skirt, her knees trembled involuntarily.

“If you're fresh, I'll inspect the goods and give you a thousand copper coins. If not, then you'll have to give me a discount.” The man touched her face. “How about it? If that works, come with me.”

A-Xiang instinctively pushed his hand away.

“There's not a single woman in the southern outskirts worth one liang of silver. I'm willing to give you such a price because I'm taking pity on your youth. That's as much as you're getting, don't try your luck... Twenty liang? The famous flowers by the Lingyang River can't bring in that much. Are you worth it?” The man grumbled and swore and made a grab for A-Xiang as he spoke. “That's settled, come on.”

Just then, a sharp voice came from the alley. “Hey, here’s something new. Where did this little wild chick come from? Your feathers haven’t even all grown in, and you already dare to come here and snatch my mealticket out from under my eyes.”

The middle-aged man quickly drew back his hand and put a smile on his face. “Chunying-jiejie.”

A lanky figure slowly strolled out of Rat Alley. This was a woman of advanced years. But the dark night and thick makeup covered the wrinkles and signs of dropsy in her face, leaving only a hazy image. She seemed like she could just about amount to having some good looks.

The woman spat out two melon seed skins and rolled her eyes. “Beat it, whoreson. Who’s your jiejie?”

The man insolently drew near, calling “jiejie,” and was slapped away by the woman. Next, a hand with nail polish on the nails softly grabbed the man by the collar and delicately let out a string of filthy language. Cursing and hitting, it pulled him into the alley.

Only then did the woman called “Chunying” give a cold laugh. Her clinging, clouded gaze fell on A-Xiang.

As if a snake had slithered into her clothes, A-Xiang involuntarily clutched the Tai Sui amulet even more tightly and took half a step back, but her buttocks were pinched by a skinny hand.

“The chicken’s behind isn’t even enough for a meal.” Pinching her was another woman, with wrinkles reaching down from her nose to the corners of her mouth. Her nose was slightly crooked. She looked like a ghost going out haunting.

The “ghost” saw her cry out in pain and laughed so hard her nose became level with her cheeks. She drew near to A-Xiang. “Go home and drink some milk. Come back when you’ve put on some fat.”

A-Xiang pushed her away. “Go away! Ah!”

Several women appeared beside Chunying and grabbed A-Xiang. The skinny girl couldn’t match an adult’s strength. A-Xiang was soon pulled by the hair into Rat Alley by several women. She yelled from the pain. A damp and stinking smell hit her in the face. In the suggestive alley, reddish lantern light like blood flitted over the amulet hanging in front of her chest.

She gripped the amulet and despairingly called in her mind: Grand Duke Tai Sui! Grand Duke Tai Sui!

Xi Ping held his forehead, feeling that this sight was unbearable and wishing to stop her mouth.

A-Xiang was pushed into a little dark room. Before she could get adjusted to it, a lantern flared up. Someone slapped her. “Little slut.”

The woman’s long nails left small wounds. Her ears buzzed, and her cheeks swelled up. A-Xiang turned her head and returned fire: “Old sl... ah!”

Before she could finish cursing, her face was slapped several times. Someone pinched her. Obscenities rained down on her, filthier than the canal water in the southern outskirts.

Chunying came through the crowd and pushed her against the door, then spat. “Shameless, cheap little egg. If I were your grandpa, I would be shamed to death.”

A-Xiang’s head was about to explode. She didn’t think too closely about how this woman would know she had a grandfather. She

blurted out: “He’s about to die, anyway!”

When Chunying heard this, she froze. She raised a hand to stop the giggling woman about to pour cold water over A-Xiang. She asked, “What happened?”

A-Xiang’s chest undulated fiercely. For a time, she couldn’t speak.

Chunying’s brows, trimmed into thin lines, rose very high. She said impatiently, “Stop wailing. Did your grandpa die doing the deed?”

A-Xiang found the strength somewhere to spring up wildly and throw off the women holding her. Her face so red it was purple, she headbutted Chunying and sent her reeling. “Bullshit! My grandpa was arrested by corrupt city guards! He was wrongly accused! What do you know?! Don’t talk about my grandpa that way!”

Chunying’s back banged into a table. Teacups and melon seeds fell in a heap. The other women quickly stepped up to support her, but Chunying seemed not to care. She asked, “Taken by the city guards? What crime did he commit?”

The crooked-nosed woman seemed better informed. She explained the grievance of the farmers who had lost their land. “The city guard has arrested many people in the last few days. They’re saying they were hired to assemble and make trouble.”

Chunying asked A-Xiang, “Did your grandpa go hang himself because he thinks he’s lived too long?”

Hearing this, the fire about to blow the top of A-Xiang’s head off suddenly cooled.

Yes, she thought as though losing her soul, it’s because of me.

Seeing that this little girl was stupid and couldn't be relied on, Chunying turned to the crooked-nosed woman. "How many people were arrested?"

"I don't know, must be nearly a hundred."

"That big a fuss?" Chunying muttered. "The city guard... Those city guard sons of bitches are so black-hearted, they'd scrape what they could off a coffin."

Then she asked A-Xiang, "Who asked you for twenty liang of silver?"

At this point, A-Xiang at last caught up. "You... you know my grandpa?"

Chunying's slightly protruding eyes flashed, her appearance once again becoming crueler. "Any more fucking nonsense and I'll break your mouth."

A-Xiang said, "... it was Uncle Salted Fish."

"Ha!" Chunying laughed sharply. "When the old bum loses a bet, he'll even dig his own mom and dad out of their graves and let them get fucked. You believed his crap? Did your brain get baked by fever?"

As she spoke, she draped an outer robe over herself, rummaged through a little box, gathered up shards of silver ingots and odds and ends of jewelry, shoved them into her clothes, and arrogantly said to A-Xiang, "Let's go!"

A-Xiang realized something. Her eyes opened wide.

Seeing her stupid expression, Chunying's eye twitched. "Right, how old are you? Sixteen? Seventeen?"

“Fifteen...”

A-Xiang had hardly said this when her face received another firm slap. She tasted blood in her mouth.

“Fifteen, and you dared to dress up in this slutty way and come here.” Chunying pointed at her and spoke one word and a time. “You’re done for! When you see your grandpa, he’ll break you to pieces!”

A-Xiang stared blankly for a long moment, then burst into wails. As she cried, she slavishly followed after Chunying.

She was willing to die, willing to be slapped. She would even be broken in two, as long as her grandpa could be saved.

The Grand Duke had heard her prayers. The Grand Duke had sent someone to help her.

Xi Ping came back from the breathless story of prostitution and opened his eyes. For a time he was too bewildered to know what time and day it was. All he heard was the girl’s heartrending crying... She thought that the god had already blessed and protected her, so she stopped praying. The crying gradually faded.

Night in the Latent Cultivation Temple was extraordinarily quiet. The sound of a straw child sounding the night watch came through the window. The courtyard gate had already been locked.

“Now what, senior? Can you still see them?” For a time, Xi Ping forgot that it was a great demon possessing him. He urgently asked, “With something so big happening in the capital’s outskirts, there must be some major case behind it. A few shards of silver... What city guard would dare release him for so little? They won’t be able to get him out! Senior, hurry up and tell them...”

Tai Sui coolly interrupted him: “My very existence was nearly wiped out by Zhaoting that day. Unless I have a piece of reincarnation wood, I can only watch.”

Without another word, Xi Ping went to rummage through his luggage.

But reincarnation wood was hard to come by. Its texture wasn't as good for carving as cedar, its smell wasn't as good as the smell of camphor, it wasn't as sturdy as mahogany, and it grew scraggly and slow. It was third-rate timber. Even in the mortal world, it was mostly used for burial objects and memorial tablets and other such not very auspicious things. Where would he find some?

Under the half-puppet's astonished gaze, Xi Ping turned his belongings upside down and came up empty... but he did turn up Jiangli's birthday stone.

“Senior, was Jiangli also like that?” Xi Ping squeezed the cracked piece of jade and asked, “Can you... tell me about Jiangli?”

CHAPTER 22 - The Dragon Bites Its Tail (10)

Tai Sui paused, then corrected him: “Miss Chen.”

Yes, her original name wasn't “Jiangli.” “Jiangli” was a pseudonym of the kind given to girls by Overflowing Splendor, used to place them in a golden tray and sell them.

“Was she your disciple?”

Tai Sui was silent for a moment. “No. If it had been me, I wouldn't have taught her.”

“Why not?”

“Didn't your Xuanyin immortal teach you? When a person opens their spiritual eyes, all their meridians link to the universe. Miss Chen was born frail and entered that sort of place when she was young, consumed all kinds of harmful medicines, so her later development was stunted. Her meridians rotted long ago. For another person, opening their spiritual eyes would be a good thing, but for her it would have been fatal. Better to be a mortal subject to all illnesses and hazards.”

Xi Ping froze. “Then how did she open her spiritual eyes?”

“She didn't. She only used the Stone Drilled in Bone technique to give herself a fake set of spiritual bones.”

“What technique?”

“Spiritual stones ground into a hundred twenty stone needles. When the needles are stuck in succession into the bone acupoints, the spiritual needles can establish ties to the whole body, amounting to creating a set of ‘spiritual bones’ inside a mortal's body that can

supply spiritual energy. After an ordinary cultivator opens her spiritual eyes and becomes a half-immortal, the spiritual energy passes through the spiritual eyes to circulate through the meridians. She must work bitterly hard to cultivate for over a hundred years in order to change her 'mortal bones' to 'spiritual bones.' But with the stones drilled into her bones, the spiritual energy doesn't pass through the meridians. When successful, it immediately produces a complete set of 'fake spiritual bones.' If she can endure it, in the blink of an eye, she can have the cultivation of a hundred-year-old half-immortal." Tai Sui paused, then added, "But when the spiritual energy in the needles is exhausted, she'll be paralyzed and live no more than two or three years."

Xi Ping felt a chill in his joints.

Jiangli... that girl named Baishao, hadn't she been a delicate young lady? Her skin could be rubbed raw by taking off an ill-fitting bracelet... What crazy hero was this ferocious person who had driven stone needles into herself and shortened her lifespan to create these spiritual bones?

For a time, Xi Ping almost suspected that the two of them were talking past each other, that they actually weren't discussing the same person.

The night wind shook the osmanthus tree's branches, tapping them now and again against the rear window. The great demon seemed very willing to talk to him about Jiangli. He tranquilly chattered away. Half a step to becoming an evil god, but not only did he put on no airs when chatting with a mere mortal, his discourse was even rather instructive. For a time, it made one forget his deranged malice at the Blissful Village, with all of Jinping in the balance.

"She was born to the Chen family of Ning'an Prefecture. The Chen family originally made its living growing medicinal herbs. In their sacrificial land, there was a not very rich green ore field... in other

words, some formless residue of green ore. But for mortals, this land was precious.

“The ore field was less than one mu. In three years, it could grow two batches of Cloud Smoothing Grass—one of the components of the magic Nine Origin Pill. By the time Baishao’s father was born, they had what could be called a prosperous business and a person at court. They had narrowly mounted to the rank of a ‘distinguished family.’ Sadly, Ning’an Prefecture is only a couple of days’ travel from Jinping, and it also has nobles everywhere. In front of nobles, this kind of ‘distinguished family’ is nothing... Viscount, you grew up in Jinping. Have you heard of the four great families of Xuanyin?”

In fact, Xi Ping had heard of them.

The power structure of Great Wan’s Jinping was in fact the state sect Xuanyin writ in miniature.

It was said that Xuanyin Mountain had thirty-six peaks. For generations, they had selected disciples from among the children of the noble and meritorious. Hundreds of thousands of years later, in the inner sect, the “four great families” had taken shape: Lin, Zhao, Zhou, and Li.

Among them, apart from the imperial family of Zhou, the other three great families all had shed skin ancestors overseeing the immortal mountains. Each family had some ascended spirit peak masters. Previously, affiliations through marriages had been even more complex... though now it seemed there were only three “great families” left—twenty-three years ago, there had been an internal struggle in the Xuanyin Mountains. It was said that its nature was the Zhao family joining hands with the Zhou family to struggle against the Li family.

The fates of all the great figures of that family in the inner sect when the Li family fell were unknown to mortals, but the families affiliated

with the Lis had all scattered—this was the group of families that Emperor Taiming had seized when disposing of his wife’s relatives.

The reason that Xi Ping knew about these stories that had happened before he was born was that one of the houses seized in the series of confiscations then had later become the Yongning Marquis Manor.

When he had been digging up anthills as a child, he had dug up quite a few scattered spiritual stones. The spiritual stones looked like candy. He had bit one and knocked out a loose baby tooth. To cheer him up, the Marquis had told him the origins of the spiritual stone and the previous identity of the Marquis Manor as a story.

Bloody memories make the strongest impressions. Xi Ping to this day remembered the Marquis saying, “Those immortal forebears, the peak masters in the clouds, are the cornerstones of the great mountain. The direct descendant cultivator disciples are trees growing between the rocks, and the relatives that the great families leave behind in the mortal world are branches on those big trees. Those that depend on them through marriage alliance and by making up their retinue are dew on the twigs. Dew can refract images of rainbows, of the sun, moon, and stars—it’s very impressive. But as soon as a wind comes, it still falls... When the time comes, even the mountain will fall.”

Tai Sui said, laughing, “What your honored father said is in fact rather interesting. The mountain will fall, but so what? Even a pebble sliding down from the ridge can crush a den of animals to death.

“Ten years ago, in the previous Grand Selection Year, all of Jinping’s notables had their eyes fixed on a selection card. The immortal envoy overseeing the Grand Selection that year just happened to be from the Zhao family, a medicine cultivator in the middle established foundation stage who had just left seclusion. A collateral branch of the Zhao family in Ning’an wanted to get one of their descendants in

and decided to bribe the immortal envoy, so they thought about what they could give to make themselves stand out... and they took a shine to the Chen family's green ore field."

"Senior, didn't you just say that the green ore field was sacrificial land?" Xi Ping put in. "Great Wan law provides that sacrificial land can't be bought or sold. Even I know that."

"Great Wan law." Tai Sui laughed softly. "Viscount, Great Wan has four sets of laws. One for immortals, one for nobles, one for commoners, and one for ants. Which set are you talking about?"

For a time, Xi Ping was speechless.

"It wasn't long before the head of the Chen family and Baishao's father Chen Zhifu went to prison for 'colluding with evil cultivators and oppressing the common people,'" Tai Sui said casually. "Less than half a month between arrest and trial, quick as cutting through a knot. Afterward, the family's males were sent to penal servitude and the females were sold. All their property was confiscated. No need to think about where the confiscated property ended up. And 'by coincidence' the tribute that the court offered to the immortal mountain Xuanyin that year contained a green ore medicinal herb field that 'by coincidence' fell into the hands of that medicine cultivator surnamed Zhao, and the collateral branch of the Ning'an Zhao family had the eldest son of its senior branch enter the Latent Cultivation Temple, just as they had wished—what do you say, isn't that a coincidence?"

Xi Ping was enraged at once. He struck a table and jumped up, blurting out, "And then what? What's that Zhao bastard's full name? Did he enter the inner sect or go to Heaven's Design Pavilion? If it's the inner sect, forget it, but if it's Heaven's Design Pavilion, I'll..."

"You'll what?" said Tai Sui.

Xi Ping opened his mouth and said nothing.

Even Emperor Taiming couldn't shake the Zhao family, so what could *he* do? Xi Ping was perfectly well aware that he couldn't openly offend a member of the Zhao family while bearing the name of Prince Zhuang's maternal family... At most he could secretly use some unworthy means to put a few obstacles in his path, and he couldn't let any person raise an eyebrow or any ghost let out a breath.

But his anger somehow managed to ingratiate him with the great demon. Tai Sui's tone became even gentler.

"The Chen family's young lady and I were total strangers. It was only a coincidence that she became acquainted with my followers. Like many hopeless people, she made offerings to me in search of support. Then some loose-lipped person let her know about the Stone Drilled in Bone technique. She was so young, but with a courage that few people have. She could carve her flesh and bend her bones to create a set of spiritual bones for herself. This kind of will and tenacity is many times greater than the good-for-nothings who pour spiritual stones into their spiritual eyes to open them year after year. If she hadn't been ruined by those people, she would have been a precious jade. Sadly, the lofty immortal mountain's thirty-six peaks can't be shaken by a mere 'open-eyed' cultivator. Though she burned up her lifespan, paid such a great price, she still couldn't break apart a single frivolous inscription.

"Such a great injustice..." Tai Sui said, sighing. "When praying to gods and buddhas gets no reaction, you can only submit yourself to an evil spirit."

The sage sat meditating in the sweet mists of the southern mountains, untouched by a speck of dust. The "evil spirit" was still willing to sigh for her in the deep and silent night.

“Senior,” Xi Ping quietly asked, “how do you know?”

Tai Sui said, “I gave her a small amount of grace once, but she entrusted me with her life. Having no way to repay her, all I can do is remember her hatred and enmity.”

Xi Ping was steeped in the sound of his sighs, looking at the gently fluorescent calendar block at the head of the bed. In that instant, his vigilance toward Tai Sui seemed to have largely thawed.

“Senior,” he said quietly after a long time, “will you get revenge for her?”

Tai Sui said, almost solemnly, “My arrival in this world was for the purpose of exposing these gross injustices and clarifying them through the light of day.”

An obvious struggle flashed over Xi Ping’s face. He sat there in the still night for a long time. He said, “Senior, are you... are you really not going to hurt me?”

Tai Sui seemed to think it beneath him to answer this question. He only gave an indistinct laugh.

“Then how can I help you?” said Xi Ping.

Tai Sui’s voice was increasingly soft. “Your spiritual eyes haven’t opened yet. The spiritual energy I can borrow is limited. I wasn’t only being polite when I said I would instruct you in cultivation. Every day sooner that you open your spiritual eyes is a day sooner that I have help.”

“You don’t need to tell me that,” Xi Ping said. Then he remembered something else. “Senior, if someone has reincarnation wood, can you tell me? I’ll definitely find a way to get you a piece.”

“Ah,” Tai Sui said, voice like a feather, “thank you very much.”

Xi Ping’s actions were no slower than his thoughts. Once he had made a decision, he immediately sat up to practice meditation.

Before, he had been finicky and restless. After less than a ke of meditating, he would always complain that his legs were numb. Either his mind would be filled with racing horses that wouldn’t be still for a moment, or else after sitting for a while he would fall asleep. But tonight, the length of time he held out was extraordinarily long.

In the dark, the evil god watched him, feeling that the words “man at his birth is good”¹⁶ were written on this Viscount.

This kid was soft-hearted and unexpectedly devoted to old friendships. Though he knew a few tricks, he wasn’t at all shrewd.

Was he being clever and pretending to cooperate, bowing his head under duress after being taught a lesson, or was he truly moved...? It was clear at a glance.

But was he still “at his birth”?

At Xi Ping’s age, he could establish a household anywhere, but he was still so childish. How absurd was this childishness! He could only have grown up like this in a great mansion, in a rich den with gold as his earth and jade as his fertilizer. Under the lightless dust, how many of the old and weak, the sick and crippled, struggled for their lives in the mud? But this noble residence had spoiled this healthy-limbed, sound-bodied man into an oversized infant.

All that was lovable was disgusting. Was there anything on earth more reprehensible than innocence?

Tai Sui looked on coldly as this lovable and disgusting Viscount of Yongning “changed his skin.” He saw him not only willing to work morning and night, but also to run to the Yanhai Building to voluntarily borrow books, showing signs of assiduous study.

After evening class the next day, Xi Ping was climbing a bookcase at the Yanhai Building when he heard a faint buzz.

“Oh?” said Tai Sui.

“Senior, what is it?”

Tai Sui was silent for a moment. “There’s reincarnation wood nearby.”

Hearing this, Xi Ping jumped down from the bookcase like a monkey and went downstairs to look around. He saw Elder Su leading a big group of stewards in rearranging the Yanhai Building.

Straw children followed the stewards, busy with this and that, scrubbing and washing and changing the Yanhai Building’s decorations.

Xi Ping heard some disciples next to him discussing quietly:

“What great personage is going to come lecture?”

“What do you mean?”

“If one of the inner sect’s thirty-six peaks wants to select new disciples, a member of the peak master’s lineage... or even the peak master in person will come to lecture to inspect the disciples’ talents. Who is coming this year?”

“Do any of you know the history of those decorations?”

“These... mostly seem to be ordinary objects.”

Xi Ping wasn't in the mood to guess. He called out directly to Su Zhun: “Elder Su, who's coming?”

Su Zhun looked up and saw that it was him, then said, smiling, “Green Pool Peak's Duanrui-shishu will come to the Songchuang Great Hall to lecture tomorrow.”

All the disciples cried out. Xi Ping ran to the noisy main hall. While adding to the noise, he asked Tai Sui, “Senior, which of them is reincarnation wood?”

Tai Sui said, “Those little decorations on the western windowsill.”

Xi Ping tilted his head to look and saw a row of adorable karma beasts carved out of wood. The artist had perfectly captured the charm of the karma beasts. They were all different shapes, endlessly entertaining.

Xi Ping raised his hands and bowed to the karma beasts. “Hey, aren't these my benefactors?”

Yang Anli said, smiling, “These were all made for fun by Duanrui-shishu in her spare time when she was cultivating at the Latent Cultivation Temple. She didn't take them when she left, so they remained in the temple.”

Xi Ping's eyes rolled smoothly. He watched the straw children arrange many similar wood and stone carvings. He thought, These are cleverly made. Is this princess of the toolmaking way or something?

Tai Sui said into his ear, “Don't get any wild ideas. The Latent Cultivation Temple is the accumulated product of thousands of years. The Yanhai Building is full of inscriptions. Never mind a mortal

disciple like you who hasn't opened his spiritual eyes, even an established foundation or ascended spirit cultivator who wanted to steal something from the Yanhai Building would have to think it over carefully.

Xi Ping gave an / see. "Senior, how much reincarnation wood do you need?"

"A bit of wooden shavings would suffice," Tai Sui said heavily. "That old monster Duanrui is the head of the Zhou family in Xuanyin. It's said that she is already a consummate ascended spirit. Don't act rashly under her nose, at least wait for her to leave. When the time comes, the stewards will order the straw children to take these things back to storage. I'll teach you a crooked spell to control the straw children, so you can take the opportunity to get some shavings from the reincarnation wood. Viscount, we'll see whether you dare to run this risk for the sake of some strangers from Rat Alley."

As he had expected, Xi Ping said without argument, "Sure, I'll try."

"You must be careful," said Tai Sui.

No sooner had he spoken than he saw Xi Ping step forward and simply say to Yang Anli, "Yang-shixiong, these karma beasts feel very dear to me. Could I have one of the wood carvings?"

Tai Sui: "..."

Yang Anli was also stunned. He blurted out, "This isn't an immortal tool."

"I know, I can't use an immortal tool. Do you think I'm that unreasonable?" The "reasonable" Viscount Xi, acting absolutely familiar, drew close to Yang Anli and talked pure drivel. "I have a special connection with karma beasts. Before, Heaven's Design

Pavilion's Exalted Zhao gave me one, and we got on great. It even saved my life... I really miss it."

Yang Anli was dumbfounded. He had never seen anyone mention this kind of request before. "Well..."

Xi Ping said, "It's all right if you say no. Duanrui-shishu is coming to lecture tomorrow, isn't she? I can ask her for it."

Yang Anli: "..."

Wait, no, what is this? Is Princess Duanrui your auntie or something?

"Let him take one. The old forebear left hundreds of these wooden carvings in the Latent Cultivation Temple. They were all things she didn't want. Anyway, we can't set them all out." Su Zhun, passing by, waved a hand. "She won't make a fuss over this. Kid, don't show it off all over the place, or else if everyone comes to ask, I won't be able to handle it."

Elder Su had heard of Xi Ping's "heroic feat" in the mortal world. He had already known that he was a magic creature without any sense of reverence. He could blab even in front of General Zhi. He really might pull a stunt like asking Princess Duanrui for the carving... Zhi Xiu was amazing. Where had he turned up this weirdo?

Xi Ping took advantage of his forbearance: "Thank you, Elder Su! I want the fattest one."

Tai Sui: "..."

How did that work?

Just then, someone said, "Elder Su, could you tell us if this is the legendary Determination Turtle?"

Zhou Xi stood gasping in admiration next to a stone platform. On the stone platform was a three-chi square big metal tray with strings hanging from it, some thick and some thin. From the strings hung a lifelike Moon Plated Gold turtle.

The disciples in the Yanhai Building surrounded it.

“Your Highness, what is it?”

“This thing is called the Determination Turtle,” Zhou Xi said. “The ‘turtle’ character is also read ‘rule’ or ‘track.’ The blueprints were drawn by Princess Duanrui herself. It’s said that it can answer all enigmas of the mortal world. Sadly, no one has ever succeeded in making it. Elder, is this an imitation or a statue?”

“An imitation,” said Su Zhun. “A downgraded immortal tool. There’s an array inside the Moon Plated Gold turtle. It can understand human speech. When you ask it a question, if the strings sound three times, it’s an affirmative, and if they sound once, it’s a negative. Naturally it can’t answer questions that are too complicated, but at your level, it should be able to answer. In the future, if there’s some cultivation matter you don’t understand and you can’t find any shixiong to ask, you can go through the ancient books and records, and you can come ask the magic turtle... Though, after all, this thing is only a downgraded immortal tool. It can only answer ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ Take care not to ask anything too confusing.”

As Elder Su spoke, he gently tapped on the gold turtle’s head. “Will there be eight treasure tofu soup in the late night snack the dining hall prepares for the stewards today?”

Thin white steam came out of the metal basin. The gold turtle moved. It waved its tail lightly, and one string hummed.

No.

“Wonderful.” It was unclear whether Elder Su didn’t like the “eight treasures” or didn’t like the “tofu.” At any rate, he let out a huge sigh of relief, then said to the disciples, smiling, “Do you all understand? You can ask your question aloud, and if you really don’t want others to hear, you can also think it to yourselves—but if you think it to yourselves, there must be no distracting thoughts in your mind. It will only work if your mind is concentrated.”

Someone asked, “Elder, what can you ask the magic turtle?”

“Anything at all. Anything you don’t understand about cultivation, daily trifles, even the health of your relatives in the mortal world,” Su Zhun said. “But you must not ask about the sect’s taboo matters. If you aren’t sure whether something is taboo, then make sure to only ask about yourself—don’t ask about other people’s business—for example, ‘Is Luo-shixiong in a good mood today?’ or things like that. That could touch his spiritual sense.”

Xi Ping put in a question: “Elder, what are the limits? Suppose I ask ‘Am I the one making the fastest progress in cultivation among my classmates, with the greatest hope of entering the inner sect?’—I’m asking about myself, but I have to be compared to others. Does that count as asking about others?”

The arrogance in these words was simply brazen. Zhou Xi’s eye twitched.

Elder Su said, smiling, “That’s actually all right, but if you mentioned some person in particular to be compared with you, that would count as asking about others—would anyone like to try?”

Xi Ping was about to speak, thought of something, and turned his gaze on His Fourth Highness. By coincidence, Zhou Xi just happened to be looking at him. Across the distance of a few zhang,

the two of them held a quick confrontation with their eyes. Xi Ping gave an insincere smile and made a *please go ahead* gesture at Zhou Xi.

Zhou Xi coldly looked away. “I would like to try.”

As he spoke, he stepped up, glanced at Xi Ping out of the corner of his eye, concentrated, and inwardly said: “Am I currently making the fastest progress in this class of disciples?”

The gold turtle puffed steam. Under everyone’s gazes, it lightly waved its tail.

Clang—

No.

Zhou Xi’s features twisted, but he very soon adjusted himself and forced himself not to break his demeanor. He saluted Su Zhun and openly said, “I am without talent. What I asked just now was whether I was making the fastest progress, and the magic turtle said no. Indeed, I have not been diligent enough. I wonder which of my classmates is a step ahead.”

No sooner had he spoken than several obvious or concealed gazes were aimed at Xi Ping—he was currently the only one who had received a spiritual stone from Luo Qingshi.

“Why don’t you all come try, too?” Zhou Xi turned his head and smiled. “Shiyong, don’t stand so far away.”

Mentioned by name, Xi Ping didn’t shirk. He handed Chang Jun his book and stepped forward as asked.

Putting his hand on the gold turtle, he gave Zhou Xi an inadvertent-seeming look, then sloppily said, “The same question.”

Su Zhun was just about to warn him that downgraded immortal tools weren't so sensitive, and it was better to say his question clearly, when the gold turtle slowly moved on the strings, plucking three times.

It happened to be lying on the thinnest string. The sound of it was very sharp. The three sounds, for no apparent reason, made your scalp go numb.

Xi Ping slowly returned his hands to his sleeves. For a moment, his expression was blank.

But this strange expression lasted for only a flash, so brief it seemed to be an illusion. When Xi Ping looked around, he once again wore that look that was asking for several good beatings. He even nodded rather provokingly to His Fourth Highness.

However good Zhou Xi's self-restraint was, his expression still nearly crumbled on the spot.

Chang Jun quietly said, "It's all right to ask, but you could have just asked silently. You shouldn't have said it aloud! You've put His Fourth Highness in an embarrassing position."

"Even if I had asked silently, he still would have known what I was asking. With Long-legged Luo's provocation every day, if I so much as breathe it puts His Fourth Highness in an embarrassing position," Xi Ping said carelessly. "Don't fuss, they're all lining up. If you don't go now, you won't get to touch it."

Chang Jun gave an *ah* and, with no more attention to spare to speak to him, quickly went to line up.

Xi Ping took back the book he wanted to borrow, put the reincarnation wood carving he had begged for away in his clothing,

and strode away as though nothing were the matter. Humming a tune he had composed himself, he returned to the Qiu courtyard.

No one knew that when he had just said “the same question,” in his mind he had asked a different question.

What Xi Ping had asked was: Can my body only be snatched after I’ve opened my spiritual eyes?

CHAPTER 23 - The Dragon Bites Its Tail (11)

Xi Ping liked going to his maternal grandfather's house for fun. Merchants traveled widely, and he sometimes managed to come along to see the sights. He had seen how Cui Ji's senior managers did business—it was precise and unambiguous: the amount of money, the quantity of goods, how the money was to be obtained, how the goods were to be transported... even whose responsibility it was to see that the goods got onto the ship and off the ship and how they were to be handed over—all of it had to be put down on paper, details fixed and contract signed.

His first uncle had told him since he was little that anyone who talked big and made grandiloquent boasts but didn't mention concrete arrangements was up to no good.

This "Grand Duke Tai Sui" that Xi Ping was carrying around spent all day fretting on behalf of the country and the people, always saying how he was going to improve the lives of the citizens, but he didn't say a word about the critical matters—up to this point, he had yet to say how he had come, when he was leaving, how he would leave, whether it would be harmful to his "host"; he had even brushed off giving a verbal guarantee of "I won't hurt you."

Xi Ping suspected that this evil cultivator took him for a rich fool who had seen nothing of the world.

Just now he had pretended to exert himself and flipped through several basic ancient texts in the Yanhai Building. He found that just as the evil cultivator had said, a mortal's "spiritual sense" was muddled, something along the lines of instinct, not something that could be linked to the senses the way he could do it.

In one text, it even said that "linking the spiritual sense" was the same thing as "opening the spiritual eyes."

So the question was, since he hadn't opened his spiritual eyes, why could he link his spiritual sense?

The Stone Drilled in Bone that the great evil cultivator had told him about had given Xi Ping some enlightenment — after a person opened his spiritual eyes, his meridians linked to the universe, like having a “road” that spiritual energy could travel; and supposing that he hadn't opened his spiritual eyes, he could use another method to open a different “pathway” for spiritual energy to pass through and obtain some of the powers of the open-eyed stage.

From this, Xi Ping deduced that his current ability to link his spiritual sense likely came from having just such a “pathway” in his body... This could explain why, when he had entered the spiritual sense mustard seed and Tai Sui had evidently not yet awakened, he had already been able to link his spiritual sense to his ears.

In other words, reasonably speaking, this “Grand Duke Tai Sui” who was possessing him could cycle spiritual energy.

So... why did the evil cultivator want to rush him into opening his spiritual eyes sooner? The way he told it was truly pitiful, just as if the magnificent “Grand Duke” could only pick up a bit of spiritual energy if he opened his spiritual eyes.

Elder Su had said that if you asked about someone else using the Determination Turtle, it would touch their spiritual sense. So Xi Ping had only asked whether his body could only be snatched after he opened his spiritual eyes.

The immortal tool had substantiated his guess... and now Xi Ping had it pretty much figured out.

This great evil cultivator was planning on stealing someone else's nest for himself.

Xi Ping didn't lose his wits—at least, he wasn't as panicked as when he had discovered that he had been possessed by Tai Sui.

The pain of the bone-searing burning he had received yesterday at the gate of the Qiankun Tower seemed to have left remnants in his bones. Xi Ping's exceptional compliance afterward had made the great evil cultivator think that he had been forced into submission by pain; little did he know that it had instead aroused his ferocity.

People Xi Ping liked, if they gave him a pinch or a shove, it would be fine; even if he bristled at the time, he wouldn't take it to heart.

But that didn't go for others. The young master wasn't having any of the carrot and stick routine. Anyone who dared to pick up a stick and hit him, he would plant that person in the ground.

“Forgive me, Miss Chen,” Xi Ping thought. “I have to destroy this great evil cultivator all of you worshipped. If I manage to survive that, I'll look after your vendetta.”

But he couldn't be hasty about this business.

As if nothing were the matter, Xi Ping, testing Tai Sui, said, “Senior, I offended His Fourth Highness pretty badly today. I don't think he'll give up until he's crushed me. How about you stop instructing me and simply cultivate in my place?”

Tai Sui coolly said, “Are you commanding me?”

Xi Ping acutely determined that he wasn't particularly angry, so he continued on his path: “A direct bloodline member of one of the sect's families like His Fourth Highness, he'll have been training his spiritual sense since he was little, rushing to enter the inner sect. They have as many spiritual stones as they want, but after all these years of training, he still hasn't opened his spiritual eyes. But your

followers... disciples... or underlings, eh, whatever they are, each one of them seems so poor they rattle, but they're so mighty. Senior, you must have secret books, right?"

"There's no such thing as secret books in cultivation. Each person has his natural affinity," Tai Sui said. "Don't spend so much time reading stories about roaming cultivators."

"Well, you've opened your spiritual eyes, so you know how it works. Wouldn't you do it faster than me groping around blindly on my own? Senior, didn't you say that I can only benefit you if I open my spiritual eyes?"

Tai Sui saw that after only a day of "exertion," Xi Ping was ready to pack it in and turn to crooked and evil means to goof off. Then he remembered those roaming cultivators who would sell out their best friends and fall out with their families for the sake of the position of "disciple of record"; he was finding this brat increasingly offensive to the eye. He said impatiently, "Your spiritual eyes are part of your spirit and are linked to your body and mind. How could another cultivate in your place?"

Xi Ping gave a disappointed *ah*, but he was thinking: No wonder.

No wonder that this evil cultivator could control even his heartbeat and breathing but couldn't simply snatch away his body and even had to expend so much effort on disciplining him.

In other words, supposing he lost his wits, went mad, or died, no matter how perfect a condition his body was in, the evil cultivator could only be a parasite on it and wouldn't have a hope of snatching it.

And before that, he had no way to invade his spirit to observe his thoughts and feelings; he would only know what Xi Ping was willing to share.

Back at the Qiu courtyard, Xi Ping saw at once that the white jade proximal was lit up. He had a letter from home.

Xi Ping had something on his mind, so he didn't read carefully, only glanced at it absent-mindedly.

In just one glance, he saw that there was a character written wrong — the character “衣,” clothing, was missing a dot stroke.

The old lady had poor vision and had never studied. There was nothing unusual about her writing characters wrong. But she was always telling him to put on more clothes and eat more food. It wasn't very likely that she would get this character wrong... Among the people Xi Ping knew, only one would write the character “衣” missing a dot stroke: his san-ge Prince Zhuang. The Imperial Consort's given name contained this character, so he held it as a taboo out of respect for his mother.

Reading the note again, apart from the exhortations, there were also a few lines at the end. The general sense was “your old grandmother is senile and often forgets what she said the day before, so don't mind if she rattles on.” At a glance, there was nothing wrong with this. All old people liked to repeat themselves. But their old lady didn't know that she had this bad habit, because even if she had told the same story more than ten times over, the whole family by tacit agreement would pretend that they were hearing it for the first time.

The more Xi Ping looked at it, the more convinced he was that Prince Zhuang had written this letter.

San-ge had given him the proximals, so it was likely they weren't a pair but a set of three. San-ge had kept one for himself and could keep up with the letters he exchanged with the old lady, and could

also contact him himself. Given Xi Ping's understanding of him, if he wrote a response now, his grandmother probably wouldn't read it.

Copying their grandmother's handwriting was child's play for Prince Zhuang. Going out of his way to add the note at the end must have been because he was worried the old lady would write another letter soon, and he was providing for that eventuality.

Xi Ping's thoughts worked quickly. He knew that his san-ge had picked up that something was wrong from him naming the half-puppet "Xi Yue."

His heartbeat quickened involuntarily. Then, afraid that Tai Sui would notice, he jumped up noisily and, flustered, called out to Xi Yue standing by in attendance: "You! In the future, don't spy on my proximal without permission, you hear me?"

His yell startled the half-puppet. Then he looked at him in doubt and incomprehension: this fickle master seemed to have forgotten that he couldn't read.

"Get out, get out. Honestly, the old lady..." Xi Ping waved a hand at the half-puppet, anxiously groping around for a brush while he quickly considered: What should he write? How could he tell his san-ge that he had been possessed?

But the moment he prepared to write, Xi Ping gave a start: No, wait, if san-ge had something to say, why didn't he say it directly?

Why would he copy their grandmother's handwriting, use such a secretive means of contacting him?

He remembered that with the gold turtle in the Yanhai Building, Elder Su had said that if you used that downgraded immortal tool to ask about someone else, it might seize on that person's spiritual sense.

In other words, downgraded spiritual tools weren't safe and confidential.

In a flash, Xi Ping restrained the notion of getting up to any little tricks.

He focused, acting as if he hadn't noticed that the letter was written by someone else, only babbled on as usual, acting cute for his grandmother, and as usual telling her about the strange people and odd events around him... Today it was mostly "strange people." First he earnestly drew a horrifying-looking Xi Yue, then a Luo Qingshi next to him—rather lifelike he was, only half as tall as the half-puppet.

After writing his shocking letter, Xi Ping picked up the karma beast carved from reincarnation wood as if nothing were the matter. "Senior, how do I use this?"

But Tai Sui was silent for a moment. He said, "I think that in the future you had better not write malicious remarks about your shixiong."

"Huh?" said Xi Ping.

"The white jade proximal is a downgraded immortal tool," Tai Sui said. "The reason no one likes making downgraded immortal tools is that these expensive pieces of trash are full of holes. Even an open-eyed half-immortal only has to use a bit of artifice to be able to spy on them as he likes. How easy is it for an established foundation cultivator? You drawing a caricature of Luo Qingshi on the proximal just now was no different from insulting him to his face."

"...it wasn't a caricature," said Xi Ping.

Tai Sui ignored him.

“No, wait,” Xi Ping, suddenly “seeing the light,” said indignantly, “senior, why didn’t you tell me before?”

“People always need to be taught a lesson a few times before they’ll remember,” Tai Sui said coolly. “The immortal sect isn’t your mortal world. The great Way has three thousand paths. You can’t imagine the tricks and weapons others have. My first lesson for you is to be discreet in word and deed.”

Xi Ping didn’t answer. His expression was clearly unconvinced.

Tai Sui had looked on as he condemned himself and had deliberately not warned him because he had realized that the proximal communicating with Xi Ping this time wasn’t the same one as usual, so he had become suspicious.

But from how it appeared now, he thought he was being overanxious: this stupid young master had no idea what was going on. And the person on the other end had seen him ridiculing Luo Qingshi and hadn’t warned him. It seemed they also weren’t too familiar with the fact that you couldn’t write about your elders and betters on a downgraded immortal tool. Probably this was also a mortal unfamiliar with the rules of the immortal sect... perhaps a father or brother who didn’t feel comfortable expressing his concern.

Xi Ping used his inner qualities to play the part of the wronged young master with no one to complain to—in fact, he had used Luo Qingshi to test the great evil cultivator, and to secretly pass on a message to his san-ge, but he really hadn’t deliberately drawn a “caricature” to insult anyone.

How could he deliberately insult him when he knew perfectly well he would be looking? Was he looking for a fight? He had obviously

drawn an earnest portrait!

The more he considered it, the more he thought that the great evil cultivator didn't appreciate his talent. He toyed indignantly with the reincarnation wood carving.

All of a sudden, he felt a faint chill in his fingers squeezing the wood carving. Countless voices exploded in Xi Ping's ears. He gave a start and tried to withdraw his hand... but failed.

Tai Sui was controlling his hand, firmly holding the wood carving with it.

"Calm yourself," Tai Sui said. "Focus. Didn't you learn how to meditate?"

Xi Ping struggled to ignore the noises in his ears. He closed his eyes and concentrated on the center of his brow. Various images flashed before his eyes. In an instant, Xi Ping met countless clouded or dim eyes briefly. Finally, he stopped on the slightly light-colored round eyes of a teenage girl.

He'd found A-Xiang.

A-Xiang passed Chunying a pot of water—Chunying had just cursed for half an incense stick without taking a breath, rooting out eighteen successive generations of the ill-intentioned Uncle Salted Fish's ancestors to sully each one in turn. The old gambler was hiding in a corner of the room, playing dead, not daring to make a sound.

But after letting loose such an unbridled stream of curses, neither of them felt any relief.

Chunying had taken the girl to run around for a whole day. Her social network was unbelievably wide. It seemed that she could

claim a connection to everyone in the southern outskirts. But despite this, they had still come up empty. They had only found out that this matter was being personally supervised by the Capital Overseer. All those who had been arrested were already in prison.

Chunying had also gone to find a foreman surnamed Lü at the southern outskirts docks. He was always boasting that he had a brother-in-law in the city guard. This individual was known for his lechery. Seeing Chunying, his squinting eyes travelled up and down three times, looking her over. But when he heard her ask whether he could find someone to clear the way for them, he sprayed spit: “What are you talking about? With something so big happening in the factories, even senior managers will be punished. Don’t go getting yourself into that trouble, woman!”

Seeing it would be dark soon, Chunying bought A-Xiang a bowl of noodles. She didn’t eat herself, only sat next to her frowning and fretting.

Chunying seemed to be very familiar with everything about A-Xiang and her grandfather. She could casually mention her grandfather’s name and his nickname back home. She knew where the two of them lived. But A-Xiang had already been in Jinping for half a year, and she hadn’t known that her grandfather knew this person. So she couldn’t resist asking, “Auntie Chun, how do you know my grandfather?”

“None of your business,” Chunying said crossly. “Eat your dinner.”

When she was pretty much done eating, Chunying added, “Leave when you’re finished. You don’t have to worry about your grandpa’s business anymore. Go home and change out of those clothes. Since your grandpa raised you as a boy, you can keep being a boy — anyway, there’s no way to tell your sex from your ugly looks.”

A-Xiang didn't answer, not wanting to annoy her. She was grateful to this woman she had met by chance and didn't want to have any unkind thoughts toward Chunying, but this Auntie Chun was truly unreasonable. It would take the forbearance of a Buddha to remain good-humored while listening to her dog's mouth.

After she finished speaking, Chunying gave the noodle stand owner a line of coins, then remembered something. She turned and tossed a little silver bead in front of A-Xiang, then left without a word.

Long ago... she didn't remember precisely how many years, when she wasn't even as old as that little girl A-Xiang, her parents had died, and she had run from hunger, ending up in Ling County. That year, rarely seen heavy snow fell in the south, freezing heaven and earth. In order to survive, her older brother sold her for two liang of silver to be an old landowner's concubine.

The second young master of the old landowner's family was a scholar... He wasn't very clever. After toiling away at his studies for most of twenty years, he had no achievements to show for it. But he was sensitive. Encountering this business, the silly young master felt that his old father was behaving atrociously. So he gave his servant two liang of silver and an order to go "buy" her, and had her do a winter's worth of odd jobs to pay off her debt.

When spring began, the silly young master gave her back her indenture and said to her, "The old man will be dead soon, and my big brother likely won't put up with me, so I won't keep you. You're quick-witted and a good worker. You can go to Ning'an or Jinping, work as a servant for a big family, and over time earn a respectable position for yourself. The maidservants of wealthy families are better off than the young mistresses here in the countryside."

The second young master's full name was Wei Pengcheng. He couldn't memorize a single eight-line poem in a couple of months. The locals all called him Second Idiot Wei. The Second Idiot was

clueless, but he had a pair of willow leaf eyes, with conspicuous red birthmarks on his brow and at the corner of his eye, very charming, and he had given Chunying the most comfortable winter of her life.

After many years, when he had asked her for directions in Jinping's southern outskirts with those dim old eyes, she had recognized those two red birthmarks at once... but she hadn't had the face to reminisce about the old days.

What bullshit were you spouting, Second Idiot Wei? How could it be so easy to earn a respectable position? Wasn't the young master himself living in destitute misery in his old age?!

Chunying sent A-Xiang away, fixed her clothes, and went to knock on Foreman Lü's door again—to make it convenient to get to work, the foremen usually lived beside the canal and only went home once in half a month. They usually had a small courtyard, much better off than the laborers who slept in big multi-person beds.

Lü opened his door and saw her, and an evil light flashed in his eyes. “What is it, Chunying-jiejie, didn't you say you wouldn't have my business no matter how much money I paid?”

Chunying didn't answer, only smoothed her temples, smiling.

Foreman Lü remembered something. “I can't do what you asked me for this afternoon.”

Chunying slowly stepped forward and blew a breath toward his face. “Really?”

“Really, I...”

Chunying put a hand to his lips. “What if I let you... flog my face?”

Foreman Lü's eyes glimmered for a long moment. He swallowed a mouthful of saliva, then moved aside to let Chunying in.

Creak. The wooden door shut out the waves of the canal.

In the street, A-Xiang curled up in a shady corner, gritting her teeth, nails almost digging into the reincarnation wood amulet around her neck.

Xi Ping opened his eyes, throwing off the lightless mortal world. "Senior, do you have a way to help? If you don't, then let go of my hand. I'll write a letter to tell my grandmother to explain to my dad..."

"Oh, and have you determined how you'll explain it to your honored father?" said Tai Sui.

Xi Ping's mind worked extremely fast. "I'll just say I accidentally touched some immortal tool in the Latent Cultivation Temple and saw something. My dad is mortal, he doesn't understand anything about immortal tools. If I just make one up, he won't know whether it's real or fake."

Tai Sui thought: That must be the owner of the other white jade proximal.

"Don't worry, senior, I've been making up lies to fool my dad since I was little, and I've never been seen through. Let me go, those two, they're..."

"Shh." Tai Sui sealed his mouth and forced him to close his eyes. "Don't talk. Wait."

Xi Ping couldn't speak with his mouth, but inwardly he kept calling "senior."

“What are we waiting for? Didn’t you say she was your follower? Senior! Senior! If you wait, both the grown-up lady and the little lady will be done for!”

Tai Sui ignored him.

On the other end of the reincarnation wood, A-Xiang once again began desperately entreating the god.

Thirty steps away from her, a man’s roars mixed with filthy language, the crack of a whip, and now and then some screams that couldn’t be held back came from the crack in a door.

All the gods and demons in the heavens looked calmly and benevolently upon her and didn’t respond, listening to her hopeless vows.

She seemed to hear an auditory hallucination: *Your life while living, your body after death, what you have grown to this day, your future spirit and primordial being, will you give them all to me?*

“I’ll give you everything,” she thought. “I’ll give you anything, just help me...”

But when she raised her head, she found that there was no one around her.

A-Xiang, pushed beyond her endurance, finally picked up a brick and smashed it against Foreman Lü’s door...

There was blood in the chaotic night, blood that smeared on the reincarnation wood amulet, imprinting the girl’s vow of “I’ll give you anything” on it.

As soon as the blood seeped into the reincarnation wood, Xi Ping felt a faint warmth from the wood carving. At the same time, a line of

writing appeared on the amulet on A-Xiang's chest.

The conflagration burns on, the cry of the cicada is without end.

The image in Xi Ping's mind crumbled. A-Xiang was gone. He was looking into a man's eyes.

This man was tall and broad, wearing the armor of the city guard. Before Xi Ping could react, ecstasy flashed over the man's face. He whispered toward him: "Tai Sui!"

"A man was recently arrested in the southern outskirts factory district, named Wei Pengcheng," Tai Sui instructed briefly. "He's one of ours."

The man said excitedly, "I understand! The conflagration burns on, the cry of the cicada is without end."

Next, the city guard soldier was also gone. Xi Ping now met the eyes of an old man with cataracts.

Tai Sui said, "Lü Zhen of the canal docks has insulted my follower. Kill him."

Cold killing intent crashed against Xi Ping's ears, startling him.

The next moment, Tai Sui let him go. The wood carving fell out of Xi Ping's hand. All the sounds and images vanished. In the quiet Qiu courtyard, there was only the sound of the wood carving rolling over the floor.

Xi Ping's fingers trembled slightly.

He had originally thought that he could get hold of some reincarnation wood, perhaps use helping that little girl get her

grandfather out of jail as an opportunity to pass on some information...

“Senior,” he quietly asked at last, after some time, “if you’re so powerful, why didn’t you act sooner?”

“Miracles must come only when you’ve reached the end of the road and will give away all you have,” the evil cultivator said slowly. “If they were easy to come by, wouldn’t that be very unfair?”

CHAPTER 24 - The Dragon Bites Its Tail (12)

Xi Ping had no attention to spare for pitying others.

Right now, he had a marrow-chilling guess in mind—concerning why Tai Sui had possessed him.

That day in the Blissful Village, apart from him, all the walkers in the mortal world had been open-eyed half-immortals.

Xi Ping had picked up a considerable amount of common knowledge at the Latent Cultivation Temple. He already knew that Heaven's Design Pavilion's Exalted only seemed awesome to mortals. To a mighty ascended spirit cultivator, they were no different from mortals. That being the case, why hadn't Tai Sui simply chosen a "half-immortal" whose body he could snatch right away, instead of waiting for him to open his spiritual eyes?

What if he had been a "lucky stick" of an idiot who couldn't even link to his spiritual eyes?

In fact... from the circumstances back then, it hadn't even looked as though he would be chosen to enter the Latent Cultivation Temple.

This had been a problem Xi Ping had been unable to resolve no matter what, until now, when he had heard the great demon make A-Xiang swear.

Everything a follower had must be offered without reservation to the demon, so naturally Chen Baishao's life and body after death were no exception. Though her body had been created by her parents, she had only retained the rights to use it, being reduced to a "tenant."

So, when she had swapped her life for Xi Ping's with a drop of heart's blood, didn't that mean... that the swapped life also belonged to the great evil cultivator?

Tai Sui had nearly been turned to mincemeat by Zhaoting in the Blissful Village. He had only awakened when A-Xiang had by chance spilled blood on the reincarnation wood. It was likely he hadn't had any intention of choosing Xi Ping but had automatically "gone back where he belonged."

Xi Ping had originally thought that this great evil cultivator wanted to "steal someone else's nest for himself"; who would have thought that in fact he was only planning on evicting a squatting "tenant"!

What was all this? Who was he supposed to go to for a solution?

He couldn't hide the sudden tension in his body from the "landlord." The evil cultivator's snake's voice sounded in his ear: "What's the matter with you? What is making you uneasy?"

The night sky was caught in fog.

The smokestacks of the southern outskirts swallowed the anxious nightshift laborers to chew on them all night and spit out the residue only in the early morning. The people who lived there had long ago become accustomed to going to sleep to the sound of thunder.

Chunying covered the wounds on her face with her hair, lit an oil lamp, turned to look at the little girl, and rather kindly said, "The coroner has already been here. He died of a sudden attack of illness. If his family comes looking, I'll hold them off for you. What the fuck are you afraid of? Come and have some soup."

A-Xiang had a scrape on her forehead. Her gaze was vague. It was unclear whether she had heard or not.

She had charged into Foreman Lü's house holding a brick, prepared to fight to the death. But even giving it her all, she still didn't have much strength. Even though Foreman Lü didn't normally do any physical labor and was half-way hollowed out by alcohol, a little girl fourteen or fifteen years old was still no match for him.

So she was easily controlled and tied into a zongzi. Lü had just drunk two mouthfuls of wine, and his lust had become overweening from the bamboo whip in his hand. It had gone to his head. Ignoring Chunying shouting curses, he figured that since fresh meat had shown up, he certainly couldn't turn it down.

But just as he had reached out his greasy paw toward A-Xiang, an old crow had landed on top of the wall outside and let out a hoarse croak, pronouncing some sentence from the netherworld. With his hand still outstretched, Lü had frozen and hiccuped, and, just as if the Heibai Wuchang had called his name, his eyes had grown wider and wider, and when they had widened to their fullest extent, he had fallen over dead without a sound!

The dead man's face had been a hand's breadth from A-Xiang's face, branded onto her eyes... How Chunying had thrown herself toward her to untie the ropes, how she had called for help, how the two of them had been taken away, how the coroner had examined the corpse and said he had died of "paralysis of the heart" and they had been released... A-Xiang's impressions of all of this were blurred. The whole night was one deranged nightmare.

A-Xiang put a hand to her chest—she had hidden the reincarnation wood amulet in her clothes.

She remembered that there had seemed to be a voice in her ear. Then a line of writing had flashed over the "amulet."

Had the Grand Duke... truly worked a miracle?

Suddenly, there was pounding on the shack's door. A-Xiang shook with fright. Chunying put her arms around her. "Who's there?"

"A-Xiang! A-Xiang, hurry, hurry... open the door! Your grandpa! Your grandpa!"

A-Xiang's soul, floating around her head, staggered back into her body. She scrambled outside.

The old man looked hardly human, feet swollen to the size of boats, features buried in overturned flesh and blood. A few fellow workers had carried him back on a stretcher. The undulation of his chest was rapid and shallow. He didn't wake when called. Any moment, he might breathe his last.

A-Xiang's mind buzzed, and her knees went weak. She was pulled up by the hair by Chunying. "Go get a doctor!"

Pang Jian walked out of the depths of the southern outskirts's fog and fanned away the choking dust and ash. Before he could closely examine his surroundings, a skinny figure charged out of a dim alley.

Pang Jian turned and dodged, but this person still stamped on his boot.

While Commander Pang's foot wasn't quite cast in reinforced steel, it was close enough. He was fine, but the person who had stepped on him went sprawling face first and twisted an ankle.

"Hey, are you..."

... all right?

This was a girl in her teens. She must have had urgent business. She spared no attention to say anything to him, only got to her feet, limping, and ran.

Pang Jian only thought she looked familiar. Because he could see she was a child, he didn't think anything of it. Using a piece of gauze with a karma beast drawn on it, he took out a reincarnation wood amulet.

The karma beast's fur was standing on end. On the gauze, it was constantly roaring at the reincarnation wood. Pang Jian took out a stick of charcoal and drew a flower on the brick wall next to him, letting the karma beast on the gauze climb onto the wall where the drawing was.

“The evil energy points to the southern outskirts. Please lead the way, sacred beast.”

The karma beast wagged its head, readied its hooves, and dashed off along the wall. Pang Jian followed at once, now and then casually drawing a few strokes on the wall to make a “road” for the sacred beast.

Meanwhile, blue-clothed walkers in the mortal world split up and landed in different places in the southern outskirts. Dozens of karma beasts ran back and forth over the crude and mottled walls, searching for evil energy with bitter hatred.

Lantern light and the glow of swords lit up the forces of evil dancing through the southern outskirts.

In the Qiu courtyard in the Latent Cultivation Temple, under the great evil cultivator's notice, even Xi Ping's breath stopped for a moment.

Suddenly, he charged out the door like an angry horse. “Xi Yue!”

Xi Yue had just drawn some water. Before he could set it down firmly, he was grabbed by Xi Ping.

Xi Ping cut open his fingertip and, brooking no argument, smeared blood on the dragon-taming chain.

The irascible young master said, coldly, “Starting now, without my order, you must not leave this courtyard, must not say one word, write one character, or make one gesture to the stewards in the Latent Cultivation Temple or the immortals from the inner sect.”

Xi Yue couldn’t speak. He could only open his eyes wide in astonishment, finding to his despair that his naïve master had been bewildered by evil.

But Tai Sui laughed. “Your half-puppet has that dragon-taming chain around his neck. There’s no need to be so nervous.”

“I haven’t learned how to use my consciousness to control it. A drop of blood only works for a few days.” Xi Ping looked at Xi Yue and, grim-faced, returned to his room. He said to Tai Sui, “That thing is sneaky and doesn’t make a sound when he walks. I’m always forgetting about him. I have to think ahead. Hey, listen, senior, what’s going on with you?! There’s a master coming from the inner sect tomorrow, how can you still laugh? Even I’m worried for you!”

Tai Sui said, “If you’re uneasy, when you see the princess tomorrow, you can leave it to me to handle her. There’s no need to be scared.”

“No, wait.” Xi Ping seemed to truly be anxious on his behalf. He nearly became rude. “Senior, can you take it? That princess is even more powerful than General Zhi! Are you sure she won’t be able to tell anything? If it were really so easy, wouldn’t people be sneaking into Xuanyin Mountain’s inner sect every day?”

“Little devil.” Tai Sui faintly felt there was a string in his words and coolly interrupted him. “Are you trying to teach me a lesson?”

Xi Ping choked for a moment, remembering the killing intent that had come through reincarnation wood earlier. He seemed to turn cowardly once more. “That’s not what I meant, senior, I... I’m scared. Heaven’s Design Pavilion grabbed Jiangli’s... Chen-jiejie and the others’ reincarnation wood amulets. We made such a commotion just now, it might have alerted Heaven’s Design Pavilion already, so the inner sect must also know! And today at the Yanhai Building, I openly asked for the princess’s reincarnation wood carving, so...”

Tai Sui, hearing that he was scared into babbling, softened his voice slightly. “Naturally I am not the same as others. Never mind Duanrui, even if Xuanyin Mountain’s old monster of the Office of Fate Zhang Jue, came, you still wouldn’t need to be scared.”

Xi Ping’s eyelashes shook faintly—a possession that couldn’t even be seen by those who read the stars had to be caused by swapping a life, didn’t it?

“As for Heaven’s Design Pavilion...” Tai Sui laughed aloud. “Let them come find me if they can. I’d like to see them find a needle in the ocean.”

After going through the southern outskirts, white clouds would turn at once to ill omens. Pang Jian felt that his nose had turned grey from the fumes.

His face grave, he respectfully sent away the sacred beasts that were so tired their tongues were nearly hanging out. Then he irritably turned to look at the “results” those sacred beasts had dug up—they’d caught a gang of grave robbers; picked up a few shops specializing in selling human blood mantou, corpse grease, and prohibited drugs; turned up the already rotting corpses of several prostitutes; and collected a bundle of infant bones in a doghouse... including several femurs, so the bones had to belong to more than one person.

All the southern outskirts were like a big quagmire that sheltered villainy. When a pebble rolled in, you couldn't find even a trace of it.

Pang Jian exhaled wearily and was about to speak when he heard a shrill scream from a nearby shack: "Grandpa!"

A half-immortal's hearing could catch the buzzing of an insect a hundred meters away. Pang Jian froze. He heard people sighing and groaning, saying "my condolences" and useless things like that.

Someone had died before daybreak...

As he thought this, he forgot what he had just been about to say.

"Clear out," Pang Jian said after a long moment, waving a hand. "Hand those... those people over to the city guard and let them see what needs to be done. I'll go report to the immortal mountain."

On the comfortable west bank of the Lingyang River, Bai Ling slipped into Prince Zhuang Manor's south study. The paper figure landed gently on the ground and turned into the pale, skinny man. He turned and reached out to sweep a hand over the inscription by the window. Silver light flashed over the inscription. The south study's windows were all wide open, but not a trace of what was said inside left the room.

But despite this, Bai Ling still lowered his voice cautiously. "Heaven's Design Pavilion's Assistant Commander Pang just sent a Heavenly Question to the immortal mountains. He must be asking for instructions concerning some great matter—the news I have received is that, for reasons unknown, there was some sudden change to the wooden amulets they discovered on those evil cultivators who coveted the Dragon Vein before."

Prince Zhuang asked, "When did this happen?"

Bai Ling said, “On the night of the meteor shower.”

Prince Zhuang’s brow furrowed tightly—when Xi Ping had said he’d named the half-puppet Xi Yue, it had been the small hours of the morning on the day after the meteor shower.

That didn’t seem to be a normal time for him to get out of bed.

“Do you think that Heaven’s Design Pavilion’s business may have to do with the Viscount?” Bai Ling asked. “Your Highness, as I see it, there was nothing untoward in the Viscount’s response... But you ought to warn him not to mention the name of an established foundation master on a downgraded immortal tool. Aren’t you being...”

Too paranoid.

“He grew up with the old lady. He must have noticed that the letter was a forgery.” Prince Zhuang shook his head. “It contained my family taboo. If there really was nothing the matter, he would have used the fact that he’d ‘caught on’ to make trouble. Then there’s that Luo Qingshi, who clearly doesn’t like him. When have you ever seen him talk to his family about people he doesn’t get along with?”

Bai Ling: “...”

Putting it like that, it really was a little odd, in fact.

“He deliberately mentioned Luo Qingshi, probably to test whether the white jade proximal was safe or not... Luo already has an established foundation, and he’s a senior steward of the Latent Cultivation Temple. If Shiyong is willing to offend him, it proves that the brat’s stirred up trouble worse than he’d get from an established foundation cultivator.”

Bai Ling still thought he was making too much of it. Tactfully, he said, “Though the Latent Cultivation Temple only belongs to the outer sect, it’s still a critical location for the immortal mountain. They absolutely wouldn’t let any outsiders infiltrate it, not unless they’d snatched a body. But body snatching can only happen between cultivators. The Viscount had no previous contact with cultivation sects, and it would be very hard for him to open his spiritual eyes right upon entering the sect, wouldn’t it?”

“It hasn’t come to that,” Prince Zhuang said. “He must have written the letter himself. The average person couldn’t imitate his style of asking for a beating.”

“But if it’s only a primordial being possessing him, then that person is being too careless. A person whose body has been possessed by a primordial being has a separation between body and soul. Even I would be able to see there was something wrong, never mind the Latent Cultivation Temple, which is connected to the sect and might have established foundation cultivators... or even ascended spirit peak masters coming to lecture in person.”

“That’s the general rule.” Prince Zhuang’s fingers tapped now and again on his desk. “Before he received the selection card, his only contact with cultivation was that time at the Blissful Village. The reason General Zhi personally came down from the mountain must have been on account of that evil cultivator. An evil*cultivator who disturbed Zhaoting itself, nearly provoked an earthquake, and likely even escaped with his life from Zhaoting... The great Way has three thousand paths, and there are too many knacks within those. Your ‘general rule’ may not apply universally.”

“If it is concerned with the great evil cultivator at the Blissful Village, Heaven’s Design Pavilion must already be investigating. Your Highness, shall I find a way to secretly notify Heaven’s Design Pavilion of this?”

Without giving it any thought, Prince Zhuang declined at once: “No.”

Bai Ling froze.

“If you were the immortal sect and one of your young disciples had been possessed by this kind of dangerous individual, what would you do?” Prince Zhuang massaged the joints of his fingers, which could never seem to warm up. Frost seemed to form on his brow. “I don’t trust them.”

“Pardon me, Your Highness,” Bai Ling said quietly, lowering his head, “but if you want me to infiltrate the Latent Cultivation Temple without anyone knowing, I’m afraid that I...”

“I have no intention of making you infiltrate the Latent Cultivation Temple. Even if you made it in, it would be no use.” Prince Zhuang sat down. The more dangerous the situation was, the calmer his expression seemed. “The evil cultivator possessing him would certainly notice you before he did and kill him in an instant.”

Bai Ling gave up. “Please instruct me, Your Highness.”

“Wait. First let’s see what his next letter says.” Prince Zhuang tapped on the white jade proximal. “Before that, I want you to find out the full story behind that evil cultivator at the Blissful Village.”

Bai Ling had never questioned his orders. No matter how absurd, he would always carry them out meticulously.

But while he obeyed orders, he still thought this whole thing was rather ridiculous.

Perhaps even the most powerful people couldn’t resist measuring others against themselves. Prince Zhuang himself was full of watchfulness, so he thought that the spheres on other people’s shoulders all contained brains. Anyway, based on Bai Ling’s few

encounters with that wastrel, he felt that the young master didn't seem to be all that canny... If something had truly gone wrong, instead of relying on him to cooperate in saving himself, it would be better to send him a curse to ease his suffering.

Bai Ling thought that perhaps the Viscount had been careless and not read the letter closely. Wasn't it very normal for a young and vigorous fellow not to have the patience to finish reading an old lady's ramblings? He might not even have noticed that the letter had their prince's family taboo in it.

As for the name he had given the half-puppet... Who knew what had gotten into his head? When the big black cat chased its own tail while yowling, there was also no reason for it.

"A false alarm," Bai Ling thought. "I hope that's... No, it must be a false alarm."

Before leaving by the courtyard gate, he turned back to look at the south study. Lantern light cast Prince Zhuang's shadow on the window, like thick, stagnant black clouds.

There was no friendship between Bai Ling and Xi Ping.

It was only that... there was no affection from his father the emperor, he was at odds with his brothers, and after *that* business, Prince Zhuang had been estranged from the Imperial Consort and had only gotten along with his maternal uncle's family on the surface. In all these years, apart from some transient cats and dogs, the only living creature at his side had been Xi Ping, who had grown up following him around like a lackey.

Bai Ling sometimes thought that if that arrogant and disrespectful Viscount were gone, then perhaps His Highness's last emotional tie to the world would vanish.

But on this day, Prince Zhuang waited without receiving Xi Ping's letter.

Princess Duanrui, having said she was going to come lecture, for some reason put it off. The disciples once again ended up in Luo Qingshi's hands.

Perhaps because Xi Ping's portrait hadn't been to his liking, Luo Qingshi was even more vicious than usual, glaring at Xi Ping and biting as if he had gone crazy.

Xi Ping was tossed into a training mustard seed and trapped there for a whole day. When the other stewards came to intercede, they had no success.

If not for the great evil cultivator thinking he still had some use and occasionally giving him a pointer, Xi Ping would nearly have had his face disfigured by the monsters and goblins inside.

When he finally made it to evening, Xi Ping, more dead than alive, was dragged back to the Qiu courtyard... and ran into Yao Qi at the courtyard gate.

"Why haven't you gone in, Ziming-xiong?" As a prime example of "broken in health but mean in spirit,"¹⁷ Xi Ping had to tease Yao Qi even with his last breath. "Were you so concerned about me that you waited..."

At this point, Xi Ping shut his mouth—past Yao Qi's shoulder, he saw that there were two people in a little pavilion inside the Qiu courtyard, playing weiqi.

One man and one woman. The man was an acquaintance—General Zhi.

The woman was dressed all in white clothing and looked young, but each of her gestures had a particular kind of prudence. Hearing movement, she raised her eyes and looked over. Her eyes were like black frost, able to piece a mortal's soul at a glance.

Xi Ping gave a start, making a faint guess as to her identity.

“You're all back?” Zhi Xiu pretended not to know that Yao Qi had just nearly worn the steps of the Qiu courtyard flat with his pacing. He stood and beckoned to them. “Come over here and meet your Duanrui-shishu.”

The familiar sensation of shackles came from every joint. Without so much as a warning, Tai Sui had taken over Xi Ping's body.

CHAPTER 25 - The Dragon Bites Its Tail (13)

As soon as he saw Princess Duanrui, Xi Ping's heart cooled by half —the princess wasn't the way he had imagined her.

He had originally thought that since, in one year in the Latent Cultivation Temple, this senior had somehow found enough time to do so much crafting and yet had still managed to get into the inner sect, she must have been one of those lazy geniuses, the kind that could get to be Number One Scholar without trying. The carvings and stuffed toys each showed a different manner, but all the old relics gave off a strong air of wit. Xi Ping had seen them and wanted to bow to her across hundreds of years in a show of admiration.

But as for this person in front of him, never mind "wit" —she simply didn't even have "air."

To put it nicely, she seemed like an ice and jade carving of a goddess—the kind that oversaw the laws and commandments of heaven and showed no mercy.

If you were to put it plainly... she was like a mallet that had grown legs.

In the middle of the night last night, when Xi Ping had taken it into his head to silence the half-puppet, it was hard to say that he had been doing it purely for Tai Sui's benefit. In fact, there was a faint concern in his mind: in the current circumstances, could the evil cultivator easily be parted from him?

If he couldn't, and the immortal sect learned of this matter, would they prioritize expelling evil...or sparing him?

Xi Ping "watched" as Tai Sui, wearing his skin, went into the courtyard with Chang Jun and Yao Qi and fearfully prepared to bow.

Whether anyone else saw a flaw in this performance, Xi Ping couldn't say, but he, at any rate, thought this dignified appearance was extremely awkward. He thought: You've blown enough hot air to fill a whole room, but can you avoid slipping up?

What to do, what to do...

Just then, the princess looked his way again. Xi Ping's scalp went numb for a time. He thought that her expression looking at a human being was the same as if she were looking at an inanimate object.

In a flash, nameless fear spurted up in his heart. An intuition came out of nowhere straight into his mind: as soon as she found out there was a parasitic evil god in him, she would break him to pieces with one slap on the spot.

"Senior." Xi Ping quickly came to a decision and said to Tai Sui, "Princess Duanrui is completely different from what I imagined. I would definitely take another look. Why are you keeping your head down? Do you know what you're doing?!"

Tai Sui at once realized: yes, this kid had absolutely no common sense. He was bold enough to take on heaven. He didn't care who the princess was; he had never "minded his own business"!

The next moment, Zhi Xiu's gaze swept over, and Tai Sui, in a remarkably accurate imitation of Xi Ping's manner, "thinking he was being circumspect," dodged behind Chang Jun and "curiously" began to examine the princess.

Zhi Xiu smiled at him and briefly introduced the princess and her position—a forebear of the Zhou family going back many generations, more than you could count on your fingers. It seemed that she had a longer record than even the coiled dragon towers in Guangyun Palace. In a rare occurrence, Green Pool Peak had

opened up to take new disciples, and as the princess had just left seclusion, she had come in person to see the disciples' potential.

Xi Ping quickly said to Tai Sui, "I told you the inner sect must have heard the news—senior, you focus on dealing with her, give me back my mouth."

Tai Sui lowered his eyelashes, eyes flashing.

"Hurry up, senior." Xi Ping was urgent and became a little rude. "You lisp when you speak in Jinping dialect! You may not know it yourself, but how could General Zhi not hear it? If you want to get yourself killed, don't drag me into it like a fetus dying with its mother, all right?!"

Tai Sui snorted. Then, he really did "give back" Xi Ping's power of speech.

Xi Ping, taken by surprise, opened his mouth and choked on the cold wind. He couldn't resist coughing a few times.

Zhi Xiu said, smiling, "Why are you coughing? Nervous?"

Xi Ping had just taken back his voice, but he had his words ready. He picked up without any gap: "Why would I be nervous? I don't want to enter the inner sect, anyway. I'm nervous on others' behalf. Shishu, the Latent Cultivation Temple doesn't even let us talk to the female disciples, so the inner sect must be even more strict, right?"

Though there was a gulf of age difference between levels of seniority in the sect, most of these unaging, undying cultivators appeared to be in the prime of life. Supposing men and women were permitted to mingle, even if there was nothing wrong to begin with, something was bound to go wrong. In a place like Xuanyin Mountain, with rules and regulations a zhang long, there had to be

an unspoken rule that a man and woman couldn't be master and disciple.

"Anyway, Duanrui-shishu isn't going to take male disciples while she's here." Xi Ping, in a realistic performance, sighed. "I suppose some of my classmates thought they were sure bets for the inner sect, but it turns out that they went wrong in reincarnating... Ah, unjust, how unjust!"

"So you understand." Zhi Xiu pointed to him. "Come over here."

Xi Ping gave an *oh* and approached, bowing respectfully to Princess Duanrui, his mouth running like the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon: "Hello, Duanrui-shishu. I saw some of your genuine works in the Yanhai Building yesterday, and I was astonished by your talent. That Elder Su is very stingy. I begged for ages, and he only gave me one. Could you put in a word for me? I also want that cat with chicken wings."

Princess Duanrui had only nodded her head in response when he had said hello. She didn't pick up the conversation.

However reticent a person was, having heard someone talk, she would still have some reaction. Even if her face were paralyzed, at least her eyes would blink. But Xi Ping felt that all his nonsense hit a wall, bouncing back the way it had come. Not one word entered her ears.

For a time, despite all his wordiness, he actually couldn't quite come up with what to say.

Duanrui said, "Your hand."

Xi Ping inwardly called to Tai Sui: "Senior?"

"It's fine," said Tai Sui. "Give it to her."

Xi Ping moved his eyes, rolled up his sleeve, and presented his hand. “Shishu, if my natural endowments are no good, just don’t tell me, I’m a frail...”

Princess Duanrui didn’t touch him, only glanced at Xi Ping’s palm. A formless chill immediately pricked the Place of Toil acupoint on his palm and, in the blink of an eye, traveled throughout his whole body, then slipped back out through his hand.

Half a beat late, Xi Ping shuddered.

As before, Duanrui’s expression didn’t move a hair. Xi Ping’s heart tightened slightly. All his ability to read expressions lost effect in front of her.

But Princess Duanrui didn’t say anything, only called over Chang Jun and Yao Qi to examine each of them in turn... as if she was rummaging through a crate of mediocre yams.

After all three of them had been examined, she gave Zhi Xiu an inscrutable look, then walked out.

Tai Sui said, “It’s all right.”

Only then did Xi Ping almost imperceptibly let out a breath. For a time, he couldn’t say whether his heart had eased or sunk.

But when the princess reached the gate of the Qiu courtyard, she seemed to remember something.

She stopped in her tracks, looked back, and beckoned. Something broke through the window of Xi Ping’s north rooms and nearly brushed his head as it flew over, landing in that hand that seemed to be carved out of ice.

The corners of Xi Ping's eyes tightened—what Duanrui had grabbed was that karma beast carved out of reincarnation wood!

The gazes of the two great ascended spirit masters fell simultaneously on the little wood carving.

Duanrui: "..."

Zhi Xiu: "Pfft..."

The heavy-browed, big-eyed karma beast, after only one day in Xi Ping's hands, had changed its appearance—Xi Ping had penciled its eyebrows, applied eyeliner, drawn red lips with cinnabar... and next to the bloody maw, he had even dotted a matchmaker's mole!¹⁸

Princess Duanrui briefly met the eyes of the arrestingly glamorous karma beast, then gave it to Zhi Xiu, turned, and left.

Zhi Xiu put the wooden carving on a small stone table next to him. He pointed at Xi Ping. "Look out in the future when you join Heaven's Design Pavilion. The sacred beasts will crawl out in the middle of the night and bite your toes."

Xi Ping, grinning cheekily, saw them out, savoring General Zhi's words.

"In the future when you join Heaven's Design Pavilion"—it seemed that these two top masters of Xuanyin Mountain had in fact been fooled... The great evil cultivator was the real deal.

He wasn't in the mood to chat with Chang Jun and Yao Qi. He picked up the karma beast and went back to his rooms.

“Senior, what way does Princess Duanrui cultivate? Why is she so creepy?”

“Word has it that it’s the ‘way of clarity.’” Tai Sui was very satisfied with him. He said, mildly, “You didn’t panic in the face of danger. It was well done.”

Xi Ping sighed. “If you hadn’t been controlling my legs, senior, they would have been shaking—what kind of way is the way of clarity?”

“The way of clarity is also called the way of unfeeling,” Tai Sui said. “When you enter this path, you know no sensation from your five senses, are unmoved by the seven human emotions, see through the fate of humankind and common human relations, extinguish the six desires, and become one with heaven.”

Xi Ping understood. “In other words, chopping me up would be no different for her than chopping up firewood.”

Tai Sui laughed.

Xi Ping scrutinized the karma beast that the princess had made... So keen, as if it were alive, as if it could roll over and run off at any moment. “I didn’t think she would be so...”

Cruel.

“I thought she would be one of the seniors practicing the way of toolmaking or something.”

“The way you enter depends on what Way of the Heart you have,” Tai Sui said. “Do you think all Ways of the Heart are one’s own?”

Xi Ping: “...”

What... what else would they be?

Could you take one of these things out for a short-term loan?

The Latent Cultivation Temple's shixiong teaching them the basics had said, "Your heart must not be contrary to your Way of the Heart, and your actions must be steadfast."

The Way of the Heart that a cultivator believed in had to match his principles, be able to explain everything in existence. It had to be constantly refined, becoming more integrated day by day. When your Way of the Heart had no delusions, that would be the greatest success. But supposing that you developed doubts about your Way of the Heart in the process of cultivating, then most likely your cultivation would stagnate where it was.

Xi Ping, however, didn't understand why as perspicacious a person as Elder Su would say he had no Way of the Heart while Luo Qingshi could establish a foundation—he felt that Gentle Luo most likely cultivated the "way of abuse."

"Those who can feel out their own Way of the Heart are few and far between," Tai Sui said with a mocking laugh. "To use your Xuanyin's inner sect as an example, the vast majority of the established foundation cultivators' Ways of the Heart are copied from their teachers or left behind by mighty elders. If one of the present masters is taking disciples, you'll hardly have time to fight over the chance. How could you possibly pick which way to enter? The monster Duanrui was chosen by a peak master of the Zhou family who cultivated the way of clarity. The way of clarity is hard. Up to now, there has yet to be a shed skin cultivator belonging to it. Her shifu stopped in the middle ascended spirit stage, but she is a near-shed skin now. How cold and ruthless must her temperament be? Ah, though you understand nothing, you still know what's good for you."

Xi Ping was silent. He found that he was caught between two impossible alternatives.

In one direction, he might be taken by a ruthless lady immortal for the vessel of an evil cultivator and exterminated along with him.

In the other direction, he could only hold out until the last gasp, waiting for his body to be snatched.

He was still young, after all, far from having lived enough. In these desperate straits, Xi Ping only wanted to squat where he was.

For example... he could just never open his spiritual eyes and hold out until he left the mountain a year from now.

Working hard to succeed was a struggle for him, but he certainly knew how to slack off and shirk.

That was what he always did.

If the great evil cultivator stayed with him for the rest of his life, he... he would probably get used to it over time.

“For now, adjust your breathing and meditate. If you really can’t settle down, go find something else to do. Stop asking about that old monster,” Tai Sui said, for once kind. “With the power of a cultivator half a step from shedding her skin bearing down, even an established foundation cultivator might lose his mind on the spot. The abilities of the way of unfeeling are keen. If you keep thinking about her, take care that your mind isn’t damaged.”

Xi Ping felt that as soon as he thought of the princess’s cold eyes, he felt a chill coming up from the cracks in his bones, so he listened to this advice. He picked up the reincarnation wood carving and concentrated on the center of his brow. He wanted to have a look at

how the grown-up lady and the little lady were doing. The outcome was that his eyes filled with funeral banners.

He stared blankly for a while, feeling extremely dejected, then went to sleep to the sound of the Soul Calling Melody.

Due to Princess Duanrui's arrival, the atmosphere in Chengjing Hall was extremely severe. The stewards going in and out didn't even dare to breathe loudly.

Su Zhun rubbed the tip of his nose. He kept thinking that his breath was freezing into frost as he exhaled.

"Don't bring tea, she only drinks plain water," Zhi Xiu alerted him quietly. "Have everyone disperse. There's no need for them to be so nervous."

"We're afraid of snubbing..." said Su Zhun.

"At her level of the way of clarity, she is no longer moved by external things. Whether you rain down curses or shower her with flattery, it's all the same to her. She won't care if she's snubbed or not. You'd be better off acting a little more natural." Zhi Xiu waved a hand and walked into Chengjing Hall. "Go about your business, stop running around her."

Princess Duanrui seemed to be ready to enter meditation with her eyes open at any moment. When someone said something next to her, her eyelids didn't even flicker. Only when Zhi Xiu had dispatched Su Zhun and the rest of the stewards did she speak without preamble: "There's no problem with that disciple who had contact with the evil cultivators. His body and mind are one."

Zhi Xiu said, "The carving he took yesterday was of reincarnation wood. Anything wrong with the wood?"

Duanrui said, “There are no inscriptions, and no air of blood.”

Reincarnation wood was third rate timber. It was indeed rarely seen among the wealthy, but it wasn’t an uncommon material in the south. The common people used whatever wood was available; they used reincarnation wood to build door frames, furniture, coffins, anything. There was nothing wrong with the wood itself.

For the evil cultivators to use it to communicate amongst themselves, they would either have to carve inscriptions into the wood to turn it into an immortal tool, or use some evil art to first establish a connection and then to send messages back and forth using fresh blood as a medium.

What the princess meant was that nothing had been done to the reincarnation wood carving in Xi Ping’s possession.

“Very well.” Zhi Xiu’s brow didn’t unknit. “My handling of this business was unsuccessful...”

Halfway through his sentence, he looked up and met the princess’s eyes, which were like ancient wells, and felt that he was apologizing to a tree hollow. He couldn’t finish what he was saying. So Zhi Xiu paused, dropped his bureaucratic tone, and got down to business. “There are many suspicious points here. I wish to ask you for instruction, shijie. Even if this evil cultivator had created a primordial being, it would also have been destroyed by Zhaoting. How could he still be stirring up trouble? Shijie, do you think there’s someone else behind it now, or that it’s really as Su Zhun says—this is an evil god who can use the bodies of his followers to come back to life?”

Duanrui answered cautiously: “Stories of ghosts and gods are fabrications, but in my eight hundred futile years in the world, I have not heard of this one.”

The mortal world would indeed call cultivators from immortal sects “deities” and “celestial beings” and things of that nature. Some very powerful shed skin cultivators had even been made into gods by the commoners and received offerings of incense during holidays—but actually that was just superstition.

Never mind mere incense ash, even if you lit Guangyun Palace on fire, the smoke still wouldn’t reach Xuanyin Mountain. However strong a cultivator’s spiritual sense, they would still only be able to perceive people and things with a karmic connection to them. They couldn’t just “hear” any random person setting off fireworks and calling on their spirit.

Even the Southern Sage who was said in legend to have ascended to heaven was more symbol and ritual than anything else; at any rate, at her age, Princess Duanrui had never heard of him working a miracle.

Zhi Xiu asked, “But, shijie, didn’t my shizun say that the location in the Sea of Stars that was disturbed this time is identical to last time?”

Duanrui said, “Yes.”

Zhi Xiu’s brow furrowed tighter. “Shijie, I can’t understand that.”

“The Dignitary of Fate High Elder asked me to pass on that the mortal world has been tranquil for thousands of years, and many historical matters cannot be examined, but the traces of the Great War of Gods and Demons may not have been cleared away,” Duanrui said, mildly. “But if this truly is an ancient god or demon who has arisen, the Sea of Stars would long ago have been in an uproar. It’s absolutely impossible for it to show only some small waves.”

Zhi Xiu considered these words carefully. “What shizun means is that this person doing evil under the name of Grand Duke Tai Sui may only be some mad devotee who has found some ancient relic?”

Duanrui nodded and took out a small token. “The sect’s order—until this matter is resolved, you may leave at any time without need to report.”

“Thank you.” Zhi Xiu accepted the token and cupped his hand politely toward the princess. He stood up, then remembered something and asked, “Shijie, earlier, if you really had found that that young disciple had been possessed by a primordial being, what would you have done?”

Without hesitation, Duanrui said, “Expelled the evil.”

“But what if... the human and the demon couldn’t be easily separated?”

The prattling Xi Ping shut his mouth, meditating or sleeping, and Tai Sui’s ears were finally at peace.

The half-puppet Xi Yue, his steps lighter than a feather as usual, came in and picked up the boots his master had kicked away, then went out to clean them.

Suddenly, Xi Ping’s legs twitched. Tai Sui felt his heart rate speed up without cause. He must have been having a nightmare.

The great evil cultivator was unsurprised—it would have been unusual if the brat *hadn’t* had nightmares.

Human nature was utterly weak, especially that of a good-for-nothing like Xi Ping. Even if he had been moved for a time by righteousness, less than three days later, wasn’t he beating a

retreat, unwilling to put in hard work? Tai Sui knew that he had temporarily scared him into behaving, but relying on this type of person to act alongside him in Xuanyin Mountain, where danger lurked on every side, would be naïve.

Tai Sui would have dared to bet that if this rich kid found out that he was weaker than the immortals of Xuanyin, he would sell him out in terror.

It wasn't that he couldn't control him. It was just that being constantly on guard against him was annoying, so the Grand Duke had had to... use some tricks.

All of Xi Ping's functions—including heart rate and breathing, which he couldn't control himself—were under Tai Sui's control. His eyes were naturally no exception.

When they had walked into the Qiu courtyard in the evening, he had played a trick on Xi Ping's eyes.

A cultivator half a step from shedding her skin was already hard to look at directly. All he needed to do was add an embellishment of killing intent over the brat's eyes, then make his heart rate speed up, the hairs on his neck rise, and his feet and hands sweat, and he would feel like a frog being stared down by a snake.

Tai Sui had given Xi Ping the power of speech at the time because he hadn't been at all afraid of Xi Ping ruining things—he had known that Xi Ping wouldn't dare.

A mortal's body and heart were always one. Even though he hadn't yet succeeded in snatching this body, that didn't mean that he couldn't control this useless young master's thoughts.

Xi Yue brought back the boots he had knocked all the dust off of and pulled the quilt over his master.

When he bent his head, he saw that Xi Ping's brow was tightly knitted, but there was a peculiar smile on his lips. The half-puppet paused in spite of himself. After a moment, he closed the window and put out the lights, then silently withdrew once more. He curled up on a little couch in the outer room... and raised a hand to press down on the dragon-taming chain.

Light flashed over the dragon-taming chain, and he heard his master's roar coming from inside it.

“And he just used my face to smile! Did you see that?! Even Grand Mountain Luo didn't touch my face, and now that fucking son of a bitch goes and disfigures it with that smile!”

Xi Yue had never spoken in his life. Though he didn't need to use his mouth now, his reactions when it came to language were still slow. He didn't have time to chime in. He could only quietly listen to Xi Ping cursing, struggling to remember some words in the hopes that next time he could echo him.

When Xi Ping had started to quake with fear out of nowhere on first seeing Princess Duanrui, he had at once faintly thought that something was off.

Though he in fact didn't have any idea how frightening a cultivator half a step from shedding her skin, who could “make even an established foundation cultivator lose his mind on the spot,” was, Duanrui-shishu must have been holding back at the time—even Yao Ziming hadn't lost control of his bowels on the spot, so how scary could she be?

Fortunately, Xi Ping had smeared blood on the half-puppet's dragon-taming chain the day before, and there was still a connection.

So Xi Ping had quietly borrowed Xi Yue's eyes and "looked" from another point of view: the princess was only not as amiable as General Zhi; she wasn't covered all over in fiendish energy!

The evil cultivator could not only make him speak with a lisp, he was also trying to manipulate his emotions! Wasn't he trying to make it so he would have to do whatever he wanted?!

"Xi Yue." Xi Ping took a breath and quietly asked through the dragon-taming chain, "Do you dare to do something for me?"

CHAPTER 26 - The Dragon Bites Its Tail (14)

At last Xi Yue found a chance to respond. Through the dragon-taming chain, he inexpertly expressed, "Remove... the prohibition, I'll... report to... the immortals."

Xi Ping was silent for a while. "Are you afraid of dying?"

At first, Xi Yue answered sincerely: "I am."

But after considering it carefully for a moment, he thought that there was no sense in him being afraid; it was even a little self-important of him. So he changed his answer: "I'm not."

"Oh?" said Xi Ping. "Is there an array in your head, too, or something? If it doesn't work well, say the word, and in the future I'll think of a way to get someone to fix it for you."

Xi Yue: "..."

That didn't seem like a compliment.

"Listen to me," Xi Ping said, "not only can I not remove your prohibition, I'm going to have to strengthen it soon."

The half-puppet was bewildered.

"Today the princess 'scared me so much I couldn't look after myself.' When I wake up, I'll definitely be in a panic. If I don't even remember to strengthen your prohibition, it won't seem right," Xi Ping said. "If I 'don't remember,' that old roundworm that calls himself a grand duke will remember it for me. The two of us put together don't know as many things as he has at the back of his mind. Trying to match the old roundworm in tricks is just asking for death. So I can't let him stay on his guard against me, or else he'll

give me hallucinations during the day and won't let me sleep at night. Who can stand that? I have to steel myself and gang up with him, be even more paranoid than he is, be so paranoid even he'll be annoyed."

The half-puppet only understood some of this.

Then he heard Xi Ping suddenly stop, then murmur to himself, "Do you think I can trust General Zhi and the others?"

If expelling the evil was difficult, could he trust the immortal mountain to do their best to protect him?

A young disciple from the outer sect must be the most minor figure possible for Xuanyin Mountain...

Xi Ping had just entered the sect. He didn't know how the immortals operated—at any rate, he knew that if something like this had happened in the mortal world, then he would definitely be out of luck.

The half-puppet was even less familiar with immortal sects, though it was Zhi Xiu who had saved his life with a single sentence, so he stammered out his opinion.

This time, Xi Ping was silent for even longer. Xi Yue almost thought he really had gone to sleep.

"They can protect me if they like. It's their business. There's nothing I can do about it," Xi Ping said. "If that bastard succeeds in snatching my body, he might do some wretched things under my identity that would implicate my whole family. But if I render a great service, then even if the immortals accidentally take me along when they're expelling the evil, they'll have to give the whole set of posthumous honors and compensation to the bereaved family. Let's be reasonable."

Xi Yue was so anxious he stopped stuttering. “That won’t happen!”

Xi Ping ignored him. “In *Introduction to Spiritual Sense*, it says that a master’s spiritual sense can be touched by someone with a karmic connection to him. Just now, I called on General Zhi’s spirit a hundred eighty times. If that lousy book didn’t deceive me, he must have been able to feel it. If tomorrow after I leave he brings people to search my rooms, then we’ll... give the matter some further thought. If he comes by himself, you’ll act according to what I’m going to teach you. Listen carefully, I know you have a good memory, you can hear a tune once and learn to whistle it. You have to get this exactly right...”

Tai Sui took the opportunity of his noisy and obnoxious “tenant” going to sleep and finally managed to concentrate his attention on cycling the immortal mountain’s spiritual energy. He had just entered meditation when he was disturbed by Xi Ping sitting up like a risen corpse.

Xi Ping had had some kind of nightmare. Looking scared out of his wits, he threw off his quilt and got out of bed barefoot, then charged toward the half-puppet in the outer room. On his way he grabbed a decorative sword and slashed at his palm.

Luckily Tai Sui saw him sleepwalking and guessed what he was about to do. Before the blade touched his flesh, the great evil cultivator just barely controlled Xi Ping’s hand and quietly called into his ear: “Wake up! Kid, you can’t explain that big a sword injury on your hand with simple clumsiness.”

Xi Ping tossed his head hard to clear it.

He heaved several large breaths, recovered, then carefully used the sword blade to make a small cut on his index finger. He squeezed

out a drop of blood and smeared it on the dragon-taming chain, repeating the prohibition he had put on the half-puppet before.

Tai Sui thought he was pretty funny. “Didn’t you just do that yesterday? The prohibitions on that dragon-taming chain of yours don’t disappear so quickly.”

“It’s just in case.” Xi Ping’s gaze was still vague, anxiously wavering over the unlit room, as if Princess Duanrui was going to pop out at any time. “Until those two great personages from the inner sect leave, I have to apply the prohibition every day... Ah, it’s too much trouble to squeeze out blood every day, what if I cut some discreet place and keep a bowl...”

Tai Sui thought that things were going badly; the medicine was too strong. This good-for-nothing had already started to rave. “Blood dries when it’s left out.”

“Oh, that’s right.” Xi Ping froze. “True, true...”

Using every possible means of persuasion, Tai Sui coaxed Xi Ping back into the bedroom to lie down again.

In less than half an incense stick, when Tai Sui had just entered meditation again, Xi Ping once again leapt out of bed.

Tai Sui: “...”

This time Xi Ping seemed to have gone mad. He cut off a tuft of his hair and tied one strand of hair to every door and window crack.

“What are you doing now?” said Tai Sui.

“When I leave tomorrow and close the door after myself, this hair will pull tight,” Xi Ping said bizarrely. “This door has to be opened

slowly. If you use a bit of strength to open it, the hair will snap. This way, I'll know whether anyone's been here when I come back."

Fancying himself clever like a farmer's wife who could only imagine that the Crown Princess baked bread like she did!

Tai Sui sighed to himself and patiently said, "If an ascended spirit cultivator wants to investigate a room, he doesn't need to go inside himself... and he certainly doesn't need to break in. What are you thinking? Don't waste your strength. Anyway, there's nothing untoward in your rooms."

"... oh," said Xi Ping.

The third time the brat "kicked away the bed," Tai Sui couldn't take it anymore. Brooking no argument, he pinned Xi Ping to the bed and wouldn't let him open his eyes. "Aren't you finished?"

"Senior, how long do you think she's going to lecture? How can I get a bit sick and skip class? Ah... how frustrating, I haven't even had a cold in eight years. Do you think soaking in cold water would work? What could I eat to make myself get the runs like Yao Ziming? Would dirt work?"

Tai Sui: "..."

Tai Sui thought that if he exchanged another word with him, he would be infected with his idiocy. Therefore he forced Xi Ping's wild heartbeat to slow and suppressed his urgent breathing until it was deep and slow.

"Senior," said Xi Ping, "what are you doing, I... can't... breathe..."

His breathing wasn't free, and his head grew heavier and heavier. After a moment, unwillingly, he at last quieted down.

The next day, all means of resistance were of no avail, and Xi Ping was forced by the great evil cultivator to go listen to the princess's lecture—Tai Sui controlled his body the whole way. Otherwise, the brat would have fled at the last moment and perhaps gotten up to some other idiocy.

The Qiu courtyard fell silent. There was only the half-puppet Xi Yue, whistling a lonely tune as he cleaned.

At chen hour, when Xi Yue had just finished sweeping the courtyard within the rooms and had picked up Xi Ping's scattered clothes to wash, suddenly, his wooden hand froze inside the basin as he scrubbed.

Xi Yue slowly raised his head and saw that a tall and slim person had at some point landed in the courtyard and was just watching him attentively.

It was General Zhi.

On his own.

Xi Yue focused. He cautiously stood up and bowed.

“Just as I thought. You're not scared of me anymore now that I've changed clothes,” Zhi Xiu said, smiling. “Come and let me have a look. You've grown so tall in the blink of an eye.”

Xi Yue put his dripping wet hands behind his back and walked over as instructed.

With the nourishment of spiritual stones, the half-puppet had grown considerably. He actually looked like a real person. While the clothes he wore didn't quite fit, the materials were sumptuous, tastefully chosen, and scented. It was clear at a glance they belonged to the young master.

“Shiyong is treating you pretty well.” Zhi Xiu patted him on the head. “You can get back to work.”

After sending off the half-puppet, across a distance of several zhang, he glanced at Xi Ping’s northern rooms.

There was a lot of junk, but luckily there was the half-puppet to clean it up for him, so the rooms were quite tidy. There was nothing particularly bad.

That was only right. If there had been anything, Princess Duanrui wouldn’t have missed it. If there really was something so formless and untraceable, then it probably had to be a legendary god or demon.

Zhi Xiu inspected the places where Xi Ping normally lived bit by bit and suspected he was overthinking things. But his spiritual sense had kept leading him here.

As Xi Yue worked, he whistled. Because of his deformed tongue, the sound of his whistling was very particular.

Zhi Xiu listened for a while, then asked him, “Has Shiyong been well lately?”

Xi Yue’s whistling paused. He didn’t answer, only toiled away scrubbing the clothes.

Zhi Xiu looked at the dragon-taming chain around his neck with golden light flowing through it and thought, There’s a prohibition on him not to reveal his master’s personal business.

The dragon-taming chain originated in Shu’s Lingyun Sect. Lingyun excelled in taming spiritual beasts. Spiritual beasts were cruel and headstrong and often had a certain degree of intellect. To take

precautions against the spiritual beasts rebelling, beast tamers working with toolmaking masters had made the dragon-taming chain. Each dragon-taming chain only recognized one master, and the “keys” were the master’s mind and blood. They could bind even ancient mythical beasts.

If he had to break it by force, Zhi Xiu would be capable of it, but this half-puppet probably wouldn’t live long.. The golden light on the dragon-taming chain was very bright, which at least showed that the master’s mind was clear.

“All right,” Zhi Xiu said to the half-puppet, “convey to your master that his shishus only find it inconvenient to leave the mountain often. We aren’t the lofty and unfeeling ‘celestial beings’ of legend. You can just treat us like ordinary family elders. If you have some problem...or difficulty, you can always come to Chengjing Hall and see me.”

After listening to this, the half-puppet, whether he understood or not, kept scrubbing the clothes with his head down.

Zhi Xiu sighed and turned to go. Suddenly, behind him, the half-puppet blew emptily a few times as though he couldn’t find the right pitch, his whistling running across several notes.

Zhi Xiu stopped in his tracks.

The weather at the Latent Cultivation Temple was fine and clear. Xi Yue had brought all of Xi Ping’s bedding out into the sun. Inside and out, everything was clean and bright. When the disciples returned in the evening, he had just put away the quilt and was rinsing Xi Ping’s writing-brush washer in the courtyard when he saw Yao Qi rush into the Qiu courtyard with his face bright red. Seeing Xi Yue, he glared at him, hating him by extension, then shut his door in inconsolable shame.

Xi Yue thought nothing of it—Young Master Yao was like this every day. He probably wasn't likely to hang himself.

A moment later, Xi Ping arrived right on Yao Qi's heels, joking and laughing with Chang Jun the whole way. When he reached Yao Qi's door, he deliberately blew a long, sweet whistle... He must have been getting up to some fresh wickedness.

When Xi Yue heard whistling, he couldn't resist imitating a couple of notes. Xi Ping seemed to be in a pretty good mood. For once he didn't berate him, even patted him on the head as he walked by. When he reached the study and saw that the proximal's spiritual stone was still going, he took a blue jade out of his clothes and tossed it to the half-puppet. "Here, my reward from Moneybags Luo during evening class. I have no use for it right now, go ahead and eat it."

Tai Sui looked on coldly: in the morning, this brat had all but clung to the doorframe, not wanting to go. Now he was pleased with himself.

Princess Duanrui's lecture in the Songchuang Great Hall was purely a one-person performance. She didn't look at the disciples below her at all. At first Xi Ping had found a corner to curl up in, and he had been as nervous as a conscience-stricken thief for a while. Later, seeing that the princess didn't pay any particular attention to him, he slowly relaxed, his thoughts loosening up once more—the female disciples that he hadn't seen at all since they had entered the mountain were at last listening to a lecture with them!

Though there was a bamboo screen between them, it was no match for the acuteness of Xi Ping's eyes and ears. He heard all the faint movements and whispers on the other side clearly. The talk and laughter of the young ladies seemed to be some kind of potent elixir. Tai Sui looked on as the trembling sick cat turned into an excited big baboon.

The big baboon's excitement lasted throughout the day. In evening class, he once again won a spiritual stone relying on cheating, and on the way back had caught Yao Qi to amuse himself. Even when he returned to his rooms to write home, he was still worked up. He wrote densely and quickly. There seemed to be a spring under his ass that might launch him into the sky any time.

Never mind being useless, he was also a clown and a playboy.

Tai Sui, who had spent all day being annoyed by him, took a rough glance at Xi Ping's letter home. He saw that half of it was describing the petty matter of Yao Qi running whenever he saw him. It was extremely dull. Therefore, putting it out of sight and out of mind, he went to cycle spiritual energy on his own.

As soon as the proximal lit up, Prince Zhuang picked it up. A letter he would normally have read at a glance, he read three times through. After muttering to himself for a moment, Prince Zhuang raised his head and said to Bai Ling, "Xiao Bai, go to Lord Yao's manor for me."

That night, when the grand scribe Lord Yao had already gone to bed, a few page boys cleaned the study, arranged each newly purchased books on the shelves one by one, closed the door, and left.

For a moment, the study was still and silent. Suddenly, one of the new books shook and shot out of the bookcase on its own. It landed on the ground and opened. A piece of paper fell out of it. After the paper landed on the ground, it turned into a man like a little puppet, who quietly picked up the book and returned it to its original place.

Bai Ling quickly scouted the study and found nothing. There was only a letter on the writing desk, held down by a paperweight. It was

a few insipid sentences, only a report that the writer was safe and sound. The date was the fifteenth day of the fourth month. The signature was “your son Qi kneels to report.”

Bai Ling touched the letter and felt that the texture was very particular, something like oilpaper. He considered for a moment and remembered something. He slipped out of the lightly sealed window. Under the eaves by the window, he found a greenware¹⁹ fish hanging like a wind chime.

“So that’s it.”

The tool that the Yao family had given Yao Qi to use for sending messages was a transversal fish.

The transversal fish also came in a pair. Inside the fish’s bellies was special paper called transversal paper. Transversal paper was waterproof. After writing your letter, you soaked it in a mountain spring, pool, or some other outdoor body of water. The paper would dissolve in the water. When the water vapor rose to the clouds, it would float toward the location of the other transversal fish.

When it rained, the rainwater would once again coalesce into a letter inside the recipient’s transversal fish, and the greenware fish would spit it out.

The benefit of this thing was that it saved greatly on spiritual stones; one bean-sized green stamp was ample for one year. Its shortcoming was that only heaven knew how long it would take for the letter to arrive after it was written—it all depended on when it rained in the place where the recipient was.

Luckily, Jinping had entered the rainy season. They weren’t short on rain.

But in all this time, Yao Qi had only written a letter on the day he had arrived at the Latent Cultivation Temple. Clearly his relationship with his family wasn't especially close.

Bai Ling took out a piece of paper and quickly folded it into the shape of a fish. He tapped it, and the paper fish became a greenware fish identical to the original one. Bai Ling switched it out for the real transversal fish, which he took away. Then he left the Yao manor through the rear court.

The night deepened. Far away in the Latent Cultivation Temple, the other transversal fish was held up by a pair of shaking hands.

Yao Qi had to get up a shichen earlier than others to go get "tortured" by Immortal Luo, so he didn't dare to stay up too late. He hastily washed up and crawled under his quilt. When he had just lain down, he felt some foreign object inside the quilt. He reached out to feel for it. Someone had slipped a note into his quilt—

The characters had perhaps been written with someone's foot. They were bent and crooked, horizontal and vertical strokes and left- and right-leaning strokes all hugging each other, very offensive to the eye.

But the contents were brief and to the point: *Xi is going to get you.*

CHAPTER 27 - The Dragon Bites Its Tail (15)

Yao Qi had absolutely no doubt that Xi Ping would want to persecute him. He believed it there and then.

As the Yao family saw it, the Imperial Consort Lady Xi was a demoness, and the Xi family was a nest of demons specializing in turning out monsters of all kinds. As for that Xi Ping, Yao Qi felt that his expression when he looked at him was like he was plotting something nasty!

Just last night, Little Young Master Yao had had a nightmare. He had dreamed that Xi had stuck a piece of straw into his head and sucked out his brains, and had even complained that they were unsweetened!

How could this mean anything good?

All of Yao Qi's ideas disappeared. He would have loved to charge into Chengjing Hall on the spot and call for help. But he couldn't do that. Since he was little, he'd been the kind who would sooner wet his pants than dare to tell his teacher he needed to use the latrine. Normally, just to ask the stewards and elders how they were, he needed to rehearse over a hundred times. How could he call for help?

The handwriting on the note looked like a child's scrawl. If he went to Chengjing Hall with this to make an accusation against his classmate of wanting to hurt him... Yao Qi thought it would be more dependable to become a fierce ghost and get revenge himself.

His belly burbled. He bent over in pain, once again feeling the call of the latrine.

When the cramping pain passed, Little Young Master Yao quickly inspected his windows. At last he gathered up his courage, opened the north window in the study a crack, and peered out. By some coincidence, Xi Ping was just pouring the dregs of his tea out the window at the foot of an osmanthus tree. Across half the length of the courtyard, their gazes met.

From a distance, Xi Ping smiled at him, showing all his threateningly white teeth.

Yao Qi banged the window shut, on the point of tears: oh no, the fox demon had started grinding his teeth!

“Tsk.” Xi Ping finished pouring out the tea and tossed the cup aside. He picked up a green plum he had brought back from the dining hall and ate it.

But when he turned and saw the reincarnation wood carving on the desk, he suddenly seemed to become gloomy once again. Before he had even spit out the pit in his mouth, the smile in his eyes had evaporated.

“Senior, I think I saw A-Xiang’s grandpa die yesterday.”

“Yes,” said Tai Sui.

“Didn’t you say you were going to save him?”

“I had him released from prison,” Tai Sui said calmly. “This is the common fate of humanity. In all the southern outskirts, how many live past their fifth decade?”

Xi Ping didn’t debate with him. He snatched up the reincarnation wood, concentrated, and entered meditation.

All he saw were countless pairs of hopeful eyes, and what he heard was like a flood of wailing. Then, borrowing the evil cultivator's eyes, his gaze dropped beneath the smoke and dust, and he saw A-Xiang.

A whole day had passed, and the fellow workers offering their condolences had left one after another. Auntie Chun had gone out to buy food. In the dilapidated mourning shed, only the orphaned girl remained, mechanically adding paper to the brazier.

When Xi Ping looked at her, A-Xiang seemed to sense it. Across time and space, she met Xi Ping's eyes.

She kept thinking she had heard a sigh, and out of nowhere she felt a sense of grievance. Her nose stung.

Just then, someone asked quietly behind her, "What did you sense?"

A-Xiang was startled. She jumped up at once. "Who's there?"

A man wearing a bamboo hat had entered the mourning shed at some point. There was a crow perched on his shoulder.

The man didn't answer. He respectfully lit incense for the deceased, then said heavily, "My condolences."

A-Xiang returned a salute automatically and inadvertently raised her eyes. She saw the face under the man's bamboo hat. A-Xiang turned pale and nearly threw up—half of the man's face seemed to have been burned by acid. On the left side of his face, there was only tightly stretched skin, no features. But the single eye remaining in this horrifying face was warm and melancholy. A-Xiang, meeting this gaze that was like a father's or older brother's, somehow wasn't so afraid anymore.

The man said warmly, “Child, did you just sense the notice of Grand Duke Tai Sui?”

A-Xiang was surprised. She clutched the reincarnation wood amulet on her chest. “You’re...”

“That night, it was Grand Duke Tai Sui who led me to render you and your friend service,” the man said. “Good child, don’t cry. Tai Sui is watching you. You will accomplish great things in the future. What’s your name?”

The girl didn’t know whether she ought to trust him, ought to thank him. She said, haltingly, “A-Xiang...”

The man looked at the name on the memorial tablet. “Your full name is Wei Xiang?”

“...Wei Chengxiang.”

The man seemed to smile. “Fine. Do you think I’m qualified to guide you?”

A-Xiang was dizzy. “To guide me where, uncle?”

“Underground, there to put on your feathers, climb onto the branch, and cry out against injustice,” the man said softly. “Remember these words: ‘The conflagration burns on, the cry of the cicada is without end. Better to die in frost than to forsake one’s convictions.’”

Xi Ping frowned at once. The image in the center of his brow crumbled. “Senior, I don’t understand. That little girl hasn’t even grown in all her feathers. She doesn’t understand anything. What’s the use of taking her as a follower? It would be better to take the grown-up lady hanging around her.”

Tai Sui paused, then answered vaguely, “It wasn’t I who chose her. It was she who chose me—you should do your schoolwork.”

Xi Ping gave an unwilling *sure*, like a lazy donkey putting off pulling a millstone. Dawdling, he spent an age washing the cinnabar he had stained his hands with when he’d grabbed the reincarnation wood, then, idly, he removed the karma beast’s makeup, then asked for fresh tea, then ate fruit. Only when he heard Tai Sui’s snort did he unwillingly sit down in front of his desk and open the book their shixiong had told them to read.

Xi Ping was considering: the first day he had heard people speaking, the clearest voice had been A-Xiang’s calling “save my grandpa.” The old roundworm had claimed that she had been the one to wake him, and that was likely the truth.

There had to be something special about this little lady; if it wasn’t her horoscope, then it was her physical makeup.

The great evil cultivator called himself “Tai Sui,” and even said that reincarnation wood was his associated material. He might not be afraid of losing his tongue for talking so big, but Xi Ping didn’t believe a word of it.

Reincarnation wood had existed since ancient times. It wasn’t some new product brought in from abroad. But this evil cultivator... Based on his limited information, Xi Ping felt that he probably belonged to General Zhi’s generation.

The old roundworm truly talked big. To hear him talk, he didn’t attach any importance to mortals. He knew Zhi Xiu, but Zhi Xiu didn’t know him; so when he had seen Zhi Xiu before, he had been “looking up.” At least at that time, he hadn’t been a cultivator. Zhi Xiu had fallen gravely ill in his youth and entered Xuanyin Mountain at around thirty. The old roundworm had seen him in the mortal world, so he couldn’t have been born too late.

In fact, Xi Ping also felt that his birth wasn't very high, and that he must have lived in seclusion away from the world for a long period—every time he mocked “wanton excess,” he had to bring up the Phoenix's Perch Pavilion. It was absurd.

This was why Xi Ping had dared to exploit an advantage and have the half-puppet pass General Zhi a message through “sweet notes.”

“Sweet notes” were a code for Jinping's idle sons of the wealthy to send messages to each other, used to avoid their family elders when they had made trouble. They were divided into three types: “played sweet notes,” “whistled sweet notes” and “tapped sweet notes.” Of these, “tapped sweet notes” were messages passed by tapping a rhythm with your knuckles; they had the lowest threshold for use. There were quite a lot of people who used them, and it was easy for a secret to leak out, so their rules changed regularly. The played and whistled ones, on the other hand, didn't change much. The night before, Xi Ping had tried to teach the half-puppet a few “whistled sweet notes.”

He didn't know whether Zhi Xiu would be able to understand, but at any rate Tai Sui probably wouldn't. If the evil cultivator had some method of spying he didn't know about, he wouldn't be giving anything away.

As for the note he'd had the half-puppet stick into Yao Qi's quilt, Xi Ping had treated it as “a funny prank” and openly written about it in his letter home. The great demon had thought he was being dull and hadn't paid attention... This way, he could write something different in the notes later.

“I'm very sorry, brother. You can think of it as there being more merit in saving one life than in building a seven-tiered pagoda,” Xi Ping thought. “After this, I'll stand in place and let you hit me to work it out.”

But... who would have thought it—with Zhi-shishu's air like a gentleman out of an ancient book, he hadn't been proper at all when he was young.

With his mind full of evil schemes, Xi Ping casually muddled through his homework. Anyway, if his shixiong asked a question, there would be someone to help him cheat.

The next morning, Yao Qi saw the reincarnation wood carving arranged on Xi Ping's table in the Qiankun Tower. The "matchmaker's makeup" had been wiped off. Xi Ping had drawn uneven eyebrows on the karma beast and dotted freckles around its nose.

Yao Qi's blood instantly ran cold—*he* had uneven eyebrows and freckles!

After evening class, Yao Qi returned to the Qiu courtyard as though running away, and, quaking with fear, found a second note in his quilt.

When he got up in the morning, he found a third one in his shoe...

These corpse-littered scribbles would soon drive Little Young Master Yao mad. At last, he couldn't take it any more. He took out the transversal paper and, crying, wrote his family a letter asking for help. In the middle of the night, he stealthily put it in the little pond in the courtyard.

After placing the letter, Yao Qi went inside, and the half-puppet Xi Yue came out from behind a tree and carried the shoes he had finished cleaning back to Xi Ping's rooms.

Jinping had been overcast for several days. A welcome rain fell.

“He calls himself ‘Tai Sui’?” Prince Zhuang rubbed the center of his brow. “You’re saying that an evil god half a step from shedding his skin had his inscription for stealing the Dragon Vein destroyed by Shiyong using a fan?”

Bai Ling had his head very low and spoke without any confidence. “That’s the information we received from our plant in Heaven’s Design Pavilion. I also found it unbelievable and went out of my way to give the order to make discreet inquiries with Captain Zhao. I think I can say it’s been confirmed.”

Prince Zhuang frowned, not answering.

Bai Ling said, “I have been unsuccessful in carrying out my duties...”

But Prince Zhuang waved a hand and said almost inaudibly, “Actually, what you’ve said makes me think of someone from *over there*.”

Bai Ling froze. “Do you mean the Impass... Who’s there?!”

His shouted question was forceful. It broke right through the invisible screen set up by the inscriptions on the door and windows and reached outside.

Once the inscription screen broke, the sound of wind and rain swept into the room. Soon after, someone said loudly and clearly: “Assistant Commander Pang Jian of Heaven’s Design Pavilion, come to beg an audience with His Highness Prince Zhuang.”

Prince Zhuang raised his eyebrows and quickly exchanged a look with Bai Ling.

Bai Ling immediately started to turn into a paper man to hide. When he had turned halfway to paper, he was interrupted by Prince

Zhuang. “No need, Commander Pang has a Barrier Dispelling Way of the Heart, already established. You can’t hide from his eyes— Exalted, please come in.”

Pang Jian passed through the courtyard wall in answer, put his umbrella down in the corridor, and waited for Bai Ling to open the door.

His face was impassive, but inside he was aghast: apart from General Zhi, to this day no one knew that his Way of the Heart was established. How had this Prince Zhuang, a mortal, seen it? And opened his mouth to blurt it out?

And then there were the inscriptions...

There was nothing impermissible about the inscriptions in Prince Zhuang Manor. In fact, they were all third-class inscriptions that Xuanyin Mountain conferred as a rule. Another walker in the mortal world in his place may not have seen any problem, but Pang Jian just happened to know some things about inscriptions, and he saw the problem at once.

The full depth of knowledge about inscriptions could probably only be said to be understood by the great god Pangu, born in chaos, who had divided heaven and earth with his own hands. Some people even believed that inscriptions were the basis of the wind that moved the clouds and the force that made rivers flow into oceans in the mortal world.

The placement of an inscription character could swap winter and summer, make azaleas grow in the snow, settle frost beneath a blazing sun. Each stroke of an inscription had to be absolutely precise. Too long or too short by the smallest degree, and the results would be major. Even a change in the person carving it, or the time it was carved at, would cause changes to the form of an inscription.

Inscriptions required the transfer of the carver's essence; only a cultivator who had established a foundation could carve them. But for ninety percent of established foundation cultivators, never mind engraving them, they were already doing well if they had a general understanding of third-class inscriptions. Even a cultivator who specialized in studying inscriptions might not be able to carve even a simple fourth-class inscription after over a century of study.

The kind of third-class inscriptions used in the manor of a prince of the second rank needed to have a specialist calculate an auspicious time, have everyone temporarily withdraw, and lay down the inscriptions according to the strictest method and order. If the order a little off, it could blow a garden into smithereens.

But the order of the inscriptions in Prince Zhuang Manor's south study was completely wrong. Someone had clearly rearranged them!

With Pang Jian's knowledge, he couldn't tell how the disrupted inscriptions had been arranged. He only knew that just now, through two thin walls, he hadn't been able to hear a single sound from the south study.

Compared to this, the secret guard beside Prince Zhuang who, strictly speaking, was an "evil cultivator," amounted to nothing.

Prince Zhuang saw him enter and didn't stand up. There was a thick blanket laid over his lap. Smiling, he said, "I've been frail since birth. My knees start acting up as soon as it gets rainy. Forgive me for not being able to rise to meet you, Exalted."

Pang Jian quickly said, politely, "No need."

Bai Ling silently prepared tea. Prince Zhuang gave Bai Ling a look and said meaningfully, smiling, "Coming here alone, Exalted, I

presume you haven't come for the purpose of 'burning paper.' What did you want to see me about?"

With him not observing propriety, Pang Jian got right to the point as well. "I came because I received a secret order from the inner sect's Zhi-shishu. He told me to tell no one else but to come see Your Highness."

Prince Zhuang's hands, lying on his knees, curled up. "Oh?"

Pang Jian said, "Concerning the matter of the Viscount of Yongning."

The smile like a spring breeze vanished from Prince Zhuang's face. The look of his pitch-dark eyes put you in mind of bottomless wells.

"Has Xi Shiyong been getting up to mischief again in the Latent Cultivation Temple? There's no need for the sect to stand on ceremony. If he's done something wrong, by all means go ahead and give him a beating." He took the tea Bai Ling offered him and softly, as feebly as if he were in unbearable pain, said, "Anyway, what can I do about him? You would be better off going to the Marquis of Yongning, Exalted."

Pang Jian said, "Your Highness, it was the Viscount himself who told shishu this and said we should come to you."

The cup and lid in Prince Zhuang's hands met with a loud click.

"Shishu said that because we were inattentive for a time, we allowed the evil cultivator from the southern outskirts to get away, and he has used some unknown evil arts to possess Xi-shidi, concealing himself even from Princess Duanrui's observation. Luckily, shidi has yet to open his spiritual eyes, and he is alert. He has done what he can to notify shishu of this, and he says he has a

means of communicating with Your Highness. He told us to come see you.”

Prince Zhuang was silent for a moment. He smiled a little strangely, and, with emphasis, said, “He has... a lot of confidence in the immortal sect.”

“Yes. No matter what, we will protect Xi-shidi,” Pang Jian said. “Your Highness is very powerful. You even laid bare my Way of the Heart. Presumably you already know that this evil cultivator calls himself ‘Tai Sui.’ He is of the consummate ascended spirit stage. Though his cultivation level doesn’t match his actual strength, he has many strange methods at his disposal. With Xi-shidi in his hands, we don’t dare to alert that evil cultivator lightly. Shishu has already returned to the inner sect to request an immortal tool, but we must first find out that evil cultivator’s true name before we can know how to strip him away from Xi-shidi. Your Highness, if you have information, can you help us out?”

Prince Zhuang raised his eyes. “Exalted, everyone says the Way of the Heart is a cultivator’s lifeblood. Now that I know your Way of the Heart, aren’t you scared?”

Pang Jian’s expression didn’t change. He didn’t even stumble. “A Way of the Heart must be constantly questioned to begin with, constantly interrogated. It can only be fully integrated if it survives tribulations. If you are afraid of your Way of the Heart being questioned, it means you are afraid you yourself do not believe in it and are only attempting to fool yourself and others. I feel no threat.”

Prince Zhuang gave him a profound look. “Exalted, with your talents, it’s a pity you haven’t entered the inner sect.”

After saying this, he threw off the blanket on his legs, stood up, and finally returned Pang Jian’s salute. “On the day of the Grand Selection, owing to a slight indisposition, I did not go to Heaven’s

Design Pavilion and missed the chance to see General Zhi's elegant bearing, which has subdued our family's fiend in human form. Since that bastard has made a clean breast of everything, then I have nothing to conceal..."

Before he could finish, there was a sudden peculiar sound of water outside the window.

Prince Zhuang paused. Bai Ling swiftly leapt up. After a moment, he brought back the flailing greenware fish. "Your Highness, there really is a letter!"

A transversal fish?

Pang Jian stared, thinking that this was very shabby. Had the half-puppet really eaten that brat into poverty?

Prince Zhuang had already spread the letter out. He scanned it quickly and gave it to Pang Jian.

As soon as Pang Jian saw the neat and cautious writing, he instinctively knew it hadn't been written by Xi Ping. He looked at the heading and found that the sender was a young disciple whose name was "Qi."

The letter babbled a request for help to his family, telling an incredible story.

"Qi" said that Xi Ping had a monster made of reincarnation wood that he had made up to look like the writer. It was very strange—as soon as he saw the wood carving, his chest hurt, and he couldn't breathe. An anonymous master had told him that this carving was used to control a person in his sleep. As soon as he opened his spiritual eyes, it would lead an evil monster to snatch his body. The Xi family had already employed an evil cultivator to establish an altar

in the Blissful Village and was planning a conspiracy to murder the Crown Prince using him.

The evil cultivator had a name, wrote Second Young Master Yao, who would believe anything when scared: “Her name is Wei Chengxiang. She’s hiding in the southern outskirts!”

Pang Jian: “...”

It made sense that Xi Ping would be able to contact Zhi Xiu. Pang Jian knew that he had the dragon-taming chain. Even if that Tai Sui were unusually meticulous, or Xi Ping was sloppy and allowed himself to be found out, with General Zhi there, he would do his best to take the consequences for him.

But how could that brat make a classmate who obviously didn’t get along with him write a letter in his place?

And the person who had sent the letter was completely in the dark!

After reading the letter, Pang Jian couldn’t resist looking at Prince Zhuang. He thought, There’s more to the Marquis of Yongning than meets the eye.

Just as he’d thought. How could Emperor Taiming confer nobility on someone just because he was attractive? His Majesty wasn’t a cutsleeve! Young Mistress Cui hadn’t lost her head from lust; she had known exactly what was good for her!

Seeing the look in his eyes, Prince Zhuang knew that Pang Jian was getting carried away. “Shiyong lived here with me for a few years when he was little. Because he’s my uncle’s only son, and I was also young and impetuous at the time, seeing that he wasn’t making progress, I disciplined him in place of his parents. These are all the cheap tricks he got up to in fighting me when he didn’t want to study.”

“Your Highness is too modest.” Pang Jian quickly went over the letter and picked out the key terms: Blissful Village, reincarnation wood, body-snatched on opening spiritual eyes.

“Elders from the inner sect examined Xi-shidi and the reincarnation wood in his possession. They found nothing unusual.” Pang Jian was a straightforward person. He explained all the details about Tai Sui at the Blissful Village to Prince Zhuang, then said, “Zhi-shishu’s guess is that this evil cultivator must simply be using his primordial being to possess him. The evil cultivators we caught before communicated amongst themselves by letting writing in fresh blood soak into reincarnation wood. As the evil god they worship, this ‘Tai Sui’ doesn’t seem to need bloodletting to communicate with them. Your Highness, what do you think about it?”

Prince Zhuang didn’t interrupt. Only after listening carefully did he slowly say, “First, this fake god must be a man, not too old, about the same age as General Zhi.”

Pang Jian stared—Zhi Xiu had also said as much.

“Second, this Wei Chengxiang in the southern outskirts is likely closely connected to the evil cultivator... At the very least, the evil cultivator must be able to observe her at any time. When your people investigate her, they shouldn’t get close, or else it will alert the evil cultivator. Third, at the Blissful Village, why did that evil cultivator choose Shiyong and not one of the half-immortals? From your description, it seems connected to that prostitute swapping her life for his. When you investigate Wei Chengxiang, don’t forget the prostitute.” Prince Zhuang paused, then said, “There’s another thing. Commander Pang, you just mentioned the ‘sleep paralysis imps’ and ‘soul-driving spice’ from the south... These two things disappeared from the black market many years ago, but this person can not only obtain them, he also knows the ‘secret art.’ I suspect

this person has a connection to the south—the spiritual stone mines that once belonged to the Lancang Sword Sect are there.”

Pang Jian took a deep breath and decided to keep to his own judgment, not listen to Prince Zhuang’s nonsense—certainly there was more than met the eye to the whole Xi family.

“We’ll investigate. If you receive any other information, Your Highness...”

“I’ll deliver it to you at once, Exalted.” Prince Zhuang didn’t put on his painted-on false smile. “I’m entrusting Shiyong to you.”

CHAPTER 28 - The Dragon Bites Its Tail (16)

“This Wei Chengxiang is an orphan, only fifteen, originating in Ling County. She and her grandfather were left on their own. Her grandfather’s name is Wei Pengcheng. The two of them worked together in the southern outskirts. They’re purely mortal—there’s no association with cultivation in eighteen generations of their ancestors. The only unusual thing is that when there was a change in the reincarnation wood held by Heaven’s Design Pavilion, Wei Chengxiang’s grandfather had just been arrested by city guard soldiers.”

Heaven’s Design Pavilion worked very efficiently. It wasn’t long before they knew everything about A-Xiang’s history.

In front of an outsider, even if the sky collapsed, not even the speed Prince Zhuang blinked at would change.

But while he had originally been listening calmly, holding his tea, at this point, his expression changed for the first time. “Why was her grandfather arrested?”

“Recently someone hired a group of workers to cry a grievance in the southern outskirts and slander the court. It’s something like that... Your Highness must know more about it than I do.” Pang Jian gave him a strange look. “What’s wrong?”

Prince Zhuang quickly covered up his slightly unusual expression and waved a hand. “Nothing. Please continue, Exalted.”

“A few days later, Wei Pengcheng was released for no reason at all. It was said that a city guard had found out he had been wrongly accused. It sounded strange to me that a city guard would actually know the meaning of the words ‘wrongly accused’, so I found that particularly learned officer and had a karma beast search his

residence. As expected, it found spiritual stones and immortal tools. The same night the old man was released, the little girl was involved in another case. A foreman surnamed Lü got drunk and became unruly. He intended to commit unlawful acts against her and another woman. He was unsuccessful and died of a heart attack in the process. After the coroner determined the cause of death, the girl and the woman were released. But Heaven's Design Pavilion reexamined the body and found that it contained traces of spiritual energy—our guess is that someone shut the arteries in his heart to make it stop beating.”

Bai Ling cut in: “An evil cultivator accomplice received word and helped her?”

“Yes. That was the very day Xi-shidi begged a reincarnation wood carving from the Latent Cultivation Temple. Perhaps the evil cultivator could only communicate with his disciples then,” Pang Jian said. “Apart from that, another mysterious person has appeared beside Wei Chengxiang. This person is unusually alert. He has a crow we suspect of being a spiritual beast. We don't dare to get close for the moment.”

Prince Zhuang asked, “What about Wei Pengcheng?”

“He's dead.” Pang Jian paused. “He was elderly and weak, already sick in bed. He was beaten a few times in prison. He died the same night he was released.”

“I see,” Prince Zhuang said slowly. “In other words, that evil cultivator doesn't actually care what happens to this Wei Chengxiang. He only wants to trick her into joining him. What can a fifteen-year-old orphan girl have that's worth coveting? Does she have any connection to that prostitute from Overflowing Splendor?”

Peng Jian thought about it. “Wei Chengxiang's hemogram is vermilion bird. Jiangli... Jiangli died without an intact corpse. We

can't be sure of her hemogram,²⁰ but it's probably the same. Eight out of ten people in Ning'an have the vermilion bird hemogram. Wei Chengxiang's horoscope happens to be 'yin in all four pillars,' and it seems that Jiangli's is as well... but there are quite a lot of 'yin in all four pillars' people. Apart from this, the two of them are unconnected."

"Hemogram, horoscope..." Prince Zhuang tapped his palm now and again. "Are their figures also similar?"

"The little girl hasn't developed yet, so it's hard to say. She seems to have a small frame, though her grandpa was of the tall and slender build." Pang Jian froze, then caught up. "Your Highness, do you mean..."

"The spiritual image," said Prince Zhuang.

"The spiritual image?" said Pang Jiang.

The two of them spoke almost simultaneously.

If different people carved the same inscription character and wanted to achieve the same result, they had to adjust the form of the inscription character. In the immortal sects, some inscription experts believed that this was caused by the cultivators having different "spiritual images." But as for what a "spiritual image" actually was, how many types there were, whether different types had their own merits and drawbacks, or how they were determined, there were currently no conclusions—there were too few established foundation cultivators, and among them those who would carve inscriptions were few and far between. There was insufficient data for research.

There was only one commonly accepted conclusion: people with similar spiritual images had similar horoscopes, and they were often

alike in physical appearance and disposition.

“I fought against that chief sacrifice Jiangli,” Pang Jian said. “She was inexperienced, but her cultivation was no worse than mine. At her age, even if she had opened her spiritual eyes in her mother’s womb, she still wouldn’t be able to clarify herself to the point of having spiritual bones. Anyway, if she had opened her spiritual eyes earlier, she wouldn’t have been reduced to prostitution.”

“Oh,” said Prince Zhuang, “then it may be the Stone Drilled in Bone technique.”

Pang Jian was already numb toward the extent of his knowledge. He sighed. “A fatal technique. I suspect she was tricked. Back then...”

Back then, apart from the Dragon Vein, Jiangli must have been just the sacrifice that Tai Sui wanted. Even if Jiangli and the others had succeeded in tricking a member of Heaven’s Design Pavilion into taking her place, in the end, the great evil cultivator still wouldn’t have let her go. He had only been pretending to take all possible means to avoid it in order to make her willingly offer up everything she had.

Prince Zhuang had no interest in the wrongs committed against an evil cultivator who had endangered the public. He interrupted Pang Jian’s “back then.” “A half-immortal can’t perish without making a sound. Heaven’s Design Pavilion likely has a record. First investigate whether there have been any similar evil cultivators who died for reasons unknown.”

“I’ll go look through the files.” Pang Jian tactfully followed along with his change of subject. “From Renzong up to the present...”

“No,” said Prince Zhuang, “start from the present and go backward. I think that this person hasn’t been causing trouble that long.”

Pang Jian paused, then understood what he meant—if it were otherwise, the Sea of Stars couldn't only now have given a warning. And even if the Sea of Stars had broken down, if there really had been an “evil god” hidden beneath the peace of the last two hundred years, then the support he had used to steal the Dragon Vein had been too shoddy.

Pang Jian thought, If His Highness Prince Zhuang became an evil cultivator, give him ten years and he might have infiltrated all of Xuanyin's inner sect.

Prince Zhuang watched him walk through the wall and leave. For a long moment, his eyes remained on the shady wall, unmoving.

Bai Ling didn't dare to disturb him. He stood there not making a sound.

After a long time, Prince Zhuang finally seemed to come back to life. He lowered his lashes. “Xiao Bai, do you believe in destiny?”

Though the lousy idea of hiring people to cry a grievance was something Lord Sun of the Canal Office had come up with on his own, making an issue of the farmers who had lost their land was in fact something he, Zhou Ying, had stirred up from the shadows. He had muddied the waters, made the Crown Prince “plead illness and stay home to recuperate” up to now, reaped the benefits of His Majesty's anger against land transport... He had thought that the plan was seamless, but who could have expected that the aftereffects created by it would have gone around and at last fallen on Xi Ping?

The constantly shifting evil flood dragon had opened its mouth to bare its fangs and bitten its own tail.

Bai Ling said, seriously, “Since the day Your Highness took me out of the Impassable Sea, I no longer believe in it.”

“The Impassable Sea.” Prince Zhuang’s lips curved in a false smile. “How do you know that the Impassable Sea wasn’t the start of the fork in the road?”

Just then, the white jade proximal lit up. Prince Zhuang’s still clouded gaze fell on it—since Xi Ping had found a ready mouthpiece in Yao Qi, he had stopped writing anything proper on the proximal.

Handwriting showed the writer’s emotions. Xi Ping, this magical creature, had stirred the Peak Master of Flying Jade Peak, all of Heaven’s Design Pavilion, and even Prince Zhuang Manor into unease day and night, but he himself was eating well and sleeping soundly, feeling pretty pleased with himself. On the proximal, he praised the Latent Cultivation Temple’s green plums and bazhen cakes, then bragged smugly that he had recited his lessons well and received six spiritual stone points from Yang-shixiong; soon he would have gathered up enough points for another blue jade!

Prince Zhuang stared at the proximal for a moment with a strange expression, not knowing whether to laugh or cry: since he was little, Xi Ping had acted like making him memorize a lesson was butchering him. It was harder to make a few words stick in his head than to reach the sky. Could he have changed now that he was in the Latent Cultivation Temple? This brat! Everyone was holding back for fear of harming him, but he was doing fine, using the evil cultivator to cheat his way to success!

In the Latent Cultivation Temple’s Qiu courtyard, Xi Ping had just finished writing home. Before he could even stretch, Tai Sui suddenly asked, “Where is your half-puppet?”

Xi Ping’s joints cracked.

Without waiting for an answer, Tai Sui controlled him and stood up, then strode out. He grabbed the half-puppet, who was just peering toward Yao Qi's rooms, and pulled him back. "Don't think I don't know what you made him do!"

Xi Ping's scalp tightened. In an instant, the cracks in his bones went cold.

But it was only an instant. Then he caught up—no, Yao Qi had already sent the letter. If the old roundworm had really noticed something, he couldn't have waited until now to flare up. He was trying to trick him.

So Xi Ping said inwardly, with justice on his side, "Senior, be merciful, senior, I made him... well, play a little trick, that's all. I wasn't playing it on you!"

Tai Sui dragged the half-puppet inside and roughly tore a wad of paper from his clothes.

Xi Yue quickly reached out to snatch it back. A finger blast hit his arrays, and the half-puppet fell to his knees without a sound.

Tai Sui kept feeling that something was touching his spiritual sense, but "Tai Sui" wasn't his true name, so the direction the spiritual sense pointed in was very blurred. Seeing that Xi Ping's half-puppet was always sneaking away toward Yao Qi next door, he had involuntarily become suspicious.

Xi Ping's eyes became cold. He saw the great evil cultivator use his hands to quickly open up the wad of paper. A big worm the thickness of a finger pattered out and wriggled along the ground. There was a cartoonish face drawn on the unfolded paper.

Tai Sui: "..."

Xi Ping cried out: "It's getting away! It's getting away! Xi Yue worked so hard to catch it..."

Before he could finish, one of his legs lifted without warning and stamped the worm flat.

Xi Ping was pulled into a stagger by that leg. He screamed, "That's disgusting!"

"You know what disgusting means?" Tai Sui tossed the paper aside and coldly said, "If you get up to these silly tricks again instead of focusing on cultivation, you'll be in for another burning."

Xi Ping: "..."

Aside from the words "cultivation" and "burning," he had heard this sentence many times growing up.

"What's the point of memorizing those ancient texts? Be reasonable, senior, do you make your own followers memorize lessons? Can't they open their spiritual eyes without that?"

"The rogue cultivators of the mortal world have no formal teaching. They pay all kinds of prices to have people teach them. If someone were willing to read a legitimate ancient text to them, they would get on their knees and be that person's dog!"

Xi Ping pressed his lips together. He couldn't put himself in those people's shoes at all.

The princess had finished lecturing and had left the Latent Cultivation Temple with Zhi Xiu. Perhaps the young master felt the danger was past. He had relaxed and was spending all day teasing his classmates or making mischief, not shrinking from any crime.

He seemed to have turned his head and tossed away his resolution to “work to redress the wrongs of people like Jiangli,” like the dissolute people of the mortal world who, after they were through lamenting the state of their lives, wasted no time in burying themselves in licentiousness.

He had also tossed the reincarnation wood carving aside and lost interest in it.

Oh, yes, the reincarnation wood carving.

Tai Sui had another thought—why had he suddenly stopped touching the reincarnation wood carving?

But before his suspicions could arise, Xi Ping casually grabbed the reincarnation wood carving and said, naïvely and unfeelingly, “I completely forgot, that little beauty you took in as a disciple, how is she doing?”

As he spoke, Xi Ping closed his eyes, concentrated on the center of his brow with practiced ease, and found A-Xiang. He was just in time to see A-Xiang take out a little paper bag, hesitate a moment while staring at the green powder inside, then pick it up, about to pour it into her mouth.

Seeing this, Xi Ping thought that she was depressed and planning to take poison. “Hey, don’t eat that!”

A-Xiang paused at once. She opened her eyes wide and searched all around—she thought someone had just called to her. “Who’s there?”

Xi Ping didn’t dare to speak again.

“Is it.. Grand Duke Tai Sui?” A-Xiang jumped up and held the reincarnation wood amulet on her chest with both hands. Not

hearing an answer, she prayed, “Bless me, Tai Sui, and let me smoothly begin my cultivation and be worthy of my shifu... and of this expensive spiritual stone powder. I’ll definitely avenge my grandpa, make lots of money, and take Auntie Chun away from here...”

Only then did Xi Ping understand that the bright green powder wasn’t pesticide; it was powdered jade stamps.

His eyes opened wide. A-Xiang’s prayers still echoed in his ears. “How can she hear me, too?”

Before, only Tai Sui could talk to his believers through the reincarnation wood. Xi Ping was only a tool; he could only close his eyes and follow along with the action. Why did it seem like the little girl had heard his voice just now?

“Well, there’s no harm in it for you,” Tai Sui said lightly. “Swallowing spiritual stone powder is common practice for rogue cultivators. There’s nothing to be shocked about. Outside, there aren’t the resources your Xuanyin immortal mountains have. If they want to do their best to squeeze out a bit of spiritual energy to nourish their meridians, they have to grind up inferior grade spiritual stones and swallow them.”

Xi Ping stared at the reincarnation wood in his hands, feeling a sudden sense of danger. “Senior, am I going to open my spiritual eyes soon?” said Xi Ping, pretending to beam with joy.

Tai Sui said, “If you aren’t so distracted, then perhaps... it’ll happen before the first leaves fall.”

Xi Ping’s heart missed a beat. It was the height of summer now, and the Latent Cultivation Temple was in the mountains. The cold came early. It would be only a few days, wouldn’t it?

But that was wrong! He had been completely feigning compliance the whole time!

When they trained their spiritual sense in the Qiankun Tower, Xi Ping pretended every day to be competing with His Fourth Highness to be first, rushing to open his spiritual eyes as fast as possible; when he “entered meditation to cycle his breathing,” what he in fact entered was the dragon-taming chain to pass the time chatting with the half-puppet; as for working hard... he hadn’t done a bit of hard work, only used his natural abilities to play the part.

How could he still open his spiritual eyes like this? And how could the old roundworm know how much progress he had made?

Xi Ping paused. Then he suddenly picked up *Latent Cultivation Notes*—everyone had one of these books. It contained the sect rules, information about the Latent Cultivation Temple’s stewards, and other such content.

“What are you looking for?”

“I’m looking for the record.” Xi Ping was so “excited” his heart was pounding. “Latent Cultivation Notes has a record of the first person in each class to open their spiritual eyes. Afterward, nearly all of them entered the inner sect. I vaguely recall that the record for the fastest person to open their spiritual eyes is five or six months... Ha! Senior, do I have those legendary innate spiritual bones or what?”

Tai Sui: “...”

You have that legendary “innate shamelessness.”

Xi Ping, deeply self-satisfied, said, “So why should I work hard? I...”

To guard against him floating into the sky and knocking down the moon with his self-proclaimed “innate spiritual bones,” Tai Sui

splashed cold water on him. “Innate spiritual bones occur in less than one in ten million people. In the last thousand years, the only instance in your Xuanyin Mountain has been Duanrui. If you had innate spiritual bones, you would have caught the inner sect’s attention long before coming here. Stop gloating.”

“Hehehe,” said Xi Ping, “I don’t believe you.”

Tai Sui: “...”

A normal person couldn’t talk sense to an idiot.

So the next moment, it was as if Xi Ping had stepped into a bonfire. Burning pain leapt up his foot, burning up to his knee. At the same time, Tai Sui sealed his powers of speech, so he couldn’t even scream. Xi Yue, however, immediately noticed something was wrong through the dragon-taming chain. He let out a sound and threw himself forward to support him.

Xi Ping waved a hand at the half-puppet and kept his footing on his own. All the color had gone out of his face.

In the small study, one couldn’t speak, and the other didn’t know how to speak. Stifling stillness filled the air. The evil cultivator’s soft voice sounded in Xi Ping’s ear... Perhaps it was his mistake, but the voice sounded closer than before.

“Every night when you’re asleep, I do your breathing exercises for you and make you touch the reincarnation wood. With my powers running through you, naturally your spiritual sense is superior to that of others, and your spiritual eyes are looser than those of others. In the future, as soon as you open your spiritual eyes, your spiritual bones will also be easier to complete than those of others... That’s because you’ve had the good luck to encounter me, encounter that stupid Chen girl who was willing to give up her life for you—there’s

no cause for you to think highly of your own accomplishments and slack off, understand?”

Xi Ping couldn't answer.

Having “scared” him, Tai Sui once again became gentle. “Making you work hard is for your own good. The reason you Latent Cultivation Temple disciples open your spiritual eyes slowly is a delicate choice on the part of your shixiongs. It's so that your meridians, your lungs and heart, your whole body can become fully soaked in spiritual energy, to prevent you from suffering when you open your spiritual eyes. Making progress too fast isn't necessarily a good thing. There have even been people whose meridians shattered the moment their spiritual eyes opened. Why don't you go to your Yanhai Building and read the records of failed spiritual eye openings?”

Xi Ping's mouth and tongue relaxed. He could talk again, but he didn't dare to make a sound. He could only nod obediently.

“Good child. Go to bed early.”

A little fawningly, Xi Ping said, cautiously, “Senior, what kind of suffering comes with opening your spiritual eyes? Those followers of yours... with no immortal mountains to rely on, what will happen to them? Will A-Xiang be all right just eating spiritual stone powder?”

Tai Sui saw that he had scared him, so he very patiently explained some common knowledge to him: “When you open your spiritual eyes, if your meridians haven't been fully soaked in spiritual energy, they may be destroyed by it. There are usually two ways rogue cultivators open their spiritual eyes. One way is by chance. If they live for a long period in a place with abundant spiritual energy, when they encounter mortal danger, their latent potential will erupt at the moment their life hangs by a thread...”

Xi Ping carelessly asked, “Like Pang Jian?”

“How did you know?” said Tai Sui.

“Heard it from someone before coming to the Latent Cultivation Temple,” Xi Ping lied casually—in fact, he had felt it from the way Commander Pang talked. Heaven’s Design Pavilion was the same as the inner sect; it had countless ties to Great Wan’s court. Though each of the Exalted seemed like a celestial being with classic texts in his belly, Pang Jian didn’t. Xi Ping felt that he wasn’t very concerned with politics; he hadn’t even known the full background of the Imperial Consort’s maternal family.

“You could call him lucky. There was a mine collapse in the spiritual stone mines in the south. Hundreds of people died, but he survived.” Tai Sui simply assumed all these sons of the aristocracy had their own sources of information and didn’t think much of it. He sighed with emotion, then said, “The other way is like A-Xiang, eating spiritual stone fragments to make spiritual energy enter their meridians from the inside... Though that’s always second best, and rather perilous when it comes time to open their spiritual eyes. Those whose bodies haven’t been nourished by spiritual energy will often be injured and disfigured when the time comes. Or did you think that my followers looked hardly human on purpose?”

Xi Ping was stunned silent.

After a long moment, he said in agitation, “What? That little beauty is going to be disfigured?”

He thought: Commander Pang comes from the south? He became a cultivator because of a mine collapse? How does this old roundworm know?

Heaven's Design Pavilion's Exalted who came from among the common people didn't especially mention their origins, each more mysterious than the next, because strictly speaking, until they had entered the aboveboard path, they counted as "evil cultivators." This wasn't something you could talk about openly.

Xi Ping's mind worked quickly. He had an idea.

The next day, the Qiu courtyard's disciples all went to morning class. Xi Yue, who had been bent over cleaning, paused.

He seemed to be tired. He stood and strolled around the courtyard... Unconsciously, he formed writing with his feet.

Xi Yue diligently memorized his steps. After a moment, he deftly climbed up an ancient cypress in the Qiu courtyard and took a sheet of transversal paper from a bird's nest in the canopy—he had snatched it from Yao Qi's rooms under the guise of a "prank" after getting a glimpse of Yao Qi's letter home.

Xi Yue drew out the characters he had just memorized by rote on the transversal paper: *Pang is from the south.*

Then, imitating Yao Qi, he quietly put the transversal paper in the pond.

"Good morning, Ziming-xiong!" Yao Qi was just copying out scriptures in the Qiankun Tower. Hearing this sound, his hand shook. He was so scared by Xi Ping's call that he left a big smear on his paper.

Zhou Xi was sitting next to him. Upon seeing this, he gently puffed out a breath.

But after a while, His Fourth Highness realized something was wrong—Yao Qi kept trembling. Even his sleeves were shaking. His

face was ashen. He didn't seem startled; it was more like he was scared of something.

Zhou Xi slowly frowned: what had Xi Shiyong done to him?

CHAPTER 29 - The Dragon Bites Its Tail (17)

Xi Ping, having been punished by Tai Sui for making trouble, “obediently” went to the Yanhai Building as soon as he had free time.

But it turned out that *Detailed Account of Meridians* was poisonous. It knocked him out right from the start. Before he had turned the first page, Xi Ping’s upper and lower eyelids contracted lovesickness. The “lovebirds” were only broken apart when Tai Sui lightly burned him. He sat there enraged but not daring to speak, sulking. All he could do was pick out a specialized record of spiritual eye opening stories, yawning fit to bring down the ceiling.

This one he managed to read. It told all kinds of horrifying stories about opening spiritual eyes.

There was someone who must have had been very wicked for several lifetimes and had opened their spiritual eyes on the day of a thunderstorm, and spiritual energy had poured into their spiritual eyes along with the celestial lightning, roasting them from the inside out; there was someone who had let themselves indulge in a wild fantasy and taken established foundation grade elixirs, planning to ascend to immortality right away, not expecting that instead they would ascend to heaven; there was also one unlucky person who was said to have suffered from a rare disease that made their bones weak, who wanted to strengthen their body with the nourishment of spiritual stones, but instead had somehow opened their spiritual eyes, turning their bones to powder at once...

One bloody tragedy after another dragged Xi Ping right into wakefulness.

Tai Sui saw that the hairs on the back of his neck were standing up and said, “Opening your spiritual eyes is a little dangerous, but not

everyone is so unlucky. The Latent Cultivation Temple has the backing of the immortal mountains' spiritual stone mines and is surrounded by auspicious beasts, and there's a crowd of stewards to look after you. It's not so easy to have an accident."

"Senior, those followers of yours seem to have boundless powers, so can't the wounds they receive while opening their spiritual eyes be healed afterward? I hear that Heaven's Design Pavilion's Exalted can break all their bones, and then be fine in no time at all."

Tai Sui said, "An open-eyed cultivator's body is far sturdier than that of a mortal. An ordinary wound does indeed heal quickly. But the wounds sustained during the opening of spiritual eyes can't be removed. These are brands that heaven leaves on those who have 'taken the wrong path.' They will only vanish if you can remake your body when establishing a foundation."

But if opening your spiritual eyes was perilous, establishing a foundation was usually a dead end, barring some lucky chance.

Xi Ping thought about it. Pointing to one case in the book, he said, "Look, senior, this person opened their spiritual eyes, but their meridians snapped. What's going on there? Break the seal on a jug of wine, and the jug shatters?"

"Right," said Tai Sui. "When your spiritual eyes link, they connect to the universe. If your meridians are destroyed at that pass, it means you are unable to 'connect to the universe.' It doesn't count as opening your spiritual eyes—why do you think Miss Chen was unsuited to the immortal path and resorted to the path of ruin?"

Because you were egging her on, you old bastard, Xi Ping thought.

He closed the book, then picked up a few more and prepared to leave. His eyes scanned seemingly inadvertently over the

fireproofing inscriptions all around the Yanhai Building. The inscriptions in the Latent Cultivation Temple, like the ones used by the nobility of Great Wan, came from Xuanyin Mountain, and must have been carved by the same set of people. The inscription characters seemed very similar to the ones in Prince Zhuang Manor.

As Xi Ping went down the stairs, he “walked” two fingers along the banister. The inscriptions on the wooden banister lit up the whole way following his fingers, as if scolding him for his idle hands.

He had already sent the information out. Zhi-shishu didn’t seem to be in the Latent Cultivation Temple, so everything was probably arranged. Then there was his san-ge and the people from Heaven’s Design Pavilion... Supposing that they couldn’t be relied upon, then Xi Ping couldn’t imagine who on earth was reliable.

But everything had a “what if.” However reliable they were, he wasn’t going to lie there waiting for others to make arrangements. Anyway, everyone had their own things to do. He wouldn’t interfere with anything.

There were over two hundred years from Renzong’s reign to the present. The wheel of reincarnation had turned countless times. Looking for one person was like looking for a needle in the ocean. He had to be ready for them not to make it in time.

Xi Ping thought that if he really did come to a dead end, he still had one last move, which was to think of a way to destroy his meridians when his spiritual eyes opened and leave the great demon a “broken jar.”

“While the green hills last, there’ll be wood to burn, no matter how bad it gets,” he thought to himself dauntlessly. “There are always more solutions than problems. As long as you have a breath left, can you let yourself die from holding back piss?”

Xi Ping walked out of the Yanhai Building and whistled a vulgar tune. He kicked a stone at a patrolling straw child's head.

Bang—

The black cat knocked over Prince Zhuang's brush stand. The blood jade brush stand fell onto the floor and rolled several chi away.

Prince Zhuang had hardly closed his eyes the night before. He had just had his head propped on his hand, eyes closed, dozing. Startled awake by the little beast, his heart beat like a drum. For a long moment, he couldn't catch his breath.

Bai Ling floated in through the window like a snowflake, quickly tipped out a Spring Sunshine Pill to give to him, and moved the cat ancestor along.

“How is it?”

Bai Ling shook his head. “All the files about evil cultivators involved with ‘reincarnation wood’ for the last two hundred years within Great Wan's borders have been looked through. They fill up a whole storeroom. Commander Pang and his people investigated each one in turn. But the so-called ‘Tai Sui’ in the files must only be a totem thrown together by the evil cultivators. He has no physical body. We've only started differentiating by hemogram in recent years. We tried investigating by horoscope and physical characteristics, but the records for the former are too few, while the latter are too vague...”

“You only investigated within Great Wan's borders?” said Prince Zhuang. “What about to the south?”

Bai Ling quietly said, “Your Highness, to the south... to the south is the Land of Turmoil.”

After Southern He and the Lancang Sword Sect were destroyed, there was no one to look after the former territory of Southern He. The immortals of each country had divided up Southern He's spiritual stone mines, and each only looked after their own doorstep. After two hundred years, monsters ran wild and evil thrived; there was truly nowhere to start looking.

Bai Ling said, "Commander Pang sent me to ask whether another letter had come from the Viscount."

Prince Zhuang shook his head. There hadn't been any rain in Jinping for a few days.

Even if it did rain, Xi Ping might not necessarily have much to say. Each and every one of his movements was carried out under the eyes of the evil cultivator. Every act was a knife edge struggle. Where there was an absolute disparity in strength, any number of clever schemes were only flourishes.

Flourishes were flourishes; using one once in a while, you might have a lucky win. If you used them too much, you were sure to run into trouble.

"Princess Duanrui couldn't see the possession by a primordial being, the Sea of Stars overlooked it." Prince Zhuang stood up and slowly said, "Is the evil cultivator... really an evil cultivator?"

"Your Highness." Bai Ling paused and lowered his voice until it was almost inaudible. "I know what you're thinking, but you only have a suspicion. There's no basis for it."

Prince Zhuang didn't answer. He was silent for a long moment. He pinched the center of his brow. "I just dreamed that he was asking me to save him."

Bai Ling said, “We have to take our time in this matter, Your Highness. We can’t mention *over there*. You know that as soon as that place is exposed, it will mean a change in Great Wan’s leadership. There will be no more peace.”

Prince Zhuang turned his head to the window. The greenware transversal fish swayed lightly outside the window with the breeze. It had only been hanging there a few days, but the fish had already taken on a layer of dust.

The greenware fish had become a pond loach, and there was murder in Zhou Ying’s eyes.

A wind blew by, the smell of earth rose, and dark clouds at last covered the sun.

A crash of thunder. Mountain rain poured down on the thick forest of the Latent Cultivation Temple. The disciples who hadn’t brought umbrellas covered their heads and scurried away, looking all over for straw children to ask for umbrellas.

The warm-hearted Chang Jun called out: “Ziming, Shiyong is sharing his umbrella, let’s go together!”

Yao Qi’s eyes fell on Xi Ping, shoulder to shoulder with him, drew back, and quickly shook his head.

“Hey, let’s hurry up.” Xi Ping pulled Chang Jun, deliberately not looking at Yao Qi.

He had overdone it tormenting Ziming-xiong over the last few days. Lately he had found that if he even said hello, Yao Qi would tremble, so he had been consciously avoiding him.

Xi Ping had only used Yao Qi to send a letter. After he had worked out how the letter sending immortal tool worked, he’d just had Xi

Yue snatch some transversal paper. For one thing, Yao-xiong got sick as soon as he got nervous, and he was worried about doing him serious damage. For another, his ridiculous fabrication was full of holes; only Yao Qi could have believed it, and it couldn't go on too long.

Xi Ping mulled it over: not having received a response from his family, he definitely would have told Chengjing Hall already. That was all right; Zhi-shishu would help him smooth it over.

Yao Qi kept his head down and waited for them to leave, then touched his back—there was a big cluster of red blisters there, very dense, like a snake's scales. At night, it was as if there were needles poking under his skin, so painful he couldn't sleep.

He thought he had already been cursed by an evil art.

Xi Ping couldn't imagine how hard it was for Yao Qi to tell Chengjing Hall; it was easy for him to say. Every morning, Yao Qi gathered up his courage, but when he went in the direction of Chengjing Hall, his legs would always turn at the critical moment toward the Yanhai Building.

He could only tell himself day after day: I'll wait another day. Today I'll investigate ancient texts for myself to see what kind of evil art this is, so when I see a steward from Chengjing Hall, I'll be able to explain it all clearly... Otherwise, what if it isn't an evil art?

As soon as Yao Qi imagined the scene of himself saying something wrong in Chengjing Hall, he wished he could commit suicide on the spot.

But he came up empty in the Yanhai Building, and the blisters not only didn't take a turn for the better, they showed a tendency to spread, climbing toward his chest!

At home, it must not have rained lately or something. His letter had sunk like a stone into the sea. There was no word.

Yao Qi was utterly desperate.

“Ziming,” a voice asked behind him, “you’ve been listless lately, there are dark circles under your eyes, and you don’t pay attention in class. You haven’t been eating well in the dining hall, either. What’s wrong?”

Hearing these words, Yao Qi’s extremely tense heartstrings snapped. Before he’d had a clear look at who he was talking to, his tears began to fall.

“No, wait... what’s happened to you?” Zhou Xi, who had only been asking in passing, was startled. “Your back? What’s wrong with your back?”

The immortal mountains were full of spiritual energy. Even a chicken couldn’t catch the flu here. Because of this, there was no medical hall at all. If the disciples had minor injuries or illnesses, an elixir could take care of it. In one incense stick, Zhou Xi, brooking no argument, had taken Yao Qi back to the Qiu courtyard and pulled open his clothes to look. “If I can’t do anything, I’ll go to Chengjing Hall and get some medicine for you... Hm? I thought you had thrown out your back. Why does it look like you’ve caught the waist-winding dragon?”²¹

Choked with sobs, Yao Qi said, “What-what kind of evil art is the waist-winding dragon?”

“What kind of evil art?” Zhou Xi was bewildered. “It’s a kind of rash. My nurse got it and left the palace on that account. I snuck out to see her. She got better in a little while.”

The two of them stared at each other in dismay for a long moment.

Zhou Xi frowned. “The imperial physician said that people who get this rash are either elderly or have too much on their minds. Ziming, what’s going on with you? Who told you this was an evil art?”

Yao Qi hemmed and hawed for a long time without getting it out clearly. At last, he gave himself up as hopeless and took out the evil scrawls and cursed letters he had received recently.

Zhou Xi unfolded and looked at each one in turn. The more he saw, the more interesting his face became. Finally, he hit a table in indignation, turned, and went toward Xi Ping’s north rooms.

The half-puppet had been sent by Xi Ping to the Yanhai Building to return a book—after the two great ascended spirit cultivators had left, Xi Ping had not only “come back to life” himself, he had also relaxed the prohibition on the half-puppet. Apart from not letting him talk to others at random, he would occasionally let him run errands to get food and return books.

Hearing someone knock on the door now, Xi Ping had to go out and answer himself. When he opened the door and saw Zhou Xi, he froze for a moment. “Your Fourth Highness?”

“You’ve gone overboard this time, haven’t you, Xi Shiyong?” Zhou Xi pushed aside Yao Qi, who had come chasing after. Without warning, he tossed all the notes he had taken from Yao Qi onto Xi Ping and coldly said, “You’d better have an explanation, or else we’re going to Chengjing Hall to clear this up!”

Xi Ping was entirely unprepared. He knew that Yao Qi definitely wasn’t the kind to confront a person to his face. He had expected Yao Qi to write a letter home, to complain to Chengjing Hall... He absolutely hadn’t expected that Yao Qi, who normally didn’t talk to anyone, would tell Zhou Xi!

When he realized what Zhou Xi had thrown at him, Xi Ping's scalp bristled.

His first reaction was to shut the door, but it was already too late.

Like a marionette, his movements and expression stopped stiffly. His backward steps suddenly came to a stop. He turned back.

Zhou Xi only saw "Xi Ping," as if he had pulled a muscle, turn halfway, then turn back. He tilted his head slightly, his eyes falling on the notes on the floor. "Oh..."

In a slightly odd tone, he said, "What are these?"

"Xi Shiyong, you..."

"Xi Ping" leaned down and picked up a note. He looked up and smiled at Zhou Xi. For some reason, Zhou Xi found himself unable to continue. Next door, Chang Jun had heard movements and quickly came running over. "What's wrong? Shiyong, Ziming... Hey, and His Fourth Highness is here, too. If you have something to say, talk it out, don't argue."

"Xi Ping" looked at their three faces with eyes like a snake's. "It's nothing. I played a little joke on Ziming-xiong that went overboard. I'm very sorry. I'll make Ziming-xiong a proper apology another day."

Zhou Xi opened his mouth. Words came to his lips, but a chill ran up his spine, and he forgot what he was going to say.

But Chang Jun clutched his hair. "Shiyong, speak properly, why are you lisping all of a sudden?"

"Xi Ping" heard this and, a little clumsily, turned his head toward him. "Really? Is it that obvious?"

There was another flash of lightning, its glare making Xi Ping's familiar face deathly white. The rain fell harder.

Pang Jian was more punctual than a calendar block. He fell upon Prince Zhuang Manor almost at the same time as the rain. "Prince Zhuang, have you received... oh, there it is!"

The filthy transversal fish had "revived" in the rain. Flapping its tail, it spat out a pile of letters—most of them were nonsense.

"What's this about 'cursed by an evil art... blisters on the waist'... Listen, Your Highness, are these also code words you two have arranged? I can't understand it anymore."

Prince Zhuang quickly scanned the pile of unfamiliar handwriting. His eyes hardened. He grabbed the last letter.

The writing on this letter was a mess, three out of six characters written wrong, as if a dog had drawn them. Only looking at them from a distance could you work out roughly what they were. The writing said: *Pang is from the south.*

Pang Jian's pupils contracted. His expression went blank.

Prince Zhuang quickly turned his head to look at him. "Exalted, what have you thought of? Exalted!"

Pang Jian recovered. He clenched his teeth. "I was in fact raised in the spiritual stone mines in the south—in Great Wan's mining district. My father was a miner... But only the half-immortal steward at the mine who sent me back to Great Wan knows of this, along with a few old seniors in Heaven's Design Pavilion. Since the previous General Commander of Heaven's Design Pavilion Su Zhunshixiong got me the position of disciple of record, it's been a hundred years, and no one has mentioned it again."

Prince Zhuang held him down. “We only investigated evil cultivators. We didn’t investigate our own people. Right?”

“Impossible!” Pang Jian’s instinctive first reaction was to deny it. “The mine supervisors and Heaven’s Design Pavilion are both outer sects and have only open-eyed cultivators. Even if there was someone who went against the rules, at most he would be in the initial established foundation stage. How could he get within half a step of the shed skin stage without anyone finding out?!”

“But you also said that this evil cultivator’s cultivation and actual strength don’t match.”

Bai Ling put in a word: “If it’s a half-immortal from an outer sect, then his place of birth and horoscope will be recorded—half-immortals from the Renzong years must be coming to the ends of their natural lifespans by now. There won’t be many left alive.”

Pang Jian quickly pulled out a piece of talisman paper and quickly drew a talisman on it. He clapped it against the desk. The talisman at once turned into golden light, and the image of a name roster appeared on the desk.

“Heaven’s Design Pavilion’s Assistant Commander Pang Jian requests the outer sect name roster,” Pang Jian ordered. “Which open-eyed seniors were born in the Renzong or Xiaozong eras and were in the outer sect in the eighteenth year of Shizong Yongxing?”

The name roster opened. Countless people’s figures floated in the air.

Pang Jian glanced through them and saw that most were acquaintances.

“Those who are still living.”

“Originating in Ning’an or with a record of living in Ning’an in their youth.”

With each criterion he added, some of the figures evaporated.

“Ask about the hemogram and horoscope,” said Prince Zhuang.

Pang Jian said, “Vermillion bird hemogram... horoscope yin in all four pillars.”

The figures on the illustrated roster flew off in disorder. Finally, the dust settled, and only one person remained.

A tall, thin man of middle-aged appearance, looking out expressionlessly from the illustrated roster, cold and severe.

Prince Zhuang quickly raised his head. “Who is this?”

Pang Jian stared at this image for a long moment. With difficulty, he swallowed a mouthful of saliva. “My... superior.

“Heaven’s Design Pavilion’s current general commander, who’s been in seclusion for eight years.”

CHAPTER 30 - The Dragon Bites Its Tail (18)

“Liang Chen?” A flash of lightning lit up Su Zhun’s sunken eyes. He looked up in disbelief. “Liang Mianzhi?!”

“Liang Chen?” Zhi Xiu twisted his fingers, and the note paper dissolved. He vanished from the precipice above the Sea of Stars, leaving behind a mumbled sentence: “Why does that sound familiar...?”

“What going on with this General Commander Liang Chen? How did he get like this while being part of a perfectly good orthodox sect? Also, since he’s the general commander of Heaven’s Design Pavilion, when he wanted to steal the Dragon Vein at the beginning of the fourth month, why did he go by such a circuitous route? Couldn’t he have just ordered everyone to withdraw from the Azure Dragon Towers?”

In Jinping City, one blue and one white figure passed through the dim downpour faster than lightning, heading straight for Heaven’s Design Pavilion’s head office.

Pang Jian shook his head. “His position in Heaven’s Design Pavilion is in name only. He has no true power. Well, it’s a long story. He used to be a mine supervisor in the south.”

Southern He’s spiritual stone mines had been divided up by the big sects. It was far from civilization, and the mines were an important place that needed to have specialists sent to oversee them.

Therefore, starting in the time of Renzong, a special outer sect had been developed, called the “Mining Office.”

“Lord Liang worked his whole life in the mines. His hard work merited great reward. He ought to have retired like my Su-shixiong. But some years ago, he was attacked while escorting a shipment of

spiritual stones and sustained serious injuries. It was said that he might... He never married or had children. He had no wishes. When the discussion came up, his only regret from his youth, which he had always held onto, was not having entered Heaven's Design Pavilion. At the time, Su-shixiong was just about to retreat to the Latent Cultivation Temple. The superiors came and asked me whether I could let Lord Liang serve as assistant commander under me in name only. It would only be a few years, like compensation for injury. I said that Lord Liang was an elder, and he had once saved me during a mine collapse. Of course I couldn't let him be my subordinate in name, so they should just give me the real responsibilities. He was always in seclusion tending to his injuries, anyway, and couldn't be in charge. I have both the Heavenly Question and the Azure Dragon Seal. It makes no difference to my work whether I'm officially a full commander or an assistant commander."

Bai Ling had no time to compliment Commander Pang on the tastefulness of his actions. He followed up: "So you mean that since he came to Heaven's Design Pavilion, he's been in seclusion tending to his injuries and hasn't showed his face?"

"Yes, that's right. I saw him once when he first came. He was all skin and bones, looked like he wasn't long for this world." Pang Jian said "excuse me" and pinched Bai Ling, who had turned into paper, between his fingers, and took him through the wall into the innermost courtyard of Heaven's Design Pavilion's head office.

Inside this courtyard was a perfectly ordinary garden. The rockery was rough and slipshod, and the plants grew wild, untended.

But as Pang Jian stepped inside, Bai Ling's eyes swam, and he found that there was a little world in the garden—inside it was picturesque scenery, with flowers and trees as far as the eye could see. A little creek passed through it, connecting scattered pavilions and little houses. At the entrance was a several-zhang high boulder

with an enormous karma beast drawn on it. It was napping. When it opened one eye and saw Pang Jian, it rolled over and showed its belly as if begging for pets.

Bai Ling said, "This place is..."

"Where we live." Pang Jian, knowing the way, carried the paper man through the sea of flowers. "The head office's walkers in the mortal world and our colleagues who come to the capital to report all stay here."

For a time, Bai Ling thought this was a little strange, because this "hidden land" like a paradise was obviously a mustard seed maintained by a superior array. However beautiful, it was still only a floating mirage.

Before he could think much about it, Pang Jian had crossed through a large expanse of inhabited houses like a strong wind, landing in a valley at the end of the creek.

In the valley, flower petals blown here by the wind lay in a thick layer, covering a path no one had walked for a long time, cushioning a single-entrance, single-resident little house, solitary and secluded.

Pang Jian called out loudly: "Pang Jian seeks an audience with General Commander Liang on an urgent matter!"

Xi Yue ran through the rain, tightly clutching a piece of wood to his chest. There was a third-class inscription on this piece of wood. He had just taken it from the Yanhai Building's fireproofing wood column while returning a book.

Xi Ping had examined him concerning the position and form of the inscription character six separate times, exercising the greatest caution, to guarantee that he absolutely wouldn't remember wrong. All the same, while he had been stealing the inscription just now, Xi

Ping had still been uneasy and had watched him the whole time through the dragon-taming chain.

Inscriptions were a thing you absolutely couldn't fool around with. In all his life, Xi Ping had gotten into so much trouble, and his san-ge had never turned on him; the one and only time he had hit him had been when he was fourteen or fifteen and had carved out a part of the inscriptions at Prince Zhuang Manor.

That time, even the manor's secret guard had come out in alarm. Afterward, that secret guard-da-ge had told him that because the inscriptions on furniture and buildings needed to be dismantled, there was a special design called an "active inscription." It was the last to be put down and the first to be removed, and it was the only type of inscription that could be carved out by a mortal.

If you picked up the active inscription, it would immediately take effect.

Xi Ping's luck was good. Fireproofing inscriptions were the safest among third-class inscriptions, and a single one didn't have a strong taboo on the active inscription.

Xi Ping had picked one up with his own hands; that was why he had dared to send Xi Yue to "borrow" one from the Yanhai Building, in case it was needed.

Xi Yue had successfully taken the inscription under his observation and was on the way back. Xi Ping had just finished instructing him to put it away carefully and not let the tinderbox touch it when a guest had come at the other end of the dragon-taming chain. Xi Ping had said "wait a moment" and gone to open the door. Since then, there had been nothing.

Out of nowhere, the half-puppet had an ominous feeling and sped up involuntarily. He ran the whole way down the slope from the

Yanhai Building. From a distance, he saw the stone wall of the Qiu courtyard. Then Xi Ping's urgent voice came from the dragon-taming chain: "Come back, hurry!"

Xi Ping had calmed down in the blink of an eye. "Senior, let's talk out anything we need to later. First send the three of them away, all right?"

Tai Sui ignored him.

Xi Ping went on: "It is what it is. If these meddlers stay here and keep getting in our way, it won't do you or me any good. Even Yao Ziming is hardly a nobody, never mind that His Fourth Highness is also here. I can't make good on anyone's losses. If you damage one of them, even if you snatch my body later, you still won't be able to use my identity to infiltrate the orthodox sect..."

"The orthodox... sect." For some reason, these words made Tai Sui laugh. "Little devil, I slipped up before and underestimated you, but you shouldn't think yourself too clever. What use does your identity still have?"

Xi Ping's heart tightened—yes, the old roundworm had figured out that he had gotten the information out.

Why were those three still standing there staring? Your Fourth Highness! Where's your discernment, Your Fourth Highness? Didn't you grow up playing with spiritual stones?!

Zhou Xi had in fact realized that something was off, so he raised an arm and pushed Yao Qi behind himself. He asked Xi Ping: "Why are you behaving so inconsistently?"

Xi Ping thought, Oh, heaven, you've finally worked it out! Now hurry up and run!

But His Fourth Highness, who had grown up playing with spiritual stones, righteously advised him: “Shiyong, you’ve already entered the immortal sect, so you must follow the established path, working hard to cultivate. Have you allowed your mind to be confused by some crooked magic?”

Xi Ping: “...”

He really would have loved to get down on his knees and kowtow to Zhou Xi—you’d be more clever than this if you’d grown up playing with bird shit! Either His Fourth Highness or his san-ge had to be adopted; it was impossible for them to have the same father!

Tai Sui laughed loudly. “Following the established path, hahaha, His Fourth Highness has learned his lessons well!”

Just then, a cord in Xi Ping’s mind moved. He felt the dragon-taming chain approaching. Xi Yue was back!

Xi Ping still remembered that when the secret guard-da-ge at Prince Zhuang Manor had put back the active inscription, his movements had been very gentle. The guard had said that the active inscription of a fireproofing inscription had no other taboo apart from not being able to come into contact with fire. If wood rubbed together too strongly, there would be sparks, and if a spark touched the inscription, the inscription would be activated. A solitary inscription character couldn’t connect; once activated, it would leave the wood and “flow” toward whatever in its surroundings had the most spiritual energy; then things would go wrong.

Xi Ping had originally prepared this inscription character in case he unexpectedly opened his spiritual eyes—when a person’s spiritual eyes opened, he would become a “spiritual energy vortex,” pulling in all the surrounding spiritual energy. If you used fire to open up the inscription character then, the activated inscription character would “flow” into your spiritual eyes along with the energy. As long as he

chose his time right, he should be able to shatter his meridians at once.

Though Xi Ping hadn't opened his spiritual eyes yet, it was near enough. With that evil cultivator on him, he had to be the focal point of the spiritual energy in this courtyard.

So he decisively ordered through the dragon-taming chain: "Tie the tinderbox and the inscription character together and throw them at me!"

Xi Yue had traveled all over with an evil*cultivator. Of course he knew how powerful inscriptions were. He was startled. "No!"

The slow-thinking Zhou Xi heard the malicious laughter and finally felt a sense of danger—he suspected Xi Ping was losing his mind. So he said decisively to Chang Jun, "Go get a steward..."

Before he could finish, Tai Sui raised his hand and pulled Zhou Xi over.

Xi Ping shouted at the half-puppet through the dragon-taming chain: "Hurry, don't argue!"

Under the control of its master's tyrannical will, the dragon-taming chain took no more notice of the half-puppet's weak resistance. It irresistibly controlled Xi Yue's limbs, making him run over.

Tai Sui had known all along that Xi Yue was approaching, but after closely associating with him for several days, he knew perfectly well how useless this little thing was; he wasn't even as strong as these pampered young masters. So he took absolutely no notice of Xi Yue. He raised a hand to grip Zhou Xi's neck.

Chang Jun let out a shout: "Shiyong!"

Yao Qi had been scared to his knees.

The dragon-taming chain dragged Xi Yue toward them. At a distance of three steps, it forced him to roll the inscription character and the tinderbox together, then throw them as hard as he could at Xi Ping's back.

Xi Yue's eyes were red, but the dragon-taming chain around his neck dragged him behind a tree the moment the things left his hand.

The tinderbox hit Xi Ping's sturdy shoulder blade and burst into flame, lighting up the cotton bundle. The burning inscription character broke away from the wood at once and seeped into Xi Ping's back.

In the chaos, Xi Ping didn't even have time to feel pain.

Something pierced directly through his chest. It was as if it wanted to push all his organs out from between his ribs.

Oh, no! Xi Ping knew at once that he had underestimated the inscription character.

This wouldn't just rupture all his meridians. It would smash him to bits.

All these years later, Xi Ping finally understood that he had deserved the beating he'd gotten at Prince Zhuang Manor back then!

In that flash of time, everything seemed to slow down. Countless things passed instantly through Xi Ping's head. His mind was unprecedentedly clear. His senses were extremely acute; he seemed to be able to hear things outside the valley, and drumbeats and human voices from even further away. All the joys and sorrows of the human world turned into a vast wind and enveloped him.

He seemed to have become endlessly large, scattered across all living things; he also seemed to have contracted into a speck of dust, unable to distinguish direction, exiled in a world without bounds.

When Zhou Xi had knocked on the door, his mind had been in the dragon-taming chain, and his hand rubbing the reincarnation wood carving. He had brought it along with him when he'd gone to open the door. Through the wooden carving, he could see Tai Sui's ugly, humble followers without having to focus. With only a thought, he found A-Xiang.

Xi Ping had no time to speak. At the final juncture, he transmitted a thought:

Don't trust those goblins! Don't learn how to disfigure yourself with magic from them!

Then the jade crumbled and dust flew everywhere—

Pang Jian's talisman burst open the gate of the general commander's residence. Bai Ling was about to land when he saw Pang Jian pull a long bow out from his femur. An invisible arrow shot toward the emptiness in the residence. Where the arrow passed, the scenery of Jinping's high summer disintegrated, and a clammy chill blew Bai Ling two chi away.

The mask over the courtyard went to pieces, revealing the truth—there was nothing left alive in this courtyard. Withered grass lay on the ground giving off a deathly air, covered in a layer of frost. Some careless flower petals flew over the courtyard walls from afar and landed in the courtyard; before they landed, they had already dried and curled up.

The courtyard was piled high with layer upon layer of arrays, with the door of the house as their endpoint. For a moment, these two masters were dazed, unable to puzzle them out.

Before Pang Jian could look closely at the arrays, he sensed some change. He pulled out a reincarnation wood amulet.

He saw the amulet letting out a faint, ominous red light. Pang Jian touched it and instantly felt the cries of countless people calling out for “Tai Sui” race up his bones to his brain.

They didn’t know that Xi Ping had been exposed. But while “Tai Sui” wasn’t a real name, “Liang Chen” was a real name carved on his spiritual image. Heaven’s Design Pavilion and Xuanyin Mountain had fixed on this person at the same time; of course Liang Chen’s spiritual sense would be moved.

Bai Ling said, “He’s noticed. There’s no time to lose. Commander Pang, lend me your Barrier Dispeller Bow!”

Pang Jian had faced danger for many years. In battle, his reactions were incomparably fast. Before Bai Ling finished speaking, he already understood.

He stretched out a talisman paper and wrapped it around the reincarnation wood amulet. He drew his bow. “Brother, you’ll have to run a risk.”

Bai Ling curled up into a piece of paper and stuck to his invisible arrow. With a whistle, he pierced the group of arrays along with the arrow.

Meeting provocation, the arrays immediately exploded into fierce light. The invisible arrow from the Barrier Dispeller Bow forced its way through and only ran out of strength when it had come to the end.

The invisible arrow vanished, and Bai Ling was forced to land. A hurricane curled up at the tail end of the arrays, and within the hurricane, countless blades like a meat grinder pulled Bai Ling in. He seemed to have been pulverized; scraps of paper floated everywhere!

Pang Jian's pupil's contracted sharply, but the next moment, a piece of paper blown up by the wind landed by the door. After plastering itself to the door, it quickly stretched out and turned into a complete human figure. Bai Ling's feet didn't touch the ground; he drove a paper knife home. When the paper knife fell, it became a true blade and split open the group of arrays from within.

Pang Jian darted after him. The door to the general commander's residence was wide open. The two of them charged in one after the other... and froze.

Bai Ling said, "...Is this your general commander?"

Inside the room sat a man's... skeleton.

All his shriveled skin and flesh was stretched tightly over the bones. He was sitting cross-legged on a giant piece of reincarnation wood. His hair, beard, and skin all appeared to be the particular pale hue of reincarnation wood. At a glance, it was impossible to tell what was man and what was wood.

But his chest was still undulating slightly!

On the reincarnation wood pedestal, countless faces appeared and disappeared, all of them shouting something. This image was bizarre and shocking. But the "Grand Duke, the true god," they were calling upon was hidden behind his amulets, looking more wizened than a corpse that had been dried out by the wind for hundreds of

years. The smell of rotting wood came bubbling up from his whole body!

“His primordial being has left his body?” said Pang Jian.

Bai Ling raised his paper knife. “He must be in the early established foundation stage.”

“He’s in the early established foundation stage, but his primordial being is near-shed skin? So... the primordial being shunned the body and went flying off on its own?” After saying this, Pang Jian himself thought he was talking nonsense. “No, how could he have a primordial being in the early established foundation stage?”

Bai Ling said, “It doesn’t matter. There’s no time!”

As soon as he spoke, he drove the knife toward the man on the reincarnation wood.

The paper knife flashed coldly. With a clang, the blade that had cut apart the arrays slipped and fell onto the reincarnation wood pedestal. On the wooden pedestal, all the faces were infuriated, roaring at him in unison. The paper knife disintegrated, and Bai Ling went flying. He only avoided slamming into the wall by turning into paper at the last moment. When he landed, he spat out a mouthful of blood.

Among the densely packed faces on the wooden pedestal, a teenage girl’s flashed quickly. Her expression was confused, standing out among the others.

A-Xiang watched as her companions around her screamed “Tai Sui” as though they had been cursed. She clutched the reincarnation wood amulet on her chest.

Why had her “vision” been different from the others...?

The Grand Duke seemed to have just called these people goblins!

CHAPTER 31 - The Dragon Bites Its Tail (19)

In the Latent Cultivation Temple, the direction of the wind shifted.

The south wind blowing through the valley turned around before it hit the cliffs and formed a vortex with the Qiu courtyard as its center. Where the circling wind passed, it touched the new buds and brought out the cries of the blue luan. White fawns looked in at the door as if coming to report good tidings. Ripples emerged on the pond and the little creek in the courtyard, spreading endlessly.

Xi Ping had been soaking in spiritual energy among the immortal mountains for months. On the brink of death, the fierce desire for survival opened his spiritual eyes. Here was the threshold to the shortcut between mortal and immortal, right in front of him!

Two figures landed one after the other in the Latent Cultivation Temple's Qiu courtyard.

Su Zhun waved his sleeve and moved the dumbfounded disciples away. "Duanrui-shishu!"

The other person turned out to be Princess Duanrui, who had "left the Latent Cultivation Temple." She seemed to come up from underfoot out of nowhere. An invisible talisman hit Xi Ping's back—in the place where the inscription character had seeped in.

Xi Ping was like a vase about to explode, frozen solid by extreme cold, narrowly remaining "intact" on the point of shattering.

The princess formed a complex hand seal in her palm. A transparent cocoon congealed around Xi Ping. She ordered: "Get back!"

Su Zhun didn't even think. He rolled up the three young men and one half-puppet, then ran.

Next, all the spiritual energy in the Latent Cultivation Temple came rushing in like a flood, hitting the “cocoon” wrapped around Xi Ping. The sound was so thunderous that everyone thought they had gone deaf. The buildings and rockery of the Qiu courtyard were instantly turned into a pile of ruins.

Only the princess’s hand seal didn’t move a hair, keeping the will of the whole valley out by force.

Zhi Xiu had once asked her what she would do if Xi Ping really had been possessed by a primordial being. Duanrui’s response had been “expel the evil.”

What if the man and the demon weren’t so easy to separate?

Duanrui’s answer then had been: “I don’t know. This isn’t where my strength lies. You ought to avoid alerting the enemy and return to the inner sect to consult other masters.”

Zhi Xiu said, “But right now, as soon as the disciple opens his spiritual eyes, his body will be snatched at once. There’s something unusual about this evil cultivator. Before, ‘wearing’ a corpse, he was already half a step from shedding his skin. If his body snatching succeeds, I’m afraid you and I won’t be able to take responsibility for the outcome.”

The princess said matter-of-factly: “It’s all right. If it really comes to that, I can temporarily block the spiritual energy in the Latent Cultivation Temple and wait for the inner sect to act. If there is truly nothing the inner sect can do, it won’t be too late then to discuss how to proceed.”

“But, shijie, rivers flow naturally into the sea, and a waterfall flowing upward is against nature. When a person crosses the border between mortal and immortal, the universe will pull him toward

cultivation. You're planning to block all the spiritual energy in the valley with your own strength alone? How long can you hold out?"

"It will be eight centuries soon." No matter what Princess Duanrui said, her tone always sounded as if she were ordering food. "This won't be long."

With these words, Zhi Xiu had handed the Latent Cultivation Temple over to her and returned to the inner sect to request orders.

For one zhang around Xi Ping, the rain went backward. The accumulated water already fallen on the ground turned back into drizzle and flew up to the sky.

The mountains rumbled as though ready to collapse. The auspicious animals who had just gathered all ran as far away as they could. Xi Ping was frozen. Amid the furious lightning and thunder, his shadow was now man-shaped, now dragon-shaped. The black dragon and the human shadow were tightly wound together, like a desperately uneven fight to the death.

To protect the disciples, Su Zhun allowed himself to be swept by the brutal spiritual energy. His headdress let his hair loose. He looked back in horror.

Before leaving, General Zhi had said to him that this Xi brat understood the situation perfectly. He was cautious in action and frequently exceeded people's expectations. He had told him to keep an eye on him and not interfere too much. That was why Elder Su, seeing that half-puppet sneaking around the Yanhai Building, had turned a blind eye and let him go.

Good heavens, this truly did exceed expectations!

Was Zhi Jingzhai going senile? Was this kind of suicidal behavior what he called "perfect understanding"?

Tai Sui, trapped in the cocoon along with Xi Ping, laughed quietly. “Princess Duanrui, ha, it seems I’ve fallen into your hands. Who else is here? What about General Zhi? Had he gone to the mountain to ask for some magic weapon? Your Highness... Your Highness Princess Duanrui, this is the flood of the universe—you dare to hold it back with a single hand seal, but you can’t deny the will of the immortal mountains. You’ve taken your vanishingly rare innate spiritual bones along the way of clarity, stayed trapped in prison for eight hundred years. The Zhou family is truly grateful to you... Hahaha!”

It was as if the princess had heard a dog barking. Not even her eyelashes moved.

With Xi Ping’s eyes, Tai Sui looked greedily at the spiritual energy assuming physical form outside the cocoon—if only a sliver leaked in, if only...

“Your Highness, don’t you think this situation is very delicate?” With no care for Xi Ping’s body, on the point of collapse, he forced Xi Ping’s hand to lift.

At this movement, the shattering bones in that arm couldn’t hold out anymore. The joints pierced right through the skin.

Tai Sui raised the limp arm and pressed the bloody hand to the reincarnation wood Xi Ping had tucked into his clothes. “I am conforming to heaven’s will, while you are waging a hopeless struggle. Do you think I can only get the spiritual energy I need from the mountains?”

The princess’s eyes fell on the reincarnation wood in his hand. Finally, she frowned.

“I was unwilling to sacrifice so many lives. It was you who forced me to it, Zhou Xueru, you forced me—”

In the bizarre residence of Heaven’s Design Pavilion’s general commander, all the faces on the reincarnation wood pedestal contorted. The ugly, disfigured faces began to leak blood from the seven orifices of their faces. It was clear to the naked eye that they were being drained by something, just like Jiangli at the Blissful Village!

A-Xiang jumped up in fear, looking on as her “shifu” and her companions called fanatically for Tai Sui while blood ran from their faces as they held the reincarnation wood in both hands. Their skin dried, the color faded from their black hair...

Bai Ling turned his head swiftly. “Commander Pang, give me the reincarnation wood!”

Pang Jian quickly tossed him the piece of reincarnation wood wrapped in talisman paper that he was carrying. He saw Bai Ling fish out yet another paper knife. The point of the knife quickly carved a particular character into the wood.

Pang Jian’s pupils contracted—this was an inscription character that he had never seen before!

But this Bai Ling was clearly only an open-eyed cultivator, with cultivation not even as high as his own. He couldn’t have seen wrong!

An open-eyed cultivator didn’t even have a primordial being. What was he using to carve the inscription character?

But the situation was critical. This was no time for asking questions. Pang Jian quickly dug up all the spiritual stones he was carrying and tossed them over along with his purse. “Catch!”

Bai Ling caught them one-handed. As soon as the dozen liang of jade stamp stones touched his palm, their spiritual energy was immediately sucked dry. They shattered into powder through the purse, helping him carve the final stroke. The bones of his fingers had already twisted out of shape!

Once the inscription on the reincarnation wood amulet was complete, Bai Ling tossed it away, throwing it onto the reincarnation wood pedestal. “Break!”

The inscription character burst into blinding light. The connection between the master of the reincarnation wood and his frenzied believers was broken off. The bleeding faces on the wooden pedestal were frozen in place.

The sounds suddenly vanished from Tai Sui’s ears. He realized at once what had happened and flew into a rage. “Scoundrels!”

Pang Jian exhaled. “Bai-xiong, if you had this kind of magic power, why didn’t you use it before...”

“It’s no good,” said Bai Ling.

“What do you...”

The faces frozen on the wooden pedestal slowly and with extremely difficulty began to move. The profound hatred and indignation on those faces was clear to see. The inscription character began to tremble.

Pang Jian was appalled.

In hardly any time, the inscription character was shaking harder and harder. Finally, like a thin and frail dike, it burst before the mighty current of myriad minds pushing on it.

The wooden amulet that the inscription had been carved on shattered. Bai Ling's strength failed at once. He turned into paper. If Pang Jian hadn't quickly grabbed him, he would have landed right on the blood-colored wood.

There was nothing left to obstruct the desperate believers who would hand over everything for the sake of a faint notion.

Tai Sui laughed heartily.

Just then, there was an enormous sound in the air above the Latent Cultivation Temple. Fierce light broke through the sky where night still lingered without any warning.

The tremors from the sound made fine cracks in the "cocoon" the princess had wrapped around Xi Ping. Xi Ping's consciousness, which had nearly sunk into an abyss, was instantly called back to wakefulness.

The blinding light was a little bewildering to him.

Why would it be light now?

Was he really seeing tomorrow's sun?

The sun was so big... Why hadn't the rain stopped?

Before he could make sense of it, Xi Ping heard Tai Sui use his own voice. Gentle as a sigh, he said, "How fortunate I am to have merited the Bell of Tribulation."

Su Zhun held back his colleagues, who had rushed over. "Stay away!"

The sudden light in the sky had forced Yang Anli to close his eyes. In the middle of the night, he raised his hand to shield them. He asked, “Elder Su, what’s going on? What was that sound just now? Why is it light?”

“It’s the Bell of Tribulation.” Luo Qingshi stood on the shoulders of two straw children, not worried that he would be forced to do the splits, finally succeeding in raising his head above everyone else’s. “One of the present four great divine tools, hanging for thousands of years on the Principal Peak under the charge of the Dignitary of Rites Elder. Without the unanimous consent of the three elders, no one can use it. A great demon must have emerged... It’s fortunate that this is the Latent Cultivation Temple.”

“Oh?”

“Well, it’s Xuanyin Mountain’s ironclad rule that the Bell of Tribulation must not pass the border between mortal and immortal. Otherwise, if it rang, it could cause a three-year drought in the mortal world.” Luo Qingshi would have loved nothing better than to extend his neck. “Is that Xi Shiyong in the courtyard? Interesting!”

“Enough with the ‘interesting’s, Luo-shixiong,” Su Zhun’s voice came from several zhang away. “Hurry—go—”

“Alas, you’re right.” Luo Qingshi’s “high perch” didn’t prevent him from turning nimbly. His pair of “high perches” ran away in his stead while he himself could still crane his neck and keep looking back, trying to see everything he could.

Dong—

Xi Ping’s brain was nearly knocked out of his ears by that tolling. His mind cleared a little further.

“The Bell of Tribulation needs the true name carved on your spiritual image,” he heard Tai Sui say in a peculiar tone. In a whisper, he asked, “General, have you remembered who I am?”

“Liang Chen.” General Zhi’s voice came from the clouds. The aftereffects of the tolling added a chill to his previously warm voice. “Current general commander of Heaven’s Design Pavilion, member of a righteous sect who has engaged in evil practices. Do you know your crime?”

“And what else?” the fearsome and violent great evil cultivator asked. There was some indescribable impatience in his voice. Anyone could have heard the eagerness in it. “What else?”

Zhi Xiu frowned. He thought this was strange, but he didn’t have time to get to the bottom of it—even if the princess could withstand the weight of the whole valley, Xi Ping’s mortal body, only a thread away from collapse, wouldn’t necessarily hold out.

“If you come out on your own, I can take responsibility for letting you live to await trial. Otherwise, at three tolls of the Bell of Tribulation, you will be destroyed, body and soul.”

Hearing this, Tai Sui was silent for a moment. Then he laughed. “Of course. You don’t remember. The nobility are so forgetful. General Zhi, there’s a criminal brand on my spiritual image. There’s no justification I can give for myself. Can’t you see that? Await trial, ha..”

As he spoke, he suddenly struggled, seeming to be planning on breaking through the princess’s prohibition by force. How could the young man’s brittle ice body bear this torment?

Zhi Xiu’s heart tightened. He had no choice. He had to sound the Bell of Tribulation again.

Dong—

The air above the Latent Cultivation Temple was harsh. Xi Ping's mind filled with screaming.

The next moment, he realized these weren't his screams.

His body suddenly relaxed. A beam of bloody light shot out from the top of his head. The false evil god possessing him had been locked onto by the Bell of Tribulation and pulled out of his body!

The great evil cultivator's demented laughter mixed intermittently with the screams, sprinkled all over the sky. The sound dyed the rain blood red, so sad and shrill it chilled you to the bone.

Dong—

The ruthless Bell of Tribulation tolled for a third time. The echoes of the laughter and screaming were both suppressed. The tolling carried through the valley for a long time, bearing witness to the cold will of heaven.

In the head office of Heaven's Design Pavilion, the densely packed faces on the reincarnation wood quietly vanished without a trace. The invincible skeleton split apart and rolled over the ground under Pang Jian and Bai Ling's panicked gazes.

The body that had still been drawing clear, shallow breaths a moment ago was like a spiritual stone with the spiritual energy sucked out. As soon as it hit the ground, it broke to pieces then and there. The dust that went up made the two men present back up several steps in dread.

Warm lamplight slanted in through the window, following the dust... the ashes of the dead as they wafted around quietly for a while, then, with nothing to rest on, fell to the ground.

Destroyed, body and soul.

After a long time, Xi Ping finally recovered from the tolling, but he found that he still couldn't move.

“Xi Shiyong.” A slightly deep female voice sounded in his ear. “You have been injured by the inscription. Your tendons and bones ought to have broken to pieces. I have used a talisman to keep you together.”

Xi Ping: “...”

In other words, he was a person made of sand now; even breathing was dangerous.

Princess Duanrui continued: “But your spiritual eyes opened in the moment between life and death. Now that the evil cultivator has been expelled, I will release the prohibition and allow the spiritual energy to pour into your meridians. Prepare yourself.”

What? Xi Ping thought. He couldn't stand up to a wind blowing right now, and she wanted to pour spiritual energy into him?

Why didn't she just take a pot of boiling water and steep him in it?! Maybe if she planted him in the ground, a little one would grow next year.

Zhi Xiu respectfully sent the Bell of Tribulation away and landed among the ruins along with the night. First he nodded to the princess. Then he said to Xi Ping, “Your Duanrui-shishu and I will keep your body from being destroyed, but when the spiritual energy passes through you, it will be hundreds of thousands of times more painful than for others. You must maintain spiritual clarity. If you can't endure it...”

Princess Duanrui interrupted him: “Enough. The longer we draw it out, the greater the danger becomes. I will let go now.”

No! thought Xi Ping. Wait, can’t you think of another way to rescue me...?

The princess had already uncompromisingly released the hand seal.

At once, all traces of the “cocoon” wrapped around Xi Ping were blown away by the mountain wind. Duanrui backed up three steps as if collapsing from exhaustion.

His ears hummed.

In that instant, every bit of flesh and blood in his body was torn over and over; the pain was more tumultuous than the spiritual energy surging like the tide. It drowned his mind at once.

He was only a somewhat bad-tempered young master, not some hero who had gone through a trial by fire. Apart from the suffering he’d experienced at Tai Sui’s hands, the most serious injury he’d had in his life had been breaking his leg falling off a horse... These two had overestimated him!

If he’d really had that kind of strong will, he would have made something of himself by now. Could he still be put to sleep by a few pages of a book filled with unpronounceable words?

The princess quietly said, “I’m afraid this child won’t make it.”

Zhi Xiu’s expression altered slightly. “Shiyong!”

But sounds from the outer world couldn’t reach Xi Ping’s ears. He seemed to be a small insect curled up on a leaf in the middle of a vast tidal wave; he couldn’t even struggle against a splash.

Human strength has its limits.

However bold a sparrow is, can it fly over the peak of Mount Kunlun?

What if... what if he just dropped it?

Xi Ping thought that he had eaten well and played well, had lived in comfort for nearly twenty years, fully marinated in gold dust. He'd gotten his money's worth.

Racking his brain, he couldn't come up with any regrets, so he abandoned his pitiful resistance.

Let his spirit fade, his mind dissolve...

Suddenly, a weak voice passed through the storm: "Tai Sui! Grand Duke Tai Sui..."

The reincarnation wood was still stuck to his hand with blood.

To the south were innumerable pieces of reincarnation wood—trees growing in the ground, wood made into timber, memorial tablets placed in shrines... A-Xiang's constant calls pulled Xi Ping's drifting consciousness into the wood. As soon as he sank into it, he seemed to grow a vast body. The pain that had nearly killed him was considerably diluted.

Xi Ping shook, automatically clutching that distant call.

A-Xiang ran breathlessly through the alleys, darted into her house, and plopped down on the ground. She was frightened out of her wits when she remembered what had just happened.

She had become confused somehow, as if her mind had gone wandering, and had nearly gone mad along with her shifu and the

others. A-Xiang remembered she'd had only one thought at the time: worship. If only she was sincere enough, everything she had lost would come back to her, all her wishes would come true.

If that "vision" hadn't woken her...

A-Xiang clutched the reincarnation wood in front of her chest. Still recovering from her shock, she thought: I must have been the only one to hear the voice of the true god.

So she earnestly thanked Grand Duke Tai Sui, who had saved her once again.

The grand canal's lighthouse indefatigably puffed out steam, striving to send its light far away through the pouring rain.

The swift rain fell all night, cleansing the skies of Jinping. A rare blue sky appeared.

Amid the girl's prayers, there was a hum as a steamship raised waves and slowly put into port. A crowd of workers in straw sandals ran over, shouting as they scrambled for work.

The wind in the Latent Cultivation Temple dropped.

CHAPTER 32 - The Dragon Bites Its Tail (Final)

“In all the history of the Latent Cultivation Temple, this was the greatest commotion caused by the opening of spiritual eyes, bar none.” Su Zhun walked into Chengjing Hall with his arms folded, looking fretful. “We may as well rename the Qiu courtyard the Gu courtyard,²² and the Hu courtyard next to it was also affected. Even the discipline hall has collapsed... Well, how is he?”

Zhi Xiu put down Xi Ping’s wrist. “Better than expected.”

Su Zhun said, “Not dead, not paralyzed, not maimed, and not an imbecile either?”

“Have some higher hopes.”

“Thank heaven and earth, he’s in one piece.” Su Zhun let out a big sigh of relief. “Good, we can hold him for ransom to make the family pay for the damage.”

Zhi Xiu added, “Only I’m afraid he’ll be down for some months.”

Elder Su gave an *ah*. His first reaction was, “But what about his schoolwork?”

“The schoolwork is no problem.” Zhi Xiu waved a hand. “Shijie, what do you think is going on with those spiritual bones of his?”

“Spiritual bones?” Hearing this, Su Zhun’s white beard nearly curled. “What spiritual bones? Him? *He* has spiritual bones?!”

Others sought for a hundred years to acquire a set of spiritual bones, and this brat had blinked his eyes and studied only two chapters of *Detailed Account of Meridians*; how could he have spiritual bones?

Su Zhun involuntarily looked at the princess. “Do you mean he has innate...”

“He doesn’t have innate spiritual bones, and the first-class spiritual sense was an error of judgment on Luo Qingshi’s part. This disciple’s inherent endowments are on the upper end of average,” Duanrui said. “Those spiritual bones aren’t his own.”

“Then-then whose are they?”

“That evil cultivator surnamed Liang’s,” said Duanrui. “We received word from Heaven’s Design Pavilion. This evil cultivator had no more than an established foundation. He shouldn’t have had a primordial being. If my guess is correct, what possessed this disciple was a set of spiritual bones. When Xi Shiyong gained these spiritual bones, while he couldn’t use them for himself, his spiritual sense still took form in his senses.”

If anyone but Princess Duanrui had said this, Su Zhun definitely would have thought he was listening to a stupid ghost story. “How can bones possess someone?”

“Precedent does in fact exist,” Zhi Xiu said, standing. “I investigated it in the inner sect. When the ancient gods and demons still existed, there was once a demonic god who legend says was a long-time enemy of the Southern Sage. This person’s cultivation path was extremely unusual. It is said that he passed through tribulations by ‘being smashed to pieces.’ With each boundary he crossed, his body had to die. This is known as the ‘way of death.’”

Su Zhun felt that this was even more unbelievable than “a skeleton possessing someone.” “A dead man came back to life? And he could cross boundaries?”

Unless you had ascended to the world above, then even if you were a master cultivator, you were in the end still human.

When a human died, it was ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

And the so-called “primordial being” wasn’t at all like the ghosts that the common people imagined, which could travel the world, freely haunting. The sturdiest primordial being could only survive snatching a body once. Otherwise, the cultivation sects would truly have become “ghost sects.” A primordial being still had to rely on a body. Even for an ascended spirit cultivator, when the body was destroyed, the absconding primordial being couldn’t withstand even the lightest tap from an open-eyed grade immortal tool. Once the body was destroyed, even if you succeeded in snatching another body, your progress along the immortal path would stop dead. You would have no way to take another step forward.

“‘Death’ is a metaphor, not true death,” Zhi Xiu said. “In the incomplete manuscript I found, it says that this master of the way of death cultivated a special set of ‘hidden spiritual bones’ that could be concealed among all things in nature. His true body was those hidden bones. Each time his bones and flesh parted, it was like ‘shedding his skin.’ The perfectly preserved hidden bones would grow another body... until those hidden bones were captured by the Southern Sage, and this ‘undying’ master at last passed away.”

“Never mind ancient stories. Many of the records are no different than ‘Nüwa Mends the Heavens’, even more fantastical than legends from the mortal world,” Su Zhun said. “Little shishu, what connection does this demonic god you’re talking about have with this child?”

Zhi Xiu raised his eyes. “By coincidence, this legendary master of the way of death’s associated material was reincarnation wood. That is where reincarnation wood gets its name.”

Su Zhun was stunned.

Princess Duanrui said, nodding, “After I cut off the spiritual energy in the valley, that evil cultivator wanted to go through the reincarnation wood to absorb people’s energy and blood to fill his spiritual eyes. It’s clear he could in fact use the reincarnation wood to carry out ‘supernatural’ activity. The legend about the hidden bones isn’t unfounded.”

“Xiao Pang says that over there they found the evil cultivator’s true body, and his bones aren’t spiritual bones. After only eight years, they’ve already rotted,” Zhi Xiu said. “It’s impossible that an established foundation cultivator wouldn’t have spiritual bones. So where did his spiritual bones go?”

Su Zhun broke out in gooseflesh. “In other words, it’s likely that Liang Mianzhi... by some coincidence obtained a portion of this ancient demonic god’s hidden bones, and after merging them with his spiritual bones, he left his body like a primordial being? No wonder no one could spot a primordial being on that child. Body and soul were indeed one.”

Hearing him say “Liang Mianzhi,” Zhi Xiu raised his eyebrows slightly. Then he said, “My guess is that body and soul being one also had to do with the life-swapping talisman of that young lady who performed the sacrifice at the Blissful Village. She must already have offered up everything she had in life and death to the reincarnation wood. Using the life-swapping talisman, she saved his life, but she also made him a target.”

The princess asked, “I heard that this evil cultivator surnamed Liang was very attached to those whose spiritual image resembled his?”

“Yes. There was a criminal brand on his spiritual image.” Zhi Xiu murmured to himself for a moment. “While I don’t know what his

precise plans were, my guess is, he must have wanted to use some method to remove his criminal brand.”

Su Zhun felt that his two hundred plus years of cultivation had all been for nothing. His mind was buzzing now. “Little shishu, what is a ‘criminal brand’ on the spiritual image?”

“In the past, when Heaven’s Design Pavilion was first established, the outer sect system was incomplete. For the sake of defeating evil, many cultivators were recruited from among the common people. While these people were talented, they were often undisciplined. To prevent them from going astray, a master established the art of branding the spiritual image,” the princess said coolly. “This is an outmoded practice that was abolished over six hundred years ago. You young people have likely never heard of it. For the spiritual image brand, both sides must be willing, and afterward, the one bearing the brand may never betray their master. This brand is like a person’s name and follows them their whole life. Even if their primordial being inhabits another body in the future, they will still be unable to cast it off.”

Su Zhun’s scalp went numb. He blurted out, “As an official appointed by the court, why would he have such a thing? Who put it on him?”

“Yes, I also want to know that,” Zhi Xiu said slowly. “It also puzzles me that this person seems to have obeyed the rules his whole life, so where could he have gotten the relics of an ancient demonic god... and how could he have concealed himself in Heaven’s Design Pavilion for eight years without the Azure Dragon Towers or the Sea of Stars having any reaction?”

As he spoke, he lowered his gaze, and the other two’s eyes fell along with his on the unconscious Xi Ping.

Su Zhun unconsciously lowered his voice. “The Bell of Tribulation left Liang Mianzhi’s... half set of ‘hidden bones’ in this child?”

“He was wounded by the inscription before opening his spiritual eyes. To let the spiritual energy pass through his meridians, shijie fused his meridians and skeleton together... Luckily it wasn’t a ‘spiritual eye opening wound,’ or else no amount of spiritual energy could have repaired it. He would have been paralyzed for life. When the spiritual energy passed through his injured bones and sinews, they healed spontaneously. The evil cultivator’s remnants must have fused with his own bones.”

As Zhi Xiu spoke, he snapped his fingers across empty space. Xi Ping’s fingers, swept by gentle spiritual energy, let out a *twang* like a qin string and cracked a coarse pottery teacup by the bed. “Though they haven’t fully developed yet, they are in fact spiritual bones.”

Out of nowhere, the princess said, “If he were a girl, I would take him.”

Zhi Xiu understood her, hesitated for a long time, then sighed and said, “Fine. I’ll take him back to Flying Jade Peak.”

Su Zhun turned to him, gaping, as if he had heard the calendar block say it was going to rain blood.

“Good.” The princess nodded. “Then I’ll leave.”

Su Zhun quickly shut his mouth and stood up to salute her. When Princess Duanrui had vanished into thin air, he turned impatiently to Zhi Xiu. “Jingzhai, are you really taking a disciple?”

“After I reported the evil cultivator’s name on the cliff above the Sea of Stars, shizun immediately sent word to the Dignitary of Rites and the Dignitary of Rule Elders and gave me the Bell of Tribulation. This is clearly no minor storm,” Zhi Xiu said rather heavily. “This little

devil obtained this half set of hidden bones by coincidence and reached the consummate open-eyed stage in a single step—that's not a good thing. As my disciple, he may not make anything of himself, but at least if he encounters those with unlawful intentions, he won't be bullied too badly.”

Su Zhun dryly said, “Little shishu, in all fairness, I feel that you ought to discipline your disciple properly so that he doesn't bully others too badly.”

Zhi Xiu laughed good-naturedly and gently put Xi Ping's hand back under the quilt. Then he said, “I just heard you call Liang Chen by his courtesy name. What, were you friends?”

For some reason, perhaps because of the brand on his spiritual image or because of the hidden bones, there was a fog over Liang Chen's history. Even Zhi Xiu couldn't divine it.

Hearing this, Su Zhun looked at him strangely for a long time. “Jingzhai, I think you must actually be cultivating the way of clarity... You don't remember? Two hundred years ago?”

“Who can remember things that happened two hundred years ago?” said Zhi Xiu.

Su Zhun: “...”

“You...you... Fine.” Elder Su pulled up a chair and sat down, sighing. “It was back when Southern He had fought its way to the foot of the capital's walls.

“All the able-bodied men sixteen and over went into battle then. Once, the two of us went past a team of temporary guards. I saw that there was a scrawny kid who seemed like he shouldn't be there. You snatched him up and questioned him, and it turned that he was a little bean not yet fourteen years old. You told the kid to

run along and play and not cause trouble. The child cried and said he had come to Jinping to visit a sick family member, who'd died just as he arrived. After the funeral, he'd wanted to return. He didn't want to be trapped in the city. But he'd heard that his home back in Ning'an had been crushed by Southern He's iron heel, and things boded poorly for his whole family. The child was left with no one and nothing to rely on, not knowing what he could do. You took pity on him and kept him with you as a personal guard to run errands and pass messages and so on... Anyway, it wasn't clear whether he was guarding you or you were guarding him. That child was Liang Chen. You don't remember at all?"

Zhi Xiu blankly gave an *ah*.

With Lancang's masters surrounding the city and the Dragon Vein leaping, no one knowing when he might die, and him busy and fretting day and night, how could he have remembered all these trifles?

"And then what? How did he enter the Way?"

"You could say it was knocked into him in battle. That battle was so bitter, even you..." Su Zhun paused, then continued: "To resist the invasion, we used too many immortal tools. Not a single child was born within thirty li of Jinping the year after, never mind what happened to the soldiers stationed next to the immortal tools. Afterward, the immortal mountain allocated a special batch of elixirs to treat the wounds of the survivors. The majority of them took the elixir and were all right, but a dozen of them had their turning point because of this and unexpectedly opened their spiritual eyes. They had performed a service to the nation, so though they weren't part of a righteous sect, of course they couldn't be considered evil cultivators. But opening their spiritual eyes by means of that kind of elixir was too harmful to their conditions. None of that group of people had the aptitude to enter Heaven's Design Pavilion. Later they were all sent to the Mining Office. Liang Mianzhi retired eight

years ago due to an illness following an injury sustained in the course of his work. That's why he returned to Jinping and went into seclusion.”

After hearing this, Zhi Xiu nodded. “I see. The Mining Office is constantly stationed in Southern He. It seems that the problem likely arose from the Land of Turmoil.”

Su Zhun looked at him, on the point of speaking.

“What is it?” Zhi Xiu said. “Is there something wrong?”

There was absolutely no problem. General Zhi's train of thought was clear. It never strayed from the point.

Su Zhun, looking at his face, which showed that he remembered absolutely nothing, finally shook his head—

Afterward... Hearing that General Zhi was seriously ill, Liang Chen had gone all around the south seeking medical advice and medicines. When he found something he believed would be useful, he would send it to Heaven's Design Pavilion and ask Su Zhun and the others to have a look... Of course none of it was any good. He had only stopped when he learned that Zhi Xiu had been taken in by Xuanyin Mountain.

From then on, Liang Chen had resolved to work hard to cultivate so in the future he could enter Heaven's Design Pavilion and offer his life for the people like the hero he worshipped. “Walkers in the mortal world” who rendered outstanding service would be registered with the sect, so perhaps he could see General Zhi again and tell him in person that he had lived up to his patronage.

But when your spiritual eyes had opened through elixirs, the damage would stay with you for the rest of your life. Su Zhun couldn't stand extinguishing the boy's aspirations, so when calling

on his old friend, he had mentioned him to Zhi Xiu. General Zhi had given a casual encouraging “exert yourself,” letting Su Zhun send those words to the boy far away beyond the southern border.

Henceforth, Liang Chen had had a courtesy name—“Mianzhi.”²³

But when they’d met again, the message had vanished, along with that person’s airy memories, and the solemn boy, just like his courtesy name, had been forgotten... in the vague depths of time.

Fair enough. It had been two hundred years, and he had changed beyond recognition. It wasn’t General Zhi’s fault his memory was so poor.

Zhi Xiu quickly turned his attention away and instructed, “Oh, right, Mingyi, don’t forget to have Xiao Pang tell the child’s family he’s all right.”

“I will, I’ll go now.” Su Zhun swallowed his sighs. “You’re so considerate, little shishu.”

“Thank you for going out of your way, Exalted.” Prince Zhuang politely escorted out Pang Jian, who had come to report on Xi Ping’s well-being. He also gave Pang Jian the Yao family’s transversal fish and a small bag of blue jade. “If I may be so bold as to ask, could I trouble you to return this greenware fish to Lord Yao?”

Pang Jian was a slick customer. He understood at once and said smoothly, “Well, of course it was Heaven’s Design Pavilion that borrowed it, why should Your Highness spend money to compensate them...? In that case, I’ll be bold enough to thank you in Lord Yao’s place.”

Once the formalities were out of the way, Pang Jian put the blue jade into the transversal fish's brocade box and left carrying it, not saying a word about Prince Zhuang privately changing his inscriptions or employing a cultivator—a prince of the second rank had money and certainly wouldn't let a subordinate of his pilfer "heaven's order," which was full of impurities. Even if he were keeping an established foundation or ascended spirit cultivator around, he wouldn't harm others. There were no unauthorized inscriptions, and it was on his own head if the roof came down; anyway, the courtyard of the prince's manor was deep. If it got smashed up, it wouldn't affect his neighbors—Lao Pang was a commoner; he wasn't about to get involved in whatever schemes these nobles got up to.

Prince Zhuang saw Pang Jian out and heard someone behind him say, "Pang Wenchang is an old fox."

There was a brocade box on the edge of the desk in the south study. The lid of the box opened on its own. Inside was a layer of dazzling white spirit stones. There was a paper pressed between the priceless stones, almost matching the color of the spiritual stones.

"Why are you coming out again?" Prince Zhuang drove off the inquisitive black cat, then put the cover back on the box. "Curl up."

Bai Ling's voice came from the box: "Your Highness, Liang Chen's inscription that I broke in the general commander's residence was a 'gold-inlaid inscription.' He and his reincarnation wood did indeed have an air of the Impassable Sea."

Prince Zhuang raised his eyebrows. "What did I say? The Impassable Sea truly was the start of the fork in the road."

"Pang Wenchang said that Liang was ambushed on the road while delivering spiritual stones eight years ago." Bai Ling spoke a little

faster. “Wasn’t that just when...”

“Shh.” Prince Zhuang knocked on the lid of the box. “Take care of yourself, don’t worry about it.”

As he spoke, he sat by the desk, picked up a qin, and put it on his knees. “I’ve done all that duty and humanity could ask of me in not attracting Heaven’s Design Pavilion’s notice to that place. The rest of it... is someone else’s problem.”

Inside the brocade box, Bai Ling heard him pluck out a tune with his own hands. It was full of rustic charm, but a little jarring; even the cat got irritated and ran off after listening for a while.

It really didn’t seem like Prince Zhuang’s style.

“Your Highness, is this the song the Viscount played eight years ago?”

“Yes.” Prince Zhuang held down the strings. There was a faint smile at the corners of his eyes. “I don’t know what shady person he learned it from. The lyrics are even more absurd. He filled my ears up with elopements with inferiors in that childish voice, so the first thing I had to do when I crawled back to the mortal world was to write a letter to his father to complain...”

“Xiao Bai, thank you.”

“I can’t accept that praise. I was the Viscount’s own luck.”

The “lucky” Xi Ping stayed in bed for half a year.

He was occasionally woken by pain and would hear the sound of whistling, always the tunes he was usually modifying. Sometimes he would also hear a girl’s voice chattering on, telling how her shifu and her companions had all been captured by blue-clothesers, how she

had been alarmed, but fortunately the Grand Duke had blessed and protected her, how she was still buying Golden Tray lottery tickets but still never won... and some other trifles.

Only when Jinping's midwinter lay over the southern outskirts and a freezing rain was pattering down did Xi Ping finally stick together his scattered consciousness.

For a time, he couldn't remember whether he was dead or alive. He only saw that A-Xiang was working while calling out to him in her mind. He couldn't resist putting in a word: "Are you kidding me? How can you still believe in that thing?"

A-Xiang's hand was nearly crushed by the machinery. She quickly stood up and looked all around in shock.

"Stop looking, it's the wood, that piece of wood."

A-Xiang's heart began to beat wildly. Dazed, she found an excuse and slipped out of the factory. She squeezed the reincarnation wood. "Tai Sui?"

"*You're* Tai Sui, your whole family's..." The voice from the reincarnation wood stopped for a moment, as if remembering that A-Xiang's whole family was dead. He stiffly changed the subject. "Let me ask you, where are those goblins?"

"They were all caught by blue-clothesers. Thanks to your blessing and protection, Tai Sui, I..."

"Tai Sui" interrupted her: "Don't worry, you helped me out, too. We're even."

A-Xiang: "..."

No, wait, how could this Grand Duke keep accounts with his believers?

A pained groan came from the reincarnation wood. A-Xiang was surprised. “Tai Sui?”

“I said don’t call me Tai Sui, I’m not that old roundworm.” The voice in the reincarnation wood cursed for a few sentences. “Hey, listen, couldn’t you get anywhere making vows at the Southern Sage’s big temple? Is that why you blindly believed in some knock-off god? He sold you out, and you still swore a blood oath and were all in a rush to be his meal. What’s the matter with you?”

A-Xiang finally noticed something was wrong. “Who... who are you?”

“I’ll tell you what’s been going on, listen carefully. When I’m finished, I advise you to burn that lousy piece of wood at once. Otherwise, as soon as you call for ‘Tai Sui,’ I’ll be able to see you. You’re not a little girl anymore, don’t you think that’s inappropriate?”

Next, before A-Xiang could refuse, the slightly weak voice in the reincarnation wood methodically told the whole story from the beginning: from how the girl A-Xiang had woken the greedy evil cultivator with her blood, to how the evil god had looked on indifferently from the shadows, guiding her into offering up body and soul as sacrifice...

A-Xiang’s lips trembled. Leaning back against the wall, she slowly squatted down.

In the immortal mountains, Xi Ping finished overturning his “sole believer”’s faith and suddenly seemed to be able to feel his own body.

He was pleasantly surprised and had no more time for A-Xiang. He took a deep breath. Unusually plentiful spiritual energy poured at once into his lungs.

Xi Ping opened his eyes.

BOOK 2 - Forming the Heart

CHAPTER 33 - Fragrant Jade Miasma (1)

Bang—Xi Yue had dropped a basin.

The half-puppet stared blankly at Xi Ping for a long moment, opened his mouth, then turned and started to run outside.

“Wait, come back!” The thought flashed through Xi Ping’s mind, and Xi Yue’s footsteps halted. He was pulled back by the dragon-taming chain.

Xi Ping was stunned: after so long, hadn’t the blood in the dragon-taming chain worn off yet?

He was confused and disoriented. He wanted to prop himself up in bed, but as soon as he exerted a bit of strength with his hand, he gasped.

His arm had cramped!

Xi Ping seemed at once to have returned to when he was growing taller at thirteen and fourteen. There had been some months when his height had spurted up too fast and his flesh couldn’t keep up with his bones. Every day he was woken in the middle of the night by his muscles cramping—but at that time, it had been only his legs cramping. Now it was his whole body.

At the same time, the pain also seemed to sharpen his senses. Xi Ping’s eyes and ears had become unprecedentedly acute.

When he closed his eyes, he could hear the sound of accumulated snow breaking tree branches in the mountain forest a thousand zhang away.

Wait... accumulated snow?

As Xi Ping grimaced from the cramps, he turned his head to look out the window.

Outside was a vast expanse of white, big snowflakes swirling in the north wind and gathering together to come falling down. The number of snowfalls a person who had grown up in Jinping had seen in his life could be counted on one hand. Xi Ping stared at it, gaping, and thought, Who am I? Where am I? Am I still alive? How did I survive?

Just then, his ears caught the sound of a particular “snowflake” flying extremely fast, and going in a somewhat different direction from the other snowflakes—in an instant, it was in front of the house he was in.

The center of his brow itched slightly, and a thought flashed through his mind: Someone is here.

Indeed, the next moment, the door opened with a creak.

Zhi Xiu walked in holding Zhaoting. His cape was piled with fragments of ice. He pulled down his hood and, entirely unsurprised, said, smiling, “Awake?”

“Finally I can stop feeding him spiritual energy. Stop crying already, go get him something to eat.” Zhi Xiu patted the half-puppet on the head, shut the cold air outside, then instructed Xi Ping, “If you want to go out and play, dress warm. Flying Jade Peak doesn’t have much, but it has cold.”

Xi Ping nodded as if sleepwalking. Halfway through nodding, his head stopped.

What peak? Where’d you say this is?!

“Flying Jade Peak. It snows most of the year here.” Perhaps because he was in his own territory, Zhi Xiu was much more at ease than he had been outside. He undid his cape, sat down on a little couch spread with a snow-white blanket, crossed one leg over the other inelegantly, and got out a bag of pine nuts. “Do you want some?”

Xi Ping: “...”

Zhi Xiu had hardly ever seen him looking so utterly lost. He thought it was pretty funny. Ever since he had first seen this brat Xi Ping in the Blissful Village, he had thought he was full of ideas, and not very reliable in giving them play—sometimes they were good ideas, sometimes they were lousy ideas, but whether an idea was good or bad, you couldn’t get a clue from his face; you had to wait for him to reveal it himself at the final juncture; it was even more stimulating than removing the lid of a dice cup in a gambling house—so he had a mind to tease him.

“Listen,” said Zhi Xiu without warning, snapping his fingers toward Xi Ping, “how about you enter the inner sect and become my disciple?”

Xi Ping had finally managed to ease his muscle cramps. His mind hadn’t cleared yet. He blurted out, “No.”

Zhi Xiu: “...”

Though General Zhi was the legend of an era, he still only barely kept his expression intact.

The little house wrapped in heavy snow fell silent; there was a very awkward moment.

“No, wait, that’s not what I meant...” Xi Ping finally took this time to review his memories and quickly asked, “Let’s not talk about that

right now—shishu, that, that who’s-it, he’s gone, right?”

Zhi Xiu uncrossed his legs and solemnly sat a little more upright. “If he hadn’t died by the Bell of Tribulation, we could have been living under a new regime by now. Don’t worry.”

Hearing his confirmation, Xi Ping relaxed all over. His spine became three cun shorter on the spot.

He threw himself at the quilt, remembered how he had been shocked at every step in the Latent Cultivation Temple, and felt that his pent-up frustrations were hard to express. Therefore he drew his voice out to a length worthy of Luo Qingshi and howled, “Ah! He’s gone at last! What sin did I commit?!”

Zhi Xiu forced down the corners of his mouth, which were tilting up.

Having recovered his freedom, Xi Ping would have loved to go out and run around. After acting out for ages, he finally remembered what he had just turned down.

“Shishu, did you happen to believe in someone’s ‘slander’? Let me tell you the truth, I didn’t do any proper work in the Latent Cultivation Temple. I relied entirely on cheating for my spiritual sense and entirely on the demon for memorization. I’d meant to eat enough to gain ten jin, but it turned out that the dining hall only serves two meals a day, and with the demon tormenting me every day... Ah, what do you want me for? I already told my parents, if I couldn’t open my spiritual eyes, I’d go to the young masters’ training camp... uh.”

As he spoke, he lifted the quilt and got out of bed. As soon as his foot touched the ground, he lost control and stamped a crack into the snow-white wood floor.

Xi Ping put his foot on the crack, pretended that nothing had happened, and gave General Zhi a cute smile.

Zhi Xiu waved his sleeve, and a cool breeze swept over.

Xi Ping quickly pulled his foot back onto the bed and sat on it. He saw frost appear on the place he had cracked. The frost instantly turned to steam, and the crack in the floor was gone.

“You forget,” Zhi Xiu said, pointing at him, “you’ve already opened your spiritual eyes.”

Xi Ping froze.

His loose hair slid as he moved, and Xi Ping found that he could distinguish the path of each strand of hair, could even determine in advance where they would fall. All over his body, he could fix on any part...including his organs.

He looked down and examined his hands backward and forward. He found that the faint calluses on them had all disappeared. His fingers moved slightly, and there was a *twang*, like a qin string.

Xi Ping was startled, not knowing what he had touched, looking around everywhere.

“Stop looking,” Zhi Xiu said, “the sound is coming from your fingers.”

He’d turned into a qin?

Puzzled, Xi Ping recalled the introductory text he had just barely managed to read—the book hadn’t said that opening your spiritual eyes had after-effects.

“An open-eyed cultivator’s physical condition is far superior to the average person’s, but those who practice trivial martial arts out in the world still have to rely on external objects like arrays and immortal tools. Only when their spiritual bones are complete can an open-eyed cultivator be said to have their first power,” Zhi Xiu said. “For example, that bow your Pang-shixiong pulls out of his femur.”

Xi Ping didn’t dare to move at random. He spread his fingers out wide, as if he had just put on nail polish. “Where would I get spiritual bones?”

“Picked them up.” Zhi Xiu briefly explained about the hidden bones that “Tai Sui” had left him with, then said in consolation, “It’s because your foundation is unstable that you start making noise at a touch. In the future, when you’ve learned to control spiritual energy, it’ll be fine.”

Xi Ping suddenly saw the light: “No wonder!

“No wonder that even though the great demon is gone, when that girl calls ‘Tai Sui,’ I can still see her!”

Zhi Xiu’s brows knit, and he became serious. “What? You can see people calling on ‘Tai Sui’ through the reincarnation wood? You can see ‘Wei Chengxiang’ with your own eyes? When did that start? Can you still see her now?”

“Since the great demon woke up until now, I’ve always been able to, but I can only watch. If I want to communicate with them, I have to rely on the reincarnation wood... Hey, shishu, where is that ‘big-eyed lamp’ made of reincarnation wood?” From the Latent Cultivation Temple to Flying Jade Peak, Xi Ping’s clothes had changed long ago, and Xi Yue had of course taken the bloody reincarnation wood carving to be washed. It wasn’t on him. Xi Ping searched all over without finding it, then muttered, “Strange, the reincarnation wood isn’t on me, so how did I talk to her?”

“Tell it to me in detail,” said Zhi Xiu.

So Xi Ping explained it from beginning to end, starting from the first day he had heard A-Xiang begging for help, up to how he and A-Xiang had mutually helped each other, and how they were even now.

At first, Zhi Xiu had been listening with an increasingly grave expression. At the end, his expression became strange. “You told her the whole truth?”

“Not exactly,” Xi Ping said. “I didn’t tell her precisely who I am. We’re both Jinpingers. It’d be awkward if we ran into each other in the street.”

Zhi Xiu looked him over for a moment. “There are those who wouldn’t willingly step down from the shrine even if all that remained to them was their bones. That young lady bowed and prayed day and night. She must have sincerely worshipped you as a god... Why did you want to expose yourself?”

Xi Ping said, confused, “What benefit is there to me in being worshipped by a foolish little girl?”

Zhi Xiu raised his eyebrows; he had no retort. After a moment, he shook his head and said, smiling, “No wonder your Duanrui-shishu said she wanted you as her disciple. Your temperament does indeed suit her way.”

“What? Duanrui-shishu?” Xi Ping gave a start. “I think... I think I’d rather not. If she became my teacher, wouldn’t I have to cut something off first... ow!”

Zhi Xiu had flicked him on the forehead across empty space.

“Even the Southern Sage won’t work miracles, and you expect me to do it?” Xi Ping covered his forehead. “That’s all I need. I’m not doing it.”

“This is Xuanyin Mountain. Please mind your mouth.” Zhi Xiu glared at him, then sternly instructed, “Don’t talk about this matter with anyone else.”

“I’m not stupid.” Xi Ping waved a hand. “You just saved my rotten life, shishu, so I felt like I had better make a clean breast of it to you, to make sure there’s no more buried lurking danger that I don’t know about.”

“The way of death isn’t Liang Chen’s path. While he obtained half a set of hidden bones, in the end, he couldn’t grow himself a body from those bones like that demonic god. From the Blissful Village to the Latent Cultivation Temple, his plan was always possession and body-snatching.” Zhi Xiu considered, then said, “My guess is that in order to communicate with his believers, he would have relied on his spirit. He couldn’t control your spirit, so that’s why he needed the reincarnation wood... No wonder you made such fast progress. Spying on his believers along with him, it was as if you were opening up your spirit to him. He used that opportunity to draw a considerable amount of energy to ‘help you’ fill your spiritual eyes.”

Xi Ping: “...”

That fucking bastard!

“Now you have the hidden bones, and your body and soul are united, so you don’t need to use the reincarnation wood anymore,” Zhi Xiu said. “Don’t look at those evil cultivators again, and don’t talk to them.”

“So what will I do when they keep coming to bother me?” said Xi Ping.

“It’s your own spirit. Of course you’ll learn to control it.” Looking at this young disciple who had entered the sect only some months ago and had yet to piece together his general knowledge, Zhi Xiu felt a little anxious, so he said, “My experience may not be as extensive as that of the other peak masters, and I may not necessarily be able to teach you anything. But those shixionsgs and shijies with mountains full of pupils don’t take disciples. If you went there, you would only be allotted a residence, then cultivate along with your shixionsgs from the same peak, say ‘peak master’ instead of ‘shifu.’ I’m alone here on Flying Jade Peak. I’ve never even opened the mountain seal. If you become my disciple, you’ll be the only one. All of Flying Jade Peak’s resources will be at your disposal. Won’t you consider it?”

If the inner sect’s sword cultivators with no lineage to inherit had heard this, they would have burst into tears. But Xi Ping very indecorously really did start to “consider”!

Actually, Zhi Xiu didn’t want a disciple. He thought it would be too messy having another person around. However easygoing, he was still a sword cultivator. How sociable could the disposition of a sword cultivator who had cultivated alone in the snow and ice for hundreds of years be?

Anyway, if he took a disciple, he would have to “give moral and practical instruction, dispel doubts.” Especially that “dispel doubts” — if he said anything wrong and misled his disciple, he would have to take responsibility for it. Just thinking of it made his brain hurt. It was only because after Her Highness Princess Duanrui had spoken, it would have been unsuitable for him not to respond, and because that brat Xi Ping wasn’t disagreeable, that he had been reluctantly willing to make a “sacrifice” this once.

Who would have thought he would encounter this oaf.

Human nature is contrary. General Zhi found that he couldn't act contrary to common practice. With Xi Ping being reluctant, he instead ceased to be reluctant and really did rather want to have him for a disciple. So he added, "Your spiritual bones are no problem. When you're used to them, you can make up what you lack in cultivation, then consider establishing a foundation. I can pass my Way of the Heart on to you."

Xi Ping asked for instruction: "And what is your Way of the Heart?"

"I am a sword cultivator," said Zhi Xiu.

Xi Ping balked slightly. "Then wouldn't I have to train with the sword every day?"

Zhi Xiu said, smiling, "Don't worry, I'm very lax myself, so of course I won't be too strict with a junior. Three or four shichen of training a day is enough."

Xi Ping sucked in a breath and said in a panic, "Thank you very much, shishu, I can't learn that!"

Zhi Xiu said, curiously, "Don't you want to become immortal and live forever?"

Xi Ping became even more panicked. "Live forever, too? Train with the sword for three or four shichen a day, and do it for eight hundred or a thousand years? Shishu, if I've done something wrong, just give me a beating. I feel that my crime can't be that bad!"

His genuine panic amused General Zhi. "I only train with the sword because I like it. If you don't like it, then it's not absolutely necessary for you to go by that path. What do you like?"

Plenty of things...

Xi Ping thought over what he had said for ages and for a time actually couldn't smooth out his thoughts. He liked good food, fine wine, lovely people, beautiful scenery—he was willing to try anything new; he liked roaming all over the place with a trade caravan, fooling around the whole way; he liked the snows of Northern Li, the mountains of Western Chu, the streets of Southern Shu full of exotic animals; he liked finding local specialities to bring back home, and then picking up a new box of rouge for his mom on the way back.

So he summarized it in one phrase: “Eating, drinking, and making merry.”

Zhi Xiu laughed.

But Xi Ping didn't laugh. With these recollections, his thoughts had cleared.

When General Zhi said he wanted you for his disciple, it was impossible not to feel giddy. The reason Xi Ping hadn't flown up into the sky on the spot was that he had been too surprised, so shocked he couldn't quite catch up.

But while he'd been secretly overjoyed, he had kept feeling that there was something faintly scratching at him, not letting him rashly agree. Only when he had talked it out did Xi Ping realize it all of a sudden: from the bottom of his heart, he wanted to go home.

However tasty the snacks at the Latent Cultivation Temple, however funny the auspicious animals running all over the mountains, he still thought that this was only an interesting journey, the kind he could brag about when he returned... but, after all, he would have to return.

So, for once serious, he said, “Shishu, actually, I don't think I especially want to be immortal.”

Zhi Xiu raised his eyes. “You can’t give up the mortal world?”

“Of course I can’t give it up, but that’s not all it is.” Xi Ping looked out the window. There was snow as far as the eye could see on Flying Jade Peak, linking the mountains to the clouds. Houses and immortals, immortals and men, men and birds and beasts... all were as insignificant as a snowflake, without any difference between them.

If a mortal went out to walk in it, he would probably get snow blindness.

“Elder Su said that to establish a foundation and become immortal, you need a Way of the Heart. I don’t want a Way of the Heart. I think it’s just fine to burn incense at whatever temple you come to. Everyone takes their ‘Way’ and uses it to make inquiries of heaven and earth. If I were heaven and earth, I’d be sick of it.”

Zhi Xiu was slightly stunned. In that moment, his Way of the Heart seemed to move.

Xi Ping waited for ages without hearing a response from him, so he asked, “Shishu?”

“You’ve missed half a year of classes and obtained spiritual bones. You can’t even control your own spiritual energy. Letting you return to the mortal world would be asking for trouble,” said Zhi Xiu, recovering. “How about this? Make up the classwork you need to make up here with me, and then I’ll drop a word to your Pangshixiong and have you go to Heaven’s Design Pavilion to learn some things from him.”

Xi Ping’s eyes opened wide.

“As my disciple, before establishing a foundation, you can walk freely through the mortal world,” Zhi Xiu said warmly. “You can find a Way of the Heart on your own, then come back to Flying Jade Peak when you’ve found it. If you can’t find it... your lifespan will come to its end. I won’t have anything more to do with you. How does that sound?”

Well, what could he say to that?

Though Xi Ping had always been quite confident in his own charm, he was still overwhelmed by flattery in spite of himself. His fingers bumped into each other, clattering, nearly playing a melody of “Flute and Drums at Sunset.” He carefully asked, “Shishu, when you were in the mortal world, you didn’t happen to leave behind... some illegitimate child who changed his surname to Xi, did you?”

General Zhi’s self-restraint was exceptional. His smile didn’t waver. “I see it’s no good letting you keep that mouth. Why not give it to Xi Yue instead?”

And so, near the dead of winter, the Viscount of Yongning, who had still been picking out beauties with Jinping’s ghosts in spring, became the head disciple of Flying Jade Peak, like a dream.

But half a month later, the dream of teacher and disciple getting along was broken.

“Shifu.” Xi Ping, already accustomed to this form of address, dutifully warmed a pot of wine for Zhi Xiu while undutifully pulling a long face and saying, “I feel that your teaching isn’t even as understandable as All Clear Luo’s.”

“... Don’t make impertinent remarks about your shixiong behind his back,” said Zhi Xiu.

General Zhi was also bewildered. He had seen other people's disciples: there were exceptionally thoughtful and clever ones; there were particularly understanding ones; there were ones who were uncommunicative but did whatever their teacher told them... even when he had been a disciple, he had been very respectful toward his shizun, revered him.

Where was there a disciple like this?

“Shifu, you're really amazing. You've burned the pine nuts again.”

“Shifu, you're so lazy. You stuck a mustard seed into a cottage and now you pretend you have a real house... I think you'd be better off just putting the mustard seed outside and taking down the cottage. The snow on the roof is about to bring it crashing down!”

“Shifu, this jar of wine tastes different from yesterday's. Your brewing standard isn't very steady.”

“Shifu, why is the food in the inner sect not as good as in the Latent Cultivation Temple?!”

“Shifu...”

This brat was too much trouble. How could he make such a fuss?!

“What don't you understand?” said Zhi Xiu.

“I don't understand anything,” said Xi Ping.

Teacher and disciple looked at each other in dismay. There seemed to be a barrier like the border between two warring nations between them. Neither could tell what the hell the other one used for brains.

That thing that had touched the peerless sword cultivator's Way of the Heart like a brief glimpse of beauty on the day they had

discussed immortality seemed to have been only a lovely illusion.

General Zhi was exasperated. He tossed aside *Detailed Account of Meridians*. “Forget it—how are you doing with getting used to your spiritual bones?”

“Oh, pretty well,” said Xi Ping. “I’ve found all the notes of the pentatonic scale.”

“Let’s go outside,” said Zhi Xiu. “Let me see.”

Xi Ping was confused, not knowing why they had to go outside so he could play the qin. But, after all, shizun had ordered it, so he wrapped himself up in a cloak and obeyed.

Zhi Xiu led him to the place where he normally trained with the sword. All around were boulders covered in ice and snow. Matchlessly keen sword energy had left scar after scar on them. Their harshness was evident.

“Don’t be nervous, shifu is here. Just try.”

Xi Ping had played at the House of Overflowing Splendor’s Flower Viewing Festival. He didn’t have the least bit of stage fright. He rolled up his sleeves and spontaneously played one of “Mr. Yu Gan”’s works that he was pleased with.

General Zhi, who had wanted to see what properties his spiritual bones had, was silent for a long moment after he finished listening. He asked, “What was that?”

“A song,” answered his head disciple. “It tells the story of a young mistress escaping a marriage and eloping with a stableman.”

Zhi Xiu didn’t say anything about it. He nodded rather patiently. “Quite well-practiced. Try another one.”

So Jinping's famed specialist in elopements Mr. Yu Gan performed "The Immortal Lady Elopes with a Mortal," "The Enraged Widow Smashes the Paifang,"²⁴ and other such masterpieces.

Listening to this, Zhi Xiu for the first time felt chest pain and shortness of breath in his own sword array. For the first time, he had the thought of kicking this brat off his peak.

CHAPTER 34 - Fragrant Jade Miasma (2)

At first, in order to protect Xi Ping, the fewer people who knew about investigating the business of “Tai Sui,” the better. In the Latent Cultivation Temple, Elder Su was the only one aware of what had happened, and in Heaven’s Design Pavilion, only Pang Jian, who had been in direct contact with Zhi Xiu, knew the whole story. The other blue-clothesers had only “received a secret order from the inner sect” and run errands for Commander Pang in total confusion.

Even more so, it couldn’t be publicized that they had at last tracked the evil cultivator to their general commander’s residence.

Fortunately, Bai Ling, the other eyewitness, was in no better a position than the desiccated corpse on the reincarnation wood pedestal; he also couldn’t be exposed to the light of day. Pang Jian wasn’t worried about him divulging the secret. He simply asked Zhi Xiu for a seal to plaster back over the general commander’s residence. When the matter of “Tai Sui” was thoroughly investigated, they could report it to the court under some guise.

Outwardly, he only said he’d had to ask the general commander for instructions on an urgent matter, so he’d had no choice but to burst in.

As for the “urgent matter”... everyone thought it had to do with Heaven’s Design Pavilion exercising its “substitute governance” authority, hunting down the remaining evil cultivators all over the city without restraint. It was said that just among the city guard, they had ferreted out seven or eight people, and the rear courts of the wealthy people of Dangui Lane were even more uncommonly “exciting.” For a time, the whole city was awash with activity and everyone on edge, and there were many peculiar little details that no one looked into.

The Yongning Marquis Manor was like the eye of the storm, caught in the heart of the wind and waves, so calm that not a bit of information blew in. When Xi Ping's letters suddenly stopped, if not for Prince Zhuang's obscure assurance of his well-being, the Marquis would hardly have known what to say to the old lady.

Half a year later, the white jade proximal lit up once more. Before the Marquis could relax, he got a clear look at what was written on it, and his vision dimmed.

That shameless wretch Xi Ping first praised himself to the heavens, then announced: because he was so good in this, that, and every other way, he had been carried off like a fine pearl by the discerning master of Flying Jade Peak to become General Zhi's own disciple.

For pity's sake, the history books never said that General Zhi had eye disease!

The Marquis didn't sleep all night, and the lights in Prince Zhuang Manor's south study also stayed on until dawn.

Far off on the snowy mountain, Xi Ping knew nothing about his family's deep anxieties. After getting the proximal back, he had more to say every day.

“Because I've come here, an immortal beast comes to Flying Jade Peak every day to deliver meals (I found out later that the immortal beasts are immortal tools that need spiritual stones to run, so no wonder they don't sneak bites). The food in the inner sect has no oil, no salt, no taste, and no smell. Shifu says the inner sect puts cultivation above all and doesn't indulge in the vulgar desire for food, so no one cares about it. So I asked, wasn't it because all these mighty people practice inedia, so no matter how good the food was, there would be no one to appreciate it? Eating and drinking are everyday matters, but flattery rises above the

mundane... Shifu punished me by making me go up on the roof to sweep snow.”

“Shifu is teaching me how to use my consciousness to undo the dragon-taming chain. It turns out that after you open your spiritual eyes, you can send out your consciousness. It’s amazing! But shifu says that the mind is the same as the body. If you meet a powerful cultivator, sticking out your mind is no different from sticking out your head in front of them, it’ll only spare your neck; where your body must not go, your consciousness can’t go, either. It’s only because the dragon-taming chain recognizes me as its master that I can enter it as I like.”

“I learned to do it and undid the dragon-taming chain, but that idiot Xi Yue acted like his parents had died. I played a song to cheer him up... but he cried even more. At night, when I wasn’t paying attention, he snuck off with the dragon-taming chain and put it back on. I think that idiot’s intellect isn’t all there, so I asked shifu how I could make him smarter. Shifu says that someone with higher cultivation than his original master has to alter the arrays on his puppet body. His original master wasn’t that powerful, but arrays really give you a headache. Such a pain.

“Postscript: I also used my consciousness to peek at shifu’s wine cellar. There’s good stuff in there, another day I’ll get some of it to taste.”

“Respectful greetings, grandmother, I am well. Because I secretly drank a cup of shifu’s Maze, I was drunk for five days. I won’t say more, shifu is punishing me by making me go up and sweep snow.”

“Today I didn’t sweep snow. The cottage roof collapsed under me.”

“Since the cottage roof collapsed, shifu had to open the mountain seal. It turns out there’s more to Flying Jade Peak than bare mountain and snow! There are all kinds of rare plants growing on

the mountain because of its spiritual energy, and spiritual beasts everywhere. They're very respectful when they see the peak master. There's a green-faced lynx that even knows how to bow with folded hands. Shifu pointed it out in admiration and said it was much more sensible than his inferior disciple. Can you believe that! There are countless jade towers in the peak master's palace, ancient texts piled up like mountains, and there are even more immortal tools and strange treasures collected by elders. I was ordered to make an inventory of all the treasures in the palace with my consciousness and compile a register so as to keep an account. I wasn't having any of it—what's the point of keeping an account? Shifu also wasn't having any of it. He thought it was disgracefully messy. Xi Yue can't read properly yet. After fighting over it for half the day with no result, the three of us had to seal the mountain back up and leave, then build another cottage.”

“Today shifu is teaching me how to activate talismans. Talismans are all very wonderful. Apart from talismans for exorcism and avoiding contamination, and other protective talismans, it takes only a drop of spiritual energy to activate them—won't it be easy to sweep snow from now on? But these doodles are too picky. At a glance they all look the same, you can't tell one from the other—how am I supposed to remember them? Shifu ordered me to study them on my own. I'm planning to buy them in the future, then arrange them carefully and label them with their names, so I can let them loose when I need to use them. What's the point of studying them?”

“...it's almost the eighth. Respectful wishes of good health and safety to my aunt. The Rose Gold Mind-Strengthening Pill that the white crane brought can soothe the nerves and strengthen the mind, dispel restlessness and promote sleep. I collected all the medicinal herbs used to make the medicine myself and asked a shixiong from Rose Gold Peak to refine it to send as a birthday greeting from afar to my aunt. Best wishes to her for good fortune, long life, and good health.

“PS: It’s the dead of winter. San-ge, when you go to the southern mountains to light incense, be sure to dress warm and take care of yourself.”

The eighth day of the twelfth month was Imperial Consort Xi’s birthday. The immortal crane that Xi Ping sent brought a birthday gift, and also seemed to bring a breath of magic. The golden plum tree that had shown no growth in all the years since the old lady had planted it suddenly budded. Everyone said it was an auspicious omen.

The old lady was extremely pleased. She squinted her weak eyes for ages picking out the branch with the best blooms and told the Marquis and Madam Cui to take it to the palace.

Guangyun Palace was too big. The old lady’s legs couldn’t walk through it. Her memory had also been getting worse and worse in recent years. When the Imperial Consort in the palace was mentioned, the old lady was always confused. In her mind, her daughter still looked the way she had before she was married, even more tender than the golden plum flowers about to bloom.

The Imperial Consort stuck the flowers into a jade vase and said a few words to her brother and sister-in-law. The marquis didn’t stay long. He wished her a happy birthday as a mere formality, passed along their mother’s instructions, then left behind his wife Madam Cui and went to have an audience with the emperor.

Once the man was gone, the Imperial Consort ordered the gauze curtain removed, gave Madam Cui more of the new fruit juice Prince Zhuang had brought, and sent away all her servant girls.

Madam Cui said, “Has His Highness been here?”

“He came early,” said the Imperial Consort, “and went to the southern mountains.”

Madam Cui said, "His Highness shows filial piety."

The Imperial Consort smiled and made no answer.

Looking at their features, the Imperial Consort and the Marquis seemed to have been made in the same mold, but in motion, brother and sister looked nothing alike.

Though none of the wealthy ladies of Jinping's upper class had vulgar habits of movement and speech, few of them had this degree of composure. She made hardly any extraneous gestures. Even her blinking and the movements of her eyes were regular, like a dummy with springs inside it.

Madam Cui seemed to have had her eyes scalded by the Imperial Consort's even, steady smile. She lowered her head at once to pick a topic up off the floor. Forcing a smile, she said, "Ping'er wrote to the old lady yesterday to ask whether the medicine had been good for Your Ladyship."

"Very good. He is a mindful child," said the Imperial Consort. "Of Xuanyin Mountain's thirty-six peaks, each has its influence. Only the Dignitary of Fate High Elder's lineage stands aloof among them. Now that Ping has been taken on as General Zhi's disciple, he will not only live forever, he will also be unvexed by petty matters. This is the blessing of our ancestors."

"Your Ladyship..."

The Imperial Consort gently raised a finger, interrupting Madam Cui.

In the tranquil palace, water roiled in the ceramic pot, and the chime clock let out a crisp *click*.

“It is a good thing,” the Imperial Consort said in a voice like floating clouds and mist. “My mother is healthy, the children are both well. What is there to be unsatisfied with? Jinjin, try to comfort my brother, tell him not to be depressed. His temper is stiff, and he’s a melancholy person. At his age, he still doesn’t understand. It’s good of you to be tolerant. Luckily Ping isn’t like him... If I had listened to him back then, I suppose our bones would all have disintegrated by now. How could we have this good fortune? Let’s not speak of it. For the distribution of free porridge to the poor outside the city this year, will your family help manage it?”

“...yes.”

“Good.” On the Imperial Consort’s dummy-like face, a slightly different smile finally appeared. “Thank you very much. That’s good.”

Because her birthday fell on Laba, Imperial Consort Xi went to distribute porridge to the poor²⁵ outside the city every year.

Beneath the white jade railings of the Sage’s Road, before daybreak, big pots cooking Laba porridge appeared. Cui Ji, managing this business, did things in style. Only genuine, high-quality ingredients went into the porridge, and they didn’t even stint to add sugar. They hired a few dozen strong laborers to stir constantly. At the start of mao hour, people began to line up. Today, all the mixed grain flatbread vendors left their stands and lazed around—there was no business to be done.

A-Xiang mixed in with the crowd and said along with the others: “Best wishes to Her Ladyship the Imperial Consort.”

“Best wishes.” The worker serving the porridge saw how skinny she was and put a whole ladle-full into her bowl. “Careful, it’s hot.”

A-Xiang said thank you and stepped aside, carrying the bowl in both hands. The rich rice and beans were a comfort to her insides, and the chilblains on her hands itched from the warmth.

In the sleet that fell like shards of ice, she ate a few mouthfuls, but somehow she became distracted and, holding the porridge, stared blankly into nothing.

Last year, at this place and time, it was this bowl of porridge that had kept her and her grandfather in Jinping.

They had just arrived and were strangers in a strange place. Seeing the factory district overflowing with people, the old and weak not necessarily able to find work, they had been hesitating when they had happened upon the porridge distributed by the Imperial Consort. A-Xiang had never eaten such good sweet porridge in her life. She had burned her tongue, leaving two blisters. Seeing her gluttony, her grandfather had said, "Let's stay here from now on. Jinping is full of nobles. If they scatter just a bit of food with their fingertips, it'll be enough for the two of us!"

Certainly if the nobles tossed just a bit of food, they would have enough to eat. But... if the nobles didn't watch where they were going, they could also trample them to death.

Suddenly, A-Xiang gave a start and came back to herself as if waking from a dream. She didn't know how she had just started dreaming with her eyes open.

Just then, someone yanked her backward, spilling all the porridge.

There was a whistle, and a Moon Plated Gold steam carriage nearly scraped her as it flew by.

These metal monsters had just become popular, and new roads had been put in on the east side of the Lingyang River—they weren't

allowed to drive on the west side yet—but none of them were as level and wide as the freight-hauling road beside the canal. Lately, there were always wastrels going on joyrides in these things outside the city. There were no reins once they got going; there had been many accidents.

A-Xiang, recovering from her fright, found her footing and saw that there was some animal, maybe a dog or a horse, tied to the back of the Moon Plated Gold steam carriage. It must have been one of the exotic beasts from Southern Shu. A gold chain around its neck flashed with blinding light. It was foaming at the mouth as the carriage pulled it along. It overturned a fruit stand. The carriage's window opened. A hand reached out and tossed out a handful of money like sand at the wailing stand owner, then went off into the distance puffing smoke.

A-Xiang was scared of wasting food. She quickly lapped up all the spilled sweet porridge on her hands, and only then turned to thank the person who had pulled her out of the way.

The newcomer had a large frame, but his skin was dazzlingly pale. Even the color of his eyes was considerably lighter than other people's. Adding in the thick bandages around his neck... he simply looked like a woman dressed in men's clothing.

“Be careful,” he said indolently. As soon as he opened his mouth, it was obvious he wasn't a woman. His voice was coarse and deep, and his breath smelled of alcohol. “There are lunatics full of ‘snow wine’ all over the street.”

It was said that unmined spiritual stones had tiny rock crystals adhering to them; for a distance, they looked like a covering of snow, so they were also called “rock snow.” They could be made into a special kind of “snow wine.” Drinking it would make a person immortal for a day, drunk enough to forget their troubles... and often also to forget their morals.

“Poor wretches get drunk and laid low, in the mansions they drink snow... Well, listen, little brother, let me ask you something,” the man said, “how do I get to the Canal Office?”

A-Xiang said, “Look toward the riverbank when you go into the city. It’s the most impressive building.”

“Oh, good. Hey, wait, one more thing.”

A-Xiang turned her head. “Hm?”

Without warning, the man drew close to her. Lowering his voice, he said, “Where do I find Tai Sui’s shrine?”

A-Xiang’s heart thudded. The yellowish-brown eyes stared at her. Soundlessly, the man mouthed distinctly: “The conflagration burns on, the cry of the cicada is without end.”

Xi Ping was just learning to fly a sword on the north slope of Flying Jade Peak.

Teacher and disciple had already abandoned *Detailed Account of Meridians*. Shizun had casually tossed it into the fire pit while roasting chestnuts.

Zhi Xiu said that this was like swimming or riding a horse. There was no use in scouring books. It was better just to go up and fly a lap.

In order to fly a sword, you had to adjust the spiritual energy as the wind changed. If you learned to fly a sword, then naturally cycling and transferring spiritual energy would become as familiar as the back of your hand.

Xi Ping looked down the slope. It was a vast expanse of white, further than the eye could see. “Shifu, what’s at the bottom of the

slope?”

“Nothing,” Zhi Xiu said. “The north slope is prone to avalanches, so all the living things avoid this place. While you’re playing around here, do your best not to call out loudly. Pay attention, I’ll take you around.”

Then he patted Xi Ping lightly on the back. Xi Ping felt gentle spiritual energy from his palm pour into his meridians. The snow at his feet formed into an ice sword and swayingly lifted him two chi high.

“Concentrate. Remember how the spiritual energy passed through your meridians just now.” Like teaching a baby how to walk, Zhi Xiu patiently took him in a circle close to the ground. Seeing that he was keeping his balance, he said, “I’ll release the spiritual energy bit by bit, and you can try it for yourself. All right?”

Xi Ping said, “No problem!”

“Good, be bold,” said Zhi Xiu. “If you can’t fly steady, I’ll catch you. You won’t fall.”

But soon, General Zhi regretted opening his mouth. You couldn’t just say “be bold” to his head disciple!

“Come down here.” Zhi Xiu pulled Xi Ping down from the heights for the third time—if he only relaxed his hold slightly, the brat would shoot up like a firecracker. He couldn’t control himself at all. “Don’t you know how to take things step by step?”

“Shifu,” Xi Ping bragged shamelessly, “I feel like I’ve learned how to... whoa!”

Zhi Xiu released the spiritual energy, and Xi Ping, who had “learned how to do it,” felt the ice sword at his feet splinter. He stepped on

emptiness and went tumbling down. He was only caught by Zhaoting a few chi off the ground.

Zhi Xiu looked down on him from on high. "You were saying?"

"Hehe." Xi Ping clutched Zhaoting with all four limbs, rolled over in midair, and awkwardly said, "My mistake."

A moment later, General Zhi was sitting on a boulder in meditation, training with the sword in spirit, letting Xi Ping go fool around on his own.

Zhaoting hung suspended about a zhang above him. If Xi Ping's head went above that height, it would fly over and smack him.

Xi Ping flew in patterns along the ground, fell seven or eight times without getting hurt, and gradually got the feel for flying a sword. He felt that he had it now and began to fly down the snowy slope.

At first he was still careful enough, maintaining a constant height of two chi off the ground. Zhaoting kept following him, utterly loyal to its post, to keep him from floating off.

The third time he returned to the top of the slope, Xi Ping raised his head and looked at Zhaoting. Suddenly, he smirked. Then, with one foot on the ice sword, he went leaping down to the bottom of the slope like a falling object.

The ice sword braked, took him in a circle like a whirlwind, then came to a sudden stop.

For a time, Zhaoting didn't react!

Xi Ping wanted to laugh aloud and only restrained himself by remembering that Zhi Xiu had said the north cliff was prone to avalanches.

Keep him from flying up, but couldn't he jump down?

Before Zhaoting could catch up, Xi Ping stepped up on the ice sword and continued going down. He flitted over the snow-covered pine forest like a gale, knocking the frozen treetops askew. On the way, he even leaned down to scoop up snow-covered pinecones and charged toward the pine forest with an exhaled breath—cultivation really was fun!

Under the pine forest, there turned out to be a precipice. Xi Ping felt absolutely wonderful. He charged over without slowing down in the least.

When man and sword had made their disgraceful way over above the precipice, without any warning, a familiar voice sounded in Xi Ping's ears: "Tai Sui!"

Xi Ping was instantly distracted. The ice sword at his feet split apart.

"Fuck!" He lost his balance at once and went hurtling forward with nothing to rely on.

Fortunately, Xi Ping was richly experienced in getting into trouble. While in midair, he didn't panic at all. Using his finger as a string, he quickly played an urgent melody.

The song suited his feelings and took shape at once. A whole piece of ice was "cut off" and rolled beneath his feet, turned over in midair carrying him, and narrowly steadied itself.

Xi Ping plopped down on the ice and snapped his fingers. He thought he was amazing!

Just as he was planning to fly back to work out what had been going on with that cry of "Tai Sui," he heard an ominous rumble.

Thunder?

Xi Ping quickly raised his head and saw dust rising over the snowy slope, like thousands upon thousands of white horses charging down. Next, the snowy mountain began to tremble, making a sky-shaking sound.

Boom—

Oh no, an avalanche!

The toppling snowy mountain flowed down. Fragments of ice and rock scattered everywhere, all of them like flying knives.

Xi Ping's vision dimmed. The next moment, Zhaoting swept down from the edge of the cliff like a meteor. General Zhi tossed out a length of straw rope left over from when they had built the cottage and rolled up his wretched disciple, then surged out, narrowly brushing the white flood.

By the time Xi Ping recovered, the whole north slope of Flying Jade Peak had changed shape. Half of the pine forest was gone.

The thousand-zhang deep abyss reverberated without end like a dragon's roars.

Xi Ping stared blankly. "Shifu..."

Zhi Xiu took a deep breath, feeling that tomorrow the news that "the peak master of Flying Jade Peak brought down the north slope of his peak in an avalanche while flying a kite" would be all over the Xuanyin Mountains!

"I think I lost a shoe," said Xi Ping.

Zhi Xiu: "..."

Kick him out! He absolutely had to kick him out!

"Oh, also, shifu, didn't you put a mind-clearing spell on my spirit?"
Xi Ping said doubtfully, pressing down on the center of his brow and ignoring his shifu's ashen face. "Why did I hear someone calling for Tai Sui again?"

CHAPTER 35 - Fragrant Jade Miasma (3)

The original owner of the hidden bones who had cultivated the way of death had been practically a god. Never mind Zhi Xiu, even if the Southern Sage appeared, he wouldn't have been able to break the hidden bones' connection to reincarnation wood.

Therefore, what Zhi Xiu had put in place on Xi Ping's spirit was a mind-clearing spell, so he wouldn't lose his mind from irritation before learning to control his consciousness.

Mind-clearing spells were given to young disciples of unsteady temperament for the purpose of helping them ignore external things and concentrate on cultivation. Apart from A-Xiang and the evil cultivators who had been arrested in Jinping, Xi Ping hadn't had contact with any other "followers of Tai Sui." From his point of view, the "Tai Sui" they were calling on was Liang Chen, so they were "irrelevant voices" that would be filtered out by the mind-clearing spell on his spirit.

The only one who could get around the mind-clearing spell at present was Wei Chengxiang.

As Xi Ping concentrated on the center of his brow, he thought, Why hasn't she burned that reincarnation wood amulet yet?

In fact, A-Xiang hadn't listened to his advice. She was still carrying the reincarnation wood amulet.

Far from the evil cultivators and the hidden undercurrents, her life had returned to normal. The shrine was broken, but she still couldn't burn the amulet.

A girl of fifteen or sixteen, dressed as a boy, making her living alone under the noise and the smoke—she instinctively wanted to grab on

to something constant. For example, the eternally unwinnable Golden Tray lottery tickets, the eternally foul-mouthed Auntie Chunying, and the wooden amulet that could occasionally contact another person.

She knew there was no god on the other end of the reincarnation wood.

It was all right if it was a person. She wasn't afraid of a person looking at her. After all, there were too few people who could "see" her.

Elderly people all said that evil objects were plagues, calamities, not to be touched. If you picked something up from them, it would never leave you. At first, A-Xiang had thought nothing of it—the doctor at the factory had said that plagues were brought by dirty air and water.

Now she knew at last that the old people's words experience of experience weren't as absurd as they sounded.

As she inwardly called for Tai Sui, she feigned ignorance. "What?"

The man looked at her with a false smile.

"You must be talking about the Southern Sage's shrine, right? It's easy to find. You go along the Sage's Road—the one around the mountain, flashing green. Keep going and you'll get there." A-Xiang pointed and avoided the man's eyes by lowering her head to eat the porridge. She turned and walked toward a crowded spot, vaguely saying, "Don't go today, the third prince from the palace is going to pray for the Imperial Consort's good fortune, this end of the Sage's Road is sealed..."

Her speech was choked off. The white-faced man wrapped in bandages had somehow appeared blocking her way in the blink of

an eye.

The hairs rose on the back of A-Xiang's neck: this man was an evil cultivator!

She called "Tai Sui" over and over in her mind, but the reincarnation wood seemed to be dead. There was no answer.

"Don't be nervous... little 'brother'? Or is it little lady? I'm a friend of your teacher. We've lost many brothers and sisters this time. Alas, he must have known then that he wasn't long for this world and went out of his way to send word to ask me to look after you before the end."

A-Xiang backed up a step and said warily, "Who are you? What do you want? I have no teacher, and I don't know you. If you keep pestering me, I'll call for help!"

"Call who? Your grandpa?" the man said, smiling. His mouth split into a grin, but his eyes were open as wide as they could go. There seemed to be ripples spreading in his light brown eyes, pulling in the tensed A-Xiang.

In a daze, she seemed to return to that long night, her grandfather without a piece of healthy flesh on him, his breath stopping right in front of her, not closing his eyes even after he was dead.

Next, the images in front of her eyes were like time running backward scene by scene.

She saw her grandfather appearing at the door, carried in by fellow workers. It was unclear whether he recognized A-Xiang. He stared fixedly at his little granddaughter, struggling for breath, wanting to live.

Before that, it was A-Xiang watching the city guard soldiers taking her grandpa away, herself and Chunying with nowhere to turn.

Before that, her grandpa fell ill but wouldn't spend his hard-earned wages on medicine, instead buying Golden Tray lottery tickets. When he came up empty, he said sheepishly to his furious granddaughter, "god can't bully a person forever," "where there's a will there's a way; I'll win one day," and other such nonsense. The girl turned and went out the door, determined to go find a way to make her own money, taking that lawsuit form demanding that "corrupt officials return our land."

Before that, a slightly younger A-Xiang and her grandpa buried her mother. Her grandpa, stroking her little head, said, "Don't cry, A-Xiang, grandpa will take you all over the world. The finch flies through the sky, the flood dragon swims through the sea. I can earn my good little grandchild an inheritance anywhere."

Before that..

A-Xiang clearly saw her own destiny, like an ant whose nest had been toppled by a flood, sliding into a bottomless abyss. She couldn't resist clutching at the malicious thread of spider silk, greedily but vainly crawling upward in defiance of time.

Until a voice burst out in her mind: "Wake up! Wei Chengxiang!"

A-Xiang's pupils contracted almost to the size of pinpoints. The false spider silk tore, and she rolled back to the bottom of the pit. For a moment, she almost hated that voice that had once again smashed her false consolation.

The next moment, her intellect recovered, and she saw a Moon Plated Gold carriage speeding toward her!

Xi Ping hadn't meant to say anything—as long as he played dead convincingly enough, as a mortal with no exceptional talents, there would be nothing about A-Xiang that others would conspire for.

Even if that glazed White Face had taken a liking to her young body and wanted to kidnap her to sell her off or keep for his own unlawful purposes, he would still have to get her to a concealed location first. Xi Ping was keeping an eye on her location from the shadows and could have Heaven's Design Pavilion get her back.

But White Face's plot exceeded expectations. He used a soul-muddling spell to lead A-Xiang onto the canal road behind the factories.

Some obviously drunk wastrels were driving a Moon Plated Gold carriage there. The metal monster was racing at the speed of lightning, and A-Xiang, controlled by the soul-muddling spell, had run out into the middle of the road!

Xi Ping had no choice but to say something.

In a flash, A-Xiang threw herself forward and felt a keen wind scrape past her back. Loud laughter and cursing floated out of the carriage. A-Xiang's legs folded, and she went to her knees.

Weathered boots stopped in front of her. A hand as pale as death raised her head.

“As I thought.” The white-faced man stared at A-Xiang and stuck his hand right into her clothes, turning up the reincarnation wood amulet. “I knew you were here, Grand Duke Tai Sui. With an old friend here, how can you turn away?”

Xi Ping: “...”

That didn't sound like the tone of an old friend.

Next, the white-faced man pulled the reincarnation wood from A-Xiang's neck and put it into a little box covered in inscriptions. Xi Ping's vision went black. He could no longer see what was happening to A-Xiang.

Xi Ping abruptly opened his eyes.

Zhi Xiu twisted his fingers, and a note fragmented into light at his fingertips, flying in the direction of Jinping. "I've notified your Pang-shixiong—is this a remaining evil cultivator?"

"Doesn't seem like it. He's come with ill intent. He seems like a creditor to me." Xi Ping clutched his hair in irritation. His hair was full of fragments of ice. "Shifu, do a divination for me, is it my fate to repay people's debts? One by one they die, and each of them leaves me their debts. I have to repay the lady's debt, and I have to repay the rotten old man's debt. What for?!"

"Indeed." General Zhi sighed meaningfully and patted Xi Ping on the head. "Who made you the reincarnation of a spendthrift?"

Xi Ping: "..."

Zhi Xiu wrote the name "Wei Chengxiang" in the snow in flowing script and tapped it with Zhaoting. Next to it, small writing appeared in the snow: southeast...

Before the rest of the writing appeared, an inscription character appeared in the snow, scattering the writing!

Zhi Xiu frowned slowly. "I am unable to glimpse her... This is a second-class inscription."

The highest grade inscriptions that the immortal sects were permitted to let loose in the mortal world were third-class, more

than enough to protect important places and people. There was no need to go higher.

Second-class inscriptions were too dangerous. Never mind that they were hard to design; once designed, laying down a small segment would nearly drain an ordinary established foundation master dry; it took an ascended spirit cultivator to carve them.

Correspondingly, the impact of second-class inscriptions was also of the ascended spirit grade. Had Zhi Xiu been in Jinping now, he could have broken through by force using a sword cultivator's unparalleled keenness. But now his reach wasn't long enough.

Meanwhile, Pang Jian received Zhi Xiu's message and took people to the southern outskirts. He found a Moon Plated Gold chariot that had crashed into a tree lying upside down. The released karma beasts sniffed around everywhere, then chased their own tails in bewilderment.

When A-Xiang opened her eyes again, there was pitch-black darkness in front of her. Before her eyes could adjust to the dark, she smelled a powerful fragrance.

"Old Mud," the white-faced man's voice sounded in her ear, "I've brought her."

A-Xiang gave a start. Next, something hit her. She scrambled to catch it and felt that it was the reincarnation wood amulet.

On Flying Jade Peak, Xi Ping sat up straight.

The white-faced man took out a luminous pearl. By the faint light, A-Xiang saw him talking to a shadow in the corner.

Before she could find the owner of the shadow, the shadow moved on its own!

It fell to the ground like mud, flowing all the way to A-Xiang's feet.

A-Xiang froze in terror, letting the black shadow make a circle around her. Next, a dry voice sounded in her ear: "A mortal."

A-Xiang whipped around, clutching the reincarnation wood, forcing Xi Ping to see the person behind her along with her. "What the hell!"

This man was stooped. He seemed about the same height as A-Xiang. The skin of his face was like an ill-fitting piece of clothing, pulled tight, unable to cover his teeth and pulling his nostrils wide. Two eyes that wouldn't close protruded. The irises and whites of the eyes were like beaten eggs, so it was impossible to tell where his gaze was aimed.

No wonder he hid in a shadow. With this dear friend's charms, if he went out into the streets of Jinping, it would be enough to scare a whole crowd of delicate marquises to death!

"Tai... um..." A-Xiang's ragged cotton-padded jacket was soaked with cold sweat. Her nails nearly dug into the reincarnation wood. Inwardly, she asked Xi Ping, "Who are they?"

"Bad news, anyway. Your rescuers are on their way, stay alert and tell me anything you notice." At this time, the wicked Xi Ping casually took advantage: "You can call me whatever you like, any kind of uncle will do."

While A-Xiang thought that his voice was a little young, it wasn't that uncommon for a thirty- or forty-year-old to have a young voice, so her suspicions weren't aroused. "Uncle, this place is a little damp, and there's a strong scent."

Damp and scented?

The place his shifu had divined was the southeast. To the southeast was the grand canal. Had she been taken onto a cargo ship?

Transporting perfume?

Before he could think about it carefully, “Old Mud” smiled at A-Xiang... though it looked like he was only baring his teeth. “Your Excellency Tai Sui, at last you’ve learned caution. I cautioned you before not to be hasty. Well, wasn’t I right? The blue dogs have put you in a tight spot lately, haven’t they? Even Crow Two is in prison. A pity.”

Xi Ping asked A-Xiang, “Was Crow Two your worthless shifu?”

A-Xiang struggled to stand firm and not let herself tremble. “He must have been. I heard others call him Brother Two.”

Right, Jiangli and the others had all used numbers as code names.

This Brother Two’s code name had a “crow” in front of it along with the “two.” He must have had a high position among the evil cultivators.

These people obviously didn’t know that “Tai Sui” was dead. Their information ended with Jiangli and the others planning to plunder the Dragon Vein during the fourth month. They had likely come in search of the evil cultivator called Crow Two, not expecting that Crow Two had been arrested and now might be dead or alive. That was why they had followed the traces and gotten their eyes on A-Xiang, who had been the last person to have contact with him.

A-Xiang said, “Uncle, what do I do?”

Xi Ping said, “Tell him it’s none of his business. Tell him to state his business and cut the crap—describe the scent to me. Is it flowers? Or what?”

As A-Xiang kept her cool and conveyed his words, she carefully considered the strong fragrance around her. “Not flowers. It’s very sweet...”

She swallowed automatically, and only then realized how she had been salivating. “Like tasty fruit.”

Fruit?

Xi Ping was all at sea. Fresh fruits from the south were in fact transported to Jinping in the winter, but they usually had to be kept on ice.

What kind of fruit could still smell so delicious it made a person’s mouth water after being put in cold storage?

“Old Mud” didn’t get angry at A-Xiang’s rude answer. Slowly as before, he said, “When ‘Piglet Number Five’ suddenly fell out of contact, we didn’t know whether he’d had an accident or was deliberately avoiding us. Without him, we couldn’t contact you, Tai Sui. We were truly concerned for your well-being. That’s why we acted on impulse. I hope you can forgive us.”

Xi Ping’s thoughts moved quickly—this “Old Mud” knew about Tai Sui’s plot to plunder the Dragon Vein and must have found out through some indications that he had failed. He thought that Tai Sui was still hiding out near Jinping, keeping out of sight.

This so-called “Piglet Number Five” must have been one of Tai Sui’s followers who had made long-term contact with these people. He had likely been affected when Tai Sui had sapped his believers’ energy. He had either died or been caught by Heaven’s Design Pavilion.

So... why would the evil cultivator Liang let these repulsive people who obviously weren't believers know about his plan to plunder the Dragon Vein?

Xi Ping raised his head and asked Zhi Xiu, "Shifu, are 'sleep paralysis imps' rare? How rare?"

Zhi Xiu said, "Before it was all right, but now they've been extinct for many years. As far as I know, not even Xuanyin Mountain has any living ones."

Xi Ping slapped his thigh. "I've got it."

"What have you got now?"

"The black market seller who sold the old demon the bugs is here. The old demon must have bought them on credit and not paid! Wow, shameless."

Zhi Xiu sent a note reading "canal cargo ship, people suspected to be from the south," then saw Xi Ping rolling up his sleeves and readying himself for battle. "I bet they weren't using money for their transaction. Let me talk them around."

Saying so, he muttered instructions to A-Xiang.

Zhi Xiu: "..."

No wonder Pang Jian had wanted to get this brat into Heaven's Design Pavilion from the start. A shit-stirring genius like this was truly wasted on snowy and unpeopled Flying Jade Peak. No wonder all he could do was pull down houses and blow up mountains.

A-Xiang had perhaps imprinted like a fledgling. She had a kind of unreasoning trust in the "uncle" who had told her the truth through the reincarnation wood. As soon as she heard his voice, she felt she

was no longer alone and helpless. She became bolder. As Xi Ping instructed, she said to “Old Mud,” “Friends, my Grand Duke Tai Sui says that he’s indebted to you for your help last time, but he really hadn’t thought that Xuanyin Mountain would send out that peak master. Even my shifu... I’m afraid everything currently points to disaster for Mr. Five. There’s too much commotion. Can you grant us some more patience?”

“Old Mud” bared his teeth again. “Little sister, don’t you know the price of living? We’ve spent over half a year being patient, waited from spring until the dead of winter, and that shipment of spiritual stones still hasn’t arrived. Are we really supposed to go pilfer heaven’s order? What crime have the common people committed?”

A-Xiang, who had nearly been run over by a Moon Plated Gold carriage, was choked by him saying “what crime have the common people committed?”

“Little girl.” Just then, the white-faced man who had been standing there without speaking opened his mouth. “Tell your Tai Sui that we know the difficulty of your position. Wuchang One has been beside Zhao for so long without daring to take him down. That must be because he’s worried you won’t have enough people, right?”

Zhao?

This was one of Xuanyin’s great surnames, Xi Ping thought. Who were they talking about?

“Let’s do this. We’ll help you out for free again,” the white-faced man said. “Have Wuchang One cooperate with us. Before the cargo ship leaves the Land of Turmoil, we’ll raid it and split the spiritual stones, ninety percent to us, ten percent to you. What do you say?”

Xi Ping ordered A-Xiang to haggle: “Tell him that’s no good. A fifty-fifty split, or negotiations are over.”

Meanwhile, he quickly recounted these words to Zhi Xiu. “Shifu, what are they talking about?”

After Zhi Xiu heard this, his expression became slightly grave. “At the beginning of each year, the southern mines send a spiritual stone shipment convoy north. Going by the date, the shipment must be going out soon. Do they really want to steal spiritual stones?”

CHAPTER 36 - Fragrant Jade Miasma (4)

“Damn.” Xi Ping was dumbfounded. “These two friends with their quaint skeletons came to Jinping all the way from the south just to divulge information to the immortal mountain! Shifu, are they our spies?”

Zhi Xiu looked at him. “They could be.”

This shit-stirrer was idle, but these people had come right to him. Maybe he really could get something out of them.

Xi Yue silently used snow boiled in an earthenware jar to brew tea, watching this teacher and disciple pair, having gotten through persecuting the north slope, put their heads together to persecute evil cultivators. He felt that Flying Jade Peak was indeed cold.

Zhi Xiu dipped his finger in water and wrote the key terms “Mining Office,” “spiritual stone shipments,” and “theft of spiritual stones from southern mines,” then gently tapped them with his index finger. The water droplets on the table began to roll around on their own, quickly forming line after line of small writing.

The immortals were gathered in the depths of the Xuanyin Mountains, but fundamentally they were all still of the mortal world. Only General Zhi was on his own, one of the rare people among the thirty-six peak masters who was truly tranquil. It had been a long time since he had inquired after worldly affairs. If not for the Sea of Stars, there might have been no way to dig him out of his frozen hole. He really didn’t know what was going on at the Mining Office right now and had to make a hasty effort to inform himself at the last moment.

As soon as he performed the divination, he noticed that there was something fishy: the southern mines transported spiritual stones

north four times a year, each type accompanied by a guard fleet comparable to a navy. The convoy ships were full of inscriptions and loaded with immortal tools.

When the fleet traveled, it would send a “foulness clearing water dragon” a shichen ahead to clear a path and warn passersby to keep out of the way. Never mind stealing spiritual stones, the cultivators of the mortal world were at risk of being mistakenly injured by the inscriptions if they even came close.

Though desperate criminals were a local specialty of the Land of Turmoil, and there had been people who’d had the idea of stealing spiritual stones, the disparity in strength was too great. The escorting personnel might suffer occasional casualties, but not one single spiritual stone had been lost.

Right up until these last few years... in other words, after Liang Chen had left office.

The new Mining Office supervisors had begun to have frequent incidents on the road while escorting spiritual stones—there were always thieves taking advantage of laxness from the guard on duty to strike, steal a small ship and run. None of the losses were big. Normally, when this kind of thing happened, in order to guard against the enemy luring them away from their main camp to attack it, the fleet would strengthen its defenses and not blindly chase after the thieves. Therefore, the burgled spiritual stones mostly weren’t recovered.

As Xi Ping directed A-Xiang’s dealings with the evil cultivators, he split off his attention to say, “If the new supervisors aren’t particularly useless, then before the old evil cultivator left, he must have put his own believers in place at the Mining Office. As soon as he left, he was no longer the one responsible, so he began to control his underlings from a distance in pilfering, getting spiritual

stones from the southern mines to provide to his believers... Shifu, where are Pang-shixiong and the others?”

Pang Jian had already reached the bank of the canal following General Zhi’s directions.

It was nearly New Year, the time when goods moved fastest in Jinping City. Big and small ships were stopped by the docks like boiling dumplings, lining up for several li starting first thing in the morning.

Pang Jian tried sending his consciousness out to search. Unsurprisingly, he came up empty—General Zhi’s note had lacked details, which showed that even he couldn’t clearly divine the exact location. The enemy had to have something that could block the spiritual sense of an ascended spirit master.

“Commander, there are so many ships. How can we search them all?” a blue-clotheser asked. “The secret order from the inner sect told us to find a girl kidnapped by evil cultivators? What’s so special about this girl? How many evil cultivators have kidnapped her?”

Actually, Pang Jian was also puzzled.

He recalled Wei Chengxiang. Liang Chen had fixed his attention on her because her spiritual image matched his and had tricked her into joining the evil cultivators. But the girl had luck on her side. She had escaped in time without becoming either an evil cultivator or nourishment for an evil cultivator. The originator of the evil practices had turned into dust, and all the evil cultivators in the vicinity of Jinping had been put to death, so Pang Jian wasn’t planning on making trouble for a mortal. He had only left behind a karma beast to watch her for a time. Every day, apart from doing hard labor, Wei Chengxiang went to Rat Alley dressed in slovenly male attire help out, cook, clean, and do some carpentry for those listless women—every time she was seen by an old prostitute named Chunying, she

would be shoed away like a fiend. She took no notice, going again the next day.

In summary, she was a little girl who could endure suffering and had good morals. Pang Jian had removed the karma beast and hadn't bothered her again.

It had been over half a year; why did General Zhi still have eyes on her? Could it be that the general had expected from the start that the remaining evil cultivators would come looking for this girl?

Ascended spirit peak masters up in the highest heavens truly were unfathomable!

“Don't be indiscreet about a secret order from the inner sect.” Pang Jian waved a hand. “Wait, I'm going to rustle the grass and startle the snake.”

Saying so, he took out a dragon scale and flicked it into the canal.

There was a crash as raging waves came out of nowhere on the peaceful canal docks. The scale turned into a water dragon as it entered the water and swam under all the ships. The surface of the grand canal rose sharply. All the ships were gently raised by the waves, then put back down at once.

A dragon's roar came from the water, rapping through every cargo hold and container hidden underwater.

“A foulness clearing water dragon,” Xi Ping heard “Old Mud” say seriously through the reincarnation wood. “Heaven's Design Pavilion's blue dogs are searching the water here!”

“Impossible, how could they know?” White Face said, stunned. “With the ‘prying ban’ inscription in place, never mind Pang Jian,

even an established foundation cultivator wouldn't be able to find our traces!"

"Heaven's Design Pavilion has Xuanyin Mountain behind it. What do you know about the ins and outs of Xuanyin Mountain?! I told you that the situation had been tense lately." A-Xiang combined the wording Xi Ping taught her with her own skills from years of haggling at the market. All at once, she said, "You can't even guard against the pursuit of Heaven's Design Pavilion, and you want to rob the spiritual stone mines? Hilarious. Let me ask you, who's been successful all these years? If you could, you'd have done it yourselves by now. Forget about all this fifty-fifty, ten-ninety, twenty-eighty. If you succeed, it's all yours. We don't want a single share! Listen, old uncle, the key to getting the spiritual stones lies with us, not with you. Even if we're short on manpower, we still have people willing to collaborate with us. You're the one who needs us. We don't need you. If you want my opinion, fifty-fifty is still too much for you!"

"Old Mud" said emphatically, "Indeed, we aren't as brilliant as others. We have no established foundations or ascended spirits to rely on. But we do have people with a Way of the Heart. Look up at that spotless Sage's Road and those wealthy mansions stinking of wine and meat! We seek spiritual stones and suffer hardship to cultivate for the sake of smashing those celestial statues and golden nobles pressing down on the heads of the common people, for the sake of winning a corner of the sky for people crawling in the mud! What do those scoundrels count for? Aren't you people always saying, 'better to die in frost than to forsake one's convictions'?"

Xi Ping immediately seized on the key point: the Land of Turmoil lived up to its name—it was full of turmoil. Liang Chen had indeed been an amateur, unable to match the hidden heartfelt feelings of a group of evil cultivators... and what did this person mean that *they* had no established foundations or ascended spirits to rely on? Did that mean others did have them? Who did he mean? Could it be

that ascended spirit and established foundation evil*cultivators were running around all over the place, and Heaven's Design Pavilion didn't know?

A-Xiang, however, was speechless. "Winning a corner of the sky for people crawling in the mud" had struck just right, raising a cloud of dust in her young but hardship-laden heart.

Just then, the dragon's roar sounded again, closer this time!

Xi Ping gave a start. He had just asked Zhi Xiu what a "foulness clearing water dragon" was. Shifu had said it was an immortal tool that opened the way. When a water dragon passed by, it could raise the tide in the sea.

So in the canal, it must have made bigger waves. Why was the swaying here so slight?

Could it be that they weren't in the water?

No, if they hadn't been in the water, they wouldn't have swayed at all.

Yes, the thing that White Face had taken out to use for light was a luminous pearl... At first, Xi Ping hadn't taken notice. He only caught up now. Didn't these evil cultivators have to live frugally to save up for spiritual stones? Did they have to be so ostentatious?

So he quickly asked A-Xiang, "That fragrance you're talking about, is there some overripe lychee smell in it, and a bit of raspberry medicine smell?"

A-Xiang hadn't worked out what was going on yet. "...how does lychee smell?"

Xi Ping was speechless for a moment, racking his brains for a description. “It’s like... overly sweet, but when you pay attention, there’s a medicinal smell in it that’s a bit sour, a bit bitter.”

A-Xiang listened to him and silently took a breath, smelling. “I think there is a medicinal smell.”

Xi Ping immediately raised his head and said to Zhi Xiu, “Shifu, I think they’re on a ship transporting snow wine. There’s a motionless cabin on it.”

Snow wine was outrageously expensive, like liquid gold, and it was unusually fragile. Heat, gas, light, strong motion... It was said that all of it would make first-rate snow wine go bad. Within Great Wan territory, it was only permitted to sell snow wine from the southern mines. Transport by water was long. To keep the product from being shaken and damaged on the way, the cargo ships often had a special kind of downgraded immortal tool in them called a motionless cabin—a little like a mustard seed, but unlike a true mustard seed, it couldn’t collapse spacetime. It was only a container that could hang suspended within the ship. Inside the motionless cabin, no matter how the ship’s hull turned over, there would be almost no impact.

Zhi Xiu frowned, for once stern. “Have you drunk snow wine?”

“Oh, once. It didn’t taste like anything, like tea dust on the third or fourth brewing. It’s just expensive. When they asked me to come drink it afterward, I didn’t feel like going,” Xi Ping said. “Shifu, what’s wrong?”

“Since it’s not good, don’t touch it again.” Zhi Xiu didn’t explain in detail, only said, “It’s spiritual stone miasma. It damages the Way of the Heart and harms one’s cultivation.”

This time, he didn't even bother with a note. He simply snapped his fingers.

Pang Jian's eyes swam. The sleet in the sky quickly congealed into the words "snow wine," which flashed in front of his eyes, then once again broke into shards and fell to the ground.

Pang Jian's gaze was like lightning. In the space of a single breath, he looked over countless ships and precisely fixed on the precious downgraded immortal tool.

At the same time, A-Xiang heard Xi Ping say, "When Heaven's Design Pavilion comes, pretend to be scared, don't act like you were the one who called them!"

In the blink of an eye, the moment Pang Jian fixed on the motionless cabin, the two evil cultivators' spiritual senses were stirred simultaneously. Old Mud, like a tub of dirty water, "splashed" onto the ground on the spot and instantly seeped into the floor and vanished. White Face meanwhile made a grab in midair—it turned out that the door to the motionless cabin was behind him!

A-Xiang saw her chance quickly. She held the reincarnation wood and squatted on the ground holding her head, crying, "Help! There's a demon!"

The white-faced man was about to slip into the crack between the ship's hull and the downgraded immortal tool, but he ran right into Pang Jian's arms as the latter came in through the wall!

White Face froze abruptly—a talisman gun was pointed at his chin.

"Hey, what a special day," Pang Jian said, smiling. "First thing in the morning, and someone's throwing himself at me?"

Hypnotic ripples quickly appeared in White Face's strange eyes. There was no time for Pang Jian to look away.

A-Xiang, whose soul had been muddled once, saw that this blue-clothed lord had also fallen for it. She was hesitating over whether she ought to jump up and yell when Pang Jian asked doubtfully, "That's all? No other tricks?"

White Face: "..."

A-Xiang silently squatted back down.

"Where did such an unworldly evil cultivator come from?" Pang Jian expressionlessly pulled the trigger. "Your feathers haven't even all grown in yet, and you still dare come to Jinping to make trouble."

Talisman script coated that white face, then spread to the whole body. The white-faced man seemed to turn into a big white moth wrapped in a spiderweb.

Meanwhile, a number of blue-clothesers working together pulled out a big net full of talismans from the water, like fishing, scooping up Old Mud, who had melted out of his human shape.

Pang Jian casually stuck the talisman gun into the back of his belt and reached out to pull over the "big white moth." "Take him back to the Quell for a soul-searching!"

No sooner had he spoken than a note from General Zhi nearly hit him in the face: "Beware the inscription."

Pang Jian was startled. Then he saw a peculiar smile appear on the white-faced man's face. Something dazzling flashed on his chest. Pang Jian had no time to think about it carefully. He abruptly flung the man away. "Out of the way!"

The white-faced man was tall and broad, but he was flung one-handed by Pang Jian like a pebble and went flying to the sky. Meanwhile, Pang Jian took out an umbrella. The umbrella's canopy expanded boundlessly in his hand, covering nearly all the ships on the grand canal.

Those under the cover of the big umbrella only sensed darkness fall over them. Before they could see clearly what had gone up into the sky, there was huge sound.

The fierce second-class inscription had blown White Face to bits!

All the ribs of the enormous umbrella broke, and the torn canopy came fluttering down. Stronger waves than when the water dragon had passed earlier surged over the canal. Bloody rain came down from the sky.

In the net, "Old Mud"'s mouth was nowhere to be found, but he could still laugh breathlessly. "Ancients in their carven caves, called their shelters property... Their homes gave them... dignity, but... the dogs... of the rich..."²⁶

His laughter came to a sudden halt as he became a stiff paste of lime.

His protruding eyes were facing in A-Xiang's direction. His blurred featured looked like something a child had hastily sculpted. Something seemed to clutch A-Xiang's heart. She automatically squeezed the reincarnation wood amulet.

Then there was a puff as "Old Mud," who had really turned into mud, split apart, bursting into powder, landing in the still surging canal.

Xi Ping abruptly struggled free of the image in the center of his brow and opened his eyes wide. “Shifu...”

Zhi Xiu had no need to look. He could already guess what the situation was over there. “They’re dead?”

Xi Ping had only thought he was having fun, like gambling with strangers. He had been treating those two ugly evil cultivators like opponents in a game. With the game over, he had been ready to put on airs and express his self-satisfaction, but the other side had suddenly put on a self-sacrificing show.

Zhi Xiu said, slowly, “Our government employs severe punishments against evil cultivators. Once captured, they’re put in prison and soul-searched. A soul-searching carves up part of your bones. Even if you don’t die, your mind will be damaged. Therefore, if they have the chance, they’ll kill themselves. In recent years, Heaven’s Design Pavilion has alternated set after set of immortal tools, yet they still can’t keep up with the evil cultivators’ endless tricks for committing suicide. There’s nothing to be done about it.”

For a time, Xi Ping was a little dazed.

In stories, bad guys were always uncouth and steeped in evil; those who laughed wildly on the way to execution were always heroes. When he had listened to operas with his grandmother as a child and complained about them all being the same, his old grandmother had said, “It isn’t that the story writers can’t come up with new ideas. Think about it. These evildoers are all doing it for selfish reasons. They always have to consider the gains and losses first. If you calculate enough, don’t you become a vile person? Dying for loyalty and righteousness means you have heroism in your bones. Even if you turn into mud, your essence will still remain. The body is divided into male and female, old and young, tall and short, beautiful and ugly, but the temperament is always the same. You can recognize it without seeing the person.”

“Shifu,” he said, a little awkwardly, “with them meeting death so fervently, I feel like I’m the bad guy.”

The master of Flying Jade Peak looked at him with eyes that had seen two hundred years and suddenly felt that keeping him at Flying Jade Peak wouldn’t necessarily be a good thing. A person brought up in comfort grew slowly. He hadn’t even fully developed his emotional capacity; how could he seek immortality? He’d just be fooling around.

So Zhi Xiu said gently, “There are few evil people on earth, and those who die for justice don’t necessarily do good things.”

Xi Ping: “...”

Why was it “few evil people” first, “don’t necessarily do good things” later? Shifu was up to standard. Just like when he had been teaching *Detailed Account of Meridians*, he wasn’t making any sense.

Zhi Xiu didn’t continue talking about it, only instructed: “Arrange a statement with that girl so she can lay out the fact that the evil cultivators had accomplices in the Mining Office to Heaven’s Design Pavilion. Don’t let her expose you.”

“Fine,” Xi Ping agreed. He considered it, then said, “Shifu, can we ask Pang-shixiong to get that little girl a different identity? One evil cultivator found her, so there may be others. What will I do if they keep coming after her? That girl’s so much trouble. She can get around the mind-clearing spell. It’ll be no good if she causes another avalanche on the north slope.”

Zhi Xiu: “...”

Who did this shameless wretch say had caused the avalanche on the north slope?

“Oh, right, that evil cultivator just now said that one of Tai Sui’s remaining followers was next to someone named Zhao,” Xi Ping said, remembering. “Who in the Mining Office is surnamed Zhao? Does that count as a lead?”

Zhi Xiu casually reckoned on his fingers. “Mining Office, surnamed Zhao... It must be Zhao Zhenwei.”

“A relative of Exalt... of Zhao-shixiong in the capital?”

“Not really. The Zhao clan is too big. He must be from a branch family in Ning’an, your shixiong from the previous class. This person...”

Zhi Xiu divined something that made him frown. He stopped and didn’t say anymore. General Zhi had the manners of a gentleman and didn’t discuss people’s shortcomings behind their backs. Since he had come to a sudden halt, his next words certainly couldn’t have been anything good.

Xi Ping froze.

A shixiong from the previous class. In other words, ten years ago. From the Ning’an Zhao family...

“A collateral branch of the Zhao family in Ning’an wanted to get one of their descendants in and decided to bribe the immortal envoy, so they thought about what they could give to make themselves stand out...and they took a shine to the Chen family’s green ore field.”

Ho, another unexpected harvest.

“Shifu.” Xi Ping licked his canine tooth and began to scheme. He said, “There’s a remaining follower of Tai Sui in the Mining Office, perhaps more than one. All these leftovers seem to be in high demand, with all the evil cultivators lining up to use them to steal spiritual stones. It makes me worry...”

Zhi Xiu said, “If you have something to say, just say it. Does it have anything to do with you?”

“It does!” Xi Ping pointed to himself. “I *am* Tai Sui!”

CHAPTER 37 - Fragrant Jade Miasma (Final)

Zhi Xiu truly had excellent self-restraint. Hearing this grandiose statement, he actually managed to hold back from mocking him. He only calmly and good-naturedly shook his head. “No.”

Xi Ping began to boast shamelessly: “Shifu, I’m acting for the sake of the nation and the people—why can’t I go? Didn’t you say that an open-eyed cultivator out in the world had to rely on external objects...?”

Zhi Xiu corrected him evenly: “They rely on first-hand experience.”

“I won’t pick up any first-hand experience here with you, shifu.” His rebellious disciple was once again climbing onto the roof to pry up the tiles. “I think you’ve forgotten all your experience. Whenever I ask you anything, you always have to consult celestial phenomena before answering.”

Zhi Xiu: “...”

“Anyway, I also have spiritual bones...”

“You have the face to mention your half-baked spiritual bones? How many times have they done you any good?” Zhi Xiu sighed and spread his hands.

Xi Ping’s vision swam. His shizun had tossed him into a mustard seed.

Xi Ping instantly felt a thousand jun weight hanging from his feet. He tried to lift a foot. Using all his strength, the height he raised it to wasn’t enough to step on a rat. “Shifu, are you going to drown me in a lake?”

Zhi Xiu's voice came from "outer space": "Look up."

As soon as Xi Ping looked up, he saw seven candles hanging over his head, from near to far. The nearest was about a zhang away from him. "You've even got the mourning hall ready..."

"Enough nonsense. In this mustard seed, you can't climb, can't fly a sword, can't throw anything, and talismans, arrays, and inscriptions are all prohibited. You can only use your bone qin to put out the candles. When you can control the bone qin and put out seven candles with one note, then I'll let you off the mountain," Zhi Xiu said calmly. "Don't worry, Xi Yue will bring you food. I'm not going to starve you—of course, if you agree not to pester me with your absurd demands and cultivate properly on Flying Jade Peak, I can let you out any time."

Xi Ping: "..."

In Jinping's southern outskirts, Pang Jian retrieved the damaged immortal tool. Though he was already used to this, he still let out a gloomy sigh.

"It's cleaned up. Check if there are any casualties—little girl, you come with me," Pang Jian called to A-Xiang. Then he said to the blue-clothesers, "Inspect the snow wine on the ship... No, just in case, look into all the snow wine that's been on the market lately. If it's no good, retrieve it."

Of course Pang Jian wasn't about to make things difficult for a half-grown child. He was quite polite to A-Xiang. First he took her to eat, then kindly asked her a few questions. A-Xiang answered everything according to what Xi Ping had told her. In fact, as soon as he heard her, Pang Jian knew she was hiding something, but even General Zhi hadn't said anything; he had only told him to make arrangements for this girl. Presumably Flying Jade Peak was aware of whatever she was hiding.

There were times to be perceptive, but when vagueness was appropriate there was no need to rush to be clever. So Pang Jian let the anxious A-Xiang off lightly. He only said, “There are evil cultivators after you. In the future, this kind of thing will happen often. Stop messing around in those foul factories. Let’s do this—go pack your things, and tomorrow morning I’ll take you to the country and find you a position.”

A-Xiang wasn’t qualified to have objections. Carefully, she asked, “Exalted, what work will I be doing?”

“What *can* you do?” Pang Jian laughed loudly. “I’ll find someone to adopt you, you’ll be their daughter, change your name, live well, and in a few years find a nice man. Just be alert, and don’t mention the past.”

A-Xiang was stupefied, not daring to believe this kind of thing could happen.

She... wouldn’t even have to be a worker?

A-Xiang wasn’t afraid of doing physical labor for pay, and she could write and do arithmetic. She could learn how to use a new machine at once, she knew some basic carpentry, and she could handle a communal cook pot for dozens of people. Working for your food was pretty good.

But what kind of reputation did a “female worker” have in Great Wan? Just saying it sounded vulgar. Hanging out with a bunch of men day and night, living an unchaste life—it was hardly any different from being an unlicensed prostitute.

That was why her grandpa had made her dress in men’s clothes.

A-Xiang opened her mouth and nearly cried from happiness.

Suddenly, she remembered something else and apprehensively muttered, “Exalted, can I bring my ‘mom’?”

“What mom?” said Pang Jian.

A-Xiang became nervous. The Exalted had said he was going to find someone to adopt her, so of course it would be no good if she wasn’t an orphan. But since her grandpa had passed away, she and Chunying had had no one but each other in the whole world. Could she just walk away and leave Chunying by herself in that place?

So she grit her teeth and, still not knowing what was good for her, said, “She’s... an auntie who’s always taken care of me, she’s...”

“As you like.” Commander Pang didn’t even finish listening, just carelessly waved a hand. “Do as you see fit. It’s all right as long as you don’t blab.”

Just then, a blue-clotheser walked over and whispered something to Pang Jian.

A-Xiang was young and had sharp ears. She vaguely heard this Exalted saying something about “snow wine... no good... many people...” and remembered that white-faced man telling her to be careful of people drinking snow wine. She thought, Have they been mixing something into the snow wine?

But she didn’t think much of it. It was nothing to do with her, anyway. Sell her by the jin, and she still wouldn’t pay for a cup of snow wine. If the wealthy got their stomachs upset from drinking it, it wasn’t as if they would end up like her grandfather, with no money for medicine.

When Commander Pang finished listening, he walked away at a hurried pace. He only left a blue-clotheser to accompany A-Xiang

home.

In the carriage, A-Xiang belatedly thought back over this frightening day, sobbed silently to herself, then put it aside.

You were already doing all right if you could live safe and sound. Why think so much? Take it one step at a time.

The blue-clotheser perfunctorily dropped her off at the south gate and took no more notice. "With such a big fuss on the canal today, the evil cultivators probably won't dare to come for a while. There's no danger. You can go home on your own."

A-Xiang tactfully thanked him and got out of the carriage, running off toward the factory district. Just before the shop closed for the night, she used her saved up food money to buy a Golden Tray lottery ticket. It didn't matter whether she won. She wouldn't be here long enough to hear the winner announced. She would save it as a keepsake.

She was planning to go to Rat Alley to see Chunying first. If she met one of the customers today, she would cheerfully curse at him. They were leaving this damn place anyway! A-Xiang wasn't very good at using market place curses on people. The grandpa who had raised her had been a scholar, after all. Afraid of getting excited and forgetting her lines when she was on the spot, she started preparing them on the way, hopping and skipping.

Someone must have had some urgent work—the smoke and dust over the southern outskirts were heavier than usual. A-Xiang involuntarily coughed a few times, thinking, It's nearly New Year. Why are they still working around the clock...?

Suddenly, she realized something was wrong. She heard wild yelling and cursing on the breeze.

A wind swept past, and the stench of burning hit A-Xiang right in the face.

The sky to the south changed color.

Someone let out a heartrending cry: “Fire in the factory!”

“Run! Hurry...”

Boom—!

An enormous sound. The ground shook so hard it made people stumble.

A-Xiang was a little stunned. Far away, she saw an enormous black cloud rise from the ground, form into the shape of a mushroom, and soar up toward the sky.

A person covered in blood ran toward her, staggering. “Don’t stand there watching! There’s an explosion over there!”

A-Xiang was jostled by people running wildly on all sides. She craned her neck and asked, “Where’s the fire? Where’s the explosion? What’s going on?”

Someone answered, “Don’t know, it started in the cotton yarn factory...”

Another explosion covered up the answer. A warm wind raised sand and stones, fiercely slapping A-Xiang’s face. She covered her burning cheeks. Her ears hummed. She felt blood.

“The gold smelter is gone, too! The Moon Plated Gold gold smelter has exploded!”

The cotton yarn factory... Wasn’t that very close to Rat Alley?

A-Xiang raised her foot to charge toward the blaze.

Xi Ping, trapped in the mustard seed, was just picking at his fingers in utter boredom while Xi Yue stood by.

The half-puppet was like a loyal little tail. When Xi Ping was playing, he played with him and always let him win; when Xi Ping was being punished, he joined him in the punishment and did most of the work. After bringing food, he didn't leave. While Xi Ping was practicing with the bone qin, the half-puppet picked up a tree branch inside the mustard seed and started writing on the ground in big characters.

“How rotten. Only a sword cultivator could think up this kind of sideshow acrobat's cheap trick.” It was as if there were nails under Xi Ping's butt. He alternated between puffing out his cheeks and blowing toward the sky, and craning his neck to bother Xi Yue. “Listen, Yue-bao'er, your handwriting... *hss...*”

Before he could comment, a heartrending scream exploded in his ears. In front of his eyes, flames soared up to the sky.

Xi Ping gave a start.

Alarm bells rang in Southern Sage Temple.

Heaven's Design Pavilion's blue-clothesers charged out of the city on their swords. The half-immortals transferred water directly out of the canal to throw at the blaze.

But this seemed to be the eternal fire at the end of the world, withstanding fierce wind and strong rain, dancing wildly, incessant. From the mortal clash of water and fire rose dense smoke that drifted toward Jinping City and created a many-layered canopy in the sky above it.

On the west side of the Lingyang River, concealed inscriptions gradually lit up everywhere. Prince Zhuang, who had been sleeping lightly to begin with, was startled awake by the faint light.

A piece of paper floated in through the window. There was a layer of ash even on Bai Ling.

“What’s wrong?”

Bai Ling coughed a few times and quickly said, “In the southern outskirts’s cotton yarn factory, the boss’s brother-in-law or someone got drunk on snow wine and set fire to the shacks where the workers live. The fire wasn’t contained at once and spread to the neighboring warehouse. The management of that warehouse is poor. A pile of silver powder²⁷ had accumulated there with no one to take care of it. It exploded as soon as it met the flames. A nearby Moon Plated Gold gold smelter just happened to be working extra hours. There was a chain reaction, and all the land in the southern outskirts has been shaken.”

“Help me dress.” Prince Zhuang knew he couldn’t sleep anymore tonight. He pushed away the covers and stood. “Snow wine? Doesn’t that stuff just make you giggle after a couple of cups? How could it drive someone mad?”

While helping him arrange his outer robe, Bai Ling said, “Today some evil cultivators snuck into Jinping on a snow wine cargo ship. Heaven’s Design Pavilion promptly arrested them, but some goods had already flowed into the market before that. This snow wine uses double the rock snow, making it stronger. The unusual sweetness makes it more tempting to overindulge. The shopkeepers selling the snow wine have inspection techniques no worse than Heaven’s Design Pavilion. They all knew what had happened, in fact, but they went along with it because business was good, even raised the

price because it ‘wouldn’t get you drunk’... If a person drinks too much of this especially strong snow wine, his speech and actions will indeed be no different from a sober person’s, but it’ll damage his reason. He’ll often become reckless. This must be the root of there being twice as many carriage accidents in the southern outskirts as usual.”

Prince Zhuang’s thoughts moved extremely fast—the overflowing factory shacks of the southern outskirts, the warehouse containing “silver powder” in need of disposal that hadn’t been disposed of—there was no way the factories could avoid a charge of mismanagement. Never mind the headache for the capital overseer, those factories probably all had close ties to the water transport department.

But behind the largest supplier of snow wine in the capital was the Ministry of War... There was something worth tearing at there.

Just then, the white jade proximal Prince Zhuang had put on a small bedside table lit up.

Prince Zhuang turned his head and glanced at it. There was a line of writing on it without preamble: *How is everyone at home? The smoke is too heavy, san-ge and grandmother absolutely must not go out!*

“He just has to get into everything. Doesn’t he have enough to worry about...?” Prince Zhuang was in the process of considering a thousand people and a thousand things. He didn’t read closely, only smiled among his many concerns.

But before his smile had faded, Prince Zhuang froze: how did he know?

Heaven’s Design Pavilion’s walkers in the mortal world flew here and there, guarding the Dragon Vein, fighting evil cultivators. No one

could have guessed that a crowd of half-immortals would be put into such a tight spot by some fireworks let off by a few wastrels.

There were too many combustible and explosive things in the southern outskirts's factory district, and the direction of the wind was unfavorable. When a single spark fell, it sent everything around up in flames!

All the steamships on the grand canal urgently made way. Half of the canal water went to cover the factory district. It took a full shichen for the conflagration to stop.

The rain brought over by the walkers in the mortal world had yet to cease.

Xi Ping's point of view was limited to what A-Xiang saw. He couldn't see the full state of the south of the city. He looked from A-Xiang's view of Jinping to the white jade proximal to check for an answer and back. His eyes could hardly keep up.

The survivors' faces were all painted, their identities impossible to tell. A-Xiang stumbled around, stopping everyone who looked similar to someone she knew. No one thought she was being rude. Everyone wandering through the ashes had lost someone; their expressions were as desolate as hers.

Wailing floated over from somewhere, chasing her as she wandered toward Rat Alley.

Standing at the mouth of Rat Alley, A-Xiang was almost stunned for a while, suspecting she had found the wrong place.

The dark, damp little alley in her memories was gone. The view had become clear, all the way to the grand canal.

A few city guard soldiers cleaning up the aftermath rudely pushed her aside, plowing at random through the ruins while holding their noses.

“Here’s one... Fifty-four.” When they found a body, they would call out the number. “Come give me a hand.”

“Fifty-five, fifty-six, fifty-seven—these are all stuck together, let’s say fifty-seven... Hmph, these unregistered prostitutes really get around.”

“Fifty-eight... fifty-nine!”

At first the soldiers had lifted the bodies. Later, there was more work than they could handle, and they lazily dragged the burnt bodies all over the ground. Some official had told them to count the number of casualties, so these curled-up bodies each had a number.

A female corpse called “sixty” was thrown at A-Xiang’s feet. Her face was burnt. She was facing upward with her mouth open, catching the rain.

She must have been thirsty when she was alive.

She might have been Chunying, or she might not have been.

The canal water was filthy, so the rain falling from the sky was also filthy. There was a foul reek everywhere.

A-Xiang went no further. In the rain, she followed the corpse’s gaze, looking up at the sky, squeezing the reincarnation wood amulet.

Xi Ping called to her a few times, and she didn’t answer.

Xi Ping turned his head fretfully just in time to see Xi Yue’s anxious face and the ground covered in his messy writing.

Xi Yue had been writing his name. There were too many strokes in “Xi”; he couldn’t manage to get it right. The ground was littered with characters with their heads separated from their bodies, like the burned corpses at the mouth of Rat Alley.

There was no response yet on the white jade proximal.

When the women had struggled to survive in the dim alley, he had looked on indifferently; when the people who had come to the end of the road had bowed to an evil god, he had resented their passivity; when the evil cultivator who claimed a righteous cause had cried out his views, he had been confused and uncomprehending.

But the ground littered with remains and charred corpses at last gave the young master a sense of fellow feeling.

A-Xiang looked up, and Xi Ping saw along with her the inscrutable, inexorable fate hanging over the heads of all living things.

An old beggar covered in dust walked over beating a board, indistinctly singing: “Lingyang guard us, Lingyang guard us. Blessed clouds are flying high, silver moon sinks from the sky. In the mansions they drink snow, poor wretches get drunk and laid low... Everybody, grant me a couple copper coins, I’ll raise a longevity tablet for you... Grant me a couple copper coins...”

“Move aside.” An overworked officer stepped forward to drive him off, sending him reeling with a kick. “Where’d this old beggar come from? They get everywhere. How come you couldn’t have burned up in that fire last night? What bad luck!”

The old beggar agreed blindly. The officer spat and hurried away.

“Grant me a couple copper coins...” The old beggar’s face was in the mud and his back to the sky. He knelt on the ground, bowing with his hands in front of him as he mumbled, “In the mansions they drink snow... poor wretches get drunk and laid low... in the mansions they drink snow...”

A-Xiang heard these familiar lines and slowly turned her head. Through the rain, she met the old beggar’s empty eyes.

“A-Xiang,” the “uncle”’s voice came from the reincarnation wood. For the first time, he spoke kindly to her. “There’s something wrong with that man. He’s with the evil cultivators. Heaven’s Design Pavilion is nearby cleaning up. Call for help, quick!”

A-Xiang stared at the old beggar without blinking. After a long time, she quietly said, “Uncle, that Lord Pang said he wants to take me to the country to get a new identity and live a good life.”

“I know...”

“But I don’t want to go anymore. What’s the point of changing my identity? The sky above my head will still be the same sky... It’s useless.”

“Wei Chengxiang, what are you thinking? Didn’t you learn anything from last time?! You’ve seen what these evil cultivators are like. If you mix with them, beware of getting your face disfigured like that ‘Old Mud’! Do you want to be like a rat in the sewer, chased by Heaven’s Design Pavilion until they kill you? Those fuckers might have been the ones who blew up your home!”

“I have learned something, really,” A-Xiang whispered. “Uncle, even if they were the ones who did it, I can only get revenge by becoming like them.”

Travelers walking beside the mud always had to worry about being splashed by it... unless they jumped into it themselves.

Anyway, it wasn't like she could be a blue-clotheser. Better to jump.

“Wei Chengxiang!”

“Uncle, you're right. Even the Southern Sage doesn't work miracles. There are no gods on earth.” A-Xiang decisively put the reincarnation wood amulet away in her clothes, no longer chanting the name of her imagined god. For a time, Xi Ping saw nothing.

He was indignant and anxious. He pounded on the ground. The bones of his fingers let out a brief, sharp cry like tearing silk.

Twang!

Zhi Xiu, meditating on the cliff, suddenly opened his eyes. A moment later, he landed beside the mustard seed at the door of the cottage.

There was a furious crack in the mustard seed. It had broken open.

Xi Ping landed abruptly on the snow and only just kept his footing. “Shifu! I...”

Zhi Xiu took back the mustard seed and waved a hand at him. He touched the crack on the mustard seed and suddenly became aware of something. Frowning, he looked at the clear and frigid sky over Flying Jade Peak.

The pre-dawn sky informed him of the hell that was Jinping's southern outskirts now. A shadow passed over Zhi Xiu's face.

A while later, he finally turned his head and said to Xi Ping, “Your family is well. There are fireproofing inscriptions buried under the

west side of the Lingyang River.”

Hearing this didn't make Xi Ping feel better.

They were proof against fire, but what about water? What about earthquakes?

When Lancang had marched north, hadn't the whole city suffered, without any inscriptions doing any good?

He couldn't rid himself of the sight of those burned corpses. Supposing he had been in A-Xiang's place... Xi Ping didn't dare to think any further.

“I know why your bone qin works sometimes and doesn't work at other times,” Zhi Xiu said. “With your bones as your qin, what you play is the sound of your heart. If your heart is unmoved, the strings are also unmoved.”

Just so, when a sword cultivator plucked the “strings,” what he played was sword aura.

Xi Ping himself was heartless most of the time. When he plucked at his bone qin at random, he could only disturb the locals.

When others completed their spiritual bones, their vital weapon emerged. Xi Ping's vital weapon was concealed in the bones of his fingers and wouldn't come out; it was probably waiting for his Way of the Heart.

Flying Jade Peak was frozen all over. You couldn't develop your heart out of nothing.

“Northern Li's Kunlun Sect is famed for the way of the sword. The disciples go up the mountain to begin rigorous cultivation before they're ten years old. The way of a sword cultivator can be walked

without thought or heart.” Zhi Xiu put his hands behind his back and stood. For a moment, this man who hardly ever raised his voice was as sharp and solitary as the marks of the sword on the surrounding stones. “If you entered the way of the sword, your bone qin would probably become a qin sword. A sword is like a beacon. It can isolate you from external things. You have no need to attend to the affairs of others, no need to turn your head. You can spend your whole life in sole pursuit of a sharper, deeper sword aura, until you pierce the dome of heaven, pierce the void—Shiyong, are you determined not to follow my way of the sword?”

Xi Ping missed the deeper meaning in his words. He asked, very practically, “If I become extremely skilled with the sword, can I protect my family and friends?”

“Family and friends.” Zhi Xiu smiled. He turned his head to look at his young disciple. The look in his eyes was obscure. There was a bit of tenderness in his voice. “Shiyong, the Great Way leads to heaven. There are no family and friends on that road.”

“Then why would I walk it?” Xi Ping said decisively. “Shifu, just teach me something useful. I want to leave the mountain and kill that bunch of evil cultivators!”

Zhi Xiu looked at him. Bizarrely, he felt that he was looking at himself many years ago.

“Fine.” He sighed. “Come with me.”

Zhaoting carried its master up Flying Jade Peak. Xi Ping froze, then quickly used his newly learned ability to fly a sword to dodderingly follow. He heard a faint sound. His shifu had opened the mountain seal.

“An open-eyed cultivator can only use open-eyed grade immortal tools. You can’t control high level ones. Take a mustard seed, pick

out some tools that suit you. Among immortal tools, there are ones that get along and ones that are at odds. Take care when you're picking them out so they don't start fighting in your bag in the future. And don't take more than five."

"Only five..."

A pinecone rolled down and hit Xi Ping on the head.

Zhi Xiu's voice came from the top of the mountain. "Do you think just anyone can be like your Pang-shixiong, carrying around all kinds of odds and ends without getting mixed up? He has the accumulated experience of a hundred years of mortal peril. An amateur like you, you're doing well if you can operate four or five immortal tools. If you take too many things, then when you really run into trouble, you'll waste time picking an immortal tool. You can come back for more when you've picked up some skills.

"You need an established foundation to carve inscriptions, but you have to be able to recognize common inscriptions. Take a book and read it on the way.

"You can treat arrays as low-level inscriptions. They only need spiritual stones, and they're easy to modify. They also aren't as powerful as inscriptions. But while the functions and rules are different, the general principles are similar. There are no shortcuts in cultivation. You have to memorize.

"As for talismans, sword cultivators don't often draw them. I'm sloppy about inscriptions. You take the *Talisman Dictionary* and copy from it when you need to use one. If you forget, look it up again. If it fails, then you haven't succeeded in controlling your spiritual energy. Try a few more times, and you'll learn. It's easier to draw on talisman paper. When you're more proficient, you can simply draw it out of nothing.

“Then there’s this. Catch.”

Hardly had Zhi Xiu spoken than all the hair stood up on the back of Xi Ping’s neck.

The next moment, a beam of sword energy came toward the center of his brow. Half of Flying Jade Peak began to tremble.

But that matchlessly scornful sword energy didn’t harm him at all. It only entered the center of his brow and melted into his bones.

Xi Ping looked at his hand in surprise.

“Take this sword energy and join it with your bone qin. When you encounter danger, you can play it to bluff your way out. But a half-immortal doesn’t have an essence, and the scant spiritual energy in the mortal world can’t support ascended spirit sword energy. You need two white spirits every time you play it. Save up, don’t strip all your family’s mines.”

Xi Ping: “...”

This made even a cousin of Cui Ji go weak at the knees.

“I haven’t handed back my token to leave the mountain yet. Take it and say I’ve sent you to investigate the remaining evil cultivators,” Zhi Xiu said. “Shiyong...”

He seemed to have some other instructions, but in the end they dissolved into a sigh.

Jinping City was still in the dark. On Flying Jade Peak, the rising sun had already dyed the vast fields of snow red.

CHAPTER 38 - Demon Country (1)

The twenty-eighth year of Taiming had opened with the joyous occasion of Xuanyin's Grand Selection. No one had expected the auspicious air from the immortal mountains to dissipate so fast. It didn't even last until the year's end.

On the night of the eighth day of the twelfth month, a fire in the southern outskirts shook all levels of society. The dense smoke lingered for days.

The following night, in the cotton yarn factory that was the source of the fire, its primary owner hanged himself from a roof beam in his house. The words "blood calls for blood" were placed at his feet.

Two days later, the water transport department's Sun Yuqing was attacked outside the city on his way to pay respects to his ancestors. Though his guards risked their lives protecting him, Lord Sun was overwhelmed with fright and fell fatally ill. An explosive array was drawn on the outside of the Canal Office building. It failed — while burying jade stamp stones for the array, the evil cultivator was discovered by the Azure Dragon Towers. He blew himself up when Heaven's Design Pavilion arrived.

Discontented voices rose among the people. Evil ran wild. The walkers in the mortal world had more work than they could handle. Every branch of Heaven's Design Pavilion reported frequent injuries.

Emperor Taiming was furious. He indiscriminately threw several major figures in the Water Transport Department into prison, startling four peak masters of Xuanyin Mountain into sending a joint inquiry into the circumstances.

On the fifteenth day of the twelfth month, in a great court assembly, Emperor Taiming issued an order. Crown Prince Zhou Huan was to

lead the inspection of the disaster of the snow wine; Prince Zhuang Zhou Ying was to make a thorough investigation of the exploitation of workers by factories along the canal, to leave the capital at once before the New Year.

When this order was given, even the Crown Prince and Prince Zhuang themselves were stunned. In a rare occurrence, the two of them looked at each other in dismay for a moment, both thinking: What is the old man doing? Testing us?

When the assembly broke up, Emperor Taiming said a few words of encouragement to the Crown Prince, then told him to go and consider a solution, leaving Prince Zhuang alone with him.

Prince Zhuang was unsurprised—the matter of the snow wine wasn't actually hard to investigate. There was no need for the Crown Prince to direct it; there would already be a scapegoat ready. All he needed to do was ready a feast and celebrate the New Year. But the waters were too deep at the Water Transport Office, never mind that His Majesty wasn't only aiming at the southern outskirts. He showed signs of wanting to go on campaign throughout the nation.

“There was snow fungus and pear soup cooked today, no? Go and bring lao-san a bowl,” Emperor Taiming instructed a eunuch. “Pick out the snow fungus. This kid is so picky, he won't eat it.”

“No need to trouble yourself,” Prince Zhuang said to Emperor Taiming, smiling. “At my age, I've ceased to be a picky eater.”

“Talking about your age in front of your father!” Emperor Taiming pointed at him. “What a disgrace!”

The emperor wasn't really angry, so Prince Zhuang apologized half-jokingly and waited for him to discuss the inspection tour of the south.

The old emperor's thunderous rage during the court session seemed to have been a mask. Leaving court, he took it off and once again became the kindly and amiable "old father." He didn't mention serious business. For some reason, he talked to Prince Zhuang about family matters. After going on interminably about trifles, he finally mentioned Xi Ping.

"I hear that Zhengde's kid caught General Zhi's eye and entered the inner sect ahead of schedule?"

"Zhengde" was the Marquis of Yongning's courtesy name. Prince Zhuang agreed. "No one expected it. My uncle's family is overwhelmed with flattery, but also worried that being in the inner sect, with so little sense of the gravity of things, he will irritate the peak master."

"General Zhi is famous for his good disposition. Of course he won't argue with a junior." The old emperor remembered something and added, smiling, "I remember that little rascal. When he was so little he couldn't even walk properly yet, the first time I picked him up to have a look at him, he dared to pull my mustache. So bold... You can see the man in the child. I said then that he might have great fortune in the future."

The eunuch offered the pear soup and silently withdrew. In the heated room kept spotless by the protection of inscriptions, only father and son remained.

From the bottom of his heart, Prince Zhuang didn't want to talk to him about Xi Ping. He joined him in a laugh and changed the subject, but Emperor Taiming continued: "At first, you even wanted to remove him from the alternate roster. How fortunate that the immortal envoy wrote him back in by some coincidence. As I see it, General Zhi was already drawn to him by fate then."

How did he know? Had the Zhao family given it away?

Prince Zhuang's fingers stopped rubbing the porcelain bowl, but his expression didn't waver by a hair. As if nothing were the matter, he said, "My grandmother is old and didn't want to be separated from her grandson. My uncle also thought he was lazy and would never make anything of himself. He was afraid he would make trouble if he went to the immortal mountains. That's why he asked me to think of a way to remove him from the roster."

The old emperor watched him closely, the laugh lines deepening at the corners of his eyes. He said no more, only urged Prince Zhuang to eat the pear soup while it was hot.

Prince Zhuang ate two mouthfuls, then put the bowl down. "Imperial Father, about the inspection tour of the south..."

"There's no rush. We'll talk about that soon. First come and appraise this new painting I've put up." Like a naughty child, Emperor Taiming excitedly called Prince Zhuang over to admire the painting with him.

Prince Zhuang could only be patient and comply.

For the New Year, in keeping with the occasion, a Welcoming Spring painting had been hung up in the heated room. This was an ancient painting, the style a little immature. It didn't look like the work of a master, but the use of color was very lively and bold. Though it had faded a little over the years, the child chasing a butterfly and the brilliant early spring still came through the paper vibrantly.

"Well, whose authentic work do you think this is?"

Great Wan's aesthetic was simple elegance and reserve. It didn't actually care for anything too flamboyant or showy.

Prince Zhuang saw that the signature was “Carefree Old Man” and felt that the artist was no older than fifteen. He thought, Is this child’s scrawl worthy of being called an “authentic work”? Would anyone really bother imitating it?

“That’s hard to say. It has a unique style. It seems to have something of the look of the south.”

So busy it made your eyes hurt.

“Wrong! This person is a born and bred Jinping figure,” the old emperor said, smiling. “I bet you wouldn’t think that this painting was left in the palace by Princess Duanrui in her youth.”

Prince Zhuang froze.

Princess Duanrui?

The Zhou family’s forebear in Xuanyin Mountain... the one who cultivated the way of clarity?

“According to legend, this forebear was lively and mischievous in her youth, very spoiled. She often dressed in male clothes and went out with her father and brothers, and was skilled in calligraphy and painting. When she was around ten, at the birthday feast of the Empress Dowager Ren’an, she glued on a mustache and disguised herself as an actor. She imitated the storytelling of marketplace performers and made the whole room fall over laughing. Only when the empress dowager asked her to present herself to be rewarded did she recognize her.”

For a time, Prince Zhuang suspected that the old man’s vision was going, and he had read the names wrong while reading a whole series of unofficial histories. He wasn’t in the mood to indulge in this idle chatter with the old codger, so he got the conversation back on

the right track: “Indeed, I didn’t think it. Imperial Father, the inspection tour...”

But Emperor Taiming changed the subject back. He said, “She was like you. Innate spiritual bones.”

Prince Zhuang’s pupils contracted abruptly.

“Xuanyin Mountain permits the Zhou family to occupy the imperial throne, so they certainly won’t permit a shed skin cultivator surnamed Zhou. She had to enter the way of unfeeling and clarity. If she wants to go forward, she must become a plant without thought or self, entirely forget the name ‘Zhou Xueru.’ Otherwise, she can only allow herself to be tormented by endless trivialities, cultivate the way of clarity without finding clarity, go no further than the ascended spirit stage all her life... but she’s still a little more fortunate than you.” The emperor looked up at the childish painting and said, softly, “She only had innate spiritual bones. She wasn’t born with a paramount spiritual sense. She wasn’t as sensitive to the many distracting thoughts of those around her as you are, so she was able to have a happy and carefree childhood. She wasn’t as burdened as you.”

The heated room at once became deathly silent.

Prince Zhuang gently pulled back the corner of a piece of white paper sticking out of his sleeve and adopted a stance of “I don’t know what His Majesty my Imperial Father is raving about, but any bullshit the emperor says is right.”

“Enough, stop pretending. It’s been so many years—aren’t you tired? Only your mother would think you were ‘sentimental and frail.’ She doesn’t know anything.” The corners of Emperor Taiming’s mouth drew out in a strange smile. He waved a hand and allowed himself to appear elderly. “Ying, Our issue is six sons and five daughters, but none of them resembles Us... apart from you.”

Prince Zhuang stood upright and calmly responded, “That is my good fortune.”

Emperor Taiming asked, “Xi Ping is your uncle’s only son, and his entrance into the immortal sect would be a great benefit to you—so why would you want to prevent it?”

Prince Zhuang’s lashes like a crow’s plumage lowered. He was silent for a moment, then said, “Your Majesty presides over all; everything under heaven is a game piece for Your Majesty. I was born with nothing, and for over twenty years, I have had nothing but a few cats and dogs at my side. I am unwilling to take them out for show. This is inferior. Pardon me, Your Majesty.”

“It isn’t up to you, and it isn’t up to me, either. There is nothing humanity can do about fate.” The old emperor’s slightly clouded eyes were frighteningly bright. He sat sturdily and said, “We have ordered you to make an inspection tour of the south. Do you know what that means?”

“My wits are slow,” Prince Zhuang answered in a businesslike manner. “Please elaborate, Your Majesty.”

“We want you to spare no effort.” The old emperor tore away the clinging mask of the “old father” and grimly said, “Investigate those pot-bellied demons who fill iron furnaces with men, gut those animals with their bottomless greed, no matter who the master behind them is. Can you do that?”

Prince Zhuang answered, “I will strictly abide by Your Majesty’s orders and make a thorough investigation of this matter. I will await Your Majesty’s appraisal.”

Even if you cast me out, can you come out of it clean?

When the old emperor had made his big production over twenty years ago, he had reaped the benefits of the internal strife among the immortal mountains' thirty-six peaks. This time, Xuanyin Mountain wasn't about to give him tacit approval.

Emperor Taiming was silent for a moment, then said with emphasis, "The wound has already festered. The limb must be amputated to save the patient. Ying, We are giving you the knife."

Prince Zhuang frowned, not quite understanding what Emperor Taiming was getting at.

What, was His Majesty plotting a rebellion?

"The sky is about to fall. The Crown Prince is too kind and gentle. He... he can't shoulder this. Only you are ruthless enough."

Perhaps it was only because it was what he expected to see, but Prince Zhuang thought that there was madness in his Imperial Father's smile.

Emperor Taiming said, "The Xi family's boy has entered the immortal sect and joined the Dignitary of Fate High Elder's lineage. Princess Duanrui must have had a hand in this. Ying, the immortal sect has already chosen you."

Prince Zhuang thought, So what?

Supposing for the moment that Xuanyin really preferred him, could that bit of preference make them countenance this kind of provocation?

Had the old codger also been drinking the extra strength snow wine?

But Emperor Taiming said nothing more, only instructed, "You may leave. Do not disappoint Us... Remember to see your mother before you leave."

Only when the evening lanterns had been lit did Prince Zhuang leave Guangyun Palace. As soon as he got into his carriage, the inscriptions blocked the smoke and dust outside. Bai Ling, as a piece of paper, slipped out of the sleeve of his court dress. "Your Highness, His Majesty just now..."

"Don't fuss." Prince Zhuang waved a hand and pressed down hard on his temples. "Give me some quiet."

Bai Ling didn't make a sound. He took out a bottle of Spring Sunshine Pills and put it beside Prince Zhuang's hand, silently waiting on him.

The carriage drove slowly toward Prince Zhuang Manor. Outside the inscriptions there was a scattering of snow, like the ashes of the dead spread over the sky.

Prince Zhuang kept his eyes closed until they reached the manor. Before the carriage had come to a full stop, he heard a qin playing.

His brow, furrowed the whole way, relaxed. He asked, "Where is the music coming from?"

Bai Ling listened in. "It seems to be coming from the manor..."

Before he could finish, Prince Zhuang had already pushed open the door and nearly jumped out of the carriage.

Bai Ling flew up and stuck to his sleeve as paper. The servants were frightened, hastily following with an opened umbrella. "Your Highness, it's snowing! Take care not to catch cold! Your Highness!"

Prince Zhuang walked rapidly into the courtyard. As soon as he looked up, he saw on the roof of the south study one man and one cat—a pair of enemies.

The big black cat was suspiciously circling the newcomer. It came close and sniffed at the hems of his robes. Probably it was thinking that he smelled familiar, but that there seemed to be something wrong.

And this person who had been parted from him for almost four seasons raised his head and smiled at Prince Zhuang. “San-ge, I’ve come to cadge a meal again!”

Just as if he had never left.

Prince Zhuang exhaled gently. His shoulders relaxed. He left the shadow he had brought back from Guangyun Palace at the door.

First he wanted to smile, but when the corners of his mouth had lifted halfway, he forced his expression to harden again. “You’ve spent most of a year in the immortal sect, and all you’ve learned is how to climb the roof and tear up the tiles? What a disgrace! Come down here at once!”

“All right!” Without warning, Xi Ping tucked the black cat under his arm. Accompanied by the cat’s scream, he jumped down from the rooftop holding it.

The black cat instantly remembered this fiend. Its new hatred combined with old enmity. Its fur stood on end, and it tried to claw Xi Ping’s face.

But the old enemy had changed. As if he were walking on air, Xi Ping’s figure flashed, and he landed lightly behind Prince Zhuang. He stood on tiptoe and pulled a face at the black cat.

Prince Zhuang: "...”

Fine. It turned out that in the terrifying episode at the Latent Cultivation Temple, only other people’s hearts had been terror-stricken; Xi Ping himself had no heart.

“Shifu sent me down from the mountain to take care of some stuff.” Xi Ping walked into the study of Prince Zhuang Manor as if walking into his own home and familiarly brewed tea himself—the green jade cup he always used was still in its original place on the little tea tray. “I’ve just stopped by at home. I wasn’t going to come see you so late at night, but I heard my dad say that His Majesty was sending you far away... Listen, is His Majesty your father or not? How can he order you around like this? He won’t even let you stay to celebrate the New Year!”

Prince Zhuang could only wave a hand and send the servants away. He thought that General Zhi lived up to his reputation for having a good temper—he had spoiled this brat even more thoroughly!

Once the servants were gone, Xi Ping looked around and called a greeting to Prince Zhuang’s sleeve: “Hello, secret guard-da-ge!”

Prince Zhuang froze.

Bai Ling, whose hiding place had been identified, could only float down and change to human form. He chattily said, “Viscount—Flying Jade Peak does indeed have a profound wealth of knowledge. You only opened your spiritual eyes half a year ago, and you’ve already surpassed most of Heaven’s Design Pavilion.”

Xi Ping said, “Of course.”

Bai Ling: "...”

He didn’t know how to respond to this.

Fortunately, Prince Zhuang came to his rescue. He asked, "Since when have you known that Bai Ling wasn't mortal?"

"I've known since I was little," Xi Ping said. "This secret guard-da-ge even taught me about inscriptions once. I felt that he was around most of the time, but before I couldn't hear him at all."

The paperman's concealment was exceptional. Bai Ling's psyche barely withstood the fact that he had been detected by a mortal. "How did you know that I was around? How did I give myself away?"

"You didn't," Xi Ping said. "I knew by looking at my san-ge's expression."

Prince Zhuang squeezed his teacup and softly asked, "Didn't you think it was strange that I would have a cultivator as my secret guard?"

Xi Ping looked at him in confusion, his expression plainly saying "What does it have to do with me?" "Oh, right, san-ge, let me show you something good."

"You..." Prince Zhuang saw what he had taken out and froze. It was a white jade ornament the size of a finger pad. Following the natural bit of green in the jade, it had been made into an openwork carving of a budding snow lotus.

Xi Ping didn't touch it with his hands. A little inexpertly, he used a layer of spiritual energy to take the white jade ornament out of his mustard seed and, beset by peril, placed it in Prince Zhuang's hand.

When the jade ornament touched him, the small snow lotus slowly opened. Prince Zhuang instantly felt a refreshing breeze sweep

through his body. The tight pain he'd felt in his chest for several days diminished considerably.

As if afraid of startling the flower, Bai Ling lowered his voice. "This is... the legendary Heart-Protecting Lotus carved by Master Lin Chi himself?"

"Yes. Shifu ordered me to take a few immortal tools from Flying Jade Peak before I left. I saw this and asked for it at once. This jade has been soaking up spiritual energy on Flying Jade Peak for over a hundred years. It's thoroughly marinated. Even without a cultivator to help it along, it's still enough for it to bloom for a hundred years. Carrying it on you dispels illness and avoids filth, wards off all poisons... Anyway, you could drink three jin of extra strength snow wine without any problem."

Prince Zhuang heard the words "snow wine." "Was it General Zhi who told you about what happened in the factory district in the southern outskirts?"

"Sure." Xi Ping nodded as if he wasn't too concerned about this matter. He changed the subject so quickly it was a little unnatural. He looked down and took out a thick stack of talismans. "There are also these... Oh, no, that's wrong."

He flipped through them and saw that the ones he'd drawn incorrectly had also gotten mixed in by accident. He pulled out more than half of them. "Use the ones on top as much as you can, the ones on top are the good ones. The ones on the bottom all have some problems, but they'll still do something."

Bai Ling looked at them. "They're all talismans for avoiding contamination."

"That's the only one I've learned so far." Xi Ping grumbled, "My shifu isn't good at anything but the sword. He tossed a talisman

dictionary at me and told me to look them up myself, as if you could look one up and learn it like an unfamiliar character in the *Shuowen Jiezi*²⁸. It's not that easy!"

Prince Zhuang squeezed the Heart-Protecting Lotus in his hand for a time. He seemed to be feeling faintly ill at ease. He said, "I have Bai Ling with me. I'm not short on talismans to use."

Without even thinking, Xi Ping said, "That's different. *I* drew these."

As if it was self-evident that talismans drawn by him were more meaningful than those drawn by someone else.

Prince Zhuang was speechless for a moment. He held his forehead and said, smiling, "What else have you learned? Go ahead and flaunt all of it."

"There's also the qin," Xi Ping said, flexing his finger. As if there was an invisible string, his finger made a clear and melodious sound.

Bai Ling said, "Flying Jade Peak truly does have a profound wealth of knowledge. What treasure is this? I haven't heard of it."

"This is a 'bone qin.'" Xi Ping didn't explain further. "San-ge, you probably haven't been sleeping well the last few days. I'll play a song for you."

Prince Zhuang was afraid of his songs. He quickly said, "There's no hurry. Let's dine first. You can play when you've eaten."

His original thought had been that Xi Ping would eat and drink his fill and forget about this matter, but it turned out that he had his heart set on performing today. Prince Zhuang didn't know what General Zhi had been thinking giving him a qin. All he could do was put his

ears at risk. He adjusted his posture and prepared to give his full attention to Mr. Yu Gan's work.

But Xi Ping didn't play one of his bewildering love songs. He sat and lightly moved his fingers, playing a "Spell of Lucidity and Calm."

Prince Zhuang listened. This "bone qin" of his must have been an immortal tool used for healing. Its sound was mild and peaceful. It passed through the manor's courtyard walls, spreading far outward. Jackdaws and sparrows landed all over the wall outside the south study, and the black cat that hissed as soon as it saw Xi Ping had slipped in at some point, found a corner of the study, and curled up with its ears pricked up.

In the middle of the song, the playing paused for a moment. Bai Ling, who was practically about to enter meditation, came back to himself and saw Xi Ping raising a finger toward him.

At some point, Prince Zhuang had fallen asleep with his head propped on his hand, looking as if he had no cares at all.

Bai Ling quietly stepped up to place him on a small couch and cover him with a quilt.

The calming spell continued.

A-Xiang—Wei Chengxiang arrived in the ruins left by the fire in the southern outskirts near dawn. Starting from the former mouth of Rat Alley, she walked fifty paces south, lifted a burnt plank, and as she expected found a pouch.

The pouch was full of blue jade.

She bit through her finger and spilled blood on it. The blue jade in the pouch flashed and sank into the palm of her hand. Wei Chengxiang had a traveling bag on her back—inside were two

memorial tablets, one reincarnation wood amulet, a stack of mixed grain flatbread, a handful of coins... and a Golden Tray lottery ticket for a lottery whose winner had yet to be announced.

Then she walked to the ferry crossing. A boat was waiting for her there.

There were already five or six raggedly dressed people crowded onto the boat, all in the prime of life, all left with nowhere to go after the fire in the southern outskirts. All their faces wore the same blank numbness.

The punter just happened to be the old beggar who had beaten a plank while singing in the ruins of the fire. He waved his pole, and ripples spread from the boat, as if he were taking the boat full of people over the Wangchuan River that separated mortals from ghosts.

After leaving the ferry crossing, they switched to a steamship. Someone came down from the steamship to welcome them.

Wei Chengxiang looked around and saw several similar boats stopped nearby. She knew that there was more than one boat worth of people who had been attracted by these evil cultivators.

The greeter who had come down from the steamship silently saluted each person on the boat. When Wei Chengxiang's turn came, the greeter met her eyes and involuntarily froze—it was as if a living person had been mixed in with the ghosts.

Wei Chengxiang smiled at him unwaveringly and took a step forward. Lowering her voice, she said, “The conflagration burns on, the cry of the cicada is without end.”

The greeter said in astonishment, “You’re...”

“Before Old Mud died for the cause, he was negotiating the matter of the spiritual stones with my Tai Sui. Unexpectedly, the blue-clothesers burst in to arrest him.” Through her bundle, Wei Chengxiang tightly hugged the two memorial tablets. These tablets were her blood and soul.

“My number is sixty. Tai Sui has ordered me to travel with you to the tumultuous southern border.”

CHAPTER 39 - Demon Country (2)

On the seventeenth day of the twelfth month, Prince Zhuang went south.

His Third Highness's health was poor. He didn't normally leave the capital. No one was clear on what approach he would take. They only knew that sickly people generally came in two types: either they were frail and anxious from their illness, or they were fickle and disagreeable from their illness. They didn't know which type he was.

But soon they found that while Prince Zhuang had left in some hurry, he didn't proceed quickly. Before he had even left Jinping's city gate, his journey's itinerary had already been made public, giving everyone enough time to prepare.

Officials and merchants everywhere breathed a sigh of relief—Prince Zhuang was a decent person.

Decent was good. A decent prince meant that subordinates had the latitude to be proper; these two positive qualities would combine, and that would be to everyone's pleasure and satisfaction.

"As expected, the Crown Prince has started smoothing it all over." The ship was rocking too hard. Prince Zhuang couldn't read, so he was having Bai Ling read all the secret dispatches aloud to him. "His Majesty has made no indications."

"I see." Prince Zhuang nodded a little sluggishly. "That's not unexpected."

For some reason, in a rare occurrence, he couldn't quite get his bearings.

Though there was hidden turbulence between Emperor Taiming and Xuanyin, there was also a delicate sort of tacit agreement that he couldn't entirely get a handle on.

Zhou Ying was used to hiding behind the fog and seeing everything clearly. Now, pushed unexpectedly onto the stage, he had a faint sense of losing control.

Bai Ling checked his expression and changed the subject. He said, "The Viscount left the capital with Heaven's Design Pavilion's Commander Pang today. The Azure Dragon Towers have temporarily been handed over to Zhao Yu. They didn't say what they were going to do."

Prince Zhuang, who had been resting his eyes, opened them, considered, and said, "They're probably going to the Land of Turmoil."

"To investigate the Liang Chen business?" Bai Ling caught up. "Traveling with Commander Pang and under the notice of Flying Jade Peak, there shouldn't be any danger on the way. But the Land of Turmoil can't be compared to Great Wan. The Viscount will get experience."

Prince Zhuang rubbed the center of his brow. "I don't think that General Zhi sent him. What would be the point? Pang Wenchang holds a Heavenly Question. He could contact the master of Flying Jade Peak at need."

Bai Ling said, "So..."

Prince Zhuang said, "He must have made a fuss about leaving the mountain to play."

Bai Ling was about to say, "how could that be, what a disgrace," but he soon remembered what an odd person the Viscount of

Yongning was and swallowed his words—this was the kind of stunt he would pull.

“General Zhi became a sword cultivator beside the Sea of Stars and reached the ascended spirit stage in less than two centuries. His heart for the sword is stronger than iron and stone. I’m not sure Shiyong will be able to inherit his Way of the Heart. That kid takes cultivation as play, fooling around with magic tricks...” Prince Zhuang stopped talking and involuntarily grasped the snow lotus blooming at his neck. After a long moment, he sighed. “It will be a good thing for him to go there and see with his own eyes what becomes of the powerless.”

In the Land of Turmoil, a squadron of passenger steamships passed over a still river, humming, puffing out thick, rolling smoke.

The sides of the ships were inlaid with copper reliefs of all kinds of flowers surrounding two rows of cannons with the heads of beasts. Below were row upon row of fourth-class inscriptions. At a glance, it was clear these were government ships of Great Wan.

At mao hour two ke, before daybreak, the morning shift had begun to swap with the night shift. Each member of the crew wore armor. There was even a troop armed with hand cannons on the ships.

It turned out that these weren’t ordinary government ships. They were Great Wan’s border patrol headed to relieve the garrison in the Land of Turmoil.

After Southern He had been destroyed, it became the so-called “Land of Turmoil” and was split up by the four nations—mainly they divided up the spiritual stone mines. The demon-infested places had little oversight—the euphemistic name for this was “common rule.”

Each country had its area of jurisdiction, with its own courier stations and garrisons in that area to aid the transport of spiritual stones, make arrangements for their country's traveling merchants, and so on. Outside the areas of the spiritual stone mines, mortals who stayed here too long were likely to damage their health, so the garrisons used a rotating system. Great Wan relieved its garrison every two months.

While the Land of Turmoil was dangerous, it also had many priceless treasures, especially some exotic plants that were said to be able to invigorate yang, which were very popular among the idle rich in Jinping. Merchants who cared for money and not shame went in search of profit. They pulled in connections, then paid to get guest cabins with the garrison relief squadron, borrowing the garrison's ships. It was a little expensive, but at least it was safe.

But the end of the year was coming up, so there weren't many people going out on business. All the passengers traveling with the squadron were on a steamship at the end of the line.

At the beginning of mao hour, a light went on in the guest cabin in the furthest corner of the third deck.

A servant as light-footed as a leopard cat opened a window and let the morning wind in. He turned and looked at the bed, where his master was covering his head with a quilt. His expression became exasperated.

As though it was haunted, a scroll was floating in midair, constantly poking at the head under the covers.

The head wrapped in the quilt played dead up to the hilt, not moving no matter how much the scroll poked.

Refined methods had failed to get him up, so the scroll rose three chi and prepared to thrash him. The person on the bed seemed to

be an experienced maggot; each time the scroll nearly hit him, he twisted away exactly the right amount.

The servant sighed, raised the bed curtain, and respectfully invited the scroll out.

A piece of paper fell out of the scroll. It was full of incomplete arrays. There was a line of small writing on it: *A test on yesterday's lesson. Complete the arrays on the paper—Xi Yue, do not do it for him.*

The servant—Xi Yue—held down the invisible dragon-taming chain on his neck and transmitted the test paper to the head of the maggot on the bed.

A moment later, a warm paw reached out of the covers, blindly felt around for a while, and grabbed Xi Yue's hem.

Good Yue-bao'er, do it for me, said Xi Ping.

Young master, said the half-puppet, *this is your lesson. The peak master says I can't do it for you.*

The young master stayed buried in the quilt, not answering. The hand clutching his hem swayed around.

Xi Yue refused righteously: *The peak master will definitely punish you if he finds out. Get up, quick, young master!*

The big maggot named Xi Ping, wrapped in the quilt, burrowed into the bed, indicating that just looking at arrays made him want to hurl. Beat him or kill him, he still wouldn't get up.

Xi Ping had left the mountain, but his lessons had pursued him relentlessly.

Zhi Xiu himself never slept, and he didn't let his disciple sleep. Every day around the start of mao hour, he would send him a small scroll. If he was a little slow to accept it, it would start beating him up.

The scroll explained his lesson for the day and included a test on what he had learned before.

Studying every day, taking a test every day—it was demented.

If he had known it would be like this, he would sooner have buried himself in Flying Jade Peak than made a fuss about leaving the mountain.

Xi Yue couldn't stand up to his wheedling. He could only obediently do the work for him.

His useless master, having succeeded in his evil scheme, stuck his head out, rolled over in satisfaction, and went back to sleep. He also had a beautiful dream: it would be good if Xi Yue learned to alter his own arrays in the future and Xi Ping didn't have to do anything himself. The half-puppet could become a grand master on his own.

Xi Yue remembered everything he saw. Though he hadn't completely learned to write yet, he was pretty fast at drawing arrays. In less than an incense stick, he had completed all the arrays on the test paper. But before he could put his brush down, a line of small writing appeared at the corner of the paper: *Pour in spiritual energy.*

Xi Yue: "..."

Oh, it needed spiritual energy, too. He couldn't pour in spiritual energy.

So the half-puppet went to Xi Ping with the test paper. Before he had come up to the bed, the even-tempered line of instructions

disappeared and was replaced by a line of wild cursive: *I knew it! Rebellious disciple!*

Xi Yue's current puppet body hadn't yet reached a high enough level for him to be able to use spiritual energy like a cultivator, so he hadn't noticed the invisible array on the back of the test paper. It combined with the arrays he had completed. Because he hadn't promptly poured in spiritual energy to stop it, the array paper immediately went out of control in midair and rolled up into a paper sword. A beam of spiritual energy sliced toward the dreaming Xi Ping.

The half-puppet: "..."

Pang Jian, who was meditating, sensed spiritual energy flying around next door and knew that General Zhi was once again disciplining his disciple.

The matter of Tai Sui was still a secret, and they were going to the southern mines to deal with traitors. Therefore, Pang Jian had taken Xi Ping to Great Wan's border in secret, disguised as traveling merchants, and had gotten a place on a garrison relief ship—it had been mostly Pang Jian who was in disguise. Xi Ping could do what he wanted. No one knew him, anyway, and he didn't look like any kind of respectable person.

Though steamships traveled fast, it would still take a few days to cross the Land of Turmoil to get to Great Wan's mines. So every morning, Commander Pang got to observe a chaotic show.

The situation between teacher and disciple could be described as "evil advancing a zhang while good advances a chi." Their struggles were marvelous, well worth watching.

The spiritual energy in the paper sword had some magic power. It only chased after living things. When it touched the door, window,

walls, or cabinets, it gently rebounded. The rebounding spiritual energy didn't disperse. As soon as it turned, it joined the force pursuing the rebellious disciple. The more Xi Ping dodged, the more it bounced; the more it bounced, the more there was.

Xi Ping, with his hair loose, was sent hopping and skipping by the room full of spiritual energy. He stroked his palm. A string like silk appeared in his hand and reached out like a snake's tongue, dispersing three or four beams of persistent spiritual energy at once.

This was one of the five immortal tools Xi Ping had picked out at Flying Jade Peak. It was called "spirit-winding silk." It was bonelessly soft and slender as hair. A single strand of the thread was almost invisible to the naked eye. It didn't hurt to be hit with, but it was specifically useful for breaking up spiritual energy.

Shizun had said that this thing was like an iron wire lockpick; it was useless just lying there, but when it fell into the hands of a master thief, it could become a magical weapon for housebreaking. It had many functions, which depended entirely on its owner. If the owner was no good, he wouldn't even be able to hang himself with it; but if the owner was sensitive enough to spiritual energy and precise enough in his attacks, this open-eyed grade immortal tool could go pilfering spiritual energy in the midst of a battle involving established foundation cultivators or better.

Xi Ping obviously wasn't very good yet. There was too much spiritual energy chasing him. A dabbler like him, who had just learned to fly a sword, hadn't reached the level of a "master thief." He was soon overwhelmed.

Pang Jian took pleasure in his misfortune, listening in from next door. Hearing occasional sucked in breaths, he knew Xi Ping was getting a beating and simply wanted to clap and exclaim "well done" in admiration—he'd never seen someone sleep in after opening their spiritual eyes; he deserved to be hit.

Xi Ping had been chased and beaten by the spiritual energy until his head swelled. Hearing a quiet laugh from next door, he was instantly filled with anger. He thought, Laughing at me? Just you wait.

He shook the spirit-winding silk, destroyed the beams of spiritual energy right in front of him, and took advantage of the gap to pull out another immortal tool—this was a decorative seal made of field-yellow stone, carved with “Hither and Yon,”²⁹ by an unknown artist. Xi Ping had taken a fancy to it as soon as he’d laid eyes on it.

His first thought had been to nickname this thing the “absconding stamp.” It was used like this: place a seal on Point 1; then, before the spiritual energy in the first seal had dispersed, place one at Point 2. As long as Points 1 and 2 were within one li of each other, this stamp could tie them together.

When Xi Ping had been going around observing the lay of the land yesterday, he had taken the opportunity to leave his Pang-shixiong a stamp.

“Since shixiong is so pleased...” Xi Ping leapt up nearly to the ceiling. The dense spiritual energy brushed past him, hit the wall, and doubled as it rebounded. He didn’t even look back as he landed. He stamped “Hither and Yon” on the wall.

The magic stamp took effect at once. The two rooms were instantly connected.

Xi Ping said, “Then you’re welcome to share, hahaha!”

Pang Jian had just been “watching” the fire across the river, not expecting that he would be taken “across the river” by a stamp. The raging “spiritual energy arrows” came right toward him.

Damn it!

In a flash, Commander Pang showed that it wasn't for nothing that he was number one below the established foundation level. He retreated instantly behind the door and pulled out a sword.

The body of the sword hummed as it blocked the spiritual energy. The veins on the back of Pang Jian's hand stood out. He brandished the sword, and the spiritual energy coming toward him was rolled up. Spiritual essence from the sword cultivator of Flying Jade Peak had a natural affinity for the sword. It wound around the blade, coating it with petrifying frost, then disappeared.

Pang Jian took a deep breath and returned the sword to its sheath, then saw that at the place where the absconding stamp connected, that scoundrel Xi was grinning at him. "Morning, Pang-shixiong. My gift of peerless sword energy. No need to thank me!"

Hardly had he finished speaking when the stamp's spiritual energy ran out and the two rooms each returned to its original position.

Pang Jian: "..."

That kid!

Commander Pang wasn't going to put up with him. He put the stuff inside the room that had been disarranged by the spiritual energy back in place, rolled up his sleeves, walked through the wall next door, ready to take care of that little whelp.

Xi Ping had his outer robe draped over his shoulders and was having the half-puppet do his hair as he flipped through Zhi Xiu's new lesson with a show of propriety. Seeing Pang Jian charge in, he didn't panic one bit. He pushed the scroll forward and said, smiling, "Shifu told me to thank you for your help, Pang-shixiong."

Pang Jian fixed his eyes on it and saw that the first line of General Zhi's neat script on the scroll said: *You have become familiar with the use of the Spirit-winding Silk and Hither and Yon, so I have sent you the spiritual energy. If you are unable to handle it, you can go to your Pang-shixiong.*

Pang Jian: "..."

Before Pang Jian could manage to put a smile on his murderous face, the ship came to an abrupt stop, and the water on the table splashed out.

Xi Ping deftly picked up the scroll. He heard a quiet roar.

It was not yet daybreak. The morning star hung alone, and there was still mist over both banks of the river. Xi Ping stuck his head out of the ship and saw an enormous figure in the depths of the morning mist, crossing the grand canal.

This giant creature was shaped like a pangolin, with a sharp head and a long tail, its back covered in golden scales. Its four limbs glided unhurriedly through the water. The part outside the water alone was practically the same height as the garrison relief ships!

A group of boats traveled alongside it, undulating as the creature raised ripples. The boats had special fog lamps on long poles that let out a gentle, milky light in the night, lighting up the giant creature's back, graceful as an unbroken mountain ridge.

Looking from the ship, this scene was like some bizarre dream.

Xi Ping heard people talking outside. Presumably it was the other passengers, startled by the sudden halt, coming out to ask what was happening.

A garrison relief soldier on board responded, "This is Shu's encampment. You often encounter them herding spiritual beasts here. Our boat has fourth-class inscriptions bestowed by the immortal sect for expelling beasts and avoiding miasma. You'll be all right as long as you don't get too close."

Shu's state sect Lingyun was skilled in the arts of controlling beasts.

Xi Ping had gone with Cui Ji's caravan to Shu's capital, Zhaoye City, and all the "spiritual beasts" he had seen had been the size of ordinary cats and dogs. This was his first time seeing such a magnificent sight.

"You're talking about pets for entertaining children that peddlers breed, with a drop of exotic animal blood. They aren't 'spiritual beasts'," Pang Jian said after listening to him. "The dragon-taming chain comes from there and is used to control spiritual beasts. Think about it, do you need such a grand immortal tool to bind a cat or dog?"

A boy could be pleased for half a month after getting a good horse. There were few who didn't like exotic animals, and Xi Ping was no exception.

He nearly stuck his whole upper body out the window and asked Pang Jian a series of questions: "Pang-shixiong, what is that big spiritual beast called? It seems to be very docile, how smart is it? Can it reason? Actually, doesn't Shu have enough space? Why do they have to bring their spiritual beasts all the way over here to raise..."

Just then, the carefree and content creature turned its head toward him.

Xi Ping's eyes lit up, but before he could get a close look, the creature suddenly opened its bloody maw and snapped at a boat

next to it!

Its mouth was full of sharp teeth more than a zhang high. A chilly gleam passed through the morning mist, and man and boat were eaten up in one bite. Xi Ping was taken unawares. His ears, covered in spiritual sense, instantly caught the sound of the big teeth piercing flesh and blood!

“It isn’t that they don’t have enough space.” Amid the flesh-creeping chewing, Pang Jian stood by the window with his hands behind his back and calmly said, smiling, “It’s that the ‘manpower’ in the Land of Turmoil is comparatively cheap.”

Xi Ping caught up half a beat late. His hands abruptly tightened on the window lattice.

Pang Jian held him back by the shoulders. “We are in another country’s encampment, and this is a government ship of Great Wan. What are you doing?”

One light after another went on in the steamship’s guest cabins. In spite of the inscriptions, the soldiers on deck still quietly raised their hand cannons.

The spiritual beast, like a goat chewing on a leaf, unhurriedly finished eating the man, then continued swimming forward. The boats followed as before, as if nothing at all had happened just now.

Only when the fog lamps had gone far away did Great Wan’s steamship squadron blow a whistle and continue on its way.

“That spiritual beast is called the gold-armored zheng.³⁰ Every part of it is a treasure. Nearly half of protective immortal tools use its scales. Its flesh and blood can be used as medicine. It’s very costly,” Pang Jian said slowly. “Actually, it isn’t especially violent.

Apart from occasionally eating people, it's all right in other ways. And it's been two hundred years since Lancang was destroyed and Southern He was dissolved. The Turmoilers don't especially count as people."

Pang Jian let him go. "Welcome to Demon Country, young man."

A beast's roar startled awake Wei Chengxiang, who had fallen asleep not long ago. She opened her eyes, adjusted to the sunlight, then looked through the ragged carriage window at a colossus passing by in the distance. This big animal had golden armor on its back, glittering in the morning sun.

"That's a gold-armored zheng. They're raised in Shu's encampment. There are many spiritual beasts in this area. Those animals spare no one when they go mad. Everyone take care," a man said, then looked through the carriage window at Wei Chengxiang. He dragged away a corpse that had gone cold beside the carriage and nodded to her with a false smile. "The Indignant Cicadas have some tricks up their sleeves."

Wei Chengxiang didn't respond—she had a spiritual stone in her mouth.

The spiritual energy in this blue jade had already been exhausted, and the stone had turned to soft dust, shattering as soon as her tongue pressed down on it. She didn't waste it, swallowing the stone dust. Then she reached out to touch the damaged array inside the carriage.

The "uncle" in the reincarnation wood had said that while she had made up her mind to follow these evil cultivators, she still couldn't be the same as those nameless refugees. These evil cultivators swept people back and forth as if sweeping fallen leaves with a broom; if anything went wrong, they were sure to throw these people out to live or die as luck treated them. She had bought so

many Golden Tray lottery tickets without winning a single copper coin, so where would she find the good fortune to save her life?

She had to pretend, pretend to have backing, to have accomplices, make it so no one knew what her actual situation was. If she didn't know what to say, she should say nothing at all, and if she really couldn't hold back, she could secretly talk to the reincarnation wood.

She was a "guest," not a believer. As expected, these evil cultivators who called themselves the Exonerators were fairly polite to her. On the ship, Wei Chengxiang had had a single-person cabin, and when they reached the shore in the Land of Turmoil, others slept in the open, while she had a carriage... There were quite a few arrays hidden inside the carriage.

From what Wei Chengxiang guessed, arrays were perhaps an independent branch of learning. At any rate, the uncle in the reincarnation wood called himself a "sword cultivator" and didn't especially understand these things, either.

When she'd gotten into the carriage last night, the uncle had spent half the night painstakingly going through a book before he had a rough understanding of what the arrays in the carriage actually were — there were ones to watch her and ones for attack. The latter hadn't been connected and activated; they were probably being kept in reserve just in case.

With so many "eyes" in the carriage, these evil cultivators would certainly test her. The uncle had asked whether she dared to modify the arrays in the carriage according to his instructions. A mortal who hadn't opened their spiritual eyes, even if they made an array, it would have limited effect. They could only use ready-made ones.

The uncle had said that with his weak foundation in arrays, he would simply tell her as he learned; he couldn't guarantee that the arrays

would work. If he messed up, there would be no need for anyone else to act; he might blow her to bits along with the carriage.

“Why wouldn’t I dare?” Wei Chengxiang thought.

Was there anything she wouldn’t sacrifice?

In the middle of the night, the two of them, one talking and one acting, had reworked the arrays in a hair-raising process. Then Wei Chengxiang had clenched her teeth as though gambling with her life and put spiritual stones into the arrays.

Blue light quietly flowed through them. They didn’t explode and kill her on the spot.

In the morning, the altered arrays broke and gave her two corpses. The spiritual stones the arrays had used had now gone into Wei Chengxiang’s stomach.

Outside the carriage, several of the refugees sleeping in the open had died. It was said they had been ambushed by Turmoilers last night.

Wei Chengxiang didn’t look closely at the two bodies that had died by her hand, and she didn’t take the time to sob for her fellow travelers, whose lives were cheaper than dirt.

While the evil cultivator was removing the bodies, she made the most of her time, leaning against the carriage and conserving her strength.

She had dragged herself through another day.

Author’s Note:

Zhi Jingzhai: I didn't say you wouldn't have to do online classes if you left the mountain to study abroad.

CHAPTER 40 - Demon Country (3)

In the Land of Turmoil, corpses had to be dealt with as soon as possible, or else they would attract things unknown.

A few dozen Turmoilers corpses were piled up and dissolved using corpse-dissolving liquid. Nearly all of them had been killed by the three “Exonerators” leading the way.

The neither quite male nor quite female “Sixty” in the carriage hadn’t looked out all night.

The Turmoilers who had raided them were short and skinny, with deformed limbs, but they moved extremely fast. Each had a bladed weapon in hand and stabbed anyone they saw, like mad dogs. All the new believers had come from Great Wan. Great Wan was prosperous and well-ordered, and the locals were generally delicate. Where would they have seen lunatics like this? They had been stunned silly at first sight.

Last night, a few Exalted had risked their lives to protect them. But there had been too many monsters, and it was unavoidable that the Exalted would have too many things to attend to. They had let two monsters slip in. Before the new believers could get a clear look at what was happening, one of their companions was gutted. Though the terrified new believers were on average taller by a head and twice as strong as the Turmoilers, their first reaction had been to scatter. Someone had run out of the Exonerators’ protective ring in a panic and had been bitten to death by the Turmoilers.

Those two Turmoilers, as if lured by something, had killed people on their way while heading straight for “Sixty”’s carriage. Some well-intentioned person was just about to call a warning when they saw that as soon as the Turmoilers approached the carriage, two rays of

chilly light shot out of it, nailing the two ruthless monsters to the ground.

Quick and tidy. Even the Turmoilers were shaken to a standstill.

No wonder this “Sixty” had a carriage to ride in. What skills! Killing monsters more easily than killing chickens, all the while sleeping soundly in the carriage as people died.

At first, seeing that she was young and shy, people had approached her to start conversations. Having gone through this battle, the Exonerators’ new believers all spontaneously kept away from her.

There was only one fellow named Zhang Da-lang who still had no reservations. He went over and knocked on the carriage, saying, “The Exalted want to take us to give our departed companions a send off. Are you coming?”

Wei Chengxiang quietly opened her eyes.

She remembered this Zhang Da-lang. He spoke with a Ling County accent, the county of her birth. He was loyal and warm-hearted. Even in this sorry state, he still spent all day fussing over people; the whole way, he had been trying to take care of practically everyone around him. He was a lot like her grandfather, who had always been sticking his nose into other people’s business.

When she heard him speak, she dimly returned to her childhood, when her home hadn’t been broken up and her grandfather had still been alive.

But she didn’t answer. Zhang Da-lang knocked a few times, got no response, and went off on his own.

The Exonerators put the bodies of the new believers on some open land and held a simple funeral.

For each one of their companions who had died for the cause, Wei Chengxiang heard an Exonerator say who they were, what their name was, where their place of birth was, what regrets they had in the world and what cares. Then he led all the believers in reciting the deceased's regrets and cares with him two or three times. He knelt to adjust the posture of the body, spilled special perfumed water onto it, then said, "Go in peace. We will remember you."

The scent floated on the wind. Wei Chengxiang warily soaked her sleeve and covered her nose and mouth.

She looked on with detachment. These new believers were at first panicked and dazed, on the point of collapse, but as they recited the gratitudes and resentments of others time after time, a resonance seemed to arise between the living and the dead. As if bewitched, accompanied by the perfume, they gradually entered some kind of inexpressible ambience of sorrow.

Supposing she hadn't known where the bottle of snow wine behind the big explosion in the southern outskirts factories had come from, she would nearly have been taken in as well. Which of these people who had never had a name could refuse the sense of belonging that came from having someone to recite your joys and sorrows?

Of the three Exonerators, two were currently taking spiritual stone powder; they were probably cultivating like her. There was also another one who'd kept his hood up the whole way, covering his face, occasionally flying on some object. He was evidently an open-eyed half-immortal.

She had seen the abilities of half-immortals with her own eyes. To a mortal, even if they weren't all-powerful, they were close enough. However monstrous the Turmoilers looked, in the end they were still human. A half-immortal could exterminate them with a wave of the hand. If not in order to test her, how could those Turmoilers have

been allowed to slip by? As long as you weren't looking for a place to put your trust, you could have doubts in your heart. Another look at these people, and they were full of holes.

Indeed, as long as you didn't fool yourself, there was no need to be too smart.

The Land of Turmoil had been desolate for hundreds of years. Only traces remained of the public roads, with no one to look after them. They had been broken up by wildly growing trees. According to the old custom of Great Wan, the new believers sang the Soul Calling Melody in chorus.

Go to the West—go to the West—

Wei Chengxiang had another spiritual stone in her mouth. According to the methods her no-good shifu and the senior in the reincarnation wood had taught her, she entered meditation and frantically rammed spiritual energy into the mortal shell she had used for over a decade.

Every day earlier that she opened her spiritual eyes was a day earlier she could stop getting trampled on.

In the evening, Great Wan's garrison relief squadron took on provisions at the boundary between Southern Shu and Chu. There was a small dock there to put in at, belonging to Western Chu. There was a government post at the dock where you could come on shore and rest for a night. The garrison relief troops notified each ship in turn, telling the passengers that they must not leave the dock and the post, or they would be responsible for their own life and death.

Foreign posts didn't accept Great Wan's cash coins; it had to be gold or silver. A bowl of tasteless, rotten noodles you wouldn't pay five copper coins for, and they wanted to sell it for two liang of silver.

It was simply ridiculous. You wouldn't spend that much to buy a feast at the Phoenix's Perch Pavilion!

"If you won't eat it, there's nothing else, unless you've brought it yourself." An old trader who was traveling with them, being rather experienced, took out the dry provisions he had brought to soak them in water. "This is the Land of Turmoil."

Xi Ping asked, "Then what do the locals usually eat?"

The table went quiet. Pang Jian kicked him under the table. "Eat. Don't ask stupid questions."

Xi Ping: "..."

He immediately understood something. He looked at the noodles floating like corpses in the soup and found them even more unappetizing.

Just then, a sharp whistle came from a distance.

Knots of Great Wan garrison relief troops stood up throughout the post. Next, a spiritual beast's roar sounded. There was a loud rumbling, and all the gas lamps in the station began to shake along with it!

Great Wan's garrison relief ships issued an order, telling all the relief troops and passengers to board the ships at once.

All the inscriptions on the steamships lit up, the reflections making the copper relief flowers change color. Soldiers in full battle array stood ready beside the mouths of the beast-headed cannons.

"They say it's coming from the Shu encampment's spiritual beast pool," Xi Ping heard someone say quietly. "Spiritual animals are the

base materials for all immortal tools. There are always evil cultivators trying to steal them.”

“Such a major disturbance? How bold are the evil cultivators in the Land of Turmoil?”

“I heard that a ‘silk dragon’ just arrived.”

“Oh, no wonder...”

A silk dragon!

After encountering the gold-armored zheng in the morning, Xi Ping had borrowed a spiritual beast record from Pang Jian to read. Just before it got dark, he had read up to this type of spiritual beast.

It was said that this was a water-dwelling spiritual beast. Its horns, if ground up, could be used to treat dim sight disease.

An adult dragon could grow to over three zhang long, but its heart was only the size of a walnut. An adult silk dragon’s heart had the texture of stone or metal. Like a powerful cultivator’s essence, it could constantly absorb and store the spiritual energy in its surroundings. It was one of the essential components of the established foundation elixir. Each one was worth over ten thousand gold.

At the same time, it was a magical tool for “pilfering heaven’s order.” Using a silk dragon’s heart, you could pilfer heaven’s order and use it directly for powering downgraded immortal tools without expending a single spiritual stone. It was the beast of evil cultivators’ dreams.

“Go back to the ship,” Pang Jian said quietly, giving Xi Ping a push. “I’ll go have a look.”

Xi Ping didn't catch on at first. "It's another country's encampment. What does it have to do with us?"

Having witnessed the scene of the spiritual beast grazing first thing in the morning, his slight positive impression of Zhaoye had completely evaporated. He was pleased to hear that the Shu were having bad luck.

Pang Jian glared and said sternly, "It is everyone's duty to punish evildoers. Tsk, you're so young. How can your views be so narrow?"

Xi Ping: "..."

For some reason, he sensed that under Pang-shixiong's righteous expression, the look in his eyes was like that of a weasel that had caught a whiff of chicken. He didn't look like he was going to uphold justice; he looked like he was going to profit off of others' misfortunes.

A silk dragon's horn could treat dim sight disease...

Xi Ping grabbed Pang Jian. "No, shixiong, haven't you heard that you'll get diarrhea if you hoard all the good food for yourself?"

Pang Jian: "..."

"Xi Yue, go back to the ship and don't come out," Xi Ping instructed excitedly. Eagerly, he said, "Take me with you, Pang-shixiong."

Pang Jian gave him a strange look. "A mighty son of the nobility like you, don't you think it's beneath your station to go do this kind of petty pilfering with a bumpkin like me?"

Xi Ping didn't think so at all. He thought that Pang-shixiong's lack of bother about trifles was very manly.

“Fine. Did you bring any tools for disguising yourself?”

Xi Ping did in fact have one. Apart from the heart-protecting lotus, the spirit-winding silk, and the hither seal, the fourth immortal tool he had brought was called the “thousand old skins” — it was a mask that, as its name implied, changed your appearance into that of an old man. What this open-eyed grade immortal tool covered wasn’t only your name; it could also change your aura and spiritual image. Established foundation cultivators and below couldn’t see through it.

Under cover of night, two figures crossed the border between Chu and Shu, flying on swords in the direction of the spiritual beast pool in the Shu encampment.

On the way to the Latent Cultivation Temple, Xi Ping had already discovered that Pang Jian, a rather steady person when walking on the ground, seemed to become possessed as soon as he stepped onto a sword. He turned into a white stripe on the waves.³¹

He swiftly rode the wind, fast as lightning, not waiting for his little shidi who had just left the cottage.

In no time at all, Xi Ping, who had learned to fly a sword not long ago, had fallen behind.

Xi Ping cursed silently. He was just struggling to discern direction when Pang Jian descended from the heavens and jeered, “Hey, listen, how come you fly a sword like a fine lady walks? Will your face powder come off if you mince too fast or something?”

Then he once again deliberately shook him off, leaping up like a runaway horse.

Xi Ping: “...”

In fact, he felt that his skills were imperfect, and he was very ashamed, but he also felt too embarrassed to ask his shixiong to wait for him. So what could he do?

He could only strive to follow. At the same time, he got out the spirit-winding silk and lightly tossed it.

The spirit-winding silk was faster than a sword. It silently caught up to the sword at Pang Jian's feet and abruptly twisted downward!

Most of the spiritual energy in the sword at Pang Jian's feet was instantly twisted off. Before his self-satisfied smile could fade, he had gone plummeting along with his sword.

Pang Jian quickly held a breath, bent almost double in midair, flipped over and grasped the sword hilt, threw off the spirit-winding silk, and when he had fallen nearly to a zhang above the ground, he was once again steady on the sword.

Xi Ping said, "Beautiful! Nicely done!"

Pang Jian: "..."

Little bastard!

Just then, as if sensing something, Xi Ping quickly turned his head and saw a faint bonfire in the thick forest.

"Traveling traders." Pang Jian caught up and looked in the same direction as him. "The ones with connections travel by ship, the ones without connections run a risk."

Xi Ping frowned—he had sensed Wei Chengxiang's reincarnation wood.

So those so-called “Exonerators” had come here.

Strange. Not far ahead was the Chu encampment. Despite their price-gouging, at least they didn’t have man-eating spiritual beasts running around all over the place. Why did these people want to sleep in the open in a spiritual beast pasture?

Weren’t they worried about becoming fodder?

Meanwhile, Wei Chengxiang’s throat had gone dry.

When the whistle had startled her, she’d had a bit of an ominous feeling. Then she heard someone knock on the outside of the carriage window a few times. The open-eyed Exonerator said softly, “Miss Sixty, your sect is paying a call on the Shu encampment tonight. Why didn’t you give us word ahead of time? How distant you’re being. If we hadn’t seen the mark of your Indignant Cicadas, we would have missed it. May I venture to inquire who has come tonight?”

What was the mark of the Indignant Cicadas?

Wei Chengxiang slowly reached for the reincarnation wood. *Uncle, it’s over, I’ve run into real ghosts while playing at being a ghost!*

Xi Ping had just landed along with Pang Jian in the woods beside the spiritual beast pool. He let his mind wander and stepped on something soft.

His spiritual sense felt danger at once. There was no time to react. Coming to a rapid decision, without even turning his head, he jumped toward Pang Jian.

Pang Jian cut toward him backhanded. Xi Ping lowered his head and passed below the edge of the sword and only looked back

when he had rushed over a zhang away. He saw that Pang Jian's sword had pierced through an animal four or five chi long.

"Lurking zheng," Pang Jian said. "Excels in ambush and concealment, moves as fast as lightning, claws that can pluck out a person's heart. Pretty quick reaction, kid."

Saying so, he pulled out a talisman gun and casually shot a stealth talisman at himself and Xi Ping. Their figures immediately blended with the surroundings. "Come on. Stay on your sword, and don't touch anything in the woods."

Xi Ping split his attention, flying his sword after him as he glanced at the distant fire, narrowing his eyes. He told Wei Chengxiang, *Wait. We're going to take care of the real ghosts.*

CHAPTER 41 - Demon Country (4)

Wei Chengxiang swallowed a mouthful of saliva, and a thought slipped through her mind—what did that mean? Who was going to take care of whom? Was the nameless “divinity” in the reincarnation wood really nearby? Who was he, anyway? Could he be relied upon?

The Exonerator was waiting outside. There was no time for much thought. She asked, “What should I say?”

Xi Ping didn’t even think about it. “Say they’re fake.”

Wei Chengxiang gave a start. “Is that true? How can you tell they’re fake?”

Xi Ping said matter-of-factly, “You’re real, so naturally they’re fake.”

Wei Chengxiang: “...”

No, wait, senior, aren’t you going a little too far?

You’re a fake who’s run into the real thing, and not only are you not thinking about how to stay away, you also want to seize the nest for yourself! And you assert that they’re fake as if justice is on your side! Who gave you the self-confidence?!

Wei Chengxiang urgently said, “But what if they see through me?”

“They haven’t seen through you yet,” said Xi Ping. “We’ll talk about it when they do. At worst you can smear them as traitors.”

“Miss Sixty?”

The sound of the knocking on the carriage was as persistent as an ulcer on the bone. In her anxiety, with her head full of “real or fake,” Wei Chengxiang blurted out, “Fake.”

The Exonerator was stunned. “Fake?”

Wei Chengxiang: “...”

She was done for. How could she have said it just like that?

But at this point... there was no help for it.

The young girl made a desperate resolution: let whatever the fuck happened happen. She had already gone from a female worker in Jinping’s southern outskirts to a ghost in the Land of Turmoil. It was ten thousand li too far—was this one extra li any worse?

“The mark is fake.” She licked her lips and heard herself say in an extraordinarily calm voice, “I have not heard that Tai Sui directed an operation for tonight. These must be imposters.”

She paused. Then fortune seemed to bless her wits, and she outperformed herself: “The true god hides, the demons run wild. Anyone at all will dare to go about as an imposter now. They go too far. I will be sure to notify my companions of this.”

Through the fire and chaos, Xi Ping praised her from afar.

He and Pang Jian were hiding high up and looking down on a panoramic view of the Shu encampment’s huge spiritual beast pool—the spiritual beast pool was perhaps as big as Ning’an’s famous Longevity Lake and showed clear traces of being manmade. A long corridor led to a pavilion in the center of the pool that had long fallen out of repair. While it was dilapidated, the elegance of the carved railings still remained.

Mist curled in the center of the pool, making the figures of the enormous spiritual beasts appear indistinctly. Roars like an elephant's and also like a lion or tiger's undulated along with the waves.

A spiritual beast whose whole body was white as the moon was wrapped in a big net and struggling nonstop. At a glance, it looked like a python that had eaten too many blue jades, but on its head were two azure horns.

Two groups of cultivators flew high and low, battling fiercely.

One side had their faces covered and were dressed in black; these must have been the evil cultivators who had come to do some illegal fishing. The others hadn't concealed their faces and all wore Shu-style clothing with tight sleeves and pant legs; these were presumably the spiritual beast herders.

Pang Jian heard Xi Ping grumble that he "couldn't tell who was who," then saw him take a pair of glasses from his mustard seed... Actually, they were pretty well suited to his current vulgar old man disguise.

Looking at them made Pang Jian's eyes hurt. He asked, "And what the hell are those?"

Xi Ping said, "These are called unseen glasses. When I put them on, for anyone below an established foundation cultivator, as long as their cultivation isn't higher than mine, no matter how they're disguised, I can see the true name on their spiritual image."

Pang Jian was bewildered. Why do you need to look at their true names? he thought. Are you going to set up a marriage interview?

Only now that he was close up did he find that the sword at Xi Ping's feet wasn't any kind of immortal tool. It was purely

decorative. The sheathe was covered in completely unnecessary carvings and set with a pair of precious stones that Lao Pang couldn't identify. On the hilt, a sumptuous brocade carp indicated this object's nature—this sheath was men's "jewelry" made by Cui Ji.

Paired with Xi Ping's current appearance, it made him look like a sly old lecher.

As for the "pulp" inside the sheath, it was probably a piece of scrap metal that had been thrown in for free.

"What did you bring from Flying Jade Peak?" Pang Jian couldn't resist saying. "Is there anything decent?"

"I brought a piece made by Lin Chi-shishu," said Xi Ping.

"Where is it?" said Pang Jian.

"It's for treating illness. I'm not sick. I gave it away."

Pang Jian: "..."

"I did want to take some awe-inspiring precious sword or bow." Xi Ping sighed in exasperation. "But immortal tools have their own properties. Each and every one has such a temper. After I took the spirit-winding silk and the abscond... the hither seal, all the immortal tools on Flying Jade Peak avoided me. What could I do?"

Saying so, he put on the unseen glasses. "You always have to make choices in life... huh?"

Wei Chengxiang's racing heart was about to break her ribs, but she didn't dare to gasp for air and spoil her "lofty" image. After talking nonsense, she had to hold back and keep her face expressionless.

The open-eyed Exonerator drawled a long *ah* and said, “So that’s what happened. Even I was taken in by them. If not for that, we would have been camping in the Chu encampment tonight.”

Wei Chengxiang carefully exhaled.

It seemed she’d muddled through...

“No need to be angry, Miss Sixty,” the Exonerator said, smiling. “I’ll contact your companions in your stead.”

What?!

Wei Chengxiang’s heart stuck between two ribs.

“It’s a funny coincidence,” the Exonerator said slowly. “I traveled through the south in my early years and got to know an ‘Indignant Cicada.’ Though our beliefs are different, our goals are identical. We’ve stayed in contact. This friend is still in the south now, waiting to hear from me.”

Perhaps because she had been eating spiritual stone powder lately, Wei Chengxiang’s senses had become considerably more acute than before. Through the carriage, she clearly heard the sounds of the Exonerator folding a piece of paper, and the paper flying away.

Cold sweat soaked the back of her clothes.

One of the spiritual beast herding cultivators used some kind of magic power. A bolt of lightning fell from the clear sky.

Xi Ping pulled the unseen glasses down the bridge of his nose, looked out over the frames, then looked through the glasses again.

“My mouth is truly magic,” he thought. “These people really are fake evil cultivators!”

The reason Xi Ping had taken the unseen glasses was so he could investigate Tai Sui's remaining followers in the south—he didn't know any of them. Even if he removed shifu's mind-clearing spell, he could still only hear a babble of voices. He couldn't tell who was who. If one of the remaining followers came and personally danced around in front of him, he still wouldn't necessarily be able to recognize them.

Not unless Xi Ping could concretely identify that person.

It was like his shifu using the Bell of Tribulation against Liang Chen —by finding the true name on his spiritual image.

Many evil cultivators had disfigured faces; their own parents wouldn't necessarily recognize them. They also used aliases and code names among themselves. If he wanted to know their true names quickly, with his current level of cultivation experience, he had to rely on an immortal tool.

Xi Ping had glanced over and seen the true names of the black-clothed people who were stealing spiritual beasts. But when he tried to fix on these people with reincarnation wood, he found that there were no such people recorded in it!

Even more bizarrely, there was one person among the black-clothed people whose name didn't appear in full; there was only a blurry "Lin" character.

If he couldn't see this person's true name with the glasses, it meant that their cultivation was higher than his... but there was one character, at least, so the difference wasn't much. It was just a little higher.

"Pang-shixiong." Xi Ping tugged at Pang Jian and handed over the unseen glasses. "Can you see for me what the name of the black-

clothed person leading the others is? That person has higher cultivation than me, I can only see his surname.”

Pang Jian was just considering how to reap the benefits from this fight. He took the glasses and casually put them on. His pupils contracted sharply.

Xi Ping sensed his relaxed body tense and couldn't resist giving him a questioning look.

Pang Jian was startled and concerned. He automatically took off the glasses and inspected them, suspecting that these things were broken.

He was startled and concerned on two points: first, for the person Xi Ping had pointed out, he could also only see the character “Lin,” so this person was likely an established foundation cultivator. Pang Jian himself was only one reception order from the inner sect away from an established foundation, so it wasn't surprising that he would be able to see an established foundation cultivator's surname while wearing a superior open-eyed immortal tool. But wasn't Xi Ping a young disciple who had only started cultivating half a year ago?

Second, among the names he could see, there were many he recognized... If he recalled correctly, these people were mine supervisors from the southern mines!

Pang Jian's first thought was: could these be the evil cultivator traitors from the mines?

But he didn't say anything.

Pang Jian turned his head and looked at Xi Ping through the unseen glasses—he could see Xi Ping's name, but it was very blurry. Only half of the character “Ping” appeared. “What level is your cultivation at?”

Xi Ping raised his eyebrows, catching up with startling speed. “So you also can’t see that Lin person’s full name? Is he really an established foundation cultivator?”

Pang Jian was astonished. “Do you really have innate spiritual bones?”

Xi Ping met his eyes for a moment. Without blinking, he said, “Sure.”

Hearing this, Pang Jian truly wished to indulge in some chest-beating and foot-stomping—the chest he wanted to beat was Xi Ping’s.

No wonder such an unreliable person could be accepted by Flying Jade Peak without even studying for a full year in the Latent Cultivation Temple!

No wonder General Zhi had dared to let him leave the mountains and run around when he couldn’t even fly a sword properly!

Innate spiritual bones! Innate spiritual bones that would give you the cultivation level of someone who had worked for a hundred years as soon as you opened your spiritual eyes!

They might not appear once in a thousand years. How could this wretch have been born with them? Where was divine justice?!

Xi Ping watched his face change color and played it up even more. He casually gloated, “When I just entered the Latent Cultivation Temple, Luo-shixiong judged that I had a first-class spiritual sense.”

“Bullshit!” Pang Jian said. “With innate spiritual bones and a first-class spiritual sense together, if you didn’t become a demon, how could a mortal body withstand it? If you’d really had both, you

would have died in your mother's womb twenty years ago and wouldn't be here now to show off!"

Xi Ping was shameless, anyway. Having overdone his gloating, he brushed over it with a smile and asked, "Shixiong, can't established foundation cultivators 'pilfer heaven's order'? Why would he need to steal a silk dragon's heart?"

Pang Jian was silent for a moment, then said, frowning, "I think there are deep waters here. You can stop thinking about taking this opportunity to scrounge something—keep away from the established foundation cultivator. Don't think that having spiritual bones means you're half a step from an established foundation. The difference between established foundation and open-eyed is like the difference between heaven and earth."

Xi Ping was very agreeable. "Yes, whatever you say."

"Lend me the glasses," said Pang Jian. "Look after yourself. Wait here and don't mess around. I'll go over and have a look."

The established foundation cultivator surnamed Lin hadn't even gone all out, and the battle in the spiritual beast pool had already gone in favor of one side—Shu's spiritual beast herding cultivators clearly couldn't compare.

The whole Lingyun Sect focused on taming beasts, and the outer sect cultivators were the same. On the battlefield, the better part of their fighting force relied on spiritual beasts. Now, something had gone wrong with the spiritual beasts in the pool. Each and every one was looking sickly, unable to even walk straight.

Only when Pang Jian came close did he find that the roars seemed more like cries of woe.

Evidently, these black-clothed people had some weapon or drug for subduing spiritual beasts... Pang Jian knew of a few types, but they were all wildly expensive—if they could subdue spiritual beasts, then naturally they were more expensive than the spiritual beasts themselves.

So the question was, if they could get something so expensive, then why would these rich and overbearing black-clothed people come here to steal a few spiritual beasts?

Wasn't this like using a golden net to catch river crabs?

Moreover, since they could control spiritual beasts, why hadn't they come quietly, taken what they wanted, and left? Why did they have to kick up such a big fuss?

Looking through the unseen glasses, Pang Jian's eyes once again fell on those familiar names.

The waves in his mind had calmed. He considered it carefully and only thought that this matter was increasingly odd: assuming that these people really were the cultivators he knew from the mines, they would also all be nobility. How could they associate with destitute evil cultivators? That didn't make sense.

Just then, a Shu cultivator missed his footing and fell into the spiritual beast pool. A spiritual beast wearing a dragon-taming chain was so dizzy that it actually took a swipe at the cultivator with its tail. A chilly gleam flashed over the dragon-taming chain. The cultivator flew away, and the beast let out a dying wail.

Seeing that things were going badly, the Shu cultivators blew another long whistle.

The whistle circled in the air over the encampment. Dozens of figures arrived on swords. After landing, they quickly formed an

array.

The established foundation cultivator surnamed Lin gave a long cry and stopped holding back. The net that had been holding the silk dragon suddenly expanded, as if it wanted to scoop up the whole spiritual beast pool.

Pang Jian hid nearby and counted the Shu cultivators: thirty-seven, thirty-eight...

How many cultivators could there be in the whole spiritual beast pasture?

He understood: these black-clothed “evil cultivators” hadn’t come to steal spiritual beasts. They had come to make a commotion and gather together all the Shu cultivators in the spiritual beast pasture.

Luring them away to attack their base?

Wei Chengxiang leaned against the carriage, nearly collapsing, and seized the reincarnation wood. “Uncle, this Exonerator actually knows one of the Indignant Cicada evil cultivators. I’m going to be exposed!”

Xi Ping was just sitting cross-legged on his precious sword, narrowing his eyes and wondering why Pang Jian had borrowed his unseen glasses. He himself had the hidden bones left by Tai Sui and needed them to see the true names of Tai Sui’s remaining followers.

So what had Pang-shixiong wanted to look at when he borrowed the glasses?

From his reaction just now, there were certainly names he recognized among the black-clothed evil cultivators.

Then there was the established foundation cultivator whose name he couldn't see clearly... surnamed Lin. That was one of Xuanyin's great surnames.

Could it be...?

Xi Ping said to Wei Chengxiang, "You won't be exposed. These evil cultivators really are imposters."

"If you know that, why didn't you say so earlier? I was scared to death..." Wei Chengxiang grumbled. Then she quickly said, "No time for that now. Uncle, the Indignant Cicada he's in contact with wants to see me!"

Xi Ping said, "Nothing strange about that. 'Tai Sui' has kept silent for half a year, so they've all turned into headless flies. You've suddenly appeared saying you've received orders from Tai Sui, so naturally they want to come interrogate you."

"Should I see him?" said Wei Chengxiang.

"Can you run?" said Xi Ping.

"No, the Exonerator watching me is an open-eyed cultivator."

"Then what the hell are you talking about? See him," Xi Ping said. "Hang the reincarnation wood around your neck. I'll keep an eye out for you."

He had conspired at the death of Tai Sui himself, so what did his remaining subordinates count for? The young master was open to all comers.

Wei Chengxiang felt that this senior was sometimes reliable, sometimes not—it had taken him ages to get a single sentence out when he was teaching her how to alter the arrays, as if he were

having birthing pains, and he had kept getting flustered. He had nearly scared her to death. When urging her to join him in deception, his voice was as strong as if he had been doing this all his life.

She focused, hung the reincarnation wood around her neck, and got out of the carriage.

The Exonerator had already drawn an array on the ground and placed a jade stamp spiritual stone at each of the four corners. In the middle of the array, which flashed green, a very ordinary man's face appeared. He had the kind of features you would forget as soon as you saw them. This was a common means of disguise for cultivators concealing their faces.

The man greeted: "The conflagration burns on, the cry of the cicada is without end."

Wei Chengxiang cleared her dry throat. "Better to die in frost than to forsake one's convictions."

"My code name is One." The man looked A-Xiang over, seemed astonished by her age, and quickly said, "Little Sister Sixty, may I ask who your teacher is?"

So this was the "Wuchang³² One" she had heard of.

Wei Chengxiang lifted her chin and clenched her fists to prevent anyone from seeing that her hands were shaking. As Xi Ping had instructed her, she proudly said, "I have no teacher, although Grand Duke Tai Sui once ordered Mr. Two to look after me for a while, so you could say he initiated me."

Mr. Two had long since gone to see the kings of the underworld with his birdcage; a dead man couldn't testify. Wuchang One said, "So it

was him—you say that Tai Sui contacted you. Is that true? Is he doing well?”

Wei Chengxiang said, with a cold smile, “Thank you for your concern. He isn’t doing very well. He has ordered me to ask you for enlightenment: he left so important a stronghold as the southern mines in your hands, and is this how you all go about your business? Why are Xuanyin’s lackeys from the mines making a sneak attack on Southern Shu’s spiritual beast pasture tonight under our name?”

The Exonerator maintaining the array was stunned when he heard this. He thought, Those “fake cicadas” attacking the spiritual beast pool were from the Great Wan mines?

There truly was an oddity every year, and this year there were especially many... Court-appointed officials dressing up as “evil cultivators” and going to a neighboring country’s pasture to pilfer!

Wait. This little girl had been in the carriage the whole time, not even sticking her head out. How did she know? As expected, the Indignant Cicadas’ mysterious Tai Sui had cunning means.

After hearing this, Wuchang One was in fact startled. He had no more attention to spare for doubting Wei Chengxiang’s identity. He blurted out, “Shix... Tai Sui, they’re looking for ‘that place!’”

Xi Ping rubbed his chin.

Interesting—he’d worked it out. Those fake evil cultivators really were their own people.

Where was “that place”?

Apart from putting together a group of believers in the southern mines, had Liang Chen also turned traitor to a foreign nation and

made illicit transfers with Shu?

Then there was this Wuchang One... the first of Tai Sui's believers. He was indeed different from the others. He seemed to know Liang Chen's true identity.

Wuchang One knew that he had been indiscreet. He looked quickly at the Exonerator and went on, "Half a year ago, many of our brothers were exposed, and those people took over the old contact signals for their own use. Of course the lackeys couldn't make a night raid on Southern Shu in the name of Xuanyin's outer sect. Presumably they thought passing themselves off as us would be safest..."

"No." While A-Xiang was inwardly quaking, mentally pursuing Xi Ping and howling "Senior, have you gone mad?" three times over, she still said, as Xi Ping had instructed her to say, "Heaven's Design Pavilion has kept the truth closely concealed, so it's normal that you wouldn't know. Jinping's wolf dog... has already seen my true body."

Wuchang One's expression instantly let Xi Ping know that he not only knew what Liang Chen's true identity was, he also knew what condition Liang Chen's "true body" was in.

Next, this "Mr. One" closely examined Wei Chengxiang's physical appearance and suddenly "understood" something.

He lowered his voice and said, "So Tai Sui is now... here with us?"

Wei Chengxiang nodded, her expression steady. "That's right."

Inwardly, she asked, "What does he mean?"

Xi Ping calmly said, "He thinks that rotten old man Tai Sui is possessing you. You won't have to dig out arrays in the middle of the night anymore. Better get ready to enjoy the evil god treatment."

“What?!”

Then she heard Wuchang One say to the Exonerator, “Miss Sixty is a holy woman of my sect. Thank you, Brother Exonerator, for escorting her here. I’ll send someone to receive you at once.”

Having finished persecuting the evil cultivators, Xi Ping turned his head to look at the spiritual beast pool, which was nearly boiling. He was still hung up on the silk dragon horn. His eyes spun, and his troublemaking heart said: *Since these are shixionsgs from Xuanyin’s outer sect, then they shouldn’t have any objection to me coming along for the ride and picking up a souvenir, right?*

He had come all this way.

CHAPTER 42 - Demon Country (5)

Xi Ping searched around inside the mustard seed he was carrying and turned up a set of stealth clothes. He had taken along a complete assortment of all kinds of clothing. Never mind long robes and sets of jacket and pants, he had beggar's clothes and stealth clothes, all you could want of each country's distinctive apparel... and he had even brought burial robes; it was anyone's guess what occasion he was planning to wear them to.

He put on the stealth clothes, covering up the white hair and wrinkled skin, making himself look about the same as the group of black-clothed people below.

Xi Ping considered further, put away his flashy sword, and, preparing for any eventuality, stamped a "Hither and Yon" on the back of a big tree—if things didn't go well, he could slip away in time.

Then he felt he was absolutely safe. Excitedly stepping on a tree branch, he passed out through the thick forest, rushing toward the spiritual beast pool.

He had just caught up with the number one Indignant Cicada believer, made up a "holy woman" out of nowhere and convinced them to invite her in, and now he was going to impersonate the black-clothed people who were impersonating the Indignant Cicadas—it was too stimulating.

In the future, when he had become powerful and eliminated the evil cultivators, he would have to write an elaborate record of this story so later generations could sing its praises far and wide.

Xi Ping, beside himself with self-satisfaction, flew away and didn't see that in the place where he had just stamped a spiritual seal, the

branches began to move on their own without a wind. Shortly, a little spiritual beast in the form of a lizard gradually appeared.

The little spiritual beast had just seen someone sneakily leaving something on the tree and crawled over curiously to investigate. It didn't find anything. It was a little suspicious and reached out its paw to scratch the tree trunk. This little thing was clearly only palm-sized and looked adorable, but when it extended its paw, a half-chi nail popped out of it, like a sharp blade, cutting a nick over a cun long into the tree trunk!

The spiritual seal immediately leaked spiritual energy and was sucked up by the spiritual beast's long extended tongue. The seal script characters of "Hither and Yon" flickered on the tree trunk, then vanished.

The spiritual beast let out a satisfied burp.

Xi Ping didn't know yet that a "lizard" had made off with his retreat. He had already made his way to the edge of the spiritual beast pool.

The two groups of cultivators had sent the water in the spiritual beast pool boiling high. A stench assaulted the nose. A black-clothed person had just been brought down by the Shu cultivators' talismans and was about to fall onto an array beside the spiritual beast pool.

Xi Ping's spirit-winding silk quietly left his hand and hooked the array lightly. The unimpeded spiritual energy in the array instantly went astray, breaking the jade stamps next to it and ruining the array.

Xi Ping picked the right moment to step forward. He lightly borrowed power from the ruined array, reached out to scoop up the injured black-clothed person, and quietly said, "Careful, shixiong."

The black-clothed person heard his pure West Jinping accent and, in the dark, didn't suspect him for a moment. He only said, "Thank you, go help out at the kan position of the array."

Xi Ping thought, All right, no problem.

Like a swimming fish, he took his chance and joined the battle, blending into the group of black-clothed people without a trace.

Putting on a show, he casually loafed around and arrived beside the big net.

There were too many spiritual beasts caught in the big net. The silk dragon was squeezed into the very center and unreachable. Xi Ping attempted to haul on the big spiritual energy net. He had just pulled on it when a cold and sharp gaze came his way.

No good. Randomly touching the spiritual energy net would touch the established foundation senior's spiritual sense.

A Shu cultivator was just coming toward him with a knife raised. Xi Ping dodged quickly and let his attacker's knife fall on the spiritual energy net and rebound, pretending that he had accidentally bumped into the net while "arduously resisting the enemy."

In the night, the almost invisible spirit-winding silk silently wound around the sword at the Shu cultivator's feet. The fiercely charging Shu cultivator felt himself standing on emptiness, and the constantly circulating spiritual energy broke off. He stagnated in midair, then plummeted down. Xi Ping took the opportunity to pluck the knife from his hand and waved it around with a "hi-ya!", putting on a rather convincing performance of "summoning all his courage."

Only then did the gaze that had fallen on him withdraw.

Xi Ping let out a breath and thought, I'm too obvious on the surface. I'd better try going down.

So he took a deep breath. When yet another Southern Shu cultivator came toward him, before he could make contact, Xi Ping grandly threw himself backward and fell into the spiritual beast pool, "brought down."

The Southern Shu cultivator, having encountered an insurance scammer, was stunned. Before he could work out what was going on, a talisman sent him flying.

Pang Jian hadn't rushed in without thinking. He hid in the shadows, carefully studying precisely what moves these familiar names had—after an open-eyed cultivator had their spiritual bones, they would acquire a unique magic power, like Pang Jian's ability to walk through walls and Bai Ling's to turn into paper. These powers didn't come out of nowhere. When cultivators could only rely on external objects, they would display different preferences, have affinities for different immortal tools. These preferences couldn't be covered up even if you hid your spiritual image.

The longer he looked, the more he thought that these "evil cultivators" were in fact people from the Mining Office. He was just hesitating about whether to contact Great Wan's Mining Office when he suddenly saw a familiar name through the glasses.

Pang Jian: "..."

When had that son-of-a-bitch Xi Shiyong gotten mixed in?!

Xi Ping jumped into the water and squeezed through the cracks between the dizzy spiritual beasts. He saw the fangs of a big spiritual beast he couldn't identify and couldn't resist idly touching them.

Some of the spiritual beasts had been caught in the spiritual energy net, and others were floating around randomly, bumping into each other. As expected, they blocked Xi Ping's way firmly.

He stepped on the back of a spiritual beast, got a fix on the spiritual energy net, quietly pulled out the spirit-winding silk, and sent it through a hole in the net.

The silk dragon's heart was like a natural spiritual energy pump. The spirit-winding silk quickly locked onto it. The soft, thin strand passed through the closely packed spiritual beasts and lightly hooked the silk dragon's tail.

Like pressing down on instrument strings, Xi Ping held down the spirit-winding silk to steady it, cutting off the bit of spiritual energy that the spiritual energy net had placed on the silk dragon without anyone knowing. He pulled the dragon down—

Just then, someone raised the spiritual energy net. Xi Ping clicked his tongue and was just about to give chase when the Southern Shu cultivators dropped talismans in unison, sending the net flopping back into the water.

The spiritual energy net couldn't handle this much pushing and pulling. It tore at once. All the big spiritual beasts caught in the spiritual energy net fell right on Xi Ping's head.

To avoid being squished to death by spiritual beasts, Xi Ping casually grabbed the thigh of a one swimming by and hid under the beast's belly.

The water in the spiritual beast pool was so muddy that Xi Ping couldn't see anything clearly for a time. Luckily, an open-eyed cultivator wasn't like a mortal. It was nothing to stay submerged underwater for half a shichen on one breath. He paddled around groping blindly for ages before finding that the leg he was holding

was covered in gold scales—looking up along the big, thick leg that was like a column, he saw that this was actually a half-unconscious gold-armored zheng.

This gold-armored zheng was half the size of the one he had seen in the morning. Perhaps it was a zhenglet.

It must have been dosed with something. Its eyes were half-closed as it looked blankly at Xi Ping, the “animal” holding its thigh.

The man-eating one on the canal may have been its dad or its mom... Xi Ping thought, Doesn't matter which, let the child pay the parent's debt.

He snickered, pulled out the spiritual knife he had snatched out of the Southern Shu cultivator's hand, and abruptly stuck it into a crack in the zheng's golden armor. At the same time, he poured spiritual energy into the wound!

The animal that had been about to turn over and float belly up gave a start and let out a furious roar.

Pang Jian hadn't yet had time to find where that brat Xi Ping had fallen in when he saw a huge furious beast arch out of the water like a carp, jumping right out. It indiscriminately opened its bloody maw and snapped toward the two sides of cultivators mingled in the fight.

The cultivators, like dandelions blown by a strong wind, instantly flew everywhere. Even the spiritual energy net shook and loosened at once!

The silk dragon immediately entered the water. The spiritual energy wrapped around it had already been broken off, so it slipped through the gaps between the other spiritual beasts.

Next, it paused, and its slide took an unnatural turn, as if an invisible cord had pulled on it.

The furious gold-armored zheng flopped around in the spiritual beast pool like a natural disaster. Meanwhile, a figure passed like a flash of lightning through the waves it had stirred up.

In the instant the figure passed by the silk dragon, one horn on the miserable silk dragon's head became a segment shorter.

He had it!

Xi Ping tossed the dragon's horn into his mustard seed.

The next moment, the all-encompassing spiritual energy net came after him. He tossed out all the spirit-winding silk he had. The half-transparent spirit-winding silk flickered in the light off the water. He seemed to have become a jellyfish that had suddenly unfolded.

The dense spirit-winding silk threads suddenly wrung a hole out of the spiritual energy net. Before the gaze of that established foundation senior could come his way again, Xi Ping had already vaulted out of the hole. He sank to the bottom of the spiritual beast pool as if there were lead attached to his feet.

All the spiritual beasts being kept in the pool were amphibious. The water wasn't too deep, only about four or five zhang.

As soon as Xi Ping landed on the bottom of the pool, he didn't delay any longer. He pressed the hither and yon seal right to the bottom of the pool and prepared to abscond.

But... nothing happened.

Xi Ping: "..."

He didn't have time to think carefully about the reason. The gold-armored zheng he had just stabbed had been forced back into the water by the two sides of cultivators working together. It came smashing toward Xi Ping.

Xi Ping quickly vaulted out of the way, but the spiritual beast was clever!

The wretched gold-armored zheng recognized at once that the jerk who had just passed by it was the attacker who had stabbed it earlier. The big animal was unbelievably nimble underwater. It turned abruptly and snapped its teeth toward Xi Ping.

No good, the injured victim had come to demand repayment.

Xi Ping wished he could grow a fish's tail.

He turned and shifted in the water, practically swimming out a whole "Free and Easy Wandering."³³ Several times he felt the huge beast's sharp teeth brush past his back.

But just then, by coincidence, the spiritual energy net he had broken came chasing after.

Xi Ping had been wandering around without restraint all night and had nearly forgotten his own name. Now it could be said he was encountering retribution.

In a moment of desperation, when Xi Ping had once again been forced to the bottom of the pool by the enormous beast, he stamped another "Hither and Yon."

The two hither seals were less than a hundred paces apart. The two seals connected, and the space at the bottom of the spiritual energy pool instantly warped.

Because it was only an open-eyed grade immortal tool, after the two hither seals connected, the space where they met was very limited, just about enough to allow a few people to pass from one place to another. A dear friend of the gold-armored zheng's size certainly couldn't pass through. Xi Ping wanted to use this opportunity to throw off the four-legged man-eating fish.

But instead, there was a rumble, and an ominous silver light flashed over the bottom of the pool. Xi Ping's eyelids twitched: what kind of invisible inscriptions were there at the bottom of the spiritual beast pool?

The hither seal had joined two points, and it had also brought the inscriptions from those two points together. The mysterious inscriptions that Xi Ping had never seen before were agitated at once. An enormous flow of energy screamed up from the bottom of the pool, coming right in the face of the relentlessly pursuing gold-armored zheng and disfiguring it.

Xi Ping rolled away, using all four limbs. Suddenly there was emptiness at his feet—it turned out this lousy pool wasn't solid!

As soon as the inscriptions exploded, it began to leak!

A hurricane rose above the spiritual beast pool. An enormous whirlpool opened in the water. Not only the spiritual beasts in the water, but also the artifacts of Southern He on the surface, the plants and rocks beside the water, as well as the cultivators in midair... they were all pulled in.

For a time, neither the black-clothed people nor the spiritual beast herding Southern Shu cultivators had attention to spare for fighting. All of them scattered in terror.

There was an established foundation cultivator present, as well as several dozen people fighting like thunder and lightning, but none of them had made as much of a disturbance as he, Xi Shiyong, had made on his own.

Pang Jian was overwhelmed with admiration. The admiration wasn't aimed at Xi Ping; he admired the Marquis of Yongning and his wife —how extraordinarily gifted they must be to have brought such a thing up for twenty years without going bald! If they weren't reincarnated deities, he wouldn't believe it!

Just then, a bunch of fireworks leapt up in the western sky. There was a team of flying horses coming against the wind. From a distance, someone loudly called: "We are cultivators from the Western Chu encampment, come to aid a friendly nation. What evildoers have imprudently come here?"

Pang Jian frowned. Why had the Chu also come to get in on the action? It was getting messier and messier.

He hesitated, then leapt into the chaotic spiritual beast pool, plunging toward the depths of the big whirlpool.

For a time, Xi Ping could neither see nor hear. He only felt that he was being stretched out by the enormous attractive force beneath his feet. If not for the fact that an open-eyed cultivator's body was far more resilient than that of a mortal, he figured he would already have been pulled in two.

He tried to play the bone qin, but while the veins stood out on the back of his hand, the qin notes that had brought down half of Flying Jade Peak were so weak that he himself couldn't hear them—he couldn't gather any spiritual energy, as if his meridians had been broken again.

This was wrong...

Xi Ping suddenly realized that it wasn't that his meridians had broken, it was that wild spiritual energy was surging all around, pouring toward his insufficiently wide meridians like a flood. He couldn't control himself.

Suddenly, the pull dragging him down disappeared. Xi Ping was swept up by the current. He tumbled forward along with a bunch of spiritual beasts just as confused and disoriented as he was. Covering his head, he dodged the tail of a spiritual beast that was sweeping toward him. He closed his eyes and made a grab, steadying himself with the spiritual beast's weight.

After some more time, the current gradually slowed down.

Only then did Xi Ping find that he had once again grabbed onto the gold-armored zheng—its nose was still crooked.

Shameless as he was, he still didn't know how to react at first. He could only smile at this Brother Zheng.

The gold-armored zheng couldn't understand why this person was doing everything he could to bring disaster upon it. Enemies walked a narrow path. It turned its head to chew on him.

But before the huge beast's big mouth could clamp down, its upper jaw was pierced by an invisible metal arrow.

The huge beast knocked into the stone wall beside it. The blood gushing out sprayed all over Xi Ping.

Xi Ping was picked up by the scruff of the neck and hauled away.

When Xi Ping turned his head, he saw Pang-shixiong's indignant face. Before he could say hello, Pang Jian waved a big hand and slapped him on the back of the head.

Xi Ping spat a big, round air bubble into the water. He was dragged by Pang Jian through the stone wall next to them.

He didn't know how many times he went in and out of the stone. The pangolin Pang walked in and out of stone walls as though walking on level ground, going on until Xi Ping couldn't get his bearings. In about an incense stick, his ears popped, and he was pulled out of the water by Pang Jian. The two of them had come to a cave with signs of being manmade.

Despite being a half-immortal, he had still nearly run out of air. A mouthful of long-awaited air filled Xi Ping's lungs, and he coughed fit to shake the earth.

“Pang... *cough-cough*... shixiong, you were choking me...”

Pang Jian said with a sneer, “If I could have strangled you to death on the way, the nation might have built a living temple dedicated to me out of gratitude.”

Xi Ping's words came quickly: “And then, during the holidays, everyone would come worship and pray for Master Pang to give them pretty wives and beautiful concubines, two children in three years, and the healing of all ills—sincerity guarantees results.”

Bastard!

Pang Jian truly couldn't resist. He grabbed him and gave him a beating.

When he was finished, Commander Pang himself thought it was unbelievable. This brat Xi Shiyong always had a way of bringing other people's intelligence down to his own level, making each person who had decided not to “sink to his level” give way. He said, “Come here, I won't hit you anymore.”

Xi Ping didn't buy it. In his dripping stealth clothes, he circled around the cave's ceiling like a bat and wouldn't come down. He said accusingly, "You're bullying the weak... I'm only so casual with you because we get along so well. You don't appreciate my good intentions."

Pang Jian said in surprise, "You've only known me for a few days. Why are you being so familiar?"

Xi Ping put out his old but crafty head and stuck his tongue out at him. "Back there, when I accidentally broke the bottom of the spiritual beast pool, why did you come after me, Pang-shixiong?"

Pang Jian scoffed. "Don't flatter yourself. I was doing it for your shifu. I was afraid you'd die back there, and I wouldn't be able to account for myself to General Zhi."

Xi Ping said, "No wonder my shifu likes you so much. He's always saying 'ask your Pang-shixiong' and 'tell your Pang-shixiong to take you.'"

Pang Jian: "..."

For a moment, this unruly, undisciplined man whose mouth was sharper than an arrow bristled and jammed. He nearly began to stutter. "You... you're..."

This brat definitely wasn't some kind of innocent and artless loose-tongued pampered child. Pang Jian knew that perfectly well. He was a manipulator full of bad intentions, deliberately keeping to the boundary between "rude" and "direct," specifically looking out for people's soft spots.

Pang Jian said, "... Did your shifu really say that?"

Fuck, he'd hit the spot just right.

“So now...*hss!*” Xi Ping leaned back and carelessly hit something hard with the back of his head. Swearing, he felt around behind himself and broke something off from the wall. “What the hell is this?”

With a half-immortal's vision, there was no need to light a lamp in the dark.

Xi Ping recognized that what he had broken off was the base of a bracket light, rather old-fashioned—it had been a long time since anyone had used this kind of oil lamp. This base wasn't made of Moon Plated Gold and was a little rusty. You could still see that the engravings were complex and exquisite, almost sumptuous.

He brought the lamp base closer and sniffed it. He smelled a faint floral fragrance.

Before the immortal sects had bestowed Moon Plated Gold, the mortal world's level of metallurgical arts had been unable to sustain machinery. Back then, workers had mainly done handicrafts. Southern He in particular had brought handicrafts to the highest pitch. There had once been countless skilled artisans here. Now, of the ancient works in the collection of the Ministry of Works, half originated from Southern He.

It was said that Southern He's imperial family had used a special kind of lamp oil, called moon melting perfume. When a bowl was lit, the aroma in the palace wouldn't disperse for hundreds of years. Moon melting perfume candles had once been popular in Dangu Lane.

Relying on the bit of geography he had crammed before leaving, Xi Ping remembered that the Shu encampment seemed to be in the former location of Southern He's capital.

“Shixiong, why is there an antique from Southern He times here?”

Pang Jian took the lamp base and looked at it. After hearing him describe the incredible inscriptions at the bottom of the spiritual beast pool, he roughly calculated their location and mumbled, “Could it be a secret passage from the old Southern He palace...?”

“Ah?” said Xi Ping.

“The spiritual beast pool is the former ‘Glimmer of Jasper Lake’ of Southern He’s imperial family’s palace away from the capital... My god, how can you be so ignorant?” Pang Jian said. “We just passed through the bottom of the spiritual beast pool, pushed east by the current the whole way. I’ve calculated it, and we ought to be close to the former imperial city of Southern He.”

Xi Ping immediately remembered Wuchang One saying “they’re looking for that place.” “No wonder they—I mean, those shixiongs from the mines disguised as evil cultivators tonight—no wonder they made such an uproar in the spiritual beast pool. They were searching the Shu encampment! What were they looking for? Could it be this place?”

Pang Jian narrowed his eyes. “How did you know those black-clothed people were from the mines?”

Xi Ping said, “I guessed it by looking at your expression. I went over and tested it, and, as expected, they all spoke Jinping dialect.”

Pang Jian asked, “Then how do you know that they were drawing attention away from their real target and searching for something in the Southern Shu encampment?”

Xi Ping didn’t stumble. “Heard it when I mixed in with them— anyway, given the background of our Mining Office shixiongs, how

could any of them be interested in a few lousy spiritual beasts?”

Pang Jian’s instincts told him that he wasn’t being entirely straightforward. This brat mixed absolute truth with total nonsense without any trace of a transition between the two. It was impossible to take precautions against.

He glared at Xi Ping and asked, “Weren’t you also interested in those spiritual beasts? I haven’t questioned you yet. What were you doing getting mixed in?”

“I was looking for this.” Xi Ping opened his hand and showed Pang Jian the segment of silk dragon horn he had put away in the mustard seed earlier. “Pretty, huh? As if it were carved out of blue jade.”

Pang Jian: “...”

Pretty my ass! You destroyed the whole spiritual beast pool for the sake of this thing?

Commander Pang took a deep breath and warned himself: Lao Pang, you’re over a hundred years old. You have to behave properly. You can’t lose your temper at a little brat.

He slowed his speech down as much as he could, steadied his tone, and asked, “What did you want the silk dragon horn for?”

“A silk dragon horn can treat dim sight disease,” Xi Ping said. “I just read about it in the book. I’m bringing it back to treat my san-ge’s illness.”

Pang Jian had to think for a while before he realized who “san-ge” was. He thought, Treat what illness? Isn’t that brat Zhou Ying faking it?

“The silk dragon is rare, but what’s mainly rare is the heart. It changes its horns once every hundred years. They aren’t that hard to come by,” Pang Jian said. “If Prince Zhuang wanted to use a silk dragon horn, couldn’t the imperial palace get one? Is there any need for you to run a risk?”

“Well, it’s not like I wanted to run a risk, but I was already here, so I was just picking up a gift on the way. That was an accident just now.” As Xi Ping walked forward following the bracket lights, he said, “As for whether there was any need for it, we’ll see about that—you’ve met my san-ge, shixiong. He’s reserved and care-laden. You can only get him to talk a little more by making sure he knows you’re thinking about him. Otherwise, I’m afraid he’d close himself off so much it’d make him sick.”

Pang Jian had nothing to say to this. He could only respond with a sneer.

As they talked, the two of them quickly passed through the secret passage. The further they went, the wider it became. But after walking roughly a hundred zhang, they came to the end of the line—a dead end.

But with Pang Jian there, dead ends were nothing to fear.

“It wasn’t deliberately designed like this. The passageway must have collapsed. It’s been blocked for many years.” Pang Jian knocked on the wall a few times, determined that there was no spiritual energy fluctuation from inscriptions or arrays on the other side, then grabbed Xi Ping by the shoulder and took him through the wall.

As soon as Xi Ping landed, he heard a crack beneath his feet.

At the other end of the collapsed passageway were several skeletons. He had just stepped on and broken a set of ribs.

“Pardon me, pardon me.” Xi Ping quickly moved his feet and bowed toward the skeleton with folded hands. “I’m truly sorry, I really didn’t see. It’s all Lao Pang’s doing.”

Lao Pang kicked him. “These people must have wanted to run away through the secret passage when the four nations besieged the city, but instead they were trapped here.”

Xi Ping asked, “They didn’t have immortal tools to escape with?”

“They’re all mortals,” Pang Jian said. “There were no downgraded immortal tools back then... and moreover, there were ascended spirit masters of the four great sects in the siege. If there had been a fluctuation of spiritual energy, wouldn’t they have noticed at once?”

The two of them avoided the skeletons and walked down along a small flight of stone steps. Their field of vision widened.

There was an underground hall here, a hundred meters high. Though half of it had caved in, the remaining space was enough to hold a thousand people.

Dust was piled more than a cun high. The grandeur of the carved railings and the murals on the walls hadn’t decreased in the slightest. The ones in Guangyun Palace were far inferior.

In the ruins of the underground palace was half of a feast that hadn’t been cleared away—the other half had been buried by boulders coming down in the collapse.

The guests at the feast had all turned to bleached bones. Some had even been crushed beneath rocks.

When everything had come to an end, the Southern He nobility had fled disaster up to this point, but they had been trapped here by a

cave-in.

In that hopeless situation, some people had crowded at the exit, trying to no avail to dig out a means of survival. Others, meanwhile, had arranged a feast here.

Xi Ping saw a broken qin amid the ruins: on the point of death, these people must have danced and sung about the good times in the collapsing underground hall. Throughout the feast, people were being crushed to death by falling stones... and the string accompaniment continued until the qin broke.

In the center of the feast was a stone platform that must have been a stage for dancing. There, a statue was arranged like an offering. It was in the form of a kneeling man with a dozen kinds of torture performed on him, vivid and lifelike. There was bloody writing all over the statue. Not even all the years of dust could obscure the obvious hate and rage. It made your blood run cold.

Xi Ping couldn't read Southern He's writing, so he asked, "Pang-shixiong, what does that writing say?"

CHAPTER 43 - Demon Country (6)

Pang Jian frowned, staring at the bloody writing for ages, his expression turning strange.

Xi Ping said, "Oh, you can't read it either."

"Piss off." Pang Jian didn't so much as raise his eyelids. "It says 'Moon Plated Gold eats people.'"

"Huh?" Xi Ping was surprised. "There was Moon Plated Gold back then?"

"And here is the first Moon Plated Gold gold smelter in the mortal world. Construction began in the fourth year of Xiaozong Kangning. Please take a look, Your Highness!"

Accompanied by the Suling prefect, the Ling County magistrate, and a group of major and minor local officials, the elegant president of Ling County's chamber of commerce led the way while spraying spit as he explained Ling County's glorious history, doing his best to ingratiate himself with the young third prince.

"In that year, Great Wan had two happy events: General Zhi went to the immortal mountains, and Moon Plated Gold came down to the mortal world," the Suling prefect cheerfully cut in. "With a stroke of the brush, Master Kangning gave the first gold smelter to us here in Ling County. Since then, this obscure little place has become the Land of the Golden Moon. It is the grace of heaven."

Prince Zhuang nodded courteously. Standing on a high step, he glanced down from on high.

He saw that there was no one around the gold smelter. The body of the smelter and its base were covered in complicated arrays.

Countless gears were constantly turning, propelled by the arrays, changing one smelter load after another of ordinary iron into Moon Plated Gold, which could raise mortals to the skies or take them burrowing into the earth.

Prince Zhuang lightly covered his nose and mouth and absentmindedly asked, “Are the fireproofing and dust-settling arrays all activated? The trouble with the southern outskirts’s gold smelter happened because the arrays weren’t fully activated.”

“How could they not be activated?! Wouldn’t that be playing with human lives?” Ling County’s magistrate spoke with a sense of righteousness. “It’s those petty, grasping law-breakers trying to get lucky, doing it for the sake of saving a few spiritual stones. Not only do they have no regard for human life, they’ve even made Your Highness have to rush around and work when the New Year is coming up. They ought to be seriously punished as an example to others!”

“Our Ling County’s Magistrate Zheng has always been known for loving the people like his own children,” the Suling prefect said, smiling. “I heard that recently the common people even wanted to establish a longevity tablet for him and only dropped the subject when he turned it down again and again.”

The Ling County magistrate quickly said, “How could I overstep my authority like that, how could I dare...? The workers’ lodgings are up ahead. Your Highness said you wanted to see the actual situation, so we deliberately didn’t notify them in advance. Ling County’s fields are infertile. These workers used to farm at home and couldn’t even get enough to eat. When the factories were built, they all went to them, and they all said that finally they could live well! They work in the factories when they’re young, and when they get older, the factories look after them in old age and arrange for their burials. If their children and grandchildren display aptitude, the factories put up money to send them to study and take the imperial

examinations... Everyone says that they've received the benefits of Moon Plated Gold!"

Prince Zhuang lowered his eyes and said half-jokingly, "In the southern outskirts, everyone says that Moon Plated Gold is a man-eating demon. How is it that in Ling County, it's become a divine being that aids the needy and relieves distress?"

The president of the chamber of commerce quickly picked up, answering at once, "But of course. Wind and rain, thunder and lightning are all bestowed by the heavens. Whether they are punishments or blessings depends entirely on mortal virtue! This way, please, Your Highness."

Prince Zhuang said "good" and followed their lead, making a superficial inspection of the workers' dwellings, appreciating the realistic performance of "lasting tranquility and well-being."

As he turned the corner, there was a wind. A small piece of paper flew out from the shelter of his wide sleeve and stuck to the president's shoe.

"Have you been to Ling County before, Miss Sixty? I hear some Ling County accent in your speech." In the Land of Turmoil, while the leading Exonerator didn't understand the riddles Sixty and Wuchang One had been speaking in, he knew now that this young lady had a superior position among the Indignant Cicadas and had become more polite toward her. He had voluntarily suggested that as the Shu encampment was unsafe, they should go stay the night at the Chu post.

Wei Chengxiang had been a village girl and a female worker. Now that she had suddenly been made a "holy woman," she had no experience to rely on. She was as cautious as a hedgehog and replied only when she had no choice. If she could respond with just

one word, she wouldn't say two. She only said, "I have relatives in Ling County. I lived there in my childhood."

The Exonerator said, smiling, "Ling County is a good place, the Land of the Golden Moon, the place where Moon Plated Gold came down to the mortal world. Have you seen the first gold smelter, Miss Sixty?"

Wei Chengxiang had seen it. Because the arrays used up too many spiritual stones, the factory substituted manpower wherever it could be substituted. People were cheap, anyway. Her grandfather had worked as a smelter-turner. This work took a great deal of strength, and you breathed in smoke and dust all day and ended up sickly. When people fell ill and weakened, they would be kicked out by the factory.

The look in her eyes turned cold, but she said, "I haven't."

"Fair enough. There's nothing worth seeing about a smelter that eats human flesh," the Exonerator said. "Do you know what year that gold smelter arrived?"

Wei Chengxiang didn't answer. Next to her, Zhang Da-lang couldn't resist cutting in: "Everyone in Great Wan knows. It was the fourth year of Kangning."

"Precisely. Six years after the destruction of Southern He," the Exonerator said, sighing. "If Southern He hadn't been destroyed, Moon Plated Gold couldn't have come to the mortal world."

Zhang Da-lang asked, "Exalted, why is that?"

Wei Chengxiang forced herself to hold back and display curiosity. When someone else asked, she pricked up her ears to listen.

She heard the Exonerator say with a sneer, “Moon Plated Gold is awesome. The Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon can cover all of Great Wan in a few days, bring fresh fruit still bearing dewdrops from the south to the plates of the wealthy—but how many spiritual stones must be spent to make this Moon Plated Gold? If there were no southern mines, how could Xuanyin have permitted Moon Plated Gold to come to the mortal world?”

Few of the new believers were literate. Hearing him telling a historical tale, they all gathered around to listen.

“Know that the Gold Imitation Technique was an ancient method to begin with,” the Exonerator said. “It was eight hundred years ago that Xuanyin’s Lin Chi in his youth developed it along with another. That person was named Hui Xiangjun, originally from Chu. She was expelled from the Sanyue Sect for departing from orthodox practices, then traveled to Southern He. The people of Southern He had been skilled at wicked crafts since ancient times. Relying on her unfathomable toolmaking arts, Hui Xiangjun became a disciple of record of Lancang... until she met Lin Chi, and the two of them created the Gold Imitation Technique and came to grief.”

A new believer asked, “Exalted, would the Gold Imitation Technique cause them to come to grief?”

“There were no steam engines then, but the original purpose of Moon Plated Gold was to conduct spiritual energy, so mortals could also have ‘immortal tools’ to use. Eight hundred years ago was very different from the present—and even now, in the north, downgraded immortal tools are still taboo. Back then, the mighty people of the immortal sects were outraged. If mortals could use immortal tools, wouldn’t it destroy the distinction between mortal and immortal? They thought these two people were sully cultivation, committing the worst offense. Lin Chi was a member of Xuanyin’s Lin family’s main branch. He was confined for a hundred years and then released. But Hui Xiangjun had her spiritual bones removed out and

her meridians broken. She was reduced to a mortal and passed away not long after. Xuanyin Mountain and Lancang joined hands to seal away the Gold Imitation Technique, forbidding their toolmaking cultivators to mention it.

“Until a talented individual in Southern He made a strange steam engine.

“At that time, Great Wan had reaped the benefits of the canal and become rich and prosperous. Gold and silver were flowing north like water. Southern He was its neighbor, and its lifeblood was nearly sucked dry by that canal. The domestic price of silver soared. Half a string of copper coins couldn’t buy two jin of low-grade grain. Even spiritual stones were flowing outward. For the national economy and the livelihood of the people, Emperor Xiaohuai Yang Zou conspired with the Lancang Sword Sect to steal the Gold Imitation Technique—the factories you see all over Great Wan today all began in Southern He.”

Zhang Da-lang asked, “In that case, why did Southern He invade the north back then?”

The Exonerator gave a peculiar laugh. “Ha, that’s just what the orthodox sects won’t tell you.”

All the believers asked him to tell them. Hearing his diction, Wei Chengxiang sensed that he was about to start pouring evil doctrine into the believers’ ears again. She became wary and simultaneously passed the information along through the reincarnation wood.

The Exonerator’s voice echoed in the wilderness of the Land of Turmoil. “It was because when Southern He had had only a few years of prosperity, and domestic businesses had just reached a favorable balance of trade, they found that within the country—especially in the area of the Lancang Mountains—the land and the fields showed signs of heaven’s order being pilfered. Within a few

years, there were a number of great pestilences in succession, and there were more and more infants born with deformities. First they thought there were monsters wreaking havoc. Lancang sent a master down from the mountain to investigate thoroughly and came up with nothing. The immortal sect couldn't understand what was happening. The sect leader personally tested the veins of the earth... and found that when the spiritual energy of the mortal world drained away, it surged toward the Lancang Mountains. It wasn't others pilfering heaven's order; it was the immortal mountains."

"Why was that?"

"Spiritual energy mines aren't inexhaustible. Southern He had previously lost many spiritual stones, and Moon Plated Gold consumed a great quantity as well. The immortal mountains had a deficit of spiritual stones. Past a certain critical point, a spiritual energy mountain range will draw spiritual energy from the mortal world." Slowly, the Exonerator said, "There wasn't enough spiritual energy in Southern He... so what could they do?"

"Five great immortal sects was truly too many. What if there were only four left? The extraneous spiritual energy mines would take at least several hundred years to burn through, and perhaps by that time, Moon Plated Gold wouldn't need so many spiritual stones."

No sooner had he spoken than a scream came from nearby. All the believers crowded together in fear, but the Exonerator unhurriedly tossed out a talisman.

There was a screech, and a winged spiritual beast with a mouth full of sharp teeth was sent reeling by the talisman. It ran away, staggering. The body of a Turmoiler was left behind on the ground... This Turmoiler had sparse hair and a build that seemed to belong to a child twelve or thirteen years old, but the face was crisscrossed with wrinkles, creased as a walnut. There was no way to determine the Turmoiler's age or sex.

Once the spiritual beast ran off, two Turmoilers charged out, one big and one little. They cried mournfully beside the deceased. They seemed to be a family. It made the ragged figures crouching on the ground look more human.

There were believers who couldn't stand to see this and were about to say something, but then they watched in terror as the older Turmoiler, wailing, extended sharp teeth and claws, tore a piece of flesh off the body, and swallowed it!

Wei Chengxiang quickly returned her gaze to the inside of the carriage. Her stomach rolled.

The horrifying sounds of chewing echoed in the wilderness. The Exonerators' new believers stared dumbfounded as the two Turmoilers, one big and one little, quickly divided up the corpse and picked it clean. Only bloody remains were left on the ground.

"They... they're not human..."

"Not human? These are the extra humans from the feet of the extra spiritual energy mines." The Exonerator snapped his fingers, and the jade horse began to pull the carriage, rumbling forward. "Moon Plated Gold soars to the clouds, plunges into the sea, and cuts through mountains; it creates gold, creates silver, and creates ships; and it eats people. Ha!"

Wei Chengxiang on the surface and Xi Ping in the underground hall simultaneously broke out in gooseflesh.

They went far away, and the bloody smell still floated into their noses on the night wind, which also brought a small, shrill, tender childish voice. They couldn't make out the indistinct lyrics, but the tune was the Soul Calling Melody they had sung at the funeral for their companions.

Do not linger, a lifetime's joys and sorrows are like illusions.

Go to the West...

“Great Wan was rich and prosperous then, and the price of spiritual stones was considerably lower than in other places. Lancang’s sect leader had asked Xuanyin for aid. He was willing to share the profits from Moon Plated Gold with Great Wan in exchange for spiritual stones. Xuanyin angrily denounced Lancang for privately using a forbidden technique and betraying our trust, and refused to work together. Yang Zou was demented. The following year, he launched a large-scale invasion of the north.” Pang Jian knocked on the statue. “This must be a carving of Southern He’s Emperor Xiaohuai, Yang Zou.”

Xi Ping had “heard” the mourning song of the Turmoilers from Wei Chengxiang. “But later, didn’t we also...”

“Later, the Lancang Mountains became spiritual stone mines, and all the nations took up the Gold Imitation Technique they had long coveted. Once the flood has broken through the dam, it can’t be taken back. If you’re too slow, someone else will get there ahead of you, and a hundred years later, you end up the way Southern He did,” Pang Jian said. “You think that when Southern He marched north and was able to cut contact between the immortal mountains and Jinping so easily, the other three countries didn’t have a hand in it? Come on, let’s go find an exit.”

Xi Ping didn’t move. Pang Jian thought that the naïve young master was crushed by the immortal sect’s filthy history, so he impatiently scoffed, “The cub has left the den and finally knows there are tigers and wolves outside, huh? When a country lacks resources and the state sect isn’t strong enough, you may be an aristocrat today, but your parents, brothers, and sisters will be Turmoilers tomorrow. If General Zhi hadn’t been there then, Guangyun Palace would be like

these ruins at your feet. If you have time to cry for others, you're better off going back to put in more work. Xuanyin Mountain is the foundation on which Great Wan's people build their lives. Don't dawdle!"

Xi Ping suddenly asked, "Then has my shifu been to the Land of Turmoil?"

Pang Jian paused briefly.

On Flying Jade Peak, the snow had nearly covered the sword platform. The spirit of the sword-bearing person meditating in the center moved slightly, and the sword aura instantly dispersed.

Zhi Xiu opened his eyes and looked south. There was a boundless field of white there. It was unclear what he saw.

His mind only wandered for a moment. Then he averted his gaze from distracting matters and once again continued alone along the limitless way of the sword...

Making inquiries to his heaven and earth, which failed to understand so many things.

After saying this, Xi Ping didn't speak again. The atmosphere became oppressive.

The two of them each thought of their own business as they picked their way through Southern He's imperial palace. They went this way and that among the traces of the past, from time to time stepping on skeletons.

Suddenly, Xi Ping, who had been letting his mind wander, paused; both the half-immortals' spiritual senses moved at once—there was a wind!

They had left the sealed off area of the collapse.

Xi Ping quickly noticed that something was off. The air was so rich with spiritual energy, nearly as much as Xuanyin Mountain!

He remembered the boundless spiritual energy he had encountered when he had broken through the spiritual beast pool... That must have been the dense spiritual energy that had soaked the complex underground palace for many years, sealed inside the secret passage and accumulating. So he asked, “Shixiong, have we reached Shu’s mines?”

“Lancang had close ties with Southern He’s imperial family. Their palace was indeed built against the immortal mountains.” Pang Jian was also frowning. He muttered to himself, “But it was like the Latent Cultivation Temple, the barrier between mortal and immortal. Why would the spiritual energy underground be so thick?”

Xi Ping said, “We’ll know if we go look.”

“Hey, wait!” Pang Jian held him back. He took out the talisman gun and silently shot talismans at Xi Ping’s eyes, ears, and hands.

Having the muzzle of a gun pointed at him, no one could be unmoved. Xi Ping instinctively shuddered, then resisted and didn’t dodge. He quietly grumbled, “Shixiong, why didn’t you even warn me? If I get used to you hitting me with a talisman gun and later you fire at me for real, won’t I not know to dodge...? What kind of talismans are these? Why have I never seen them before?”

“Bone-sharing talismans. They’re uncommon. If you didn’t have spiritual bones, these talismans would be no use—for three ke, I can share half the power of my spiritual bones with you. You can walk through walls yourself. I won’t have attention to spare for you,” Pang Jian said. “In a place where there are many spiritual stones, the guard will be heavy. Remember to hold your breath when you

walk through walls and suppress your heart meridian with spiritual energy. Do you know how?”

Xi Ping nodded.

No wonder he'd felt like he was going to stifle to death when he'd been taken through walls by Pang-shixiong before. It turned out he had been forced to hold his breath.

“Mind your mouth, and don't make a sound. Sound moves faster and farther through walls. If you encounter something within the walls, don't just touch it. Follow me closely.” Pang Jian waved to him and took the lead in slipping into the stone wall.

Xi Ping took a deep breath and followed. This time he didn't have the feeling of being pressed flat that being taken through walls had given him before. Only now did he learn that Pang Jian could open his eyes inside the walls and under the ground. For Pang Jian, solid walls were like a half-transparent passageway. There was slightly more resistance moving through a wall than there was in water. You could vaguely see what there was outside the wall.

The two of them walked through the walls, following the spiritual energy. Soon, they vaguely saw the white light of gas lamps. This was an underground storehouse, with a sentry every three paces and a patrol every five, guarded strictly enough for an imperial palace.

The corner of Pang Jian's eye twitched: the encampments and mines had many storehouses. What was being kept in this underground storehouse?

CHAPTER 44 - Demon Country (7)

This place was full of peculiarities. If Pang Jian had been on his own, he would have gone ahead to scout it out without a second thought, but he had brought along an encumbrance.

While Xi Ping claimed to have “innate spiritual bones,” having the cultivation level didn’t mean he had the skills; the number of established foundation cultivators Commander Pang had gone above his grade to kill couldn’t be counted.

In the eyes of an old walker in the mortal world, someone with innate spiritual bones who had begun cultivating half a year ago was hardly any different from a baby holding a hand cannon. If he didn’t shoot himself when he met trouble, that would count as keeping his cool.

But before Pang Jian could finish hesitating and reach a decision, Xi Ping, seeing that he wasn’t moving, simply went around him and pushed forward.

Pang Jian pulled him back and glared at him ferociously: *Where do you think you’re going?*

Hiding in the walls didn’t necessarily mean you were safe. Pang Jian wasn’t the only cultivator in the world who could use some means to pass through walls, and even Prince Zhuang’s south study had inscriptions to prevent walking through walls, never mind this kind of place where mysterious spiritual stones were hidden. Pang Jian pointed warningly at Xi Ping and walked forward himself.

As expected, as the spiritual energy became plentiful enough to soak the stones, the Shu guard outside became stricter and stricter. Dense inscriptions blocked their way.

Looking out from the wall, the inscriptions looked like light shining through from the other side of the wall, sinking in without weakening, forming a grating.

They couldn't get through this way. They had to turn back, unless they could shrink to the size of beans.

If only Bai Ling were here, Pang Jian thought.

Outside it was all Shu sentry posts. They couldn't go that way, either.

Xi Ping looked at Pang Jian: *Shixiong, do you have another magic weapon in your pocket? Don't keep it hidden.*

Pang Jian really did have one. He considered and, from his pockets that contained absolutely everything, took out a karma beast the size of a thumb.

Normally, the karma beasts that accompanied Heaven's Design Pavilion on official business were all like drawings on paper; they moved around on walls. Now that Xi Ping and Pang Jian were inside the wall, the karma beast became three-dimensional.

Seeing a three-dimensional living karma beast for the first time, Xi Ping saw that this big-eyed lamp's buttocks were rounder than its head and couldn't resist trying to touch them.

But the karma beast recognized him. Seeing him about to invade its territory, it jumped up and tried to bite him. Pang Jian quickly grabbed the sacred beast by the scruff of its neck while batting away Xi Ping's paw, separating the two of them.

Xi Ping was very regretful and gesticulated: *How can this beast harbor resentment against me?*

Pang Jian rolled his eyes. *All the karma beasts in the world are avatars of one sacred beast. You don't have a chance to clean up your act. Better be careful when you go to Heaven's Design Pavilion.*

He put his hand over the karma beast's eyes and silently mouthed something. Xi Ping saw Pang Jian's eyes become identical to the sacred beast's.

Then Pang Jian took out a jade stamp stone and gave it to the karma beast. The little sacred beast picked the stone up in its mouth, wagged its tail at him, then cleverly wormed its way into a crack in the inscriptions.

Xi Ping carefully observed Pang Jian's eyes. He saw the reflections of changing inscriptions constantly flashing through them and knew that Pang-shixiong could borrow the karma beast's eyes to scout ahead.

Pang Jian's vital weapon was called Barrier Dispeller; he himself could walk through walls and burrow into the earth, see all barriers as emptiness. If he knocked on a wall, he would know whether there was spiritual energy surging on the other side... All his powers seemed to add up to the words "dispelling barriers."

Shifu had said that spiritual bones you cultivated for yourself would often correspond to your Way of the Heart. Whether Pang-shixiong was using a bow or a knife, it was always with the notion of indomitably pressing forward, undisturbed by all evil spirits.

Xi Ping was different. He had someone else's spiritual bones, and the original owner had suffered bitterly and been full of profound hatred. He had been an old lunatic of a demon who liked to smash himself up periodically... There couldn't be anything more unsuitable. Xi Ping wondered whether there would be a chance to swap them out later.

As his thoughts were wandering, Pang Jian narrowed his eyes automatically; his beast's pupils contracted sharply as though they had been swept by a strong light.

The karma beast had passed through the inscription area!

Xi Ping poked Pang Jian: *What do you see?*

Pang Jian muttered to himself for a moment, then wrote the words "spiritual stones" on the back of his hand.

The glow of the spiritual stones had been dazzling enough to make the karma beast's pupils contract? How many must there be?

Pang Jian hesitated a moment, then shook his head—he couldn't be sure for the moment, either.

Behind the protection of those heavy inscriptions was an astonishingly large storehouse full of white spirits, stacked up like bricks as far as the eye could see. If you ran into someone who liked counting things like General Zhi, on seeing this sight, he probably would have counted himself numb on the spot.

The blue jade was arranged much more carelessly, never mind the jade stamps, which were piled up at random, the rock snow on them not even cleaned away.

Miners handling spiritual stones definitely wouldn't be this slipshod. All the big spiritual stone mines had very strict oversight for the extraction of spiritual stones—there were rules for how to handle the stones, for how to see if they were up to standard, for how to weigh and inventory them. There was layer upon layer of checks, with no room for error. Moreover, there were people who came to collect rock snow; the miners usually turned a blind eye to this. The rock snow was the miners' income. No one was going to turn their nose up at money.

So where had these spiritual stones come from?

Just then, the karma beast shook its head, as if sensing something, and began to run again.

With countless priceless spiritual stones over its head, it slipped between the inlaid inscriptions for maintaining temperature, maintaining humidity, and fireproofing. It ran for a full li, then stopped.

There was big pit. The ground was recessed by a full hundred chi. The bottom of the pit was a perfect circle dozens of zhang in diameter, polished bright, clearly manmade.

Apart from abhorring evil, karma beasts, because they moved around in writing and murals, were also unusually sensitive to arrays.

This was a secret... array?

Pang Jian frowned—arrays were driven by spiritual stones. Putting an array in a spiritual stone storehouse amounted to putting a tinderbox in a barrel of oil. Ordinarily speaking, in a major spiritual stone storehouse, you couldn't have anything but some specific types of inscriptions.

What was this tinderbox... this array for?

The little karma beast ran down along the rim of the pit and cautiously made a big circle around the bottom, from time to time carefully avoiding something. Then it seemed to understand the invisible array. Measuring its steps, it walked to the center and spat out the jade stamp in its mouth.

The karma beast was passing through the ground. The jade stamp it spat out was as good as inlaid directly in the floor. The array activated at once.

Next, a beam of light so fast neither man nor beast could react pierced the karma beast's body. It instantly vanished into thin air.

Pang Jian's vision swam, but soon after, the karma beast was released once again—it had just been caught in a transport array.

Pang Jian only had time to take one look when the karma beast came out of the array before his link to the sacred beast was cut off because of the distance. His beast's eyes changed back to human ones. Pang Jian shuddered.

Xi Ping had never seen such an expression on Pang-shixiong's face before. There was something indescribable mixed in amidst the confusion. For a moment, he even thought that Pang Jian's soul had departed!

But before he could ask him about it, Xi Ping's spiritual sense sounded an alarm. Perhaps because the little karma beast had touched the array in the storehouse, the inscriptions in front of the two of them were alerted. The inscription characters surged.

The guards at the storehouse door abruptly became vigilant. Across the wall, they turned in unison toward the place where the two of them were hidden.

Xi Ping grabbed Pang Jian and ran for it.

Behind them, blue light bubbled up from the inscriptions like the tide coming in. The light surged in pursuit of them, pointing out the thieves to the guards.

The guards gathered on the other side of a thin wall and tossed talismans and weapons at the wall as though they were free.

Pang Jian had just gotten his soul stirred by some wild fox demon; he allowed himself to be pulled along by Xi Ping. This was Xi Ping's first time experiencing such an event. Seeing the guards surround them, he instinctively ran deeper into the wall and stumbled over something—a stone hidden inside the wall that had an inscription carved on it. It trapped the two of them in place like a vine.

Almost at the same time, a rumble went outward from inside the wall. The sound quickly went from low to high, as though a Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon were coming their way. Xi Ping turned his head in that direction and saw a huge black figure fully a zhang tall rolling toward them.

The corners of his eyes twitched, but his feet were trapped. He couldn't do anything.

With lightning speed, Xi Ping turned over his hand and took out the hither seal. Then he extended his arm, hooked his wrist backward, and, in the direction the black shadow was coming from, placed a stamp in the middle of the wall—when they had encountered the first Southern Shu guard, he had left a stamp in the wall like this, in case of future need.

This time it worked!

The two seals joined. The black shadow was just approaching—it was a big statue with a human head and a scorpion body. It was jostling through the wall, its face savage.

The crisp sound of bone breaking called Pang Jian back to himself. He abruptly turned his head and saw that Xi Ping's hand, which he hadn't had time to withdraw, had been crushed to bits by the statue.

Next, the statue hit the spiritual seal and was transported right to where the other seal was.

And the young master really didn't make a sound!

So fast his hand nearly became a blur, Pang Jian threw out a handful of talismans, temporarily suppressing the inscription on the ground. Then he scooped up Xi Ping and escaped the trap, flying in the direction the statue with the human head and scorpion body had gone.

Just then, three ke passed. The talismans on Xi Ping abruptly lost effect, and he once again returned to the state of being unable to see or hear and being forced to hold his breath as Pang Jian pulled him through the wall. When he saw the light of day again, they had come to the border between Southern Shu and Chu's encampments.

Xi Ping came up out of the ground, staggered, and fell onto Pang Jian. His back was soaked with cold sweat.

Pang Jian stuck a spiritual stone into his mouth, put him over his shoulder one-handed, put a stealth talisman onto the two of them, then flew back to Great Wan's government ship like a swallow. He landed right on the third deck and passed through the wall.

Before he had steadied himself, a figure came toward them, snatched Xi Ping away, and pushed Pang Jian aside.

Normally, Xi Yue looked like a delicate-featured youth, but now, as soon as rage appeared on his face, it instantly took on a demonic look. His sharp teeth seemed about to pierce through his lips... before they were startled back by Xi Ping's gasp.

Xi Ping lay powerlessly in the half-puppet's arms, wave after wave of black passing in front of his eyes. Despite this, he still spat the

spiritual stone into his remaining intact hand to take a look at it. Almost inaudibly, he whispered, "... a jade stamp. So damn stingy."

Pang Jian, frowning, inspected Xi Ping's crushed hand. "Doesn't your hand have spiritual bones? What's going on? Are they this brittle?"

Xi Ping's spiritual bones were hidden bones attached to his real ones, and these hidden bones saw breaking the real bones as a good thing. With a bitter smile, he said almost inaudibly, "Maybe they... they... have a taste for this..."

Spiritual bones all had their own peculiar tempers. It was like a birthmark on someone's ass; however well you knew a person, it was still unsuitable to insist on asking about the details. So Pang Jian didn't follow up. He rummaged in his mustard seed for elixirs.

He heard Xi Ping curse. He seemed to go into convulsions—these pestilential hidden bones had begun putting on a performance of "the dead coming back to life." Growing the bones back hurt more than having them crushed had in the first place!

For a while, Xi Ping's consciousness cut off. Then he was woken by the pain. He crushed the spiritual stone in his mouth with his tongue; at some point, it had already turned to powder.

Xi Yue, wearing the dragon-taming chain, didn't need him to speak an instruction. He immediately took out a white spirit and fed it to him, then quickly put him on the bed.

"His bones and flesh are healing. It's not a big problem... Ah, this little devil."

Like a distressed cub, Xi Yue pushed Pang Jian's hand away. He let out a sharp hiss.

Fine. Before, he'd trembled as soon as he saw Pang Jian and didn't even dare to move. Now he dared to scratch him. He hadn't grown taller for nothing.

Pang Jian didn't squabble with the half-puppet. He clicked his tongue, withdrew his hand, and stood still with his arms crossed. He said to Xi Ping, "You're doing pretty well, kid. You haven't even cried. Plenty of guts."

"Damn it... *hss*... If... if my mom were here... I guarantee... I'd be howling so loud that n-no rooster would dare to crow within three li." Xi Ping, clenching his teeth, pulled out a towel and wrapped up his injured hand. "What... what would be the use of crying to you? Ah... Forebear Yue, have a heart. You want me to comfort... you, in my condition?"

Hearing this, Xi Yue clenched his teeth and forced back his tears.

Xi Ping's gaze was unfocused from pain, his breath coming too short to pass through his throat. He rambled as though raving, "Too unreliable... you're too unreliable, Lao Pang... Next time I go out pilfering, I'm not taking you..."

Pang Jian: "..."

Apologies for holding up your business.

In about an incense stick, the lump of crushed bones and flesh at the end of Xi Ping's wrist at last had the bare outlines of a hand. The sharp pain was over. He gradually adjusted and could finally take air into his lungs.

Xi Yue helped him drink half a cup of clear water. Xi Ping drank two mouthfuls, then shook his head and dodged. "I don't want that, pour me a cup of wine—listen, Lao Pang, what the hell did you see back there?"

Pang Jian paused. The cynical smile evaporated off his face.

He covered the door and window with anti-eavesdropping talismans, appropriated Xi Ping's wine, tossed it down in one gulp, and only then slowly began: "The people impersonating evil cultivators last night to sneak into Shu's encampment were from Great Wan's Mining Office. You already know that. Because you got involved, and because the Chu encampment overheard the disturbance and came to get in on the fun, they probably withdrew in haste without reaching their goal."

Xi Ping blinked sweat off his eyelashes. "What were they looking for? That underground spiritual stone storehouse covered in inscriptions?"

"That storehouse is full of spiritual stones that have been very crudely handled. The rock snow wasn't even wiped clean," Pang Jian said gravely. "I didn't see an exit in the storehouse. I only saw a transport array."

"A transport array? Connected to the origin of the spiritual stones?" Xi Ping's thinking had been pared incomparably keen by pain. He asked at once, "So the karma beast went into the array to investigate? Where do the spiritual stones come from?"

"The karma beast lost contact with me as soon as it left the array. I only took a glance. But even at a glance, I couldn't fail to recognize that place... It had been taken to the southern mines." Pang Jian looked up and said with emphasis, "There are people in the spiritual stone mines selling us out to another country, secretly conveying large quantities of spiritual stones to the Shu encampment."

Great Wan's southern mines were truly full of activity. Not only were the evil cultivators hung up on them, there were also neighboring countries eyeing them covetously.

But more than these affairs of state, what always interested Xi Ping before anything else were the expressions and tones of voice of the people around him. He found that when Pang Jian said the words “southern mines,” they were said between his teeth.

What kind of a place could a person take a hurried glance at and be unable to fail to recognize?

If he didn’t go home for three months and some of the potted flowers in the Marquis Manor’s rear court changed, he still couldn’t guarantee that he would recognize it at a glance.

Xi Ping suddenly remembered Tai Sui Liang Chen inadvertently revealing that Pang Jian was the son of a miner from the southern mines—his whole family had died in a mine collapse!

He gave a start, temporarily set aside even his injured hand, and asked, “Can you just steal spiritual stones from the mines? Aren’t they counted?”

“They are.” Pang Jian’s expression became even more grave. “There are often impurities in spiritual stones, and rock snow unevenly distributed. If you only make an inventory and record weight, it’s easy for there to be discrepancies. In order to prevent embezzlement in the mines, the volume of extracted spiritual stones is reckoned by the state of the spiritual energy surge—the activity level of the spiritual energy in the mines has to match precisely with the volume of spiritual stones that leaves the mines. There’s no way to fake it. If even a single low-grade jade stamp is missing, it has to be investigated... There’s only an exception in one circumstance.”

Xi Ping had a premonition of what he was going to say.

Pang Jian said, “A mine collapse.”

During a mine collapse, the mine caved in, the spiritual stones bounced around, and surveillance lost effect.

Xi Ping held his breath. “Do mine collapses happen often?”

The corners of Pang Jian’s lips twitched in an unsuccessful sneer. “Occasionally.”

Spiritual stone mines weren’t like other places. Apart from a great array, comparable to something from Xuanyin’s inner sect, there couldn’t be any other arrays placed in the mines. Even inscriptions had to be used with the greatest caution. Safety measures for miners were in fact not even as good as those for the factory workers beside the Moon Plated Gold gold smelting furnaces—supposing that the factories were willing to activate the arrays.

If a miner hadn’t experienced a handful of mine collapses, he wasn’t worthy of being called an “old miner.” All they could do was carry all kinds of protective talismans, do their best to hold out if a minor mine collapse occurred... If they encountered a major catastrophe, it would be up to fate.

Despite this, every year large quantities of laborers dreamed of going south to work in the mines. The selection process was strict enough for a military exam. The mines paid well, and adding in rock snow to subsidize household expenses, you could buy a house and settle down after working there for a few years. Even if your luck was bad, and you died in a mine collapse, your wife, children, and elderly relatives would have support in the future... Moreover, in the Land of Turmoil, Great Wan’s miners counted as “superior people.” Even if you could get the same salary working in a street stall listening to people’s overbearing shouts, how could it compare in dignity to holding a bowl of noodles in the mines and pitying the Turmoilers?

But looking at it now, how many of those occasional mine collapses had been naturally occurring, and how many had been man-made?

From outside the window came a crew member's shout. The garrison relief ships were leaving the Chu post.

CHAPTER 45 - Demon Country (8)

The steamship gave a muffled sigh, and Pang Jian came back to himself. He suppressed his chaotic emotions and waved a hand at Xi Ping. “I will explain this matter to the sect. You leave it alone. Your shifu sent you to investigate the remaining evil cultivators.”

Xi Ping immediately said, “Shixiong, do you mean that the people colluding with the Shu aren’t evil cultivators?”

Pang Jian: “...”

No good. He’d let his attention wander and said too much.

Taking a child along wasn’t scary. He rather liked young people, and in fact didn’t mind if they were a little mischievous; after all, he wasn’t very solemn himself.

But this type of brat—the kind who could snatch at a flaw in anything you said without careful consideration—was truly too annoying! It was appropriate for this Xi Shiyong to be traveling with a mute.

“You...” Pang Jian was speechless for a long time, then said in exasperation, “There’s no need to catch on so quick when you don’t have to be clever.”

Arranging this matter according to normal lines of thought, the most suitable explanation for it would be this: the evil cultivator Liang Chen, who styled himself Tai Sui, had been a mine supervisor on the surface and a traitor to the nation in reality. For many years, he had not only committed evil acts, he had also caused man-made mine collapses and colluded in secret with a foreign nation. Eight years ago, Liang Chen had for some reason left the southern mines to enter seclusion, leaving a trusted associate—the unidentified

Wuchang One—back in the mines. This person had continued to act as a traitor, secretly conveying spiritual stones to the underground palace in the Shu encampment.

The karma beast could serve as evidence for all of the above.

This way, if they only captured Wuchang One, the head of the remaining evil cultivators, this horrifying case of spiritual stone theft that had spanned hundreds of years would be revealed. It would be clear at a glance which evildoers ought to be punished and what evil ought to be expelled. There would be justice for the souls of the victims of hundreds of years of mine collapses floating over the southern mines.

But evidently, Pang Jian wasn't prepared to accept this "suitable explanation."

"I understand. Embezzling spiritual stones on such a large scale and creating man-made mine collapses longterm without anyone getting to the bottom of it—that couldn't have been done by a small handful of evil cultivators. If that really were the case, the rulership in Jinping would have changed by now," Xi Ping said quickly. "Also, as I see it, the vast majority of those evil cultivators are paupers. When they attract new followers, they only give them some green ore dust to eat, so all their subordinate cultivators look hardly human. If the evil cultivator Liang had the ability to get his hands on so many spiritual stones, would he have had any need to mess around with those thugs?"

Pang Jian's expression hardened. He called him to a stop. "You understand nothing. Don't talk blindly."

Xi Ping continued: "The strangest thing is that, last night, the Mining Office people impersonated evil cultivators and went to scout out the Southern Shu encampment. It's simply unbelievable. If you said it, even the evil cultivators themselves wouldn't dare to believe it. If

the theft of spiritual stones really had been done by a few evil cultivator traitors, the Mining Office could easily get them under control. First investigate the thieves in their own house, then go to the foreign nation for an explanation. Why would they need to expend so much effort, ignore what was right in front of them and go far afield?”

Pang Jian said, “Shut your mouth!”

Xi Ping said, “So the ones colluding with Southern Shu must be people they don’t dare to investigate openly.”

The two of them said these final sentences almost simultaneously. Pang Jian’s expression looked as if he had been dealt a staggering blow right after getting over a hangover. Pointing at Xi Ping, he couldn’t get any words out for ages. “... Have a heart, spare me some trouble.”

Xi Ping cradled his crushed hand to his chest and once again became selectively “impervious to reason,” eyes lighting up like the stars that Jinping was unworthy of, full of the aura of fearless youth.

It made Pang Jian remember that he had only just come of age.

Pang Jian looked at him, and his tone involuntarily became somewhat warmer and steadier. He said, patiently, “Shiyong, there are some things in the world that aren’t as straightforward as catching evil cultivators. If anyone commits atrocities against heaven and reason, you catch them, and everyone has a simple and straightforward battle... It’s not that easy to be a walker in the mortal world.”

“I know. If you find out that someone like Liang Chen, who has no background and no connections, has done something wicked, it’s to everyone’s satisfaction. You can just arrest him, and neither the sect nor the court will have anything to say about it. But other people...”

Xi Ping's eyelashes lowered to screen his gaze. "... for example, those Zhaos and Lins, that won't do for them. Everyone has to get involved, there have to be a hundred or more immortal meetings and conferences, and then you have to go ask the Sea of Stars. When the stars, the moon, the gods, the immortals, and the mortals have all given the nod, you can finally put a lid on it."

Pang Jian said, "... Why can't your shifu control you?"

Xi Ping asked, "Shixiong, what are you planning to do?"

Pang Jian wasn't a talkative person who liked explaining himself. He hadn't been planning on telling Xi Ping anything in detail. But what General Zhi had entrusted to him was a stray dog without a leash that could get up to anything at all if you took your eyes off him for a moment. He had to explain himself plainly: "I'm going to investigate this to the end and keep it a secret."

Investigating it to the end was in service of his barrier dispelling Way of the Heart; keeping it secret was in service of the bigger picture.

He was the commander of Heaven's Design Pavilion, not the little victim who had survived a mine collapse a hundred years ago.

"Then I will explain matters to Xuanyin Mountain and leave it to the sect to make a ruling."

Xi Ping asked, "And if the sect's ruling is improper?"

"Be sensible. I know you can." Pang Jian's temper was nearly worn away. He paused, then said almost in perfect sincerity, "Shiyong, when I was your age, I also thought that I was the most public-spirited, the most reasonable. But actually, Xuanyin's thirty-six peak masters, the cultivators of the established foundation level and above, all have Ways of the Heart. The Way of the Heart is innocent,

and those that go against it receive punishment from heaven and earth. Immortal sects... naturally have their own reasons.”

“I see,” Xi Ping said perfunctorily. “I’ve got it, Grandpa Pang.”

“If a day comes when the justice in your heart goes against your nation and your sect, goes against your parents and your teacher, what will you do?” Pang Jian sighed. “Behave yourself, don’t go making trouble. If there’s something you really can’t resolve, write to ask your shifu... I’ve practically become your mom. It looks to me like your flesh and bones will grow back in a day. Rest up, don’t drink wine.”

Then he stood up and was about to return to his room. When he reached the door, he remembered something else. “Right... that miserable little wretch from the southern outskirts factory who’s been plagued with evil cultivators—that girl named Wei Chengxiang—do you recall her?”

Xi Ping: “...”

Of course he recalled her. She had just set out for the evil cultivators’ main headquarters as a holy woman.

Pang Jian didn’t notice his suddenly stiff expression, only said, “General Zhi entrusted me with getting her settled. Because of her youth, I wanted to find a family to adopt her in Jinghua Village—oh, you may not know about Jinghua Village. It’s the territory of the walkers in the mortal world, a little village created with a mustard seed. Cultivation is lonely, and the burden of a family is heavy. Some walkers in the mortal world pretend to be mortal and get married, and their spouses and children all live there. It’s easy to defend. You could call it... a place for the walkers in the mortal world to catch their breaths. But then, just that day, there was the explosion at the southern outskirts factories, and Heaven’s Design Pavilion was

running around everywhere. My subordinate was inattentive to his duty and lost her. I've sent people to look for her."

Without displaying anything unusual in his expression, Xi Ping said, "It's all right. If you can't find her, forget about it. Maybe she went back home to find her relatives."

If Wei Chengxiang had had a single decent relative, whether they were old or sickly or crippled, she wouldn't have ended up making her way alone in the southern outskirts, going to reeking Rat Alley every day in search of warmth.

Pang Jian was sharp as a whip. Reasonably speaking, he should have immediately noticed that something was off. But when he heard this, he only nodded and said feelingly, "She still has relatives? That's pretty good."

Xi Ping watched him leave and thought, Pang-shixiong's runaway soul hasn't come back yet.

A half-immortal... Accommodating the Way of the Heart of the immortal half alongside the big picture ultimately made the heart unsettled.

His injured hand twitched. Xi Ping drew in his breath with a hiss. Then he saw Xi Yue run over carrying an old book without a cover. He opened it to the middle and pointed out a monster to him. This monster had high, broad shoulders and a pair of blades where its hands ought to have been. Its face and scalp were covered in arrays, crowding out the features and leaving no room for them. There was an explanatory note next to it: *Sword-bearing half-puppet, can travel a thousand li in one day, knows no weariness, will go until the last gasp and fight the enemy without end.*

Xi Yue said, *I want to become like this. I've memorized all the arrays. You only need to follow along with my thoughts in the dragon-*

taming chain, young master.

Xi Ping waved a hand. "Piss off."

Xi Yue entreated him, *I want to become a little useful.*

Xi Ping sniffed in contempt at the half-puppet's aspirations. He himself was a person who was interesting but useless, and he didn't understand at all why anyone would insist on becoming "useful."

"Steam engines are extremely useful. I can send you to a factory to blow hot air. Ah, I told you to look up how we can get you to be able to talk, to grow a little taller, to look a little more human. Instead you went and looked up how to become a monster!"

Xi Yue didn't respond. He didn't want to talk at all. There was no need to talk to others, and he could "talk" to Xi Ping through the dragon-taming chain... He kept suspecting that as soon as he could talk, Xi Ping would take the dragon-taming chain away and destroy it.

Xi Ping said, "If you dare to turn into that, I'm abandoning you."

Xi Yue slammed the book shut and fearfully put it behind his back.

Xi Ping wanted to smile, but halfway through the smile changed shape from pain. The crushed bones of his fingers were starting to put themselves together.

The fingers connect to the heart. His trembling fingertips seemed to have extended to link to his whole body's sense of pain. Even his back began to go numb. But he still did his best to hold out and not make a sound, because Xi Yue was there.

As he saw it, Xi Yue was a little thing whose intellect hadn't fully developed. Apart from when he was lazing around in bed to the

point of unconsciousness, the young master wanted to save face.

He clenched his teeth and made his breathing gentle and slow, leaning against the bed and dozing. Sometimes he remembered last night's quick tour of hell, and sometimes he thought of his shifu.

Mao hour had passed long ago, and shifu hadn't sent him an assignment. He must have known he had been in the underground palace at the Shu encampment then. Xi Ping thought, Shifu's consciousness can reach to this... crisis-ridden, demon-spawning, awful place.

This person who had spent so many years alone in the ice and snow practicing the sword was now occasionally sending his gaze to the Land of Turmoil, watching everyone fight and scheme for the spiritual stones that were made of the Turmoilers' flesh and blood... How did he feel when he saw it?

Xi Ping suddenly felt a twinge of regret. He shouldn't have been in such a hurry to leave the mountain. He should at least have stayed on Flying Jade Peak to celebrate the New Year with shifu.

Just then, Xi Ping's spiritual sense moved. He sensed Pang-shixiong next door sending off a Heavenly Question, which went in the direction of the Xuanyin Mountains.

If a day comes when the justice in your heart goes against your nation and your sect, goes against your parents and your teacher, what will you do?

Xi Ping thought over Pang-shixiong's words. He thought that Pang-shixiong looked like a bandit, but in reality he was unbendingly upright; it made a person admire him.

But admiration was one thing; he still wasn't convinced—if he went against heaven and earth, against his sovereign, his family, and his

teacher, wouldn't that mean becoming an evil cultivator?

In that case, he might as well get up to evil cultivator business.

For example, he had come here to take care of that Zhao person. A little thing like this, was there any need to publicize it so the whole world knew? As he saw it, there was no need to bring this matter to the sect to ask for justice, and certainly no need to ask for redress from the court... Anyway, never mind survivors, Miss Chen's family's ashes couldn't even make up a double handful. Who would benefit if he went through every possible trouble looking for justice?

He only had to determine that this Zhao Zhenwei was the source of the injustice, the primary debtor, then quietly get rid of him and put the blame on the evil cultivators when he was done.

In the underworld, the whole Ning'an Chen family had waited respectfully for a long time. If there were any unsettled accounts in this world, let them go settle them themselves.

"Ugh..." As crooked thoughts went through his mind, another finger came together without warning. Xi Ping felt as if he had been whipped from shoulder to hand with an iron whip. He curled up from pain. "Xi Yue... Xi Yue..."

Xi Yue heard that his voice sounded wrong and stood there helplessly, wanting to touch him but not daring to.

Xi Ping said almost inaudibly, "Get me some wine."

Xi Yue hesitated. *I think that Commander Pang said just now...*

Xi Ping pounded on the bed with his good hand. *Is he right, or am I right? Are you on his side or on mine?*

Xi Yue was afraid he would move too much and disturb his injury. He quickly took the hand Xi Ping was pounding the bed with and hurriedly nodded. *You're right, you're always right, I'll get it for you.*

He rushed off to get a small pot of wine. Only when he had handed it over to Xi Ping did he dimly realize that there was something wrong— who was right and whose side you were on... were those the same thing?

Xi Ping finished off half the pot of wine in one gulp. His blood, warming suddenly, seemed to open his pain-numbed meridians. He let out a long breath, and confusion arose in his mind: why had Pang-shixiong remembered A-Xiang just now?

After sending the Heavenly Question, Pang Jian emptied his head of all distracting thoughts and entered meditation.

Of the eight hundred legendary hallucination arrays, not one could trap Heaven's Design Pavilion's Pang Jian. Because the way of dispelling barriers was to always seek the truth, never to be trapped by bewildering barriers. The barrier dispelling Way of the Heart was forged by throwing off illusions time after time while beset by perils.

The sea of thought in which he forged his Way of the Heart was full of confusion, hallucinations growing wild... like the accumulated fragrant jade miasma that had been lingering in the southern mines when he had opened his spiritual eyes.

When there was a mine collapse in the spiritual stone mines, the spiritual energy bouncing between the stones would often activate the rock snow and form a particular miasma, which was called fragrant jade miasma. Before the raw materials of that priceless snow wine had been processed, they had hallucinatory properties, stronger than any snow wine.

Actually, Pang Jian didn't count as a "survivor" of a mine collapse. When the caved-in spiritual stone mine had buried the mining station underneath it, he had just gone with a companion to the docks to meet the merchant ships. He hadn't been inside.

The unprecedented mine collapse had raised a small mountain of fragrant jade miasma. The miasma hung around for over a month, while the precious and fatal spiritual stones continued to slip down. Not even the mine's half-immortals dared to approach. Only he, as if he had gone mad, charged inside while the supervisors weren't looking.

At first, he still knew to cover his mouth and nose with wet cloth as he searched hopefully for people in the miasma and the ruins.

But when he found them he was exhausted, his fingers worn bloody. He only pulled out one twisted corpse after another, all people he had known when they were living.

When the teenage Pang Jian dragged out his parents, who no longer looked like themselves, he finally couldn't resist crying aloud.

Just then, he heard a weak cry for help: "Da-ge..."

Pang Jian gave a start. He had a little sister two years younger than him who was slower to grow tall than other girls. At thirteen, she still looked like a child. Because she was small and skinny, she had been trapped by a doorframe and a rock in a corner that an adult couldn't reach and so had survived.

The surviving girl gave him strength. Pang Jian turned at once from a despairing, bereaved boy into a big brother who could move heaven and earth. Beneath stones that could come crashing down at any time, he spent two full days calmly and patiently using his hands to dig her out.

The fragrant jade miasma had by now turned into a bewildering barrier. People outside couldn't get in, and people inside couldn't get out.

Pang Jian said, "It's all right. However big the miasma is, it'll break up one day, and I'll take you out of here. Mom and dad are gone, so I'll take care of you in the future. In two months, I'll be of age, and I can work in the mines... All the supervisors know me, they'll definitely take me."

Along with his little sister, he fought desperately to survive, desperately looked for food among the ruins. In hardly any time, there wasn't even a single grain left. The boy went behind his sister's back and quietly cut meat off the bodies of those who had died in the mine collapse and brought it back to eat, pretending it was animal meat... In the fragrant jade miasma, the bodies didn't even rot.

Finally, they were even running out of bodies, and the miasma still hadn't broken up. Pang Jian was just at his wit's end when he found a live deer that had somehow run inside.

He took out a bow and arrow. He was dizzy from wild joy on top of hunger, so he didn't carefully consider where the bow and arrow had come from. He drew the bow and shot the arrow smoothly, brought down the little deer in one shot, and happily shared one of the deer's legs with his little sister.

That night, for the first time, he saw a faint, blurry moon in the fragrant jade miasma and optimistically thought, If a living thing could get in, the miasma must be about to break up.

Pang Jian's premonition was right. The fragrant jade miasma that had continued for two months was at last about to be absorbed by the spiritual stone mine's great array.

Two days later, cultivators wearing miasma-repelling talismans and masks charged in. Someone soon found him and cried out, “Look, quick, there’s someone here! There’s a living person!”

“No...” Pang Jian thought vaguely, “there are two.”

They all babbled something about “fragrant jade miasma pouring his spiritual eyes open,” and someone had put an elixir in his mouth and was constantly asking him questions, what his name was, who his parents were, what other family he had, telling him not to be confused, to maintain his spiritual clarity.

Pang Jian didn’t understand what “spiritual clarity” was. He only knew that the elixir was so bitter it made the root of his tongue go numb. He swallowed it with difficulty, and the elixir began to expel the miasma that had accumulated in his body. The distinctive fruit fragrance of rock snow poured out of the seven orifices of his face.

The fragrant Pang Jian grabbed the hem of the person questioning him. “My little sister...”

“What?”

“My little sister... she’s here, too... she’s little, Exalted, save her first, she’s over...”

When the mine supervisor heard this, his expression altered. After a moment of peculiar silence, he stammered, “Don’t... don’t worry, my colleagues have already...”

His words came to a sudden stop, because just then, two miners who didn’t understand the situation lifted out a tiny body, which came right to Pang Jian’s eyes—and by now, the cruel immortal pill had already blown away the sweet dream blinding his eyes.

The little girl's body had stiffened long ago. Her head had been crushed out of shape, and there was even a spiritual stone inlaid in her skull. But the rest of her was perfectly preserved. Her clothes could even be called tidy. Someone had been taking care of her as though she were a living person... except that the body was missing a leg.

Next to an extinguished fire, there was a clean leg bone laid out. A human one.

It turned out that his little sister, the little deer, and the bow that had hit in one shot... had all been a dream inside the fragrant jade miasma.

Waking from the dream, his spiritual eyes linked to heaven and earth, and he swore from then on not to be confused by any illusion.

But today he nearly failed. After entering meditation, he couldn't get out of the miasma in his spirit no matter what. Just as Pang Jian was beginning to feel fretful, the sound of a qin suddenly pierced the fog before his eyes.

It was a rather unlucky Soul Calling Melody.

Following the sound of the qin, Pang Jian opened his eyes, but he didn't move. He sat there quietly, listening to the music next door, which could penetrate a person's spirit.

Night fell, the hull trembled slightly, and the small window of the cabin was swept by a lighthouse beam. They had at last reached the Great Wan encampment.

Meanwhile, Wei Chengxiang's party, traveling by land, also reached the Great Wan encampment—Great Wan's trade routes were well-developed, and it had the most merchants traveling to the Land of Turmoil. The encampment seemed more like the human world than

any other place. Near the docks, a bustling little town had nearly come together, and many of the guesthouses had seasonally hung up Spring Festival couplets.

Though it was nowhere near as good as in Great Wan itself, it was still pretty decent... At any rate, Wei Chengxiang had never stayed at such a good inn before.

The mysterious person who came to meet her set her up in a single-person room. Tea and fruit were even set out in the guest room.

She investigated for a long time before finally working out how to peel the fruit, but as soon as she bit into one, she spat it out.

The taste of snow wine—she knew it; this was lychee.

CHAPTER 46 - Demon Country (9)

The mountain was timeless. Only when a bright red “fortune” character fell out of the assignment his rebellious disciple had sent back did Zhi Xiu realize that the twenty-eighth year of Taiming was about to come to an end.

In the big assignment scroll, there was no need to look at any of the proper things—the precise arrays and the neatly copied inscriptions had certainly been done for him by Xi Yue. That brat Xi Ping had nails under his buttocks. If you wanted him to sit still for one shichen, you first had to break his lousy legs.

Zhi Xiu roughly flipped through the assignment, then noticed there was something stuck in it. He pulled it out to look and unexpectedly encountered a karma beast stamping with fury on a paper card.

The karma beast was trapped on the paper card and had inflated into a furry ball from anger. It was roaring silently, baring a pair of little triangular fangs, when the waste paper over its head was unexpectedly lifted, and it saw Zhi Xiu. The little beast instantly settled down, the fierceness in its eyes vanishing without a trace. It wagged its tail appealingly and sat down.

Zhi Xiu knew without having to touch it that there was an invisible array on the paper card. This array was extremely peculiar. It wasn't anything standard; it was actually something original.

It wasn't that arrays couldn't be created. It was just that every classic array had undergone revisions from countless masters since its creation before being handed down to posterity. It had to be precise, simple, and subtle in order to conserve spiritual stones to the utmost degree. Blindly altering an array, you wouldn't necessarily blow up if your luck was good, but you would definitely waste money.

Looking at Xi Ping's superfluous spiritual threads made Zhi Xiu's head hurt. He thought, If you wanted to activate this thing, wouldn't you need to burn up a white spirit?

"Can't even crawl and you already want to run. It's pure waste. You ought to be beaten..." Zhi Xiu sighed and asked the karma beast, "What did he want you to show me?"

The karma beast motioned for him to put the card down on the snow, then indeed spat out a white spirit. Seeing it made Zhi Xiu's eyelid twitch.

The array on the card only activated half a beat late. It went halfway, then stuck and stopped. The karma beast looked at Zhi Xiu in dismay for a moment, also seeming very helpless. It ran back to the middle of the array and put down a blue jade.

Zhi Xiu: "..."

He had actually underestimated how wasteful this kid could be.

This time, the array at last came to life. The dizzying spiritual threads tangled together, and fragmentary flames burst from the card.

Its prohibition vanished, and the karma beast immediately leapt onto another piece of paper. Then there was a faint whistle, and a dazzling fireball ran counter to the snow in the sky like a shooting star. It broke through the hazy sky and exploded into glittering fireworks—it was a crooked picture of a brocade carp.

Next, another fireball flew out of the array. A karma beast with a face that was nothing but eyes, a Zhaoting sword, a bust of the peak master of Flying Jade Peak that made Zhi Xiu clench his fists... The rich colors of the fireworks splashed on the pure white snow, bright

and grand, appearing in the sky above Flying Jade Peak for half an incense stick.

Finally, a line of big, vigorous cursive wound it up: *Happy New Year, Shizun!*

Zhi Xiu put his hand on his forehead. There was a rumble, and another corner of the north slope collapsed.

Cultivators passing by heard the commotion and without exception stopped to observe. The karma beast had nowhere to hide. It buried its face in its front paws and cried.

“Hey, don’t cry. That monkey’s brought the perfectly good north slope down twice now, and even I haven’t cried.” Peak Master Zhi stroked the paper where the karma beast was hiding and gently consoled it. “I’ll go wrap up a red packet for him and put in a beating as a New Year’s gift.”

The sacred beast couldn’t take this. It crawled up the auspicious embroidery on Zhi Xiu’s sleeve and wouldn’t come out.

Zhi Xiu picked up the expensive array paper and saw the blue jade turned to powder and the dim white spirit; it was painful and ridiculous. Pinching the edges, he carefully put the paper card levelly into his mustard seed for safekeeping, unconsciously wearing a faint smile. He didn’t want to train with the sword anymore. He called Zhaoting back and was planning to return to the cottage to warm a pot of wine and have a drink.

Just then, Zhaoting moved on its own, pointing to the northern sky.

Zhi Xiu abruptly turned his head and frowned—a corner of the thick clouds dropping snow tore open, revealing a few unusually bright stars.

The Sea of Stars was calling.

The Sea of Stars was in the depths of the Xuanyin Mountains. It was an abyss like a wound. No matter what the weather was in the mountains, above this “wound,” the sky was always cloudless, always showing a clear thread of starry sky. The Sea of Stars took its name from this.

Looking down from beside the precipice, there was dense fog in the abyss. When the mountain mists passed through, it let out an echo like a large bell ringing, like the rambling warnings of fate.

When Zhi Xiu arrived, nearly all thirty-six peak masters had assembled.

Apart from the lineage of the Dignitary of Fate High Elder, no one dared to go down into the Sea of Stars casually. Therefore, everyone was only waiting beside the precipice.

There were eight or nine people who had the surname Zhao or were connected to the Zhao family, enough to put together two card tables; the Lin family valued quality over quantity; the few remaining peak masters of the Li family stuck together, keeping a clear distance from the Zhaos and the Zhous; the rest were unremarkable, standing together because they were in the same situation.

Rosy Cloud Peak³⁴ was Flying Jade Peak’s neighbor. Peak Master Wen Fei beckoned to Zhi Xiu, gave him a derisive look, and waved a fan in midair. A line of small gold writing flashed on it: *Just watched your fireworks. Very exciting.*

Zhi Xiu sighed. “If you like excitement, why don’t you take him? I’m all right, but Flying Jade Peak won’t be able to handle much more.”

As he spoke, he looked around. Suddenly, he frowned. There were two people who weren't associating with anyone else: there was no need to mention Princess Duanrui; she had never been approachable to strangers. The Zhou family members were all gathered not far from her but were maintaining a careful distance. Standing almost directly opposite from Duanrui was a man in convict's clothes, of middle height, with fine features, so delicate he was a little feminine.

Zhi Xiu lowered his voice. "Lin Chi-shixiong is here, too?"

In the mortal world, the common people might not necessarily be able to say who the high elders of Xuanyin were, but they definitely all knew Lin Chi—member of the Lin family's main branch, peak master of Moon Plated Peak, creator of Moon Plated Gold, the unprecedented and unequalled genius of the toolmaking path, born with the golden touch. But though they were both peak masters, Zhi Xiu could count on one hand the number of times he had seen this Master Lin. Lin Chi was always in seclusion. If someone requested an immortal tool, he handed the task over to his disciples without exception. He had even more "clarity" than Princess Duanrui.

Wen Fei shook his head, and another line of writing appeared on his fan: *When all thirty-six peak masters gather, nothing good will come of it. Last time so many of us assembled, it was the time Li Yuelan's spiritual bones were removed.*

Zhi Xiu said, "Crow's mouth... crow's fan."

Just then, all the ascended spirit cultivators raised their heads simultaneously. A cluster of white frost floated out of the Sea of Stars. It flew with the wind to the precipice, landed next to Zhi Xiu, and turned into a man.

The man had his eyes closed and seemed like he was made out of frost himself. Unless a cultivator came to the end of his lifespan, he

normally wouldn't show any signs of aging, but this person had deep wrinkles on his brow; he was so haggard that he seemed middle-aged.

As soon as this person appeared, the sound of the wind in the deep valley calmed for a moment. Then the mountain wind swirled and rose, tearing open a thread of sky over the Sea of Stars. It was raining all around; only above the heads of the peak masters did the stars extend forever, so clear they seemed to be right before their eyes.

Everyone greeted: "Dignitary of Fate High Elder."

Zhi Xiu said, "Shifu."

The Dignitary of Fate High Elder pricked up his ears and turned in Zhi Xiu's direction. He gave him a very faint smile, and the notches in the center of his brow became shallower for a moment. But soon they knotted back up.

He didn't make small talk, simply said, "The Sparkling Deluder stands guard, the Imperial Star is dim—the twenty-ninth year is ill-omened."

Before the change of date at midnight, the Dignitary of Fate High Elder's words meant there was no way to celebrate the New Year.

The High Elder turned to Duanrui. "What does the Zhou family say?"

Duanrui said, "The Zhou family has always put the state first."

"In ancient times, the Zhou family fed demons with their own bodies and sealed the Impassable Sea, creating thousands of years of tranquility in the mortal world. Bear the common people in mind." The High Elder of the Office of Fate nodded slightly to her. "The Zhou family is good."

Then the Dignitary of Fate High Elder turned back to Zhi Xiu. “Strange manifestations appear in the Sea of Stars. Disaster brews in the south.”

The corner of Zhi Xiu’s eye twitched. “In fact, a Heavenly Question flew up the mountain from Heaven’s Design Pavilion recently, saying they were concerned someone in the southern mines was colluding with Shu and embezzling spiritual stones. This has yet to be verified... Can it be connected with this matter?”

The peak master of Nine Questions Peak, who was an expert in arrays and inscriptions, immediately said, “I will request a talisman to leave the mountain and send people to tour and inspect the great arrays at the southwest border.”

The Dignitary of Fate High Elder shook his head and said, “Please prepare yourselves, peak masters. A miasma has come up from the Sea of Stars. There is a great tribulation on the way. I fear it will not only be a bit of discord on the border.”

All the peak masters looked at each other in dismay. The *clang* of a clock striking came from a distance—

The change of date at midnight. The twenty-ninth year of Taiming had begun on schedule.

The Sea of Stars sighed.

Prince Zhuang was startled awake by the New Year’s firecrackers. His heart beat like a drum, but it was soon slowed by the snow lotus on his chest. The paper man silently appeared beside his bed and poured him a cup of water.

Prince Zhuang raised his eyebrows, and Bai Ling quietly reported: “I went to the place Your Highness indicated. I was in haste and only

found some fragments...”

“I see,” said Prince Zhuang. “Tell me about it.”

“Last year alone, Suling’s factories had a dozen and more accidents big and small, all of them hushed up. In the worst case, a human life was repaid with only two liang of silver. The number of casualties is unknown, though at a conservative estimate it was over a hundred people. Witnesses and physical evidence can both be found. Suling is a near neighbor of Jinping, and matters are already so bad, so never mind those places that are far from the capital...” At this point, Bai Ling hesitated, then said, “Your Highness, you really ought to have taken Mr. Wang along on this trip. These political affairs are outside of my realm of expertise.”

“No need. These are not complex matters,” Prince Zhuang said indolently. “They’ve only put a piece of paper over the head of a bald man. Lift it, and you’ll know how many lice there are at a glance.”

Bai Ling lowered his head, wanting to speak but holding back.

“What is it?” said Prince Zhuang.

Bai Ling said, softly, “I also went by a ‘Village of the Living Dead’ today. It used to be a graveyard, but now it has been occupied by the living. These old or crippled laborers have nowhere to go. They sleep beside the tombs, living off of sacrifices to the dead...”

Prince Zhuang listened absent-mindedly, eyelashes drooping very low, as if he was about to fall asleep. Bai Ling stopped talking.

Only when another round of joyful firecrackers sounded did Prince Zhuang frown as if disturbed. Somewhat wearily, he said to Bai Ling, “How is it that in the years since returning to the human world, you’ve learned to be sentimental?”

Bai Ling sighed to himself and changed the subject. “Your Highness, the power networks behind the factories are complex. Once you begin to investigate, it will inevitably implicate Xuanyin Mountain. In this inspection tour of the south, the difficulty isn’t in investigating, it’s in how to close the case and report it. By convention...”

“By convention, I should choose a sufficient number of scapegoats, pick out a few other problems, apply a bit of pressure, and move on. If you were to ask Wang Ziqian, he would arrange a name list for you this very night—which to help up, which to take down—analyze everything neatly.”

Prince Zhuang said carelessly, “Nothing new about it at all. If it were so dull, wouldn’t that disappoint His Majesty?”

He stood and opened the window. The smell of firecrackers floated in on the wind. “Do you know how the air above Suling looks to me at this moment?”

Bai Ling quietly said, “No one on earth has a spiritual sense like Your Highness. What you see and hear, we have no way to fathom.”

“Resentment so thick it can’t be dissolved. There are at least two or three groups of evil cultivators mixed in, ready to drag people down into their mire. I think a single spark would be enough,” Prince Zhuang said. “Tomorrow I’ll leave Suling Prefecture, and before leaving, I’ll give Ling County’s sham factories a commendation and bring everyone to hear it.”

Bai Ling thought in astonishment, Are you deliberately fanning the flames to aggravate the people’s resentment...?

“Do you know why I took you with me instead of Wang Ziqian?” Prince Zhuang said.

“Please instruct me, Your Highness.”

“We went out to fan the flames. Why would I take along a useless, delicate scholar?” Prince Zhuang turned. “Let them have their last meals tomorrow. The next day, before zi hour, I want the heads of that chamber of commerce’s arrogant president and County Magistrate Zheng separated from their bodies.”

Bai Ling was startled. “On what charge, Your Highness?”

“What are you saying? What charge? Evil cultivators are running amok. What reason do they need to assassinate court-appointed officials?” A peculiar smile appeared on Prince Zhuang’s face. “The evil cultivators in the factories have been idle too long. It makes even me anxious on their behalf to see it, So I’m going to give them a demonstration. These evil cultivators’ nests are obvious at a glance. I’ll tell you where to find them, and when the time comes, you’ll divide up the bodies, give equal shares of the credit to those people. Remember to be fair and impartial. Don’t play favorites.”

Bai Ling: “...”

“It’s annoying to investigate these trifles. His Majesty has lost his mind, and I don’t feel like joining him in his madness. I’m also not planning on going about the arduous and thankless task of bringing balance all over the place... Since the people are resentful, then let the ‘people’s resentment’ deliver the punishment.”

What could the immortal mountains say about it? At worst they would blame him for being incompetent—as a chronic invalid who had hardly ever left Jinping, wasn’t it normal for him to be incompetent?

Prince Zhuang laughed cheerfully. “Only I don’t know whether these evil cultivators who feed off the people’s resentment can handle the

heroic office of ridding the people of a scourge.”

For a moment, Bai Ling looked at his profile that seemed to be carved out of jade and suddenly thought, His Highness isn't actually concerned about the nation, and he doesn't care about the people's livelihoods and hardships.

He hates everyone.

Wang Jian and those others followed him around cautiously and conscientiously and put forward plans for him, all thinking that Prince Zhuang was burning with ambition, that he was shrewd and profound, and that if they did well in assisting him, in the future perhaps there would be imperial honors for them... Only Bai Ling sensed that whether His Highness was shifting his ground or sowing discord, none of it was for the sake of inheriting the throne.

All he wanted was to see the world sunk in chaos. He found new ways to torment his father and brother, created farces, and obtained a brief bit of pleasure from it, like a person drinking himself into a stupor on snow wine.

What had His Majesty released from the capital?

Just then, a beam of soft white light slipped by the corner of Zhou Ying's eye. The two of them turned simultaneously and saw the white jade proximal light up—since opening his spiritual eyes, it had been easy for Xi Ping to control the downgraded immortal tool. His white jade board connected to two others, and he could contact either one whenever he wished. It wasn't like before, when anything he wrote would appear on all three boards.

On the white jade board was a joyful series of auspicious phrases; from all the way across the border, it was still possible to sense the writer's tail sticking up ingratiatingly. As expected, the final sentence

brought up the main topic: *I've used up all my spiritual stones. Send emergency aid, san-ge!*

Prince Zhuang: "..."

Bai Ling watched his lord's expression change several times. He seemed to be about to open his mouth and curse. Before he could speak, he was cut off by another firecracker and choked the words back.

After a long moment, the din calmed, and His Highness forgot what he had been about to say. All he could do was helplessly wave a hand and say, "... send him some through a transport array."

Xi Ping had failed six or seven times before working out the array with Xi Yue's help. It was only at times like these that he regretted not working harder. As soon as the array was activated, a big brocade box popped out of nowhere and crushed his half-baked array.

Abundant spiritual energy at once swept through the room. Xi Ping leaned back and heaved a sigh of relief. "Finally I'm back in business. *Hss... oh, my back...*"

He spent money without keeping count, and he spent spiritual stones without keeping count, too. Injuring his hand had accelerated the looming crisis in his financial affairs.

Although...

Xi Ping looked down at his healed left hand. The sensation in this hand was different from before. It was very subtle—before, the bone qin had felt like a qin that was attached to him; though he could play it by curling his fingers, it had been like the evil cultivator Liang Chen, always external, separate from him.

The newly-grown left hand was entirely his own, as if he had brought it out of his mother's womb.

Yesterday he had tried it out and found that his left hand could now play a kind of silent music that only Wei Chengxiang could hear. And when she heard the music, her heart moved with the strings. She had originally been tossing and turning somewhat from being alone in a strange place. Hearing the faint comfort in the music, she had quickly settled down and fallen asleep... Though perhaps some people were naturally sensitive to music. If he had an opportunity, he would have to try it on someone else.

There was a gentle knock on the door of his guest room. Someone respectfully said, "Viscount Xi, the Mine Governor has requested to see you and Commander Pang."

CHAPTER 47 - Demon Country (10)

Pang Jian had originally planned to operate covertly. He hadn't wanted to alert the Mine Governor as soon as they arrived at the southern mines—he had been worried that the evil cultivators planning to loot the convoy wouldn't dare to act if he alerted them.

But now it was clear that what he had to investigate wasn't the small matter of the evil cultivators.

“Don't babble,” Pang Jian exhorted Xi Ping ahead of time. “You're a junior who's just joined the sect. Mind your mouth, just act like you don't know anything no matter what they ask you. No one is going to go after you making inquiries. When we see the Mine Governor, just say that because of evil cultivators running wild and brewing calamity in the southern outskirts, Heaven's Design Pavilion received orders to go south to investigate the snow wine trade and verify the identities of the miners in order to prevent evil cultivators from infiltrating the valuable spiritual stone mines.”

On the surface, Xi Ping said “fine,” putting on an obedient “whatever shixiong says” expression, but he was thinking: The evil cultivators know what we've come here to do—I revealed it to them.

This Wuchang One was very interesting. First of all, he wasn't really a “Tai Sui believer,” because he not only knew Liang Chen's true identity, he also knew that Liang Chen had the hidden bones and could possess other people's bodies. If he knew so much about “Tai Sui”'s background and could still remain a believer, Xi Ping would salute him for being quite the fellow—he seemed more like Liang Chen's partner.

At the same time, Wuchang One also obviously knew about the traitors who were colluding with a foreign nation and stealing spiritual stones from the mines.

In other words, in Great Wan's southern mines, there were three groups of people with ulterior motives: first, the "thieves inside the house" who were creating mine collapses and colluding with Southern Shu. These were well-established thieves who had long-standing power in the mines, deep-rooted.

Second were the people who had realized something was wrong and were furtively investigating the thieves inside the house; in other words, those "fake evil cultivators" who had been scouting out Southern Shu's encampment by night. While these people had an established foundation cultivator among them, they had been forced into doing an unseemly thing like that; it was clear their foundations were shallow.

The third group consisted of Tai Sui Liang Chen and his remaining followers. There was no knowing about the others, but Liang Chen and Wuchang One evidently also belonged to the "thieves inside the house" faction; at the same time, they had certainly drawn no profit from this. Never mind going around buying things on credit, they had also become disloyal and begun to have dealings with bumpkins like the Exonerators.

Xi Ping had gotten mixed up in this, planted Wei Chengxiang among the evil cultivators, and, at the same time, had given Wuchang One two pieces of information: one was that Tai Sui Liang Chen's identity had been exposed within Heaven's Design Pavilion, and Pang Jian had come with ill intent; the other was that the "fake evil cultivators" had already grasped the outlines of the situation and had begun to secretly investigate the "thieves inside the house."

Would Wuchang One reveal the latter piece of information to the "thieves inside the house"?

Xi Ping believed that he was certain to: if he had been Wuchang One, he wouldn't know that Pang Jian had found the transport array

by a mysterious coincidence; he would only know that Heaven's Design Pavilion had come looking for him. So he would certainly reframe Pang Jian's purpose in coming as "Heaven's Design Pavilion has come to investigate the theft of spiritual stones," then let the "thieves inside the house" treat this as an existential threat and deal with Heaven's Design Pavilion, concealing himself.

Right now, the most ignorant people in the game were the "fake evil cultivators." The "thieves inside the house" were facing an existential threat. The "real evil cultivators" thought they had everything under control and were prepared to sit tight and watch the other two go at it.

Also, beneath the Bell of Tribulation, Liang Chen had said that there was a "criminal brand" on his spiritual image. Shifu had later explained to him what a "criminal brand" was; could this be connected with the thieves inside the house who were stealing spiritual stones?

The Mine Governor commanded all of the southern mines. Did they belong to the "thieves inside the house," or to the helpless "fake evil cultivators"?

And what party did Zhao Zhenwei, who was getting ready to escort the spiritual stones north, belong to?

As Xi Ping circled the game board in his mind, he followed Pang Jian, asking about everything left and right like a pampered young man who had never been out in the world and thought everything he saw was fresh and new.

The Mine Governor's manor had a rather "southern" flavor. It didn't have courtyards as deep as those of Jinping. As soon as they walked through the gate, there was an unrestrained sea of wisteria, growing unusually rampant in the warmth of the south. A narrow path passed through, and inside were gardens within gardens, the

butterflies so busy they didn't know where to land. Xi Ping was keeping count: since they had come in through the gate, Pang-shixiong had sneezed three times.

He thought to himself, Is this Mine Governor obsessed with flowers?

Then, when he saw the Mine Governor in a garden of peonies, Xi Ping thought, Bah, the flowers don't deserve it.

The Mine Governor was a female cultivator. Her lightly made-up face made the whole hall of flowers look dismal... Anyway, Xi Ping, who cursed young ladies and turned down famed courtesans, who made the Marquis so mad he chased him through the streets, suddenly turned polite.

Even the bandit-like Pang Jian became somewhat more reserved. He lowered his voice three notches and respectfully greeted her, "Your Highness Anyang."

Xi Ping had a moment of realization: Oh, she's from the Zhou family.

As expected—there was an eight or nine out of ten chance that any shijie he met in the outer sects would be a princess.

Great Wan had many restrictions on women. Though recently female workers and merchants had begun to appear, they were all taken by renowned scholars as signs of "the decline of public morals" and "the decay of society," and all of them had to struggle against rumors and slander. It was as if after a woman grew up, the only two types of work she could do were being a wife and being a prostitute, and anything else was only a shoddy coverup for being a prostitute.

This was also why any walkers in the mortal world who couldn't stand the loneliness had to hide their names and make do with mortals in a mirage. It was practically impossible to find a cultivation

partner among their colleagues—selection cards were so hard to come by that there weren't even enough to go around for the sons of the wealthy; how could there be a share for the wealthy young mistresses? They had to stay behind to make brilliant matches. Xuanyin's female disciples were very rare. If they weren't so extraordinarily talented that they immediately went into the inner sect, then they were of extremely lofty birth; how could anyone be a suitable match for them?

Actually, Xi Ping had a vague feeling that the title "Anyang" sounded familiar...

"Lord Pang, you have traveled a long way and gone to many pains," Princess Anyang said politely. Then she looked at Xi Ping. "And who is this?"

Xi Ping put on his most proper-looking smile and gravely stepped forward to salute her. "Hello, shijie, I am..."

Before he could finish, Princess Anyang saw the sword he was wearing and said, "Your surname is Xi. Are you Shiyong?"

Xi Ping's brows moved. He thought, Has my good name spread so far?

So he put on an even more active show of propriety. "Shijie has heard of me? Ah, to be spoken of to such venerable ears, whether the speech was good or bad, is a blessing upon me for three lifetimes."

Where no one was looking, Pang Jian glared at him: *Mind your manners!*

Then Princess Anyang suddenly smiled. The whole peony garden faded. She said, "Wow, it really is you. You've gotten so big! Is Jinjin well?"

Xi Ping: "..."

"Jinjin" was his mother Madam Cui's given name. This beauty wasn't just making conversation. He had an ominous premonition.

Princess Anyang said, smiling, "When I was young, I went out incognito to visit Cui Ji. I took a liking to a hairpin. When I asked, it turned out that it was a coming of age gift Cui Ji had made for the family's young mistress. I was arrogant and willful in my youth and insisted on buying it. Jinjin came to collect it just then, and we became instant friends. She let me have the hairpin along with the whole set of hair ornaments. She's an exceptional talent, with a very good disposition. We got along very well when I was young."

Xi Ping suddenly remembered: "Anyang" was a princess of the first rank—she was the present emperor's full blood older sister!

The princess smiled kindly and said, "So you can stop calling me 'shijie.' Just call me Auntie Qing."

Before the smile Xi Ping considered "elegant and unrestrained" could fade, he was hit in the face with this "Auntie Qing."

Pang Jian bent his head; his shoulders began to shake.

After a moment, Xi Ping, having nothing left to live for, accepted the princess's presents on the occasion of their first meeting: a small bag of spiritual stones and a lock of longevity.³⁵

Was there anything in the world that was a better antidote to lust than a lock of longevity?

In fact, there was. The princess wrapped the damn thing up in a red packet and said it was a New Year's gift.

Xi Ping followed Pang Jian, contemplating the illusory nature of the sensual world, listening to these two “elders” discuss the explosion and the evil cultivators in the south and sighing about the hardships to the common people caused by the evil cultivators running rampant.

“Forget about the rest,” Pang Jian said calmly. “If there are traitors among the miners and the crew members of the convoy ships, then there’s a problem.”

“Ah, you’ve said it. What a headache.” A person’s mind and manner would often change along with the age of their appearance. Zhou Qing had the face of a girl, and when she grumbled, there was an indescribable air of naïve coquetry about her. There was no way anyone could have imagined that she had a brother whose hair had all gone grey.

Pang Jian said, “Are you in some difficulty, Your Highness?”

Zhou Qing said with a bitter smile, “I won’t conceal it from you, shixiong. Since I was transferred to the southern mines twenty years ago, I’ve always been in difficulty. They all said my natural endowments were insufficient and I couldn’t enter the inner sect, and I only got made Mine Governor because my surname is Zhou. My natural endowments are weak, and I’m a woman. On the surface, the ten senior mine supervisors are polite to me, but when something really comes up, never mind obeying my orders, they don’t even consult me.”

Pang Jian and Xi Ping exchanged a veiled look.

This oppressed Mine Governor who had come here only twenty years ago didn’t sound like she belonged with the deep-rooted “thieves inside the house.”

“I’ve always said that while snow wine is a good thing, rock snow causes hallucinations, and the mines ought to strictly control it, but they said I didn’t understand the plight of the common people and wasn’t making allowances for the hardships of the miners,” Zhou Qing said, sighing. “Since Liang-shixiong left office, there have been frequent incidents with the convoy ships. They tell me I’m incompetent, and then they block me from stopping shipments and performing a thorough investigation. They say, ‘The spiritual stone shipments must be made at the right time, and they may not be delayed.’ The next shipment is about to go north... Ah, perhaps I really am incompetent. I should go back to the Latent Cultivation Temple to repair straw children.”

Pang Jian considered, then said, “In fact, there’s no need to delay the shipment. Let Shiyong go with the escort, and I’ll stay in the mines to help Your Highness investigate the traitors.”

“Very well.” Zhou Qing had no objections to the latter part of this sentence. She only glanced hesitantly at Xi Ping. “Sending Shiyong on his own... Can he handle it?”

Xi Ping gave a dry cough and automatically sat up straight.

Zhou Qing bit her lip and took out a talisman. She snapped her fingers to light it up and said, “Commander Zhao Zhenwei of the escort team, Head of the Guard Lü Chengyi-shixiong... and Mine Supervisor Lin Zhaoli-shixiong, please come and see me.

“Lin-shixiong is the only one of the mine supervisors willing to help me,” Zhou Qing said. “But he’s advanced in years, and recently he showed signs of reaching the end of his lifespan due to injury, so he had no choice but to establish a foundation by force in the mines. Now the inner sect has sent a reception order after the fact, and he ought to be leaving the southern mines. I’ll ask him for one last thing —to go with the shipment. In troubled times, no matter what, it will

be safer to have an established foundation master to oversee matters. He can also take care of my old friend's son for me.”

Xi Ping: “...”

Anyway, the princess thought he was unreliable.

But an established foundation cultivator surnamed Lin... Wasn't that the head of those black-clothed people who had drawn fire beside the spiritual beast pool that day?

So it would seem that Princess Anyang was part of the “fake evil cultivator” group.

“Matters must not be delayed,” Pang Jian said to Princess Anyang. “I want to go to the mines and have a look. A little later, can Your Highness lend me a register of miners... including those already dead, a log of the supervisors' comings and goings from the mines, and a full log of the quantities and other properties of spiritual stones leaving the mines?”

As a mine supervisor, Zhou Qing was truly hopeless. Hearing this, she frowned. “I'll do my best to ask all the mine supervisors. If they decline and give me excuses...”

Pang Jian said, “Just say Heaven's Design Pavilion is investigating a case and anyone who obstructs us will be judged to be an accomplice of the evil cultivators.”

Zhou Qing's eyes lit up, like a little girl who had been given the imperial sword. “Then I'll rely on shixiong for everything!”

“You flatter me.” Pang Jian cupped his hand. “Also, Your Highness, please permit the karma beasts to follow the southern mines' great array to search out evil energy.”

Zhou Qing agreed at once: “No problem.”

Heaven’s Design Pavilion and the Mine Governor who found herself elbowed out of her own territory came to a ready agreement; everything was going unbelievably smoothly.

But Xi Ping secretly frowned: he was afraid it wouldn’t be that easy. The princess was in the dark, but the “thieves inside the house” must already have received Wuchang One’s warning; they would certainly have cleaned up their tracks by now.

Then, as Zhou Qing led them to the southern mines, she said, “When I first heard what had happened in Jinping’s southern outskirts, I sent someone to investigate the snow wine merchants. I didn’t expect that I would be a step too late. The evil cultivator who tampered with the snow wine had already run off. He had counterfeit identity documents from the start... Evil cultivators have endless tricks for disguise and concealment. There’s really nowhere to start investigating once they’ve snuck in.”

“It’ll be easy to identify them,” Pang Jian said. Before Xi Ping could stop him, he pulled out the “unseen glasses.” “These glasses can observe the name on a person’s spiritual image. We’ll know at once when we check that name against the one on their identity documents.”

Xi Ping: “...”

Dear shixiong! “Unseen glasses” *can’t be seen*. If you reveal them to the light of day, how am I going to secretly investigate the evil cultivators’ true names?!

But this was his greatest secret right now. He couldn’t say it. So there was no way Xi Ping could stop Pang Jian.

Just then, Wei Chengxiang's voice came through Xi Ping's spirit: "Uncle, can you control the reincarnation wood?"

Xi Ping's eyes flashed.

There was a middle-aged man sitting in front of Wei Chengxiang. He was an Indignant Cicada who had received orders from Wuchang One to get her settled in.

This man called himself Old Nine. He looked like a leavened bun. He wasn't necessarily using his true face. There was an evil light flashing in his little eyes. He said respectfully and politely to Wei Chengxiang, "Since Tai Sui ceased manifesting, we have also been unable to use the reincarnation wood to send messages amongst ourselves. Even to contact you, the holy woman, we had to rely on outsiders."

Xi Ping immediately said, "I don't know how to make it work, drop the subject—just say... can they contact the holy woman as they like? They are unworthy."

Wei Chengxiang was already used to his tyrannical attitude of marching in and taking over. She put a chilly expression on her small face and didn't respond, haughtily scrutinizing the pasty-faced man in front of her.

Old Nine's eyes moved. He said ingratiatingly, smiling, "We are naturally unworthy of speaking to the holy woman without being summoned. But Senior One is in the mines and can't come and go easily, and he often has urgent matters to report to Tai Sui and the holy woman. Could we ask Tai Sui to give him a special pardon to allow him to use the reincarnation wood to communicate with the holy woman?"

This couldn't be refused with "you are unworthy."

Wei Chengxiang clenched her teeth in secret, racking her brain to think of how she should answer.

Then she heard Old Nine say, “Senior One said that Tai Sui knows him and is certain to agree.”

Wei Chengxiang: “...”

Xi Ping: “...”

Tests always came without warning.

Wei Chengxiang’s throat went dry. She involuntarily avoided the pasty-faced man’s eyes. “Tai Sui says...”

Just then, Xi Ping’s left palm warmed slightly, and he called Wei Chengxiang to a stop: “Wait.”

He raised his head and looked around. He saw three men coming their way.

At the same time, through the unseen glasses, Pang Jian saw that the name of the man in the lead was a blurry “Lin.” This was the established foundation cultivator from that day at the spiritual beast pool.

Of the other two, one was very young—not only his face. He was impressive, giving off an air of luxurious living. Loyal to their post, the unseen glasses revealed his name: Zhao Zhenwei.

The last one was dressed like a scholar and showed signs of nearing the end of his lifespan. His skin was slack, and he appeared middle-aged.

For a time, Xi Ping had no attention to spare to examine Zhao Zhenwei. He met the middle-aged man’s eyes directly. The man

smiled easily at him, and the feeling in Xi Ping's left palm became more evident.

What did this mean?

Xi Ping's thoughts moved rapidly. He said to Wei Chengxiang through the reincarnation wood, "Tell this Old Nine that when Wuchang One has finished dealing with Heaven's Design Pavilion's people, I'll make my own arrangements."

Wei Chengxiang composed herself and passed this on. Old Nine was surprised, and the doubt in his eyes instantly faded. He asked almost humbly, "Holy woman, how do you know that... Mr. One has gone to scout out Heaven's Design Pavilion?"

Wei Chengxiang learned by analogy. This time, not waiting for Xi Ping's instructions, she put on the "you are unworthy of knowing" expression on her own.

At the other end, Xi Ping only managed to keep from showing anything unusual in his expression by pressing the tip of his tongue to the roof of his mouth—got you, Wuchang One.

"Lin-shixiong!" Zhou Qing quickly stood up to introduce everyone.

When she came to Zhao Zhenwei, Xi Ping smiled as brilliantly as if he were reuniting with his own brother after being separated for many years. When she came to the middle-aged man, Xi Ping was like an orphan who had roamed the world for half his life finding his father.

"This is Lü-shixiong," Zhou Qing said, "one of the old hands here at the mines. He has always accompanied the shipments."

"You flatter me. I am Lü Chengyi. Greetings to you two representatives from Jinping."

Xi Ping gently curled his left hand and thought: “Lü Chengyi.”

The next moment, a peculiar point of view appeared in the center of his brow—Xi Ping as “Tai Sui” seemed to become a pair of eyes behind Lü Chengyi’s back, loftily observing the clueless “believer” from another angle.

Author’s Note:

Madam Cui: As long as you’re good-looking enough, I’ll give you anything, go through any difficulty or danger. If you weren’t the wrong sex, eloping would also be feasible!

CHAPTER 48 - Demon Country (Final)

Before Wei Chengxiang could relax, there was a sudden knock on the door. She nearly collapsed on the spot. Her head and her expression went blank at once.

But the empty look in her eyes made Old Nine's sweat trickle faster: this was the look of a ghost or a god!

Old Nine felt the ice cold gaze of the divine coming from the girl's completely emotionless eyes. For a time, he felt unbearable regret toward his own attempt at cleverness. He quickly bowed his head respectfully, then stood and went to open the door.

The newcomer was the Exonerator who had brought Wei Chengxiang to the Land of Turmoil.

The Exonerator came in smiling brightly and said, "Hello, Brother Nine—I hope that your holy woman has rested well. Is she finding it comfortable here?"

Old Nine couldn't let Tai Sui think he was both reckless and useless, so he forced himself to concentrate and once again become a sly operator hidden in the southern mines. "She's doing well, thank you, Brother Exonerator."

"The Indignant Cicadas cry out against injustice, and the Exonerators correct unrighted wrongs. We are fellow travelers. There is no need for thanks." After this brief small talk, the Exonerator got right to the point. "It's like this. My lord heard that the holy woman has arrived and has gone out of his way to arrange a feast in the Looking South Building to welcome her. Will the holy woman be able to attend?"

Wei Chengxiang instantly came back to herself—the master of the Exonerators... Wasn't that one of the people responsible for turning the southern outskirts into scorched earth?

Old Nine didn't dare to take the initiative. He looked back to ask Wei Chengxiang for instructions with his eyes.

Wei Chengxiang's hands, hidden under the table, tightened. This time, she didn't consult the opinion of the senior in the reincarnation wood. She only said to Xi Ping, *Uncle, I must go see this person.*

“Cover your face. Heaven's Design Pavilion's people have seen you, so avoid being spotted by accident.” Xi Ping kept his eyes on Lü Chengyi and said to Wei Chengxiang, “Go ahead, I'll cover for you.”

The unlucky Lü Chengyi hadn't expected that he would be completely exposed at first sight. He only felt something touch his spiritual sense with no warning and suddenly had a feeling that a master was watching him.

This powerful sense of danger came from behind him. It wasn't one of the two people from Heaven's Design Pavilion in front of him.

Xi Ping saw his back stiffen and his consciousness quickly scout around within a small range—yes, Xi Ping could sense his consciousness, even though Lü Chengyi's scouting consciousness didn't touch a single person.

No wonder that even when Liang Chen had only a skeleton remaining to him, he had still insisted on lying on the reincarnation wood pretending to be a god.

So this was what “divinity” felt like.

In Xi Ping's eyes, each and every one of Lü Chengyi's movements was infinitely magnified. Xi Ping could look up and see him head-on,

but when he lowered his eyes, in the center of his brow he could “see” everything about Lü Chengyi: his slight gestures, where his gaze fell, his scouting consciousness... he could even faintly “see” the direction of the spiritual energy flowing through all of his meridians.

To Xi Ping, it was both novel and astonishing. At the same time, a terrifying thought rose in his mind: this Wuchang One... had he known that he was under Liang Chen’s surveillance?

He must not have known.

As long as he was human, he couldn’t endure this kind of observation, even if these two old men had been having an affair.

Right now, Wuchang One thought he had everything under control. He didn’t know that someone else had him completely in his hold.

So... were there true ghosts and gods in this world? Who was watching him at this moment?

Thinking about this too deeply could simply make a person lose his mind. Luckily, Xi Ping was naturally light-minded and quickly put it aside—he didn’t worship gods or believe in ghosts anyway.

He tried withdrawing his mind, calming himself, suppressing the excitement of capturing Wuchang One. As expected, Lü Chengyi could soon no longer sense him and hesitantly relaxed.

Then Xi Ping saw him draw back his consciousness and faintly look at someone.

Oh?

Under normal circumstances, at a time like this, shouldn’t he check Lin Zhaoli’s expression? After all, an established foundation

cultivator had a strong spiritual sense. If it hadn't been his mistake just now and there really was an unknown master nearby, the established foundation cultivator would have been the first to perceive it.

But... why had Wuchang One glanced at Princess Anyang?

In fact, it was likely that the glance had been inadvertent. After all, the princess was in command at the southern mines, and she looked good enough to be a magnet for the eyes. It was normal for a subordinate to look her way when he felt uneasy.

But for some reason, Xi Ping suddenly thought that there was something wrong here.

So he asked, "When did you start traveling with the shipments, Lü-shixiong?"

Lü Chengyi suppressed his unease and answered, "It's a long story. Nearly two hundred years now."

"Wow." Xi Ping sighed with emotion and "carelessly" turned to ask Pang Jian, "Shixiong, isn't that the same record of service as our General Commander Liang?"

Lü Chengyi tensed. He looked up just in time to meet Pang Jian's eyes, which were like two blades. He couldn't resist taking another look at Princess Anyang.

But even a dog could learn to scheme after living two hundred years. A human would naturally become shrewd.

Lü Chengyi took the unexpected hit from Xi Ping, but he only paused. Then, not giving anything away, he said with a smile, "You flatter me. Liang-shixiong was part of the first group of mine supervisors at the southern mines and made sacrifices for the

country in his youth. My endowments are poor, and my cultivation is humble. How could I be worthy of being compared to him? Liang-shixiong was transferred back to Jinping some years ago. Has he been well recently?"

Pang Jian laughed meaningfully. "Thank you for your concern. I went to see him just a few days ago. He was doing quite well."

There were hidden currents surging under their small talk, but the bystanders didn't know that Liang Chen had already been disposed of by the Bell of Tribulation. Zhao Zhenwei said fervently, "As soon as I heard Her Highness's summons, I knew that the lords from Heaven's Design Pavilion had come. I've already booked a feast at the Missing North Building to welcome the two of you. The mines aren't going anywhere, Lord Pang, Viscount Xi. We half-immortals don't practice inedia, after all. Food is of paramount importance, right?"

Princess Anyang said jokingly, "It seems that I have been inconsiderate."

Zhao Zhenwei knew all the necessary tricks. Without a stumble, he picked up the princess's joke and took care of everything in a few words. Pang Jian had already sent out the karma beasts and had no choice but to follow along with the general plan. He took off the unseen glasses and allowed Zhao Zhenwei to take the lead, heading for the Missing North Building.

"Not even the birds come here to the Land of Turmoil, but we in the Great Wan encampment have our own civilization," Zhao Zhenwei explained as he walked. "The Looking South and Missing North Buildings are particularly well known. They both serve Southern He specialties prepared according to single extant copies of ancient texts—the Looking South Building is a little more authentic, while the Missing North Building has been slightly improved to accord with our Great Wan tastes. Many people from other countries

scheme to get passports to come to our mines because they want to taste the old flavor of the south... Ah, here we are, shixiongs.”

In the mines’ bustling little town, there were two restaurants not far from the docks. One faced south, and one faced north; there was a street between them.

The turned up corners of the two buildings’ eaves were opposite to each other, and their terraces faced each other. The scent of wine floating out mixed together—it was the legendary flower wine of Southern He.

Just then, Xi Ping’s spiritual sense moved. A carriage was just passing by them at the intersection.

Wei Chengxiang had a spiritual stone in her mouth. She was using every free moment to meditate and practice breathing when she suddenly heard the senior in the reincarnation wood say, *Look out of the carriage right now. Careful not to show your face. Look at a middle-aged man wearing a grey robe.*

Wei Chengxiang was startled. She immediately opened her eyes and lifted a corner of the carriage curtain according to instructions.

But the first thing to meet her eyes was a young man in brocade robes. Though she only saw him in profile, his features were almost dazzling. This person was completely at odds with the gloomy and defeated Land of Turmoil.

Wei Chengxiang blinked involuntarily and thought, “Where did such a handsome nobleman come from?”

But the thought only flashed by in a hurry. She carried a blood feud, and there was terror at every step. The romantic wind that could easily crease a girl’s heart had already passed by like fleeting

clouds. Wei Chengxiang quickly moved her gaze away from the young man and searched for the middle-aged man in the grey robe.

Lü Chengyi, walking at the end of the line, felt the reincarnation wood he was carrying heat up. His expression unwavering, he turned to look and met the eyes of a teenage girl.

Wei Chengxiang smiled at him, and Lü Chengyi nodded almost imperceptibly, acknowledging their respective identities.

The carriage and the people passed by each other.

“Uncle,” Wei Chengxiang excitedly asked Xi Ping, “is that person in grey you?”

“Bullshit.” Xi Ping felt that he had received a colossal insult. “The person I told you to look at is Wuchang One! Remember that face—that’s his true face.”

Wei Chengxiang: “...”

Why didn’t you say so before? I smiled at him for nothing.

Old Nine saw the “holy woman” replace the curtain, the smile quickly disappearing from her small face as it stiffened back into its icy manner. In spite of himself, he trembled with fear. He thought, “The holy woman is only a mortal now, but if she hadn’t lifted the curtain just now, I wouldn’t even have noticed that Senior One was nearby... Tai Sui is truly with her!”

He became increasingly deferential. When they reached the door of the Looking South Building, he jumped out of the carriage first and made a step with his hands to help the holy woman alight.

Wei Chengxiang simply stepped on him to get out of the carriage and heard the Exonerator meeting them at the door say quietly,

“The Looking South Building belongs to our brother. It’s safe. The private room is already prepared. Please enter.”

The carriage blocked Wei Chengxiang’s skinny back. Across the street at the Missing North Building, the manager himself came out to receive the honored guests.

Zhao Zhenwei explained, “Our Mining Office anonymously supplies the funds for the Missing North Building. It’s our territory. If we want to use it, no outside customers are accepted. There will be no interlopers here.”

With a street between them, the immortals faced south, and the evil cultivators faced north.

In the street, people came and went.

Traveling merchants brought goods and sold them on the spot, then took away exotic goods from the south. Because of this, there were stalls set up everywhere. Not far from the Looking South and Missing North Buildings, there was also a stage. Two Turmoilers in an iron cage were doing all they could to tear at each other. But the locals no longer found anything novel in this. Few people stopped to look. The fee-collector yawned from boredom.

The miners’ children had found a kite somewhere and were running wildly holding the string. But the kite still sank and fell on a laborer cleaning river mud. The laborer was carrying a heavy weight and didn’t have time to dodge. The kite knocked off his filthy hat and revealed a deformed face—he was also a Turmoiler. Thirty percent of Turmoilers were like witless mad dogs as soon as they were born; the rest, though they didn’t look human, still more or less counted as human. They could voluntarily pull out their teeth and nails and go to the various nations’ encampments to do hard labor... or herd spiritual beasts.

The urchins of the mines were used to seeing Turmoilers. They weren't afraid. They snatched the kite back and sent the laborer stumbling. The laborer cowered and didn't make a sound. Only when the urchins had run away did he cautiously pick up his hat and put it on. His gaze fell on the iron cage where the fight had already been settled. The laborer met the eyes of the heavily-breathing victor for a moment, then numbly put the stuff on his back again and continued shuffling forward.

The delighted voices of the urchins sounded along the street:
"Untouchable! Untouchable!"

"Ah, that crowd of undisciplined wicked children." A waiter in the Looking South Building said solicitously to Wei Chengxiang,
"Careful on the steps, miss."

Wei Chengxiang ignored him, walking up with her eyes fixed ahead of her. Someone opened the door of the private room for her, and surging spiritual energy poured out. The four walls, the floor, and the ceiling all had complex arrays drawn on them. They instantly put an end to the dull heat of the south.

A rather portly man stood up to welcome them and said, smiling,
"Indignant Cicadas, we have been friends in spirit for so long!"

The Exonerators respectfully bowed their heads and saluted, calling him "my lord."

"I am White Amaranth,"³⁶ the portly man said. "Mr. Nine, Miss Sixty, please sit down."

Old Nine made small talk in the holy woman's stead, saying, "Mr. White, a cup of your snow wine intoxicated all of Jinping City and added some very festive fireworks to this year's New Year celebrations. What scope, what daring!"

“It’s not worth mentioning.” White Amaranth laughed and waved a hand again and again. “Not worth mentioning—you’ve had a long trip, Miss Sixty, escorting my disciples all this way south... Since time immemorial, the heroes have come from among the young. Is your Tai Sui well?”

Wei Chengxiang’s eyes opened wide. In a daze, through the pampered man in front of her, she saw a burnt woman’s corpse with a mouth that wouldn’t close.

Like rusted carriage wheels, the girl’s features under her veil slowly formed a... somewhat ghastly smile. “Thank you. Tai Sui has asked me to give you his regards, Mr. White.”

And to send you on your way to the underworld.

In the Missing North Building, Xi Ping became Zhao Zhenwei’s brother in a few words, exchanging eight hundred stories about “Little Immortal Luo behaving badly,” lamenting that they hadn’t met sooner.

After the two of them had put their heads together to bemoan the misery of cultivating at the Latent Cultivation Temple, Xi Ping casually leveled a false accusation against Prince Zhuang: “I always said I wasn’t cut out for this kind of thing. It was all my cousin. He insisted on getting me into the Latent Cultivation Temple.”

Zhao Zhenwei naturally went along with his subject, shaking his head and sighing. “I have no doubt you’re better off than me, Viscount. I’m the one who isn’t cut out for this. It’s only that my father truly exhausted his means to get the immortal envoy to look at me during the Grand Selection. He collected famous plants and hunted everywhere for green ore fields... I spent a whole year sleeping in a spiritual stone bed and had nightmares every night,

afraid that the immortal envoy wouldn't approve of me and I would let my parents down."

Hearing this, Xi Ping poured a cup of wine, lowered the mouth of the cup, and ardently touched his cup to Zhao Zhenwei's. "Ah, shixiong, we truly are in the same boat! Fate has brought us together!"

We both owe the Chen family a life. Don't you think that's a coincidence?

The dishes full of Southern He flavor flowed like water to their table. Xi Ping sipped flower wine, listening on one end to Princess Anyang bemoaning how long the southern mines had been plagued with evil cultivators, and on the other end to White Amaranth spouting empty rhetoric about the social ills of the day.

Zhao Zhenwei stood up to make a toast. He expressed that this would be the first shipment of the year and also his first time accompanying a shipment north since he had been transferred to the southern mines; he was absolutely petrified and would rely entirely on Lin-shixiong and Viscount Xi. The charlatan Xi Ping had his social graces; he took advantage of the moment to toast Lin Zhaoli, expressing that he was only going along to make up the numbers.

Princess Anyang also sighed and said, "With Lin-shixiong leaving, I'll really have no one to rely on... Let me give a toast to Lin-shixiong, too."

Upon hearing this, Lü Chengyi quickly stood up to accompany her: "The mines really can't do without you, shixiong."

Propped up high by the whole crowd, including a matchless beauty like Princess Anyang, Lin Zhaoli was utterly befuddled from self-satisfaction. Taking himself very seriously, he said, "Set your mind at ease, Your Highness. I'll go to the inner sect to take care of the

formalities, then request a token to leave the mountain. No matter what, I'll help you arrange matters appropriately at the mines before leaving again."

Then he set about passing judgment on all major worldly affairs.

Xi Ping lowered his eyes and listened as on the other end the Indignant Cicadas' Old Nine said to White Amaranth, "This shipment will be more strictly guarded than prior ones, and there will be an established foundation master coming along to escort it."

White Amaranth's smile became somewhat shallower. "Does Mr. Nine mean that we shouldn't attack this shipment but should take our time making plans?"

"No," Old Nine said gravely. "Senior One told me to ask you, Mr. White, whether you dare to seek riches amidst danger."

"What do you mean?"

"The southern mines' outer sect dogs are fighting amongst themselves. That established foundation cultivator Lin is haughty and self-important. He has offended someone without being aware of it." Old Nine said with emphasis, "There is someone who wishes him to die in transit."

The corner of White Amaranth's eye twitched.

"If you're bold enough, Mr. White, we can cooperate inside and out and catch a very big fish while the waters are muddy." Old Nine looked south, as if he could see through the walls to communicate with Wuchang One. "The spiritual stones we obtain will be split up proportionately according to the terms Tai Sui negotiated with you before, to be attested by spiritual covenant. If the collaboration goes well, we Indignant Cicadas may well swear brotherhood with the Exonerators."

As if the cloying sweetness of the flower wine was too much for him, Xi Ping gulped a mouthful of tea and glanced out of the corner of his eye at Lin Zhaoli, just delivering his pompous harangue. He thought that Lin-shixiong's nose was truly remarkable. He said inwardly, "In these two buildings right across from each other, there's a whole handful of people who want you dead, brother. How come you aren't sneezing?"

He had offended someone without being aware of it—in other words, Lin Zhaoli was investigating the traitors in the mines, but one of the "thieves inside the house" was evidently someone he didn't expect.

Someone who wished him to die in transit—he had been appointed by a certain person to escort the spiritual stones...

Just then, the karma beasts Pang Jian had sent to search the mines returned. A dozen avatars combined into one and climbed up along the design on the sheath of Pang Jian's sword.

Commander Pang had some discussion with the sacred beast. The karma beast shook its head in vexation, then disappeared.

Xi Ping was entirely unsurprised. These people had even settled on how to dispose of Lin Zhaoli; it seemed that the incriminating evidence had already been cleaned up.

When he lowered his eyes, he "saw" in the center of his brow as Lü Chengyi obscurely looked toward Zhou Qing. This time, Zhou Qing's gaze happened to meet Lü Chengyi's.

Princess Anyang lowered her eyelashes slightly, nodding with her gaze.

This gaze was extremely icy. There was absolutely no sign of being “at a loss.”

Xi Ping had a sudden realization: so that was it.

Since his mind had cleared after being muddled by her beauty, he had kept thinking that there was something wrong about Princess Anyang. Now at last he knew what it was—there was a contradiction in what Zhou Qing had said.

Liang Chen and the rest of the first group of mine supervisors had been placed in the southern mines only because their meridians had been harmed and they were unable to enter Heaven’s Design Pavilion. They had set the tone for the southern mines from then on—though they were both outer sects, the Mining Office was a rung below Heaven’s Design Pavilion.

A crowd of mine supervisors like this, even if they all went mad and got up the guts to collaborate in squeezing out the princess, would Zhou Qing put up with them for twenty years?

If so, her temperament was too weak and easily bullied; it didn’t match the unruly princess she had described, who insisted on having anything she liked.

She had been only too anxious to agree to let Pang Jian search the mines. It wasn’t that she had been oppressed for so long; it was that she had prepared everything and knew she had nothing to fear.

So Lü Chengyi’s two glances at the princess earlier could be explained: the first time, he had noticed that a master had caught sight of him and suspected that Heaven’s Design Pavilion had brought along another assistant, so he had asked the princess with his eyes how many people had come.

The second time, he had heard them mention Liang Chen without warning and had once again looked at the princess's expression; he had been concerned that Heaven's Design Pavilion had shared their purpose in coming and exposed his lie.

Xi Ping ate a mouthful of the meat of some unknown animal and felt that there were hardly any dishes on this table that weren't sweet. It was so cloying it made him lose his appetite. He no longer felt like eating and picked up a piece of lotus pastry to give Princess Anyang. He said appealingly, "My mom likes this kind of thing, but she doesn't dare to eat too much because she's afraid that eating too much and not moving enough will make her belt too tight. Auntie Qing, you work hard looking after the mines every day, so you should eat up."

Zhou Qing accepted with pleasure and asked in passing after everyone at the Yongning Marquis Manor.

Xi Ping used the skills he normally employed to please his mother, making the princess so happy she beamed.

Auntie Qing, you'd have been better off not mentioning this connection and sticking to seduction.

CHAPTER 49 - The Mountain Falls (1)³⁷

In order to put on an act for the inexperienced royal personage from Jinping, Ling County's thundering machinery stopped for several days. The chimneys shut their mouths. When snow fell, it instantly produced a clear blue sky.

The twenty-ninth year of Taiming, early morning on the second day of the year. The starry expanse had faded, leaving only the morning star.

The rising sun spilled a bowl of blood over the east. It was as much of a sham as the arrays on the gold smelter. Its light was cold; where it shone on the ice and snow, the ice and snow were completely untouched.

Ling County was the last stop in Suling. After he left here, Prince Zhuang would go to Guzhou. Before leaving, His Highness, as though fulfilling a social engagement, picked out a few little problems with the water transport office and the trading companies and let them change them or not as they liked, then praised the openness of Ling County's chamber of commerce, proclaiming: *Good and righteous merchants form a reservoir of beneficence for their hometowns.*

Ling County's magistrate and all the major figures in the chamber of commerce were beside themselves with joy. They wanted to have these words put on a decorative plaque that very day.

Who would have thought that extreme joy would bring tragedy? The decorative plaque was never hung.

That very night, the bodies of the Ling County magistrate and the president of the chamber of commerce were cut up into mincemeat,

all mixed together, loath to part. Their blood was splashed over a whole street in the factory district.

In some sense, the “reservoir of beneficence” had in fact been realized.³⁸

Reasonably speaking, neither of the two men who died had been average people. Their homes practically had more guards than the county yamen³⁹ had bailiffs, never mind the arrays for preventing incursion and expelling evil all around their houses, which were active day and night—they were far more hardworking than the arrays on the gold smelter, anyway.

Magistrate Zheng’s manor even had unauthorized inscriptions.

But both arrays and inscriptions were tidily broken by the unknown assassin with a single slash of the sword; there was no other trace of a bladed weapon. Never mind the servants and guards; Magistrate Zheng had fallen asleep after fooling around with his concubine that night, and even she had no idea what time the person sleeping beside her had gone missing.

Were these mortal means?

While there were always evil cultivators active in the mortal world, the people had never before fought with officials. The Xuanyin Mountains hadn’t fallen, and these evildoers dared to run rampant like this!

For a time, all the high officials and wealthy merchants of Suling were in a state of anxiety. The Suling Prefecture magistrate was furious and sent his subordinates to ask the local branch of Heaven’s Design Pavilion to perform a thorough investigation. The sacred beasts quickly sniffed out the traces of evil cultivators. But

when Heaven's Design Pavilion went to arrest them, the evil cultivators had been warned ahead of time and fled.

The "heroic" story quietly passed by word of mouth among the commoners. People who normally would have handed over their own heads for a few copper coins unanimously kept silent.

The silent people gradually understood the truth:

Were the grand dwellings protected by immortals really so impregnable? Not at all. It turned out that those magical inscriptions could be broken.

Were these high officials with their roots so deep that even a prince couldn't shake their trees really so untouchable? No. It turned out that when heads were rolling everywhere, it didn't matter how tall your hat was.

These two people's deaths were quickly illustrated in pamphlets, which circulated among the not especially literate common people.

When everyone in the vicinity was willing to be an accomplice to evil cultivators, forget about some mere unauthorized inscriptions around the house; even the great array of Xuanyin would tremble.

At any rate, Suling's notables were in a panic.

On the night of the third day of the year, the bailiffs began going home by home and family by family making raids, searching for supporters of the evil cultivators. If there was a trace of suspicion, they would take people in without regard for the facts.

When the kings of the underworld lost their heads, of course the little devils would run wild. On the surface, the bailiffs were justly enforcing the law; in secret, they took the opportunity to reap benefits. They released those who could pay them and put those

who couldn't pay in prison; they arrested even seventy-year-old greybeards and ten-year-old children as "murderous evil cultivators." Mournful wails shook the sky.

The people's fury, which had been one spark away from exploding, at last boiled over.

On the fifth day of the month, a group of workers in rags took up iron rods, shovels, and so forth, and charged into the homes of the county magistrate's assistant and the patrol commanders.

No one had expected this—everyone had some protective immortal tool or array around the house. These things were more useful than any guard. Lions and tigers would be cooked, so what about mortals, who were no better than beasts of burden?

But when good advances a chi, evil advances a zhang—those bold evil cultivators mixed in among the workers and helped them break the immortal tools and arrays.

This time the beasts of burden had turned on their masters.

By the time the troops from the provincial seat of Suling arrived, not one of Ling County's three patrol commanders was still alive. The fires in the factories reached the sky, and Great Wan's first gold smelter had reopened for the New Year.

Sometimes, all that's missing is a single hole in the dam, the first knife daring to fall for the whole country.

With someone to open the way, what follows can't be held back.

Prince Zhuang, who ought to have gone to Guzhou, mysteriously disappeared. All the branches of Heaven's Design Pavilion had too much to worry about. Even Xi Ping only received a brief "all's well" from Prince Zhuang.

Xi Ping was at this time already aboard ship.

He shut the white jade proximal and gasped for breath—in order to pick out Tai Sui’s remaining followers, he had long ago removed the mind-clearing spell Zhi Xiu had placed on his spirit. Before, Xi Ping had already been able to control his consciousness, having made his first steps toward “being unmoved by external things.” But in the last few days, for some reason, many more people had been calling for “Tai Sui.”

The noise didn’t stop day or night. Even if he removed distracting thoughts and meditated, wave after wave still battered his spirit, making him distracted and irritable.

“No good. I’m about to die from being cooped up. I’m going out to get a breath of fresh air,” Xi Ping told Xi Yue, then went out on deck.

The setting sun had fallen into the west, and the calls of the water dragons were audible on deck. A faint salt scent hit him in the face—they had reached the sea.

The spiritual stone shipment took a rather different route going north than the one Xi Ping had come by. After leaving Great Wan’s encampment, they had gone a short way north, then turned onto the Chunqiu River, going east directly to the sea. When they reentered Great Wan territory, they would put in at port and return to the canal in the interior by a runoff channel.

First, this was because the convoy was practically a navy. Adding in the water dragons to lead the way, once they entered the river, no one else could pass. Apart from their own country’s territory, no one would clear the river for them.

Also, when government ships transported spiritual stones, packaging, counting, stowage... every stage was extremely strict—

this wasn't like Prince Zhuang sending Xi Ping spare change and neither of them caring if ten or twenty percent of it was used up by the array. If the quantity of spiritual stones was a bit off, all the cultivators and crew aboard the convoy ships would be blamed. Going through rivers in the interior was unsafe. Even if no one set up cannons on land and lay in wait for them, while passing through another country's territory, they wouldn't even be able to handle someone burying an array under the riverbed.

"Viscount." A page boy delivering food solicitously greeted Xi Ping. "The ship has been rocking since we entered the sea. Are you seasick? Should I bring you a cup of southern grape wine?"

Xi Ping quickly waved a hand and said, "Spare me. If you don't give me something salty to eat, enough acid will come up from my stomach to support a factory—is that for Lin-shixiong?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Then hurry up," said Xi Ping. "He'll get mad at you guys again if you're late."

Lin Zhaoli had just passed the established foundation boundary, and his state was unsteady. He also hadn't attained inedia yet. This gentleman was unusually picky. He only used the tableware he had brought himself; the bowls, chopsticks, trays, and dishes had to be put in fixed places; and the food had to be brought at exactly the time he said, neither a little early nor a little late would do. The only thing he hadn't stipulated was how many grains of rice should be in his bowl.

Xi Ping suspected he was cultivating the "way of fussiness"—this way had no benefits apart from making it easy for people to poison him.

When Xi Ping passed by the page boy, he slightly curled his left hand, hidden in his wide sleeve. The page boy's eyes went blank for a moment, as if his soul had been temporarily removed.

Using the skills he had learned gambling with dice as a teenager, Xi Ping quickly palmed a talisman and swept it over the food. The talisman disappeared in his hand. Next, thin white steam came up from the tea on the tray and vanished in midair.

These movements took only a moment. The page boy's vacant gaze quickly focused. He shook his head and muttered, "What was that sound...?"

Then he continued walking forward, having no idea what had just happened.

Xi Ping idly leaned on the railing, looking out over the sea. He "heard" the page boy pray to Tai Sui in his mind: "Bless me, Tai Sui. Let this go smoothly."

Xi Ping thought, Nope, I'm not protecting you. I even have to curse you.

While there was still nothing he could do about the noise, if he met a Tai Sui believer face to face, his once-broken left hand was extremely effective. He could catch each one precisely. On this shipment convoy, apart from Wuchang One Lü Chengyi, all the other Indignant Cicadas were mortals. Xi Ping had tried a few times and found that the music made by his left hand could only affect mortals—once when there had been a musician at a feast, he had taken the opportunity to try plucking a string in Lü Chengyi's mind, and the outcome was that not only had he been unable to affect his consciousness, he had instead touched Lü Chengyi's spiritual sense.

Xi Ping deduced that this was because his own cultivation wasn't high enough.

Fortunately, Lü Chengyi had a foot on two boats now and was ready to flee or die. He wasn't planning on letting a single person in the convoy return alive, so he hadn't been willing to bring along the other cultivators among the Indignant Cicadas.

Lin Zhaoli opened the door for the page boy bringing his food and glanced at Xi Ping, who was being buffeted by the wind not far away. Presumably he had heard Xi Ping mocking him just now; Lin Zhaoli didn't grace him with a smile.

This old brother was indifferent toward everyone. At any rate, in this shipment convoy, no one, not even Commander Zhao Zhenwei, was worthy of him so much as rolling his pupils down from checking the weather—he only cared about Princess Anyang. Before leaving, he had repeatedly consoled Zhou Qing, ardently guaranteeing that he would certainly come back as soon as possible. He wouldn't leave Her Highness all alone in the southern mines.

Xi Ping had looked on from the sidelines at this moving parting. He simply wanted to sigh: Within just three days of setting off, this weak and helpless good princess of yours arranged for you to be drugged twice. She's terrified that you'll come back.

Clearly there was a reason that Lin-shixiong, an established foundation cultivator and direct descendant of the Lin family, couldn't even look after the southern mines. As Xi Ping saw it, it was a pity to leave this kind of talent in the mortal world; he would be better off going back to the inner sect to cultivate in peace as soon as possible.

The detoxifying talisman he had used was a special kind of miasma clearing spell—the name alone told you that Pang Jian had taught it to him.

Pang-shixiong had said that toxicology was a broad and deep area of knowledge; you could forget about becoming an expert to save yourself at the last minute. If you wanted to guard against the plots of others, you only had to remember one thing—a mortal couldn't poison a cultivator. Ignoring whether the poison would work or not, as soon as the stuff was brought in, it would immediately touch the cultivator's spiritual sense.

If you wanted to poison a cultivator, you needed another cultivator to use spiritual energy to fabricate a toxin.

He didn't need to worry about what kind of poison it was. He only needed to use the miasma clearing spell to break up the spiritual energy in the poison. With a cultivator's constitution, swallowing arsenic or heartbreak powder would be no problem.

At first, Xi Ping had been pondering what kind of lie he could make up to reveal the information he had overheard to Lao Pang. But on the night of the one-day tour of the Missing North Building, Pang-shixiong had walked through the wall to see him, stared at him as he practiced the miasma clearing spell until he was good at it, then instructed: "Remember to use this on anything from Anyang."

Xi Ping: "..."

Fine. This Commander Pang had nearly cultivated to spiritual enlightenment in Jinping City; any problem obvious enough for Xi Ping to see, the old fox would have sniffed out long ago.

Though the two of them were always goading each other, they had quite a good tacit understanding when it came to presenting a united front toward the outside world; they could communicate with a single look.

Pang Jian said seriously, “I suppose your shifu gave you something to protect yourself with?”

“Yes,” Xi Ping answered, also solemnly, “a technique for wasting lots of money.”

“Piss off.” Pang Jian kicked him, then said, “Lin Zhaoli is an idiot, and that Zhao Zhenwei only thinks about having a good time. Neither of them is reliable. You were the one who turned my attention onto Lü. I don’t know how you figured it out, but I think your idea is right.”

Xi Ping sat up straight and heard Pang Jian say, “I looked into his background. He grew up in the mines, like me, then became a miner himself when he came of age. He must have a naturally good spiritual sense. Spending all his time in the spiritual mines, he opened his spiritual eyes by chance. Though quite a few mine supervisors became cultivators like this, it isn’t a good thing when a miner opens his spiritual eyes—the superiors will first suspect that he’s been embezzling. They’ll hold him and subject him to strict investigation several times. Only when he’s proven that he’s done nothing wrong can he remain in the Mining Office as a disciple of record... As for whether you get soul-searched and turn into an imbecile or go on to be a half-immortal, it mostly depends on whether there’s anyone with influence in the mines to protect you. The person who protected Lü Chengyi was Liang Chen. Generally speaking, that kind of gratitude is heavier than a mountain. It’s within the realm of possibility to regard such a person as an adopted father. But the strange thing is, these two didn’t mix afterward.”

They had both spent most of two centuries in the southern mines, and their relationship had been as distant as ordinary colleagues. The spiritual mines’ logbook even showed that of the ten senior mine supervisors, Lü Chengyi and Liang Chen had the smallest

number of interactions. It was as if the two of them had been deliberately avoiding suspicion.

“If Anyang really is involved in this, this trip may be dangerous,” Pang Jian said. “Look, find an excuse to stay at the mines with me...”

As soon as he heard this, Xi Ping wasn't having any of it. He thought, Then wouldn't I have come for nothing?

“Riches come in the midst of danger. Maybe I'll be able to get to the bottom of their scheme,” Xi Ping said. “Shixiong, this is a serious matter. Practically all your subordinate walkers in the mortal world come from noble families. Their backgrounds are all deep-rooted and complex. If even Princess Anyang is involved, who can you trust now?”

Pang Jian: “...”

In fact, there was no one he could use.

“I think you'll have to rely on me.” Xi Ping licked his lips. “Don't worry, shixiong. No one knows about my natural spiritual bones. Even if they've heard that I joined Flying Jade Peak, it's been hardly any time at all. None of them will take me seriously. If I'm really hard up, I can always peddle my charms. I think you'll acknowledge that I'm better off in that respect than you, right?”

Pang Jian said, “What are you showing off for, pretty boy?”

He frowned and thought about it over and over. There really was nothing else to do.

“If Anyang really is involved in this, I don't know what she could want. Great Wan is her and her family's own home. Why would she go crazy and collude with others to steal her own things...?” Pang

Jian frowned again. “We already know that these ‘thieves inside the house’ are colluding with Southern Shu.”

Xi Ping caught up quickly: “If they needed foreign aid for something, they would certainly want to use Southern Shu’s power.”

“Southern Shu isn’t a problem. You’ve already caused one calamity for them. It gets easier the second time.” Pang Jian waved a hand. “I’m going to warn you to look out for Chu and Northern Li—especially the Chu. They were involved that day by the spiritual beast pool.”

Xi Ping knew absolutely nothing about international politics. He gave a confused “oh.” “Why?”

“Because Southern Shu doesn’t have a border with us, you total ignoramus!” Pang Jian slapped him on the back of the head, resenting him for being unable to improve at once. “While that bunch of beast tamers at Lingyun aren’t necessarily good people, they certainly don’t want to see domestic upheaval in Great Wan. Southern He has become the Land of Turmoil, and Southern Shu has no strength with any hope of winning against Chu’s Xiang family—you can study on the way, young master! You must at least know some history within the last two-hundred years?”

“Well...”

When Xi Ping thought of the word “study,” it was as if some spell had been worked on him. All his lazy muscles ached again and again. He leaned against the railing for ages like a dead dog. Today the sea was all water, with nothing worth looking at. The evil cultivators on board the ships had also calmed down. All he could do was idly loiter back to his cabin and take out the *Notes from a Progress to the West* that Pang Jian had given him.

While he was going through his mustard seed, he paused—there was a pile of stuff in there.

Snacks, specially made rouge, little trinkets... These were things Princess Anyang had given him to take back to Madam Cui.

Very distrustingly, he had already inspected the items. There was nothing wrong with them. At Xi Ping's brief glance, the colors of the rouge were the ones his mother generally preferred. Because he had casually mentioned lotus wine, Zhou Qing had ordered several big cases of it packed up for him at the Missing North Building.

Before leaving, this princess had even gone out of her way to stop him and instruct, "Your Lin-shixiong needs to consolidate his cultivation. He isn't likely to show his face unless something major happens. Just listen to your Lü-shixiong on the way. He's spent his whole life traveling with the spiritual stone convoys. He knows everything."

Xi Ping sighed. Zhou Qing hadn't been making it up. She really must have been friends with Madam Cui when she was young. She had told him to "listen to Lü-shixiong" because she thought Lü Chengyi was one of her people.

She even thought she was pointing him toward safety on that ship of murder.

"Auntie Qing." Xi Ping had been unable to resist then. He had tested Anyang, saying, "You aren't happy here at the mines. You're all oppressed. Just go back to the Latent Cultivation Temple. Be a steward for a few years, then go into the inner sect. This place in the middle of nowhere is unworthy of you."

Zhou Qing's smile had faded. Age had suddenly appeared on that girl's face. She was silent for a moment, then finally said, "This empire bears the name of Zhou. His Majesty is still working hard, so

how could I abandon him and flee into the deep mountains myself? It's only that my abilities are limited, and there isn't much I can do to help him... You're a child. You don't understand."

So you're "helping" him by colluding with a foreign nation, robbing your own spiritual stone mines?

In fact, Xi Ping didn't understand. When he thought about it, he was at a complete loss.

He casually flipped through the book without really looking, then once again "heard" one of the people on the ship that he had marked out as a Tai Sui believer praying for divine protection. He used his spirit to "look" that way.

He heard the believer say to Lü Chengyi, "Lin has already taken the second dose of Mirage Powder. The final dose will be the day after tomorrow. It will take effect immediately. We'll have just reached the Resurrection Vortex. Our brothers are ready."

CHAPTER 50 - The Mountain Falls (2)

Xi Ping abruptly sat up straight and concentrated on the center of his brow. The whispers of all the evil cultivators in every corner of the convoy came to his ears.

“... the fourth watch...”

“... allies responded to confirm there was no mistake. The Shu will be disguised as evil cultivators...”

“Time to give them a taste of their own medicine...”

“The foulness clearing water dragons will...”

“When the Mirage Powder flares up...”

“Don’t worry, we can control the water dragons...”

“The inscriptions and the great array...”

Here it comes!

Xi Ping tapped on his knee, considering what he ought to do.

The bone qin in his hands was a little more useful than before... but only a little.

Apart from that sword energy of shifu’s that was so expensive you couldn’t buy it with your life, his bone qin only worked well when he had intent. For example, the music had only had the drive to cut through stone when he had been in mortal peril. Normally, if he wanted to use the music to hit a target, it would be hit or miss.

There were only the fingers of his left hand, which could play a silent string directly in a person's spirit that would produce the handy-for-kidnapping effect of confusing a person as soon as he touched the string. But this was also limited: first, the target had to be an Indignant Cicada who had spilled their blood on reincarnation wood; next, the target's cultivation had to be lower than his. Mortals... and perhaps cultivators who had just opened their spiritual eyes, he figured he could take care of those, but anyone with an especially high natural spiritual sense, or an old half-immortal with decades of experience, he definitely wouldn't be able to control; finally, his music could only affect one person at a time.

In others words, in dealing with Lü Chengyi, the "junior Tai Sui" Xi Ping's most effective weapon was trickery.

And in this convoy, apart from Wuchang One, there were about a dozen other Indignant Cicadas among the crew and entourage, dispersed among different freight and guard ships. Xi Ping could perhaps seize an opportunity to get up to a bit of sabotage when they struck, but he couldn't control the whole operation.

Apart from that, Xi Ping knew that he had one other disadvantage: though he believed he had been working very hard lately, he still wasn't as familiar with the inscriptions and arrays on the guard ships as those old half-immortals—the daily lesson papers covered in mistakes circled by his shifu were enough to help him dispel any illusions and act accordingly.

So all he could do was... abscond.

On the evening of the following day, Xi Ping accurately calculated when Zhao Zhenwei would be patrolling the main ship and started to warm up wine in his cabin. To the wine he added a drop of Maze that he had brought from Flying Jade Peak.

The ordinary wine immediately became exquisite. The fragrance made everyone who passed by his door unable to resist swallowing a mouthful of saliva. As expected, it lured Zhao Zhenwei in. Zhao Zhenwei was keen on making connections with everyone. He had already decided to make friends with the Viscount of Yongning. He started a conversation with “smells delicious,” was invited by Xi Ping to join him, and joyfully put aside his duty at once to go drink.

“You’re asking about the Resurrection Vortex.” Zhao Zhenwei smacked his lips over the taste of the wine and, very pleased with himself, said, “It’s a big area of whirlpools in the sea caused by the tides. When it begins to swirl, the sea can fill up with hundreds of thousands of revolving abysses. The biggest can be up to a hundred zhang—terrifying and magnificent. But we won’t see it. When we ship spiritual stones north, we have masters to calculate an auspicious time—not the way the almanac says when it’s suitable to start construction, break ground, or something. It’s when the Resurrection Vortex is calm.”

As Xi Ping encouraged him to drink, he said casually, “Then why don’t we just avoid that area altogether?”

“If we could avoid it, we would. There’s nothing to be done. The location where the whirlpools appear isn’t fixed. The range is very large. There’s no way to go around. Anyway, this is the Land of Turmoil. Where are we supposed to go to resupply?” At this point, Zhao Zhenwei shook his head. “Actually, sometimes I think, well, men are men. We can’t struggle against heaven.”

Seeing him begin to sigh, Xi Ping knew that the wine had gone to his head. He calmly poured him another cup and said naïvely, “Zhao-shixiong, I don’t like listening to this kind of demoralizing talk from you. Doesn’t everyone say that man is sure to triumph over heaven?”

Zhao Zhenwei waved a hand. “You’re still young.”

Xi Ping adopted a posture of requesting instruction.

Zhao Zhenwei had no authority in the southern mines. On one hand, he had to call everyone shixiong or shijie; on the other hand, none of his subordinates obeyed him. Having for once run into someone younger than him who wanted to consult his experience, he immediately developed an itch to be paternal.

“Man is sure to triumph over heaven?” He laughed a few times and downed a cup of wine without noticing. “Let me tell you—a man, once he comes out of his mother’s womb, there’s basically no suspense about how his whole life will go. Heaven decides whether he’ll be rich or poor. In my opinion, it’s best to let things go as they will—let’s say for example those commoners. A butcher’s son grows up and becomes a butcher, marries the carpenter’s daughter next door, lives on steadily for some decades, and then it’s over, and everyone is happy. I envy that. If you insist on ‘triumphing over heaven,’ concealing spiritual fields, hiding evil cultivators... or simply becoming an evil cultivator yourself, turning yourself into a monster, what’s the benefit of it to this mortal world?”

Xi Ping was just peeling grapes. Perhaps he used too much force; he splashed his whole hand. Then, as if in a fit of temper, he tossed the grapes aside and didn’t touch them anymore.

Xi Yue looked at him and silently took the fruit tray, peeled the grapes for him, then used a sliver of wood to pick out the seeds.

Xi Ping, with his eyes fixed on Zhao Zhenwei, said, smiling, “Zhao-shixiong, do you mean you can still run into evil cultivators while at the southern mines?”

“Ah, of course I’ve run into them, and not so long ago, just... just last year, an evil cultivator came after my home.” Zhao Zhenwei was

already starting to slur a little. “My...*hic*... my home, it’s in Ning’an Prefecture, at the emperor’s feet. Weren’t they bold!”

“Wow,” Xi Ping said, “astonished,” “I had no idea something like that could happen!”

“And their cultivation wasn’t low, must have been late open-eyed stage. Luckily, a shixiong from the inner sect had come to harvest the medicinal herb field that day and was staying with my family... Oh, you may not know about medicinal herb fields. They’re green ore fields scattered all over the mortal world, of no use to us, but medicine cultivators often use them for planting medicinal herbs. There’s a green ore field in Ning’an, it belongs to a forebear from our Zhao family.” When speaking of his family’s status, Zhao Zhenwei couldn’t avoid some appearance of bragging. He said exultantly, “That evil cultivator was strong enough to force our inner sect shixiong to use an immortal tool that the sect had bestowed on him. The immortal tool gutted them, and they still kept coming. Finally they were carried away by their own accomplices. Fierce, no?”

When he wasn’t paying attention, Xi Ping poured out the wine in his own cup and muttered, “Truly fierce. Must have been crazy?”

“Obviously.” Zhao Zhenwei slapped his thigh and sighed. “What is this world coming to!”

Xi Yue put a small dish of cleaned up grapes in front of Xi Ping and carefully checked his expression.

Xi Ping didn’t look at him. He conveyed a thought through the dragon-taming chain: *I’m not angry.*

Xi Yue pushed the dish forward again. *If you’re not angry, then eat something.*

There was nothing Xi Ping could do about him. Expression unwavering, he took a deep breath and ate the grapes... They were cloyingly sweet, choking.

“Shidi, where did you get this wine? It’s great!”

Xi Ping said, smiling, “A family elder made it. If we weren’t going into the Resurrection Vortex tomorrow and I wasn’t worried about holding you back from your duties, Zhao-shixiong, I would certainly invite you for another round of drinking until we drop.”

“It’s nothing.” Zhao Zhenwei waved a hand, slurring. “Six water dragons are going into the water tonight, all the protections on the guard ships have been turned on. Even the Dragon King would have to make way if he showed up. There’s nothing to keep the two of us from drinking.”

“Good,” Xi Ping said, enunciating clearly, “then it’s settled. I’ll be waiting for you, shixiong.”

Assuming you survive the night.

A full moon rose over the waves on the sea. A figure silently entered the great water dragon array on the first guard ship.

The foulness clearing water dragons leading the way over the sea were different from the one Pang Jian had tossed into the canal by the docks. Once they entered the water, they were no different from the mystical dragons in ancient legend. The dragons’ roars could make sharks, whales, and sea monsters within thirty li avoid them. Six water dragons dispatched at once and circling around would even let the convoy pass smoothly through a tsunami or a tempest.

Right now, there were two water dragons leading the way and four still in the great array. They were frisking around together in the three-zhang-square array like carp.

Lü Chengyi stood beside the array, reciting a spell. A pitch-black talisman gradually took shape in his hand.

The water dragons began to move restlessly. They opened their mouths and roared silently at the ill-intentioned man outside the array.

Lü Chengyi didn't so much as raise his eyelids. He abruptly pressed the talisman down. The water dragon array shook, all its spiritual threads trembling like ripples. The four water dragons first struggled fiercely. Then mist rose over their clear eyes, which gradually clouded over. A moment later, the water dragons stopped moving.

Lü Chengyi let out a breath, bit through his finger, and wrote on the reincarnation wood: "All goes smoothly."

The writing was quickly absorbed by the reincarnation wood, then came to a stop in Xi Ping's spirit—this was another thing Xi Ping had had Wei Chengxiang help him test.

He didn't know how Liang Chen had had his believers use the reincarnation wood to send messages between themselves before, but Xi Ping, having fixed on a particular believer, could not only pick out that person's prayers, he could also receive the messages they wrote in blood on the reincarnation wood. Once he had read the message, he could transmit it in its original form to another believer's reincarnation wood.

In this way, Wuchang One communicated with the "holy woman," with Tai Sui as a courier.

Right now, the "holy woman" was accompanying Old Nine and the Exonerators, acting as point of contact for the two sides. The Exonerators were already lying in wait. This message from Lü Chengyi was to give the "holy woman" a status update.

Xi Ping was arm in arm with Zhao Zhenwei, making a spectacle on the deck. Both of them were stumbling—even singing.

Lin Zhaoli looked outside and muttered “what a disgrace,” then slammed his door shut. The crew members passing by didn’t dare to say anything, either. All they could do was carefully stay by the railings to make sure these two nobles didn’t go overboard.

Luckily, these two showed no intention of swimming off their wine. Singing wildly off key, they went down into the ship’s hold.

The moment Lü Chengyi’s message touched Xi Ping’s spirit, Xi Ping, having reached a place in the ship’s hold that no one could see, without any hesitation dragged Zhao Zhenwei toward a wall. At the same time, he stamped a hither seal on the wall.

On the guard ship, a spiritual seal he had left behind earlier in a little corridor outside the water dragon array was instantly activated.

The two places immediately connected.

Xi Ping pushed Zhao Zhenwei in. There wasn’t a trace of drunkenness left on his face. He watched as Zhao Zhenwei and the spiritual seal disappeared together from the main ship.

Then he fixed his gaze on Lü Chengyi through the center of his brow. He saw Lü Chengyi, having just finished secretly tampering with the water dragon array, leave the water dragon cabin. Before he could even take a breath... he walked right into Zhao Zhenwei, reeking of wine.

Both of them froze.

“Hey,” Xi Ping said to himself, “you’ve been caught in the act now.”

Keeping calm, he said the name “Wei Chengxiang” in his mind and conveyed Lü Chengyi’s message. He casually said, “Don’t worry, he’ll be sending you another message soon.”

Wei Chengxiang opened her eyes. The spiritual stone in her mouth had already turned to powder. She sucked in a breath and grimaced, moving around, swallowing the powder along with blood.

At first she had kept quiet because she was scared of saying the wrong thing. Now she didn’t want to talk even when there was no need to hold back—having spent so long holding spiritual stones in her mouth, the roof of her mouth and her tongue were always being rubbed raw, healing, then being rubbed raw again. They were about to start festering. Never mind giving a long-winded speech; even when she drank a mouthful of water, she wished she could tear open her throat and pour it right in.

In the eyes of Old Nine and the others, at any rate, the holy woman became increasingly enigmatic.

Before Wei Chengxiang could answer, the roots of her ears suddenly caught a sound—perhaps because her spiritual eyes were loosening, she had recently begun having a faint sense of her spiritual sense gathering in her five senses. Her hearing and vision had been increasingly sharp.

As soon as the person at the door approached, she could hear who it was. She quickly folded up her out-flung legs, straightened her crooked hips and waist, and adopted a frosty posture.

A moment later, there were three knocks at the door. Old Nine quietly said, “Holy woman.”

Wei Chengxiang knocked once on the table, indicating for him to come in.

Old Nine came in with his head bowed, not daring to look the holy woman directly in the face. He said, “Holy woman, in a display of good faith, Mr. White’s side has already signed a spiritual covenant. I have read the contents. Take a look, holy woman. If this is good, could I ask you to sign the spiritual contact as Tai Sui’s representative?”

Saying so, he took out a ball of “gold thread.” When Old Nine stretched it out, it seemed as though line after line of golden writing was written on transparent paper. They leapt into Wei Chengxiang and Xi Ping’s eyes. They saw that the writing listed how the two sides would collaborate, how they would divide up the spoils, and so on.

Wei Chengxiang skimmed it and came to the final ghastly term: *If either party violates the contract, their spirit will shatter.*

Wei Chengxiang said, *Uncle, what is this?*

Xi Ping: “...”

He had vaguely heard someone mention a “spiritual covenant” before, but there had been too much information at the time, and it had been too jumbled. He hadn’t taken note.

Xi Ping quickly asked Xi Yue through the dragon-taming chain: *What is a spiritual covenant?*

Xi Yue, who studied in his place every day, quickly responded: *It’s a kind of contract written on the spiritual image. When both sides have given voluntary consent and shown good faith in the form of their heart’s blood applied to the contract, the spiritual covenant is formed.*

Xi Ping said, *Can it be broken off? Violated?*

Xi Yue said, The contract can't be broken off. Whether the terms can be violated depends on the arrangements. In lighter cases, the violator's meridians will be damaged or broken. In more serious cases, their spirit will be extinguished and their cultivation destroyed. Even if one side dies, if the spiritual covenant doesn't provide that it will dissolve upon death, the obligation won't disappear. The other side still has to honor it.

Xi Ping: "..."

Wei Chengxiang: "..."

Oh no. Why hadn't he taken precautions against this kind of thing?

Just then, Xi Ping's spine went cold. His spiritual sense had been touched. He gave a start and followed where his spiritual sense led him. To his shock, he found that Lü Chengyi and Zhao Zhenwei hadn't performed according to his script.

Zhao Zhenwei mumbled, "...Lao Lü?"

Having been bumped into on the scene after tampering with the water dragon array, Lü Chengyi didn't panic. He slapped a talisman to Zhao Zhenwei's forehead.

Zhao Zhenwei quickly tossed his head and sobered up.

"What's going on?" Lü Chengyi said grimly. "Weren't you patrolling the main ship?"

"I... was..." Zhao Zhenwei was confused for a moment, then realized something. "Did you just finish with the water dragon array?"

The two of them looked at each other in dismay, then said at the same time, "Oh no!"

Damn it, Xi Ping thought, I didn't expect this. Zhao isn't an evil cultivator, but he's still one of the thieves inside the house!

CHAPTER 51 - The Mountain Falls (3)

“Xi Yue!”

Xi Yue had been cleaning up the aftermath of the drinking party. When this shout came through the dragon-taming chain, the half-puppet was startled and broke a glazed cup.

Two figures—Lü Chengyi and Zhao Zhenwei—swept like a tornado from the first guard ship to the main ship. One headed for the lower levels of the ship’s hold while the other rushed straight to Xi Ping’s guest cabin.

The Indignant Cicada crew member who had been trying to poison Lin Zhaoli and bringing him food in the meantime was just passing by. To his astonishment he saw Lü Chengyi, who had always been mild and courteous, arrive at Xi Ping’s door, glance in with his consciousness, then break the door down without so much as a heads up.

“Senior... Exalted Lü, what’s wrong?”

Lü Chengyi ignored him. He stood grimly at the door—Xi Ping’s room was completely empty. There was only a broken cup on the floor, the aroma of wine still hanging around it.

Could this be coincidence? A bored young man using an immortal tool to make mischief, just happening to send Zhao Zhenwei to the guard ship?

The corner of Lü Chengyi’s eye twitched over and over.

But if that was the case, why would even his mute servant be gone, without even having taken the time to clean up the broken cup?

Lü Chengyi turned abruptly and pursed his lips in a whistle. One of the water dragons leading the way in front of the convoy leapt out of the water. Lü Chengyi took a talisman between his fingertips and wrote “Xi Ping” on it. Then he tapped the talisman. It broke into a beam of light and dispersed into the sea, rushing toward the water dragon.

The water dragon roared, dove back underwater, then turned and headed back toward the area of the convoy.

“As soon as that brat Xi Ping realizes he’s been seen through,” Lü Chengyi thought, “his first response will definitely be to hide in the water. I have to keep him on the ship.”

Xi Ping had already taken out the emergency “water-repelling pearl” Pang Jian had given him—when the pearl was thrown into the water, it could hold two people and stay submerged for a year and a half with no problem.

The pearl had already left his hand when he heard the roar. Xi Ping reached out to scoop the water-repelling pearl back up.

Damn it! That bum Lü!

His spiritual sense was touched once more. Part of it was the dragon-taming chain, part of it was a reaction from his left hand—Xi Yue was nearby and had run into one of the Indignant Cicada traitors.

The half-puppet Xi Yue had been originally made to hunt down spiritual objects for his master; he was unusually sensitive toward spiritual energy, so he could easily avoid the cultivators on the ship. But the crew were all mortals, and his luck wasn’t very good. When he heard footsteps coming around the corner, he was trapped in a narrow corridor.

He couldn't be seen. Xi Yue wanted to go back up on deck at once, but the ship's hull surged fiercely, and the deafening roar of the water dragon came from the direction of the deck.

He had no way out.

Just then, the crew member stopped in his tracks.

The next moment, a familiar aura quickly approached. Before Xi Yue could turn around, he was scooped up. Xi Yue's vision swam. He was stuck under this person's arm and flew through the narrow passage like the wind, brushed past the dumbstruck crew member, and squeezed into a storage closet.

In about the space of a breath, the crew member's footsteps sounded once again. The Indignant Cicada crew member had no idea he had been hypnotized by the junior Tai Sui's "sleepwalking song." He kept walking forward without even changing the frequency of his footsteps.

Xi Ping abruptly let out a sigh of relief and caressed the back of Xi Yue's head. You were nearly a goner.

Feeling his hand, Xi Yue went cold. Young master, what's going on?

Xi Ping's head was buzzing. He first instructed Wei Chengxiang: Don't sign it, A-Xiang. Stall for time, I'll think of something.

Then he said to Xi Yue, Wuchang One just tampered with the water dragon array. I sent Zhao Zhenwei there. I didn't think that Zhao would be one of Anyang's people.

Xi Yue was stunned.

Xi Ping evened out his breathing. This damned shipment convoy. The commander is a traitor, the head of the guard is a traitor among

traitors... Ugh, my tongue is about to tie itself into a fucking knot.

Lin Zhaoli thought he had caught the traitors in the mines by the tail and was prepared to lay down his life to eliminate this evil for Princess Anyang, but he didn't know fuck all. He was on the "bottom rung" of the complex southern mines.

Anyang herself was the head of the thieves in the house. She must have been very moved to receive this kind of fawning from him, both funny and irritating, and had casually arranged for Lao Lin to take a sumptuous cruise to the Western Heaven. But she was still only on the "middle rung," because she also hadn't thought that the person she had dispatched to send Lin Zhaoli to his death was a genuine article evil cultivator who had already made plans with his co-conspirators to finish off the established foundation Lao Lin and make off with all the goods—Lü Chengyi, as Wuchang One, was on the "top rung" of this dog-eat-dog game.

Xi Ping had succeeded in infiltrating the real evil cultivators' central altar and pretended to be a god, receiving sacrifices while listening in on their secret plans. He had thought he was sitting above them all, with a commanding view. But instead he had floated up too high, and his vision had been obstructed.

He said to Xi Yue, This is my fault. I've been negligent. I thought that if I kept an eye on the Indignant Cicadas, I'd have it all under control. I ought to have expected this. Anyang has everyone in the mines deceived and has to put on an act in front of Lin Zhaoli every day. If that idiot Lin could bear to put her to the trouble, I figure she'd have infiltrated them and been investigating herself—a genius like that couldn't possibly send Lü Chengyi as Lin Zhaoli's sole executioner.

Xi Yue had never seen Xi Ping so fretful. Even at the Latent Cultivation Temple, when he had been ready to smash himself to pieces and had ordered Xi Yue to go steal the inscription, he had

still acted as though nothing were the matter, making Xi Yue think that there really wasn't anything the matter and nearly making him live the rest of his life full of remorse.

Xi Yue made an upright proposal: Why don't we just go out and face them directly?

Xi Ping held his head down. I don't need any lousy ideas from you.

Wasn't it stupid to think about saying to Idiot Lin "Zhao Zhenwei and Lü Chengyi are both Anyang's people, and they're sharpening their knives getting ready to sink you"? How could the old boy's heart bear that naked truth? He was sure to be shamed into anger. Anyway, he had neither witnesses nor physical evidence. It wasn't as if he could say "I guess I am Tai Sui"... But the other side might well have evidence.

Since Zhao Zhenwei was Anyang's man, what about the other cultivators on board? Xi Ping didn't know.

Playing tricks was like playing with fire while facing the wind; if you got slightly distracted, it would backfire and burn you. Xi Ping had learned this lesson at the Latent Cultivation Temple. But back then, it had only been him. Being smashed was no big deal. He'd gotten better after half a year in bed and forgotten the pain once the injury was healed. This time, he not only had Xi Yue with him, he had also gotten a little girl trapped in a den of evil cultivators.

That Lü Chengyi hadn't worked it out yet, but soon...

"A-Xiang," he called impatiently to Wei Chengxiang through the reincarnation wood, "listen to me, forget about it, we can take revenge together later—I'll help you. Things have gone badly, escape as fast you can now!"

As Wei Chengxiang pretended to carefully examine the contents of the spiritual covenant, she secretly said to him, “Uncle, we aren’t on a ship, did you forget? We’re in the Exonerators’ immortal tool, under the sea. Where am I going to escape to?”

Xi Ping closed his eyes and bit the tip of his tongue to force himself to calm down, then focused on Lü Chengyi.

He saw that the water dragon’s movements had alerted Lin Zhaoli, too.

“What’s going on?” Lin Zhaoli’s cabin was next door to Xi Ping’s. He came out and saw Lü Chengyi standing in front of Xi Ping’s door with a strange look, then frowned and said peevishly, “What’s the matter with that precious Viscount now?”

Lü Chengyi looked up at him.

Lin Zhaoli was short-sighted and full of himself, but he was still an established foundation. Between open-eyed and established foundation, a “half-immortal” became an “immortal”; the distance between the two was like a chasm. It wasn’t everyone who had the abilities and natural endowments of Heaven’s Design Pavilion’s Pang Jian; Lü Chengyi and Zhao Zhenwei put together wouldn’t be worth a wave of Lin Zhaoli’s sleeve.

Lü Chengyi put on a reluctant expression and said, deliberately ambivalent, “I’m not precisely sure what’s happened myself, but the Viscount of Yongning has an immortal tool that I think is somewhat improper. I wanted to ask him about it.”

Lin Zhao said, “What immortal tool?”

“Something like a transport array,” Lü Chengyi said awkwardly. “Transport arrays are prohibited on the convoy ships, but this is the Viscount’s first time here, so he may not know the rules. He was

joking around with Commander Zhao and used something that transported Commander Zhao right to the first guard ship. Commander Zhao thought this improper, so he told me to come ask.”

Just then, Zhao Zhenwei ran over, head covered in sweat, just about to tell Lü Chengyi that Xi Ping was gone, and unexpectedly met Lin Zhaoli’s eyes, which were like stars on a winter night. He had a guilty conscience and was so scared his legs went weak on the spot.

But Lin Zhaoli gave him a cold look and said, “Sobered up?”

Zhao Zhenwei stuttered and didn’t dare to answer.

Lin Zhaoli snorted. “Where are the two transport points? Take me to look at them.”

The hither seal’s spiritual seals had vanished, but it was only an open-eyed immortal tool, after all. An established foundation cultivator could still catch a sliver of leftover aura.

Lin Zhaoli passed a hand over the leftover aura of the spiritual seal and thought it was familiar... He seemed to have sensed this aura somewhere else recently—where was it?

On the way, Lü Chengyi and Zhao Zhenwei exchanged a veiled look. Lü Chengyi said, “Commander Zhao, when you were transported, did you notice anything wrong on the first guard boat?”

Zhao Zhenwei stuttered, “N-no, I was scared sober at once...”

Lin Zhaoli paused: right, the water dragon array was on the first guard ship, and the water dragons were going to enter the water tonight!

He turned toward the water dragon cabin, pushed aside the good-for-nothing Zhao Zhenwei, and charged in.

He saw that the four water dragons in the array, which had previously been lively, seemed to have been bewitched; the four dragons were head to tail, going in circles mechanically.

Lin Zhaoli rolled up his long sleeves. When one of the water dragons swam by the edge, he made a grab in midair and picked it up.

The water dragon left the array and spasmed. Then a fierce look appeared on its face. It attacked indiscriminately, snapping its jaws toward Lin Zhaoli!

Lin Zhaoli grabbed the water dragon by its weak spot; at the same time, he gave a quiet rebuke and placed a talisman on the water dragon.

The water dragon arched stiffly. Then, black gas spurted out of its mouth, the stench assaulting the nostrils. The water dragon's body relaxed. The shadow in its clouded eyes dispersed, its eyes once again became clear, and it looked at Lin Zhaoli in confusion.

Lin Zhaoli, his expression grave, threw it back into the array. The other three dragons seemed to think some foreign creature had come and immediately stopped circling, surrounding the clean water dragon, full of hostility. Before they could attack, Lin Zhaoli abruptly slapped the water dragon array, "cleaning" the mud from the heads of the other three dragons as well.

After the water dragons entered the sea, their bodies would grow up to a hundred zhang long, their roars turning to rain, their breath turning to mist. If these water dragons had been released into the sea after being tampered with, they would have capsized the convoy.

This wasn't mischief. This was extreme malice!

Lü Chengyi put on a show of shock, saying, "What... what is this?"

"A hypnotic art from Shu, used for large-scale hunts of spiritual beasts living in groups," Lin Zhaoli said coldly. "They can make spiritual beasts attack each other. Before being subdued by the Southern Sage, the water dragons also amounted to spiritual beasts."

"How would a kid just out of the cottage know of a hypnotic art from Shu?" Lü Chengyi first muttered to himself, then said, "Wait, I think that servant of his wears a dragon-taming chain on his neck!"

Hearing this, Lin Zhaoli frowned. Then his expression changed abruptly—he had just remembered what that familiar aura from earlier was.

On the night he had led people to scout out Southern Shu's encampment, he had been responsible for attracting the notice of the Shu and sent his subordinates to search for the spiritual stones that had gone missing from the mines. When his subordinates had been about to find the way, the spiritual beast pool had collapsed and even attracted the Chu, who had only wanted to see more chaos.

At the time, there had been a faint, peculiar aura at the overturned bottom of the spiritual beast pool, identical to what he had sensed just now!

It was Xi Ping who had collapsed the spiritual beast pool. He had been working with the Shu!

Lü Chengyi took the opportunity to add, "Lin-shixiong, Shu's Lingyun Sect often resorts to insidious tricks. You've been staying

next door to the Viscount of Yongning these past few days. Have you felt unwell?”

Hearing this, Lin Zhaoli was startled. He quickly sank his consciousness into his flesh and bones and inspected himself from top to bottom several times, inwardly reciting a miasma clearing spell three or four times. Seeing that there was nothing out of the ordinary, Lin Zhaoli finally relaxed. Maintaining his haughty pose, he sneered, “How could I be unwell? A kid who’s only just begun to cultivate—even if I stood here and let him scheme against me to his heart’s content, what could he do to me?”

Xi Ping, witnessing this scene: “...”

I’m begging you, sir, don’t brag.

Xi Ping had never felt so oppressed in his life. Idiots were just like the limited edition products Cui Ji put on its shelves—you had to fight for them. First come, first served, and if you didn’t snatch one up, someone else would get there before you!

“Thank heaven.” Lü Chengyi exchanged another look with Zhao Zhenwei and said, “How truly fortunate...”

When a low level cultivator poisoned a master, it would only work if the target was unprepared. In the early stages, Mirage Powder had no symptoms, and an ordinary person wouldn’t scan his own body with a miasma clearing spell for no reason. Once the drug took effect after three doses, no medicine would work against it. But supposing the established foundation cultivator was paranoid and thought people were always trying to kill him, and checked himself for poison daily, he would certainly be able to detect a toxin created by an open-eyed cultivator.

Reasonably speaking, Lin Zhaoli ought to have taken two doses of Mirage Powder by now. Saying that there was nothing amiss with

him meant that he had never been poisoned at all!

Given the Venerable Lin's idiocy, he certainly couldn't have avoided the poison on his own. Someone must have removed the toxin for him—in other words, ever since boarding the ship, Xi Ping had known what they were planning!

Zhao Zhenwei simply didn't dare to think about it closely. As soon as he thought about it, he felt his guts about to tear; the good-for-nothing could hardly keep his innards together. There was only one thought left in his mind: "It's over, it's all over."

Lü Chengyi, meanwhile, thought, "That Yongning Viscount is such a profound schemer, yet he couldn't tell that that good-for-nothing Zhao was like me, one of Anyang's people. That shows that Heaven's Design Pavilion doesn't understand what's going on in the southern mines. From beginning to end, they've only had their eyes fixed on us Indignant Cicadas."

But where had the leak been?

How could there be such a coincidence? He had just finished tampering with the water dragon array when Zhao Zhenwei was tossed onto the first guard ship. It was as if someone were watching his every move...

Lü Chengyi narrowed his eyes. He had only revealed the information to one person: Miss Sixty, their new holy woman.

That little girl knew too much. And, starting from the day he had told Old Nine to mention it, he had been able to communicate with her through the reincarnation wood. These were certainly Tai Sui's methods. It must be true that Tai Sui's consciousness and hidden bones were attached to her.

But they had all overlooked the fact that she hadn't opened her spiritual eyes yet, so her body couldn't be snatched. She had her own mind...

The "holy woman" had perhaps already betrayed them.

Though he didn't know how a mere mortal like her could do that under Tai Sui's nose, it was clear that under these circumstances, that was the only reasonable explanation.

Heaven's Design Pavilion, Pang Jian, Xi Ping... What excellent methods.

But who said that god only helped good people?

Lü Chengyi turned and said to Zhao Zhenwei, "Commander Zhao, please give the order for the whole convoy to stop and hunt down the evil cultivator."

Zhao Zhenwei said, "I..."

"Wait," Lin Zhaoli said, interrupting him. "That's wrong."

As soon as Lü Chengyi frowned, he heard Lin Zhaoli continue, "I mean it's wrong of you to say 'evil cultivator'—you're too distant from the sect and perhaps haven't heard. This Xi Ping was originally a disciple from this year's class at the Latent Cultivation Temple. Apart from him, the other new disciples are all still there. He was able to leave the mountain ahead of schedule because he was chosen by the inner sect."

Lü Chengyi's heart stuttered.

Zhao Zhenwei simply said, dumbfounded, "Th-the inner sect? Which peak?"

Lin Zhaoli expelled a breath through his nose, seeming exasperated and bewildered. “Flying Jade Peak, General Zhi—I don’t know whether this person was bad to begin with and got into the inner sect by using some evil art to bewitch General Zhi, or whether, as a young disciple with no experience, he was targeted by evil cultivators after leaving the mountain... Anyway, I’ll first use my consciousness to locate him. You two control him. Don’t harm him. Wait until I write a report to the sect and to Heaven’s Design Pavilion.”

No sooner had he spoken than the consciousness of an established foundation cultivator covered the whole convoy. The water dragons at the bottom of the sea came up uneasily. Under this absolute force, Xi Ping instantly had nowhere to hide!

Lin Zhaoli tossed out a talisman and fixed on Xi Ping, then calmly drew back his consciousness. “Go get him.”

Zhao Zhenwei immediately turned his head to look at Lü Chengyi: “We’re dead. What should we do?”

Lü Chengyi ignored him. He lowered his head and accepted Lin Zhaoli’s orders.

Then Lü Chengyi turned quickly and personally took some people to get Xi Ping. As soon as he was out of Lin Zhaoli’s sight, his hand, hidden in his sleeve, pulled out a talisman and tossed it into the water without anyone knowing.

“There’s nothing to be done,” Lü Chengyi thought. “We’ll have to bury these people here ahead of schedule.”

Meanwhile, Old Nine, waiting for the holy woman to inspect the spiritual covenant, felt the communication tool that he carried heat up slightly. Surprised, he thought, “Isn’t Senior One already in

contact with the holy woman? Why would he contact me in private?”

To keep the holy woman from getting paranoid, Old Nine excused himself and left Wei Chengxiang’s room. Outside the door, he quickly took out the immortal tool and looked at it. After just one glance, he gave a start.

It said: I suspect the holy woman of betraying us. Force her to sign the spiritual covenant and attempt to alert Tai Sui.

CHAPTER 52 - The Mountain Falls (4)

Before Lin Zhaoli's consciousness reached him, Xi Ping had already come to a decision. He gave Xi Yue his mustard seed and left himself a small bag of spiritual stones.

Xi Yue immediately realized what he was planning and abruptly took a step back. But before his foot could land, the dragon-taming chain held him in place.

Xi Ping said, *Hide in the water-repelling pearl, jump into the sea.*

Xi Yue said urgently, *No! Young master, I won't...*

But the dragon-taming chain had stripped him of the right to say "no." All Xi Yue could do was watch as he was forced into the ocean like a real puppet. He resisted with all his might, but with the dragon-taming chain around his neck, he couldn't even look back.

For a moment, Xi Yue hated himself, hated the dragon-taming chain that he had personally taken back, even hated Xi Ping.

The water-repelling pearl gently wrapped around the half-puppet's body and continued to sink into the water. It stuck to the bottom of the ship and disguised itself as a big swath of barnacles, hidden among all the others.

At the moment, Xi Ping could only protect the half-puppet's life. He had no time to attend to the little devil's feelings. When the water-repelling pearl entered the water, Lin Zhaoli's belligerent consciousness had already reached him. Next, Xi Ping was firmly nailed in place by a talisman.

The talisman wasn't very polite. Xi Ping felt like a fly caught in a spider's web. Even his internal organs were wrapped up. He paid no

attention to it. He closed his eyes and ignored Xi Yue's enraged babbling. Through the dragon-taming chain, Xi Ping sensed a water dragon swimming past the bottom of the ship. The dragon's beard nearly brushed the water-repelling pearl.

The water dragon seemed slightly suspicious and circled Xi Yue's hiding place a few times. The dragon's huge eyes fixed on the water-repelling pearl.

Xi Ping's hands and feet were stuck fast by the talisman and wouldn't move, but he could still move his fingers. He already had the ascended spirit sword aura on the string.

The next moment, the voices of the people coming to arrest him sounded. The water dragon turned its head and swam away without interest—it was a foulness clearing water dragon, and Xi Yue wasn't foul. This wasn't the person it had been ordered to find; there was no match—it took Xi Yue inside the water-repelling pearl for seafood on the bottom of the ship.

Xi Ping's fingers abruptly relaxed. He set half of his worries at rest.

It was fortunate that Xi Yue was extremely reserved and cautious. He normally had little contact with outsiders. Everyone on board thought that the mute half-puppet wasn't all there. Apart from his face, which looked human, he seemed about the same as the straw children in the Latent Cultivation Temple. No one took him seriously.

Xi Ping took a glance at the talisman on him. It wasn't that he couldn't use the sword energy to destroy the talisman and escape. It was just that if he did so, Lin Zhaoli would certainly split off his attention to hunt him down. The Shu allies and the Exonerators were still waiting nearby. It would be very unprofitable for them to have an internal conflict. Anyway, one person's head was only so big. If Xi Ping was devoting attention to dealing with pursuers, he

wouldn't have time to attend to Wei Chengxiang—she was in more danger.

Lin Zhaoli wouldn't dare to kill him, anyway. His ultimate defensive move had to be used only at the critical moment.

While making arrangements for Xi Yue, Xi Ping had kept his attention on Lü Chengyi from start to finish. Just then, he glimpsed the private exchange between Wuchang One and Old Nine.

His worries, eased due to Xi Yue's temporary safety, were renewed.

This was bad. That old fox Lü Chengyi had caught on faster than he had anticipated!

Before he could think about it carefully, through the reincarnation wood, he had already seen Old Nine return to the room with a strange expression.

Though Old Nine was still as respectful as before toward the holy woman, his hands were hidden in his sleeves.

In fact, as soon as Old Nine had exited, Wei Chengxiang had known things had gone wrong—not because her spiritual sense was good and her instincts were accurate, but because the senior in the reincarnation wood had just called her “A-Xiang.”

When this senior spoke to her, it was “you” this and “you” that. Occasionally he would bring out her full name and call her “Wei Chengxiang.” Every time he called her “A-Xiang,” it meant something was wrong.

But she didn't panic.

When she was little, her grandpa had said that a person's temperament determined their manner, and their manner would also

in turn influence their temperament, so he hadn't let her fight and curse like the country children, saying it would "change her temperament." She didn't believe it. She hadn't dared to do anything in front of her grandpa, but behind his back she had made quite a lot of trouble. Only now did she suddenly find that while the old man's words had been pedantic, there was some sense in them. It turned out that manner really could influence temperament. Before, she had acted like a child and had a child's temperament; now she had a mouthful of blood and was putting on the act of holy woman, cold as ice. After long enough putting on that act, it seemed as if it had grown on her, steadying her soul.

A hundred zhang under the sea, encircled and watched by demons, Wei Chengxiang wasn't uneasy. She had calmed her mind and read the contents of the spiritual covenant just now. She determined that this must have been drafted by the Exonerators.

The Exonerators were afraid that they would be used and then dumped. Their primary point of concern was after the fact—how they would divide up the spiritual stones, that neither side would betray the other, and other such terms were precisely stipulated. But as for how the operation was to be accomplished, the spiritual covenant skimmed over it. It only said "both sides will exert all their efforts to cooperate from within and without" and so on and so on—robbing Great Wan's shipment convoy couldn't be done without exerting all their efforts. The Exonerators took it for granted that in this section, everyone's interests were aligned, and they would all naturally pull together.

Old Nine walked in, beaming, and said, "Holy woman, have you finished reading the spiritual covenant?"

Before Wei Chengxiang could answer, the senior in the reincarnation wood urgently warned her: *Wuchang One just sent a private message to Old Nine, telling him to force you to sign the spiritual covenant.*

Wei Chengxiang's pupils contracted slightly. She inwardly asked Xi Ping, "What does Wuchang One suspect me of?"

Xi Ping said, "He suspects that though you've been possessed, because Tai Sui can't snatch your body, you're exploiting that advantage right under his nose to sell him out to Heaven's Design Pavilion—I've let you down this time. I messed up."

Just then, the cultivators pursuing Xi Ping charged in but didn't dare to approach. They first overcautiously tossed a dozen immortal tools to suppress spiritual energy at him—there were enough to tie up a gold-armored zheng!

Xi Ping's hands were bound behind his back, and every finger was strapped down by thin threads like silk. If he only moved a finger slightly, these sharp threads would cut into his bones.

Wei Chengxiang: "..."

There's no need for you to admit it so openly.

An evil cultivator who could crush her with one finger was watching her menacingly, but oddly, Wei Chengxiang wasn't nervous at all. Instead, she rather wanted to laugh.

She thought it was miraculous. The senior in the reincarnation wood certainly wasn't any sort of good person who treated others with sincerity. Every time he instructed her in swindling people, it was as if he had brought those skills out of his mother's womb; when he chatted, his mouth ran like a Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon. But for some reason, on critical matters, he had never put on an act with her. For example, the first time he had spoken to her, he had simply unmasked Tai Sui's shrine, having no intention of tricking her into worshipping him as a god; now that she had been exposed out of nowhere, as soon as she felt a bit of suspicion and before she'd had

a chance to think of blaming him, he had already neatly carried off the blame.

Why? Did he think there was nothing worthwhile about tricking an inexperienced country girl?

Perhaps it was because of this that she had dared to go on the road alone with a reincarnation wood amulet. She was a wanderer with no roots at her feet. For her, the human world was a never-ending tempest. Fate always pointed in the direction of “sudden events.”

Only this piece of reincarnation wood was real.

It was the only fixed point in her unsettled exile.

“Since you’ve finished reading it, why haven’t you signed it yet, holy woman?” Old Nine said, smiling, his hands hidden. “Each and every term was negotiated by you according to Tai Sui’s own instructions. What, does he have some other misgivings?”

The atmosphere became a little dangerous.

The smile at the corners of Old Nine’s eyes disappeared. He lowered his voice and said, “Don’t make our brothers the Exonerators wait too long. The sea is vast, and we’re relying entirely on their immortal tool... for our survival.”

Wei Chengxiang met his eyes without dodging, saying to Xi Ping, “If there’s no way around it, I can sign.”

In the spiritual covenant, there were very few stipulations in the part about stealing the spiritual stones. There were many loopholes to take advantage of. It wouldn’t impact her ability to lure the evil cultivators onto the wrong path. As for later, when she killed White Amaranth and received the backlash from the spiritual covenant... Never mind.

She was willing to walk this road of revenge: the ill-intentioned evil cultivators, the lackeys who bullied men and tyrannized women, the water transport office that kept everyone in the dark, the heavens pressing down on the heads of all living things... She would go as far as she could. If she exerted all her strength and could only get this far, then she would acknowledge it. If she could really drag these demons to their deaths, that would also be good.

“Nonsense.” Xi Ping had read the clauses of the spiritual covenant even faster than she had. As soon as he heard her, he knew what she was thinking. He scolded, “Sign your ass. Put that knife down!”

Old Nine smiled. “The holy woman does indeed still obey Tai Sui.”

Xi Ping was pushed out onto the deck with brute force. He staggered and nearly went to his knees. He said angrily, “What’s wrong with all you women? Don’t you understand ‘while the green hills last, there’ll be wood to burn’?⁴⁰ Why do you all love walking the road to ruin so much?”

Wei Chengxiang’s gaze fell on the flashing spiritual covenant. “While I don’t know who you’re talking about, my guess is... it may be because we never had ‘green hills’ to begin with?”

Xi Ping froze.

Just then, Zhao Zhenwei came down flying his sword and landed precisely in front of Xi Ping. This coward who had been so scared he couldn’t straighten his knees after the earlier incident saw Xi Ping, and his cowardice instantly fermented into violent rage. If he hadn’t had scruples on account of Lin Zhaoli, Xi Ping sensed that he might have come over and stabbed him without any hesitation.

Through the reincarnation wood, Wei Chengxiang calmly explained to him, “A woman always has fewer roads. It’s possible that with just one slip, all she’ll have left is the road to ruin. It’s no wonder my grandpa always made me dress as a by.”

She had always been angry at him for making her look so plain. She hadn’t really understood.

For some reason, Wei Chengxiang’s voice for a moment didn’t seem like that of a sixteen-year-old girl. It sounded a little deep, like a weary singer who had once again spent all night singing beside the Lingyang River.

Many thoughts swirled in Xi Ping’s mind like a windstorm. In the moment his eyes met Zhao Zhenwei’s, he had a sudden thought and silently mouthed to Zhao Zhenwei: *Traitor to the nation. The evidence is undeniable. You’re done for.*

The inside of Zhao Zhenwei’s mind roared. The already strained string snapped, and his reason collapsed.

He stepped forward and pulled on the immortal-binding cords holding Xi Ping. The cultivators around them were caught unawares.

Xi Ping nearly folded back at his attack. Bloody light appeared around Zhao Zhenwei’s hands as they were carried along by his momentum. He grasped Xi Ping’s neck and at the same time fiercely kicked Xi Ping’s knee—his kneecap broke at once!

Meanwhile, Wei Chengxiang lowered her hand toward the blade—

In an instant, Xi Ping’s left and right hands curled at the same time. The left hand played a “silent string,” the right hand’s bone qin let out a sharp note, and the silk threads pressed close to his hands cut into the joints of his fingers like a sharp knife slicing through grease. Wei Chengxiang felt her mind shaken by a huge noise. For a

time, her whole body was paralyzed. Her hand, pressed to the knife, wouldn't move down one bit.

At the same time, the sound of the qin also disturbed the others. Lin Zhaoli flicked Zhao Zhenwei aside with a wave of his sleeve. Xi Ping went to one knee. There was a new red mark on his neck.

From the cracks between his eyelashes, which were full of cold sweat, Xi Ping looked at Zhao Zhenwei. Perhaps because he was too anxious, he didn't notice the pain at first. He only smiled at Zhao Zhenwei, who was full of incompetent rage, succeeding in turning Zhao Zhenwei's face ghastly pale.

“Jiang... Wei Chengxiang, I'm not dead yet. How did you accidentally end up with only a road to ruin?” Xi Ping said with distinctly. “Do what I say.”

Old Nine watched the holy woman pick up the knife, then suddenly go rigid—she wasn't voluntarily not moving. All the muscles in her body were being locked at once by an external force, so she couldn't move. Next, Wei Chengxiang began to tremble, her jaw extremely tense. She seemed to be struggling to throw something off, her whole body a contest of strength. There were two forces fighting to the death in that one body, one side trying to put down the knife, the other trying to press her hand to the blade. The girl's originally not very evident veins all stood out.

The sight petrified Old Nine. “Holy woman?”

Clank. The knife fell to the ground. Wei Chengxiang stepped on it.

In the space of a moment, she seemed to have been scooped out of the water. Her whole body was covered in sweat.

Wei Chengxiang raised her head. The look in her eyes had changed, as if she had removed a mask. She smiled at Old Nine. “I'm sorry,

your Tai Sui's orders... don't have much sway with me right now."

Receiving the news, Lü Chengyi was startled—Tai Sui was so weak that he couldn't even fully control a mortal!

No wonder that little bitch could contact Heaven's Design Pavilion under his nose. This was a perfect explanation!

It seemed that the destruction of his true body had done far more harm to Tai Sui than Lü Chengyi had imagined. Those damned blue-clothed dogs! What the hell had they done to him?!

Now, they not only couldn't kill that little bitch, they also had to protect her body, or else Tai Sui's frail hidden bones might not be able to withstand another upheaval.

Old Nine looked down at the girl he had squeezed unconscious. He was caught in a dilemma—he hadn't dared to squeeze with too much strength, afraid that that fragile neck would snap if he squeezed too hard. There was nothing to be done about the spiritual covenant. It had to be signed by her personally in order to be imprinted on her spirit. With the girl unconscious, even if he bled her dry and smeared the blood on the contract, it still wouldn't take effect.

"Senior One, what do we do?"

"Don't panic, I'm thinking." Lü Chengyi had also broken out in sweat all over. "Don't alert the Exonerators. Wake her up in a little while and fill her up with spiritual stone powder and elixirs. Give her as much as you have. Force her to open her spiritual eyes and make way for Tai Sui!"

After passing on these instructions, Lü Chengyi silently cursed that good-for-nothing Zhao for ruining things and hurried off in pursuit of Lin Zhaoli.

Xi Ping let out a sigh of relief—his second weak spot was also temporarily safe.

At last he could devote all of his attention to dealing with the people in front of him.

You want to think about it? Xi Ping glanced at Lü Chengyi rushing over and thought, It's a no-go.

Lin Zhaoli took one look at Xi Ping's wretched state and frowned, glaring fiercely at Zhao Zhenwei.

But now was no time to settle accounts with his useless colleague. He strode forward, slapped seven or eight talismans toward Xi Ping, and didn't detect anything out of the ordinary.

Lin Zhaoli's expression involuntarily became grave. He examined Xi Ping and coldly said, "Do you want me to perform a soul-searching, or will you tell the truth?"

One of Xi Ping's kneecaps was broken. He leaned rudely on the cultivators dragging him, acting very familiar. Emboldened by their support, he smiled at Lin Zhaoli. "I've heard that if a half-immortal is soul-searched, he won't end up an imbecile, but it'll damage his spirit. If his spirit is damaged, he won't be able to take another half-step forward in cultivation... Tsk, that's so scary. I'm my shifu's only direct disciple, and he's just passed his Way of the Heart on to me. His lineage will be broken—Lin-shixiong, can you take responsibility for that?"

Lin Zhaoli: "..."

Lü Chengyi: "..."

Lü Chengyi had been prepared to block all kinds of self-justification from him and couldn't react at first. The song they'd arranged for him to sing was "an accusation that's hard to explain away," so how had it turned at the last moment into "bullying others with his position"?

Lü Chengyi's background as a low-level roaming cultivator had limited his imagination—were all inner sect disciples this overbearing?

"Hey, don't be mad." Xi Ping adjusted the position of his rapidly healing kneecap and, cool under pressure, said, smiling, "You've already established a foundation, and you certainly have a great future ahead of you in the inner sect. You should maintain self-restraint in front of your fellow sect members."

The corner of Lin Zhaoli's eye twitched. No matter how upright he was, he could still hear the threat in these words. He immediately said with a cold smile, "What, are you telling me that with your conduct, if I went to report to the inner sect, General Zhi and the Dignitary of Fate High Elder would still be able to shield you?"

"What have I done?" Like a scoundrel, not waiting for Lin Zhaoli to accuse him, Xi Ping simply laid it out: "Did you sense something on the first guard ship, Lin-shixiong? Wow, that remaining spiritual energy is so familiar, where did you see it before...? What place was it now?"

Lin Zhaoli: "..."

Right, it also wasn't so easy to explain why he had privately impersonated an evil cultivator and gone to Southern Shu's encampment.

Xi Ping continued: "Or are you saying I stole something? May I ask where the spoils are? At any rate you have to catch the criminal with

the spoils, no?”

“You... you’ve sold out to the... evil cultivators.” Lin Zhaoli was nearly stuttering. “You ruined the spiritual stone convoy’s great water dragon array with unlawful intent. What punishment does that merit?”

Xi Ping didn’t so much as blink. “Who saw it?”

Lü Chengyi instinctively felt that things were going badly and took a step back. Xi Ping glanced at him, and a trace of a cold smile appeared at the corner of his eye: *Don’t be scared. I’m not after you, you old fox.*

Then his gaze fell directly onto Zhao Zhenwei.

“Your witness is Zhao-shixiong?” Xi Ping licked the blood that had spilled in his mouth when he had taken a hit in his fall earlier. “Right... When did Zhao-shixiong see it?”

Zhao Zhenwei had a guilty conscience. Under Lin Zhaoli’s gaze, his calf muscles cramped. In a panic, he could only say what Lü Chengyi had told him to say: “I-it wasn’t me who saw it, it was Lin-shixiong himself who found out...”

Xi Ping stared directly at him. “Then why are you shaking?”

Lin Zhaoli froze.

Xi Ping lowered his eyes, his gaze falling on his injured leg. He said meaningfully, smiling, “Here I was thinking Zhao-shixiong wanted to kill me so I couldn’t reveal that we were working together.”

Zhao Zhenwei said, “Malicious slander!”

Lin Zhaoli frowned, his suspicious gaze falling on Zhao Zhenwei.

True, that crowd of traitors in the mines had everyone deceived. He couldn't be sure that none of their people were aboard the convoy ships. This Zhao Zhenwei... was in fact acting very strangely.

Xi Ping laughed softly. "Lin-shixiong, you can't take responsibility for performing a soul-searching on me, but performing a soul-searching on this... Supervisor Zhao of the Mining Office outer sect shouldn't be a problem for you, right?"

Who didn't have weak spots?

Only his weak spots were all dear to him, whereas Mr. Wuchang One's weak spots...

CHAPTER 53 - The Mountain Falls (5)

No one would dare to punish the disciple of the peak master of Flying Jade Peak out of hand. If Lü Chengyi had known of this before, he wouldn't have alerted Lin Zhaoli just now and turned this into a deadlock.

He had already had Zhao Zhenwei contact their Southern Shu allies to signal that they were carrying out the plan ahead of schedule. But now they were still some distance away from the place where they had determined to strike, and the other side must also have been caught unawares and needed time to reach them.

Over there with the Exonerators, there had been a last-minute problem with the holy woman and Tai Sui...

If this went wrong, it would go wrong because the mine's outer sect was too far from Xuanyin, and he didn't know the most crucial information. Curse that Zhao Zhenwei. He was more trouble than he was worth. After spending all his time fooling around and drinking with that "dear shidi" of his, he didn't even know whether he belonged to the inner or outer sect!

Lü Chengyi's original plan had been: first tamper with the water dragons, taking down the convoy's "shield in the water"; then wait for the Mirage Powder to take effect and weaken Lin Zhaoli, the established foundation cultivator they couldn't defeat. When the ambush set up by foreign aid from Southern Shu, which Zhao Zhenwei's party was colluding with, had taken down Lin Zhaoli and his subordinates, better than half of the convoy's fighting force would be gone. That would be when Zhao Zhenwei and the others would be at their most relaxed and unguarded, so he could have the Exonerators come over and give this farce a perfect ending.

But now it was clearly not going to work. Lin Zhaoli hadn't been poisoned at all, and he had easily dispelled the water dragon spell!

Lü Chengyi came to a prompt decision, resolving to abandon the spiritual stones—relying solely on the Shu, there was no way to kill Lin Zhaoli.

He had originally wanted to stall for time and distract Lin Zhaoli by questioning Xi Ping, giving him the opportunity to resolve matters with Tai Sui. When the Shu arrived, he would trick White Amaranth into coming here ahead of time—as the head of the Exonerators, White Amaranth was also a genuine article established foundation. Only in a three-way battle would Lü Chengyi have an opportunity to make a stealth attack and escape safely with Tai Sui.

Who would have expected that this pampered young master who had grown up in Jinping wouldn't behave according to the script? Abruptly faced with an accusation, he had admitted it openly, then splashed it all over anyone he could grab!

Lü Chengyi, watching Zhao Zhenwei's disgraceful behavior, knew that he couldn't control this situation anymore. He silently crushed a stealth talisman so he wouldn't be noticed. Zhao Zhenwei wouldn't be able to stand up to questioning. A soul-searching... No, perhaps there would be no need to wait for a soul-searching. He might get so scared he exposed everything himself! How was it that these two were both pampered young masters, but the one he'd been stuck with was this piece of trash?

Now it seemed that the Shu couldn't arrive yet. There was nothing to be done...

Xi Ping was half-lame now, and tied up, but his expression was the calmest. Zhao Zhenwei's eyes were spinning, and his head was covered in sweat as he looked for Lü Chengyi; his vision was confused by the stealth talisman, so he couldn't find him, and he

was in such urgency it was as if he hadn't pissed in three years. Lin Zhaoli's expression was cold, showing that he didn't trust anyone. The three of them were standing in a triangle, looking at each other in pairs.

Nearby, a crew member seemed to have some business. He trotted toward Lin Zhaoli, muttering something.

The crew were all mortals. What urgent business could a mortal have? Lin Zhaoli didn't even spare him a glance.

But just as the crew member passed Zhao Zhenwei, there was a sudden change. Without warning, he pulled out a hand cannon, and before anyone could react, he aimed it at Zhao Zhenwei's back and pulled the trigger!

Zhao Zhenwei was just looking all over the floor for his guts. He didn't realize what had happened at first. Only Xi Ping's left hand, the fingers of which had already been cut to the bone by the threads, moved gently.

At his note, it was as if the crew member had been hit directly in the face. He froze in place. Lin Zhaoli, catching up, pushed away the crew member assassin. The hand cannon fell to the ground and spat out a silver fireball. It turned out that this was a rare downgraded immortal tool of the type used to inflict casualties.

When the crew member assassin's attack failed, he bit through the poison pill in his mouth without any hesitation. The poison pill took effect at once. His breathing had stopped before he hit the ground!

Zhao Zhenwei's legs went weak, and he toppled over onto the ground. Lü Chengyi's heart plummeted: no good!

Xi Ping's gaze bypassed the stealth talisman and shot toward Lü Chengyi as if he were an all-seeing divinity. He said meaningfully,

“Zhao-shixiong, someone is afraid you’ll reveal something. They want to silence you.”

The stealth talisman lost effect as soon as it was exposed. Lin Zhaoli abruptly realized what was happening and gave an angry shout. He swept his hand out like a knife, chopping toward Lü Chengyi.

Lü Chengyi’s business was escorting ships. He hadn’t spent a single day in the Latent Cultivation Temple, and he certainly didn’t have a long tradition of family learning. If cultivators had been divided into “civil and military” like mortals, he certainly would have been a “frail scholar.” At such close range, he absolutely couldn’t dodge the attack of an established foundation cultivator.

But just as Lin Zhaoli’s chop was about to cut him in half, Lü Chengyi’s figure flickered.

The next moment, the powerful chop cut through the place where he had been. Lü Chengyi... had vanished into thin air.

Lin Zhaoli was surprised. Even Xi Ping was stunned.

That an established foundation cultivator hadn’t sensed a fluctuation of spiritual energy showed that whatever he had used hadn’t been an array or an immortal tool; because of the reincarnation wood, Xi Ping could sense that Lü Chengyi was nearby, but... he couldn’t fix on him.

Something had cut the connection between Lü Chengyi and the reincarnation wood!

Then the foulness clearing water dragon that had been calmly circling the convoy received some provocation and leapt out of the water, nearly capsizing several guard ships that didn’t have time to dodge. The water dragon’s eyes were open wide with rage and its

long beard was trembling. It let out an earth-shaking roar, bringing down lightning.

The people on deck were nearly deafened by this roar. Even the Exonerators heard it.

Hundreds of zhang under the sea, an enormous “cuttlefish” was carefully trailing after the shipment convoy, maintaining a distance of about one li. Faint jade stamp green flashed in the eyes of this colossus; it was an immortal tool.

The ill-intentioned evil cultivators were hidden inside the belly of the cuttlefish.

Old Nine was about to transport the spiritual covenant to Wuchang One when he heard the sound. For a time, he was petrified. He felt the communication tool he was carrying heat up and quickly took it out to examine it. The horrifying news on it was: “Things have gone badly. I have been exposed. Take Tai Sui and go. I will meet you.”

Old Nine didn’t dare to delay. He picked up Wei Chengxiang and stuck his hand into the mustard seed he carried with him. Before he could pull out the emergency immortal tool and talismans, the door behind him slammed open. White Amaranth, standing at the door, shut a fan. “Sir, madam, something is wrong... oh? What’s happened to the holy woman?”

Old Nine couldn’t avoid him. All he could do was salute him and say, “Mr. White, I’m truly sorry. There’s been an incident aboard ship, and the holy woman has been injured. Senior One has been exposed ahead of time. We’re going to...”

Before he could finish, an even louder dragon’s roar sounded in the sea.

This time it wasn’t only a dragon’s roar. Even the sea was disturbed!

On the surface, when Lü Chengyi disappeared, the water dragon circling the ships became somewhat uneasy; before Lin Zhaoli could work out what was happening, another water dragon that had been guarding up ahead became wildly agitated, roaring in warning.

Lin Zhaoli looked around in shock and saw an ominous haze surging up in the sky to the north. A reeking wind hit him in the face.

“Let me go, idi...” Xi Ping belatedly remembered that this was his shixiong and perfunctorily swallowed his insult. “Shixiong. Those are the Shu!”

Sadly, an established foundation cultivator’s ears weren’t so easily fooled. Lin Zhaoli turned his head and glared at him.

Xi Ping figured that he had caught up by now and said in all sincerity, “Hey, shixiong, as the saying goes, a sweet and fair maiden is a good match for a gentleman. We don’t mock a person for being captive to love. Wouldn’t it be miserable if you never fell for a honey trap in your life...?”

Lin Zhaoli brought down his hand. “Shut—up!”

All the immortal-binding cords on Xi Ping dropped off. The filaments had broken halfway through the fingers of his right hand, which hung down covered in blood. But there was some magic about his left hand; the filaments had only cut through a bit of skin and slipped off the bones—it turned out that this kid had been able to move one of his hands from start to finish!

In the time it had taken to have this exchange, the “ominous clouds” to the north had already flown over their heads. Xi Ping, dragging his miserably injured leg behind him, raised his head with difficulty and saw that what had flown over was actually an enormous bird. In

front of that huge bird, the water dragon looked like a snake under an eagle's beak. No wonder the Shu had arrived so quickly.

Lin Zhaoli's pupils contracted. "A great roc..."

The great roc, like the water dragons, wasn't an extant living creature. It was also an animal spirit that had been subdued by the ancient elders and forced into an array—it had been left behind by Ancestor Tianbo of Southern Shu's Lingyun Sect. Princess Anyang, having made up her mind to kill Lin Zhaoli, hadn't even cared to use the slightest concealment.

But... why?

Xi Ping abruptly turned to look at Lin Zhaoli. "Lin-shixiong, what was it that you actually found?"

If Lin Zhaoli had known, he wouldn't have ended up being sent running in circles by all the thieves and traitors on board. "Have all the water dragons go underwater! Guard ships, activate the great array! All cultivators..."

Before he could finish, Xi Ping, who had been beside him, had turned into a blur, standing on his sword with one foot as he slipped away. Lin Zhaoli's consciousness followed him closely, and he saw Xi Ping catch a crew member and uncompromisingly plaster a talisman to him. The crew member was a mortal who had no means of resistance. He was firmly tied up by the talisman.

Lin Zhaoli got a clear look. The bound crew member was familiar—he was the one who delivered food to him every day!

Xi Ping seemed to have already known who the traitors were. Without any hesitation, he tossed out talismans on his way, "plastering" even those who had seen that the tide was turning against them and hidden in storage closets.

Lin Zhaoli was horrified. He passed word to him: “These people are all traitors? How do you know?”

Xi Ping, collapsing, said, “Da-ge, the foreign enemy is in front of us, can’t you just question them yourself later? If I got any wrong, I’ll kowtow in apology!”

No sooner had he spoken than there was a sharp cry. The great roc dove.

When the giant spread its wings, it could nearly cover the whole convoy with them. The people on the ships had the impression that the sky was falling.

The guard ships tightly surrounded the ships carrying the spiritual stones. The activated arrays instantly shot out fierce light. The bird came toward them abruptly, its sky-blotting wings brushing past the edges of the array. Two water dragons leapt up, snapping their jaws toward the great roc’s wings.

The great roc’s dropped feathers were like small ships... No, there really was a ship among the feathers.

The ship approached quickly. Dozens of black-clothed figures came from it on their swords.

On the sea, lighting flashed and thunder rumbled. The great roc and the six water dragons mixed in a terrifying clash.

Xi Ping had just ferreted out the last of the Indignant Cicadas. Seeing this battle, he turned and ran—impressively, he could still keep his balance flying his sword with one foot, and he even looked rather elegant.

He “elegantly” hid behind Lin Zhaoli like a streak of smoke. “I’m no good in a fight. Go ahead, shixiong.”

Lin Zhaoli: “...”

This kind of rubbish could inherit General Zhi’s heart for the sword?!

Lin Zhaoli gave a loud cry and pulled a sword as tall as a man from his palm. Where the sword pointed, it produced a roar like a wild beast’s. This haughty established foundation master did nothing to organize the other cultivators on board to resist the enemy. He simply raised his sword and went out to join battle himself.

Xi Ping sat on his gaudy decorative sword, rotating two white spirits in his left hand like walnuts. To his right, one leg and one injured hand dangled. His consciousness was scanning the surroundings without a moment’s pause.

Lü Chengyi... Wuchang One, where was he hiding...?

One stroke of Lin Zhaoli’s sword cut a “rift” in the ocean, reaching the Southern Shu ship. The protective array on the ship took this attack and was immediately near to collapse. Before they could move, Strongman Lin cut three strokes in a row, hitting the same spot each time without the slightest error.

The noise of the huge sword made the roots of Xi Ping’s ears go numb. He felt that this Lin-shixiong was truly held back by wielding a sword; someone ought to give him the axe that the god Pangu had used to split the heavens!

There was a loud, clear sound. The protective array on the enemy’s ship was smashed apart by his series of slashes. With one stroke, Lin Zhaoli waved away the Southern Shu cultivators coming to surround him. Before the sword’s momentum could dissipate, he turned it around. The sword stroke hummed, paring the wind and

breaking the waves, splitting the enemy ship right in two—animal spirits like the great roc and the water dragons were controlled using arrays and couldn't go too far from them. A half-immortal could only get up to a few tricks, but an established foundation sword cultivator could simply break the array.

The enemy ship broke, but the great roc fighting with the water dragons didn't disappear.

The array wasn't on the ship?

Lin Zhaoli froze. Then he heard Xi Ping passing word to him: "In the water!"

Next, the sharp sound of a flute pierced the surface of the sea. A big fish like a steamship leapt out of the water. There was a black-clothed person standing on the head of the spiritual beast.

The big fish crashed against Great Wan's main ship. The protective inscriptions on the ship activated at once; it nearly overturned.

The newcomer was an established foundation beast-taming cultivator!

Without any hesitation, Xi Ping jumped down from his sword and into the water, dragging his injured leg behind him. He reached out to scoop the water-repelling pearl off the bottom of the ship, narrowly avoiding a hit from the big fish.

Xi Yue pounded fiercely on the inside of the water-repelling pearl, glaring furiously at him.

Xi Ping said, "Among the talismans Pang-shixiong gave me, was there one that could turn a person into a white streak on the waves? Hurry, hurry, give me one, and give me the mustard seed, too... Oh, right, were you cursing at me before?"

Xi Yue couldn't resist baring his teeth at him.

The half-puppet clearly used a good deal of strength. He pulled out a stack of talismans Xi Ping didn't know the purpose of, quickly pulled out three, and shoved them all into the mustard seed.

When Xi Ping reached into the water-repelling pearl to take the mustard seed, Xi Yue took the opportunity to bite him with relentless accuracy.

Xi Ping: "Hss..."

Amazing! The little brat was revolting!

But the tilting main ship was about to overturn. There was no time for him to discipline the half-puppet.

"Just you wait!"

Xi Ping pulled out his hand, now with toothmarks on it, and didn't even look at the contents of the talismans—he wouldn't recognize them, anyway. He raised a hand and activated them with spiritual energy.

It turned out that these were three small-scale foulness clearing water dragons. They left his hand and went into the sea, turned, and worked together to push the ship that was about to overturn back upright.

Talismans transformed into water dragons lasted for a limited time, and they were very small. For now he would have to make do.

Xi Ping pointed at the big fish spiritual beast that the beast-taming cultivator was riding. "Fuck it up!"

Two water dragons threw themselves over on his order.

The last one became his steed.

Xi Ping himself could stay underwater for a shichen on one breath, but he was worried that Xi Yue would drown, so he didn't let him out of the water-repelling pearl. He twisted the water-repelling pearl into the shape of a bag to make it more convenient to carry. Amidst the half-puppet's rage, Xi Ping picked up the water-repelling pearl and jumped onto the dragon's back.

A sword cultivator was a sword cultivator. Within his own grade, he would be the best fighter. Brandishing the big sword, Lin Zhaoli sent the other side's established foundation cultivator and a crowd of open-eyed half-immortals flying all over. Xi Ping watched him and thought that he was very heroic; no wonder Lü Chengyi and the others had wanted to drug him first.

Just then, his spiritual sense suddenly alerted him. Wei Chengxiang had woken up.

Wei Chengxiang quietly controlled her breathing and continued pretending to be unconscious. She contacted Xi Ping.

It wasn't very easy pretending to be unconscious under the nose of a cultivator. Fortunately, no one was paying attention to her now.

White Amaranth's eyes glowed with villainous light. "Of course nothing ever goes perfectly. There are always incidents. Since we're here, we may as well make the best of it... and seek riches amidst danger."

He snapped his fingers, and the spiritual covenant Wei Chengxiang hadn't had time to sign turned to dust in his hand. "But please notify Tai Sui that we'll be relying entirely on our own efforts, without

depending on your cooperation, so the distribution of spiritual stones we arranged earlier can't be seen as valid.”

The big cuttlefish passed over the bottom of the sea as fast as lightning, avoiding the battle between the great roc and water dragons, wildly floating up through the seawater full of scattered spiritual energy.

Wei Chengxiang felt herself nearly pressed to the ground. The next moment, the cuttlefish with its bellyful of unexpected guests appeared on the battlefield out of nowhere. Its belly opened, and a row of spiritual cannons took aim at the two groups of grappling cultivators, unexpectedly opening fire.

Boom—

Xi Ping and the water dragon parted ways. The water dragon dove to the bottom of the sea, carrying Xi Yue, while Xi Ping flew up on his sword.

Lin Zhaoli and the Southern Shu assassins were all taken unawares. The flute music of the beast tamer on the big fish went off tune, and Lin Zhaoli's big sword slipped out of his hand.

Though this sword was his vital weapon, which he could call back with a thought, in just that moment, a cloud of white fog wrapped around him. Lin Zhaoli quickly held his breath, but it was already too late. His arms and legs were instantly paralyzed.

Lin Zhaoli was appalled. A half-immortal couldn't have powers like this. Another established foundation!

In the depths of the white fog, a long hook came right toward the top of Lin Zhaoli's head. The Exonerator White Amaranth's smile was sinister. “Hunting a sword cultivator... is so satisfying!”

Meanwhile, Southern Shu's big fish turned over nimbly in the water, taking the opportunity to seal off Lin Zhaoli's retreat.

The huge fish cast a big shadow on Lin Zhaoli. His vision went blank. No good, he thought, this is the end of me!

Just then, a figure came out of nowhere and landed beside him. Before Lin Zhaoli could distinguish whether this person was friend or foe, he heard the sound of an instrument string being played.

In an instant, the established foundation sword cultivator's spine began to tremble. The matchless sword aura in that note nearly brought him to his knees. He felt a kind of despair, as if he would never be able to lift his sword again.

Two white spirits turned to powder at the sound, shaking the heavens—

Xi Ping went numb all over. All his meridians seemed to explode. If not for the fact that his newly grown left hand's bones were much sturdier than before, he would hardly have been able to play a single complete note. The vast sword aura gushed out, and the two great established foundation masters, along with the colossal spiritual beast, all turned into ants. The big fish and the beast controller on it were both cut in two. Bloody rain fell over the sea.

“White Amaranth” turned into “Red Amaranth.” This secretive evil cultivator chief had over a hundred protective amulets on him; when the ascended spirit sword aura fell, all of them turned to dust, and he fell headfirst into the sea.

The roc array in the spiritual beast's mouth broke, and the great roc that was pecking the six water dragons into a frenzy instantly disappeared. The sword energy fell into the water, and the sea, which ought to have been in a calm period, was stirred into a big vortex.

Xi Ping: "..."

He had to kneel before his shizun. He had actually been considering using this sword aura to break the immortal-binding cords and escape... He had truly been ignorant.

Was this sword aura for saving his life?

This was for causing mountain-toppling, sea-overturning havoc!

CHAPTER 54 - The Mountain Falls (6)

Cold light flashed over Zhaoting. The snow falling around the sword halted. It disturbed the master of Flying Jade Peak, who was immersed in the sword aura.

Zhi Xiu abruptly opened his eyes. His expression was somewhat bewildered: the sword energy he had placed on Xi Ping had been given play... pure and complete ascended spirit sword energy— even he hadn't used it in the mortal world!

In fact, the sword energy Zhi Xiu had given Xi Ping amounted to a protective talisman. Normally it would exist within his spiritual bones. At Xi Ping's cultivation level, with the help of two white spirits, he could probably set off a bit of sword aura. Provided his opponent was unprepared, it was possible for him to go above his grade and restrain an early established foundation cultivator, giving him enough time to escape with his life. He had plenty of money, anyway, so he could use this move over and over. As long as that brat didn't go take on the other three great sects all on his own when he left the mountain, the sword energy could last for three to five years.

But just now, the sword energy that ought to have persisted for three to five years had been shot out all at once!

How could that be?!

Never mind using it, if Xi Ping hadn't picked up an ancient demonic god's relic, an ordinary open-eyed cultivator's spiritual bones wouldn't even have been able to contain ascended spirit sword energy.

To use an analogy, for a half-immortal, Zhi Xiu's sword energy was like a mountain. With his back to the mountain, a half-immortal

could quarry stone and chop wood; if he had the skills, he might be able to use those things to build a maze and put on a show to make himself seem more impressive... but who had ever heard of someone picking up the mountain and pounding a person with it?

Zhi Xiu stood up abruptly—no, there was no point now in thinking about how the kid had done it.

Completely unrestrained ascended spirit sword energy was enough to cause a local earthquake in the mortal world; it wouldn't be hard for it to bring down mountains and crack open the earth... Was Xi Shiyong still living?

His rebellious disciple was amazing. How could he always manage to bring about disasters beyond his expectations?!

With a wave of his sleeve, a beam of sword energy hit the clouds, making a crack in the thick cloud layer that was letting down snow. Starry sky flashed out. Zhi Xiu quickly began to divine Xi Ping's location. Astonishment gradually appeared on his face—he couldn't divine it.

At the Sea of Stars, the Dignitary of Fate High Elder Zhang Jue frowned as he looked into the depths of the abyss: a fog was rising.

Xi Ping was still living, but he wasn't far from the “moment of parting.”

The reason this had all gone wrong was that the bones of his right hand had been broken, so he only had his left hand to use.

When the real bones of his left hand had been smashed and grown back through the power of the mysterious hidden bones, it had perfectly suited the ancient demonic god's “way of death”... and apart from the demonic god himself, no one understood that way of death.

The left hand that had grown back by means of the hidden bones could “play” directly in another person’s spirit. Xi Ping had tried this out with a ship full of Indignant Cicadas. He was a broad-minded person; he had just thought “my left hand is more useful than before and has an added function,” and the rest didn’t matter. If a senior had found out about this, they might have flipped—even when Liang Chen had possessed him, he hadn’t been able to invade his spirit; he could only wait for him to open his spiritual eyes so he could snatch his body. Music that could cloud a person’s intellect could only be played by a god or a demon; the effect was only so limited because of his cultivation level.

But the sword energy that Zhi Xiu had placed in his spiritual bones wasn’t “limited”... and even more unluckily, for reasons unknown, this area of the sea had struck up a resonance with his left hand.

Ascended spirit sword energy was like a natural disaster. It had disturbed the legendary Resurrection Vortex that could swallow all things.

The vortex grew bigger and bigger as it spun, and the sword aura lingering in the area continued to hover around; even the sea breeze turned into blades.

The water dragons that had been pecked full of wounds by the great roc turned quickly and attempted to guard the convoy.

The Southern Shu assassins, the evil cultivators, Great Wan’s shipment convoy... not one of the three sides that had just been embroiled in conflict had any more attention to spare for each other.

When Lin Zhaoli recovered, he gave a long whistle, ordering the convoy to retreat at full speed.

Miserable and distressed, he flew several dozen zhang up, turned his head, and found that the “sea monster” Xi Ping who had stirred up the East Sea was still standing in place, unmoving, watching his reflection in the water and having some kind of marriage interview with himself. Lin Zhaoli shouted to him, “Xi Shiyong, stop preening! Hurry up!”

“Lord Lin!”

Once the Resurrection Vortex started to spin, there would be more than one whirlpool. The water dragons were desperately holding off the largest of the whirlpools, but rapidly moving little whirlpools quickly began to spin in other places; their danger zone was no less than that of the big whirlpool. A spiritual stone freight ship that had had its protective inscriptions scraped off by the great roc had been sucked into a small whirlpool.

In the whirlpool was lingering sword energy that quickly cut shocking gouges in the ship’s hull. Lin Zhaoli had to go save the ship before anything else.

When he took another look after putting aside his many other pressing problems to rescue the freight ship and surround it with the few surviving guard ships, Xi Ping was gone.

Xi Ping had been blown off his sword by the storm raised by the whirlpool.

His outsides seemed completely intact, but inside, his meridians had all collapsed into some unknown state. He had truly become a paperman who could be blown away by a puff of wind. He couldn’t move a single finger—not even of his left hand; his arm wouldn’t take orders.

By coincidence, there just happened to be a whirlpool where he landed. It swallowed him whole.

The scattered sword energy immediately broke his white jade hair crown. Fortunately, the sword energy had been stored in his bones for a long time and “recognized” his aura. When it touched him, it suddenly turned gentle.

The “big cuttlefish” that had been sucked into the same whirlpool as him was much less lucky. In just this short time, countless sword slashes had cut through the immortal tool, so dense it was as if it had been lattice cut before being deep-fried.

The cuttlefish’s master White Amaranth was gone, and the immortal tool had gone out of control. The Exonerators on board had to save themselves.

Wei Chengxiang wasn’t pretending to be unconscious anymore. In the high-speed swirling whirlpool, she couldn’t even open her eyes. The sword aura surging all around seemed to be resonating with her spirit, nearly boiling her brain.

She kept her teeth firmly clenched, maintaining a line of clarity.

In the chaos, Old Nine rifled through his mustard seed for a long moment, pulled out a water-repelling pearl, considered, felt unsafe, and added an extra protective array to the outside of the water-repelling pearl. He grabbed Wei Chengxiang and stuffed her into the water-repelling pearl, then escaped from the big cuttlefish.

But as the saying goes, luck isn’t equivalent to virtue. When bad luck came, neither the righteous nor the evil could escape it.

Old Nine’s luck evidently wasn’t any good.

As soon as he left the cuttlefish, the water-repelling pearl crashed firmly into a beam of sword energy. The mere open-eyed grade protective array disintegrated on the spot, and the sword energy

poured into the water-repelling pearl, cutting Wei Chengxiang's ankle.

Wei Chengxiang felt sharp pain leap up from the injury. The sword energy seemed to have burrowed into her body, splitting open all her meridians and blood vessels.

At the same time, as the water-repelling pearl went to pieces, ice cold seawater poured ruthlessly into her nose and mouth.

Old Nine quickly reached out to grab her, but just then, yet another beam of sword energy flew over from somewhere. Old Nine scurried away like a frightened rat, but the whirlpool pulled Wei Chengxiang, who had no power to resist it, down toward the bottom of the sea!

At the critical moment, a hand appeared out of nowhere in the whirlpool and pulled Wei Chengxiang to a halt—it was Lü Chengyi, who had vanished earlier.

Lü Chengyi held Wei Chengxiang with one hand and gestured to Old Nine with the other. The two half-immortals swam toward the surface at full speed.

All of Wei Chengxiang's senses were numbed by the rapidly swirling water. Her consciousness gradually dimmed. Many people's faces flashed before her eyes: her mom, her grandpa, Auntie Chun, the heavily made-up women of rat alley, her fellow workers with their faces covered in coal dust..

Strangely, none of their expressions were pained. They were all faintly smiling at her, as if they had come to take her away from worldly suffering.

But worldly suffering wasn't prepared to let her go.

Just as Wei Chengxiang was about to take the hands of her nearest and dearest, a figure struggling in the water appeared in her peripheral vision.

Wei Chengxiang's slackening consciousness instantly returned. All the friendly faces disappeared abruptly—she had seen White Amaranth.

The sword energy had cut off half of White Amaranth's arm. His established foundation had been destroyed, but all those protective immortal tools hadn't been bought for nothing; in the end, they had let this great evil cultivator escape with his life.

Wei Chengxiang's eyes nearly popped. He wasn't dead? How could he dare not to be dead?

Why was it that the innocent could only obey the mandates of heaven, while evildoers could always escape calamity? Was it because good people were worthless, and each batch would be replaced by another when they died?

There was a crisp sound in her ears, as if something had broken.

Spiritual energy mixed with sword aura poured into her bones, bursting open the tender skin beside the girl's eye and on her cheekbone, then following her cheek and tearing down to her lower jaw. She wanted to scream from the pain, but the seawater was covering her nose and mouth, pressing down on her heart and lungs, not letting her cry or scream. All she could do was futilely breathe out the last mouthful of air in her lungs.

Boom—

The raging waves beat against the shore. The overpowering seawater surged desperately toward the land, reshaping the

originally low-lying land that had allowed countless people to tread on it.

Earth and stone cracked, the veins of the earth severed, and at last mountains burst from the level ground.

All the spiritual stones Wei Chengxiang had eaten seemed to turn into fuel, trying to burn up her mortal body all at once. Her spirit suddenly became clear and spacious, like the former location of Rat Alley when it had been flattened—

Her spiritual eyes were wide open.

She opened her eyes in the deep sea. The skin on nearly half her face that had been burst open by the spiritual energy was still oozing blood. Her burning gaze met Lü Chengyi's.

Naturally Lü Chengyi couldn't miss sensing an event as big as the opening of spiritual eyes. Undisguised joy immediately appeared on the calculating old fox's face.

A beam of sword energy came their way, and Lü Chengyi pulled Wei Chengxiang aside without any hesitation, using his own back to block it, just as decisive as he was in killing witnesses. Though the sword energy only brushed past him, it still cut into his back hard enough that the flesh tore. Blood spurted out. Lü Chengyi clenched his teeth, trembling, and squeezed out a smile. As if in consolation, he patted his imagined Tai Sui on the back of the hand.

The next moment, his eyes opened wide. First he leaned back. Then he looked down at the person he was protecting in disbelief.

The moment he had thrown himself toward her, Wei Chengxiang had pulled out the defensive knife at his waist. She stabbed the open-eyed grade weapon into his belly.

Lü Chengyi opened his mouth.

Liang-shixiong, you...

But he only gulped mouthful after mouthful of salty and bitter seawater. It seemed to be the taste of retribution.

Wei Chengxiang didn't want to know what last words the evil cultivator had. She held the knife with both hands and fiercely cut upward, disemboweling the great evil cultivator, cutting all the way from the base of his abdomen to his neck. Then her hands were knocked away by the damaged array on the knife, and she left the knife with its curved blade in Lü Chengyi's throat.

She felt neither fear nor remorse.

With one stroke, the half-immortal whose last breath had been squeezed out by the bottomless abyss was separated from the trembling, terrified girl.

The water was clouded with blood and air bubbles stirred up by the whirlpool, but the eyes of vengeance can always see their foe.

Before Old Nine could react, Wei Chengxiang exerted all her effort to escape the whirlpool and burst out. There was plentiful spiritual energy in the place where the three parties of cultivators had fought, still unceasingly pouring into the newborn half-immortal, giving her the strength to escape fate.

The weak of Jinping's southern outskirts rested; the one who couldn't close her eyes took on the regrets of the slumberers.

She didn't turn back to look at Lü Chengyi as he was pulled into the abyss.

The bloodstains on Wei Chengxiang were quickly washed away by the restless seawater. She approached the head of the evil cultivators, who was on his last gasp.

White Amaranth, who called himself an Exonerator, had dozens of identities in the Land of Turmoil. He had smuggled spiritual beasts, traded in illicit snow wine... made enough money that even a good-for-nothing like him could safely pass to the established foundation level and support nearly a hundred pretty girls. Whenever this was mentioned, he spoke as if he had no alternative, saying something like “there’s no way around it, when you have dealings with important people, you have to follow their customs,” sighing that a true gentleman who had been noble and benevolent all his life had simply been forced into debauchery by beautiful girls.

White Amaranth had used up all his strength now. He couldn’t even dodge the sword energy that was everywhere in the whirlpool. When he saw his “ally” swimming toward him, he was overjoyed.

Miss Sixty! Holy woman!

The holy woman smiled at him and pulled him by his remaining arm.

He would be saved.

White Amaranth relaxed, nearly going limp in her arms: after this, the Exonerators and the Indignant Cicadas would be brothers who had gone through mortal peril together. The Exonerators would share everything with them...

Then a beam of sword energy swept through the whirlpool. The weak and frail “Miss Sixty” held his head down with all her might. Before the happiness on White Amaranth’s face could vanish, his intact skull was held to the beam of sword energy by Wei Chengxiang!

The peerlessly keen sword energy pierced the center of his brow. Its fury didn't abate, and it stabbed right through Wei Chengxiang's palm. She was covered in blood, in so much pain that the corners of her eyes twitched, but she didn't care at all. She let go and tossed this corpse into the abyss as well.

Old Nine was stunned by this sudden change. For a time, this old half-immortal whose cultivation was clearly stronger than hers was terrified. When he met Wei Chengxiang's gaze, Old Nine didn't even have the strength to fight. He turned and fled.

Before she could chase after him, the heedlessly fleeing Old Nine was hit across the midsection by the damaged Southern Shu ship that had gotten mixed up in the whirlpool. Confused and disoriented, he rolled over, and a beam of sword energy skewered him and the damaged ship.

Wei Chengxiang stared for a moment. Then she clasped the reincarnation wood in front of her chest with a bloody hand and surged toward the surface.

"Uncle." Seawater flowed past her wide open eyes. "I've taken my revenge, but I don't feel happy. I..."

The reincarnation wood was silent.

"...uncle?"

Xi Ping only had time to give Xi Yue an order through the dragon-taming chain: "Get onto the main ship, don't approach the shore, don't leave the ship!"

Then he was pulled down into the whirlpool amid Xi Yue's heartrending cries and knew nothing more.

The Resurrection Vortex dragged both the living and the dead to the bottom of the sea, then tossed them out.

The strange thing was that the bottom of the sea was calm.

Xi Ping was suspended in the water, drifting with the current. After a moment, he bumped into his old acquaintance Lü Chengyi.

These two people whose battle of wits had caused the East Sea to flare up had been completely neutralized. They bumped against each other peacefully.

During the collision, Xi Ping's left hand suddenly gave a light shake. Lü Chengyi's corpse lowered its head toward his left hand. A savage brand appeared on the ghastly pale face. Next, silver light slowly came from the center of the corpse's forehead. After floating clear of the body, it dropped toward the bottom of the sea and was caught in Xi Ping's disheveled hair.

The dazzling silver light dispersed... It turned out to be a finger bone.

Something at the bottom of the sea let out a faint sigh and drew that bone down. The finger bone was wrapped in Xi Ping's seaweed-like hair, so it had no choice but to carry this big encumbrance down with it.

The moment the bone touched the bottom of the sea, an amazing sight appeared: an enormous inscription, too big for the eye to take in, was exposed.

Had a cultivator proficient in inscriptions been present, they would certainly have been dumbfounded—because this wasn't any kind of inscription that existed on earth!

Xi Ping and the finger bone sank to the center of the inscription; then, as if something were pulling them in, they both disappeared.

Far away in Guzhou, Prince Zhuang's spiritual sense was suddenly touched. It was as if his right thumb had been burned.

Prince Zhuang frowned and tucked his thumb against his palm... Strange. It had been eight years since his spiritual sense had been touched by *over there*.

CHAPTER 55 - The Mountain Falls (7)

For his spiritual sense to be touched, only a person with an intimate karmic connection to him could be involved. There were truly few people like that.

Prince Zhuang raised his head, and Bai Ling landed beside him like his shadow.

Without preamble, Prince Zhuang asked, "When you sent him the spiritual stones last time, where was he?"

Bai Ling said quietly into his ear, "He had already reached the southern mines."

Prince Zhuang massaged his thumb: counting the days, the spiritual stone shipment convoy would indeed have reached the East Sea, but wasn't the Resurrection Vortex in a calm period?

And also... why would it only be his thumb?

He waited patiently for a moment, but there were no other indications.

It was as if that moment just now had been his mistake.

"A little later, go ask where our Viscount is now," Prince Zhuang instructed Bai Ling. Then he pressed down on the center of his forehead and stood up. "Let's go."

The two of them were currently in a forest that had just been cut down. On the ground were leftover ruts and wooden stakes of all sizes. There were dry twigs and withered leaves everywhere. It looked like a land of stumps.

When night fell, many people gathered here. There were workers who ought to have gone to work the night shift, and refugees and beggars who had lost their jobs and their homes. There was a ring of coffins laid out all around.

Some had clearly been recently buried and then dug back up. The dead inside them probably hadn't fully rotted; they gave off a putrid netherworld smell. Some coffins were old, already decayed, the dregs of the rotten wood mixing with fragmented skeletons. They looked truly shabby laid out and had to be covered with rags.

With an old moon-white cloak draped over his shoulders, Prince Zhuang walked among the dead ghosts and the living ghosts, like a specter looking on from the sidelines.

A man in mourning clothes was standing on a new coffin, shouting out an accusation: "... First they occupy the farmland. When they've occupied the farmland, they occupy the graveyards, leaving the living with nowhere to shelter and the ancestors to become wandering spirits! To calm the people's resentment, they come up with another sinister plan. They dress it up by calling it a designated patch of wilderness for folks to move their graves to, but in secret they're pushing us to occupy land whose fengshui is at odds with tombs! Everyone, everyone! Open your eyes and see who are your brothers and who are the jackals!"

Sobs rose among the crowd. Some people stepped over the coffins to shake hands and make peace, and some burned paper. A wind blew, and paper money filled the sky along with the ashes of burnt paper. Sparks lit the eye sockets of the skeletons, like in some grotesque ritual.

People carrying coffins kept gathering. Prince Zhuang, with his hands behind his back and his face turned toward the fluttering paper money, walked out against the flow of the crowd.

He and Bai Ling both had talismans on them. Ordinary people couldn't see them. There were only a few cultivators mixed into the crowd who calmly glanced at them, nodded, and made way, indicating "we walk the same path and have no ill intent."

Prince Zhuang wasn't on the "same path" as anyone. He kept his eyes focused straight ahead. Only when he had left the crowd did he say to Bai Ling, "I hadn't thought that these 'roaming common cultivator friends' would be so rampant in Guzhou. If Guzhou is rotten, then everything is rotten down to the roots."

The traditions of Guzhou were conservative. The common people were very superstitious and had always especially shunned evil.

In the eighth year of Xiaozong, a few errant monks had come here, just as an epidemic was spreading. Because their certificates of ordination were incomplete, they had been taken for evil cultivators by the terrified villagers and beaten to death.

Similar events came one after another. The history books recorded that in Renzong's reign alone, over a hundred people had been captured and handed over to the yamen on suspicion of practicing "nightmare spells," bringing about countless disputes and tragic cases of sentencing on false charges. Out of concern that some people would use the common people's fear of evil to frame others, Heaven's Design Pavilion had specially established two branches in Guzhou, one in the north and one in the south, in order to make it easier to operate.

In the local parlance, the worst curse you could call someone was a "child of filth," meaning "a monster's progeny."

Prince Zhuang pinched a piece of paper money that had flown onto his shoulder. Wishing only to see the world in chaos, he said, smiling, "Only five generations, and the people of Guzhou who would have loved to bathe in incense ash are standing on the

coffins themselves, waiting for the children of filth save them in their time of need. How exciting.”

Bai Ling said, “According to your instructions, I have already disseminated the instructions for dismantling some common standard inscriptions... But Your Highness, the greater the commotion gets now, the less Heaven’s Design Pavilion will be able to deal with it. If Xuanyin Mountain gets word of this, the part we have played in it cannot be hidden.”

“That is no problem. Xuanyin Mountain won’t dare to interfere,” Prince Zhuang said calmly. “The people’s resentment has risen. Now they can only pretend to be ‘immortals unconcerned with mortal affairs,’ turn a blind eye, and afterward hold their noses and come out to bury all their families’ unfilial descendants.”

Bai Ling said in surprise, “How come? Only for the sake of reputation?”

Never mind Xuanyin’s inner sect, even its half-immortals could crush a pile of ordinary people with one hand. Would they care about a bit of resentment from the people? As for their reputation, it would all depend on how conscientiously they whitewashed it. If the immortal sect cared, couldn’t they just bring out some high-sounding justifications?

Prince Zhuang laughed. “You can only blame the Southern Sage.”

On each of the rare occasions he was willing to discuss the history of the immortal sects, Bai Ling always felt that he was the better for listening. He unconsciously began to focus.

“Thousands of years ago, the structure of the immortal sects had yet to be established. Masters floated everywhere like clouds. Of the shed skin cultivators who could control the elements, some became sages who cut through mountains and established

lineages, enjoying the sacrifices of hundreds of generations; and some became ‘demonic gods,’ their bodies and souls destroyed, sunk forever in the Impassable Sea.” As Prince Zhuang spoke, he looked at the distant crowd. Flames leapt angrily in the distance. He asked dully, “Do you know why that was?”

Bai Ling hesitantly said, “Perhaps because their skills were inadequate, and history is written by the victors?”

“At their level, it’s no longer a war of arts and skills,” Prince Zhuang said evenly. “An ‘ascended spirit’ breaks free of mortality, a ‘shed skin’ ascends to heaven, and beyond the ‘shed skin’ is the ‘full moon.’ At the full moon level, you become a god, become a sage, dominate the spiritual mountains.

“When the shed skin masters were fighting over the divine full moon positions, it was a war of Ways of the Heart. In the end, only five people rose above the crowd, and they created the five sects of Xuanyin, Kunlun, Lingyun, Sanyue, and Lancang, and with this split the territory into five nations—among those five sages, there was a specialist in taming beasts, a scholar of arrays, a master of the sword... In summary, the techniques they were skilled in were different, but their Way of the Heart was the same.”

Bai Ling asked, “What was it?”

Prince Zhuang smiled with a trace of ridicule. “To bless and protect the common people.”

For a moment, Bai Ling suspected he was reciting from the history books of the orthodox sects.

“It’s true, not whitewashing by immortal historians.” It was as if Prince Zhuang had eyes on the back of his head. He had no need to look to know what Bai Ling’s expression was. “The Way of Heaven is universal. It has its own equilibrium. Before the shed skin stage,

cultivation depends on the individual. Past the shed skin stage, it's no longer a matter of cultivation. If you want to attain the full moon stage, your Way of the Heart must merge with the universe, be accepted by the Way of Heaven. I suspect that among the three thousand ways, only the one that 'looks to all living creatures' is qualified to reach the full moon stage."

Bai Ling trembled. "So nonentities are born and die in an instant while all the immortals consider them beneath their notice, but the immortals must still rely on their holy sages' sects, and those holy sages were determined by the strength of those multitudes of nonentities!"

"Correct. The Way of the Heart cannot be violated. If the Way of the Heart is broken, cultivation is destroyed. I sometimes think it's hard to say whether the five sages back then 'dominated' the spiritual mountains, or whether they were detained in the spiritual mountains as collateral, to reach the final unsullied level of cultivation and be released only when there was peace in the mortal world," Prince Zhuang said. "Xuanyin's foundation is the Southern Sage's Way of the Heart. The four high elders, the thirty-six peak masters—while on the surface they all have their own Ways of the Heart, Xuanyin makes up their roots, from start to finish—in other words, a part of all their Ways of the Heart is inherited from the sage. Normally those shed skin and ascended spirit cultivators fight over power and influence for the sake of resources. When the people's resentment boils over, do you think that they would dare to disobey the sage's Way of the Heart for the sake of protecting some nobodies from their own families?"

"All they can do is watch the flames burn higher, hoping that the wind will be weak and the fire will go out soon." Prince Zhuang looked into the distance and murmured, "I think now that Zhou Kun was scheming against me. The old fool knew from the start what I was going to do and deliberately let me out to start the fire."

Zhi Xiu glided down from Flying Jade Peak wrapped in ice and snow. When Zhaoting flew past Green Pool Peak, he saw mists hanging over the always lush peak, firmly covering all the green waves on the mountain.

Green Pool Peak was sealed... Her Highness Duanrui was in seclusion?

Now?

There was no time to think about it. Zhaoting swayed, and Zhi Xiu landed on Xuanyin Mountain's Principal Peak, in front of Shouxin Hall.

The inner sect disciples coming and going in Shouxin Hall were startled to see General Zhi. One after another, they stood in place and called out "shishu." Despite the colossal urgent business he was on, Zhi Xiu didn't forget to be polite. He nodded in response to each of them. "Is the Dignitary of Rites High Elder here? I want to request a token to leave the mountain..."

Before he had finished speaking, he saw someone flying a sword land hurriedly. He was flying too quickly and stumbled when he landed. Zhi Xiu held him up from a distance, and the newcomer quickly said, "Thank you, little shishu."

Zhi Xiu saw the mark of Dim Mist Peak embroidered on this disciple's clothes—Dim Mist Peak was one of the peaks that belonged to a direct descendant of the Lin family. He said, "What has you in such a hurry?"

The disciple said, "An outer sect disciple who had just joined my peak, originally a mine supervisor in the southern mines, is currently escorting a shipment north, on his way to leave office and enter the inner sect. He just sent a Heavenly Question to the mountain. He says that the spiritual stone shipment convoy was attacked in the

Resurrection Vortex. A gold-winged great roc of Southern Shu appeared and disappeared. Convoy Commander Zhao Zhenwei and Head of the Guard Lü Chengyi were colluding with a foreign nation. Lü has vanished.”

Zhi Xiu was startled. “Convoy Commander Zhao Zhenwei?”

When Xi Ping had asked, he had casually performed a divination on this Zhao Zhenwei. He had seen that he was from a collateral branch of the Ning’an Zhao family. His family’s traditions weren’t particularly upright. They had used some dishonorable methods the year he had taken part in the Grand Selection. Apart from that, there had been nothing else. How could he have failed to divine as major a matter as colluding with a foreign nation?

Just then, another Heavenly Question flew over. The Dim Mist Peak disciple grabbed it and saw what it said: *The convoy has escaped and withdrawn outside the Resurrection Vortex. Zhao Zhenwei has been soul-searched, without result. There is a criminal brand stamped on Zhao’s spiritual image. His spirit has collapsed.*

Lin Zhaoli was soaked in salty seawater, his robes cut to rags by the remnants of the ascended spirit sword energy, his hair nearly soaked enough to extract salt from it. In this sorry state, he glared at Zhao Zhenwei, who was like a pile of mud—he was still breathing, but his spirit had collapsed and couldn’t be repaired. All that remained of him was an empty sack of skin.

Lin Zhaoli pounded his fist against the wall of the ship’s hold.

The convoy commander and the head of the guard had been involved in a conspiracy; who could be behind them? The Mine Governor? In all the southern mines, who was clean?

The cultivators beside him saw Lin-shixiong’s expression change several times. At last, to their surprise, he began to laugh quietly,

savage and distraught, frightening them so they didn't dare to make a sound.

Very few sword cultivators came out of the Lin clan, and Lin Zhaoli hadn't obtained his Way of the Heart from his family.

In the inner sect, his family had always valued quality over quantity. They were very harsh when it came to picking among juniors and descendants; they wouldn't take anyone with slightly insufficient endowments. Lin Zhaoli's disposition was unsociable and indolent. He didn't like social graces, was too lazy to heed others, and he had no ambition. At any rate, everyone in the southern mines respected him somewhat. There had been nothing wrong with muddling through life... until he met Anyang.

Anyang...

Being "captive to love" sounded like an even more humiliating spectacle than raping and pillaging. Lin Zhaoli had always taken the position that all women captive to love were fools, and all men captive to love were worthless... and his arrogance had brought his punishment upon him.

Anyang was his punishment.

When a member of the Zhou family had dived in and snatched away the Mine Governor position that he ought to have had sewn up, he hadn't grumbled at all. Instead, Anyang's seemingly joking words had given him a strong prod: "Forgive me, Lin-shixiong. I've robbed you of your office. Don't worry, I'll probably only be here a few decades before returning to the Latent Cultivation Temple."

True—for the most part, the girls of the Zhou family would ultimately enter the inner sect and become lady cultivators he was unworthy to associate with.

So he had begun to madly cultivate his spiritual bones, searching everywhere for an ancient master's Way of the Heart. Perhaps because he had so few wishes, when he occasionally raised a request to heaven, his luck had always been good. Over twenty years had passed, and just before he came to the end of his lifespan, he had completed his spiritual bones and filled up a great vacancy with the vital weapon of a master sword cultivator—and obtained the Way of the Heart within it.

Lin Zhaoli hadn't even waited for the inner sect to issue a reception order. Because the end of his lifespan was nearing, his face was slack, his hair was turning white, and the faint reek of age was already upon him... He had felt a sense of inferiority about this and hidden from Anyang for five full years. The day before Princess Anyang's birthday feast, he had impatiently violated the rules and established his foundation. Even if the inner sect were to punish him, he had wished too much to go in person to wish her a happy birthday in person, see her dressed in splendid regalia.

The instant he had succeeded in establishing his foundation, his consciousness had blanketed the whole of the southern mines—and just that night, those thieves stealing from the mines had activated their transport array. The secret array had crashed against the unauthorized established foundation cultivator, and both secrets had been exposed without warning.

The thieves in the house had worked through the night to move the array. By the time he went to investigate, there wasn't a trace. The lovestruck sword cultivator learned only then how deep were the waters of the southern mines. He hadn't known that he was a blind fool with his eyes open.

He had immediately notified Anyang and seen her beautiful face turn pale. His heart had instantly filled with heroism. He would rather help her clean up the southern mines than join the inner sect, even if it meant dying here as her watchdog.

It turned out that he had been flattering himself.

How ridiculous. She must only have thought that this unsuccessful love affair was standing in her way, right?

In the princess's manor, the sea of flowers in the garden was in full bloom. Purple mist nearly spilled from the wisteria pergola. Princess Anyang Zhou Qing sat on a swing, the hem of her dress trailing a zhang on the ground, her jewelry and ornaments so ceremonious it was as if she was about to attend a palace feast.

She looked down at her own palm. Dozens of criminal brands flashed in her white hand. Three of them—Liang Chen's, Lü Chengyi's, and Zhao Zhenwei's—had been crushed. The assassination of Lin Zhaoli had failed—she had known even before Lü Chengyi that Heaven's Design Pavilion had come with ill intent. From the day Liang Chen had died, she had known that this day would come sooner or later.

It seemed that every arrangement she had made only constituted a dying struggle; she couldn't overcome fate.

“You've also prepared yourself, haven't you?” Zhou Qing sighed gently and took out a gold butterfly hairpin.

Pang Jian kicked down the gate of the princess's manor, pushed aside the irritating sea of flowers, and saw the swing swaying lightly in the wind. There was a smile at the corners of Princess Anyang's lips and a gold butterfly in the center of her brow, looking like it was fluttering its wings preparing to take flight—she had stabbed the butterfly pin through her spirit, taking all her secrets with her, not leaving a single word.

Pang Jian stared blankly for a long moment, then suddenly remembered: the year that Zhou Qing had ridden the flying horse

carriage to the Latent Cultivation Temple, he had also been the one escorting the disciples.

He was a little face-blind to start with, and a grown man had no business looking closely at a female disciple. He had seen her for a brief moment forty years ago and hadn't remembered what Zhou Qing looked like. But bizarrely, he remembered that butterfly hairpin.

Just before the provisional disciples had gotten into their carriages, a teenage boy had rushed over and put that butterfly hairpin into the hands of one of the female disciples. Someone else had told Pang Jian that that teenage boy was the fifth prince... the present Emperor Taiming.

Others were jubilant on the way to the Latent Cultivation Temple, full of curiosity and excitement. When they reached the sky, they never listened to an old man's advice; they insisted on sticking their heads out the windows and only dropped it when they got dizzy from looking. Pang Jian didn't know how many classes of disciples he had escorted, but only that girl, clutching the butterfly hairpin, had cried the whole way. It was a far cry from her carelessness in death.

It was as if at eighteen she had already foreseen the wrong path that would take her here.

"I don't believe it can all be over and done with just because she died." Pang Jian casually sealed the manor with a talisman and released karma beasts onto the carved walls. He turned abruptly and said to a group of dumbfounded mine supervisors, "Starting now, I am confiscating the Mine Governor's seal. Martial law will be imposed on all the ports in the southern mines. No one may go in or out. I want records of all mine collapses beginning from the opening of the southern mines."

In front of Shouxin Hall on Xuanyin Mountain's Principal Peak, practically on the heels of Lin Zhaoli's message, Zhi Xiu received a

Heavenly Question from Heaven's Design Pavilion.

Pang Jian's writing was about to take flight: *Shiyong went north with the shipment convoy, his fate is unknown, and Princess Anyang has committed suicide!*

Xi Ping, whose fate was unknown, heard whispers filling his ears.

There were male and female voices, old and young. He was dazed for a long time, gradually regained a bit of consciousness, and felt that the "bed" under him was unpleasantly hard.

Wait... what bed?

Hadn't he fallen into the sea?

Xi Ping abruptly opened his eyes and found to his astonishment that all the water on him had dried.

He was in a forest of reincarnation wood. The coiled and knotted branches were interlaced, woven into a hammock wrapped around him. There were also unknown vines carefully stabilizing his injured leg and hand. Seeing him move, they somewhat reluctantly let go.

His injured hand and injured leg were actually mostly healed. This place was as full of spiritual energy as Flying Jade Peak.

Even his meridians, nearly blown apart by the ascended spirit sword energy, were much better. Xi Ping tried moving—he could shift himself.

Xi Ping took a backup sword from his mustard seed, pushed aside the branches that wanted to block his way, and jumped down.

"Hss..."

If the vines hadn't sped over to catch him, he would nearly have broken his still not very nimble leg again.

"What's going on?" Xi Ping, recovering from his shock, hugged the vines and thought, "I can't fly a sword?"

Next, he also found that he couldn't activate a talisman, couldn't control an array... He could still play his bone qin, but it was no different than playing an ordinary qin that cost three liang of silver on the market—in this place with its unusually plentiful spiritual energy, he couldn't use a single sliver.

Where is this? Xi Ping thought blankly, throwing back his head to look at the ancient trees that reached to the sky.

Xi Yue, Xi Yue?

No response. He couldn't sense the dragon-taming chain that was tied to his mind.

Xi Ping then focused on the center of his brow and called to Wei Chengxiang... still no response. But this time, he felt his voice bouncing around the reincarnation wood trees around him.

Just then, something fell out of his hair and slipped down his collar into the front of his robes. Xi Ping reached in to take it out and have a look, then nearly threw it away. "W-w-what the hell!"

It was a small segment of finger bone!

But when he squeezed that segment of bone and considered it for a moment, his spiritual sense was faintly touched... He thought that the owner of this bone had some connection to him. Xi Ping hesitated, then carefully put the bone away. He picked up a piece of straw and carelessly tied up his hair, then began to go in circles in the reincarnation wood thicket.

The reincarnation wood forest must have been hundreds upon thousands of years old. It was dense enough to shut out the light. Xi Ping couldn't resist muttering, "What a hindrance..."

Before he could finish speaking, something miraculous happened. All the reincarnation wood trees collectively wriggled their heavy, clumsy trunks, leaning and swaying, making an empty space about a zhang in circumference as if afraid of annoying him.

Xi Ping was shocked. These things were more obedient than Xi Yue.

He hesitated a moment, then tentatively said, "Where is this place? Can you point the way for me?"

The reincarnation wood trees continued to push and shove at each other. If not for the fact that the trees couldn't leave their roots, they would have walked a few steps aside on their long beards. After a moment, a clear path appeared in the thicket.

Xi Ping walked a few li along this path and left the reincarnation wood forest. His field of vision suddenly widened—

He was in an enormous valley. The bottom of the valley was full of ruins, like an ancient battlefield. The cliffs all around were full of caves. He couldn't see clearly what was inside, but he heard the wind passing in and out of them, carrying terrifying sobs.

The cliffs and the ground were covered in inscriptions, not one of which he recognized.

In the cracks between the inscriptions, Xi Ping saw a line of footprints and boldly attempted to walk up. Nothing happened. So, walking on tiptoe, he followed the footprints upward.

At the end of the footprints was a tall and upright sacrificial altar.

Xi Ping threw back his head and looked up at the altar, thinking, Oh, mother...

The sacrificial altar was full of human skeletons, seated or standing. The skeletons were all different, their postures almost elegant, the spiritual energy upon them oppressive, so it was impossible to tell at first whether these were real human bones or bizarre statues carved out of white spirits.

In a moment of resourcefulness, Xi Ping suddenly pulled out the unseen glasses Pang Jian had given back to him before he'd left and looked up through the lenses.

He saw that the skeleton closest to him, standing, had a name: Zhou Ye.

He looked to the next ones: Zhou Suxin, Zhou Li, Zhou Qi...

Zhou Qi?

That name was familiar. Who was it, now?

Also, why were all these skeletons surnamed Zhou?

Xi Ping walked in a circle around the altar. Suddenly, he saw a skeleton sitting upright, its head in its hand. For some reason, this skeleton's posture gave him a sense of utter familiarity. Xi Ping's heart jumped for no reason.

Then he saw the name of these bones: Zhou Ying.

CHAPTER 56 - The Mountain Falls (8)

How miraculous. There's a dead man here with the same name as my san-ge.

Xi Ping said to himself: Such a fated meeting. Should I pay my respects?

But for some reason, he couldn't bring himself to do it.

His feet seemed to be set into the ground, and his heart beat faster and faster. A thin layer of sweat rose on his back. He couldn't even avert his gaze from that skeleton.

The skeleton had his head slightly tilted, the index and middle fingers of his left hand curled and held together, propping up his cheekbone; the thumb was laid against the edge of his jaw. An exasperated gaze seemed to be coming from those empty eye sockets, looking at Xi Ping across a distance of several paces; he seemed to be alive.

Xi Ping practically had the feeling that any moment this skeleton would open his mouth and say, "What trouble have you gotten yourself into now?"

He abruptly averted his gaze and bit down fiercely on the tip of his tongue, turning away so he couldn't see the skeleton. He sat down crosslegged on the ground and focused, his mouth full of blood.

What was he thinking...? There was something strange about this damned place!

Luo-shixiong had taught them that the senses arose from the body and were easily invaded by illusions, so you had to avoid acting rashly when you were agitated and unsettled. First you had to seal

your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body, concentrate inward on your spirit, examine everything you had just thought, and remember that the origins of many illusions were only want or fear. “Want” didn’t concern him; he had never known the pain of wanting something he couldn’t have in his life. What about fear?

Right—Xi Ping quickly found a reasonable explanation for his “hallucination”: it must be because he had heard that there was trouble brewing everywhere lately, and he had always been faintly uneasy about Prince Zhuang on his inspection tour of the south.

Thinking of this, Xi Ping relaxed slightly—not long before he had fallen into the sea, he had received san-ge’s report of his own well-being.

Since he had opened his spiritual eyes, it had been easy for Xi Ping to distinguish the aura of the person writing. Though the handwriting was similar, Xi Ping could tell at a glance which letters san-ge had written himself and which he had made Bai Ling write for him out of laziness.

The bare “all’s well” had certainly come from him directly—Bai Ling-da-ge would at the very least have written some plausible-sounding exhortations.

Somewhere among the inscriptions that covered the ground, there had to be ones for illusions. Sadly, he didn’t recognize a single character. He wished Xi Yue were here.

Though Xi Ping had “worked out” that this was all an illusion, for some reason, he still unconsciously avoided that skeleton named “Zhou Ying.” He turned his head to inspect another skeleton next to him.

This skeleton was named “Zhou Qi.” The figure was tall, with broad shoulders and a narrow pelvis. Xi Ping sensed that it was likely this

person had been a man in life. The skeleton was standing, its skull tilted down slightly, silently “looking” at Xi Ping sitting at his feet. For no reason, he gave Xi Ping a feeling of gentleness and sadness.

This place was truly strange. How could a pile of bones be so full of emotion?

Xi Ping met his eyes for a moment and couldn't resist touching the skeleton. He felt very faint spiritual energy flit across his fingertips, then scatter in the wind like fine sand.

Then a deep masculine voice sounded in his ear: “A-Qing, Kun, er-ge is going now. You two, be well...”

When he spoke, the dimly flickering radiance around the skeleton that seemed carved of white spirits dispersed, revealing the ghastly whiteness of ordinary bone.

As if the dead man had let out his very last breath. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. That sense that he was alive had also vanished altogether.

But these seemingly ordinary last words were like a bolt of lightning out of a clear sky, frightening Xi Ping, who feared neither god nor man, so much that his face turned ashen—Princess Anyang's name was “Qing,” His Majesty Emperor Taiming's name was “Kun”...

He thought he knew who “Zhou Qi” was now!

In a panic, Xi Ping pulled the *Notes from a Progress to the West* that Pang Jian had forced him to read from his mustard seed. This wasn't a proper book. It was a history primer for young cultivators used in Great Li to the north, using the style of travel notes to describe the sights and traditions of each country and incidentally mentioning each country's great events and important people in recent generations.

Xi Ping quickly flipped to the Southern Wan chapter and consulted the record of imperial kinsmen in the appendix—because this book was somewhat old, it only recorded up to Emperor Taiming’s generation...

Qi, second son of Xianzong, died young in Wan’s twenty-fourth year of Zhaoxi, posthumously conferred the title of Prince of the First Rank Rui in Wan’s second year of Taiming.

Prince Rui Zhou Qi was His Majesty’s full blood older brother who had died young.

Emperor Taiming waved a hand and somewhat wearily said, “Withdraw.”

“Your Majesty! Guzhou is in a state of emergency. Today, a mob besieged the yamen of Guzhou’s Yunshan County. They’ve staged an uprising. Without a tiger tally, the commanders of Suling and Guzhou don’t dare to act on their own authority. This matter...”

“We told you to withdraw.” The emperor abruptly looked up. The slack skin of his eyelids folded into sharp arcs, as if he were an old wolf king who still had his influence and his underlings. “The court will discuss this tomorrow.”

The old courtier scraped his head against the ground. Seeing His Majesty unmoved, he ultimately didn’t dare to repeat himself. He withdrew in silence. On leaving, he looked at the Marquis of Yongning, standing upright off to one side, minding his own business. The courtier all but sprayed the word “sycophant” from his eyes to plaster it onto the Marquis’s face. Ancestors above, look at the situation! How could His Majesty still be in the mood to drink and make merry with this old boy toy?! Granted that Xi had once been a renowned beauty among men, what charms could he still have at his age?

It was simply unbelievable!

The Marquis of Yongning stood there composedly, acting as an ornament, and didn't so much as raise his eyelids.

Having dismissed the interlopers, Emperor Taiming closed his eyes and massaged his temples for a long time. Then he permitted the Marquis of Yongning to take a seat.

The Marquis sat when he was told. He wasn't the least bit apprehensive. He didn't even take the time to counsel His Majesty with a perfunctory "serious matters should take precedence."

The eunuchs brought warmed up wine, then withdrew from the heated room—every year on the eighteenth day of the first month, His Majesty spent half the night drinking with the Marquis. At such times, he didn't let anyone disturb them.

In past years, there had been much gossip and slander about the relationship between the emperor and his subject. When tainted with imperial power, it seemed that anything could turn into a palace scandal and provide people with a subject to chew over with relish for a long time.

But the old personal servants knew that His Majesty had never been interested in men, and the Marquis of Yongning was no standard sycophant, either. He wasn't even very good at complying in order to please. Good looks aside, he was a dull and taciturn middle-aged man—and anyway, however charming he had once been, that had been a couple of decades back. Once a mortal passed his fifth decade, he could be called a Pan An⁴¹ as long as he had hair and no belly.

When these two drank, it was purely drinking. They didn't even exchange any meaningless pleasantries. And their drinking was very restrained. The two of them would split a single small jar. Once they had finished drinking, it was "This subject requests leave to withdraw. Take care, Your Majesty." It was like this every year. No one knew what kind of ritual this was. It passed the understanding.

But this year, the rules of the "ritual" had changed slightly.

After dismissing the eunuchs, Emperor Taiming took out a brocade box, which he gave to the Marquis of Yongning. There was a set of hair ornaments inside, with a big, brilliantly colored pearl arranged in the center. Apart from the pearl, the Marquis of Yongning knew at a glance that the rest had been produced by his wife's family, and that they were somewhat antiquated one-of-a-kind products. Even he had never seen them. They had been very meticulously preserved.

"What is..."

"I've heard that now, this set could be exchanged for a big mansion on the west of the Lingyang River." Having dismissed the attendants, His Majesty's tone relaxed considerably. "These were recently sent back by Anyang. My si-jie was extremely arrogant and willful when she was young. She got up to quite a bit of the wretched business of snatching other people's treasures. Now that I think about it, she really shouldn't have done that. You can take these things back to your wife. Si-jie asked me to have them returned to their rightful owner and compensate for the fault in her place. She encountered this pearl in the East Sea. She valued it tremendously and could never bear to have it set. She sent it as a form of apology."

How could someone ask the emperor compensate for a fault? The Son of Heaven was always right.

The Marquis of Yongning didn't know what had gotten into him. He could only say, "Your Majesty and the princess overwhelm my humble wife with flattery..."

Emperor Taiming waved a hand. As though half-grumbling, he said, "This wasn't the only thing she sent back. She wanted me to deliver each one in turn... Alas, at our age, many old acquaintances are no longer living. Where should I go to deliver them? It puts me in an awkward position. But what can I do? In all her life, her only happy years were when she was a young girl. She wanted to make arrangements for her cherished memories before she went. I had to agree."

Hearing this, the Marquis of Yongning was startled: what did he mean? These words sounded extremely ominous.

Then he saw the emperor narrow his dim eyes and look toward a corner of the heated room. "Today, those peonies in the heated room that haven't shown any growth in years suddenly bloomed. Do you think that peonies can bloom in the first month? So I knew... that Anyang must be gone. This is her coming back to have a look at me."

The Marquis of Yongning looked in the direction of his gaze and saw that there was indeed a potted peony bush that had bloomed. Beside the big, bleak desk clock, the peonies were unsuitably colorful.

It was just reaching the full hour. The desk clock tolled to report the time, and the flowers shook gently at the sound of the tolls, making an observer tremble with fear for no reason.

As if senile from age, the old emperor gazed at the peonies and murmured, "You also chose today, the same as er-ge. Were you worried that I was too old and wouldn't be able to remember so many dates?"

The Marquis of Yongning's thoughts moved quickly: did he mean that Princess Anyang was dead? But she was a half-immortal, still far from the end of her lifespan. And in the southern mines, there was no need for her to spend all day contending in wits and valor with evil cultivators... What had happened?

“Your Majesty...”

But before he could ask, the old emperor interrupted him again. “Oh, yes, the Imperial Consort has been somewhat unwell the last few days. Go and have a look at her when you have the time.”

The Marquis of Yongning said, “Of course, I will have my wife come to the palace tomorrow to pay her respects to the Imperial Consort. Your Majesty, just now...”

“I said you. I didn't say your wife.”

The Marquis of Yongning was silent for a moment, then respectfully said, “Though we are brother and sister, men and women must still keep a distance. Take it as avoiding suspicion.”

What would be the point of having a look? He wasn't a doctor. Wouldn't the best thing for her be to drink a little less snow wine? When he went into the palace, nothing would happen apart from the two of them staring helplessly at each other; they had nothing to say. Then she might go and get herself dead drunk from the stress of holding back. One of these days, she might drink herself into a living corpse, and that would be the end of it.

“At your age, what suspicion are you avoiding?” the old emperor said. “Xi Zhengde, you old fool... Tell the truth, seeing her upsets you—you can't forgive yourself. I know, I know... We've all been there.”

The Marquis of Yongning's heart jumped. He felt that the topic was sliding in a dangerous direction. What the hell had happened to Princess Anyang to upset the old emperor like this?

Then the old emperor said, "After all these years, you're the only one lao-san has a good relationship with. It's because he knows, too."

The Marquis frowned: His Highness Prince Zhuang? What did he know?

"He knows that you colluded with an evil*cultivator from Northern Li, brought your family to the brink of ruin, planned to betray your country and flee," Emperor Taiming said with emphasis. "You would rather have taken your whole family, young and old, into exile in the Beijue Mountains, let him die in the womb, than languish on a bed of riches bought by the spiritual bones of an unborn child."

The Marquis of Yongning's face instantly went blank.

For a time, no one spoke inside the heated room. Only the radiator and the desk clock went on clamoring obliviously.

After a moment, the Marquis of Yongning flexed his stiff knees and slowly knelt beside his seat.

"You really did silently pierce the sky. Today's brats, they all bluster to their heart's content, but which one among them can measure up to your ruthless decisiveness back then?" Emperor Taiming waved a hand. "Get up already. It's been over twenty years. If I had wanted to investigate you, would I have waited this long? Back then, I... actually wanted to let you go. Xi Zhengde, you have courage. You did what generations of us have dared to think without daring to do."

The Marquis of Yongning said, expressionlessly, "I am petrified."

Emperor Taiming gave a laugh. “It’s true that a sister’s son takes after his uncle. When I exposed your nephew’s secret, his display was just the same as yours is now.”

The Marquis of Yongning, undaunted, considered: Prince Zhuang already had his independence, anyway, and Xi Ping was in Xuanyin’s inner sect, part of the Dignitary of Fate’s lineage. Could the old emperor still choose this moment to settle old accounts? Even if the emperor had gone crazy in his old age, he could only take it out on him. He didn’t believe that the emperor would dare to make a big fuss and drag in his whole family.

In that case, the Marquis had nothing to fear. He was too lazy to even think up the words needed to go through the motions of admitting his guilt and quibbling. He simply obeyed the imperial command, stood up, and even poured himself a cup of wine.

Indeed, Emperor Taiming didn’t accuse him of rudeness. He sighed softly and said, seeming very regretful, “But in the end it was Ziyi who backed out at the last moment. Because of this, you haven’t said a single word to her in private ever since, am I right? Hey, why are you drinking on your own? Give me a refill.”

Accordingly, the Marquis of Yongning poured him a cup. Emperor Taiming picked it up and downed it in one gulp. He quietly said, “Stop blaming her. She wasn’t weak. It was because a new month had started just then, and the palace’s half-immortal private physician told her that her child not only bore spiritual bones, he also just happened to have an inborn paramount spiritual sense. Being like a half-immortal the moment you open your eyes... isn’t something a mortal body can bear. If one of those things wasn’t removed, he wouldn’t have survived.”

This time, the Marquis of Yongning was truly shocked. “What?!”

“She never told you, right?”

“Why did she...”

If it had been for the sake of protecting the child, then it was a whole different matter. Did Xi Ziyi have the spirit of a mouthless bottle gourd? Never mind anything else, how could she have concealed this, too?

Emperor Taiming was watching him with interest. “If she had told you, what would you have done?”

The Marquis was a little blank. He pondered for a moment, then said frankly, “Followed my original plan. If it was possible to save the child, we would have saved him. If not, then he would have reincarnated wrong. Children who are sick in the womb not surviving is in accordance with nature. Anyway, there are secret arts there. There could be masters in the north who would have known how to remove the spiritual bones. If he had begun cultivating when he grew up, we would have given them back to him. If he didn’t make anything of himself, we’d have used them as an ornament to repel evil. At least it would have been clean.”

Emperor Taiming clapped his hands and laughed. “Betray your country and flee with innate spiritual bones that not one in a hundred million people has, then use those spiritual bones to repel evil. Xi Zhengde, you’re as stubborn as a smelly rock in a latrine. You really are something else... but your sister is an ordinary mortal. She was worried about her old mother going into exile in the wilderness in her failing years, worried about what to do if the child who might not even live turned from a child of royalty into an evil cultivator betraying the nation, worried about the future of your whole family.”

The Marquis of Yongning didn’t laugh. His unease grew stronger and stronger: while he couldn’t approve of the Imperial Consort’s

preoccupations, he still thought she could be excused for having them. Blood is thicker than water, and he wasn't an absolute despot like Emperor Taiming. Why hadn't she explained herself over two decades later?

Something must have happened afterward to make her regret abandoning their original plan.

The Marquis couldn't resist asking, "Your Majesty, I have never heard of innate spiritual bones and a paramount spiritual sense being united in a single person; may I ask, Your Majesty, what happens to such a person if he survives?"

Emperor Taiming said softly, "A connection will remain between the spiritual sense and the spiritual bones even after they are parted."

The Marquis of Yongning was shaken. He knocked over his wine cup.

"The possessors of innate spiritual bones before him didn't know that they were that generation's sacrifice for the Zhou family. They only thought that they had been born frail," the emperor said. "Only Ying... A first class spiritual sense is comparable to being a half-immortal, but a paramount spiritual sense—it's said that it can naturally see through all things, perceive the energy of all creatures—I'm not sure. Ying has never told me how the human world appears in his eyes. A person like that, even when his spiritual bones have been removed, will still be connected to those bones in thought if not in body. In other words, for over twenty years, while his body was in the mortal world, his mind... half of it was always held far below in the Impassable Sea."

As the old emperor spoke, he poured himself more wine, three cups in a row, knocking back each in one gulp. On the strength of the alcohol, he seemed to recover a bit of boyish spirits. "You're right, Zhengde. Even if the child had gone to herd sheep at the feet of the

unpeopled Beijue Mountains, dragging around a sickly body—even if he had spent his whole life as a wanted criminal—even if he had never been born—he still would have been better off than as a child of royalty in Jinping.

“Innate spiritual bones are a curse passed down from our forebears. Originally, they occurred only once every few hundred years. Later, they began to appear practically once every generation... Do you know why that is?” Before the ghastly pale Marquis could speak, Emperor Taiming answered himself, smiling, “Because again and again a useless full blood brother of the one carrying innate spiritual bones would be chosen to be the next Crown Prince. The bloodlines converged. With generation after generation chosen like this, the innate spiritual bones increasingly became an ulcer on our bones... Those whose spiritual bones were carved out could only eke out a living with false bones substituted by a secret art. Virtually none of them lived to the prime of life. My mother was the daughter of a fifth-rank official. Under this throne of mine lie the flesh and blood of my own full blood brother.”

The Marquis of Yongning picked up his toppled wine cup and set it heavily on the table. He said, coldly, “Forgive my rudeness, Your Majesty, but if just one generation had wanted to be rid of that ulcer, it wouldn’t have been handed down to the present.”

CHAPTER 57 - The Mountain Falls (9)

“Seas run dry, mountains wear away. How can a country remain eternal? Even the plants rotate across the four seasons. Isn’t Great Wan fed up with being named Zhou?” At this moment, Prince Zhuang’s spirits were rather high. “With turmoil in Great Wan, discounting Southern Shu for the moment, Chu and Northern Li are bound to be unable to restrain themselves. Xuanyin is presumably also eager to see a foreign invasion in order to take back popular sentiment... Before, Zhou Kun only provoked internal strife in Xuanyin by stealing a heart demon. This time, as his son, I will perform my filial duty and give him a free lesson in how to bring about an immortal war empty-handed—oh, right, don’t forget to ask that brat Xi Shiyong where he’s run off to.”

Bai Ling silently took out the white jade proximal and sighed to himself.

This was a natural born evil spirit of chaotic times, like the legendary child born of dragon’s saliva, who would only laugh on seeing the sky full of burning war beacons.⁴² The heart-protecting lotus made by Master Lin’s hand couldn’t improve his vitality as much as a bloody conflict.

But who could criticize him?

At any rate, Bai Ling’s life was his. If he wanted to become an immortal, Bai Ling would become a step up to the heavens; if he wanted to become a demon, then he would simply become a soul-burning lamp.

Prince Zhuang looked at him. “Why are you sighing?”

Bai Ling quietly said, “I was only thinking that when the world falls into chaos, the lives of the people are hard.”

Prince Zhuang said, smiling, “When the canal connected north and south, when the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon began to ride the mists, did the lives of the people cease to be hard? If they aren’t hard, then where has this turmoil come from?”

Bai Ling hesitated, then said, “Your Highness, since Xuanyin does not dare to resist the people’s resentment, why don’t you simply step forward and petition on the people’s behalf, personally lead them in demanding justice? It would save them from being used by those evil cultivators.”

“If I petition on their behalf, what are they going to do? If I lead them to demand justice, do you think I’ll know what ‘justice’ they want?” Prince Zhuang said calmly. “I don’t know of the people’s suffering, and they don’t know of my grievance. You say that the lives of the people are hard—in what ways are they hard? Have you lived the life of an unemployed laborer? Since you haven’t, you’re only an onlooker judging others against yourself. Why should I take someone else’s business into my own hands? Who am I to act as a savior to others? Are they sheep, not men?”

Bai Ling was at a loss for words.

“Even if they would rather be sheep, I am no shepherd. I am but a demon from the bottom of the Impassable Sea.” Prince Zhuang massaged the thumb of his right hand. “Instruct Shiyong to return to finish his business and hurry back to the immortal sect. Tell him not to run around outside in this turmoil.”

Bai Ling accordingly bowed his head to write the letter.

Fine. In the end, this “demon” had a tether holding him to mortal desires.

Xi Ping nearly tore the pages of the book as he turned them.

He compared the skeletons around him to the names of the deceased in the book one by one: Zhou Ye, seventh son of Shizong; Zhou Li, posthumously conferred the title of Princess Changping in the second year of Xianzong...

In the book, it said that this Princess Changping had been only eight years old when she died, so the spiritual bones set here were also very small. She had her hands propped behind her, sitting on a stone step with her feet dangling; she seemed to still be a mischievous imp. Xi Ping gently touched her skull and heard a little girl's tearful voice calling out "Mother"... She seemed to be in a great deal of pain.

He passed among the skeletons, endless lingering spiritual energy sweeping by his ears, hearing the unheard last words of the owners of these spiritual bones that had been trapped at the bottom of the fathomless sea.

Xi Ping's scalp prickled. What was all this? What the hell was it?

It certainly wasn't an illusion. Illusions arose from the heart; no illusion would use things he didn't know and had to look up in a book to solve the riddle!

At last, he clenched his teeth and stood in front of the skeleton named "Zhou Ying."

The muscles of Xi Ping's calves nearly began to twitch faintly.

Only close up did he find that this skeleton's right hand thumb and index finger were each missing a joint, but he had no time to consider this minor detail now. All the names of the skeletons around him that he had looked up belonged to members of Great Wan's imperial family who had died young... and the Zhou family's members almost never shared names with their ancestors.

But what if...

What if when san-ge had been named, the Board of Rites had made an oversight? After all, there had been so many generations. Or what if there had once been an amorous emperor who had given birth to an illegitimate child he hadn't entered in the record of family names?

Clinging to a last thread of hope, he fiercely squeezed his wrist, held his breath, and reached out a hand toward that skeleton.

When he tested the spiritual energy, he would know... He would certainly hear more last words that had nothing to do with him, right?

Having written the letter, Bai Ling suddenly frowned—there was no flow of spiritual energy in the proximal. In other words, the connection between the two proximals had been broken.

What was going on? Had the immortal tool been damaged? Or had the young master used up all his spiritual stones yet again?

He couldn't have used them up so quickly, could he?

“Your Highness, I can't seem to contact the Viscount.”

Prince Zhuang clicked his tongue. “That big spender. He's run out of spiritual stones yet...”

But before he could finish speaking, it was as if Prince Zhuang had been stabbed. His right hand trembled, and Xi Ping's horrified, distraught face flashed before his eyes.

On the nameless altar, Xi Ping gathered his courage and took the right hand laying by the skeleton's side. But unlike the other

skeletons, the spiritual energy didn't scatter. Instead, it flowed toward the place he had touched. The glow of the dense spiritual energy made the bones seem even more like a statue carved from white spirits... Xi Ping didn't hear last words from this skeleton. The moment he touched the skeleton, all of his spiritual sense was suddenly concentrated between his brows, in his spirit. There, he met a pair of familiar eyes.

Through the spiritual bones, the spiritual senses of these two people whose connection through the white jade proximals had been cut off collided without warning.

Bai Ling saw the languor from earlier vanish entirely from Prince Zhuang's face. He put a hand to his forehead. An inscription flashed dimly on his brow. This "demon who wouldn't be a shepherd" instantly reverted to an ordinary mortal and asked one question after another, almost babbling: "Where are you? How did you end up at the bottom of the Impassable Sea, all alone? How did you get in?"

Xi Ping's legs went weak, and he went right to his knees at the feet of the seated skeleton. "...san-ge?"

There was a thin layer of spiritual energy on the bones. They could absorb the spiritual energy hovering around them. Xi Ping was at any rate a half-immortal, and he had learned some general knowledge at the Latent Cultivation Temple. He knew what this was — only spiritual bones could absorb spiritual energy.

Supposing that these spiritual bones had belonged to a cultivator, even an open-eyed one, his cultivation level would have had to be at the peak of the open-eyed stage. For Xi Ping, this would have been someone with a cultivation level similar to his. Through the unseen glasses, the name should have been blurred and incomplete. But on this skeleton, the name "Zhou Ying" had been so clear that he couldn't avoid seeing it even if he wanted to. That

meant they had to be the bones of a mortal... the legendary innate spiritual bones.

Innate spiritual bones like those of Princess Duanrui, the likes of which had only appeared in Xuanyin once in a thousand years.

Bai Ling gasped. “The Viscount is at the bottom of the Impassable Sea? He isn’t a member of the Zhou family. How did he get in?”

Once the initial shock was past, Prince Zhuang immediately remembered how his right thumb had been touched out of nowhere. “He must have had my thumb bone.”

Bai Ling said, “But the Viscount grew up with you and has a profound karmic connection to you. If he had touched one of your spiritual bones, you could not have been unaware.”

“Yes, so someone else must have had that thumb bone before.” Prince Zhuang’s thoughts were extremely quick. He hurriedly connected the sequence of events. “One of my spiritual bones was stolen and I didn’t know about it—that must have happened after I broke my connection to the bones eight years... nine years ago. You took my finger bone then, and the thief must have conjectured that a finger bone could safely bring a person out of there, so they imitated you. Nine years ago... nine years ago... Didn’t that traitorous former general commander of Heaven’s Design Pavilion go into seclusion nine years ago?”

Bai Ling said in surprise, “There was indeed a whiff of that place about him. Can it be...”

“Nine years ago, during the big earthquake that provoked a rare tidal wave throughout the Resurrection Vortex, we opened the seal on the Impassable Sea and took advantage of the chaos to escape. It’s likely that Liang Chen fell to the bottom of the Impassable Sea by bizarre coincidence then and borrowed my finger bone to free

himself. That bone must later have fallen into the hands of his accomplice, and Shiyong went to investigate the remaining evil cultivators in the southern mines and came across it..." In an instant, the clear sequence of cause and effect was exposed before Zhou Ying's eyes. For a time, he couldn't catch his breath, only felt that he was like an ensnared insect; it seemed that no matter what, he couldn't escape the venomous web of fate. "Damn it!"

"Your Highness!" Bai Ling grabbed his fist, which he had slammed against the wall.

Prince Zhuang took a deep breath, quickly restrained himself, and calmed down. "Shiyong, listen to me carefully..."

"Who..." Xi Ping interrupted him, his voice so strained it nearly tore his throat. "Who did this?"

"I can't explain it properly in a few words. You can't stay in that place for long. I'll explain everything to you when you come back, okay? Listen to me. The wind hasn't risen yet in the Impassable Sea. Right now, take the finger bone that brought you there, return to the place where you came in, and find the inscription there. Remember this."

He projected an image of an inscription into Xi Ping's spirit. "Find this. When you find it, use that finger bone to pass through. Hurry."

Xi Ping didn't move. Half-kneeling, he held the skeleton's hand, his gaze not leaving the skeleton. His expression was somewhat blank. He asked, "What happens if the wind rises? I think there *is* a wind."

This brat was truly full of curiosity. If he wasn't satisfied, he definitely wouldn't drop the subject. All Prince Zhuang could do was say, "Not that kind of breeze—raise your head, look at the cliffs on either side of the valley."

Like a puppet on strings, Xi Ping raised his head. He saw that in the ring of towering cliffs around the valley, the countless pitch-black caves looked like one malicious eye after another, covetously eyeing his flesh and blood body. When he looked into the caves, the frenzied warning from his spiritual sense pricked his eyes almost painfully.

“Suppressed there is the demon host.” Prince Zhuang’s speech was somewhat faster than usual. “When the wind rises, the demons in the caves will be shaken awake. There’s no way to determine when the wind will rise or fall in that awful place. The demon host might wake at any moment. There’s a ten point⁴³ demon seal there. With your current cultivation level, you won’t be able to control spiritual energy inside it. Don’t delay any longer!”

“Right, I understand.” Having listened to this, Xi Ping nodded very firmly. “Then you’ll just have to put up with being in my mustard seed for a while.”

“Wha...” Sparks nearly flew from Prince Zhuang’s spiritual bones. To Xi Ping, his voice actually sounded flustered from agitation. “Don’t fiddle with my... my spiritual bones! Can’t you see that I’m securing the demon seal? Don’t you understand that the people who came before you only dared to take a small finger bone? Aren’t you...”

Before he could finish, the two of them simultaneously heard the sound of the sobbing wind in the valley change its tune slightly.

Prince Zhuang’s expression changed abruptly. “Xi Shiyong, get out of there right now!”

Xi Ping remained motionless. “How powerful are these demons? Are they like the ones in the legendary Great War of Gods and Demons?”

Prince Zhuang nearly had a heart attack at his question—when he was studying, this brat couldn't learn a thing even if it was taught eight times. He'd been nicknamed the "teacher's headache." But when there was no need for him to be clever, he could always hit right on target. At the moment, all Prince Zhuang could do was vaguely say, "Something like that. Since you know they're powerful, hurry up and leave."

Xi Ping said, "I don't believe it."

Prince Zhuang: "..."

Was Xi Shiyong the wrath of heaven sent directly to him from the highest clouds?

The "wrath of heaven" slowly said, "I've listened to shizun's lessons about the Great War of Gods and Demons. Your shed skin forebear only sealed the demon host in the Impassable Sea by exhausting his cultivation and feeding his body to the demons. San-ge, even though you have innate spiritual bones, you're still a mortal. The demons shut up in here can't be of the grade of the demonic gods of antiquity..."

Prince Zhuang's head was about to split. "Whatever grade they are, they can still crush you..."

"There's nothing impressive about crushing me. Even a gold-armored zheng raised by the Shu could crush me just by sitting on me. But the Xuanyin Mountains have four high elders and thirty-six peak masters." Xi Ping was paying absolutely no attention to the increasingly wrong pitch of the wind. "I don't believe that taking your mortal skeleton can release the demon host suppressed here and leave all those mighty people at a complete loss. Before you, the most recent spiritual bones belonged to His Highness Prince Rui. Don't lie to me, I looked it up in a book. You hadn't been born

yet when His Highness Prince Rui passed away. Even if they took your spiritual bones before you were born, there would still have been nearly twenty years in between. The demon seal was all right even with no one to secure it for twenty years?”

Prince Zhuang: “...”

He had never expected that at such a time he would hear of Xi Shiyong reading a book.

There was a wail, and a bone-chilling laugh came on the wind. It was sharp and thin, echoing in the valley. The ground began to tremble faintly. The inscriptions that had been carved into the ground popped up. A rancid smell spread, the sky clouded over, and a bloody mist rose.

“The seal couldn’t have been missing someone to secure it for twenty years, but it wouldn’t have been a problem for an offering. I suppose these demons wouldn’t starve to death in twenty years.” At the moment, Xi Ping could be described as so furious that he was brave enough to do absolutely anything. He turned a deaf ear to the laughter that could have scared a dozen Zhao Zhenweis into pissing themselves. He took his backup sword out of his mustard seed. “Who’s been raising demons in this damned place? Who took your spiritual bones and left you here as collateral? I’m going to get out of here and kill them.”

“You know it’s an offering and you still want to pull the tooth from the tiger’s mouth? Xi Shiyong, you...” Before Prince Zhuang could finish, the spiritual sense linking him to his spiritual bones abruptly cut off—he had done what he could to escape the connection between himself and his spiritual bones nine years ago. It was only because Xi Ping, a person with a profound karmic connection to him, had touched them that the link had been reestablished. Now that it had broken off again, it meant that that bastard Xi Ping, not

listening to a single word he said, had simply stuffed his spiritual bones into his mustard seed!

The moment that Xi Ping “seized the spiritual bones by force” from the altar, the weather in the valley changed. Ear-splitting roars sounded. The starving demon host at the bottom of the fathomless sea was enraged.

Xi Ping’s expression didn’t so much as flicker—even if the sky fell today, he still had to get these spiritual bones out of here.

The sky in Jinping was so heavy it seemed ready to come crashing down on people’s heads. Dense clouds rose above Guangyun Palace. Suddenly, an unseasonal bolt of winter lightning fell, the light giving all the auspicious animals on the palace walls and eaves a malevolent look.

“We can’t stop.” Emperor Taiming slowly shook his head. “The Zhou family can’t stop now.”

The Marquis of Yongning said derisively, “The Zhou family’s forebear gave up his body to feed the demons and used himself to build the Impassable Sea—a meritorious deed persisting for generations. Are you saying that you not only couldn’t shield your children and grandchildren, you also had to turn ‘feeding demons with your own body’ into a family calling? If you hadn’t been willing, I don’t believe that Xuanyin would have publicly demanded that you place your own children into the Impassable Sea—Your Majesty, are you all so attached to that throne that gives you no freedom?”

Emperor Taiming was stunned. Then he stroked his chin and said, smiling, “Zhengde... Zhengde, you really are... just as upright as your name.”⁴⁴

The Marquis of Yongning stared.

“The war of gods ended long ago, and the structure of the five great immortal mountains... oh, there are only four great ones left now... the structure is already established. The world is clearly divided. All the ancient demonic gods have fallen. What kind of evil creatures can there be that my Xuanyin’s thirty-six peak masters couldn’t get rid of and would need ordinary mortals to stand guard over? After being held at the bottom of the Impassable Abyss for thousands of years, the demonic gods, too, ought to have starved to death.”

The Marquis of Yongning faintly realized something, and chills went up his spine.

“This throne that gives us no freedom—you’re right,” Emperor Taiming said quietly. “Since ancient times, my family has been a family of demon subduers. For thousands of years, a hundreds generations of my ancestors have taxed their ingenuity for the sake of this country, working night and day. Back then, it was my family that gave up the Xuanyin Immortal Mountains to the Southern Sage, gave up our bodies to fill the Impassable Sea. It is fitting and proper for us to rule this country, but now we must hold ourselves back on point after point for the sake of those so-called ‘great families’ of Xuanyin.

“Eight hundred years ago, Princess Duanrui with her innate spiritual bones was born into this world, and the whole family was wild with delight. They thought that the Zhou family would at last have its proper place in the immortal mountains. But what was the outcome? What has the Zhou family amounted to? A dog that Xuanyin uses to control the mortal world?

“The immortals have forgotten that demon subduers must have a means to control demons. All antidotes grow beside the poisons they treat.” At this point, the old emperor’s face took on a somewhat deranged expression. “The Impassable Sea is the only place that Xuanyin’s Sea of Stars cannot penetrate. It is the foundation of my

family's rebellion against the Way of Heaven... Since Anyang has already made her arrangements, it shows that Xuanyin has already learned of the deficit of spiritual stones in the southern mines... Where would you guess those spiritual stones have gone?"

The Marquis of Yongning was dumbfounded. After a long time, he met Emperor Taiming's bloodshot eyes. "Have you all gone mad?"

"The 'innate spiritual bones' offerings of previous generations only learned of their fates on the point of death—that was for their own good. At any rate they could be happy in the mortal world for a brief time. Even if they had known that they had the deep Impassable Sea pressing down on them, they would still have been unable to breathe a word about it to outsiders. Wouldn't that have been too painful? That pain has been borne by us... us despicable wretches who hold the throne on the basis of our nearest and dearest's flesh and blood. We can only carry on bearing the sin of murdering our own family members, or else their flesh and blood would have gone to waste."

Like a sigh, Emperor Taiming said, "Ying has no full blood brothers. Can you guess why that is?"

CHAPTER 58 - The Mountain Falls (10)

“Because the curse on my family has at last come to a head,” Emperor Taiming said. “In the war of gods, the victors became sages and the defeated became demons. The corpses of the beheaded masters fell forever into the Impassable Sea, their bodies dead and their cultivation eliminated, but their resentment did not dissipate. This is what gave birth to the countless true demons at the bottom of the Impassable Sea. And the head of the demon host is..”

The Marquis of Yongning saw His Majesty’s lips move, but after the final words left his mouth, it was as if they had been swallowed by the air. Not even a sound of breath came to his ears.

Emperor Taiming paused and said, smiling, “As expected. We are both mortals. I cannot say that name.

“This ‘head of the demon host’ feeds on demons. As soon as he emerged, the stars fell into turmoil, the sages working together were unable to snuff him out, and at last it was a forebear of the Zhou family who gave up his body to establish the ten point demon seal, scattered that great demon at the bottom of the Impassable Sea. Since then, the Impassable Sea has been impervious to surveillance by the immortal sects, and no one but a member of the Zhou bloodline can enter. Xuanyin Mountain betrayed us. Emperor Gaozong risked himself, passed through the Resurrection Vortex and went down into the Impassable Sea. At first it was because he wanted to raise a private army there, but instead he found, contrary to his expectations, that the scattered demon seeds at the bottom of the Impassable Sea were still alive. They couldn’t flourish, but.. they carried some of the aura of that great demon. Emperor Gaozong, that old lunatic, did something that pulled a hundred generations of the Zhou family into a nightmare—he ordered a cultivator who was his trusted aid to remove his spiritual bones.”

The old lunatic was calling someone else an old lunatic...

The Marquis of Yongning didn't know how to react at first.

"Gaozong was the son of Princess Duanrui's full blood brother, so he also had natural spiritual bones?"

"Yes. Their branch of the bloodline seems to have reverted to type. Gaozong saw his aunt's fate with his own eyes and was unwilling to enter Xuanyin. He removed his spiritual bones at the prime of his life and from then on was plagued with illness. He died two years later, leaving a bone altar at the bottom of the Impassable Sea," Emperor Taiming said. "The demon seeds were like waste discarded by the universe. They were the remains of the demon. Unlike other living things, they couldn't receive the nourishment of spiritual energy, except through marrow made of spiritual energy in the spiritual bones of the family of demon subduers... Don't you think it's very mysterious, how the Way of Heaven leaves all living things one last gleam of hope?"

In the heated room that was as warm as spring year round, the Marquis of Yongning's old rheumatic legs ached faintly as Emperor Taiming spoke.

"A cultivator only attains spiritual bones at the consummate open-eyed stage, and Xuanyin would be certain to know if a cultivator's spiritual bones were removed. Fortunately, my family has innate spiritual bones. These spiritual bones, as soon as they're born... even before they're born, are separated from the body and end up at the bottom of the Impassable Sea, to constantly absorb spiritual energy, form spiritual marrow, nourish the demon seeds. The demon host is constantly renewed from the demon seeds, then is swallowed into the void and becomes nourishment for the head of the demon host. With the blessing of the southern mines, since Renzong's time, the demonic energy at the bottom of the Impassable Sea has been making daily strides."

Hearing his diction, The Marquis of Yongning felt a chill surging up from his guts. “Your Majesty, when Southern He invaded the north, was it truly because the sect leader of Lancang Sect lost his mind?”

“It truly was,” Emperor Taiming said. “Southern He’s greed knew no bounds. They selfishly brought Moon Plated Gold into the mortal world, until they had hollowed out their spiritual mountains and were harming heaven’s order for the common people. Had Lancang’s sect leader not gone mad, rather than being kicked out of the five great established sects, being led into injustice to the point that their Ways of the Heart were crushed, being condemned by the whole world... instead, they could in fact have brought themselves back from the brink of destruction, circulated spiritual stones from other countries for a high price, slowly recuperated. But... a shed skin great master like the Lancang sect leader should have had a Way of the Heart as steadfast as iron—why would he have lost his mind?”

“Why?”

“Because in that year, Princess Jiade died. Jiade was the offering of Renzong’s generation. She was weak and sickly and had never married. She always lived in seclusion deep within the palace. But there are rumors that say she didn’t die from illness, but died in childbirth—that was when Renzong’s oldest son was born. The child of this illicit relationship between brother and sister was the next generation’s possessor of innate spiritual bones.”

What was all this... The Marquis of Yongning’s ears were ringing from the wildly throbbing pulse in his own neck.

“Suppressed by the ten point demon seal, the demons are unable to leave the Impassable Sea. Only when a new offering sinks down and the demon host rejoices will the demon seal loosen... Ha, perhaps it’s our forebear being enraged by his unworthy descendants. When Renzong sank the spiritual bones of his eldest

son into the Impassable Sea, he took advantage of the seal loosening to take away a heart demon seed, which he planted in the Lancang Mountains.” With a sigh, Emperor Taiming said, “It wasn’t the Lancang sect leader who was mad. It was Renzong.”

The Marquis of Yongning sat there in a daze for a long time, feeling that if you poured out the black filth of the Zhou family, it would stop up the Grand Canal for half a year. In comparison to the others, the one in front of him seemed open-minded and reasonable. “... I hardly recognize the word ‘benevolence’ anymore.”⁴⁵

Emperor Taiming quietly said, “It was brought about deliberately.”

“What?”

“Not long after I was born, my mother passed away. Anyang was only two. Motherless babies in the palace are usually given to the empress or another consort or concubine to look after, but Anyang and I were practically raised by our older brother. When he left the palace to set up his own household, his manor became our home. Or else how could Anyang have had so many opportunities to leave the palace to go strolling around in her youth?” Emperor Taiming said. “In the palace, the children of a single mother will indeed be a degree closer than others, but they wouldn’t rely on each other the way we did. That unusual closeness was something the previous generation deliberately promoted.”

“Why?”

“In order to perpetuate the bone altar. The Zhou family hasn’t produced any renegades like you, who would rather let the dead die for nothing and take your whole family into exile if it meant scraping that ulcer off the bone. Each one of us, since learning the secret from the previous generation, were already sinners. We could no longer leave that bone altar... In a thousand years, only Ying, feeling

the pain of the demon host absorbing his marrow since birth, has known the whole truth. Though the Impassable Sea has kept his mouth shut, left him unable to speak to an outsider of this secret, he was still determined not to be manipulated in this way. How do you think the Imperial Consort's later children died?" Emperor Taiming sighed. "Truly a demonic star from the heavens... What a coincidence. With him, the hundredth generation of bones, the great demon has at last taken shape. Nine years ago, the tidal wave in the Resurrection Vortex was caused by the great demon opening his eyes. At that time, half of the demon host was swallowed by him. Xuanyin Mountain must have been very nervous lately, because the Sea of Stars has been predicting calamity for no apparent reason... The demon seal is about to break. Zhengde, don't you think that is heaven's will?"

"Your Majesty, forgive my rudeness, but if there truly was such a thing as heaven's will... if heaven truly had eyes, it should have brought punishment down upon the Zhou family long ago."

Emperor Taiming laughed quietly. "Heaven does have eyes..."

In the depths of the valley in the Impassable Sea, the altar began to shake. The joints and teeth of the skeletons on it clicked together in time with the tremors. Next, the peculiar laughter turned into a shriek, droning—an astral wind appeared out of nowhere in the valley.

This wind seemed to be able to pierce a person's ears. Xi Ping had just put away the spiritual bones when he was blown right into the air.

Instinctively, he played his bone qin, like the time he had been dangling from the north slope of Flying Jade Peak. But while the urgent sound of the qin echoed in the valley, it didn't move the inscription-covered cliffs a hair. He couldn't even resist the wind.

The tyrannical wind threw him fiercely at the cliff face. At the same time, in the cave facing him, a pair of blood red eyes appeared. The eyeballs were one chi square, maliciously waiting for the wind to blow this snack their way!

Fortunately a half-immortal's body was far more resilient than a mortal's. On the impetus of that wind, Xi Ping abruptly turned around in midair and drew his sword. There was a clank as his sword hit something hard.

The owner of the blood red eyes was an enormous lizard with the head of a man. Its thick and heavy body was covered in scales; on its neck was a head the size of a table for four.

Xi Ping's sword had jabbed that "person"'s face; it was as if he had sliced at a rock. Propelled by the force of the gale, the blade scraped against the demon's face, sending up sparks. Next, the ordinary iron was defeated, and the sword snapped. Xi Ping was catapulted to the cliff face next to the cave!

When it moved, the demon was also just as swift as a lizard. In a blink, it threw itself out of the cave and swiped its sharp claws toward Xi Ping's middle. Xi Ping pulled out the spirit-winding silk and, ignoring everything else, aimed it at the inscriptions on the cliff. The spiritual energy flowing through the inscription character was momentarily blocked by the spirit-winding silk, and the cliff supporting the inscription immediately collapsed. Spiritual energy spurted out like the tide, blocking the demon's claws and slowing the wind!

When the wind paused, the floating "kite" Xi Ping rolled down along with the cliff. On the cliff face, countless demons reached out of the caves. Some had human forms, some were shadows, there were monsters you'd have to fill a whole page to describe...

Amid the shaking, all the skeletons slowly turned toward him. Opening and closing their jaws, they seemed to be furiously saying: Ignorant boy, how dare you shake the foundation built here by a hundred generations of resentful ghosts!

Xi Ping took only one look, then averted his gaze, his eyes hard. He thought, "What's it got to do with me? Save your resentment."

He narrowly avoided a series of hands and claws and fixed on a boulder where there seemed to be fewer inscriptions. When he had rolled to that point, he grabbed the boulder to stop his fall. He raised a hand and stamped a hither seal in a crack between the inscriptions.

Before going to a strange place, Xi Ping would stamp a spiritual seal in the place he set off from out of habit, whether or not he had a use for it later.

Inside the demon seal, while he couldn't use spiritual energy himself, it seemed that the spiritual seal still worked!

The two seals instantly connected. Xi Ping, raising his half-snapped-off sword, threw himself in one-handed. Just then, a twiggy paw grabbed his ankle and pulled him down!

Xi Ping looked down. Below him were countless bloody maws waiting to split him up and eat him. In the space of only a few breaths, the bottom of the Impassable Sea, where the wind had risen, had become congested with bloody fog.

The demons' evil eyes seemed to have floated up from the depths of nightmare. A look could sway your spirit.

But Xi Ping looked directly into those eyes unwaveringly and thought, All these years, san-ge's spiritual bones have been here with these things?

He clenched his teeth fiercely and, backhanded, used his broken sword to cut through his own ankle. “You can have it, motherfucker!”

The strength of a half-immortal neatly sliced through the bone. His flesh and blood fell along with the demon. The wind swirled the blood spurting from the wound all over Xi Ping. Wrapped in bloody rain, he passed through the hither seal and fell back into the reincarnation wood forest.

The reincarnation wood forest seemed to be disturbed by his flesh and blood. The ancient trees began to tremble.

A number of demons gave chase before the spiritual seal vanished. Xi Ping had no more strength left to grip the broken sword. It slipped out of his hand. He was soaked in sweat, as though he had been scooped out of the water. His vision went black again and again. “Help... help me out...”

The reincarnation wood trees dropped a vine and scooped up this blood-covered person, making the demons throwing themselves at him come up empty. Then, the vine tossed Xi Ping into the dense forest behind them, right into the embrace of another vine.

The furious roars of the demons echoed throughout the reincarnation wood forest. The towering ancient trees were brought crashing down by the sharp claws.

Xi Ping felt that he had never concentrated so hard in his life. And it turned out that when you concentrated up to a certain degree, you really could weaken pain.

Ever since he was little, he had thought there was something strange about san-ge and the Imperial Consort. No matter how he tried, he couldn't understand it. Once he had secretly asked his

mom, and she had looked as though she was going to cry, so he hadn't dared to ask again.

Now, it seemed he had finally caught sight of the secret undercurrents his relatives, distant and close, were hiding. He had made some faint guesses, but he didn't dare to think any more carefully about them.

Xi Ping remembered that when san-ge had been in his early teens, he had often left the palace, but it wasn't because he had been very fond of play... He got tired so easily doing anything, he couldn't have played even if he had wanted to. He had only gone under the name of visiting his grandmother to spend a whole day sitting in old Madam Xi's rear courtyard, listening to the opera pieces he had heard a hundred times before, drinking tea so weak it had less taste than water, seeming more elderly than his grandmother in her seventies.

Xi Ping thought, No wonder he would rather spend a whole day weeding the garden with the old lady than return to Guangyun Palace.

No wonder that at only fifteen, not waiting to come of age, he had left the palace early to set up his own household and taken only a dog with him.

Xi Ping licked his dry lips, casually pulled an inner robe from his mustard seed, tied it tightly around his wound, and stamped another spiritual seal under cover of the forest in case he needed it later.

He had to leave this place with san-ge's spiritual bones today; even if he died, he'd have to find another opportunity to die when he got out, or else san-ge wouldn't be able to stay with the Xi family afterward. How could he go drink tea and pull weeds in the old lady's garden again?

If he couldn't even go to the old lady's garden anymore, where could he go?

Xi Ping wiped the blood on his hands off against his clothes, reached into the mustard seed, and gripped Prince Zhuang's spiritual bones. "San-ge, how many of those inscription exits you mentioned are there?"

"Only one." At this stage, Prince Zhuang had no more time to scold him. Anything but helping him escape as soon as possible would be pointless. "But the location isn't fixed. It's tied to the Resurrection Vortex and related to the circulation of the water in the vortex. It's a good thing you've only been there a little while. The longer you delay, the farther the exit will move."

Before he could finish, his connection to Xi Ping was broken off again. Unnoticed, a demon like a shadow had appeared, the demonic energy extending from it like hair wrapping around Xi Ping, growing tighter the more he struggled. Xi Ping tossed out the spirit-winding silk and began to rummage around with brute force, making a hole in the "hair." When he fell to the ground, he stamped another hither seal.

As he passed through the spiritual seal, it was as if the reincarnation wood trees behind him were of one mind with him. The moment he vanished, they toppled over, holding down the demon that wanted to give chase.

Xi Ping threw off the demon chasing him, squeezed out of the spiritual seal he had left before... and ran right into a "person."

This "person" was tall and graceful, with a smile at the corners of his lips, sitting on the trunk of a chopped down reincarnation wood tree, a pair of eyes as warm as jade looking his way, as familiar as could be.

San-ge?

Xi Ping came to an instant halt. The obedient reincarnation wood vines immediately wrapped him up and pulled him back in a cautious retreat of over a zhang.

“Oh?” This “Prince Zhuang” was slightly astonished. “You’re a perceptive little brat. Have you also got a first-class spiritual sense or better? You actually saw through me at a glance.”

Xi Ping thought that if his ge had been here in person, he would have boxed his ears by now. Would he be smiling at him? As if.

At the same time, he looked and listened in all directions and found that all the demons that had just been chasing after him like an avalanche, snapping their jaws, were roaring nearby; it seemed that they didn’t dare to chase after him rashly. He instantly became even more wary. “How kind of you to say so.”

This “Prince Zhuang”’s face slowly changed. The muscles of the cheeks became slightly plumper, the traces of the bones became fainter, the distance between the brows widened... With a faint change to the features, he no longer looked like Prince Zhuang. There was a feminine look to him. Xi Ping was distracted and instantly saw the traits of many people he knew in that face where masculine and feminine mixed together.

“I am called a heart demon,” the “person” said candidly. He curved his eyes in a smile at Xi Ping—those smiling eye were identical to his mother’s. “Don’t be afraid, you’re too young. You’ve yet to know the hardships of life or taste its flavors, and your spiritual sense is sharp. I’m the one who’s afraid of people like you.”

“Really?” Xi Ping didn’t hesitate for a bit. “Then I won’t bother you. Maybe we’ll meet again.”

No sooner had he spoken than the reincarnation wood tree tossed him several zhang away. Another vine reached over and caught him. His second time leaping through the trees, the previously obedient reincarnation wood tree got something into its head. The vine abruptly twisted around Xi Ping's neck, trying to wring him. Xi Ping all but heard the sound of his bones dislocating—

The next moment, there was a scream in his ear, and a black shadow was pulled out of the reincarnation wood tree by the heart demon and swallowed right up.

The reincarnation wood tree's vine gently brought Xi Ping with his missing foot down to the ground and stopped moving.

“That was a ‘parasite.’” The heart demon had his hands behind his back, looking at him calmly. “At the bottom of the Impassable Sea, these things are everywhere. Are you sure you can get out on your own?”

For a moment, Xi Ping couldn't speak. He only probed his dislocated shoulder with difficulty and pushed it back in place.

“I'm an old acquaintance of Zhou Ying's. If you don't believe me, ask him. I'm the one who taught him about inscriptions.”

Xi Ping froze—this heart demon knew that he could contact san-ge.

The heart demon laughed. “Nine years ago, when the Impassable Sea was unstable, it was I who helped him escape with his little friend... He was the one who let me down. It's truly heartbreaking.”

Without waiting for his prompting, Xi Ping had already reached into the mustard seed to ask Prince Zhuang.

Prince Zhuang said, “The heart demon speaks nothing but lies. Don’t trust it.”

But the heart demon put in a timely word: “A-Ying, you’re speaking ill of me right now.”

Prince Zhuang, hearing this, frowned.

The heart demon said, smiling, “Don’t be so nervous. I only want to discuss a transaction with the two of you... A-Ying, this little brother of yours, he can’t use spiritual energy, he can’t even walk. His condition couldn’t be more tragic, and he doesn’t even have a loyal and devoted paper friend beside him to help. Do you want him to escape from the mouth of the demon seal on his own?”

Prince Zhuang’s spiritual bones were inside the mustard seed. Only when Xi Ping was touching him could he hear the voices in the Impassable Sea through the intermediary of Xi Ping. He couldn’t see anything. Hearing this, he was startled. “What happened to you?”

Xi Ping said, “I’m fine. Cutting down any number of prattling little pretty boys is no problem.”

CHAPTER 59 - The Mountain Falls (11)

The heart demon clicked his tongue a few times and deliberately said nothing.

Prince Zhuang said, “Xi Shiyong!”

Xi Ping didn't answer. He found the elixirs Pang Jian and Zhi Xiu had given him in the mustard seed. Both of them had been absolutely orthodox in what they gave him. Apart from a small bottle with an established foundation pill that open-eyed cultivators regularly carried as encouragement, the elixirs the two of them had given him were practically all of the mind-calming and wound-treating sort that a mortal could also use. They wouldn't cure an illness, but they wouldn't kill you, either. Therefore, there were no prohibitions on using them.

Xi Ping grabbed a handful and munched them like candy.

The products of Rosy Cloud Peak were out of the common run. The elixirs dissolved as soon as they were in his mouth, and the effects were instantaneous.

As they slipped down his throat, Xi Ping's spirit cleared at once. Then, a shallow-rooted shadow was pulled out of his spirit by the mind-calming pills. The unsteady emotional state he'd been in since he had come to this damned place settled rapidly. Xi Ping calmed down.

It turned out that at some point the heart demon had already gotten to work on him.

His spiritual sense, which had been crowded out by emotion so much that it couldn't operate, recovered and all but grabbed Xi Ping

by the neck and shook him, warning him that the man-shaped monster in front of him was dangerous.

The heart demon wasn't in the least bit embarrassed, looking at him with Madam Cui's soft, smiling eyes. "Don't misunderstand. My heart demon seeds can't be removed by an open-eyed grade pill. The vast majority of this world's worries are what people have imagined for themselves, but, alas, they always want to blame me."

"How true," said Xi Ping with a false smile. "Blame the pillow when you can't sleep, blame the heart demon when your six roots of sensation are unclean—anyway, you can't be the problem. How worthless of them."

This heart demon was different from that crowd that would bite you as soon as look at you. He was glib-tongued and looked at a glance like bad news; he gave Xi Ping the impression of being a person. Xi Ping just happened to be the type who would always play to an audience. When no one was watching him, if his temper went to his head, there was no telling what kind of suicidal stunt he might pull. But if there was an outsider present, however much he was falling apart, whatever impulses he had, he could still quickly piece together his wavering reason.

"A general in the field needs no permission to meet an emergency." Xi Ping pulled back his severed ankle. The elixirs had temporarily eased the pain. He leaned the injured ankle against his intact leg. "It's no use for you to provoke him. He's not here in person, and I don't do what he says. Come on, let's chat."

Prince Zhuang: "..."

This scoundrel. He hadn't been punished enough as child. All of this hadn't been knocked out of him, and he'd gone to ruin.

The heart demon narrowed his eyes and examined Xi Ping for a moment, then said, “If I’ve guessed right, the Resurrection Vortex ought to have been in a calm period. The Impassable Sea isn’t connected to the outside world during calm periods. Since you got in, it means that something has gone wrong during this one, right?”

Xi Ping—the chief culprit in agitating the Resurrection Vortex—nodded without hesitation and played dumb. “We were escorting a spiritual stone shipment north. Naturally we calculated to make sure that the Resurrection Vortex would be in a calm period before we set off. But as soon as we got there, an evil wind came out of nowhere, and suddenly there were whirlpools in the perfectly calm sea. And as if that weren’t enough, we ran into some evil cultivators trying to steal the spiritual stones, and somehow I got carried down here.”

Meanwhile, he quietly wrote on Prince Zhuang’s spiritual bones: *Can you contact Pang? In the southern mines.*

Prince Zhuang said, “I can think of a way to contact him, but I can’t speak of the Impassable Sea to outsiders.”

Having calmed down, Xi Ping’s mind began to work once more. He wasn’t surprised by this—his san-ge wasn’t some kind of silently enduring punching bag. If he hadn’t said a single word in all these years, it had to be because he couldn’t say anything, whether directly or by suggestion.

Moreover, neither he nor Prince Zhuang knew Pang Jian well enough to have a perfect tacit understanding. How could they get the word out..?

Xi Ping wrote: *Try asking him to send a “Heavenly Question” telling my shifu not to withdraw the sword energy.*

Prince Zhuang: “...”

Fine. Now he knew why whirlpools had arisen in the Resurrection Vortex during its calm period.

Bai Ling saw an expression of disbelief momentarily appear on the prince's face.

Prince Zhuang sighed and muttered, "It seems he isn't the wrath of heaven sent to punish me, he's the wrath of heaven sent to punish the whole Zhou family... When Zhou Kun spared the Xi family, did he forget to check whether their horoscopes accorded with his?"

Saying so, he took out a piece of paper and successfully wrote down Xi Ping's words at once. But no matter what, the words "do not withdraw the sword energy" wouldn't remain on the page.

"Won't work," Prince Zhuang said. "The demon seal can't be tricked by your clever little games. Think of something else."

Xi Ping cursed inwardly. Before he could consider it closely, he heard the heart demon say, sighing, "As I thought—*he* is returning."

"Who?" said Xi Ping.

The heart demon waved his sleeve and scooped Xi Ping up. "A-Ying can't speak of this secret. I'll take you to see."

Unexpectedly lifted by him, Xi Ping was swept by that long sleeve up into the canopy of the ancient trees. His field of vision instantly widened. From high up, Xi Ping saw a small mountain made of heaped up spiritual stones. The spiritual stones, not carefully handled, still had rock snow on them. The surging spiritual energy mixed with the murderous energy exhaled by the Impassable Sea's demon host; it was like the smell of agarwood mixing with body odor, making it so that you didn't know whether to inhale or not.

Just then, a demon lying on the cliff met his eyes and turned its head to shout at him. But the next moment, Xi Ping watched as the demon, as if held down by an invisible hand, was pressed tightly against the cliff, struggled a few times, and then... vanished into thin air!

Xi Ping's eyes opened wide.

Where did it go?

The heart demon said quietly into his ear, "Look into the valley."

Xi Ping followed his gaze, looking toward the valley. Countless demons that had lost their offering were turning impatiently around the altar, greedily sniffing and licking the already dead spiritual bones, gathering into a heap. But sometimes, a demon would get halfway through squabbling with another demon, then disappear for no reason, leaving behind only its bewildered opponent... as well as Xi Ping, who thought his eyes were deceiving him.

"The ones who disappear have been swallowed by *him*." The heart demon sighed. "You cannot see *him*, but *he* is omnipresent. The whole Impassable Sea is merely nourishment to meet his unlimited demand—this is what Great Wan's Zhou family has spent nearly eight centuries rearing... the head of the demon host that was once scattered by their ancestor. Little master, are you ready to hear the story of all the bones of the dead that lie beneath your Lingyang River?"

Prince Zhuang couldn't resist saying something to distract Xi Ping: "This miserable business—you can guess most of it without him needing to say anything..."

Xi Ping squeezed his wrist bone.

Prince Zhuang said, “A heart demon seed can shatter the Way of the Heart of an ascended spirit or shed skin master. I’m telling you not to listen to his lies!”

It doesn’t matter, Xi Ping thought. I don’t have a Way of the Heart.

In response to his mood, the reincarnation wood forest made an anxious rustling. Xi Ping raised his head and said to the heart demon, “Go ahead.”

Meanwhile, Pang Jian was rapidly scanning all the records of mine collapses.

He was like a born hunting dog; he could sniff out the clues between the words at top speed—in the records of mine collapses, there was no need to look at the causes of the mishaps; they were all excuses. What he was chiefly concerned with was the mine supervisor who had been in charge of the affected area at the time. He quickly arranged two hundred years of mine collapses according to the person responsible.

He quickly caught a trace: the numbers of dead and wounded in the mine collapses had no connection to the scale of the collapse, but the connection to the person responsible for the affected area was great.

When Liang Chen and the other early mine supervisors who had opened their spiritual eyes due to the defense of Jinping had struck, no matter where or how big the collapse was, the casualties among the miners were very small. But when it came to Zhao Zhenwei and the others like him, while they had spent less time at the mines and handled fewer mine collapses, the casualty numbers were appalling.

No...

Pang Jian frowned. It wasn't that the casualty numbers later were high. Gold and iron mines also had mishaps, and given Pang Jian's understanding, the later casualty numbers were the normal ones; it was the ones from before that were wrong.

And among all the records, the records of the mine collapses Liang Chen had handled in particular were the strangest: there had only been one big mine collapse in the area he was responsible for—precisely the time that the whole Pang family had been buried in fragrant jade miasma.

And after that, while there had been cave-ins in the mine Liang Chen was responsible for, not one single person had died. This was because after that big mine collapse, the mine he was responsible for had a strict work and rest schedule; every time a cave-in occurred in a working area, the timing was after the miners had stopped working.

What compassionate spiritual stones.

Pang Jian read these records carefully and found that in the most extreme instance, a few miners who were after rock snow had prolonged their working period without authorization and had gotten spiritual stone ore dropped on them by a cave-in. They had actually ended up caught between the ore and survived completely intact.

If they had this kind of luck, why were they still working as miners? They ought to have gone to buy a Gold Tray Lottery ticket and set up house!

Pang Jian read these bizarre records several times, then shut them abruptly. Distant memories floated up from some corner—when he had been lifted, confused, out of the fragrant jade miasma, the cultivator who had stayed by his side, full of so much genuine emotion that it was hard to say which of the two of them had been

bereaved... he thought that had been General Commander Liang... Supervisor Liang.

Pang Jian simply wanted to sneer. He smashed the record of mine collapses against the table with a thump—so this was how the thieves inside the house had quietly consoled themselves, causing mine collapses while protecting the miners... what, did they have consciences, too? When they went too far and brought about tragedies, could they also feel profound responsibility, be heartbroken from grief?

He suddenly remembered something else and went to flip through the records of all the cultivators in the mines who had opened their spiritual eyes as miners. He quickly sifted out those among them who had been vouched for by Liang Chen—there were quite a few, starting with Lü Chengyi; it was nearly forty percent in all.

And these people, Lü Chengyi included, who had been brought into the sect by the false Tai Sui Liang Chen, had all been sent to run errands like escorting the shipment convoys; not one of them had been responsible for mining.

Liang Chen had actually been protecting these juniors, not letting them stain their hands with the lives of the miners.

“For hundreds of years, only members of the Zhou family have been able to enter. There were members of the main bloodline, and members of collateral branches. All carried criminal brands on their spiritual images, making them keep the secret like the dead. They used special immortal tools to hide in the Shu encampment, stealthily arrive here, deliver the spiritual stones, and leave their allies a ‘toll fee.’” At the bottom of the Impassable Sea, the heart demon was closely watching Xi Ping’s blank expression. He twisted a loose strand of Xi Ping’s hair and carefully rubbed the blood off of it.

This heart demon seemed to know that the young man's faith in the whole world had collapsed. He seemed unusually tender. "These people were very cautious of me. Before entering the Impassable Sea, they would use the secret technique of the demon subduers to seal off their minds and spirits, turning themselves into marionettes, only acting rigidly according to prearranged plans. Many people were unlucky and came just as the wind was rising in the Impassable Sea, and were broken here—how did the little paperman at A-Ying's side come here? A half-demon born because a succubus seized a human body. The poor child... he came into the world by prying apart his father's organs and belly. From the moment he was born, he was trapped in this lightless place. Honestly, he would rather run the risk of being dismembered by the demons than talk to me."

Xi Ping came back to himself and snatched back his hair, dodging the heart demon's paw, which was stroking his face.

The heart demon laughed, taking no notice. "Apart from you, the only other bearer of a different family name was the previous owner of those hidden bones you carry. He got in by mistake nine years ago, during the earthquake in the Impassable Sea, when A-Ying and the little paperman escaped and the ten point demon seal just happened to be unstable."

Xi Ping said, "Why didn't you run away back then?"

The heart demon shrugged. "Ask that ingrate brother of yours."

Prince Zhuang said, coldly, "The heart demon can control a person's spiritual sense. If there's the slightest crack, he can invade the spirit through the spiritual sense. He agreed back then to force the spiritual sense attached to my spiritual bones into a single finger bone, let Bai Ling break off that finger bone, and take it out of the Impassable Sea. If he had only wanted to take advantage of the demon seal loosening to escape the Impassable Sea, that would

have been one thing, but his greed is bottomless. He attempted to invade my spirit. Otherwise, Bai Ling's sneak attack wouldn't have succeeded. Reap what you sow—whose fault is that?"

While the heart demon couldn't hear him, he seemed to know what he was saying. "A-Ying, you correctly predicted that I couldn't nimbly slip out of the crack in the demon seal like that little half-demon. You deliberately lured me into using your spirit to escape, then had that little devil launch a sneak attack against me... Look at your whole family—that wretched old however-many-times great-grandfather of yours took my heart demon seed for a plot to snatch another country's spiritual mountains. When your father brought you here, he also took along a seed in passing—I don't know who he wanted to use it to harm. And you, when you had nothing else to do, you used me to relieve your boredom and secretly learn about inscriptions. You enticed me into helping you, then turned around and stabbed me. It's no wonder the Zhou family is a family of demon subduers. You're filthier than the demons."

Prince Zhuang said, "There's not much to choose between the two of us."

Xi Ping put in a word: "And later, that old demon... Liang Chen, didn't he get out, too? Why didn't you take the opportunity to be a parasite on his spirit?"

The heart demon sighed. "Oh, him. Don't mention him. The quality of his bones was too poor. He was approaching the end of his lifespan without even completing his spiritual bones. I wanted to ask him to take me along, but I only said a few words to him, and his Way of the Heart shattered. Once the Way of the Heart shatters, the spirit also goes to ruin—who would have thought that a person who didn't even have spiritual bones would have a Way of the Heart? Anyway, you ought to blame A-Ying. If he hadn't wounded me to begin with, I wouldn't have been so agitated and slipped up like that."

Xi Ping froze. Liang Chen had had a Way of the Heart, which had shattered at the bottom of the Impassable Sea.

For some reason, he suddenly remembered the demented questions and laughter of that pitiable man who had taken the wrong road, on the point of death.

He had fought for the nation and the people, come back from the brink of death, unexpectedly opened his spiritual eyes, received the courtesy name "Mianzhi" that had floated down from the distant immortal mountains... What had his Way of the Heart been? When he had taken on the criminal brand, done those filthy things for the Zhou family, had he believed that he was making sacrifices for some great cause?

There was no way to know.

At any rate, the moment he had seen the heart demon, he had known the truth behind that war two hundred years ago, known that his lifetime of strife and sin had been only a joke in the palm of someone else's hand.

And his inspiration no longer remembered him.

Xi Ping, his expression unwavering, said, "But when I saw Liangshixiong later, he had already established a foundation."

"Thank heaven and earth." The heart demon seemed to be genuinely relieved on Liang Chen's behalf. "It seems that the half-skeleton of hidden bones he took from this forest brought about a fortuitous occurrence. That's worthy of the relics of an ancient demonic god. Here I thought that person had been destroyed as a consequence. I've been conscience-stricken for a long time."

That person had in fact been destroyed as a consequence.

Xi Ping raised his head and looked at the sky of the Impassable Sea, letting out a long breath. The desire to kill rose in him... That war two hundred years ago had impacted more than one person.

He had used his shifu's sword energy to stir up the whirlpools in the Resurrection Vortex. With such a major incident befalling the convoy, shifu would likely come down from the mountain in person to see what was happening. Perhaps he was already above the Resurrection Vortex now.

Xi Ping calmly thought, I absolutely can't let this heart demon leave.

The heart demon likely never would have thought that an open-eyed ant hardly different from a mortal would dare at this moment to indulge in a wild fantasy, examining him with the gaze of a hunter. This wasn't even a snake wishing to swallow an elephant; this was an ant wishing to slaughter a dragon.

"He will be awake soon. Until *he* is restored, the demon seal won't break, keeping us all trapped here. But as soon as *he* returns, we will be his nourishment. It's so hard to be a demon with a mind. Luckily, heaven hasn't abandoned me. It has brought you here. I'll take you out, and you'll help me escape—how about it?"

Xi Ping said, "I don't know how to break the demon seal. You could count the number of open-eyed arrays I've managed to memorize on one hand. I don't even know how I got in here. Sir, aren't you overestimating me?"

"I don't need you to break the seal." The heart demon smiled very sweetly. The curve of his smile was Jiangli's. "You're a living person. I like living people best... I only need you to let me attach myself to your spirit for a moment."

Xi Ping stared at his smile, thinking of something unknown. He slowly said, "I don't think I can say no to that."

Hardly had he said this than he heard the sound of rustling below him.

Xi Ping looked down and saw that at some point countless demonic figures had come to surround the base of the tree. Now they simultaneously raised their heads. On each and every one of the different grotesque faces was a smile identical to the heart demon's.

Xi Ping nearly threw up. He closed his eyes at once. "If you insult the dead again, I'll die right here and leave you without a ride."

The heart demon said, smiling, "I don't believe that. If you could stand to leave A-Ying's bones behind, you wouldn't have brazenly snatched food out of the mouths of the demon host."

"Don't even think about it. If your spirit is polluted by the heart demon, the best that can happen to you is becoming a walking corpse," Prince Zhuang said to him quickly. "Listen to me, think of a way to bring that heart demon to the demon host. When he's not expecting it, throw my spiritual bones at him. Even the heart demon can't suppress instinct. The starving demon host will fight to the death over the spiritual bones. You can control the reincarnation wood trees, right? When the time comes, use the opportunity to escape. The shipment convoy has encountered an attack, Xuanyin Mountain will have to pay attention to it. Hold out for a while, I'll think of a way..."

Xi Ping, eyes closed, finished listening to his ideas, then said to the heart demon, "That could work, too."

Prince Zhuang: "..."

The heart demon looked at him, smiling brilliantly. “A-Ying has no objections?”

“Well,” said Xi Ping, putting “a general in the field needs no permission to meet an emergency” into practice, “he wants me to throw out his spiritual bones. Didn’t I say before that I don’t do what he says?”

Bai Ling saw his lord’s veins all stand out. He clutched his chest, so angry that he couldn’t even manage to cough.

CHAPTER 60 - The Mountain Falls (12)

Author's Note

Friendly hint that this chapter can be read along with the following one.

In the showdown between the three great liars, three people have four chat rooms open. I've looked back, and up to the present not one of them has told the truth.

—

Zhaoting skimmed over the chaotic surface of the sea and stopped in the air above the Resurrection Vortex. Looking down from high up, the whirlpools of all sizes looked like malevolent eyes. From time to time, cold, oppressive light stabbed through the “eyes.” This was the sword energy that had turned the water upside down.

Zhi Xiu's consciousness scanned the whole area of the Resurrection Vortex, noting the sunken ships and the corpses. His search took him to the shipment convoy, which had miserably withdrawn from the neighborhood of the whirlpools. Lü Chengyi's body, with the criminal brand standing out on it, had been drawn down to the bottom of the sea. The mutilated remains of Shu's spiritual beast and beast tamer, though dismembered, still had an aura—when an early established foundation cultivator passed away, their aura would linger for at least half a month.

The only thing he couldn't find here was Xi Ping.

As Zhi Xiu sent out a Heavenly Question to notify Pang Jian of the approximate situation of the East Sea at present, he frowned: for better or worse, that disciple of his was a half-immortal with spiritual bones. How could he have disappeared entirely?

Just then, his consciousness found a tiny living being in the vast ocean.

Wei Chengxiang was holding onto a piece of driftwood, narrowly maintaining her balance in a gap between the whirlpools. After opening her spiritual eyes, she had enough strength. As long as she stayed alert, she could dodge the sword energy in the whirlpools; it would be no problem for her to float here for half a month. For the moment, she wasn't in mortal danger; she was only very confused and didn't know where she could go.

Her mind and body alike were floating aimlessly amid the vast ocean waves, and the person she had thought would guide her had disappeared.

Suddenly, it was as if something had pricked the center of Wei Chengxiang's brow. She quickly raised her head and saw a man in an old-fashioned grey gown fly down on his sword and land in front of her like mist. The simple, unadorned sword was notched all over with old scars. The man on the sword had his back to the light, obscuring his features. As soon as he landed, even the bluster of the Resurrection Vortex was suppressed. The crashing and jostling sword energy gently brushed his swaying hems and obediently circled his old sword.

Wei Chengxiang's eyes widened slightly. This grey-clothed immortal was different from any cultivator she had seen before. Supposing that, as she had imagined in childhood, there truly were celestial beings in the world who could grant the wishes of mortals, they would presumably look like this.

But Wei Chengxiang didn't make a wish. She tightly clutched the driftwood, arched her back, and warily stared at the grey-clothed immortal.

She was no longer a mortal. She was an evil cultivator.

But the immortal didn't seem to notice anything wrong with her. He only very politely asked, "Miss, might I make inquiries with you about a certain person's whereabouts?"

"Who?"

"The person who has always spoken to you through the reincarnation wood. Where is he? Can you contact him?"

Wei Chengxiang was startled. She thought, How does he know? Who is he?

Involuntarily, she sank most of the way into the seawater, leaving herself exposed only from the nose up. She dryly said, "Tai Sui goes where he pleases."

"He's no Tai Sui," the grey-clothed immortal said. He sighed. "You also can't reach him, right? Fair enough. He wouldn't have tossed you into the sea on your own if he could help it."

Hearing this, Wei Chengxiang's nose stung out of nowhere. All the hurt in her heart surged up. But then the grey-clothed immortal's eyes fell on the left side of her face. Wei Chengxiang was startled and instinctively wanted to cover her face—from the corner of her eye to her lower jaw, the left side of her face had a scar like a tear stain. It was a scar left behind by spiritual eyes opening too urgently. If she hadn't struggled day and night, not forgetting to keep a spiritual stone in her mouth even when she slept, nearly swallowing up the whole bag of blue jade the senior had given her, she would probably have taken even more damage.

"A half-immortal's body is far more resilient than a mortal's. As long as it isn't fatal, an ordinary wound from a knife or sword will slowly heal—apart from an eye-opening wound. That will be with you for

the rest of your life, unless you can smoothly establish a foundation in the future,” the grey-clothed immortal said slowly. Though he was standing on a sword, suspended in midair, he didn’t at all give you the impression that he was gazing down loftily. “Only that step is even harder than opening your spiritual eyes.”

Wei Chengxiang was already in enough trouble not to care about covering up. In a deep and gruff voice, she said, “That’s right, I’m an evil cultivator. Are you going to put me away?”

The grey-clothed immortal’s gaze was very gentle. There was even a trace of indescribable sadness in it. He asked, “Do you know what pilfering heaven’s order is?”

Wei Chengxiang didn’t understand anything. Fearless and ignorant, she shook her head.

“Then why would I put you away?” the grey-clothed immortal said. “Though an autumn insect won’t survive the winter, when it lets out a wail, if there is an echo, one cry may have a hundred answers. But walking the vast immortal path, you will only have yourself. Child, when you grow up, will you regret it?”

Wei Chengxiang was fearless with youth. “Of course I won’t regret it. I’m going to kill all my enemies!”

The grey-clothed immortal seemed to smile. “All right. This meeting was fated. I will give you something.”

Before Wei Chengxiang could react, the immortal snapped his fingers and made a beam of light that entered the center of her brow. The girl leaned back, feeling a book appear in the center of her brow. When she closed her eyes, she could clearly see the writing in the book and turn the pages as she liked.

She opened it in amazement and saw that the book described how ranks of cultivation were distinguished, how to manipulate spiritual energy, what each of the three great systems of talismans, arrays, and inscriptions were, and so on... This was common knowledge that the sons of the wealthy learned at the same time they learned to talk, but Wei Chengxiang had never heard of it.

It was as if she had gained the most precious treasure. In spite of herself, she floated out of the water.

The grey-clothed immortal said, "Going deeper are the ancient classics of the immortal sects. You'll have to go work those out for yourself. I'm limited by the sect rules and cannot give them to you."

By a series of coincidences, Wei Chengxiang had ended up on the wrong path, but in essence she was a child from a good family. Seeing that this person had no ill intent, she became polite. "Thank you... thank you, Exalted. Do you also know the uncle in the reincarnation wood? Did you come to find him?"

Hearing the form of address she used, the grey-clothed immortal stared. Peculiar exasperation appeared on his face. He vaguely said, "That scound... I mean, I have some connection to him."

Wei Chengxiang said, "Before, he was always there, but suddenly he stopped talking. I'm very worried."

"When was this?"

"Right after the whirlpools in the sea started."

The grey-clothed immortal considered it, then asked her, "Can you help me out?"

First Wei Chengxiang nodded. Then she said, "It has to be something I can do."

“It’s nothing hard,” the grey-clothed immortal said. “You can call him directly through his spirit with the reincarnation wood. If he has only a sliver of clarity, he’ll be able to hear your voice. I’ll send you away from here, and you help me out by calling to him a few times, is that all right?”

Even if he hadn’t instructed her, Wei Chengxiang still would have done this. Naturally she wouldn’t turn him down. Then the immortal gently tapped the water. The water arched obediently like sandy soil, then froze, freezing out of nowhere into an ice boat. Wei Chengxiang had never seen magic like this. She was dumbfounded. Then, she floated up out of the water as lightly as a feather and landed on the ice boat.

“Go on.” The grey-clothed immortal waved a hand. The ice boat made of congealed seawater dashed straight through the Resurrection Vortex. The formerly scattered sword energy obediently pulled all the big and little whirlpools out of her way. The boat went faster and faster, carrying her toward the boundless land.

When Pang Jian received Zhi Xiu’s Heavenly Question, he didn’t at first have time to read it closely. He was chasing some Turmoilers in the southern mines.

In the name of Heaven’s Design Pavilion, he had detained a whole crowd of suspicious individuals. While investigating the people he had arrested, he had found to his surprise that some Turmoilers were furtively watching.

The people in the southern mines were used to taking the Turmoilers for dimwitted, unfeeling animals and didn’t pay much attention to them. Pang Jian didn’t say anything. Unnoticed, he stuck some talismans onto the backs of the Turmoilers. He saw them gather and walk south together. After walking through a dazzling maze forest, the Turmoilers reached a little hidden village.

The Land of Turmoil had been split up among the four countries, but most places had no one to mind them. Even in Great Wan's encampment, which was the most flourishing, there was only the town that had taken shape around the southern mines and the canal docks, no more than a thousand mu, and the rest was still wasteland.

This little village had a temple brimful of the distinguishing characteristics of Southern He. At the temple gate, the other Turmoilers in the village surrounded the ones who had returned and started talking all at once in a jumble of Great Wan official language and Southern He's local dialect.

Pang Jian had grown up in the southern mines and was reasonably familiar with this hybridized Southern He dialect. From far off, he heard that these people were discussing the cultivators in the southern mines being arrested. From their speech, they seemed to be very reverent toward some of these cultivators. In spite of himself, Pang Jian was faintly surprised—these Turmoilers were dressed in rather clean and dignified clothing and had a permanent habitation in this village; they even seemed to have a division of labor among themselves... If not for their deformed features, they simply would have been no different from ordinary commoners.

One of the Turmoilers, who had the look of a village head, said, "For many years, we have been granted the caring attentions of those Exalted. From now on, I'm afraid we won't have it easy. Alas, what has the world come to? Why does it always go after the good people?"

Another Turmoiler said, "What must we do now?"

The head Turmoiler was silent for a long time. "All we can do is pray for divine aid."

Pang Jian thought, Pray to whom? He thought that before Southern He was wiped out, they had worshipped Lancang's Sword Sage... Was this village's temple a Sword Sage Temple?

But then, he heard the Turmoilers' quiet, garbled prayers for protection; it turned out that these villagers worshipped "Grand Duke Tai Sui"!

Pang Jian stared: since becoming "Tai Sui," Liang Chen had secretly housed Turmoilers and even instructed his subordinates to take care of them?

Before he could finish marveling at Liang Chen's kindness, he saw a rather familiar figure stroll out onto the little village street. When he got a clear look at the newcomer, a layer of gooseflesh abruptly came up on Pang Jian's back—this was Lü Chengyi!

Wait, hadn't he just read...

Pang Jian quickly took out the Heavenly Question to verify: General Zhi had confirmed that Lü Chengyi had died in the Resurrection Vortex. General Zhi couldn't have seen wrong, so who was this?

Above the Resurrection Vortex, having sent Wei Chengxiang away, Zhi Xiu looked down at the shambles his rebellious disciple had left behind—it was his sword energy that had stirred up the whirlpools in the Resurrection Vortex during its calm period. If he only withdrew the sword energy, the Resurrection Vortex would soon calm down and the shipment convoy could leave.

But for some reason, his spiritual sense was faintly holding him back from withdrawing the sword energy; and he still couldn't divine anything.

As he was hesitating, a Heavenly Question came from Pang Jian; it turned out to be quite a long letter.

Zhi Xiu read through it quickly. His eyelids began to twitch.

In Pang Jian's letter, he said that he had discovered a special kind of puppet in the southern mines. Its aura, speech, and appearance were absolutely identical to a real person's. If he hadn't caught and soul-searched them, even Heaven's Design Pavilion's Assistant Commander wouldn't have been able to tell that they weren't human. But these puppets, apart from being particularly realistic, didn't have any other use. It seemed that they were only there to stand in at the mines for their masters when those masters were away. Lü Chengyi had such a stand-in, and so did many other cultivators involved with Liang Chen. They were hidden in a village inhabited by Turmoilers.

Pang Jian had dismantled one of the stand-in puppets, found its core array, and searched all over the southern mines for similar objects... which had brought him to digging up graves: in the two hundred years since the southern mines had been established, quite a few of the mine cultivators had either died naturally when their lifespans had come to an end or had died in the line of duty from injury or illness. The miners had set up a small place for these seniors to sleep peacefully, called the Thousand Autumns Forest. The Thousand Autumns Forest contained the remnants of countless arrays. Pang Jian went straight into the earth to investigate and found that among the corpses buried here, nearly half were stand-in puppets!

In other words, in two hundred years, nearly half of the cultivators in the southern mines hadn't died; they had disappeared, leaving their stand-in puppets to act in their place in the mines for a time, then find a suitable opportunity to die a natural death.

A majority of the missing cultivators were surnamed Zhou—imperial kinsmen.

Zhi Xiu rapidly glanced over the names of the Zhou family imperial kinsmen that Pang Jian had picked out. He still couldn't divine anything about them. And when he tried to touch these people's fates, the Resurrection Vortex at his feet abruptly began to surge.

The Zhou clan...

There was only one place in the world that the Sea of Stars couldn't look into, and that place was closely connected to the Zhou family.

The Impassable Sea in ancient legend, sealed in some unknown place.

Beneath the surging whirlpools, the bloody aura exhaled by the demons was sickening. Xi Ping's face paled. The fierce pain that the elixirs had suppressed earlier seemed to be making a comeback. He grabbed a handful of wound healing and mind calming pills and said to the heart demon, "If you're sincere, first make them keep away. I'm going to throw up."

The heart demon waved a hand, and the members of the demon host under the trees obediently withdrew from the reincarnation wood forest. They only kept their gloomy eyes wide open, covetously watching the flesh and blood body.

Xi Ping continued selling out his teammate: "My san-ge says that if my spirit is polluted by you, the best outcome for me will be turning into a walking corpse. I can't accept that."

The heart demon said, smiling, "He's much too guarded. He'll miss out on many friends. I only want to borrow your body to leave this awful place, escape the demon seal. There's a whole world out there, five nations and thousands upon millions of people, no telling how many of them confused by the seven emotions, buried in the six desires—which one among them isn't more enticing than a young man like you whose reason hasn't even fully developed? Why

would I leave all the delicacies in the world untasted to drink a bowl of flavorless gruel like you?”

Xi Ping’s eyes moved. “Even if you don’t down me in one gulp, I won’t be able to withstand a single lick, either.”

At the same time, he quietly wrote in the mustard seed: *San-ge, how did you get out of here last time? Point the way.*

Prince Zhuang’s words nearly caught in his throat: “Don’t ask me, I can’t shoulder the responsibility. As a mere mortal, I didn’t dare to let the heart demon take a single step onto my spirit. I can’t match the boldness of a talented immortal.”

From familiarity, Xi Ping handled him far more ably than he handled the heart demon: *So you don’t care about me anymore?*

Prince Zhuang: “...”

Oh, is that the game we’re playing? Fine.

Through the spiritual bones in the mustard seed, Xi Ping heard the person speaking in his spirit stay silent for a while. Then his voice suddenly became weak. “My spiritual bones were stripped from me before I was even born. After all these years, I’m used to it. Even if you really do bring those spiritual bones out, I won’t be able to bear them. What would I want them for? If I let you die here today, how am I supposed to face my uncle and grandmother?”

Xi Ping hadn’t expected that this person who had always been reserved and self-possessed would suddenly dig out his heart. He froze, then argued: *I used shifu’s sword energy to set off the whirlpools in the Resurrection Vortex. My shifu must have found it by now. As long as...*

Prince Zhuang interrupted him: “Can you be certain that General Zhi will come in person?”

“I...”

“You can’t. And even if the master of Flying Jade Peak comes in person, he still won’t find the Impassable Sea. For thousands of years, only members of the Zhou family have known where the entrance to the Impassable Sea is. I was able to escape back then because my true body was still in the mortal world, and the heart demon could only keep a grip on my spiritual sense. As long as I kept my spirit clear and didn’t get distracted, he would have nowhere to strike. To disturb my intellect, while I was leaving the Impassable Sea, he suddenly launched an attack and tried to use illusions to trap me... I got out because there was someone who kept watch beside my feverish body all night, who played the qin the whole night through, who brought me out. This... I’ve never spoken of this to anyone else.”

Xi Ping’s breath caught.

“Xiaobao,”⁴⁶ Prince Zhuang called his long-unused pet name, “do you know how I feel right now? Can’t you... can’t you have some pity on your san-ge? What would I want those rotten bones for, to make up an intact corpse to bury?!”

A little brother’s shamelessness could pierce a person’s weak spot, but a strong person showing weakness gouged out the heart.

Their internal strife was silent, but it drew blood.

The heart demon watched Xi Ping with great interest. Seeing him bite into a mind calming pill with a crack, he asked, smiling brightly, “So what do you want?”

Prince Zhuang said, “Leave my spiritual bones behind. Come back in one piece. Leave me a way to survive, can’t you?”

For a time, it was as if Xi Ping was being compelled by two heart demons, one internal and one external; he was trapped.

Only after having stabbed right through him did Prince Zhuang slightly moderate his tone. He instructed, “Think of a way to get him to take you to the inscription exit. The heart demon is full of suspicion. You have to make him think that you’re taking every possible precaution against him. There can only be sincere cooperation if there are precautions.”

Xi Ping tossed one pain relieving pill into his mouth after another. His lips went numb.

After a moment, he seemed to finally come to a decision. He said to the heart demon, “First you have to take me safely to the exit inscription, Senior Heart Demon. You’re very powerful. You can control the demon host, kill seventy or eighty of me in the blink of an eye. You don’t have to worry about me escaping right under your nose, right?”

The heart demon nodded, smiling brightly, and said, “That’s reasonable. What else?”

Xi Ping, in accordance with what Prince Zhuang had told him, continued: “Back then, Bai-da-ge used a demon subduing talisman to defeat you. I want to place a demon subduing talisman on my spirit. He was a half-demon, and part of the Zhou bloodline. This place couldn’t restrict him much. I’m different. I can only use talismans once I leave, so you don’t need to worry that I’ll launch a sneak attack. I’m only agreeing to take you out of the Impassable Sea. If you refuse to clear out once we’re out of the Impassable Sea, then it’ll be time for the demon subduing talisman.”

The heart demon's eyes narrowed in a smile. "That thing is truly fresh in my memory. That brother of yours is so wicked."

Xi Ping said, "Do you agree?"

The heart demon put on an act of being backed into a difficult position, thinking it over for a long time. Then he said, "Well, since you're so charming."

Prince Zhuang said, "Anything can go wrong. Don't delay, go now—right, you're injured, aren't you? Bear up with some hardship, spill some blood from your wound. That way, even with the heart demon there, the other demons will still follow in secret. When the time comes, you'll attach a demon subduing talisman to my spiritual bones. When you toss out the spiritual bones, you'll be able to activate the demon subduing talisman using the spiritual energy in my bones. The effect will be limited. It can only hold him off for a moment."

Xi Ping didn't answer.

"Hurry," Prince Zhuang urged, "I'll teach you how to draw a demon subduing talisman."

In a final struggle, Xi Ping said, *My shifu really will be outside.*

Prince Zhuang said, "How else do you want me to beg you?"

The heart demon suddenly drew close. He took hold of Xi Ping's chin. "Haven't I agreed already? Why do you still seem so heartbroken?"

Prince Zhuang said, "Shiyong!"

"There's one more thing." Xi Ping's eyes reddened. He babbled, "After I get out of here, I have to report this place to the immortal

sect, announce it to the whole world. My san-ge and Liang-shixiong...”

“Oh, hey, shh... It’s all right, it’s all right, don’t get excited. Settle down.” The heart demon gently patted him on the back. A cheerful light shone in his smiling eyes. Just as the other demons couldn’t resist the allure of blood, the heart demon couldn’t resist the hatred and hopelessness of humans when they abandoned themselves to despair. He greedily inhaled those feelings from Xi Ping and quietly said, “You have a long life ahead. In the future, you’ll have plenty of opportunities to see filthier things than this. If you only take me out of here, this awful place—I want nothing more than to see it destroyed. I’ll help you.”

CHAPTER 61 - The Mountain Falls (13)

“I’m not human. As soon as I leave the demon seal, I’ll no longer be affected by this place’s prohibition.” Radiance burst from the heart demon’s eyes, as if he was yearning for something outside the Impassable Sea. That face, every angle of which was familiar to Xi Ping, began to look a little inhuman in its greed. “Don’t worry. As soon as I get out, I’ll make sure everyone in the world knows.”

Xi Ping frowned, and the heart demon immediately changed his face once more, like turning the page of a book. He lowered his eyelids, and his rapacious gaze vanished. He once again seemed human. The heart demon waved his long sleeve and took Xi Ping lightly down from the treetop.

The demons that didn’t dare to get too close followed after, unsatisfied, grumbling and swearing in horrifying fashion, cursing the heart demon to a bad end for not sharing his meal.

Perhaps the demons’ curses came from affection and thoughtfulness; before they landed, the heart demon suddenly seemed to sense something. He came to an abrupt halt and pushed Xi Ping aside, then grabbed a demon that was tailing him. Before that captured scapegoat demon could express its views, it was frozen by something. It struggled twice as if in its death throes, then silently disappeared right before Xi Ping’s eyes.

Xi Ping, tossed aside by the heart demon, went weak at the knees. If not for the heart demon pulling him up, he would have fallen—he had felt himself brush shoulders with the Impassable Sea’s great demon with the unspeakable name.

Unprecedented terror nearly crushed his guts. This terror came out of nowhere, so there was no way to overcome it with reason. Xi

Ping's back was instantly soaked in sweat... What had the Zhou family raised?

Did they really believe that they could control this thing? Did they really believe it could give them justice?

"That was close," said the heart demon that looked equal parts male and female, beaming and smacking himself on the chest. "We were nearly caught by *him*."

Xi Ping looked at him in incomprehension. "Trapped in this kind of place all the time, how can you always be so joyful? How can you still laugh?"

The heart demon said, smiling, "How could I be qualified to be a demon if I wasn't joyful? Those who experience both joy and sorrow are ordinary, and those who sigh endlessly are gods and buddhas. We demons are born with nothing. Each day we survive is another day of happiness. Watching you humans go through all the stages of life, experience your sadness, happiness, and anger, is like watching colored glass scatter rainbow light. Why shouldn't I be joyful?"

"You aren't afraid of death?"

"As long as humans don't become extinct, demons will live forever." The heart demon breathed a laugh. "At worst I'll become a demon seed and lay silent for some hundreds or thousands of years. There will always be someone presumptuous enough to come along and stir me up. Do you think that this demon host in the Impassable Sea is made of the remnants of ancient days, or the hatred of the Zhou family given form?"

As he spoke, he landed in the depths of the reincarnation wood forest, holding Xi Ping under his arm. A reeking wind blew past. An inscription one chi square appeared on the ground.

“Tell your brother to have a look and see whether this is the right inscription.” The heart demon turned and licked his lips. He said to Xi Ping, “I won’t lie to you. After all, I’m not like other demons. I can’t bear to see people being miserable...”

Xi Ping was about to reach into the mustard seed when he heard the heart demon lower his voice: “...or A-Ying suffering. Though he has wronged me, after all, I did watch him grow up.”

Xi Ping’s hand paused. Hiding it from Prince Zhuang, he quickly asked the heart demon, “Suffering how? What do you mean?”

“The Impassable Sea’s great demon will soon be restored. That will bring disaster and turmoil upon all creation. Not one of the members of the Zhou family who have sustained this demon will be able to escape this sin. The owners of the other spiritual bones died long ago, their souls departed. Isn’t he the only one left? If he’s lucky, perhaps he can go before the great demon is restored, suffer a little less...”

Xi Ping bristled. “What nonsense are you talking!”

“I’m not talking nonsense. Of the skeletons on the altar, the youngest are no more than seven or eight years old, and those who were fortunate enough to reach adulthood are still hardly older than twenty. After losing their spiritual bones, a person can’t live long... You must have felt that, too, or else you wouldn’t have been seized with an impulse and snatched his spiritual bones in this place where you can’t even fly your sword. Him, well, I figure that he has maybe a year or two left.” The heart demon sighed and stuck up one finger. “Shh—don’t tell him I was the one who said so. If he knew that I had told you the truth, he would certainly hate me to no end.”

Xi Ping grasped Prince Zhuang’s wrist bone in the mustard seed. Before he could speak, Prince Zhuang said, “The heart demon takes

pleasure in toying with human hearts. No matter what he says to you, you can't believe a word of it."

The heart demon stood in front of Xi Ping, tapped the mustard seed hanging around Xi Ping's neck, and silently shook his head, mouthing, *Lies*.

Xi Ping: "..."

Prince Zhuang said, angrily, "In a bottomless den of demons, are you going to trust a heart demon, or trust me?"

The heart demon couldn't hear the private conversation between the two of them, anyway; he only put his hands behind his back and shook his head, sighing, as if regretting something.

These two between them had nearly driven Xi Ping mad. They were both taking advantage of the fact that he was new to cultivation—he lacked common knowledge and was easy to trick!

Prince Zhuang got right to the point: "Do what I told you. I have no close friends or relatives in the mortal world. I don't have a shred of care apart from debts. If you dare to let him touch your spirit, I'll end myself on the spot at once."

Xi Ping said involuntarily, "San-ge, don't..."

The heart demon's fascinated gaze came his way. Xi Ping immediately shut his mouth.

As if he had been pushed into a corner and had no way out, he took out Prince Zhuang's finger bone, shaking. As soon as the finger bone left the mustard seed, a blanketing inscription flashed on the ground. The demons nearby immediately became restless. One was bewildered and actually took no heed of the heart demon's presence, brazenly throwing itself forward.

Without so much as taking a look, the heart demon casually snapped his fingers, and the demon's head was instantly separated from its body. Then it disappeared, "swallowed" by the Impassable Sea.

"It must be here," the heart demon said. "You can draw your talisman."

Xi Ping took a whole bottle of mind-clearing pills from his mustard seed and miserably swallowed half of it. He felt that these things weren't even as bracing as strong tea. He inspected his own spirit inside and out to confirm that the heart demon hadn't stealthily tampered with him. Then he steadied himself and concentrated, using his consciousness to draw a demon subduing talisman on his spirit—this was his first time drawing an unfamiliar talisman on something other than talisman paper. Presumably because, when forced by circumstances, a person's latent potential is limitless, Xi Ping, an amateur who messed up half the time when drawing a contamination-avoiding talisman, actually succeeded on his first try.

The demon subduing talisman that he had no way to activate settled on his spirit with a rumble, solemn and sinister, then turned invisible.

Prince Zhuang gave him no breathing space: "Now that you've learned to do it, draw a demon subduing talisman on my spiritual bones with blood from your fingertip."

Xi Ping's hands were shaking.

The heart demon calmly asked him, "Better now?"

Prince Zhuang said, "Hurry, don't make me urge you a third time."

Xi Ping clenched his teeth, pricked his finger, and drew the talisman on Prince Zhuang's spiritual bones—regardless of everything else, he first had to stabilize san-ge.

He thought: I have to get these spiritual bones out of here.

In that moment, this insufficiently shrewd young man showed all his thoughts on his face; meanwhile, perhaps because he had let his mind wander, his stroke went wild midway through the talisman.

Prince Zhuang's spiritual sense felt it at once. "You got it wrong. Draw it again!"

Under the heavy pressure, Xi Ping at last collapsed. He drew back his bleeding finger, held his head, and knelt beside the hopeless inscription.

The heart demon keeping watch over him was like a faithful and reliable comrade-in-arms, protecting him perfectly in the ring of the demon host. He said kindly and understandingly, "The demon subduing talisman is a Zhou family secret that has never been passed down. You aren't part of the Zhou bloodline. It's too much to expect for you to succeed on your first try. Try a few more times. I'll wait for you."

Xi Ping ignored him, eating the rest of the elixirs.

The overdose of elixirs narrowly steadied his mind. Xi Ping opened bloodshot eyes, and a thought suddenly appeared in his mind: wait, would his san-ge, who could pry open a nest of demons centuries old with a single crack, really kill himself?

Even if he really did correctly draw the demon subduing talisman on the spiritual bones, wasn't the decision to toss the bones out a matter of an instantaneous decision? San-ge was far away on the mainland. He couldn't do anything to control him. Even when he

couldn't walk, Xi Ping would openly comply but secretly disobey—was it possible for san-ge not to know what he was like?

Xi Ping broke away from the spiritual bones, went behind Prince Zhuang's back, and quickly asked the heart demon. "He wants me to draw a demon subduing talisman on his spiritual bones. Will the demon subduing talisman harm them?"

First, the heart demon froze. Then he began to laugh in disbelief.

Xi Ping said urgently, "What are you laughing at?"

The heart demon clapped and said, "I'm laughing because Zhou Ying was born in a lightless world, grew up in the Impassable Sea, has been at odds with his parents and his siblings, is fickle and immoral, with less common human feeling than even we true demons possess—he would be unimaginably happy as a star of calamity bringing turmoil upon the world. But, of all things, he has you... You pull him back to the human world."

Not only was there no happiness in being human, you were also doomed to die.

The heart demon narrowed his eyes craftily. Then his expression became solemn. He said, "Did he also tell you that the spiritual energy in his spiritual bones could activate the demon subduing talisman, but that the effect would be limited, and it could only shield you for a moment?"

There was no need for Xi Ping to speak. It was all written on his face.

The heart demon said, "The spiritual energy on his spiritual bones can indeed activate the demon subduing talisman. But over the years, he has been placed on the altar consecrated to the demon host. Spiritual stones and spiritual energy can only become

nourishment for the demon host by passing through his spiritual bones. What do you think will happen when the ‘spiritual energy’ that has nourished demons touches the demon subduing talisman? If you successfully draw a demon subduing talisman on them, his spiritual bones will simply explode your mustard seed and detonate the demon host.”

Xi Ping’s eyes popped: he’d known it! San-ge had been tricking him the whole time!

He didn’t listen to any more of Prince Zhuang’s lies. He abruptly stood up and planted the finger bone right onto the exit inscription. The long-expectant heart demon turned into misty smoke and seeped into the center of Xi Ping’s brow, entering his spirit.

“A-Ying, this little brother of yours isn’t easy to trick.” Landing in Xi Ping’s spirit, the heart demon laughed heartily and immediately broke his promise. With a wave of his sleeve, he was ready to wipe away the demon subduing talisman on that spirit. “I’ve won! You...”

But he couldn’t finish speaking. The moment the heart demon touched Xi Ping’s spirit, the invisible talisman suddenly revealed itself. The heart demon saw the talisman clearly, and his laughter abruptly cut off.

This was no demon subduing talisman!

Xi Ping had no idea what a demon subduing talisman looked like. The talisman that Prince Zhuang had taught him to draw on his spirit was a primer for activating an array, tied to the demon seal. When the heart demon reached out to wipe it away, it was as if he had brazenly slapped the demon seal that he had been racking his brain to escape for thousands of years!

Zhou Ying!

In the Impassable Sea, the ten point demon seal immediately noticed that a demon was attempting to escape. It instantly connected with the primer on Xi Ping's spirit.

Like a handful of dust, the heart demon was swept away by the demon seal without making a sound.

Xi Ping felt his mind buzz. A brutal aura charged through his spirit, passing right through him, but it didn't hurt him one bit. For a moment he couldn't work out what had happened. Meanwhile, now that the suppression of the heart demon was gone, the fearless demons around him immediately threw themselves toward him.

“San... san-ge?”

“Hurry!” This time Prince Zhuang's aggravated fury wasn't a pretense. “I knew that if you could obey orders, your name wouldn't be Xi. Just you wait, Xi Shiyong. When you get out of there, I'm going to beat you up!”

Xi Ping's bloodshot eyes were lit up by the exit inscription. He jumped down. “Even if you beat me to death, I still won't regret it!”

“Really?” Just then, a quiet and gentle voice sounded while Xi Ping was completely unguarded. The heart demon that had clearly been swept away by the demon seal reappeared in his spirit. “Xiaobao, if I were you, I wouldn't have spoken so soon.”

Xi Ping's pupils abruptly contracted—how could the heart demon know his pet name?!

Could it be that he had been able to “hear” everything just now...?

“A-Ying, you left your spiritual bones here with me for nine years.” The heart demon reached out a hand and picked up a withered seed—what the demon seal had scattered just now had only been a

heart demon seed. “Because I missed you so much, I couldn’t resist leaving a tiny bit of my consciousness on your spiritual bones. Such profound brotherly love. Truly touching.”

Now, Xi Ping’s spirit was completely undefended. When the heart demon easily walked in, Xi Ping became a puppet in the heart demon’s hands.

The heart demon laughed heartily. With Xi Ping’s hands, he grabbed Prince Zhuang’s bones inside the mustard seed. “A-Ying, you’ve disdained these spiritual bones of yours for a long time, haven’t you? Since you’re so eager to destroy the good and bad together, why don’t I help you...”

The Impassable Sea opened wide. The salty smell of the sea poured in.

The heart demon laughed wildly. He could already smell the aura of an ascended spirit.

He had “heard” Xi Ping and Prince Zhuang’s private dialogue perfectly—right now, outside the Impassable Sea, there was a completely clueless ascended spirit cultivator, the master of the Sword that Mended the Heavens from two centuries ago.

These brats in their teens and early twenties were no more than appetizers. Life and death seemed like important matters to them. Their flavor lacked depth.

The Way of the Heart of an ascended spirit cultivator, refined for hundreds of years—now that was a delicacy for a heart demon...

But right at the moment that the heart demon was about to use Xi Ping’s hands to smash Prince Zhuang’s spiritual bones, he went stiff.

He was stuck at the exit to the Impassable Sea. He opened his eyes wide and slowly lowered his head, like a rusted machine. He looked at Xi Ping's hand—Xi Ping's flesh was cracking bit by bit. A rumble began to sound in his ears, and his spirit began to quake.

“What... did...”

You just do?

The spirit was the foundation of the consciousness. Since he had infected Xi Ping's spirit, Xi Ping had stopped talking. Therefore, he didn't answer—inside his mustard seed, the bottle containing the established foundation pill that had been put there like a lucky charm was empty, its contents mixed in with the large quantity of mind-clearing pills. It had passed straight through his meridians and spiritual bones!

Xi Ping already had spiritual bones. Through hundreds of years of accumulation by the Zhou family, the bottom of the Impassable Sea had spiritual energy as plentiful as Flying Jade Peak. The conditions were perfect for establishing a foundation. If he only took an established foundation pill, he would immediately establish a foundation by force.

A vast spiritual wind rose throughout the whole valley of the Impassable Sea and poured into Xi Ping's spiritual bones and spirit.

But he had no Way of the Heart. It was the Way of the Heart that was the key to an established foundation!

How could anyone on earth be so arrogant as to dare to establish a foundation without a Way of the Heart!

Without a sufficiently firm Way of the Heart to stand guard, even if your spiritual bones were as complete as could be and all else was ready, your spirit would still shatter the moment you established a

foundation by force. Was he done with living? Didn't he want Zhou Ying's spiritual bones anymore?

But the heart demon that had thought he had won a complete victory would never know the answers to these questions. The spiritual wind that rose when a half-immortal established a foundation was enough to change the weather; it completely blocked the heart demon's line of retreat. When the spirit that had no Way of the Heart went to pieces, the heart demon that had stepped onto that spirit was annihilated without a sound.

Far away in Guzhou, Prince Zhuang's expression changed abruptly. He lost his footing—

Prince Zhuang had known from the start that his and Xi Ping's "private" conversation could be overheard by the heart demon: he had cut off his connection to his spiritual bones nine years ago; if the heart demon hadn't tampered with them, it wouldn't have been worthy of being called a heart demon.

Hearing Xi Ping repeatedly say "Shifu is outside the Impassable Sea," he had known what audacious notion Xi Ping was getting at.

The more powerful a master, the more dangerous it would be for him to encounter the heart demon. Suppose that General Zhi, a person who so rarely descended to the mortal world, really had come in person to look for Xi Ping in the mess of the East Sea on account of a beam of sword energy; then, given Xi Ping's temperament, he would rather break himself at the bottom of the Impassable Sea rather than drag his shifu down.

Prince Zhuang had only played along with that brat because he had thought that he had some magic weapon for controlling demons; but instead, he had taken an established foundation pill right in front of them without either of them knowing!

What kind of lousy idea was this!?

CHAPTER 62 - The Mountain Falls (14)

The heart demon was one of the most ancient demons in this world. It had once spread among cultivators like a plague.

With just one sentence to make a person waver, just one crack, the heart demon could silently invade anyone's spirit and Way of the Heart. Whether an ascended spirit who could fly through the sky or burrow into the earth or a shed skin cultivator, they might from then on enter an endless loop of wrestling with themselves again and again, be lost forever.

This was why, though Xi Ping had guessed that Zhi Xiu had likely reached the Impassable Sea, he was unwilling to bring this demon out to let his shifu deal with the problem—General Zhi had been taught by the Dignitary of Fate High Elder; in all these years, given how smart he was, he might have guessed at the darkness behind the Wan-He War back then. In two centuries, he hadn't taken a single step into the Land of Turmoil. The fact that he had only sent his unreliable disciple to investigate the southern mines went to show that he was still tied up about this. He was simply a perfect target for a heart demon.

Xi Ping simply didn't know his own limits. No natural force could stop him. He thought every day of rising to heaven. This time, he had for once made an accurate assessment of his opponent, so Prince Zhuang had thought that he could finally be relied upon, just this once.

The spiritual bones far away in the Impassable Sea once again lost contact with their owner. From somewhere came the sound of a hand cannon firing. Prince Zhuang looked out the window, his unique eyes seeing murderous energy rising from the black clouds.

Early that morning, it was the sound of the yamen's bailiffs opening fire on workers carrying coffins that tore through the dawn. The shrill wails put one in mind of the starving demons at the bottom of the Impassable Sea. Prince Zhuang swayed. It was as if something were blocking his throat, choking him so that he coughed incessantly. Under Bai Ling's panicked gaze, bloody saliva seeped out from between his fingers.

The spirit—the heart of the spiritual sense, the source of consciousness, said to be the location of the human soul.

Apart from oneself, only heaven, earth, gods, and demons could reach it; it was the end point of a lunatic attempting to snatch a body—and Xi Ping had used it as a grave offering for the great heart demon.

But before his consciousness could disperse, Xi Ping immediately knew that he had placed his bet right.

As soon as he'd heard from the heart demon's mouth that Liang Chen's Way of the Heart had been broken, he'd gotten this idea—since the heart demon had been unable to possess Liang Chen, it showed that after his Way of the Heart had broken, that senior's spirit had been so destroyed that there was nowhere to set foot. Xi Ping assessed himself; he believed that his circumstances were a little better than Liang Chen's had been back then.

If even Liang Chen could leave the Impassable Sea alive, then was it possible that he wouldn't be able to?

Ridiculous. Such a thought had never crossed Young Master Xi's mind... All that remained was how to distract the heart demon and take him by surprise.

After his consciousness lost its shelter, most of it dispersed in the reincarnation wood forest.

This was just what he had anticipated.

When he had first landed here, Xi Ping had tried to call to A-Xiang. He hadn't reached her, because his connection to A-Xiang had been blocked by the Impassable Sea, but he had clearly felt at the time that his voice had gone through the reincarnation wood forest around him—in other words, these reincarnation wood trees had some connection to his spirit.

Now that his consciousness had completely integrated with the trees, Xi Ping had a strange sensation, as if these trees were his hands, feet, and torso. With a thought, the reincarnation wood trees shook their limbs in a rhythm contrary to the spiritual wind, sending the demons approaching his physical body flying away.

But the strange thing was, the exit to the Impassable Sea had evidently been opened by san-ge's finger bone, but his body was still stuck in the middle of the inscription, going neither in nor out.

“I got in pretty smoothly. How could I get stuck going out? I only ate an established foundation pill—I can't have gotten fat just from that, right?” As Xi Ping pondered in confusion, he controlled the reincarnation wood trees, using their vines to push his body out of the Impassable Sea.

Just then, an enormous attractive force in the depth of the forest drew in his consciousness.

Xi Ping had the feeling that a sucker was attached to the back of his head. His consciousness, roaming through the reincarnation wood trees, was abruptly pulled into the earth. In the blink of an eye, he passed through the vast root network, feeling his mind being squeezed by the increasingly narrow root tips. At last, he ended up at the terminus of the roots of the reincarnation wood trees...

And encountered half of a skeleton.

Seeing the skeleton buried under the reincarnation wood forest, Xi Ping was startled. It looked as if the skeleton had been cut in half by a sharp weapon. There were fractures from the cut left behind on the bones. The former owner of the bones had been dead for ages, yet the spiritual energy on the bones hadn't dispersed. One of the skeleton's hands was turned palm upward, supporting the roots of countless reincarnation wood trees... He seemed to be the origin of this reincarnation wood forest.

Xi Ping didn't have time to think closely. The moment his consciousness met that skeleton, it was sucked in by the bones. There was a huge sound in his ears. In a daze, countless fractured images appeared before his eyes—collapsing mountain ranges, raging floods, tidal waves and huge whirlpools, rocs and dragons, gods and demons, unclaimed spiritual mountains concealed in hidden realms, the ancient sages stirring the star-filled sky with their hands...

All the figures in these images were so large that the only idea they inspired was the desire to prostrate yourself in worship.

All the points of the compass were spread out before him. All antiquity flowed past beneath his feet. Time and space were confounded. Everything known and unknown turned to emptiness in that chaos, dissolving into impermanence, enough to drive a mere mortal to madness. Xi Ping felt that he had become a tiny speck of dust that knew neither where it had come from nor where it was going. For a time he lost awareness, until he was pushed by the wind and landed before a blurred divine image.

Before this, Xi Ping had only heard his seniors explain what a "Way of the Heart" was. He had never especially understood.

In that moment, standing in front of the divine image whose age and sex were indistinguishable, he suddenly understood without being taught: the so-called “Way of the Heart” was like a frame that could contain all that chaos and disorder.

A person could fumble around for their own Way of the Heart, create a very small, yet very steadfast, framework. Then, they would constantly temper their Way of the Heart, constantly expand that framework, until it could integrate all things and all creatures, become one of the three thousand paths of the Great Way. This was the road to becoming a god, becoming a sage.

They could also follow a way that a predecessor had felt out before them, inherit an already fixed framework, slowly fumble for understanding under the protection of that predecessor. This was the road that the majority of people took.

Lin Zhaoli-shixiong had assembled the ancient sword and obtained the Way of the Heart of the ancient sword’s previous owner. The Way of the Heart that Exalted Zhao Yu in Jinping had been searching for was hidden inside an ancient painting... and the skeleton beneath the countless reincarnation wood trees here had a Way of the Heart, which was inviting Xi Ping to step forward.

He tentatively touched the blurred divine image and instantly felt that he had fallen into a boundless scroll. Xi Ping only took a half-hearted glance, didn’t even have a chance to consider closely before he felt his whole soul being filled by that Way of the Heart. A tremendous sense of comfort enveloped him: all that was irresolute could find an explanation here; all that was unstable and uneasy would find a place to rest. He wanted to belong here forever...

Wait, that was wrong! There was something he had left unfinished!

He hadn’t brought san-ge’s spiritual bones out yet.

Xi Ping came back to himself with a start, his consciousness abruptly escaping the blurred divine image, putting him at a distance from it.

There was only half of a skeleton left here. His mind worked quickly: the other half must have been taken away by Liang Chen nine years ago.

The most senior supervisor of the southern mines had ended up in the Impassable Sea by mistake and witnessed the shameful undercurrent beneath the era of steam power. His Way of the Heart and his spirit had broken here, leaving his consciousness with nowhere to go. It must also have sunk into the hidden bones of the ancient demonic god. This was precisely the peculiar aspect of the “way of death.” Apart from the hidden bones, everything else in the body could be swapped out—this could explain why Liang Chen had left his body on the wooden platform and gone out with the hidden bones to search the world for a corpse to wear; the spirit of his original body could no longer sustain his consciousness.

The half-skeleton of mysterious hidden bones had confused the peak masters of Green Pool and Flying Jade Peaks to no end, because there was too great a difference between the way they acted in Xi Ping’s body and the way they had acted in Liang Chen’s body: cloaked in the hidden bones, regardless of whether his own cultivation level was up to the mark, Liang Chen had been able to feign being a near-shed skin, had even been able to hamper Zhi Xiu, who hadn’t dared to exert all his strength so close to Jinping City.

But when this great magical weapon had come to Xi Ping, it had degenerated to its owner’s amateur level. The hidden bones hadn’t raised Xi Ping’s cultivation level, and they hadn’t given him any kind of additional magic powers. Even in dealing with those idiots who had offered up their flesh and blood to the reincarnation wood, his bone qin only worked against mortals—a half-immortal who had

opened his spiritual eyes was already a world apart from a mortal; there was nothing glorious about this.

Xi Ping quickly summarized the differences between himself and Liang Chen: first, when he'd obtained the hidden bones, he had coincidentally just opened his spiritual eyes, and his meridians had been destroyed by the inscription; in order to save his life, Duanrui-shishu had indiscriminately pinched him and the hidden bones together—but that only meant that he was better fused with the hidden bones than Liang Chen had been... Being better fused together meant he couldn't get any use out of them? How did that make sense?

The second difference was that Xi Ping had no Way of the Heart.

Liang Chen had had a Way of the Heart, which had broken; so when his consciousness had found rest in the hidden bones of the ancient demonic god, had he readily inherited that demonic god's Way of the Heart?

This great master had reached the pinnacle of the shed skin stage. Carrying on along his way, your future would be boundless. For an outer sect cultivator who'd had no one to guide him, it was simply an irresistible lure.

But Xi Ping wasn't an outer sect cultivator. He had even refused General Zhi's Way of the Heart, and he didn't think the way in these lousy bones was any more brilliant than his shifu's—cultivating the way of death... that sounded much too auspicious. He'd be better off spending four shichen every day practicing the sword with shifu in the northwest wind.

"I don't want it," he thought. "Anyway, I'm not going to die right away. At worst I'll live off the trees and be a tree spirit. Maybe I'll be able to accumulate some virtue by saving some would-be suicides trying to hang themselves. Shifu can take care of the rest."

Having thought of this, Xi Ping decisively pulled his consciousness away, planning to follow the roots up. If his body really couldn't leave the Impassable Sea, he would first think of a way to get the mustard seed containing san-ge's spiritual bones out.

This great master's Way of the Heart had never been ignored like this. It was infuriated by this proud and ignorant brat. The blurred divine image hurled itself forward, trying to force his consciousness to merge with it. Parting without hard feelings was all right, but what Xi Ping had always hated most was a forced sale. He thought, You want to seize a beautiful man for yourself, or what?

His spirit had cracked, and he had been somewhat dazed and sluggish to begin with. Now he was energized. A rebellious heart was far more effective than swallowing a whole bottle of mind-clearing pills dry.

Xi Ping uprooted his consciousness from that half-skeleton and charged into the surrounding reincarnation wood trees. The reincarnation wood trees twining around the bones moved in answer to his thoughts, quickly twisting around the half-skeleton of the demonic god's hidden bones.

Xi Ping said, "Get lost, now."

He had just wanted to use the tree roots to hold the hidden bones back for a moment. He hadn't expected that, because he had used too much force or something, the half-skeleton would be broken to bits by the twisting roots!

Xi Ping: "... "

I didn't do it on purpose...

No, this couldn't have been his mistake. How could an ancient demonic god's hidden bones be so fragile? And weren't these reincarnation wood trees the old fellow's accompanying plant?

Before he could react, the bones that had been twisted to pieces by the tree roots turned into a handful of green mist that seeped into the tips of the roots of the reincarnation wood trees—Xi Ping, whose consciousness was clearly wandering outside of his body, had a sudden feeling like his ankles were itching. For a moment, he couldn't tell whether the feeling was coming from his own ankles, or whether the tree roots were giving him the impression of having feet!

The peculiar itching quickly went up from his ankles and climbed over his whole body. Xi Ping simply had no idea where to start scratching.

Then, his chest was hollowed out. His consciousness, previously scattered throughout the reincarnation wood forest, suddenly twisted together and was pulled back into his body, hitting the vast spiritual energy that had shattered his spirit head on.

Xi Ping was nearly knocked unconscious by the crash. At the same time, his body, stuck in the inscription, struggled unnaturally.

Every bit of his bones was constantly breaking and reforming. When the bones regrew, they interlocked, making cracking sounds. The reincarnation wood trees around him grew like mad.

Now all the demons in the Impassable Sea were unable to approach. Even the demon seal was trembling incessantly amid this momentum.

Demonic energy that had been concealed for nearly a thousand years leaked out of the crack in the inscription. In the Resurrection Vortex, black shadows appeared at the bottom of each whirlpool and went upward against the rotation of the whirlpools. The sky

suddenly clouded over with heavy clouds. Next, a bolt of lightning split the surface of the sea.

In the distant Xuanyin Mountains, the foggy Sea of Stars turned over, and there was a huge sound at the Principal Peak as the Bell of Tribulation moved without a wind!

Above the Resurrection Vortex, Zhi Xiu narrowly dodged the heavenly tribulation. His heart beat like thunder. But then, his consciousness caught a faint passing sliver of... Xi Ping's aura!

Without any hesitation, the sword cultivator made a hand seal and cut right through the ominously seething enormous whirlpool. Avoiding the lightning flashing through the water, he chased after that aura.

On the ice boat skimming over the waves, Wei Chengxiang suddenly felt something. She took out the reincarnation wood amulet she kept close to her body.

The amulet was now charred black, as if it had been burnt, now restored to as good as new. Soon after, from the charred and then restored wood grain, tiny twigs and buds grew, became long and slender, and wrapped around the amulet. In the blink of an eye, the tender leaves turned deep green, then yellowed and fell away. The amulet was once again as smooth and clean as before...

Wei Chengxiang had spent the whole way chatting with the amulet, talking out all the words she'd held back for days while being the holy woman, yet she hadn't gotten any reaction from it. Now, seeing the reincarnation wood amulet behaving strangely, she involuntarily became wild with joy—any reaction was better than no reaction. "Uncle! Uncle!"

The amulet in its constant alternation of the life cycle wrapped around the girl's cry and sent it surging into the den of demons.

Xi Ping's consciousness, nearly broken apart by the wheeling spiritual energy, was called back to wakefulness by her.

A-Xiang...

If A-Xiang's voice could get in, then wasn't the exit to the Impassable Sea completely open?

San-ge's spiritual bones...

The seal on the Impassable Sea that had existed for nearly eight hundred years was on the point of collapse from his struggles. Xi Ping's constantly spasming joints gave a final crack. Where the foot he himself had cut off had been, a new foot grew... though it was only of bone.

Then there was an enormous sound—

The thread of clear consciousness he had maintained landed firmly on something. The spiritual wind that had scattered both his spirit and the heart demon settled; his spiritual foundation had been forged.

Xi Ping felt all his meridians grow countless times wider. All of the spiritual energy surging in was channeled into his spiritual foundation.

But on that spiritual foundation, there was still no Way of the Heart.

Next, the inscription under him collapsed altogether.

The Impassable Sea... The Impassable Sea, sealed in an unknown place since ancient times, where the eight-hundred-year-old great demon was about to take shape at any moment—the demon seal on it had been broken ahead of schedule by Xi Ping!

The hundreds of thousands of demons trapped there once again saw the light of day. Spiritual energy and demonic energy surged out together. A tidal wave dozens of zhang high rose in the East Sea.

Xi Ping, completely exhausted, fell into the deep sea, all the spiritual energy around him scattered by the broken demon seal.

The demon host, suppressed for ages, threw themselves forward with fangs bared and claws extended as soon as they were free, planning to enjoy the taste of this first mouthful of human flesh.

Just then, a stroke of sword light as bright as snow swept over. Zhaoting fell and tore a gap among the densely gathered demons.

Zhi Xiu grabbed hold of his disciple, who had pierced through the “underworld.”

The Marquis of Yongning hadn't yet left Guangyun Palace. He was thinking that the weather was unusually stuffy today, making it hard to catch his breath. Then he heard an enormous sound.

Fierce light dazzled the Marquis so he couldn't open his eyes. He looked back in terror and saw that Guangyun Palace's Jinluan Main Hall had been struck by a bolt of lightning. All the gas lamps nearby had been destroyed. There were flames on the coiled dragon columns.

In the seven Azure Dragon Towers in Jinping City, the bells began to ring incessantly all at once. A sudden wave on the Lingyang River overturned the pleasure boats floating there. The Dragon Vein was quaking!

CHAPTER 63 - The Mountain Falls (15)

Guangyun Palace was in chaos. Several blue-clothed half-immortals from Heaven's Design Pavilion appeared out of thin air, went through the main hall, which had been turned into a chimney by the fire, and charged right into the emperor's living quarters.

Before Zhao Yu's feet had even touched down, he saw a eunuch fall onto the ground. He broke his front tooth when he fell. The eunuch, his face all bloody, scrambled out. "His Majesty... His Majesty, he..."

Zhao Yu pushed open the door to the heated room. The wind carrying the scent of burning surged in half a step ahead of him, scattering the withered petals of the unseasonable peonies all over the ground.

Emperor Taiming Zhou Kun was sitting upright inside the room. On the top half of his face there was a mixture of surprise and fury, his eyes popping; but the bottom half of his face was fixed in a contorted yet relieved smile. His exposed face, neck, and hands were covered in sinister inscriptions, like tattoos that had come up from the cracks in his bones, publicly exposing this final sinner of the Zhou family to offer his own family as sacrificial offerings to demons.

A chill went through Zhao Yu's spine. He stared blankly for a long moment and found to his surprise that the person inside the heated room was no longer breathing. He quickly took out a pair of protective gloves and put them on, then stepped forward to investigate.

Before he could touch Zhou Kun, Zhou Kun's skin began to crumble bit by bit. The tyrant who had spent half his life playing politics fell with a crash.

At the same time, the demon seal under the Resurrection Vortex also crumbled altogether.

With one hand, Zhi Xiu carried his disciple with his exposed bones, and with the other he held up his sword, firmly holding back thousands upon millions of demons under the East Sea. In the midst of his many pressing concerns, he also quickly checked Xi Ping's wound... Then the master of Flying Jade Peak nearly breathed in a lungful of seawater.

An established foundation?!

An established foundation, just like that? Had he accidentally lost track of time in seclusion and opened his eyes a hundred years later?

Where on earth had this brat found a Way of the Heart?

Never mind that, even if he *had* a Way of the Heart and spiritual bones, with Xi Ping's attitude, he couldn't memorize *Detailed Account of Meridians* in a whole sixty year cycle; did he even know how he was supposed to direct spiritual energy to establish a foundation?

The immortal sects had a long history, and now and then they would turn up an idiot. As a precaution against these people, who could get any kind of thought into their heads, taking something by mistake, the seals on all bottles of ungentle medicines had prohibitions on them, especially established foundation pills. Reasonably speaking, only those at the peak of the open-eyed stage, who could control spiritual energy flawlessly, whose meridians and spiritual bones were already completely ready, would have the ability to break the prohibition on a bottle of established foundation elixir.

Which tooth had his rebellious disciple used to gnaw the bottle open?!

General Zhi had lived for over two hundred years, and this was his first time finding himself at a complete loss.

But this situation left him no time to think carefully. All the demons in the Impassable Sea had gone mad. Faced with the biting cold light of Zhaoting, they were boldly charging out with no fear of death.

All prohibitions had disappeared. The sword cultivator's consciousness poured through the demon host and went straight in, sweeping through the Impassable Abyss that hadn't seen the light of day in thousands of years. He saw the altar that had already collapsed.

Zhi Xiu's pupils contracted sharply.

With an ascended spirit spiritual sense, he had no need to look things up and make blind guesses like Xi Ping had done. With just a glance, Zhi Xiu could see all the long-buried lives of these nameless skeletons.

He saw the unsightly stains behind their age of prosperity and, one after another, met each of those children of royalty who had been pressed to death in the Impassable Sea; he saw a series of successive lunatics and sacrificial offerings who had no way to escape, and under the strangely beautiful skeletal remains that were like statues carved of white spirits, he saw the ground littered with fragments of the resentful ghosts of miners and the consciences of slaves... and he also saw a little half-immortal who couldn't even draw a talisman properly recklessly taking on the heart demon single-handed, for the sake of defending him.

As if the master of Xuanyin's one and only snow-capped mountain could be injured, could die.

For a time, Zhi Xiu clearly felt his heart and mind waver.

He thought, If the heart demon were still here, I might really be doomed now.

Zhi Xiu closed his eyes and called, Zhaoting!

At his thought, Zhaoting pierced through the broken demon seal, the sword energy making its way right into that reincarnation wood forest. The ancient demonic god had after all been dead for over a thousand years; his remnants vanished at one sweep from Zhaoting.

Zhi Xiu put his palm on the center of Xi Ping's brow. In the name of the Dignitary of Fate's lineage, he set down a prohibition against prying—from now on, unless someone overcame the Sea of Stars, no one would be able to catch a glimpse of Xi Ping's history and background.

Opening your spiritual eyes with the help of a half-skeleton of hidden bones was one thing; as for the question of a half-immortal not having a Way of the Heart, at most others would say that the young fellow's fate was unusual.

But establishing a foundation in a den of demons, carrying off the hidden bones of the demonic god of the way of death—now that was too much.

In fact, Zhi Xiu didn't think there would be anything wrong with a demonic god's Way of the Heart... A so-called "ancient demonic god" was only a great master who had failed in the struggle for the full moon positions. Since they had reached the peak of the shed skin stage, their ways would be no more evil than the vast majority of "orthodox Ways of the Heart" that existed today.

But he couldn't control what other people thought. Establishing a foundation less than a year after entering the Way—this was unprecedented among the four great sects. All miracles were alien; they might not necessarily be accepted by the world.

When the prohibition fell, faint sword aura flitted over Xi Ping's horrifying bones, covering up the slightly odd air about him. The impression Xi Ping gave immediately became that of an orthodox sword cultivator.

Just then, Zhaoting let out a buzzing sound like a warning. Zhi Xiu abruptly sensed something and sent a Heavenly Question back to the immortal mountains.

Then he quickly took a leaf from his sleeve, which he curled toward Xi Ping. "Take him back to Flying Jade Peak."

The immortal tool in the shape of a willow leaf expanded to a zhang square. On the tail end of its flowing light, a small "Lin" character appeared—it was an ascended spirit grade immortal tool. It wrapped tightly around Xi Ping like a cocoon. White light floated over the tool. Both the demonic energy and the sword energy nearby gave way to it. Holding Xi Ping, it surged at full speed toward the surface of the sea.

As soon as Zhi Xiu had sent his disciple away, the demon host in the Impassable Sea began to boil over, throwing themselves against Zhaoting's light as if fighting with their lives.

The sword energy spilled out. The water dragons that had already withdrawn outside the Resurrection Vortex were so startled they rose into the air, colliding with their own convoy.

Lin Zhaoli was the first to sense it. The established foundation sword cultivator's spiritual sense sent frantic warnings. Using tremendous strength, he managed to pry apart his trembling teeth;

then, with a wave of his sleeve, he pulled back and knocked out Xi Yue, who was trying to jump into the water. “Suicidal little thing... Flee south at full speed!”

As he shouted the final words, his voice broke off.

Lin Zhaoli, who had always valued saving face over heaven, no longer cared about concealing his terror in front of his colleagues. “Hurry!”

Wei Chengxiang and the ice boat were thrown up high together by the enormous waves. The new half-immortal who had just thought that she “had hold of her destiny and no longer deserved to make a wish before a celestial being” was instantly knocked back to her original form. She once again became a little ant at the whim of the elements.

Wei Chengxiang couldn't open her eyes. She could only clutch tightly to the ice boat with all her limbs, tossed up and rolled wildly by the huge waves.

An invisible beam of sword energy spilled out of the water, splitting the sea in two. Wei Chengxiang's vision went black. She fell toward the sword energy along with the ice boat.

Fortunately, the ice boat and the sword energy had the same origin. The sword energy didn't harm her. There was a loud and clear clang, and the ice boat was bounced back intact, landing on the surface of the sea. The sword energy seemed intent on escorting her for a certain distance. It gathered up a gale and pushed the boat away.

Wei Chengxiang's legs went weak, and she went to her knees. Panicked, she turned back to look. Only now did she realize how ignorant and fearless she had been.

Had she seen that sword aura before, she might not have dared to look that grey-clothed immortal in the eye!

Just then, the tumultuous surface of the sea congealed. Then it was as if a hand forcefully smoothed out the gullies and huge waves made by the sword energy.

Time and space held still for a moment. The East Sea became unnaturally calm.

The ice boat slid at full speed along the mirror-like surface of the sea and overturned, tossing Wei Chengxiang into the sea. Luckily, she hadn't let go.

But while she was climbing with difficulty back onto the ice boat, her chest suddenly ached.

In that moment, all the living creatures throughout the East Sea heard a single thump, like the beat of a heart.

The sound of that heartbeat was large and distinct. It seemed to come from the depths of the sea, and it also seemed to sound in each person's chest.

The cultivators, the mortals... even the half-puppet Xi Yue—all of them were so shaken that they nearly suffocated.

The water dragon animal spirits instantly disappeared, shaken back into their array by the heartbeat.

The dazed Xi Ping, as if hit in the chest by a nightmare, sat up with a start inside the immortal tool.

At the bottom of the Impassable Sea, Zhi Xiu watched as the densely packed demons seemed to be collectively released from a freezing spell.

Next, like light mist on a slab of stone gently wiped away by a silk cloth, they disappeared where they were in large swaths. Demonic energy, spiritual energy, sword energy... even the mysterious inscriptions in the Impassable Sea that stretched as far as the eye could see, and the unstoppable Resurrection Vortex, were all wiped away together.

It was as if the Impassable Abyss had never existed.

Some invisible force pressed Xuanyin Mountain's most preeminent sword cultivator firmly to the bottom of the sea. For a moment, Zhi Xiu had the feeling that all of the vast East Sea was bearing down on his shoulders. The ascended spirit cultivator's spine, as steadfast as a frozen mountain, let out an ominous groan, as if on the point of being crushed to pieces.

Then he heard a sigh sweep through the East Sea. "I hadn't thought that with the world's spiritual energy so diminished, it could still produce a personage like you."

The thing inside the demon seal that had once left the full moon sages helpless... had awoken.

The seawater began to vibrate faintly. The ripples in front of him arranged themselves into a human face hundreds of zhang high; the eyes of that face were lowered to gaze at the minute human.

For some reason, this face looked very familiar to Zhi Xiu, but at first he couldn't remember why.

"A two-hundred-year-old ascended spirit sword cultivator. With this sword aura, had you been born some thousands of years earlier, there would have been a full moon position with your name."

“I don’t deserve such flattery.” Cracks formed in the seafloor at Zhi Xiu’s feet, but he remained courteous. “I just sent away an established foundation cultivator who began cultivating less than a year ago. I may only be an advance wave hitting the shore.”

“That little devil,” the familiar face in the water said softly. “His destiny carries tribulation. It is right for him to take Yuan Hui’s way.”

Zhi Xiu lowered his eyes. He knew that after the immortal sect received word, they would need time to come. So, intent on playing for time, he asked, “Is ‘Yuan Hui’ the senior who cultivated the way of death?”

“Way of death?” As expected, the demon that had been sealed for thousands of years was drawn into conversation. His laughter raised ripples in the sea. “Who picked that name? It has no style.”

This laughing face... A light suddenly went on in Zhi Xiu’s mind. He remembered where he had seen this visage—this was the Southern Sage’s face!

Zhi Xiu had always treated all kinds of unnecessary formalities with perfect courtesy, carelessly muddling through. He had never given a single thought to any ritual or offering paying respects to the sage. If the image on the incense altar had one day been swapped out, he might not even have noticed. Had that big face’s posture, looking down and smiling, not been identical to the statue of the Southern Sage that received offerings on Xuanyin’s Principal Peak, he wouldn’t have recognized the founder of his own sect!

Why would the head of the demon host use the face of the Southern Sage? The implied metaphor here was bone-chilling.

Zhi Xiu focused. “Please instruct me, senior. If it isn’t called the way of death, then what should it be called?”

“His way has no name.” In the water, the demon that coexisted with chaos, using the Southern Sage’s face, said, “I would rather call it the ungovernable way.”

Zhi Xiu: “...”

That sounded like it would be more suitable than the plain and unremarkable way of the sword for his rebellious disciple, who could bring down the sky and split open the earth.

Longing appeared on the Southern Sage’s face, as if recalling an old friend. “Yuan Hui was a remarkable person. His cultivation was comparable to that of the true full moon gods. The reason he didn’t reach the full moon stage was that his way wasn’t among the three thousand paths of the Great Way. Heaven and earth couldn’t abide his way.”

“Why is that?”

“Because this way has no Way of the Heart.”

Zhi Xiu said, “What?!”

Xi Ping was boundlessly daring and lacked any general knowledge, because his shifu hadn’t gotten around to teaching it to him yet—no teacher would start a student on the Four Books⁴⁷ before he had even finished memorizing a thousand characters.

A cultivator needed to have a Way of the Heart when establishing a foundation, because in this step, a person would be completely remade. The spirit that had previously held the consciousness would certainly be shattered by the spiritual energy drawn into the body; the establishment could only be called complete once the spiritual energy had once more collected and formed a spiritual

foundation. During this process, the cultivator had to remain clear-headed.

The Way of the Heart was what gave the consciousness a temporary resting place after the spirit shattered.

Without a sufficiently complete Way of the Heart standing guard, the consciousness would simply scatter, and the person would naturally go to see the sages. For this reason, a disciple whose Way of the Heart was patterned after their teacher's had to pass through the “three inquiries and three examinations” of their elder before establishing a foundation, to ensure that their Way of the Heart was steadfast enough—this was also the reason that nearly all inner sect disciples would follow the Way of the Heart of their teacher: a Way of the Heart they had felt out themselves, or a Way of the Heart from a predecessor that they had hunted down outside the sect, wouldn't have this step; they would have to undertake the risk themselves.

Without a Way of the Heart, how had Xi Shiyong established a foundation?

Even if the demonic god's hidden bones were particularly mysterious and had temporarily sheltered his consciousness, what about after the foundation was established?

Without a Way of the Heart, what would he bring his inquiries to? What would he refine? What would be his next step? Which way would his spirit ascend?

“In Yuan Hui's way, with each step forward, he had to be completely destroyed and to cast aside the past. The opportune moment for being completely destroyed had to be precise. Otherwise, it was only a hair's breadth from breaking through the cocoon and being reborn to dying and having his way extinguished. What the opportune moment was, apart from Yuan Hui himself, no one knew. I have kept company with his remains for all these years at the

bottom of the Impassable Sea, and yet I've never been able to understand his way.

“The Zhous came and went. They all thought that reincarnation wood forest was only an ancient relic. Only when looking death in the face could you touch the hidden bones beneath the reincarnation wood forest. Nine years ago, there was a person who got by through coincidence. He encountered the heart demon, and his Way of the Heart shattered, letting him encounter and inherit the hidden bones in his hopeless position... but he didn't take the opportunity.”

Zhi Xiu knew at once that he was talking about Liang Chen. “But didn't he take away half of the skeleton of hidden bones and get a new Way of the Heart, succeed in establishing a foundation?”

“He was enticed by the false Way of the Heart within those hidden bones and thought that he had seized his last hope. He was in a hurry to throw himself in,” the demon said, smiling. “With a will like that, how could he be accepted by the ungovernable way? He didn't take that half skeleton of hidden bones. It was the half skeleton of hidden bones that used him to leave the Impassable Sea.”

Zhi Xiu had entered the Way on the cliffs above the Sea of Stars. He was extremely sensitive to the threads of karma. Hearing this, he was frightened: no wonder that in a moment of emergency, Xi Ping had coincidentally been able to pry open the prohibition on the established foundation pill bottle!

No wonder that after swallowing the established foundation pill, he seemed to have instinctively known which way to draw in the spiritual energy!

So... it hadn't been Liang Chen misappropriating the ancient demonic god's hidden bones; it had been the half skeleton of

hidden bones becoming a parasite in his body, using him to find a successor.

So Xi Ping accidentally falling into the Impassable Sea from the Resurrection Vortex—had that really been an “accident”?

Or rather, was it that since he had obtained those hidden bones... no, since he had made an instant wrong decision and hadn't handed that birthday jade over the Heaven's Design Pavilion, he had been doomed to end up here and now?

And what about the demon seal in the Impassable Sea, which had torn ahead of schedule because he had established a foundation by force?

The Zhou family had made their arrangements for eight hundred years, completely hiding them from Xuanyin's Sea of Stars. At the last moment, he had broken all the arrangements, making them fall through just before they came to completion. Could this also be someone's secret plan?

In that instant, Zhi Xiu had the trembling feeling of sinking into the Sea of Stars for the first time, seeing all the interlinked cause and effect of heaven, in which he himself was as tiny as a game piece.

“Just a little bit more. I only need one little bit more for my demonic soul to be complete.” The Southern Sage's face in the sea sighed again. “It seems that this is the fate of the Zhou family, and my fate as well. But your Xuanyin has only gained a reprieve from death. A tiny ascended spirit like you shouldn't overestimate your strength. There's a familiar aura about you, quite dear to me. It would be a pity for you to die here. Why don't you retreat?”

Zhi Xiu raised his head and drew back all his lines of thought. For a long time, he didn't speak.

Then, holding Zhaoting's hilt, he slowly stood upright.

The demon that had been irrigated by bitter rancor for eight hundred years looked at him with the Southern Sage's face and tranquilly said, "Sword cultivator, demons arise from the human heart. Even if you give all you have to keep me in the East Sea today, will that bring peace to the human world?"

When you risked your life to protect Jinping's Dragon Vein, thinking that you were fighting for the nation and the people, whose was the hand wielding you in the long run? What did you protect?

Half of the spiritual stones that have gone to fill the Impassable Abyss can be set down under your name. Those who followed in your footsteps—what ends have they come to now?

High General, your name passes from mouth to mouth, but have you heard the unending mourning songs of the Turmoilers as they devour the corpses of their loved ones?

Have you heard their curses, night and day?

Zhi Xiu threw back his head to look at the sage's face, facing the interrogation of heaven and earth.

Then he slowly smiled. "I am but a mere sword cultivator. My natural endowments are poor. I am no god, no sage. Why should I overreach myself by trying to attend to the big picture?"

His gaze was distant and calm, as if responding to his own Way of the Heart. "For the time being, if I am able to have a clear conscience in the present, that is good enough. I have no time to regret the past, and no strength to reach a perfect conclusion."

"And now, what are you going to do?"

Zhi Xiu softly said, “Now, I am in the East Sea, and my sword is in the East Sea. That is all.”

With his sword in his hand, the master of Flying Jade Peak always had a precipice at his back.

Since he had joined the lineage of the Dignitary of Fate two hundred years ago, the Sea of Stars had only taught him to consult celestial phenomena at the last moment when he had forgotten some detail, to spare him from humiliating himself in front of his juniors.

In the end, it hadn't taught him to look to the past or consider the future.

Zhaoting was still Zhaoting.

Laughing, the demon said, “The lineage of the Dignitary of Fate has actually produced a person like you, who doesn't see the past and disregards cause and effect!”

Xi Ping was now floating on the surface of the sea. The terror he had encountered once close-up at the bottom of the Impassable Sea passed through the immortal tool and pricked his back like a fine needle. His first reaction was to reach into his mustard seed to check on san-ge's spiritual bones. Seeing that the spiritual bones were safe and sound, he let out a sigh of relief.

But before he could report his own well-being to Prince Zhuang, Xi Ping's breath caught again—he had just clearly sensed shifu. Where was he?

There was something unknown surrounding him. Xi Ping looked all around without finding an exit, only heard the sound of water outside the immortal tool. “Shifu?”

The echo of his voice vibrated in the immortal tool.

Xi Ping punched the immortal tool. “How do I get out of...”

Before he could finish, something happened beneath the East Sea. Xi Ping was tossed up by the waves without warning. His head collided with the immortal tool.

But the immortal tool surrounding him gently cushioned his head.

“Shiyong.” He heard Zhi Xiu’s voice in his ear. It seemed to be coming through the immortal tool. His shizun said in a very calm tone, “I haven’t taught you a single thing about striving for your way. After all these years, my own inquiries to heaven and earth have borne no fruit. Truly, I shouldn’t rashly lead young people astray.”

Part of Xi Ping’s body was bone that hadn’t even grown flesh and blood. His center of gravity was a little unsteady. Flailing his limbs, he could keep his balance with difficulty, but his heart suddenly missed a few beats.

Why did this speech sound like...

“When you became my disciple, you said, ‘Everyone takes their Way and uses it to make inquiries to heaven and earth. Heaven and earth must be sick of it.’” There seemed to be a slight smile in Zhi Xiu’s voice. “Children are innocent. You were right. It’s the rest of us who have gone too far. We often forget the way we have come.”

“Don’t worry, shifu, we’ll talk about it when we get back.” Xi Ping’s throat went dry. “Now... now, can you let me out?”

“I have nothing to pass on to you. I’ve only taken a bit of a detour, so you can learn from my mistakes,” Zhi Xiu continued, ignoring him. “Don’t ask heaven and earth, even if heaven and earth can’t abide your way—ask yourself. Also...”

“Shifu!”

“Don’t let others pry into your way.”

CHAPTER 64 - The Mountain Falls (16)

Xi Ping searched for the exit to the immortal tool in a panic. “Shifu, let me out... Shifu!”

Zhi Xiu didn't answer.

Zhaoting wove an all-encompassing net, overreaching its own strength trying to trap the demon in the East Sea.

“Shifu...” The ascended spirit grade “leaf” was still a leaf. In the midst of the turbulent waters, it was blown around wildly.

Inside it, Xi Ping was like a ball of yarn in a cat's paws, rolling around so much that he couldn't find his own head. Through the immortal tool, he could feel the sword energy under the East Sea, as weak yet as steadfast as an ant trying to shake a tree.

Xi Ping closed his eyes, letting the immortal tool toss him around here and there.

His eyes were bloodshot. In an instant, all his thousand thoughts emptied out, and the only one that remained was: No.

As soon as he had this thought, a seven-stringed qin appeared in his hands out of nowhere. Perhaps because it was influenced by the sword energy left with him by the sword cultivator, the qin was rather narrow, its shape like a sword's at first glance. As yet, it had no name engraved on it. White light floated dimly at one end, as if waiting for its master's first song asking the way to determine the nature of its music.

Will you take a direct approach, or make an unconventional sideways stroke?

Or...

Xi Ping exchanged a look with his vital weapon for a moment, then snatched up the nameless qin and swung it heavily against the immortal tool trapping him.

Ask your own fucking way, let me out!

The qin collided with the ascended spirit immortal tool and let out a sky-shaking lamentation. With a clang, the seven strings vibrated.

Xi Ping's chest also seemed to have been hit by a sledgehammer. The taste of blood rose in his throat.

But he ignored that completely.

This exceedingly arrogant young master had never been willing to obediently do what he was told. His father hadn't beaten the habit out of him with a discipline rod in twenty years; what could his good-tempered shifu do, when at his angriest he would only punish him by making him sweep snow?

A vital weapon was tied to its master's thoughts, closely joined. Some weapons that were closely entangled with their master's fate would at a certain boundary be refined into vital weapons—for example, Zhaoting; others, meanwhile, were created through the Way of the Heart, growing in the spiritual bones, like Pang Jian's Barrier Dispeller Bow, whose every arrow was his own life energy, shot with great exertion.

Never had there been a vital weapon that, upon first emerging into the world, had suffered this kind of treatment from its master.

Xi Ping knew that as long as he didn't die, his vital weapon couldn't be damaged. Though with his cultivation level, he certainly wouldn't be able to break open an ascended spirit grade immortal tool, this

lush green immortal tool had a gentle nature; it seemed to come from the same source as the heart-protecting lotus he had given san-ge. It was evidently a tool for defense and protection. It couldn't very well allow the person it was protecting to die trapped inside it.

So, completely unstinting, he used that qin to hit the immortal tool trapping him again and again.

The debt in the Impassable Sea had its debtors. For thousands of years, the immortal mountains had laid down the soil; eight hundred years ago, the martial emperor had planted the cause.

So what if He had been annihilated—could the heart demon seed have come out of nowhere?

Southern He had been deluded by Moon Plated Gold. Lancang had reaped what it had sowed. Renzong was the bastard!

Why should the evil consequences of all this fall to his shizun to sort out?

Just because those lunatics had kicked the bucket?

Did the predestination of gods and demons bully the weak while fearing the strong? Go flog the corpses if you're up to it!

For a time, he couldn't work out the sequence of cause and effect, and he didn't know whom to hate. All he could do was vent all his indignation on the immortal tool trapping him.

The qin strings sounded wildly. Xi Ping spat up a mouthful of blood, staining the qin with mottled bloodstains. The white light dispersed, and a name engraved in flourishing cursive appeared at the end of the qin.

The engraving read: Tai Sui.

The qin once again hit the protective immortal tool. The incessant drone of the strings actually pierced through the ascended spirit immortal tool, pierced through the spirits of hundreds of thousands of poverty-stricken people.

There was a huge sound in Wei Chengxiang's ears that instantly overcame the roar of the sea and nearly struck her deaf.

The sound of the strings, which was like tearing silk, sank into her chest like a hook and suspended her bleeding heart, clogging her throat with emotion and igniting all her grief and indignation. It was more choking than the restless chimneys of the southern outskirts, even more choking than the conflagration that had burned Rat Alley to the ground.

At the same time, strike after strike of the qin dispersed throughout the mortal world. Everyone who had touched reincarnation wood and prayed to the evil god for a miracle heard it simultaneously.

His anger passed through the spirits of thousands upon thousands of people and was magnified thousands upon thousands of times.

Some people covered their ears in agony and sobbed. Others, red-eyed, clutched the weapons in their hands tighter.

In a secluded little town in Guzhou, a grimy-faced teenage boy threw himself down beside a worker who had been shot dead by a bailiff with a hand cannon. The deceased may have been his father, brother, or teacher—perhaps even his mother; half of the head had been blown up by the hand cannon, and the person's features were no longer visible. On the remaining half of the shattered face, all that was left was a single eye, unwilling to close peacefully in death.

The boy opened his mouth but couldn't shout. A protection amulet made of reincarnation wood slipped out of the front of his jacket

and was stained with blood. It couldn't protect him. He heard an enraged heartbeat and didn't know whether it came from his own chest or whether he had struck up a resonance with someone else. The crashing sound of the qin that exploded in his ears was like a spark falling into oil.

The boy screamed and threw himself at the bailiff who had fired the hand cannon, raising the iron rod in his hand.

The bailiff with the hand cannon shrank back in spite of himself, retreating in panic, and accidentally pulled the trigger. The inadvertently discharged hand cannon sent grit flying, then was knocked out of his hand by the iron rod. The iron rod swung vengefully at the bailiff's head.

With a clang, the destitute boy's iron rod and the Tai Sui Qin together struck the prisons that held them.

The ascended spirit immortal tool didn't move a hair, but the mortal bailiff fell.

The bailiff's colleague was appalled and, flustered, fired at the boy carrying the iron rod. The boy hit the ground without a sound.

Clang—

Amid endless yelling, an iron shovel came flying and hit the killer, sending him running.

Then someone picked up the dead bailiff's hand cannon and fired at the other side.

The demons were about to rise to the heavens, and calamity would befall the earth.

The rallying cattle and sheep heaved at the iron hoof oppressing them, and the tigers and wolves shivered.

The Guzhou mob was fighting back.

On the East Sea, the Tai Sui Qin raised sparks as it scratched against the immortal tool. In the Suling factories, a signal flare made a welt in midair, lighting up the barebacked workers as they surged toward the high threshold like the tide.

Uncrossable inscriptions dimmed and went out. The spiritual stones of damaged arrays, already half grey, bounced wildly and were trampled unstintingly into the mud by countless straw sandals.

Then it was Yuzhou, Jingzhou... even Ning'an.

Jinping's Dragon Vein was in imminent danger.

The wildly sounding strings of the Tai Sui Qin even reached the seabed of the East Sea. The reincarnation wood trees flattened by Zhaoting straightened their necks and revived, like seaweed.

The ancient demon easily pushed aside the sword that could hardly hold out. Irresistible demonic energy rolled toward the sword cultivator who had dared to hinder his steps.

“Two hundred years ago, with a single order, you could make millions follow you and wait upon you. In this way, as a mortal, you defended Jinping City from the Lancang Sword,” the demon said pityingly. “Two hundred years later, you are still you, but the others have gone.

“When luck is with you, heaven and earth are on your side. When luck passes, even a hero has no freedom...”

At the same time, Zhi Xiu heard the horrifying sound of the smashing qin strings. His already slackening consciousness was dazed in the midst of that violent, wild sound. A series of images flashed before his eyes with matchless swiftness. This was the future!

The lineage of the Dignitary of Fate was incompatible with the way of the sword. It had never before turned out a sword cultivator. Zhi Xiu was unconventional. Apart from when he had gone through the motions to accord with his shifu's inherited way and instruction when he was young, the vast majority of the time, he had fumbled around for himself. Observing fate and judging fortune were skills he had never especially picked up.

But perhaps because he was so closely tied to the only other living creature on Flying Jade Peak, in that moment, Zhi Xiu glimpsed Xi Ping's fate.

This was a horrifying wrong road. Bearing the evil way that couldn't be permitted by the world, he spent his whole life passing through tribulations, being broken and rebuilt, ultimately becoming a tribulation himself.

There was no one to pull him back onto the right track.

No...

Get back here, you brat.

At last, the immortal tool holding Xi Ping backed down in the face of his frightening struggles. A tiny crack appeared in it where the end of the qin had struck.

The engraved name "Tai Sui" pricked Zhi Xiu's spirit like a needle.

I said, no!

The great demon swatted at him, too lazy to even give him another look. The demon turned and headed toward the surface of the sea.

Then, suddenly, he froze.

The mountain of spiritual stones sealed in the Impassable Sea collapsed. Thousands upon thousands of jin of spiritual stones crumbled and turned grey as the rock snow on them before they even hit the ground. The sword light in the water rose sharply, heading straight for the center of the demon's brow.

In the water, the Southern Sage's face was broken to pieces by that beam of sword energy.

This was a sword thrust of the middle ascended spirit stage... no, of the late ascended spirit stage, even capable of jumping a grade to force a shed skin cultivator to retreat!

Cracks appeared on Zhaoting's blade.

The flood of spiritual energy had nearly numbed Zhi Xiu's meridians, but there was no sign of pain in his face. His hand holding the sword didn't move a sliver. "Scoundrel!"

The next moment, the Resurrection Vortex reappeared in the East Sea.

Countless whirlpools surrounded Zhi Xiu. Each of the whirlpools had the face of the demon.

The numerous visages of the Southern Sage gazed upon the sword cultivator at the bottom of the sea and said at once with many mouths, "Oh, your sword aura has changed."

Before, he had been a hero at the end of the line, facing conflict head on but in search of a clear conscience.

Whether he succeeded or failed, he would have died for a cause, coming and going graciously.

But in the sword thrust just now, he had found another preoccupation. That sword thrust seemed to cut through predetermined fate. It had a flavor of fighting to the last gasp, unexpectedly falling in line with the “Dignitary of Fate” track.

When a person’s cultivation reached the ascended spirit level, never mind becoming a pedantic stick-in-the-mud, he would long ago have fallen into a finalized mold. Yet at this critical juncture, he could change his sword energy, cross a boundary by force!

Could an expectant gaze truly have such power?

“Interesting,” a thousand mouths said at once. The ancient demon beheld this tiny ascended spirit sword cultivator. “Your name is Zhi Jingzhai.”

Zhi Xiu’s form abruptly split into hundreds upon thousands of forms in the water, and Zhaoting’s sword aura also became omnipresent.

The whirlpools were constantly expanding outward and being forced back by the wrestling sword aura. Heavy murderous intent swirled through the seawater, crushing both the human figure and the sword figure resisting together.

Zhi Xiu’s sword figure was constantly being destroyed, then regenerating after annihilation... His human figure took on more and more wounds, and the cracks on the blade of his sword became denser and denser.

The whole seabed of the East Sea was covered with sword cuts, taking on the appearance of the solitary peak of the snow-capped mountain in the confusion.

The sword aura that disregarded boundaries and risked everything on a single throw passed through the crack Xi Ping had knocked into the immortal tool and hit the rebellious disciple head on. Xi Ping was shaken. The threateningly vicious Tai Sui Qin vanished from his hands.

Xi Ping lost his balance and fell face first inside the immortal tool. He was splashed all over by the seawater seeping in.

He instinctively reached out a hand to prop himself up. The remaining sword energy was still circling in the seawater. It cut a light and shallow wound in his palm.

Xi Ping, who had just nearly crushed his own breastbone, actually felt the pain. He hissed and drew back his hand, raising his head in astonishment... It was as if shifu had smacked him on the palm.

Slander and praise, gratitude and resentment, friends and enemies, smooth sailing and rough seas, joy and indignation—all were hatchets imposed by fate.

No matter where it took you, you had to take it like iron and stone, be unmoved.

That was the path his shifu had personally shown him.

Xi Ping's overexcited consciousness was splashed sober by the seawater. Through the reincarnation wood, screaming noise poured into his ears. At the same time, he felt a faint barrier between himself and the reincarnation wood... Shifu had put a prohibition there.

Xi Ping was excellent at understanding others' intentions. He took one look at this prohibition and understood shifu's apprehensions and protection.

He thought, Since no matter what fate comes your way, you should meet it all with a heart like iron and stone, then what is the difference between a smooth road and a wrong one?

And what was the difference between love and hate?

No one should be making arrangements for him, not Liang Chen or the heart demon, not Jiangli or san-ge... and not shifu, either.

With the first note that the Tai Sui Qin played, Xi Ping simply broke Zhi Xiu's prohibition from within. The noise in his ears instantly multiplied countless times. At the same time, his consciousness, unlimited and unobstructed, linked to all the world's reincarnation wood, alive or dead.

Almost instantly, someone noticed. The Dignitary of Fate High Elder Zhang Jue landed in a white mist in front of a reincarnation wood tree and reached out to touch its trunk with a grave expression.

A couple of figures landed beside him. One of them said, grimly, "Yuan Hui?"

Xi Ping simply channeled the hither seal into his spirit and stamped it on his spiritual foundation. The hither seal instantly crumbled to pieces, and Xi Ping seemed to have been carelessly squeezed into a ball.

Reincarnation wood grew easily and wasn't useful for timber. It liked to grow wildly in the cracks between the stones of cliffs. The hither seal only fell on Xi Ping's spiritual foundation for a moment, and for that moment it brought all the world's reincarnation wood "hither." For shed skin cultivators, this was already sufficient.

Calamitous waves seethed in the East Sea. The whirlpools assembled into one.

Eight centuries of resentment surged toward the sky. The faces of all those who had died on the altar appeared in the whirlpool, screaming as they collided with Zhaoting.

At this, Zhaoting shattered. But the sword light didn't disperse. It cut through the center of the whirlpool.

The demon that was about to struggle free of the seawater halted. The next moment, the regenerated reincarnation wood forest caught the sword cultivator's sinking body. The three extant shed skin high elders of the Xuanyin Mountains flew out of the reincarnation wood forest. Acting in unison, they temporarily cut this area of the sea off from the mortal world.

Time and space stagnated. The Bell of Tribulation rang.

CHAPTER 65 - The Mountain Falls (17)

The Hither and Yon Seal couldn't be stamped onto a living person. This, like the fact that shooting a hand cannon at someone's head would kill them, belonged to the category of blatantly obvious common sense. Shifu hadn't even wasted words instructing him not to do it.

But Xi Ping had not only done it, he had placed the stamp on his own spiritual foundation.

The Hither and Yon Seal that the swords of Flying Jade Peak had scorned came to a bad end. And after the seal had brought together all the reincarnation wood in the world, Xi Ping's consciousness also dispersed into fine sand, pouring out all over the world.

He had just established a foundation. His consciousness wasn't so steadfast. Soon he lost all sense of time.

In a daze, he thought he was now wandering through fields, now roaming through ruins. Reincarnation wood grew all over abandoned villages and scorched earth, and his blurred consciousness was scattered all over.

After floating for he didn't know how long, by the shore of the East Sea, Xi Ping saw A-Xiang climbing up a reef.

A-Xiang was as good as her word, constantly calling to him. The little amulet she carried drew Xi Ping's consciousness. Xi Ping was shaken. He suddenly remembered who she was, and only then remembered who he himself was.

Then, countless voices crying for "Tai Sui" swept his consciousness into heap after heap like a broom. Xi Ping had no time to say

anything to A-Xiang before his consciousness was pulled from the seaside back onto the mainland.

He was like a scrap collector. Following these voices, he picked up bits of his brain along the way. With each piece he got back, his consciousness became a bit clearer.

There were many people who worshipped “Tai Sui,” and the vast majority of them weren’t Indignant Cicadas.

When people were no longer willing to worship the Southern Sage, wild ghosts and goblins and all their ilk would naturally ascend a level, rise to the incense altar—this “Tai Sui” Xi Ping stood shoulder to shoulder with deities like the Yellow Immortal and the White Immortal,⁴⁸ lifted onto the shrine by swindlers to give to people who would try anything in their desperation something to worship.

He heard a child asking an adult, “Why should we worship a yellow weasel? When I see a yellow weasel snatching a chicken, will I have to bow and give up the chicken?” He was just thinking that this was funny when he heard the child continue: “So what’s a Tai Sui?”

The adult answered: “Everyone says it’s a kind of magic meat fungus.”

“And what’s a magic meat fungus?”

“A big mushroom that gives you immortality if you eat it.”⁴⁹

Xi Ping: “...”

The “big mushroom” miserably picked up his consciousness and left, grumbling and swearing as he cursed these idiots to get diarrhea next time they ate mushrooms.

Anyway, it wasn't like any of his curses would work.

He went deeper and deeper among the multitude, picking up more and more memories—Xuanyin Mountain, the southern mines, the Impassable Sea... One after another, and with every bit he remembered, his steps became more hurried.

He hadn't returned san-ge's spiritual bones yet.

How was shifu doing?

Finally, he was no longer in the mood to listen to what the people were saying. He was in such urgency that he would have loved to sprout wings and fly back.

But these ragged people kept weeping and droning prayers, tangling him up and not letting him go.

Xi Ping wanted to beg them to go worship someone else—he couldn't work miracles, anyway. Had he been able to work miracles, the first thing he would have done would have been to curse all these prattling people into becoming mute.

But the people piously lighting incense couldn't hear the voice of his mind. His consciousness was bounced from one group to another. Xi Ping couldn't clearly hear what they were saying. He struggled to the point of exhaustion amid the noise that didn't seem like human speech.

The “big mushroom,” nearly nagged to death, could do nothing but hold his head, cover his ears, and run off to find a relatively quiet place to squat, then strain himself to think of something to do.

Just then, he heard a person next to him say to herself, “Does the lilac look pretty, or does the indigo look pretty?”

Xi Ping glanced over weakly and saw that this was a girl of seventeen or eighteen, taking advantage of the confusion. While others were piously worshipping, she was kneeling off to the side, making a knotted bag... no wonder it was so unusually quiet here.

Xi Ping thought to himself that neither color was right. He languidly said, "Pick the blue one."

The girl chose the lilac cord, hid it in her sleeve, and began tying knots.

Xi Ping clicked his tongue, then heard her whispering from time to time. "Tai Sui, I pray, please let me find an ideal husband."

Xi Ping rubbed his temples miserably. "I'd love to help, but I can't. You'll have to find one for yourself."

"He doesn't need to be very beautiful. He can be neat and tidy like Da Cheng-ge. The important thing is that he needs to be kindhearted, filial, and friendly. He doesn't need to be very talkative, but he has to be reliable. When you ask him for something, he can always do it..."

In the midst of all the gloom, the girl's lively chatter was like a spoonful of clear dew. After listening to it for a while, Xi Ping's splitting headache eased considerably. Resting his head in his hand, he began to look her over.

The girl had talked herself into embarrassment. She covered her face with a cry.

The daughters of the poor went out without makeup and were a little cramped in form. She wasn't as smooth-skinned as the young mistresses and wealthy wives, but she wasn't at all plain. She had made herself a flower hair ornament with a rag that was both beautiful and unique. Her flushed face had a pair of eyes like

grapes, dark and radiant, sparkling no matter where she looked. The look in her eyes made Xi Ping recall a puppy his grandmother had had when he was little. She became unusually amiable and adorable to him.

“You’re pretty good-looking,” Xi Ping said. “If you like someone, just try going up to him and saying so. I don’t think you’ll have much of a problem.”

The girl put her palms together. Holding a double handful of colorful cord between them, she shook her hands. “Tai Sui, please let the person I admire admire me as well.”

“Fine, then,” Xi Ping said, calculating on his fingers, “I’ve observed the celestial phenomena at night, and I’ve seen that your... your ruling star is bright and sparkling, in the... the what-do-you-call-it, anyway, it’s in a good position, you’ll have good fortune for three years, marry happily just as you wish, be safe and wealthy...”

The girl couldn’t hear what he was saying. Before he could finish, she sighed. “But Da Cheng-ge has also gone with the Master of Fealty. They say the Master of Fealty used to be a bandit and doesn’t even want to get justice for anyone, he only wants to seize the chance to stage a rebellion... You can get beheaded for that. I told him not to go, but he wouldn’t listen to me.”

“What’s all this nonsense?” Xi Ping’s long brows flew upward. “That’s what you call ‘reliable’? Are you as blind when it comes to picking men as you are when it comes to matching colors?”

The girl whispered, “There’s fighting and chaos all day long. Tai Sui, when will this end?”

The false Tai Sui, who could hardly protect himself, froze. He had nothing to say. All he could do was sit to one side and stare blankly along with her.

Suddenly, as if something had startled her, the girl hurriedly gathered up the colorful cords in her hands and straightened her posture.

Xi Ping followed her gaze and saw a person whose face was veiled walk in surrounded by attendants. There was a putrid stink about him. Xi Ping knew as soon as he saw him that this was an evil cultivator who had taken damage when his spiritual eyes had opened.

This evil cultivator wasn't an Indignant Cicada, either. He seemed never to have heard the phrase "better to die in frost than to forsake one's convictions" — these individually packaged evil cultivators would pick up a name at random and go around making trouble. They'd change their game a few times, get taken for immortals aiding the needy, and collect disciples; even the Indignant Cicadas were better.

Xi Ping saw this guy start to talk, all of it nonsense, teaching the way of "Tai Sui" right in front of "Tai Sui," yammering a lot of blather. The people prostrated themselves as they listened, all of them calling him an immortal envoy.

Only the person welcomed by Heaven's Design Pavilion to oversee the Grand Selection and mend the Dragon Vein was called an immortal envoy! Did this stinking piece of shit deserve the title?

Xi Ping clenched his fist as he watched, wishing he could get up to some haunting.

The bullshit "immortal voice" came to a temporary pause, enjoying the adulation of the crowd. A short, skinny man with a stooped back devoutly poured tea for him, eyes radiating zealous light. He was about to bring it up personally, then shrank back out of a sense of inferiority. He brushed his own clothes a few times. Suddenly, he

saw the girl who was furtively making a knotted bag. His eyes lit up. He beckoned with his hand. "A-Hua, come over here!"

Xi Ping frowned and reached out to hold her back. "Slow down."

But his body was far away in the East Sea. He couldn't touch real people.

The girl stood up uneasily, not even noticing when her half-finished knotted bag fell to the ground. She passed right by Xi Ping's hand to step forward and mumbled, "Second Uncle."

The short, skinny man gave her the cup of tea and ordered her to look after the shameless old evil cultivator. "Go on, offer the immortal envoy a cup of tea."

Then he brazenly turned to the evil cultivator and said, currying favor, "This is my niece, my big brother's child. She's pretty decent looking, and she's quick-witted, not yet betrothed."

The evil cultivator's gaze shot out from beneath the rag covered his face and licked the girl like a snake's tongue. He seemed to be smiling.

The short, skinny man was wild with joy. He gave the girl an impatient shove.

She stumbled helplessly, trembling, and fell beside the evil cultivator, then was grabbed by an ice cold hand covered in snakeskin scars.

What an outrage!

Xi Ping stood up at once, but a voice calling for Tai Sui sounded somewhere else. He flew away, pulled in that direction.

Wait, I don't want to go! I have to kill that bastard first!

But it wasn't up to him. He was only a consciousness being dragged here and there by sham shrines. The girl's panicked gaze sought help all around, and the numb onlookers answered her with empty, gratified smiles. The colorful cord knotted bag she had just half finished knotting was trampled by countless feet... The cheaply dyed cords were as humble as dust.

Xi Ping's eyes popped. But he couldn't work a miracle.

His curses had no effect, and neither did his blessings.

The wind swept him away. Xi Ping attempted to remember this place, remember the evil cultivator who had dared to use Tai Sui's name. In the future, he would cut him down. But he soon found that this was futile. He had no idea where anywhere was.

Wherever he looked, it was about the same. The stench of evil practices was everywhere.

The recuperative powers of the hidden bones of the ancient demonic god were astonishing. His reestablished spiritual foundation began to draw back Xi Ping's drifting consciousness.

The unbearable noise became more and more distant. Xi Ping seemed to miss a step in a dream. He fell all at once back into his body.

He abruptly opened his eyes. He was still inside that immortal tool in the shape of a leaf. The immortal tool was covered in cracks. It shattered at a touch.

Xi Ping climbed out and found that he was on the seabed of the East Sea.

It was the seabed, but he wasn't in the water. The nearby water seemed to be kept back by an invisible high wall. Occasionally a whirlpool would approach, then leave at a touch. When some foreign object hit it, faint inscriptions would flash on the invisible "wall." These inscriptions made you not dare to look at them directly. Xi Ping was horrified—shifu had taught him that only the legendary first-class inscriptions would make you feel the force of their might.

Oh, right, where was shifu?

Xi Ping started to run, following the inscriptions. He vaguely remembered that shifu had fallen into the reincarnation wood forest...

He soon found the reincarnation wood forest, but after walking circles around it like a headless fly, he still couldn't find a trace of Zhi Xiu.

"Shifu! Shi..."

Xi Ping abruptly came to a halt. On the other side of the reincarnation wood forest, the mysterious first-class inscriptions surrounded an empty space. There were three people sitting on the ground around a deep pit one chi square.

The pit seemed to go right down to the center of the earth. Because it was too deep, it appeared to be pure black. Looking fixedly at it would make you dizzy.

Of the three people sitting in a ring around the deep hole, there was a middle-aged person with his eyes closed, a round-faced and ordinary-looking man, and a delicate youth whose mouth was sealed with white satin.

When Xi Ping barged in, the three of them turned their heads toward him simultaneously. Two gazes fell on Xi Ping. In an instant, it was as if someone had shone a light straight through him.

Right, Xi Ping remembered. After he had broken through shifu's prohibition, he had sensed a strong aura. At the time, he had stamped the hither seal on his spiritual foundation without a second thought... so whom had he summoned?

The middle-aged person whose eyes were closed beckoned to him and called out, "Come."

These three seemed less alive than the divine image in Southern Sage Temple. Xi Ping had an impulse to arrange incense and present offerings before the three of them. He didn't dare to act rashly. In the posture of offering incense, he gave each one a bow, then said, "Seniors, I am Xi Ping of Xuanyin's Flying Jade Peak..."

The middle-aged man smiled. "I know. Jingzhai is my disciple."

Xi Ping was startled: the Dignitary of Fate High Elder!

Right, the Dignitary of Fate High Elder who was said to stand guard over the Sea of Stars didn't open his eyes outside of the Sea of Stars. So the other two who were sitting with him as equals...

The round-faced man nodded and said, "I am the Dignitary of Rites."

Saying so, he pointed to the youth whose mouth was sealed and said, "He is the Dignitary of Rule."

The rarely seen Dignitary of Rites who was behind the main hall of the Xuanyin Mountains' Principal Peak, High Elder Zhao Yin; and the Dignitary of Rule who was said to always be in seclusion, Lin Zongyi.

Xi Ping's heart, suspended in midair, landed with a thump. The three shed skin elders of the Xuanyin Mountains!

Never mind the great demon from the Impassable Sea, they were a sure bet even if the sky fell and the earth cracked.

So he looked eagerly at the Dignitary of Fate. "Elder, has my shifu been..."

The Dignitary of Fate extended a hand. A sword that had been smashed to pieces floated over his emaciated palm.

Xi Ping clearly saw the sword's hilt and the engraving of its name. His mind instantly roared: Zhaoting!

The same Zhaoting that had had smacked him on the back countless times when he had started to doze off, that had hung over his head when he was just starting to learn to fly a sword—the same Zhaoting that was just like shizun's hand!

Zhaoting was shifu's vital weapon. If a vital weapon broke, then...

For a moment, Xi Ping couldn't catch his breath.

Then he heard the Dignitary of Fate say, "The sword aura of Jingzhai's last thrust touched the edge of the shed skin stage. The sword aura reached it, but his cultivation level was still far away, and that is why his vital weapon broke—I suppose you know what the shed skin stage entails?"

In fact, Xi Ping did know, though right now he couldn't speak: Luo-shixiong had taught them at the Latent Cultivation Temple that the biggest difference between "shed skin" and "ascended spirit" was that the way of the shed skin cultivator had already been accepted by heaven and earth, becoming one of the three thousand paths of

the Great Way. Past the boundary of the shed skin stage, a cultivator would already be halfway assimilated into heaven and earth—for example, Zhi Xiu was the Dignitary of Fate High Elder’s direct disciple, and the Dignitary of Fate’s lineage basically had only one heir per generation; reasonably speaking, Xi Ping actually ought to have called the Dignitary of Fate “shizu”; but faced with this middle-aged man, the word “shizu” didn’t even come to his mind. If his shifu had been speaking so pompously, Xi Ping would have answered back rudely by now. But at the moment, while he was obviously anxious enough to want to crack a whip behind the high elder’s words, he still didn’t dare to rush him.

At a uniform speed, the Dignitary of Fate slowly said, “That stroke of the sword has already left a mark on the way of the sword. He is not yet destined to die. He might be described as gaining a blessing through misfortune.”

Xi Ping only heard the words “not yet destined to die”; his emotions fluctuated sharply. He nearly broke his spine letting out a sigh of relief.

Only then was he in the mood to back up and think over what the Dignitary of Fate had said, struggling for ages to understand. Afraid of getting the wrong idea, he asked, “So you’re saying that my shifu registered his sword with the three thousand paths of the Great Way...like how once you’ve deposited your silver in the treasury in exchange for silver certificates, you can report a loss and be paid back for damaged banknotes?”

Since ancient times, the people of Wan had been tasteful and reserved, deliberately leaving empty spaces in art and writing; they did not speak in long and pompous speeches but only came right to the point. Only a small child or a barely literate member of the lower class would pick words apart and seek verification like this. But the Dignitary of Fate didn’t scorn him for having such a shallow understanding of cultivation. He nodded patiently and went along

with what he had said: “Only it’s a little complicated to report the loss and be paid back. His vital sword has been damaged, and his consciousness has been seriously injured. I have already sent him back to Flying Jade Peak to enter seclusion.”

Xi Ping thought about it, then asked, “Then what about that... that demon whose name no one can say?”

“He’s here.” The round-faced Dignitary of Rites Zhao Yin pointed at the pitch-black abyss the three of them were surrounding. “This is a demon seed.”

While the Dignitary of Fate Elder Zhang was rather amiable, his face looked forlorn. The Dignitary of Rule Elder Lin simply had his mouth sealed with cloth; he probably wasn’t ready to talk.

Only the Dignitary of Rites Elder Zhao was a little more human than the other two; when he smiled, he even seemed rather benevolent.

Elder Zhao said, “This demon’s body was made from the resentment of the Great War of Gods and Demons. The masters of the five great sects were powerless against him, so they brought in a demon subduer. Had his demonic soul been permitted to become complete and break the seal, things would have gone badly. The human world no longer has full moon great masters or demon subduers. It would have been a catastrophe. When you by chance broke the demon seal ahead of time, it was like... tearing open a silkworm cocoon ahead of time. The moth inside could not fly yet. This won us a chance of survival. Child, you may claim great credit.”

Xi Ping put on a very decent false smile and said “you flatter me” — Elder Zhao was clearly imitating the tone that the Dignitary of Fate Elder Zhang had just used to speak to him.

But Elder Zhang had spoken that way out of consideration for his soaring and plummeting emotions as he worried about his shifu,

while Elder Zhao's speech made him feel uncomfortable; he seemed to be condescending to explain something to an idiot.

Xi Ping asked, "Is there some other lurking danger?"

The Dignitary of Fate Elder Zhang Jue said, "Beneath the Impassable Sea, the demon host has run wild for eight hundred years, and countless natural spiritual bones have been buried here. It will be hard for their resentment and hatred to dissipate. It will take the East Sea some time to digest it. We will stand guard here."

"Oh, that's all right, then," said Xi Ping.

Earlier, the broken Zhaoting had given him such a scare that his legs had gone a little weak. Now, as he stood, his knees were still shaking uncontrollably.

In front of three shed skin elders, he was only a witless ant. Xi Ping presumed that these three elderly men wouldn't nitpick an ant's manners, so he went ahead and gracelessly sat down crosslegged on the ground.

"Now it's time to talk about me," Xi Ping said. "How are you three elders planning on dealing with me?"

CHAPTER 66 - The Mountain Falls (Final)

The Xuanyin Mountains were normally managed by the thirty-six ascended spirit peak masters, and absent a great matter like an internal conflict or turbulence in the Sea of Stars, even those peak masters usually wouldn't see the shed skin elders.

Shifu had already been sent back to Flying Jade Peak, but the elders had kept him here alone. Xi Ping couldn't think of anything they could want to talk to him about. It probably couldn't have been just for the sake of praising him for taking a shovel to the Zhou family ancestral tomb in the nick of time.

When he had broken through shifu's prohibition, Xi Ping had known what he would have to face. He was ready.

There was nothing to regret about his own choices. He had been purely forced into taking the ancient demonic god's hidden bones; there had been nothing deliberate about it. If the elders wanted to punish him, he would have plenty to say. When it came down to it, apart from privately giving Wei Chengxiang a bag of spiritual stones and permitting her to walk the path to becoming an evil cultivator, he had nothing on his conscience. So what if he had wanted to kill Zhao Zhenwei? The evidence was conclusive, and the guy hadn't been much of a prize, either; if Zhao Zhenwei's own father showed up, even he wouldn't have the face to demand repayment from Xi Ping.

The Dignitary of Rites Elder Zhao paused. He looked at Zhang Jue.

Zhang Jue always kept his eyes closed; it was unclear whether he was awake or sleeping. He didn't respond.

So Zhao Yin amiably asked Xi Ping, "Are you aware of the full history behind those ancient demonic god's hidden bones that you

carry?”

Xi Ping figured that they weren't good news at all, or else Zhi Xiu with his nature of "there's nothing that can't be spoken of" wouldn't have gone straight to putting a prohibition on him.

"Not especially," he said lightly, and calmly tried to clear shifu of any responsibility. "On Flying Jade Peak, even my shifu couldn't work out what the hell those things were good for—apart from being able to listen in on evil cultivators talking. That's why he sent me to investigate the evil cultivators. Who'd have thought that I'd run into the other half of the skeleton in the Impassable Sea and it'd come chasing after me without another word. It nearly killed me."

Elder Zhao seemed not to have noticed what he was doing. He nodded and said, "These are very old matters. They are in fact rather distant from you juniors."

"The original owner of the hidden bones you carry was called Yuan Hui. Tradition has it that he was cut down and dropped into the Impassable Sea by the Southern Sage. In fact, that isn't the case. When I was young, I heard the venerable Southern Sage himself say that in fact he had no way to defeat Yuan Hui back then. That ancient demonic god died in a heavenly tribulation because heaven and earth could not abide him. While living, his cultivation level was extremely high, no worse than the Southern Sage's, but he had gone along an evil way. Since his hidden bones reemerged into the world, the Bell of Tribulation has rung three times, more than during the last several hundred years. The bones fixed their attention on you from outside Jinping City. Up to the present, you could say that every step you've taken has been through chance and coincidence. With our level of cultivation, we are unable to see the ancient demonic god's way clearly. We only know that it has been secretly altering the fortunes of heaven and earth."

Xi Ping nodded. He had used the reincarnation wood to bring the elders here. The elders must know perfectly well by now how he had gotten the hidden bones.

Elder Zhao continued, sighing, “Establishing a foundation after a hundred years already indicates superior natural endowments. Even your Duanrui-shishu with her innate spiritual bones took most of a decade to get there after opening her spiritual eyes, entering the inner sect, and inheriting a Way of the Heart. Establishing a foundation less than a year after beginning to cultivate is unheard of. Too great haste has always been a calamity, not a blessing. You have mistakenly entered the way of the demonic god. You have no Way of the Heart on your spiritual foundation. This cannot be sustained in the long run. Fortunately, it’s early days yet. There is still room for you to escape.”

Xi Ping stared. With all the evil schemes he was brewing, he was forced to acknowledge now that everything Elder Zhao had said was reasonable.

“Please tell me what I ought to do, elder.”

Zhao Yin said, “Remove those spiritual bones.”

Xi Ping: “...”

Xi Ping had heard the story of Lancang’s Hui Xiangjun having her spiritual bones removed and her cultivation failing. The removal of spiritual bones had always been the immortal sects’ heaviest punishment. Elder Zhao’s words were tantamount to saying, “There’s a tumor growing in your head, the prognosis looks bad. Fortunately, it’s early days yet. There’s still time to chop off your head.”

A sneer was about to appear on his lips when he heard the Dignitary of Fate Zhang Jue suddenly put in a word: “The half-skeleton of

hidden bones in his body had already fused with his own true bones when he opened his spiritual eyes, never mind now, when he has established a foundation. An established foundation cultivator has already formed his heart, fixed his way. Removing his spiritual bones will shatter his vital weapon. At best he will never be able to cultivate again. At worst, he will be utterly destroyed.”

Zhao Yin said, “He is unlike others. Others form their hearts and fix their ways when they establish a foundation, but his way has been forced on him by the hidden bones. He himself can’t say what way it is. How can you call it forming his heart? Removing his spiritual bones may not necessarily damage his spirit.”

Shaking his head, Zhang Jue said, “There is no precedent for this. It is only ‘not necessarily.’ Matters concerning the ancient demonic god do not appear in the Sea of Stars. Neither you nor I know what the outcome of removing his spiritual bones will be. Though he has no Way of the Heart, he does have cultivation. Even mortals with natural spiritual bones cannot live long after losing their bones, so what will happen to him?”

“The Sea of Stars may not be able to see matters involving the ancient demonic god clearly, but it is still an established truth that ‘what accords with heaven’s will is auspicious, what is contrary to heaven’s will is inauspicious.’” Though Zhao Yin was debating with Zhang Jue, his eyes were watching Xi Ping. He said, “For example, forcibly removing a mortal’s natural spiritual bones is ‘contrary.’ Naturally the victims will die young, unless their spiritual bones can be restored to them, returning to what ‘accords’...”

Hearing this, Xi Ping’s heart gave a fierce leap. Ignoring everything else, he said, “If a mortal loses their natural spiritual bones, can they still be returned?”

Zhao Yin nodded. “As long as they aren’t dead.”

Xi Ping said, “So how...”

Zhang Jue interrupted him: “That’s beside the point.”

Zhao Yin’s expression didn’t change. “Shiyong did this unintentionally. The demonic god’s hidden bones forced themselves onto him. For him, having the spiritual bones is what is ‘contrary,’ while getting rid of them will be restoring what is natural. It is evident at a glance what accords and what is contrary. Regardless of what the outcome of removing the spiritual bones is, surely you aren’t going to tell me it wouldn’t be better than letting him continue on a wrong path?”

Zhang Jue turned to ask Elder Lin, “What does the Dignitary of Rule say?”

With the gazes of both Elder Zhang and Elder Zhao on him, Elder Lin pulled the seal over his mouth down a little. It turned out the old fellow wasn’t mute.

Emphasizing each word, Lin Zongyi said, “Yuan Hui’s hidden bones are inauspicious.”

When he opened his mouth, Xi Ping felt all his bones give a fierce shake and nearly jump out of his body on the spot.

No wonder Lin Zongyi kept his mouth sealed. Every word that came out of his mouth was a judgment, taking effect at once. Xi Ping had a sense that if Elder Lin had found him guilty of a crime not even death could atone for, he might have been struck down by a bolt of lightning on the spot. He didn’t make a sound, only listened to all his bones clattering, as if he were being squeezed in the palm of a big invisible hand.

The folds in Zhang Jue’s brow deepened. Zhao Yin cast his eyes down indifferently.

But Lin Zongyi paused briefly, then went on: “The great service this disciple has rendered is indelible. He may not be forced to undergo the punishment of the removal of spiritual bones.”

As soon as he said this, the pressure on Xi Ping’s body disappeared. He was wholly uninjured, but all his strength was exhausted. He narrowly kept himself from falling face first by holding himself up with his hands.

Elder Lin treasured his words like gold. After these two sentences, he once again sealed his mouth, turning again into a mute minding his own business.

“Lin-shixiong’s word is final, so this matter has been decided,” Zhang Jue said. “Shiyong, it is up to you whether the spiritual bones stay or go.”

Zhao Yin also turned to Xi Ping and said, nodding, “As it ought to be.”

Xi Ping was silent for a long time. Finally, he said, “I didn’t finish what I was saying earlier. I would like to ask Elder Zhao to instruct me on a certain matter. You said that a mortal whose innate spiritual bones have been removed can have them restored. How can this be done?”

Zhao Yin answered, “It only needs a cultivator of the ascended spirit level or higher to keep the meridians from breaking during the opening of spiritual eyes, as happened with you. Then, at that opportune moment, the spiritual bones can be merged back into the original body.”

It had to be an ascended spirit cultivator or above...

Xi Ping threw his head back slightly, glancing toward the nearby reincarnation wood forest. The reincarnation wood forest at the bottom of the sea was moving without a wind, the limbs and leaves shaking incessantly. He clenched his teeth, and the reincarnation wood trees, like his own tense back, instantly calmed down.

“The rest doesn’t matter, but my san... His Highness Prince Zhuang’s spiritual bones were the last to be placed by the Zhou family into the Impassable Sea. He didn’t voluntarily choose to allow the demon host to suck his marrow. All these years, the Impassable Sea has kept him silent. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to expose that awful place.”

Zhao Yin said, “I know.”

Xi Ping thought, It doesn’t matter that you know.

He turned to look at the Dignitary of Rule Lin Zongyi.

But Elder Lin didn’t say a word.

“Poor child. This is indeed a difficult choice.” Zhao Yin sighed and turned to Zhang Jue. “I don’t believe this matter is urgent. How about this—Zhang-shixiong, you seal his meridians, and when Jingzhai’s wounds have healed and he leaves seclusion, we will make a ruling. After all, this is his only direct disciple.”

Xi Ping slowly looked at Elder Zhao’s kindly-looking face, and the blood pumping through his heart turned to ice—evidently it was no good trying to be clever in front of a shed skin elder.

Zhao Yin clearly knew what Zhi Xiu had done. Fair enough. What was Xi Ping? It was an insult to the high elders’ precious energy to give him a second look. It took a two-hundred-year-old sword cultivator whose thrust of the sword had touched the boundary of the shed skin stage to be worth them wasting their spit.

For a moment, out of nowhere, Xi Ping thought of Duanrui-shishu.

After the forebear who had died for a cause, she was the first instance of innate spiritual bones in the whole Zhou clan. It was easy to imagine how pampered she must have been from childhood. A precious princess like this, forced into the way of clarity—she was no human-shaped punching bag, either; hadn't she resisted back then?

Back then, she must also have been questioned by the sect in this kindly fashion, in this same calm atmosphere: *Are you Great Wan's princess, or the Zhou clan's princess?*

The Zhou family possesses all under heaven. With Xuanyin Mountain to rely on, they are sure to continue throughout the ages, generation upon generation. With the imperial family's power, it is easy to control Xuanyin's Grand Selection. If they are not held back, over time, it is certain that they will become the sole great family. When that time comes, will they still be able to follow the old teachings of the demon subduers, value the nation above all? If you say they will, then, Zhou Xueru, won't you be the one to prove it to the immortal mountain now?

In Xuanyin Mountain, everyone had a Way of the Heart; some were brave, some were pure, some cherished the nation. Elder Lin was just, Elder Zhao spoke of what accorded with heaven's will... In sum, Xuanyin Mountain couldn't produce those comic characters in operas who were base and shameless, who bullied others for their own ends. Everything had to be his own choice.

Right now, he had rendered an indelible great service, but if he wouldn't give up his cultivation, insisted on holding on to the ancient demonic god's hidden bones, would he still have rendered an indelible great service?

Lax teaching is the fault of the teacher. Zhi Xiu had wished to cover up the hidden bones with a prohibition. When he came back, would he be able to escape the accusation of letting his disciple run free and fostering a demon?

What position would his shizun be in when the time came?

Never mind that there was no telling how long shifu would be in seclusion. It might be a hundred years... and even if it was only three years or five, there was someone who couldn't wait that long.

Starting from when he had concealed Jiangli's birthday jade, the whole way here, he hadn't consulted anyone's opinion. Why should he let someone else make the decision to wind it all up? Even if he were facing a coffin, he would still have to choose to lie down in it himself.

Xi Ping suddenly smiled. "There's no need."

The three elders simultaneously turned their heads toward him.

Xi Ping took a deep breath and sat up straight. He said, "His Highness Prince Zhuang's constitution is special."

Zhao Yin responded, "That's correct. Natural spiritual bones cannot coexist with a paramount spiritual sense, unless the individual opens his spiritual eyes and becomes a half-immortal. In the history of this nation, there has never been an emperor of the mortal world who practiced cultivation. But in his circumstances, even if he becomes a half-immortal, he is unlikely to have a lifespan as long as that of others. If he is willing to accept certain restrictions, it would be possible to make an exception."

Xi Ping instantly distinguished several layers of meaning in his words.

“That may not be necessary. It will depend on whether he is willing to sit on the throne.” Saying so, he took out the mustard seed that held Prince Zhuang’s spiritual bones. “Thank you, elder. I have nothing else to say.”

This time last year, he had still been fooling around at the House of Overflowing Splendor under the name of Mr. Yu Gan. His parents had been fretting about how to make him settle down, get married, and embark upon a career. No one in his whole family had had a thought of that selection card.

A year later, he had attended the Latent Cultivation Temple, gone into Demon Country, been broken to pieces, and even established a foundation. It was all like a wild dream.

Even in his dreams he wouldn’t have been able to imagine that he would see General Zhi, fly a sword on Flying Jade Peak, and by coincidence break san-ge out of his hopeless game. It truly had been a busy year.

The immortal path...

He raised his head and looked up. In the depths of the sea, he couldn’t see the light of day.

In fact, you couldn’t see the light of day on dry land, either. The legendary sages who had ascended to heaven never spoke, and the gang that was left behind... ha.

What about this immortal path was worth clinging to?

“The damn things aren’t mine to begin with. They just keep chasing after me without any shame.” Xi Ping withdrew his gaze and spreads his hands carelessly. He said, smiling, “Go ahead, remove them.”

Wei Chengxiang had veiled her face and was staying in a little fishing village on the shore of the East Sea.

In the middle of the night, as she was wrapped up in wild dreams, she suddenly heard refreshing qin music playing in her ears.

She knew nothing about music and couldn't tell whether it was good or bad. She only felt that when that music sounded in her ears, all the secret anxieties and alarms in her heart calmed down. Her muscles and bones, not yet accustomed to being scoured by the spiritual energy of heaven and earth, suddenly stopped aching.

Wei Chengxiang abruptly opened her eyes. "Uncle, you're back!"

The music stopped. "Hey."

"Where did you go before? I kept looking for you, I..."

"I went to dig up a grave. There was a seal on the damn place, I couldn't contact anyone on the outside. I know you've opened your spiritual eyes. That's good." This person's voice sounded directly in her spirit, his tone just as lively as when he had egged her on into pretending to be a holy woman in a den of evil cultivators. "What do you think of the qin?"

Toward outsiders, Wei Chengxiang seemed like a hedgehog, but toward those she knew, it was just the same as the way she had tolerated Chunying—no matter how unpleasantly the person behaved, she would only speak nicely. Without any hesitation, she praised, "It's lovely. It sounds better than all the qin music on the Lingyang River!"

The person in the reincarnation wood bragged shamelessly: "Of course. Those musicians are worthless. My qin can turn a donkey into a famous singer."

Wei Chengxiang: "...”

Then she heard him continue, “Though this may be the only performance. A qin dug up out of a grave is very inauspicious. I’m playing it for you as a treat. I won’t play it again. You’re a half-immortal now, the same as Heaven’s Design Pavilion’s walkers in the mortal world. No one will be able to casually bully you again.”

Wei Chengxiang went blank, suddenly having a bad feeling. “Uncle, what do you mean?”

“Didn’t I say so before? You aren’t a little girl anymore. It’s inappropriate for me to always be watching you.” The person in the reincarnation wood laughed. “And I’m too lazy to keep watching you. The circumstances were special before. Now you’ve gotten past your obsession. Take care of yourself in the future.”

Wei Chengxiang’s eyes opened wide. “Uncle, wait...”

“Walk the path ahead on your own. We won’t meet again.”

Wei Chengxiang stood up at once and seized the reincarnation wood.

She called out, prayed, and finally, at wit’s end, she once again spilled blood on the reincarnation wood amulet.

But there was no answer.

She didn’t hear that voice again.

Meanwhile, Xi Yue had returned to the southern mines along with the spiritual stone shipment convoy. When Xi Ping’s voice suddenly came from the dragon-taming chain, the half-puppet abruptly rolled over and stood up.

“Everything’s fine, I’m going back to the inner sect,” the scoundrel young master said to him. “But I have other things to do, so I don’t have time to take care of a weak little encumbrance like you. So, anyway, I’m entrusting you to Pang-shixiong. Don’t be polite about eating his spiritual stones. Tell him to go to the Marquis Manor or the Prince Zhuang Manor to get them back.”

Xi Yue: “...”

Was he making any sense?

The resentment that had been held down by worry instantly surged up. He wanted to bite him again.

“Xi Yue.” The scoundrel young master suddenly became serious. “Xi Yue was my little brother’s name. He never grew up, and you... you also nearly died young. But you were a little luckier than him. Whether your arms and legs are made of wood or iron, at any rate you’ve survived. Even I haven’t treated you like a straw child or a puppet. If anyone dares to in the future, kill them for me.”

Xi Yue’s pupils contracted sharply. *Where are you? What are you saying, you...*

Crack. There was a chill on Xi Yue’s neck. His scoundrel young master had somehow improved his skills. Across a vast distance, he had still been able to break the dragon-taming chain.

When a dragon-taming chain had been crushed by its master, there was no way to repair it.

The billowing waves on the canal pushed away the haze of the southern mines. He no longer had a master.

BOOK 3 - Passing Through Tribulation

CHAPTER 67 - Indignant Cicadas (1)

Both Xi Yue and A-Xiang had in one way or another gotten where they were now because of him, so Xi Ping owed them an explanation. He wasn't going to take the time to worry about anyone else—Xi Ping thought it was rather fortunate that when the great demon had been about to break out of the East Sea, he hadn't had time to say anything to san-ge, or else it would be truly hard to cover up.

He used his left hand to write a crooked note on the white jade proximal: "I am alive and well. Take care and do not worry about me. I am returning to Flying Jade Peak."

The note looked like it had been written by a seriously injured person. As for what kind of injury and why he hadn't gone through the spiritual bones and used his spirit to tell him directly, let san-ge make his own guesses; anything else Xi Ping said would be a mistake.

Anyway, there was a consensus among mortals that as long as you were still breathing, the immortals could save you. With that premise, whatever san-ge guessed, he wouldn't be too heartbroken.

This way, if removing the spiritual bones went smoothly, he would go back to being a mortal. First he would go to Prince Zhuang Manor to take his beating; then he would continue being a wealthy lordling. In the future, he would marry a beauty who wouldn't disgrace the family so he could keep the family line going. When shifu left seclusion, he could send his sons and grandsons to be decorations at Flying Jade Peak.

In case... Whatever "in case" there was, he could pretend shifu had taken him back to the inner sect to go into seclusion. Immortals,

after all, could be in seclusion for a hundred years, long enough to fool a mortal's longing.

The rest, Xuanyin Mountain would smooth over. He had handled the situation appropriately enough.

Elder Zhang took out a stone only slightly larger than a broad bean, dull grey. Looking closely, Xi Ping saw that the stone was actually transparent, but its whole surface had been polished into smooth hexagons, as if it had been inset with hundreds upon thousands of little mirrors. Each mirror reflected light, so the stone seemed clouded.

"This is a star stone that comes from the Sea of Stars," Elder Zhang said. "The punishment of the removal of spiritual bones normally falls onto a master. You opened your spiritual eyes too recently. Your consciousness won't be steady enough. You can temporarily shelter in the star stone."

Zhao Yin said, "When your consciousness hides in the star stone, your sensations will be cut off. You won't feel pain. The three of us will oversee the process. We will temporarily seal your spiritual eyes. We will not harm your meridians. We'll use the best quality bone jade from the Beijue Mountains to replace your spiritual bones. It is tougher and more resistant than real bone. You won't have any difficulty getting around in the future... Is there anything else to explain?"

"Nothing," Xi Ping said, seeming careless. "I'll have to trouble you elders to send me back home to Jinping afterward... Fortunately I haven't been cultivating long."

Fortunately he wasn't yet a hundred-year-old immortal. His grandmother in her seventies was still living. His parents were concerned that he was holding up his future prospects. They didn't say it, but inwardly they were in fact hoping that he would come

back. The Marquis telling him before he had left “you’ll have no protection in the immortal sect, don’t cause trouble” still reverberated in his ears. Fortunately these people were fastened to his feet and could drag him back into the mortal world to live as a mortal in peace.

He thought rebelliously: if that hadn’t been the case, then however powerless he was today, he would have to stab right through that bullshit Sea of Stars in the future.

“Quite right.” This time, Zhao Yin didn’t see what wickedness was brewing beneath the young master’s skin. “These things pose a looming danger for the nation and for you yourself. The earlier you’re rid of them, the better.”

Zhang Jue sighed to himself, then lightly tapped the center of Xi Ping’s brow. Xi Ping’s vision went dark. His consciousness poured at once into the star stone.

The countless little mirrors on the star stone reflected countless versions of him throughout his life—Xi Ping’s own memories of infancy were vague, but all the little details of peeing and shitting appeared clearly in the star stone. He seemed to have returned to his carefree teenage years. Waking up, he was once again in the Yongning Marquis Manor, which was transformed by spring breezes. In a daze, he rolled over and fell off of a stone bench onto the ground covered in fallen petals and sneezed from the smell... some public nuisance must have swept them into a pile there on purpose to catch him.

Madam Cui’s maid, holding back laughter, ran over to call him, saying that her mistress was calling the young master to come taste some freshly made snacks. Xi Ping, covered in fragrance, had to get up. He had quite a few veiled complaints against his mother’s tricks, which hadn’t changed in twenty years. Each time he had to pretend to be taken in, let himself be “coaxed,” then dress up in all kinds of

ridiculous outfits to pose for his mother's drawings... She never changed the wording, as if he were some kind of greedy guts.

Seeing that the star stone had his consciousness firmly wrapped up, Zhao Yin nodded and said, "Not even an ascended spirit could struggle free of the life inside the star stone. Let's begin."

Zhang Jue ignored him. He sat to one side, holding the star stone that contained Xi Ping's consciousness in his palm, standing guard.

Since he had entered the dim star stone, it had taken on a coating of white fluorescence, like the fog lamps of Jinping City—only a young man just out of the cottage could provoke this kind of light from the star stone: only recently grown up, with his heart still at home, his loves and hatreds both shallow—the star stone would be as limpid as a mountain stream.

How long it had been since the immortal sect had seen such a thing.

Zhao Yin wasted no more words. He molded a few inscriptions out of thin air and placed them over all of Xi Ping's senses. Then a realistic human skeleton appeared from the palm of his hand.

Xi Ping floated in midair, and the skeleton quickly adjusted its size beside him. In hardly any time, it was identical to his own skeleton. Next, the skeleton made of bone jade turned into white light, which "spread" itself flat over Xi Ping's body, slowly seeping into his skin and flesh. Meanwhile, dazzling silver light "poured" from Xi Ping's back, as if he had grown a pair of quicksilver wings.

As the spiritual bones were forced out of his body, they gradually took on the form of a skeleton.

Indeed, Elder Zhang very meticulously avoided his meridians. Two full ke later, when the demon seed on the ground had shrunk to half

its previous size, Xi Ping's spiritual bones had at last been fully substituted by the bone jade.

There didn't seem to be anything wrong with him. Only his aura had suddenly changed. The somewhat unsteady spiritual energy around him had gone with the spiritual bones. He had become a mortal.

Zhao Yin inspected his spirit. "With no Way of the Heart, his spiritual foundation has naturally collapsed upon losing his essence. Otherwise, he is unharmed. Soon enough we will be able to restore his consciousness."

Normally, the removal of spiritual bones was nowhere near this gentle. This was Xuanyin Mountain according dignity to a disciple who "understood the big picture."

The wrinkles in Zhang Jue's forehead relaxed slightly. The Dignitary of Fate High Elder reached out and pulled over Xi Ping, who was floating in midair, as if he suspected Zhao Yin of tampering with Xi Ping in some way and he was planning on personally inspecting Xi Ping's meridians.

Zhao Yin didn't squabble over this trivial detail with him. He lowered his eyelids and pretended not to see, his gaze falling on the ancient demonic god's spiritual bones.

Perhaps it was his mistake, but it seemed to him that there was a peculiar smile on the skeleton's face.

How could a skeleton smile?

But as soon as Zhang Jue touched Xi Ping's wrist, it was as if he had accidentally grabbed a seven-stringed qin.

The strings twanged as soon as they were touched, letting out a drone.

As soon as this human-shaped qin sounded, the whole seal at the bottom of the sea shook. The demon seed that had been subdued by three shed skin masters working together instantly swelled to twice its size!

As if he had been burned, Zhang Jue quickly drew his hand back. Without hesitation, Zhao Yin smashed the removed spiritual bones.

But cracking noises came from Xi Ping's body. His flesh sank and twisted bit by bit, then returned to its original form, as if all the bones in his body had broken and regrown! Then he seemed to become a lamp. Fine white light trickled down from him continuously. When the white light hit the ground, it became shard after shard of bone jade.

Zhao Yin had spent two ke substituting his spiritual bones with bone jade, and he spent two ke "spitting out" the top quality bone jade after crushing it.

The bone jade mixed with the dust of the spiritual bones on the ground, and another set of spiritual bones grew inside Xi Ping's body!

The young man's aura suddenly altered greatly: this young man who had evidently established a foundation hardly any time ago had drawn the remaining spiritual energy in the East Sea into a newly-created essence and broken through into the middle established foundation stage!

Lin Zongyi abruptly stood up, personally rolled up his sleeves to reveal a pair of emaciated hands, and once again removed Xi Ping's spiritual bones.

His actions were far firmer and rougher than Zhao Yin's. It only took him one ke to remove the spiritual bones, simply smashing Xi Ping's

spiritual foundation.

The smile on the face of the removed spiritual bones was increasingly evident. The angle of the lower jaw was too great, no longer matching Xi Ping's appearance... As soon as the bones left him, without waiting for Lin Zongyi to act, they went to pieces. Then there was a repeat of what had just happened. Xi Ping's body once again grew another set of spiritual bones.

This time it only took one ke, and his aura came right up to the late established foundation stage!

Meanwhile, as if bouncing back the roughness with which Lin Zongyi had removed the bones, the demonic energy in the agitated demon seed rose sharply. The inscriptions all around flickered. In the distance, the reincarnation wood forest grew wildly!

Xi Ping's consciousness was obviously residing in the star stone just fine, but his body turned slowly in midair and gave Lin Zongyi a mocking smile identical to the one on the spiritual bones.

For a moment, Zhao Yin had the impression that they weren't removing spiritual bones; they were personally helping the ancient demonic god return to the human world!

"Yuan Hui's way of death has no Way of the Heart. Each time he was destroyed was an opportunity. After they were crushed, the hidden bones would regrow flesh." Zhao Yin quickly reckoned on his fingers. "Why would it be the exact opposite with him—the body regrowing spiritual bones? Could it be the his spiritual bones are not the true hidden bones...? So where are the demonic god's hidden bones concealed?"

The three shed skin high elders looked at each other in dismay for a moment. Suddenly, without warning, Lin Zongyi reached out and aimed a blow at Xi Ping.

Zhang Jue quickly stood up, but it was already too late.

Though Xi Ping was currently in the late established foundation stage, it was after all only the established foundation stage. A hit from this shed skin elder, who was nearly as old as the earth and whose every speech was like a heavenly commandment, scattered him like a puff of smoke. Before his flesh could disperse, it simply turned to dust.

Zhang Jue said, "What are you doing!"

But Lin Zongyi and Zhao Yin simultaneously looked at the star stone in Zhang Jue's hand.

A cultivator's consciousness could find a temporary resting place, but it would only be temporary. In fact, it was about the same as a mortal breathing in anesthetic gas. Once the body was destroyed, the consciousness would immediately be annihilated.

In other words, right now, the star stone ought to have become grey once more.

But the star stone in Zhang Jue's hand was still glittering brightly.

Zhang Jue also realized something. He quickly hid the star stone in his palm.

Zhao Yin said grimly, "Zhang-shixiong, these hidden bones... If my guess is correct, they are attached to his consciousness."

The way of death was born out of death. It had no Way of the Heart. It was visible but not tangible. Before, they had only thought that this young disciple had been possessed by the demonic god's hidden bones; they hadn't thought that he had managed to inherit them completely.

In other words, Xi Ping hadn't entered the "way of death" by mistake; he himself was the "way of death." No wonder that when his hither seal had smashed his own spiritual foundation, his consciousness had been able to return calmly once the spiritual foundation had been restored. The demonic god's hidden bones, which could multiply endlessly, were with his consciousness.

Zhang Jue coldly said, "So now you two want to kill him? The Dignitary of Rule himself said that this disciple had rendered an indelible great service. Do you mean to say that it would accord with the Way of Heaven to kill without cause a person who has rendered a service? Gentlemen, are your Ways of the Heart yet steady?"

Zhao Yin pursed his lips, his expression becoming very unpleasant for a moment.

Just then, the demonic energy in the demon seed began to blaze. Black fog rose toward the sky and nearly broke the seal at the bottom of the sea.

For a time, the three shed skin elders had no attention to spare for their internal strife. They joined hands to suppress the demon seed. They felt that the intensity of the demon seed's resistance was hardly less than that of a living, breathing eight-hundred-year-old great demon.

And at the same time, the dust hovering in the area once again gathered together. Right before the eyes of the three hard-pressed shed skin elders, it was about to join into a human form.

Zhao Yin said, "You saw that, Zhang-shixiong!"

Lin Zongyi pulled down his mouth seal. "The demonic god must be eliminated."

When his judgment fell, the star stone in Zhang Jue's hand shook.

And almost at the same time, outside of the Sea of Stars, the Dignitary of Fate elder abruptly opened his eyes. His pupils were white, identical to the white light in the star stone. With a glance, he kept Lin Zongyi's judgment away from the star stone.

"Dignitary of Rule," Zhang Jue said with emphasis, lowering his voice, "if you eliminate demons without reference to guilt, are you still worthy of being the Dignitary of Rule?"

Zhao Yin said, softly, "Zhang-shixiong, can you not have noticed that Lin-shixiong's verdict was 'the demonic god must be eliminated'?"

Zhang Jue's white pupils trembled slightly.

Lin Zongyi said grimly, "Dignitary of Fate, look to the human world."

No sooner had he spoken than countless scenes flashed on the four walls of the seal at the bottom of the sea, over the scar-riddled inscriptions: the sound of a qin being smashed echoed all around. The people who heard that enraged twanging seemed to have their hatred ignited. They attacked without a thought for the consequences, dying in droves by hand cannon, sword, and arrow.

"Yes, if you are able to reach the shed skin level, there is no right and wrong Way of the Heart. We all understand this. Never mind this child who has just come of age, the historical records say nothing of Yuan Hui himself committing frenzied misdeeds," Zhao Yin said. "But even if Jingzhai doesn't know what it means that the demon seed has reappeared in the human world, do you mean to say that you don't know either?"

Zhang Jue was silent.

“When the five sages achieved the full moon positions, the remaining masters were eliminated one by one by the Way of Heaven. Since then, the sects have operated on the foundation of the five sages. The spiritual mountains were divided, and in the human world, pure and impure were also separated. There was order. Only with this order in place can the immortal sects and the mortal world have peace,” Zhao Yin said. “Southern He stirred up the flames of war, and one of the five great spiritual mountain ranges was lost. Since then, the demons at the bottom of the Impassable Sea have multiplied by leaps and bounds. In the last two hundred years, how much instability has entered the human worlds, how many citizens have died as victims of injustice? Even now, the people’s resentment over Moon Plated Gold—in the final analysis, hasn’t it all been because of a loss of order among the spiritual mountains?! Can the Dignitary of Fate High Elder need someone else to explain this reasoning to him?”

Lin Zongyi said, “When those who have been cast aside by the Way of Heaven return to the world, it must do injury to the righteous path. Karma is involved here. Human strength cannot overcome it. Dignitary of Fate, it isn’t as simple as ‘without cause.’”

“In the future, when Jingzhai leaves seclusion, if he is truly able to attain the shed skin level, he will also see this reasoning. What choice do you want him to make?” Zhao Yin pointed. “Zhangshixiong, look there.”

The demon seed that had been suppressed by the shed skin elders was constantly overflowing with demonic energy. Thread after thread of demonic energy, as if drawn in by an attractive force, poured toward that gathering human figure.

“I trust that none of the masters involved in the war of gods and demons wanted to see the people suffer, but do not forget that it was because of them that the demons in the Impassable Sea were born.”

Xi Ping's form had mostly taken shape now and faintly gave off the aura of a consummate established foundation. One more time, and perhaps he would go straight to an ascended spirit.

On the young face that was gradually becoming clearer, there was a faint smile, as if he were mocking all of nature's laws and rules: the sun and moon rising in the east and setting in the west, the day and night divided into twelve shichen, men and beasts living and dying, reincarnating and multiplying without end, water flowing into the east, trees growing up toward the sky, only establishing a foundation after forming your heart, only becoming a god while following the righteous path...

Zhang Jue at last closed his eyes once more. The star stone slipped out of his hand.

A faint clash came from the Dignitary of Fate High Elder's sleeve, and the shard of Zhaoting that bore the engraving of its name flew straight out and entered the center of Xi Ping's brow.

When he had been at Flying Jade Peak, the Sword that Mended the Heavens had been assigned by Zhi Xiu to be a loyal nursemaid, helplessly flying circles around his rebellious disciple to keep him from destroying the whole frozen mountain.

Now the sword had broken, but its instinct to protect the young disciple remained.

The star stone shattered, and the pure white consciousness inside it, the indolent Marquis Manor and Jinping's late spring, all vanished along with it.

And by coincidence, just at that moment, Xi Ping's body assembled completely. The mocking smile on his face was gone. All his aura dimmed.

The East Sea calmed. The demon seed once again became silent.
The demonic god had been eliminated.

CHAPTER 68 - Indignant Cicadas (2)

The west side of the Xia River, Tao County.

This place was on the border of Western Chu. Southern Wan was just across the river. The two places were close, and people came and went between them. There was frequent commerce and intermarriage. Adding in Southern Wan's civil unrest some years back, there had also been quite a few people from Wan coming to seek refuge. The longer the people of the two nations mixed together, the more this area took on a "Wan atmosphere."

Everyone spoke a mixed language, and they learned each others' funeral and marriage customs.

In Tao County's Seventeen Li Town, a rather well-off household was having a funeral. Perhaps the deceased's ancestors had come from Wan; the officiant had been asked to sing a Soul Calling Melody from Great Wan, but the instrumentation and the procession were all according to Chu custom.

"Raise the casket, hang two mats, shelter it fully seven days. The Great Way touches Heaven and sends you back home!"

The officiant overseeing the funeral claimed to have been born and bred in Southern Wan and to have done this work since he was young; he knew all the ins and outs. The upshot was that he was some kind of eccentric. His voice was hoarse, and he sang off tune.

His beard was scraggly, his age unclear. His arms were bare, revealing weathered, sinewy flesh. His singing turned the perfectly good Soul Calling Melody into a work song for laborers breaking ground. Listening to it, the steps of the men carrying the casket were unusually uniform, resonant and firm, as if determined to make

the person inside the casket roll over and borrow another five hundred years from heaven.

The casket needed to make three circles around the town, bidding farewell to the deceased's fellow townspeople, before being taken to the ancestral tomb.

The torment of the eccentric officiant's sandpaper voice nearly sent off all the town's elders as well. As he led the procession, he calmly took in the terrain and scenery of Seventeen Li Town. He saw the "Immortal Palace" that cut across a patch of favorably situated land. There were a number of doors into the Immortal Palace, and he got a clear look at all of their rough orientations and so on. The officiant gave his colleagues carrying the casket a look.

A casket bearer knocked on the casket a few times in a regular pattern: *Each door has a pair of guards, and inside there are sure to be mechanisms and arrays. We'll need someone to show us the way.*

The officiant nodded almost imperceptibly: *Got it.*

This officiant's goal in coming here was the Immortal Palace.

This area of Tao County was remote and out of reach of the government, no matter which country you used as reference.

Border areas have always been cherished by the hosts of evil.

In recent years, the title of Pang Jian of Great Wan's Heaven's Design Pavilion had changed from assistant commander to general commander, and he seemed in the process to have gone from a wolf dog to a mad dog. His treatment of evil cultivators was ruthless; he seemed ready to kill the innocent rather than risk the guilty getting away. This had forced quite a few roaming common cultivators to run to other countries.

Comparatively speaking, Chu's Sanyue Sect had a much more lenient attitude toward roaming common cultivators. As long as there were no obvious instances of pilfering heaven's order or black market trade in spiritual stones, they could turn a blind eye; if the people didn't complain, the officials wouldn't investigate.

So Seventeen Li Town, with its well-developed waterways and roadways, had gradually accumulated a black market that traded in magic weapons, spiritual stones, and immortal elixirs. It had been given the nickname Wild Fox Country.

Wild Fox Country's local thug was called the Snake King, who took his name from the snakeskin scars that covered his whole body.

This Snake King had great powers and was highly skilled in making his own way. Some years ago, taking advantage of Great Wan's civil strife, he had gone around everywhere hoodwinking people and collected a considerable amount of wealth. When Xuanyin Mountain had used thunderous methods to pacify the rebellion, the Snake King had turned around and sought shelter in Chu.

At their nearest, Chu and Wan were separated only by a river. Chu's Xiang clan had always cast covetous eyes on their wealthy neighbor and naturally had wanted to take advantage of the commotion to reap some benefit. The Snake King had been Chu's guide in crossing the river and going south. Then a dozen or more of Xuanyin Mountain's thirty-six peak masters had come down to the mortal world. An old, long-established sect's knowledge ran deep; as soon as they acted, they stewed the whole crowd of hyenas. Sanyue didn't dare to publicly fall out with Xuanyin, so in the end it all came to nothing.

Chu had failed to take advantage, but the minor figures mixed into the plot were like weeds; as soon as a tumultuous wind began to blow, they grew wildly. Through his service, the Snake King had struck up a connection with Chu's orthodox sect.

This person had many peculiar methods. He was extremely skilled at turning everything to his advantage. He had perfectly bribed Sanyue's outer sect, and he had collected a crowd of evil cultivators in Tao County who had nowhere to go. In hardly any time, he had gotten real results. Here in Wild Fox Country, he had become a local tyrant.

It was said that in Seventeen Li Town, each and every insect and bird was this Snake King's eyes and ears. He presided over an Immortal Palace that took up a hundred mu of land. Inside the palace, there were third-class inscriptions everywhere. Not even cannons could have brought it down.

The officiant looked at the magnificent Immortal Palace for a while, then averted his eyes and lowered his thick lashes to hide the murder in his eyes.

He took a worn out wine pot from his belt, moistened his throat, and, in a voice as jubilant as if he were sending a couple to their bridal chamber, he cried out, "The living make way! The family of the deceased bestows—money!"

Paper money scattered on the wind. The funeral procession continued west, piping and drumming.

The old gentleman inside the casket was said to have been over seventy. He had said many years ago that he was going to die, yet in all this time, he hadn't died. The family's filial son had gotten fed up long ago. Now that he had finally outlasted the old bastard, he wanted to go through the motions and get everything over with. He had deliberately chosen an officiant that cost half what other officiants did.

This officiant didn't seem very dependable, but unexpectedly there were no major problems with the procession. As for the tune of the

Soul Calling Melody running off to the Beijue Mountains—if the Beijue Mountains didn't object, why couldn't his dad make do? The filial son was very satisfied. Having buried his dad, as custom directed, he gave the officiant a red packet to get rid of bad luck.

The officiant took the red packet and glanced inside. He saw a meager handful of copper coins and hit upon an idea.

Without warning, he gave a cry and began to wail, startling the filial son. “Brother, I'll tell you, while I was overseeing your family's funeral procession today, I remembered my old father back in my hometown.”

The filial son said in astonishment, “What, do you mean your esteemed father also passed recently?”

Then the officiant, holding the filial son's hand, expressed at length that he wasn't a proper officiant to begin with. It was only that his father back home had passed on, and he had been working away from home and hadn't been able to get back in time to attend the funeral; this was a regret that would gnaw at him for the rest of his life. By coincidence, just as he had been passing through here, he had come across a wealthy family making funeral arrangements, and he had been unable to resist wanting to make up for his eternal regret, sing a round of the Soul Calling Melody for his father. How could he possibly take the family's red packet? He was already doing well if he wasn't paying his customer for the privilege.

As he spoke, he unnoticeably tampered with the money.

Hearing this, the filial son took the money back in satisfaction. This was wonderful.

He took another look at the officiant. While he was sloppy, what showed of his features was quite regular, and he was nicely muscled. So the filial son, very pleased, took back the red packet

and in the process touched the officiant's clear-knuckled hand. He thought that even the crescent moon scar on the back of this person's hand was very manly. Weepingly, he said, "Oh my, then the two of us are fellow sufferers!"

This eldest filial son had once been an opera actor who played female roles. How good his singing was no one knew, but his looks truly weren't bad. He had a feminine look, even more feminine than a woman. His nickname was Misty Willow.

The Snake King was lecherous and enjoyed men and women equally; he especially liked those who were neither one nor the other. He had liked Misty Willow on sight. Hearing his nickname, he had been even more convinced that this was destiny and had decided on the spot to keep him around—"misty willow" was the name Chu's commoners called reincarnation wood, and for some reason, the Snake King had a particular love toward reincarnation wood. It was said that he privately worshipped a statue of an evil god carved from reincarnation wood and said that this wood had brought him luck.

Therefore, Misty Willow had become the Snake King's favorite, and everyone called him "Lady Willow."

Lady Willow had been in favor for several years, and he had plenty of money. He was also a miser. The officiant who had overseen his father's funeral had returned his red packet, and he, not minding the bad luck, casually put the money into his own purse. The next day, as usual, he went to the Immortal Palace to serve.

Before going into the palace, he first took a deep breath—with the Snake King's countenance, it would scare your soul out of your body to wake up and see him in the middle of the night. Misty Willow had spent a lot of time with the Snake King, and he had seen that each of the "immortals" who came from afar had their own magic power, and also their own unsightliness. Appearances were

secondary, anyway; there was no ugliness in the world that wealth and rank couldn't overcome. But the "ugliness" of the immortals was different; all of them had an inhuman air. Misty Willow often thought he was waiting upon a talking lizard.

From habit, he adjusted his own mental state, smoothed the hair at his temples, put on a smile, and slowly walked inside.

A faint breeze brushed the hems of his clothes and branded invisible marks where his footsteps fell.

It was night, starless and moonless.

The patrols in the immortal palace had just finished swapping shifts. The mortal guards at the door heard a bell ringing and at once seemed to turn into human puppets whose souls had been removed. They didn't move a muscle. A few figures landed silently. These were the officiant who had overseen Misty Willow's father's funeral procession and his colleagues.

The assassins went right around the dumbstruck guards and slipped into the Immortal Palace. The "officiant" in the lead took out a talisman and crushed it in midair. A faint set of footprints appeared on the ground. He gestured to his colleagues and flew in following the footsteps. In less than an incense stick of time, they found the main hall of the Immortal Palace.

Incense smoke curled through the main hall; it was congested with song and music. The "officiant" thrust his hand into his clothes and grasped a half-finished lilac knotted bag. He closed his eyes.

A colleague, as if in consolation, gently bumped his shoulder.

The "officiant" clenched his teeth and focused. He placed all his spiritual sense in his ears and listened intently.

A drunken male voice was delivering a harangue inside the main hall: "... the south has been no-go these past couple years. Better slow down. Xuanyin is all wound up. Old Taiming ended up on the path of evil in his old age. Never mind making life unlivable for the people, he also cooked up something big in the East Sea. That battle back then! Ha, none of you guys saw it! Of course, it takes a nation in turmoil to make a hero's qualities shine. It was back then that I made my little fortune..."

When the Snake King put together a feast in his own domain, he didn't cover up at all, exposing all of his snakeskin. Amid the voices of his guests, joining in his story to humor him, he hiccuped, unsatisfied, and squinted toward the dance floor. Pointing to the most attractive dancing girl, he said, "You, come here."

The music stopped at once. The young dancing girl was alarmed.

From behind the Snake King, Misty Willow gave her a look, telling her to smile. The young dancing girl understood his expression and falteringly put on a stiff smile, stepping forward to curtsy. Before she could speak, she was dragged over by an ice cold hand.

She felt herself pressed to the big python's body and had a clear look at the Snake King's frightening face up close. She trembled uncontrollably.

"Why are you shaking?" The Snake King gently pinched her chin. Grimly, he said right into her ear, "While you were dancing just now, you didn't raise your head once. What, do you think I'm ugly?"

The young dancing girl shook even more violently, instinctively closing her eyes.

A rough hand like a reptile's covered her eyelids. "Do you know what happens to stupid women who close their eyes after seeing my true face...?"

Before he could finish, just that moment, a beam of snow-white light from a knife pried open the door to the main hall. The scream caught in the young dancing girl's throat at last broke through the soft music.

“Bold criminals!”

The assassins descending from the heavens made the drunken ghosts and goblins attending the feast collectively sober up. Misty Willow saw that the situation was going badly and dove under a table without another word.

It turned out that these assassins weren't mortals. For a time, the immortal tools and talismans shone on each other inside the room, and curses and screams both flew.

Misty Willow carefully stuck his head out from under the table and saw the Snake King puffing out a mouthful of white mist at the head assassin. He remembered this white mist. Once, a girl who had dared to cry in front of the Snake King had had half her face dissolved by this white mist; her features had all melted!

But the assassin was fearless. He took out a chopper without a handle, drew his palm over the edge of the blade, and instantly activated the talisman on the blade. With a hum, wind from the knife cleaved through the man-eating white mist and went straight toward the Snake King.

There was a crescent moon scar on the back of the person's hand—he had touched it just the day before!

Wasn't this that unreliable officiant?

Misty Willow was startled and retreated in terror back under the table.

The Snake King whistled. Seven or eight open-eyed evil cultivators leapt into the room and held up the assassins. He himself turned and went through the wall.

The “wall” was actually an invisible door.

Some of the assassins assembled an array and stopped the Snake King’s reinforcements, calling to the head assassin: “Go after him, Xu-xiong!”

The “officiant” said “thank you” and leapt to follow the Snake King through the invisible door.

He went into the wall and out of it, and before he could stand firm, he heard a rumbling from all around. A huge spiritual beast that had escaped its chains threw itself toward him.

The chopper in the “officiant”’s hand met it unwaveringly and stabbed right into the huge beast’s bloody maw. The huge beast gave an earthshaking roar. Then he gave a low shout and tossed out a talisman that went right into the huge beast’s mouth. Spiritual energy exploded and opened up the huge beast’s chest.

Following inertia, he kept going forward. He took out a very impure jade stamp stone and dissolved it into his palm. When he had pushed away the body of the huge beast, the Snake King was nowhere to be seen.

This was a secret room with a vulgar-looking reincarnation wood divine image in the center. On the spirit tablet was written the name “Tai Sui.”

Dangerous inscriptions and arrays flashed all around.

The “officiant” gripped the chopper tightly. He rubbed a talisman between his fingers. The talisman quietly caught fire. Blue light swept the floor and ceiling beams, turning up countless hidden arrays and inscriptions... as well as a line of hurried footsteps.

Blood went to the “officiant”’s head. He was just about to follow the footsteps when, suddenly, he glimpsed something out of the corner of his eye. He quickly turned his head—he kept thinking that the reincarnation wood divine image seemed to be moving, even slightly shaking its head.

The “officiant” broke out in gooseflesh. He raised his talisman and lit up the face of the Tai Sui image with the blue light. There was a peculiar, mysterious smile on the statue’s face. It was looking at him quietly.

The “officiant” quietly cursed to himself. “Playing tricks.”

Then he averted his gaze and chased after the footsteps without hesitation, chopping toward the wall where the footsteps vanished.

Before the point of the knife could fall, he had already felt that something was wrong. There was an array to reflect spiritual energy on that wall that shot back his knife blow in its entirety.

The officiant twisted backward and dodged the knife light. The knife light hit the wall but touched another array.

In the blink of an eye, the whole secret room filled with knife light and sword images. In a moment of desperation, the “officiant” grabbed the reincarnation wood statue to shield himself. As he rolled, a half-finished lilac knotted bag fell from his waist and got caught on the statue’s wrist.

Just then, a languid voice sounded in his ear: “I *told* you it wasn’t there. Look out up above.”

The “officiant” looked up and saw a huge image of a fierce beast on the ceiling. The drawn beast escaped the picture and snapped its jaws toward him. The man didn’t have time to think carefully. He rolled desperately, holding onto the statue. He heard that voice say with a smile, “The entrance to the secret passage is in that thing’s mouth, believe it or not.”

“What the hell are you?”

The voice answered, “You’re rude, aren’t you? Whatever the hell you are, that’s whatever the hell I am.”

CHAPTER 69 - Indignant Cicadas (3)

Even a person who stepped up to answer before you asked a question rarely had good intentions, so what about a strange divine image in this den of evil cultivators?

There was drowsy mischief in that voice; he sounded like bad news.

The fake officiant was evidently a practiced hand. He knew that untimely curiosity could kill. He raised a hand, planning to toss the weird divine image away. But the wicked wood just happened to have a rather deep crack in its grain that had caught the knotted bag inside it. The cords used to make the knotted bag weren't very solid or high quality to begin with, and they were starting to wear out after all these years. The fake officiant didn't dare to hastily yank it out.

While he was tugging, the beast that had come out of the painting came right up in front of him.

The voice in his ear faintly said, "All you see before you is false.."

The fake officiant didn't listen to his nonsense. He took a breath and stabbed forward with his knife. The knife seemed to hit stone; it nearly shattered. He flew forward after his knife, about to hit the array on the wall.

This fake officiant's reactions in the face of danger were very quick. He instinctively wanted to toss away the divine image he was holding to suffer in his stead. But as the divine image flew, the side the knotted bag was caught on was facing the wall. A small colorful cord was just about to get pulled in by the array. The fake officiant cursed quietly and bent in half in midair, shielding the divine image with his body, taking the hit.

From the disturbed array, another identical beast appeared and snapped its jaws toward the fake officiant's shoulder, its fangs leaving a bloody mark on his back.

If he hadn't ducked quickly, that thing might have bitten off his shoulder.

The divine image *tsked* feelingly and gave a huge, elaborate yawn, sounding even more in need of a beating.

One beast was already enough to get rid of him, never mind a pair; the fake officiant couldn't stick this out. All he could do was race around the room, tossing out all kinds of talismans as though they were free, hitting the beasts. But the two animals weren't injured at all.

The divine image slowly announced his new observation: "Those who do not listen to their elders will always come to grief. Haven't you realized that those two look like they were birthed by the same mother?"

The fake officiant automatically looked where he indicated and saw that the two beasts surrounding him were indeed identical. Even the decorative patterns on them looked like rubbings from the same source!

The divine image said, "You understand now, right?"

The fake officiant: "..."

Understand what?

"Ah," the divine image sighed at length as though profoundly moved by the fact that he'd woken up to find that there were so many more simpletons; there was truly no hope for this world. "Which one of us hasn't woken up yet? Listen, did you come here to be an assassin,

or did you come to sleepwalk? All the arrays in this place are like mirrors. They reflected the knife light and the beast. Since it's a reflection, naturally the decorative patterns are reversed. How could they be facing the same direction? It's because you heard what I said and got the idea that they were identical, so they became identical in your eyes. These are illusions—illusions! How much clearer do you want me to be, Brother Da Cheng?"

Hearing this, the fake officiant went blank. "Da Cheng" had been his pet name in his hometown. No one had called him that for many years. "How did you..."

"Look out, don't get distracted!"

In the nick of time, the fake officiant crouched down and threw himself forward, his chopper striking out in front of his chest, dodging an attack from a huge beast on each side, one after another.

He falteringly backed up a few steps and hit the array, and in the limited space, two more huge beasts appeared!

Indeed, the fake officiant saw that the decorative patterns on these new beasts were reflected. He had been distracted by the evil god in the divine image; his mind was a little confused. As soon as he thought, "Why were they not reflections before, but now they've gone back to being reflections?", the decorative patterns on the four beasts changed once again, bewilderingly.

The divine image said, "The five colors blind men's eyes. If I were you, I'd stop looking."

The fake officiant said, "Shut—up!"

Just then, a little metal ring clamped to the helix of his ear began to vibrate, a sharp whistle that only he could hear coming from inside it

—this was a warning from his colleagues.

A series of short, rapid sounds meant that more help had arrived for the other side.

Wild Fox Country was the Snake King's domain, and all the evil cultivators who came and went in it were his people. The so-called "Immortal Palace" was complex and intricate on the inside. Their ability to infiltrate it depended entirely on luck. If they couldn't win a decisive victory quickly, infiltration would become difficult.

For this assignment, their superior wanted to take down Wild Fox Country on the Wan-Chu border and had sent more than one team. Their colleagues had presumably already infiltrated Wild Fox Country's business transactions. In fact, he shouldn't have been taking part in such a big matter. He was here because that gentleman had remembered his vendetta and gone out of his way to give him this opportunity as a special attention. He knew that neither his experience nor his cultivation were equal to those of the others, and his plans couldn't be as comprehensive as the plans of his colleagues; that was why he had gone the route of direct assassination... If he failed now, never mind getting his brothers in trouble, he was afraid he would also impact the overall plans of his other colleagues and his superior.

The fake officiant threw caution to the wind and braced himself. He abruptly closed his eyes.

But while he could close his eyes, his nose and ears didn't have lids. He could still smell the reeking wind, could still hear the breathing of those huge animals. All the hairs on the back of the fake officiant's neck stood on end and began to tremble. He was about to be buried in the mouths of the beasts.

Damn it! In a rash moment, he had been deluded by that evil god of unknown origin!

But the “evil god” coldly said, “Such a nice young woman—what was she thinking liking you? Alas, blind at such a young age... You closed your physical eyes without closing your mental eyes, and you’re still standing there remembering the illusions you just saw, idiot!”

“Who are you talking about?” For a moment, the fake officiant’s mind and soul were shaken. The murderous illusions were immediately forgotten. “What young woman?”

“I’m telling you,” the evil god said with emphasis, “there’s a secret passage here, and the entrance is in the mouth of that beast.”

The fake officiant instantly opened his eyes. In front of him was the big, bloody maw of a beast.

In that moment, he became strangely calm—at the speed these animals moved, if they had been real, they would have run over and bitten off his head in the blink of an eye; they certainly wouldn’t have let him talk to the evil god for so long!

They really were illusions.

Faith, firm as a rock, steadied his spirit. Without turning a hair, the fake officiant stepped up and walked into the huge beast’s big, bloody maw. Its fangs nearly touched the top of his head!

But the next moment, the reek disappeared. His vision went dark. When he came back to himself, he was in a narrow corridor.

The evil god egged him on: “Thank heaven and earth, finally you’ve wised up. Go on, slaughter that ogre!”

The fake officiant: “...”

Wait, with this evil god's esteemed countenance, how could he have the face to call someone else an "ogre"?

As the fake officiant dashed forward, he quickly untied the knotted bag from the reincarnation wood divine image. "Aren't you the evil god that the Snake King worships? Why would you bite the hand that feeds you?"

These words enraged the indolent evil god. The evil god cursed at length in genuine local vernacular. "*You're* the evil god, *you're* the one biting the hand that feeds you! What am I supposed to have eaten of his?"

"...incense ash?"

"And what part of my body would I use to eat incense ash? Do you think you could grow some more brains if you ate incense ash? I think I should stick some incense up your nose," the "evil god" who was unusually adept at swearing said angrily. "Every time that ogre has a big business deal, he brings me out and torments me until I wake up so I can watch them sell their dads, sell their moms, sell themselves. It's even worse during the New Year celebrations. He brings in some good-for-nothings to make music and fumigates me all day with his lousy incense burner, then nauseates me with a pile of raw meat, and he still has the face to ask me to bless him with good luck for the coming year. Bah! My blessing is for him to die soon and reincarnate soon! Hurry up, deliver retribution. If you dare to disappoint me, I'll curse you, too."

"Who are you, anyway?"

"The ogre calls me 'Tai Sui.' That lousy name doesn't sound very auspicious, but I'm used to it by now, you can call me that, too," the evil god said. "I am an old tree spirit."

“Bullshit!” The fake officiant stuck the divine image under his arm. “There are three thousand ways in the world, and mountains of ancient texts. Not one of them has a record of a tree that could cultivate a spirit!”

In that tone that was asking for a dozen beatings, Tai Sui said, laughing, “Well, pardon my lack of manners, brave warrior. May I ask how many of those ancient texts you’ve read?”

The fake officiant: “...”

“Whether there are mountains of ancient texts or oceans of them, what have they got to do with you? Ignoramus. Look out for sneak attacks, Xiao Chengcheng!”

Hardly had he finished speaking than the fake officiant slid, narrowly avoiding a shot from a sniper.

The fake officiant tossed the divine image aside and took out a talisman. An invisible shield immediately took shape in front of him, blocking the dense sniper fire.

There were both shots from hand cannons and talismans coming his way. The hand cannons couldn’t pierce through the spiritual shield, but the talismans mixed in with the dense fire made crack after crack in the shield. It was about to give out at any moment.

The fake officiant gave a loud cry. Going against the direction of the sniper fire, he nearly turned into a gust of wind.

The spiritual shield broke!

The hand cannon fire exploded right on the fake officiant. Even if this fire power couldn’t kill a half-immortal, it still nearly tore most of the flesh off his shoulder. As if he had no sense of pain, he activated the array on his knife’s blade with a handful of blood. Instantly, the

knife seemed to become a magic weapon that could press forward indomitably.

It was cast viciously by its owner in the direction the talismans were coming from.

The Snake King, seeing the sniper attack succeed, had just relaxed when, without warning, the knife cut straight through his chest!

Tai Sui, trying to stir things up more, called out in praise, “Nice hit!”

Back draped in blood like some god or demon, the fake officiant charged forward, grabbed the handle of the knife, and pushed it forward on the strength of inertia, pinning the Snake King to the wall!

Tai Sui laughed heartily.

The fake officiant stared fixedly at the Snake King’s horrifying face and kept his voice very low. “Five years ago, in Yuzhou, you pretended to be the ‘immortal envoy of Tai Sui’ to fool the people. All the people who followed you, who believed you, were common people with nowhere to go. You didn’t just swindle them out of all their money, you squeezed their marrow dry, then sold them to the Chu, turning them into cannon fodder in the war between the two nations. You also...you also violated a young woman, just seventeen years old—do you remember her?”

Tai Sui’s laughter came to a sudden stop.

The chopper had broken all of the Snake King’s meridians. He was pinned to the wall by the little knife like a mortal... no, like a gecko, desperately struggling with all four limbs, his single glaring eye like a bronze bell.

“She couldn’t bear the disgrace and escaped out of your hands... then she was brought back by your lackeys. A mortal woman beaten black and blue actually dared not to submit to you—you were beside yourself with rage. In front of everyone, you yelled ‘Tai Sui delivers your punishment,’ and in front of the whole village, you burned her to death.”

The tendons in the fake officiant’s neck stood out. His eyes were red. He quietly roared, “Do you remember?!”

Tai Sui interrupted him: “Hey, he’s almost finished his array.”

The fake officiant suddenly came back to himself. He glanced down. The hand seal that the Snake King seem to have been drawing at random had already formed a complete array. He was about to raise a hand to press it to the wall.

The fake officiant reacted extremely fast. When he broke the Snake King’s hand with a kick, a white spirit rolled out of the reptilian paw. The array had half-activated, but it died down without going further.

“Don’t be in a rush to collect on a debt, Xiao Chengzi. His left front tooth is a mustard seed. Look out for secret plots.”

“I have a full name, show some respect!” the fake officiant, at the end of his tether, howled at the divine image of Tai Sui. At the same time, his hand didn’t rest. With one punch, he broke the Snake King’s chin, narrowly avoiding a mouthful of poison mist.

The mustard seed disguised as a front tooth rolled several chi away and landed beside the divine image of Tai Sui.

The joyously smiling divine image met the Snake King’s panicked and desperate eyes. The fake officiant heard Tai Sui say softly into his ear, “First cripple him. He has plenty of resources and is skilled

in all kinds of tricks. Don't let him take you at a disadvantage again, fool. Then tell him..."

Just then, the fake officiant finally realized that the Snake King couldn't hear the "divine oracles" of this Tai Sui that he worshipped.

The evil god he had worshipped for years could in fact work miracles, and the first miracle he worked was to help an outsider kill him. What kind of bizarre karmic retribution was this?!

The believer didn't hear the "divine oracle" say: "Just say, 'Imposter, Tai Sui delivers your punishment.'"

The fake officiant broke out in gooseflesh. Before, this Tai Sui had been speaking in the local dialect that mixed Wan and Chu speech; his swearing had been especially authentic. So without noticing it, the fake officiant had actually lowered his guard and had even started to talk back.

But these last words had been spoken in perfect, sweet Jinping official language.

"If you continue along this secret passage, you can find the underground rooms where he keeps his private collection of treasures and spiritual stones. I haven't been to that place, but I have my guesses," Tai Sui said grimly. "There'll be enough to set on fire and send him on his way."

The fake officiant didn't listen to this. His hands tightened. The light of his chopper blazed, and he cut the Snake King right in two, splitting his spirit.

He was utterly dead.

Tai Sui *tsked*. "How dull."

After killing the Snake King, the fake officiant drew several rough breaths, then took out a whistle, brought it to his mouth, and blew hard several times. The whistle was voiceless; only those wearing a special item would hear it.

Having notified his companions outside “I’ve succeeded, clear out,” he tore the Snake King’s body off the wall, took out a “cloth” as thin as a cicada’s wings, and covered the body with it.

As soon as the cloth fell on the body, it melted, and the body of the Snake King under it took on the appearance of the fake officiant. The fake officiant scrutinized it for a moment, then stepped forward to pinch together the body’s knife wound and use his fingertip to draw a few strokes on the body’s shoulder.

The knife wound disappeared, and marks from a wild beast’s teeth appeared on the body’s neck, so it seemed as if a beast had chewed off its head.

Then the fake officiant took out another cicada wing and draped it over himself. In the blink of an eye, he took on the Snake King’s appearance.

“Oh,” said Tai Sui, looking on, “so you aren’t just here for private revenge. You have quite the appetite, and you’re pretty daring.”

The fake officiant’s manner had become considerably more respectful. He introduced himself: “My name is Xu Rucheng. May I ask what your connection to me is, senior? How do you come to know my pet name from my hometown?”

Tai Sui didn’t answer for a long moment. He really did seem like an old tree, caught in a memory that was too old.

Only when Xu Rucheng thought that he had left the divine image did he hear the evil god’s voice in his ear: “I heard A-Hua say it. I

guessed it was you.”

Xu Rucheng abruptly raised his head.

Tai Sui softly said, “So A-Hua is dead?”

“How... how do you know her?”

“Oh, I saw her once.” The voice of the evil god in the reincarnation wood became low; it made you weary to listen to it. “I’ve slept too long. Apart from the ogre occasionally waking me up with his noise for a while, only you... only that ugly knotted bag you’re carrying has woken me up.”

Xu Rucheng took out the knotted bag. “Her mom secretly picked this up when those people sold her to the evil cultivator—A-Hua was a mortal. She never had any contact with an immortal sect. And she wasn’t... she wasn’t some kind of peerless beauty. Why do you remember her, senior?”

“I don’t remember anymore.” The evil god was silent for a while, then dully said, “I was always dreaming about her. I kept thinking that she’d asked me for something, and I hadn’t done it yet.”

Saying so, he yawned. His voice became fainter and fainter. “I suppose it might have been getting revenge for her. I slept badly whenever I dreamed of her. Now I’ve finally done it...”

“Wait, senior!” Xu Rucheng stepped forward and went to one knee before the divine image. “You said before, ‘Such a nice young woman—what was she thinking liking you?’... Senior, what did A-Hua say to you before she died? Senior?”

The divine image didn’t speak again. Xu Rucheng looked down. The wooden carving was the same, but strange, mysterious aura from before had disappeared. Now it was only a lump of wood.

“Senior?”

Xu Rucheng waited for a long time and tried hanging the knotted bag on the wooden carving again.

But this time, there was no response.

Dressed in snakeskin scales, he knelt on the floor, staring blankly into space for a while. Hearing voices in the secret passage, he thought that the evil cultivator’s companions were coming. He carefully put the lilac knotted bag away and gathered up all his focus to go deal with these people.

“As heaven wills it,” he thought, kneading the wound on his shoulders into the form of a knife wound, pulling it all the way to his neck—this way, he wouldn’t need to talk for a while and could avoid slipping up—then lay down on the ground and picked up the divine image.

The evil cultivators who charged in ran toward their “Snake King” with exclamations and carried him and the divine image away together.

Xu Rucheng pretended to be seriously injured. Late at night, when all the interlopers had left and Misty Willow, who was looking after the invalid, had let his mind wander, Xu Rucheng silently let out some bewildering scent. Misty Willow went down without a sound.

Xu Rucheng looked at him, then took a very small jade proximal from his mustard seed and wrote on it: “The Snake King is dead.”

After a moment, the writing on the proximal disappeared.

From the other end came an answer: “I have notified our other brothers. They will cooperate with you.”

Xu Rucheng let out a sigh of relief.

Then the writing on the proximal changed again: “The dead can rest peacefully now.”

Xu Rucheng stared blankly at this line of writing for a long time, his lips beginning to tremble faintly—Mr. Bai remembered why he had entered the Way.

The Latent Cultivation Temple had sent away its disciples and become increasingly quiet. It was an ideal place to cultivate without distractions.

After over five years, the bamboo and the trees in the repaired Qiu courtyard had grown back.

Straw children swept the fallen leaves in the courtyard. In the meditation chamber of the northern rooms, a pair of eyes quietly opened and looked at the Heavenly Question unfolding in front of them.

On the scroll was Bai Ling’s familiar handwriting: *Seventeen Li Town has been taken.*

CHAPTER 70 - Indignant Cicadas (4)

Zhou Ying responded: *Understood. I will set out shortly.*

When he had just sent this Heavenly Question, he heard a shriek from outside the window. The black cat had missed its footing on the courtyard wall and tumbled down.

Zhou Ying waved his sleeve. The wind from his sleeve flew out through the crack in the window and firmly kept the stupid cat upright.

The blue luan that had been teasing the cat flew off flapping its wings, leaving a rainbow behind its butt. The black cat ran inside, its fur bristling, furiously coming to lodge a complaint.

It had gotten old. For a cat, it was already very elderly. The fur around its eyes and next to its mouth had faded slightly, making its expression look considerably more solemn. Living in the Latent Cultivation Temple with its owner for five years, it had steeped in the abundant spiritual energy of the mountains and was still quite robust; it could perhaps live to nearly two decades. But even if it lived another thirty years, it still wouldn't make any progress. It was still dimwitted and full of fight. All the auspicious animals in the mountains liked to run over to annoy it when they were idle—especially that blue luan, which came every day, rain or shine, to tease the cat and yank its tail.

Zhou Ying was about to pick it up. He had reached out halfway when his gaze floated outside. He raised his hand and put a finger to his lips. "A guest is coming. Quiet down."

Having said this, he stood upright and went out to welcome the guest. Just as he opened the door, Princess Duanrui landed at the gate of the Qiu courtyard.

Zhou Ying saluted her politely. “Your Highness Duanrui.”

In terms of blood relationship, Princess Duanrui was his aunt... some unknown number of generations back, but Zhou Ying never called her “ancestor” the way other members of the Zhou family did; neither did he call her “shishu.” He spoke like an outsider who belonged to the same generation as her—he hadn’t properly joined the Xuanyin Sect.

Five years ago, the plot in the Impassable Sea had fallen through. Dozens of generations of the Zhou family had conspired for eight centuries, and all of it had failed just on the point of success. The great demon with its incomplete demonic soul had been scattered and suppressed once more by Xuanyin’s three elders working in concert, and the last set of sacrificial spiritual bones in the Impassable Sea had been recovered and returned into the hands of their owner.

But Great Wan hadn’t had a change of dynasty on account of these events; at present, the Zhou family still ruled.

For one thing, it was because Green Pool Peak was firmly standing watch in the Xuanyin Mountains; Princess Duanrui, a near-shed skin, could still hold up the Zhou clan. For another thing, when the matter of the Impassable Sea had taken place, the resentment of Great Wan’s people had accumulated to a certain degree and exploded, bringing all kinds of filth behind all the great families to the surface. Of the thirty-six peak masters, apart from a small number who, like Zhi Xiu, stood alone, the rest were all covered in dirt. Everyone had made fools of themselves; how could a crow have the face to call a pig black? They didn’t have the capacity to investigate the Zhou clan.

Anyway, after the demon seal had broken, the spirits of all those with a criminal brand on their spiritual image had shattered along

with their brands; not one survivor had been left for Xuanyin Mountain.

Zhou Kun had died in the backlash from the demon seal and taken along a whole card table of people with him. The old fellow certainly wouldn't be lonely on the road to the underworld—the number of those who had died in the revolt alone was uncountable, and the immortal mountains had been unable to suppress the upheaval on every level of society. After the fact, to calm the people's anger, they had been forced to hold their noses and put the necks of their own worthless juniors under the knife, knocking down another big batch.

In the last five years, there had been changes in personnel at all the chambers of commerce. Authority over the Water Transport Office, which had nearly become the personal property of a few individuals, had reverted to the court. The Southern Factory Laws, the Land Laws, and other sets of laws and tax reforms had been put into effect immediately and resolutely—these had all been ready-made; they were all government decrees that Emperor Taiming had wanted to put into effect before his death but which in the end had come to nothing. The drafts had been reworked several times and were already quite perfect. They could simply be copied out with minor revisions.

The villagers who had lost their land might not be able to take it back, but at any rate their ancestral tombs had been safeguarded; the factory workers might not all be appropriately housed, but for the moment no one would dare to offer up human lives because they were too stingy to offer up spiritual stones; minor merchants naturally still didn't have any say, but at least they could manage to get a seat.

Emperor Taiming had exposed the wealthy families' coverup by force, so no one could hold the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon back from running everywhere.

In fact, looking back on it, when Emperor Taiming had used the fire in the southern outskirts as an excuse to send his troublemaking third son out of Jinping to set fires everywhere, it seemed that he had predicted everything and had been acting with intent.

Why else, on that night that lightning had flashed and thunder had rumbled in Jinping, would Zhou Kun, when everything was going just fine, have laid out all of the Zhou family's secrets to the Marquis of Yongning?

He had been the last of the Zhou family's demon subduers to go mad, and he had been the one bound to reveal it all.

Had he already dimly predicted that the Zhou family's fate was to fail?

Back then, had he no longer cared about whether the great demon in the East Sea could get justice for the Zhou family? Had he only wanted to deal with Great Wan's chronic illness?

Of the different expressions on his face in death, which had been true?

In the fifth year of Taiming, Zhou Kun had placed his own son's spiritual bones on the altar and stolen a heart demon seed; even now, it was unknown where he had used it. Not long after, there had been internal strife in Xuanyin Mountain. One of the four elders had gone into seclusion, and the spiritual bones of one ascended spirit peak master had been removed. Emperor Taiming, still young at the time, had taken the opportunity to unleash a bloody wind upon the court.

Twenty-four years later, he had seen off his full blood sister, pierced the heavens, carried off everyone who had been involved, and forced Xuanyin to come out and clean up the aftermath. His whole

life seemed to have been nothing but failed attempts, but after his death, everything succeeded.

This tyrant had held the throne for twenty-nine years, and he seemed to have spent the whole time struggling, searching for an opportunity to stab through the canopy above his head.

But a person's death is like a fire being extinguished. What the truth was, no one would know now. His accomplices were departed or dead, he hadn't been close to his wife, and he'd had no trusted aides. There was only the Marquis of Yongning, who drank a cup of bitter wine with him every year—the two old men didn't talk; the words were all held in the wine: the Marquis of Yongning wanted him to hurry up and die.

No one on earth had heard Zhou Kun's inner thoughts, so whether he had been a repentant sage or a sinful lunatic, it would be up to the ghosts in the underworld to judge.

In these five years, while Great Wan had experienced internal strife, its vigor had increased considerably. The better part of the six ministries and nine officials had been replaced with civilian officials who had done well in the imperial examination. The new emperor was a generous and benevolent sovereign who carried on the successes of his predecessors. He listened to counsel and was himself industrious, nothing like his old lunatic of a father—the throne had gone to the Crown Prince Zhou Huan.

When the three high elders had brought back Zhou Ying's spiritual bones, the Dignitary of Rites Zhao Yin had personally met Zhou Ying in Xuanyin Mountain's main hall and given him two choices: if he wanted to succeed to the throne, he would need to seal his meridians after opening his spiritual eyes and taking back his spiritual bones, not use spiritual energy for the rest of his life; the body of a half-immortal would only let him survive. He would from then on live out the lifespan of a mortal. Or he could cast off the

mortal world and enter the immortal sect, have no more association with the court; only there was no precedent for spiritual bones being restored over twenty years after being removed. No one knew how far he could be able to go along the immortal path in the future.

Having heard this, Zhou Ying didn't choose either option. He only very calmly said: "I was trapped at the bottom of the Impassable Sea for twenty years. My temperament is paranoid and narrow-minded. I certainly couldn't be a generous and benevolent wise sovereign. Moreover, the human heart is contrary. If I agree now to seal my meridians for the sake of stabilizing the nation, in a hundred years my ambition might swell. I can't guarantee that I wouldn't go looking for an unorthodox method to extend my lifespan. If the same thing that took place eight hundred years ago should happen again, what will you do? Does the immortal sect have so much confidence in me?"

Of course the immortal sect didn't have confidence in him, but the high elder's Way of the Heart was watching over him, forcing him to practice what he preached; he had promised Xi Ping to let Prince Zhuang choose, so he had to hold his nose and undertake this risk, then think of a way to strictly oversee the outcome.

"As for the inner sect," Zhou Ying said with a smile, "Her Highness Duanrui has natural spiritual bones, and she entered the way of clarity and unfeeling. Apart from spiritual bones, I also have an unusual spiritual sense. What plans does the sect have for me? High elder, no one who had been held at the bottom of the Impassable Sea since birth would want to be restrained again."

Zhao Yin asked, "You want to join an outer sect? Which one?"

"None of them would have me," Zhou Ying said. "I've heard that in the present chaos, many of the common people have been led astray by evil cultivators and eaten spiritual stones to become

amateur evil cultivators. What is the immortal sect planning to do about these people?”

This instigator actually had the face to ask!

His question in fact shut Zhao Yin up.

According to Great Wan’s previous laws, those people must all be brought down as evil cultivators.

But the law does not punish the majority. There had truly been too many people involved this time. And these people who had entered the evil way by eating spiritual stones and had led the rebellion were seen as heroes by the common people. If they were all treated as evil cultivators, then the real evil cultivators waiting to take advantage of the situation would happily take them, and the people’s resentment, just barely suppressed, would once again erupt.

It was even more impossible to accept them. Where would they go?

Xuanyin’s inner sect was so strict that even imperial kinsmen had to rack their brains to get invited. Heaven’s Design Pavilion had extremely high requirements for the endowments of its recruits; it wasn’t unusual for the blue-clothed half-immortals to go above their grade and kill established foundation cultivators. In the past, Liang Chen and the others had become mine supervisors precisely because their abilities had been inadequate. Before, all these cultivators no one knew what to do with had been placed in the southern mines, and the upshot was that an event of such scope had taken place there, so Xuanyin Mountain no longer dared to let outer sect cultivators muddle around blindly. They had simply dissolved the mining office, and in the future the thirty-six peak masters would take turns sending specially chosen people to oversee the mines.

Zhou Ying said, calm and composed, “I was indirectly responsible for these people taking the wrong path, and like me, they have nowhere to go. Isn’t that predestination? If the sect has faith in me, you can entrust making arrangements for them to me.”

In this way, today’s Kaiming Cultivators had come to be.

Xuanyin promulgated a new law. Cultivators from among the common people needed to register and place Xuanyin’s spiritual seal on themselves, becoming Kaiming Cultivators. They would then no longer be considered evil cultivators. After affixing the spiritual seal, the immortal mountain would be able to strictly monitor and control every spell the Kaiming Cultivators used. If they committed a crime, even if they ran to the ends of the earth, Xuanyin Mountain’s discipline hall would be able to break apart their spirit with a single talisman.

These legally operating Kaiming Cultivators were dispatched to various regions according to their registered permanent residence to perform tasks that mortals would be incapable of on assignment from the court—repairing inscriptions, maintaining the arrays on Moon Plated Gold gold smelters, looking after medicinal herb fields, rescuing people if they came upon natural disasters, and so on. According to their labor, they could obtain between one and two jade stamp stones every month.

Apart from this, Kaiming Cultivators were also cultivators. In a real emergency, they had the means to “bring their complaints to higher authorities.” If there were once again crafty sycophants who defied natural and moral law using the immortal sect’s authority, they would have to have some qualms on account of the Kaiming Cultivators; they amounted to protection talismans for their hometowns.

In this way, any “evil cultivators” within Great Wan who weren’t willing to register had become true evil cultivators. They increasingly

had nowhere to shelter, because as soon as the Kaiming Cultivators got involved with evil cultivators, they would be noticed by the spiritual seal and punished as “evil cultivators” — after thousands of years, the immortal sect had at last condescended to give common cultivators a narrow and barren patch of open ground on which to gain a foothold. It was too precious. No Kaiming Cultivator could stand to put their own and their family's safety at risk. Finally they became the most energetic in opposing evil cultivators, lest they be taken for one of them.

Blind suppression would only arouse rebellion. Categorization was the correct principle.

It was no wonder that Prince Zhuang Zhou Ying was the person Green Pool Peak had settled on to inherit the throne at the outset. He stayed in the Latent Cultivation Temple looking after his spiritual bones and showed no signs of being busy. Relying solely on remote control via the Heavenly Question, he arranged the common cultivators within Great Wan into a perfect order. Countless evil cultivators who had wildly expanded their influence in the conflict lost any place to shelter overnight. Within a year or two, they were practically torn up by the roots by Heaven's Design Pavilion. Any who could run had run.

Therefore, apart from the “Kaiming Cultivators,” Zhou Ying had also singlehandedly established the Luwu⁵⁰ — they mixed in among evil cultivators who had fled abroad and quietly seeped into the surroundings. They could conceal themselves much more easily than Heaven's Design Pavilion's blue-clothesers, who basically couldn't leave the country unless they were in disguise.

Zhou Ying never did anything in a hurry. Only after living in the Latent Cultivation Temple for nearly two years, when his body without its spiritual bones had nearly failed, did he at last unhurriedly open his spiritual eyes. Princess Duanrui had come

down in person to oversee his fusion with his spiritual bones. It was so steady that not even the newly grown buds outside the window trembled. All of the Latent Cultivation Temple's stewards had been overwhelmed with gratitude—they had been on tenterhooks for two years, all of them ready to repair the Qiu courtyard once more.

Zhou Ying had been in poor health since birth. He needed to adjust to merging with his spiritual bones. Duanrui had placed three hundred bone nails in his body and removed a few periodically.

After five years, Princess Duanrui inspected his spiritual bones and at last removed all the bone nails. "Your spiritual bones have been restored. You can leave the mountain."

"Thank you, Your Highness," said Zhou Ying. "I'm grateful to you for personally overseeing this all these years."

"No need. I was involved in this to begin with," Duanrui said. "The Zhou family's business has nothing to do with the younger generations. Go and look after yourself. The immortal sect will handle affairs justly."

"Yes, Your Highness." Zhou Ying humbly accepted her instruction. Seeing that Duanrui was about to go, he called her back. "Before I leave the mountain, would it be possible to see Shiyong on my grandmother's behalf? He hasn't written home in five years. The old lady is very concerned."

Princess Duanrui shook her head. "I passed by Flying Jade Peak on my way here. The mountain is still sealed."

Hearing this, Zhou Ying lowered his eyes, then quickly stood up as though nothing were the matter and politely saw her out. Smiling, he said, "Indeed? That is unfortunate."

Just then, out of the corner of her eye, Princess Duanrui glimpsed a wooden carving of a karma beast standing on the windowsill.

Zhou Ying followed her gaze and said, “When Shiyong was at the Latent Cultivation Temple before, he thoughtlessly asked for that to play with. I believe Your Highness made it?”

“Did Steward Su tell you that?” said Princess Duanrui.

Zhou Ying shook his head. “No, I can sense that its aura is similar to Your Highness’s.”

Princess Duanrui’s steps paused. She turned her head and looked at Zhou Ying. In a rare occurrence, she voluntarily asked, “How does all that you see appear to your eyes?”

“Well, this paramount spiritual sense,” Zhou Ying said, raising his eyebrows and shaking his head, “I was born with it. I have nothing to compare it with. There’s nothing unusual about it. I suppose my eyes and ears are a little keener than an ordinary half-immortal’s. If there is a very strong karmic bond—for example, if this little figurine created by Your Highness is placed beside you—I can sense it a bit.”

In his eyes, the adorable karma beast figurine and the unapproachable Princess Duanrui both had a layer of clear haze over them.

Without so much as blinking, Zhou Ying said, smiling, “You both share the same just and stainless air.”

Duanrui never listened to this sort of flattery, which was like a New Year’s greeting. She only waved a hand and instructed him, “An ordinary cultivator’s spiritual sense corresponds to their cultivation level. Only you are different. The senses cause turmoil in the human heart. Too strong a spiritual sense is not necessarily a good thing.

Though you have taken back your spiritual bones and so will not die young, you are still frailer than others of the same cultivation level. You must continue to take preservative elixirs.”

Zhou Ying nodded in agreement and watched her retreating figure as she left, his smile steady and unremarkable. He thought, “A near-shed skin, yet her Way of the Heart is exposed.”

The princess was always in seclusion. The heart demon seed that Zhou Kun had stolen twenty-nine years ago couldn't have been planted on her. But it was clear that even she had been impacted. Evidently the demonic seed had grown in the immortal mountains.

He gently tapped the joints of his fingers, calculating his plans like the Dignitary of Fate's lineage observing celestial phenomena. There was no rush. The life of a half-immortal was long.

The black cat came over, wanting to rub against his legs. When it looked up and saw his smile, for some reason, it backed up a step.

Prince Zhuang looked down and met the cat's eyes. The smile that seemed to be carved onto his face disappeared.

Fourteen years ago, when he had struggled free of the Impassable Sea, narrowly escaping with his life, his physical body had been gravely ill in the mortal world. There had been a little scoundrel who, judging others against himself, had thought that he was heartbroken over the death of an old dog and had picked this little thing up from somewhere and snuck it into his study.

The kitten had been scared to death and had peed on a set of the Four Books annotated by a great scholar of a previous reign... completely ruining them.

“I commit you to Elder Su's care.” Zhou Ying leaned down and picked up the cat. “You can live some years longer in the immortal

mountains. I no longer need your company.”

A fourteen-year-old cat could more or less understand a bit of human speech. It opened its eyes wide and looked at him.

Zhou Ying flicked out a talisman, and a few straw children came inside in answer to the summons and pack for him.

“Don’t touch that.” When a straw child picked up a brocade box on the table, it was knocked open by a talisman. Zhou Ying coldly said, “Don’t touch anything with a brocade carp on it. Pack up the other things.”

Inside the brocade box whose lid had been opened was a stack of contamination avoiding talismans.

The technique was clumsy. It was evident at a glance that these talismans weren’t very expert. They had been meticulously preserved. None of the spiritual energy had drained away. They were identical to what they had been five years ago... in the eyes of an ordinary person.

But in the eyes of someone with a paramount spiritual sense, that person’s aura had vanished long ago from the contamination avoiding talismans.

CHAPTER 71 - Indignant Cicadas (5)

There was a Kaiming Department in every region of Great Wan. Because its personnel were so numerous and had such a jumble of trivialities to deal with, the number of Kaiming Departments was more than three times that of Heaven's Design Pavilion branches.

The Kaiming Department of Jinping belonged to the south of the city. Currently, in the courtyard, a small batch of Kaiming Cultivators preparing to assist with water transport were clumsily learning to draw water dragon talismans.

These Kaiming Cultivators were dressed very tidily—the tidiness was overly solemn, each one looking ready to take part in some grand ceremony paying homage to heaven and earth. Dressed in so many layers, toiling away at talismans on a sweltering summer day, they were soon covered in sweat.

But no one ridiculed them. When the Kaiming Department's registrar came in to take a look, he only quietly ordered more ice brought to the courtyard.

The majority of people permanently stationed at the Kaiming Department were also Kaiming Cultivators. Having just washed the mud off themselves, they hadn't yet forgotten their origins. Naturally they wouldn't ridicule these brothers who came from the same background as them... and even if they did forget their roots after a few years, they probably still wouldn't dare; His Highness Prince Zhuang, who watched over them, was no Buddha incarnate.

When the Kaiming Departments had just been established, there had been few people and many things to do. They hadn't had enough manpower. Xuanyin Mountain had just dissolved the Mining Office, and they transferred the outer sect cultivators who had originally been at the southern mines to the Kaiming Departments.

The Zhou family brother and sister had muddied the waters in the southern mines. Those who managed to get out intact were practically all children of the wealthy, proper products of the Latent Cultivation Temple who had opened their spiritual eyes but hadn't been chosen by Heaven's Design Pavilion. These people weren't humiliated by their own worthlessness; instead, they were unhappy about being forced to associate with these lower class bumpkins. In the southern mines, at least there had been Princess Anyang to keep them at bay. After coming to the Kaiming Department, they stuck their nostrils up high enough to grow several rows of sunflowers in them.

This bunch of sunflower pots had never had anything to do with established foundations in their lives, and they weren't planning on forging ahead in their cultivation. They were extravagant and pampered, drinking snow wine like water. The more reason-clouding fragrant jade miasma they imbibed, the more disgraceful their conduct became. When the Kaiming Department had just opened, a few "senior cultivators" got drunk and took advantage of a female Kaiming Cultivator, driving her to commit suicide by swallowing a talisman. Grieving and furious, her companions and fellow countrymen had demanded justice. No one had acknowledged it; the superior "seniors" had closed ranks. The local Kaiming Department had been at the end of their rope. All they could do was report it to their superior while pursuing a futile investigation.

The upshot was that as soon as they reported it, that very night, the southern mine cultivators involved had been strung up in the courtyard like salted fish, all their meridians yanked out. At the feet of the corpses, a karma mirror had been placed upright, their crimes vividly carved into it. On the back of the mirror was stuck a piece of paper, laying out which of Great Wan's laws these people had violated.

When it came to business, His Highness Prince Zhuang was attentive to detail, working slowly but surely, never in a hurry; when it came to killing people, he was swift and decisive. Having killed them with his left hand, with his right, he sent a Heavenly Question to Xuanyin's main hall with polite notifications inviting the families to come collect the bodies.

The civil strife had just ended. The thirty-six peak masters had to keep their tails between their legs and behave. The families' people in the inner sect collectively asked for forgiveness in front of the Dignitary of Rites High Elder and didn't dare to make the least bit of a stink.

Interestingly enough, the four sets of laws in Great Wan that Liang Chen had once mentioned had been joined into one under the half-demon Bai Ling's knife.

The "instructor" who was teaching them to draw talismans watched more ice being brought and only then realized something. He didn't use talisman paper; right in midair, he drew a very little known talisman and gently tapped it with his finger. In the yard filled with the screams of cicadas, a cool breeze rose, immediately blowing away the fierce summer heat of Jinping.

All the sweat-covered students collectively breathed a sigh of relief. The Kaiming Department's registrar saluted the instructor repeatedly —except in a place that was especially full of spiritual energy, an open-eyed cultivator needed to burn spiritual stones to draw talismans. To tell it plain, just now, the instructor had pulled out his purse and treated them all to a cool breeze. Cultivators who came from rich families never cared about this; after all, they even dared to go to the Phoenix's Perch Pavilion for an ordinary meal. But the Kaiming Cultivators had to scrimp and save. Apart from when they used "public funds" for official assignments, no one could stand to casually draw talismans for private use. They were very much obliged.

The instructor waved a hand. He looked like a young man, dressed in the sapphire blue robes of Heaven's Design Pavilion; these looked like the winter uniform, too. He was also wearing gloves. Only his face was exposed. He must have had some kind of magic power; he actually wasn't hot at all.

He had been requested by the Kaiming Department from Heaven's Design Pavilion. All the people in Great Wan who were best at talisman-drawing were in Heaven's Design Pavilion.

When the instructor had first arrived, the Kaiming Department had been sick with nerves—this person wasn't easygoing at all. He had a pair of black eyes twice as large as normal, his whole appearance a stark contrast between black and white. When that cold gaze came your way, even the most gifted conversationalist couldn't strike up a casual chat. He never went to social events. Since coming, never mind feasting, he had never even touched a drop of tea. He spoke as little as a mute. When others offered lengthy greetings, at best he would nod. When teaching talisman drawing, if he could demonstrate, he wouldn't speak; if one word could express his meaning, he would never use a full sentence.

Anyway, this was a blue-clothed half-immortal from the head office, said to have worked with General Commander Pang; he had to be far more expert than those people from the mines, able even to enter the imperial palace; could he be an ancestor?

But as time went on, everyone found that this instructor was unusually easy to get along with.

It seemed that he just wasn't very used to opening his mouth to speak. He wasn't ignoring anyone. When people flattered him, he didn't smile, and when country bumpkins cracked jokes, he also didn't react. Many of the Kaiming Cultivators were illiterate. They had an extremely hard time when they started learning to draw

talismans. Sometimes the registrar would be watching from the sidelines, wiping away sweat, but the instructor had never once lost his patience. If a person couldn't learn something after being taught a hundred times, he would demonstrate it just the same for the hundred and first time, his manner as natural as though this were just right and proper, not forced at all.

It took three days to get through teaching the water dragon talisman; the registrar breathed a big sigh of relief and was just about to see the instructor out when one of his subordinates ran in breathlessly. "Registrar! Big news! Mister... Mister..."

The registrar frowned. "What big news? Stop panting."

"M-m-mister Bai! Mr. Bai is here!"

Hardly had he finished speaking than a person wearing a bamboo hat walked in. All the Kaiming Department's veteran stewards instantly quieted down and stood up in unison. The students didn't know what great personage had come. They hurriedly stood as well, so nervous they didn't know what to do with their hands.

Then the department head of Jinping's Kaiming Department, having also received word, came trotting out to meet him. "Mr. Bai!"

Only the senior figures in the Kaiming Department had seen Mr. Bai, who served His Highness Prince Zhuang. After the Kaiming Department had gotten on the right track, he had gone to the Luwu, becoming increasingly mysterious.

The students, not daring to breathe too loudly, carefully began to size up this founder of the Kaiming Department. They saw that he appeared to be in his twenties or thirties, with a gaunt figure, extremely agile. Under the bamboo hat was a face that seemed to have been chiseled with a hatchet.

“No need to muster the troops, I’m not here on official business. I’ve just returned to Jinping and have come in my lord’s stead to pay a visit to a young relative of his.” Mr. Bai casually exchanged greetings with the department head, then familiarly raised a hand and greeted the blue-clothed instructor: “Xi Yue.”

The department head was startled. “What, Instructor Xi is..”

Mr. Bai said, smiling, “Part of the Marquis of Yongning’s family.”

Instructor Xi—Xi Yue—saw him, and a slight smile at last appeared on his always indifferent face. He quickly walked over and saluted the department head to take his leave.

Mr. Bai lightly slapped him on the back and said in exasperation, “Talk.”

Only then did Xi Yue speak: “Department head, I’m going to step out.”

This was the department head’s first time hearing him say such a long sentence. He was so overwhelmed with flattery that he began to stutter. “Oh, oh, good, t-take care, instructor.”

Xi Yue followed Mr. Bai out of the Kaiming Department and at once impatiently made a series of rapid hand gestures.

Mr. Bai said, “Yes, my lord has left the mountain... but Flying Jade Peak is still sealed. He didn’t see the Viscount.”

Xi Yue stared blankly. The light in his eye faded.

Five years ago, that scoundrel Xi Ping had abandoned him in the southern mines and broken the dragon-taming chain. He’d had no alternative but to follow Pang Jian. It was General Commander Pang who had personally altered his core array. From then on, he

had been able to direct spiritual energy like an open-eyed cultivator. With this foundation, Xi Yue had taken care of the rest of the arrays himself. He remembered everything he saw and had scarfed down the whole pile of books General Zhi had given them when they had left the mountain; he learned arrays by analogy. Pang Jian had valued his talents and covered up his half-puppet identity for him. When they returned to Jinping, he had stayed with Heaven's Design Pavilion.

In the last five years, Xi Yue had reworked his puppet body. He looked older and more human. But while he could speak, he was still used to using hand signs most of the time.

After being silent for a while, Xi Yue's sign language continued, slower: *I know. The General Commander just wrote a letter to ask Immortal Lin Zhaoli. Immortal Lin also said that Flying Jade Peak was still sealed...but the old lady's birthday is coming up.*

Mr. Bai sighed. "There's still nothing to be done about it. There will be time later."

Xi Yue anxiously signed, *This year is different.*

The old lady was turning eighty this year, a full decade birthday. How many full decade birthdays could a mortal have?

Mr. Bai said, "The old lady will live to a ripe old age. There'll be another decade. Open-eyed cultivators don't remain in seclusion longer than a decade. Whatever happens, the Viscount will return then."

Xi Yue lowered his head desolately. *Then it's good that His Highness has come back...*

"My lord isn't returning to Jinping."

Xi Yue stared.

“Oh, the Luwu have some business.” Mr. Bai paused, his smile becoming somewhat forced. “Wait... wait until your Viscount leaves the mountain, and maybe then my lord will find some time to come. I’ll ask you to continue looking after the Marquis Manor. Take this back with you.”

Saying so, Mr. Bai took out a mustard seed and gave it to Xi Yue. “For the old lady’s birthday feast, the birthday present from Prince Zhuang Manor has been prepared by me according to specifications. In here is the present my lord picked out himself. I am a half-demon, and it is unsuitable for me to call at people’s homes on auspicious days, so I won’t be going. I’ll wish the old lady a happy birthday ahead of time. May her happiness be as boundless as the eastern seas, may she live as long as the mountains, and may her most prosperous days lie ahead of her.”

All Xi Yue could do was force a smile. Mr. Bai patted him on the shoulder, exchanged a few more sentences with him like a big brother, then turned into a piece of paper and floated away on the wind.

Xi Yue clutched the mustard seed and sighed soundlessly. Suddenly, he noticed something. When he turned his head, he saw that Pang Jian had landed behind him undetectably.

“There’s nothing wrong,” Pang Jian said. “That half-demon Bai Ling must have passed the established foundation barrier recently. As soon as he arrived, the Azure Dragon Towers became nervous. I went out to have a look—what, I heard Zhou Ying has left the mountains?”

Xi Yue nodded.

“My god, that demonic star. My eyelids will be twitching for a month.” Pang Jian rubbed the center of his brow and said with a sigh, “The Luwu has been getting up to something in the north these last few days. Yuzhou’s Heaven’s Design Pavilion branch reports that they’ve sent at least another four teams across the Xia River... It makes it seem like we at Heaven’s Design Pavilion have been pretty incompetent all these years. No wonder the immortal sect actually dares to use him. I hope it won’t blow up in their faces.”

Xi Yue frowned.

“Oh, all right, I’ll stop.” Pang Jian raised a hand. “Bai Ling gave you a present for Old Madam Xi, right? Run along. On the day of the birthday feast, I’ll come by to ask for a drink.”

After sending off Xi Yue, Pang Jian narrowed his eyes and turned his head to look north. He saw a white figure flash in midair and nod in greeting toward him from afar.

Pang Jian cupped his hand and watched Bai Ling rise and fall a few times, then disappear. He must have gone back to Prince Zhuang Manor to attend to some business. The cynical expression on Pang Jian’s face dimmed.

He had heard practically everything that Bai Ling had said to Xi Yue just now.

That brat Zhou Ying hadn’t stepped out of the Latent Cultivation Temple for five years, and it hadn’t kept him from turning everything upside down. What could require his personal attention? Were the Luwu planning to assassinate the sect leader of Dongheng’s Sanyue Sect or something?

He just didn’t want to return to Jinping.

It would seem that perhaps Xi Shiyong really was...

Back then, even General Zhi had nearly folded in the East Sea. With the situation so perilous, it was probably only that stubborn half-puppet who was foolishly still waiting for Xi Ping to come back.

Pang Jian thought, When the old lady at Marquis Manor's lifespan comes to an end, I'll have to find that half-puppet some more to do.

Just then, he sensed something. He took Heaven's Design Pavilion's token out. Seeing that the message once again came from the Yuzhou Heaven's Design Pavilion branch by the Wan-Chu border, his head instantly swelled.

He touched the messaging token and saw that Yuzhou's Heaven's Design Pavilion had reported: *Xiang Zhao confirmed dead, killed by Qiu Sha.*

Pang Jian's expression became grim.

Western Chu was unlike Xuanyin. Chu was ruled by the Xiang family, and the capital of Dongheng was built at the feet of the immortal mountains. The Sanyue state sect was dominated by the imperial family. Theirs was the final word.

Though they were both cultivation sects, Sanyue was far more relaxed than Xuanyin. Sanyue didn't have such a complicated power structure, and naturally it also didn't have so many regulations and taboos.

At Xuanyin, even Zhi Xiu had to go to the Principal Peak to request a token if he wanted to leave the mountains. No established foundation cultivator or above in the inner sect was permitted to go beyond the Latent Cultivation Temple unlawfully. The thirty-six peak masters all watched each other, worried that someone would give cause for gossip. At Sanyue, no one cared. Never mind established

foundations, in recent years they'd had an ascended spirit master leave the mountains to fool around; he'd gotten his passions aroused and disastrously gotten married and fathered a child. The child of an ascended spirit cultivator wouldn't be a mortal baby to begin with; the mother and child dying together was the best outcome. The ascended spirit himself had had his Way of the Heart damaged over this and had passed away not long after, becoming the laughing stock of all four nations.

Sanyue was lax toward its own disciples and sloppy and incompetent when it came to dealing with outsiders. From top to bottom, the whole nation was easygoing. The spiritual stone black market in Western Chu was half public, with quite a few influential figures mixed in. Those with significant family property even dared to sit on a hill of spiritual stones and open their spiritual eyes without authorization—anyway, if they found someone to make an exception after the fact and greased a few palms in the immortal mountains, Sanyue would turn a blind eye.

The other three nations all thought that if they went on messing around like this, something was sure to go wrong sooner or later. But as long as Dongheng's Dragon Vein didn't break and Sanyue's great array remained intact, apart from squabbling from a distance, there was nothing the other nations could do about Chu's domestic affairs.

And then something had indeed gone wrong.

Two years ago, Sanyue's various black markets, which seemed to be raising venomous insects, had finally turned out a big one—an ascended spirit evil cultivator had surfaced. Not a shoddy product using a demonic god's spiritual bones to boost his cultivation level like Liang Chen—this was a genuine article ascended spirit. This person called herself Qiu Sha. The day she had reached the ascended spirit stage had been the fifteenth day of the eighth

month, and all four nations had stood by watching as the mammoth full moon was dyed blood red.⁵¹

This unprecedented evildoer made all the great sects nervous. If not for her, Zhou Ying's Luwu wouldn't have been able to obtain approval from the immortal mountains so easily.

Sanyue had thoroughly humiliated themselves. Going all out in pursuit of her for two years, they hadn't caught a single hair off the great evildoer's head.

At the end of last year, Dongheng's Sanyue's greatest sword cultivator Xiang Zhao had personally left the mountains but later had mysteriously disappeared. With there being no word about such a great ascended spirit cultivator, it wasn't long before unusual phenomena began to occur—Dongheng's mountain range had an earthquake. At the time, people said it was because Xiang Zhao had passed away.

But this was Xiang Zhao... Before General Zhi had reached the ascended spirit stage, Xiang Zhao had been called the Sword of the South. And he had died at the hands of an evil cultivator who had reached the ascended spirit stage only two years ago!

Meanwhile, Xu Rucheng, who had just put down roots in Seventeen Li Town, also received the word.

Xu Rucheng responded to his colleague with "received," organized his words, then wrote: *In the Snake King's secret underground labyrinth, there is a divine image carved from reincarnation wood that calls himself Tai Sui. He is extremely strange. He can speak with people. It was he who brought about the death of the Snake King.*

Xu Rucheng paused, then added: *Everything he says is a mixture of truth and falsehood.*

This Tai Sui now said that he was an old tree who had cultivated a spirit, and then he said that he had seen A-Hua. If he had seen A-Hua, then he ought to have been a tree in Yuzhou. How could a tree from Yuzhou speak upper class Jinping official language? And according to what this Tai Sui had said, he had always been fast asleep inside the divine image, only occasionally woken by the Snake King's offerings. So where had he learned all that authentic mixed language?

The first time Tai Sui had spoken to him, though he had been foul-mouthed and mixed up his accents, he had in all been rather normal, reasonable and able to communicate, and he had saved Xu Rucheng's life. Afterward, he had stopped speaking, and in order to figure out what was going on, imitating the Snake King, he had burned incense and worshipped in front of the divine image every day—Wild Fox Country's Great Market was just coming up, a magnificent gathering that took place once a year. All kinds of evil cultivators would come here to trade. Reasonably speaking, the real Snake King would also have been incessantly burning incense and praying for protection.

Hard work pays off. One night, his "worship" really did wake Tai Sui up.

But this time, this Tai Sui was for some reason extremely irritable. He only spat out the word "scram" at him and viciously left the wood.

Xu Rucheng considered, then added a sentence: *His conduct is eccentric and unreasonable, his moods fickle.*

But before he had stopped writing, all the writing vanished as if carried off by a great wind, not leaving a single word behind.

Tai Sui's voice, for some reason somewhat hoarse, sounded in his ear: "Who are you spilling the beans to?"

CHAPTER 72 - Indignant Cicadas (6)

This was just as if he had told someone “Here there be ghosts,” and when that person had turned away, a ghost’s face had popped up and asked him “Where?”

Had Xu Rucheng not been young and vigorous, his heart might have split open on the spot.

All the blood in his body whizzed toward his limbs, his liver went cold, and his pupils dilated enormously. Then he heard Tai Sui say in an extremely weary voice, “You can’t write the name of a person with a higher level of cultivation than you on an open-eyed grade immortal tool, hasn’t anyone taught you?”

Of course Xu Rucheng knew that, but while the Luwu’s communication tools were open-eyed grade, having undergone special modification through inscriptions, while they perhaps couldn’t match up to a Heavenly Question, as long as you didn’t get too close, you could even mention the full name of an ascended spirit cultivator directly. But this Tai Sui could easily spy on it and could even simply erase what he had written without saying a word. What must his cultivation level be?

Xu Rucheng had never heard of such a thing.

Besides, he had been burning incense and calling to him every day, and Tai Sui had barely given him a response—it wasn’t that he had heard him and ignored him, it was that the reincarnation wood divine image had seemed to be dead, as if his consciousness wasn’t there at all. That was why Xu Rucheng had let down his guard.

But there seemed to be something wrong with this evil god. He wouldn’t come if you called him to his face, but if you discussed him

behind his back, he would show up at once!

Moreover, the Tai Sui divine image wasn't even next to him now. What was the evil god attaching himself to in order to speak? Was he omnipresent?

If this kind of unfathomable entity had found the Snake King unpleasant, why hadn't he gotten rid of that evil cultivator long ago?

"I had no intention to offend," Xu Rucheng answered cautiously. "I am merely inexperienced and lacking in knowledge. I have many doubts. After speaking to me that day, you vanished from sight, senior, and I only wanted to ask my companions for advice because I truly couldn't think of anything else to do. I didn't know I would violate your taboo, senior. Forgive me. After this, I certainly won't mention your name to others without permission."

Tai Sui didn't speak for a long time. Then he gave a weary "sure." "If you do say something, it won't matter. You won't be able to say it aloud, anyway."

Xu Rucheng thought: What does he mean I won't be able to say it aloud?

How could this Tai Sui also simply keep him silent?

But he acutely sensed that he wasn't angry. The sluggishness and indifference in his voice didn't sound like bad temper on being woken up; rather, there was a sense of exhausted weakness.

Tai Sui was once again silent for a long time. Then his voice became a little clearer than before. "What do you mean my moods are fickle? That wasn't aimed at you, last time."

Then who had it been aimed at? Who else was there?

Xu Rucheng was just about to ask when his spiritual sense was suddenly touched. He heard faint footsteps and had to restrain himself for the moment. After a while, Misty Willow quietly opened the door and came in. As soon as he appeared in the doorway, he gave a very flirtatious smile, making Xu Rucheng break out in gooseflesh.

Raising his voice a little high, Misty Willow gently said, “Immortal, it’s time to change your medicine.”

“Put it there.” Xu Rucheng felt awkward as soon as he saw him. He put on the Snake King’s voice, which sounded like a broken gong, and coldly said, “Leave.”

Misty Willow’s smile froze. He didn’t dare to say anything else. All he could do was give a sinuous bow and shuffle out.

Xu Rucheng was watching Misty Willow in bewilderment: were there that many bendy places in a human body?

Then he heard Tai Sui unexpectedly say, “He’s already noticed that you’re an imposter.”

Xu Rucheng: “...”

His heart stuttered. He was afraid that sooner or later this evil god who wouldn’t be content unless he was saying something shocking would scare him to death.

Xu Rucheng automatically blurted out, “Stop.”

Misty Willow stiffly stopped in his tracks. Xu Rucheng’s gaze became grave. He saw that this man’s legs were shaking so hard that it was visible through his robes—he was afraid.

Tai Sui continued: “Think about it yourself, how many days have you been here? All this time, you haven’t used him or hit him, and you haven’t passed him on to anyone else. Is that normal behavior?”

Xu Rucheng thought to himself, What kind of people are these that they’d think not being humiliated was abnormal? Then he lowered his voice and asked, “Why are you shaking?”

It was all right before he asked. As soon as he spoke, Misty Willow’s legs went weak, and he fell straight to his knees. His knees hit the stone floor so heavily that Xu Rucheng also became alarmed. Xu Rucheng was afraid he would cry out and quickly sealed his mouth with a talisman and tied him up. Misty Willow’s eyes rolled up, and he lost consciousness.

Tai Sui said, “The Snake King’s evil cultivator confidants will also be thinking it’s unusual that there haven’t been any wounds on Misty Willow for several days. If you have other companions, I think you’d be better off taking care of all those evil cultivators at once.”

Xu Rucheng went blank. When Tai Sui said the words “evil cultivators,” his tone was so natural he simply seemed like one of Heaven’s Design Pavilion’s walkers in the mortal world; but at the same time, he made killing people sound even simpler than killing chickens. Hearing it made Xu Rucheng, a cultivator who came from a good family, feel a chill go up his spine.

Tai Sui changed the subject: “Though you can spare Misty Willow. Give him something to eat, he won’t give you away.”

“This is a seducer kept by the evil cultivator.” Xu Rucheng raised his eyebrows and examined Misty Willow. “This person is evidently a well-grown man, but he relies on sexual wiles, flatters and fawns. He’s unfilial and undutiful..”

“His problem isn’t contagious,” Tai Sui interrupted him impatiently. “That father wasn’t his birth father, either. He was the head of a theatrical troupe who bought him when he was little and sold him a hundred eighty times in all. Truly a small investment that brought ten-thousand fold returns. You want him to be filial? If it had been me in his place, I’d have cut that asshole to pieces and fed him to the dogs long ago.”

Having heard this, Xu Rucheng was even more disbelieving. How could this evil god know even the full history of an insignificant male favorite?

Tai Sui seemed to notice that he had let his words get away from him. He deliberately softened his vicious tone, saying, “Don’t mind him for now. Reckoning the date, I think the Great Market is coming up soon. In the next few days, the Snake King’s major customers ought to all be arriving in Wild Fox Village one by one. You certainly won’t be able to pretend to be injured to get out of seeing them.”

In fact, Xu Rucheng had just been worrying about this matter. He quickly said, “Please direct me, senior.”

“Easy enough. He has a secret account book. Without that, you won’t be able to handle those old customers,” Tai Sui said. “Tell me your background and your purpose in coming, and I’ll tell you where the account book is... I suppose your elders have taught you not to try lying to those whose cultivation is higher than yours?”

Xu Rucheng was silent.

“A half-immortal with no eye-opening wound on you. Clearly you had plenty of spiritual stones when you opened your spiritual eyes. You use immortal tools and talismans casually. The financial resources behind you are nothing to sneeze at,” Tai Sui said unhurriedly. “No one so rich would mobilize such forces just to scheme against Wild Fox Country, where the birds don’t even come

to shit. I suppose you've come for that legendary monster Qiu Sha? All kinds of evil cultivators avoid her like the plague. They wouldn't rush to get close to her. Are you... a spy sent from Great Wan?"

In a few words, he had guessed pretty much right about Xu Rucheng. Xu Rucheng's eyelid twitched.

"Fine, I won't ask about anything else. I'm only curious about how you opened your spiritual eyes," Tai Sui said. "You don't seem like an evil... like a 'common cultivator.' Has Great Wan's immortal sect started enlisting from among the common people?"

Xu Rucheng could only say, "Yes, I am a Kaiming Cultivator. That so-called Snake King led the Chu across the border and killed hundreds of people in my hometown. Back then, I impulsively consumed a large quantity of spiritual stones and nearly died. But when I'd just managed to survive, before I'd had time to open my spiritual eyes, the immortal sect pacified the rebellion, and my enemy ran to Western Chu. Afterward, the immortal sect took pity and registered Kaiming Cultivators in our town. Though I hadn't yet opened my spiritual eyes then, having consumed the spiritual stones, my body was already different from an ordinary person's, so I also ended up on the list. Later, with the guidance of an eminent person, I had the good fortune to enter the Way entirely intact. In fact, I am no evil cultivator."

For a time, Tai Sui was bewildered by his words. "... what kind of cultivator?"

The Kaiming Cultivators weren't any kind of secret. Everyone in Great Wan knew about them. So Xu Rucheng explained in detail.

After listening to him, Tai Sui didn't speak for a long moment, so Xu Rucheng couldn't resist saying, "I have answered you. Please instruct me, senior. Where is the account book you mentioned?"

Tai Sui laughed. “Of course such an important thing has to be kept close—he sewed it into the skin of his belly.”

Xu Rucheng said, “What!”

He had used an immortal tool to disguise the corpse and to take on the Snake King’s identity. It was fine when he was wearing it, but placed on the corpse, the immortal tool would lack a supply of spiritual energy over time and would certainly fall off. If someone had seen the body then, they would immediately have known who was disguising himself as Wild Fox Country’s Snake King.

For safety’s sake, Xu Rucheng had already had the body removed and burned!

Had it really...

No... wait, that was wrong.

Xu Rucheng quickly restrained himself. There was a faint warning in his heart, telling him to be wary of this lying evil creature.

“Senior, I’m not a three-year-old child to be tricked just like that. That evil cultivator has been getting benefits from both sides in Wild Fox Country all these years. He’s collected countless spiritual stones and strange treasures. How could he sew something important into the skin of his belly like an ordinary person?”

Anyway, his Luwu colleagues were all very careful. How could they not have closely inspected the body before burning it?

Completely insincerely, Tai Sui said, laughing, “Pretty quick reaction there. Haha, I was teasing you.”

Xu Rucheng: “...”

He noticed that his mental state was unsteady and determined not to speak to this mysterious Tai Sui again. This thing was very strange, simply like a demon out of legend. If he let down his guard just a little, he would be dragged into a ditch.

Xu Rucheng had already worked out that this Tai Sui was definitely bound by certain rules, and for some reason, Xu Rucheng was the only person he could even speak to—otherwise, given that his mouth alone was enough to kill, the Snake King certainly couldn't have hung around in Wild Fox Country for so long. Xu Rucheng even suspected that his own inability to mention Tai Sui in a letter to his colleagues probably wasn't because of Tai Sui's magic powers, but because the rules that bound him meant he couldn't be spoken of.

As long as he didn't listen and didn't waver, even a heart demon couldn't do anything to him.

Tai Sui noticed his caution, laughed, and didn't try again to disturb his intellect.

Xu Rucheng concentrated, mentally recited a mind calming spell, and dragged the unconscious Misty Willow into the secret room. He wasn't planning on killing him—though he was revolted, he in fact didn't understand whether this little actor's conduct had been good or evil; it wasn't up to him to mete out extralegal punishment.

But dealing with this person was still a problem, so Xu Rucheng called over a few reliable people hiding out in Wild Fox Country cooperating with him to discuss strategies for dealing with the situation.

The lead Luwu was the most experienced person among them, called Lao Tian. Had Xu Rucheng not been impatient for revenge and simply gone in by a side door to carry out a large-scale attack, Lao Tian would have been the one making the greatest progress—

his fake identity had already put down roots in Wild Fox Country. He was the most familiar with this place.

As soon as Lao Tian walked into the secret room, his expression went blank. Pointing to the unconscious Misty Willow, he said, “Why have you tied him up?”

Xu Rucheng said, “I had to, Uncle Tian, he found me out. I called you over to discuss this matter, to see how...”

“Slow down.” Lao Tian waved a hand and gravely said, “You say he found you out. How did he find you out? With the Snake King’s hot and cold temper, he might have a nightmare and wake up to drag the person in his bed out and bury him alive. There’s nothing surprising about him doing any kind of insane thing. Even if your behavior and manner in impersonating him is a little different from before, it still isn’t likely to make people suspect that you’re a replacement. A mortal like him naturally can’t see through an immortal tool... Don’t be hasty, tell me in detail, what is it that we’ve overlooked?”

Xu Rucheng: “...”

That was true.

He suddenly remembered—he had been knocked a little silly by Tai Sui’s sudden statement and had automatically believed it when the evil god said “He’s already realized it.”

As for Misty Willow trembling when he stopped him... That Snake King had beat him and tormented him for no reason; it was normal for him to tremble!

Tai Sui’s hateful laughter sounded in his ear. No good, he’d been duped!

Xu Rucheng's expression changed abruptly. He took a step forward and quickly scanned Misty Willow with his consciousness. In the blink of an eye, he turned up three or four surveillance devices on the male favorite's body.

The Snake King's subordinate evil cultivators, seeing that the Snake King was injured, had conceived evil intentions and had put surveillance devices on the Snake King's favorite. The upshot was that he had taken fright and rashly knocked Misty Willow out, then called over his colleagues... *that* was giving himself away!

"Who doesn't want a gold mine like Wild Fox Country?" Tai Sui said softly. "When the wolf king is injured, of course all the crows who serve him will be itching to replace him. Only a little thief who's stolen someone else's nest will stupidly worry that others have realized he's an imposter. Young man, let me give you a word of advice: whatever you fear will come to pass."

Lao Tian took one look and understood. He held down Xu Rucheng. "Don't panic! We would have had to gradually replace these evil cultivators with our own people anyway. It's no big deal to act early!"

But Tai Sui said, laughing, "That's optimistic. They've already run off! They must be nearly out of Wild Fox Country by now. I wonder who they wrote to before they left, hm?"

Xu Rucheng was at the end of his tether. "What the hell do you want?!"

Lao Tian only saw his lips moving. "What are you muttering about?"

Only then did Xu Rucheng realize that the sentence he had shouted had been voiceless... That wasn't right. He had been talking to this Tai Sui when he had killed the Snake King, and it had scared the Snake King witless.

What was going on?

Xu Rucheng's scalp prickled. For a moment, he felt like an insect that had stepped into layer upon layer of spiderweb; all he could do was let himself get pushed around.

"It's simple. I need an errand runner. I want you to make a heart demon oath upon your spirit to carry out tasks for me in the future. Then I'll tell you where those people are." Tai Sui seemed to be able to see into his mind. "First, the tasks I give you won't harm your colleagues and companions; second, they won't harm your conscience; and third, they won't spoil your lord's plans. If something violates the preceding three conditions, you don't have to do it."

As Xu Rucheng followed Lao Tian's instructions in a muddle, he tightly clenched his teeth. The first thing Mr. Bai had taught them was to mind your blood and your horoscope and not let people easily obtain them, and also not to readily consent to any vow whose contents were the least unclear.

Tai Sui said, "This is bad. I think someone's already left Wild Fox Country."

Xu Rucheng's temples pounded.

Tai Sui said, "Oh no, he's already contacted an accomplice outside. The earth is vast, how are you ever going to catch up with them..."

Xu Rucheng said, "First, you can't harm my colleagues and companions in the slightest. Second, you can't go against my conscience in the least bit. Third, you can't hinder my lord's plans in any way. If your orders don't violate the preceding three conditions, I swear on my spirit that I will carry them out. If I violate this oath, I will be annihilated body and spirit! All right?!"

Tai Sui paused. For some reason, the irreverence and ridicule in his voice faded somewhat. “I thought you would add another condition, that I can’t harm your family or your life.”

Xu Rucheng said angrily, “I have no more family, and you’re welcome to my life!”

The evil god sighed softly. As if placing a stamp on his spirit, he said, “So be it.”

Two days later, nighttime.

Alone, Xu Rucheng disguised himself anew and silently left Wild Fox Country to go to a slaughterhouse in Tao County’s county seat. He suspected that Tai Sui was playing him again—last time, when he had forced him to swear the heart demon oath, Tai Sui had falsely led him to believe that the flames were about to burn up to his eyebrows, but the upshot had been that in fact the evil cultivators who had placed surveillance devices on Misty Willow had all still been in Wild Fox Country.

They couldn’t hear Xu Rucheng’s conversation with Tai Sui. When they had “seen” him tie up Misty Willow and drag him into the secret room, they had simply thought he wanted to play some new game. When Xu Rucheng had brought Lao Tian and others into the secret room for a discussion, it had already been late at night. All those spying evil cultivators had already drunkenly gone to fool around. They hadn’t noticed what was happening! In less than two incense sticks, they had been quietly captured by his Luwu colleagues.

Xu Rucheng was so wrathful that the roots of his teeth itched.

He didn’t even know what Tai Sui was attached to that let him speak to him, but at any rate that male voice that kept him running around

in circles always seemed to follow him like his shadow, deceiving him whenever he wanted to amuse himself!

“...look out for the inscriptions on the ground.”

Following instructions, Xu Rucheng drew back his foot and found that he had nearly stepped on a rather covert inscription—his expression became serious. Why would there be an inscription in a slaughterhouse?

“They’re everywhere,” Tai Sui said languidly. “Don’t let your mind wander, keep yourself alive. Fifty steps forward, there's an array. When you activate it, there will be a secret passage under it. Watch out. If you’re discovered, you’ll be silenced at once.”

Xu Rucheng couldn’t resist asking, “What kind of place is this?”

Tai Sui said, “A slaughterhouse.”

Xu Rucheng: “...”

Obviously!

But he walked forward in accordance with Tai Sui’s instructions. He hadn’t yet walked fifty steps when Tai Sui called him to a halt. “Why, you’ve passed it. Listen, Cheng-bao’er, why are you taking such long steps? Doing the splits?”

Xu Rucheng had to back up a little. As expected, he found an array.

He had studied this array in the Luwu. It really was a gateway.

As Xu Rucheng carefully activated the array, he silently criticized: while he was fairly tall, he still didn’t exceed average height for an adult man. He was no giant, and his stride was naturally of ordinary

length... Had this Tai Sui counted the steps wrong? Or was his original body a dwarf?

After quietly prying open the array, Xu Rucheng stuck a stealth talisman onto himself and slipped inside like a fish. The smell of incense hit him in the face.

The incense smell was mixed with a rancid reek, as well as the smell of grease. Breathing in a mouthful made you feel sick. Xu Rucheng's spiritual sense sent frenzied warnings. He put his hand into his clothes and clutched his chopper.

Tai Sui seemed to be very familiar with this place. He knew inside out where there were traps and where there were guards, as if he had been here countless times.

Xu Rucheng snuck in with alarms but no danger, then heard Tai Sui sigh, practically with a touch of absolving himself. "It's in there."

Xu Rucheng placed his spiritual sense in his eyes and, in the dark, looked in the direction he had indicated. He went blank.

In this slaughterhouse for livestock, there turned out to be a deep prison. Inside were twenty or more emaciated boys and girls, from those who were twelve or thirteen to those who were fifteen or sixteen, all huddled together.

In the center of the round prison was a stone platform. The bloodstains on the platform hadn't dried yet. Beside cutting tools and ropes, there was... a pair of dismembered limbs.

CHAPTER 73 - Indignant Cicadas (7)

Xu Rucheng blurted out a line of Yuzhou slang: “What in blue blazes...?”

He remembered Tai Sui’s seemingly pointless answer earlier—this was a slaughterhouse.

Xu Rucheng had joined the Luwu to dedicate himself to his country and to get revenge. He had known he would have dealings with all kinds of evil cultivators; he had been ready to conceal his identity and go underground. But now he was still chilled to the bone. The ghost stories adults had told to scare children when he was little surged up one after another—human meat buns, medicine made with human organs...

“Don’t move.”

Xu Rucheng had been about to take a step forward and was called to a halt by Tai Sui. He came back to himself, touched his face, and struggled to shake the wild thoughts out of his head.

Total nonsense... That was all total nonsense repeated by villagers...

Human meat was no tastier than pork, beef, or lamb—who would eat human? Anyway, was there any meat on these children’s bodies? And there were so many spiritual beasts for making elixirs in Southern Shu—weren’t they all more useful than mortals?

“Who are these people?”

Tai Sui said, “A specialty of Wild Fox Country’s black market. They’re called spiritual image dolls.”

“... what kind of dolls?”

“A spiritual image doll is a kind of insurance,” Tai Sui said unhurriedly in the gloomy prison. “All of Chu’s wealthy people want to prolong their lifespans, live hundreds of years without aging. Many of them open their spiritual eyes without authorization. Anyway, when it comes down to it, all they have to do is pay Sanyue some protection money every year. But spiritual energy is scarce in the mortal world, and unevenly distributed. If your meridians haven’t been infused with spiritual energy, you’ll end up with an eye-opening wound if you’re lucky. If you’re unlucky or in poor health, forget about prolonging your lifespan, you’ll go see your ancestors right on the spot. Opening your spiritual eyes is like gambling with your life. The wealthy treasure their lives. So even if they’ve made all kinds of preparations, they still give themselves insurance—spiritual image dolls.”

Xu Rucheng had never heard of this. He asked, “How does that protect them?”

“Buy a living person whose spiritual image is similar to yours, usually between twelve and sixteen. Too young is brittle, too old is unclean. Then a secret art of Western Chu is used to connect the buyer’s spiritual eyes with the teenager. That’s a spiritual image doll... You can think of them as a sort of stand-in. When the buyer opens their spiritual eyes, half of the spiritual energy that pours into their body will be split off by the doll. This way, even if there’s a part of the buyer’s body that hasn’t been fully soaked in spiritual energy, the impact on them will be much smaller. It will hardly leave any eye-opening wounds.”

Xu Rucheng was struck dumb.

Evil cultivators were nothing. Evil cultivators themselves were covered in scars from eye-opening wounds; they couldn’t compare to these wealthy Dongheng people!

“Close your mouth, stop looking like a country bumpkin.” Tai Sui *tsked*. “At the Wild Fox Country Great Market, there’s more demand for spiritual image dolls than the supply can meet. The Snake King hadn’t heard of this convenient forbidden art when he opened his spiritual eyes, so he ended up covered in eye-opening wounds. He was always brooding about it. This is the business he took the highest percentage from. It’s your main financial backing.”

Xu Rucheng thought, Some motherfucking financial backing.

“When the buyers open their spiritual eyes, what happens to these kids?”

Tai Sui said, impatiently, “A mortal’s completely unprepared meridians have a large quantity of spiritual energy poured into them — what do you think happens? If their deaths looked pleasant, do you think that the buyers would leave these spiritual image dolls in the slaughterhouse instead of taking them away?”

Xu Rucheng’s mind roared—in other words, the children being used as spiritual energy vessels were shut up in here and had no idea when they would explode and die.

“The buyers... the buyers know this and can’t bear to see it?”

“Obviously,” Tai Sui said. “Haven’t you heard the saying ‘a gentleman stays away from the kitchen’?”

Hearing this, the hotheaded Xu Rucheng, who had taken part in a revolt five years ago, had an urge to take up his old profession once more here in Western Chu. His eyes slowly fell on the stone platform in the center of the prison.

“Oh, that. That’s for dealing with the bodies. The spiritual image dolls die through the impact of a great quantity of spiritual energy.

Their bodies are valuable. You can't let money go to waste," Tai Sui said. "Flesh and blood mixed with a great quantity of spiritual energy can be used as fodder for spiritual beasts. The organs can be used to make elixirs, cheaper than using spiritual beasts. With luck, you can even get a little bit of spiritual bone out of it, the best product for toolmaking. Also..."

Xu Rucheng was starting to feel sick. "Also?"

Tai Sui paused. There seemed to be a peculiar laugh suppressed in his voice. "You can use them as offerings to evil gods during festivals. They're full of spiritual energy—isn't that more respectable than horse meat or beef?"

Xu Rucheng covered his mouth, holding back his retching.

Tai Sui had said before that the Snake King had made offerings of "raw meat" to the reincarnation wood divine image... He was absolutely certain now that this so-called "Grand Duke Tai Sui" was trapped in the reincarnation wood. If he had been able to move a single fingernail, he would have cooked the Snake King into jerky long ago.

"Using human flesh as tribute, wasn't he afraid of being struck by heavenly lightning? Or was he tacitly accepting that he was worshipping a monster... Wait, no, I didn't mean you, senior..."

Tai Sui, his mood unreadable, said, "No, actually. That ogre believed that all gods eat humans—if the gods didn't eat humans, what else would they eat? Would they eat the five grains the same way humans do?"

Xu Rucheng: "..."

Goodness gracious, what that evil cultivator had said actually made some sense. For a moment, he actually couldn't refute it!

“Can’t they die?”

“Great Warrior Da Cheng, do you think everyone is like you, able to hack through gold and jade as soon as they pick up a chopper? Take a look at these little ghosts. They’ve hardly eaten a good meal since they were born. On a good day they might not have the strength to stab themselves to death, never mind that their food and drink is drugged. Even if they manage to get hold of a weapon and pull it across their necks, they still need to bleed for a while before they die, right? An elixir will bring them right back.” Tai Sui said, “Do you want me to describe in detail what the outcome is if they don’t manage to die?”

Xu Rucheng didn’t want that at all. “Senior, if you had told me this before, I wouldn’t have hesitated to come even without the heart demon oath. What should I do?”

“You?” Tai Sui paused, then indifferently said, “Oh, whatever you like. I’m all right.”

Xu Rucheng let out a breath. “... didn’t you bring me here to rescue them?”

“You think I brought you here to get yourself killed?” Tai Sui sighed. “Big brother, there’s at least one established foundation cultivator keeping watch here, and I figure there are around ten open-eyed evil cultivators. You want to steal the kids? You couldn’t even steal a couple dozen buns.”

Xu Rucheng didn’t quibble with his ruthless diction. He quickly reckoned: he remembered the way he had come. If he went back and requested reinforcements, what would their chances of taking down this den of evil cultivators be? An established foundation... They had an established foundation cultivator... If there was really

nothing they could do, it would still be better to give these children easy deaths. That would also be a good deed...

Tai Sui seemed to know what he was thinking. "If you kill off this batch, they'll find new spiritual image dolls. Or if you're powerful enough, you might be able to get rid of this whole gang of evil cultivators... Ha, this bunch has a monopoly on Wild Fox Country's trade in spiritual image dolls. If you kill them, those other envious evil cultivators may be so pleased they'll build a temple in your honor."

Xu Rucheng was at a complete loss after having this bucket of cold water dumped on him. "Wait, senior, so what did you actually bring me here to do?"

Tai Sui said, "The third kid from the left, the one with the shaved head, and the rightmost girl sitting staring into space. Each of them has an amulet made of reincarnation wood... Oh, there's also one that's fallen under the butchering platform. Take them all and destroy them for me. That's all. The rest has nothing to do with me. You can do whatever you like."

Hearing his incomprehensible instructions, Xu Rucheng became even more bewildered. Relying on the stealth talisman he had on him, he went to the butchering platform. His eyes avoided the not fully grown severed limbs on the platform. Indeed, there was a reincarnation wood amulet sticking out of a crack under the stone platform.

There was a rather coarse divine image carved onto the wooden amulet, called "Tai Sui" — this was a Tai Sui amulet.

Reincarnation wood liked darkness and damp. It was one of the most common trees along the banks of the Xia River, on the border between Wan and Chu. Seeing the local tyrant of Wild Fox Country worshipping Tai Sui, many locals had blindly imitated him, praying

that this deity of unknown origin would bless them as he had blessed the Snake King. You could buy Tai Sui amulets at quite a few miscellaneous goods stands.

After he turned the amulet over, he sucked in a breath as though his eyes had been stung. On the back of the wooden amulet was a very small bloody handprint, with one deep scratch made by a fingernail. Xu Rucheng could easily imagine how, when the overwhelming spiritual energy had come surging in, this frightened child had had nowhere to run and could only pour all their will to live into this wooden amulet...hoping that there was someone who could save them.

On the point of death, how much strength could a person exert? This little hand had even left a mark on the wooden amulet, had even kept holding on in death. Only when the body had been hauled away and dismembered had the bloodstained amulet dropped under the stone platform, unnoticed.

Why would this evil god want to destroy his own amulets?

“Senior...”

Before he could ask, Tai Sui interrupted him. “It has nothing to do with you. It won’t harm your conscience to destroy a few pieces of wood, will it?”

The heart demon oath was hanging over his head. However much this stuck in Xu Rucheng’s throat, he could only act according to orders and go remove the other two amulets.

Concealing himself from the eyes and ears of these mortal teenagers took less effort than blowing away dust. He didn’t even need to approach the iron cage to get the amulets. He quickly reached out across empty space and took the one from the boy. Then he came up in front of the girl.

Whether it was coincidence or something else, through the iron cage, the girl's hollow eyes were looking directly at Xu Rucheng. The two gazes met, one falsely and one truly.

Xu Rucheng's extended hand stopped in midair.

Tai Sui said, "Don't you know how to use a sleep spell?"

"I do." Xu Rucheng didn't break eye contact with the girl for a moment. After being silent for a while, he whispered, "Senior, I don't know why you want to destroy your amulets, but do you have to take away the only thing they have to rely on?"

Tai Sui said, with a cold laugh, "Isn't it stupid to rely on a piece of rotten wood?"

The corners of Xu Rucheng's mouth tensed at once.

Tai Sui said, "No nonsense..."

"It *is* stupid." Xu Rucheng abruptly jerked his gaze away from the girl's dried up eyes and faced upward toward the chilly inscriptions on the ceiling of the prison.

Of course it was stupid. Back then, his parents, his uncles, his grandparents, his fellow townspeople... and the girl in his heart, hadn't they all been this stupid? Pitiful insects vainly wishing for a god or buddha to come carry them through their troubles?

"Incredibly stupid. Everyone who comes to the end of their road is stupid. I know I've sworn a heart demon oath, so I'll take the amulets for you, and you can stop rushing me! Aren't you disgusted that one of your believers would give you another believer's flesh and blood as an offering?!" Xu Rucheng abruptly raised his voice, which only he and the evil god could hear. "Do you know what it

means to come to the end of the road? Do you know what it feels like to have had no freedom since birth? You don't know anything. Can't you at least leave them a bit of dignity when you speak?! Have a heart, your divinity!"

Tai Sui was stony-hearted. He was entirely unmoved by these words. "Heart demon oath."

"Fuck!" Xu Rucheng swore angrily. The rims of his eyes turned red. He raised a sleep talisman in midair and aimed it at the little girl's brow.

Still hugging her knees, the girl's head fell sideways. She fell asleep like that.

Xu Rucheng crooked his fingers across the distance, and a reincarnation wood amulet flew from the girl and landed in his hand. The veins rose on the back of his hand. The three amulets instantly turned to fine dust. "All right?!"

"Good boy." Tai Sui seemed to breathe out a long sigh. After a moment, he resumed his odious tone of voice: "Even if you muster reinforcements when you get back, you won't be able to destroy this bunch of evil cultivators without anyone knowing. If you're exposed, your lord's plans in Seventeen Li Town will get nowhere."

Xu Rucheng clenched his teeth with a click. "There is no need for you to remind me of that."

Tai Sui didn't bicker with him. He laughed softly. "Western Chu is some awful place. There are many mountains and many wrong roads. Natural disasters are frequent. It's rare for a whole family to suffer no disasters within a given year. All these little ghosts were taken from disaster-stricken places. You can buy the cheaper ones for a single copper coin. But when they're made into spiritual image dolls, each one will cost at least a box of white spirits. Who wouldn't

be envious of a trade that brings such big returns on investment? Established foundation cultivators can have whatever they want in the mortal world. When have you seen them be cautious?”

Xu Rucheng stopped in his tracks.

“This is ‘Tao’ County—‘tao’ as in ‘flee.’⁵² There’s no shortage of desperate criminals. What are you waiting for? Hurry up and spread the word, get someone else to do your dirty work for you. If you wait for the trouble to come when they get to Seventeen Li Town, it’ll fall on you,” Tai Sui said in a tone that seemed to be angry that a piece of wood couldn’t reach enlightenment. “Which prince did you say your lord was before? Where did he dig up a walking, talking, brainless club like you? Why didn’t anyone teach you how to be an evil cultivator before you came here?”

Xu Rucheng took to his heels and ran.

“Hey, look out. If you step on a trap, I won’t save you. I just taught you a lesson for free, so it won’t be asking too much for you to do something else for me, right?”

“What?” said Xu Rucheng.

Then he heard Tai Sui say, “I want you to cut down the reincarnation wood trees within a hundred li radius of Wild Fox Country and from now on forbid everyone in Tao County to worship Tai Sui or to privately keep a Tai Sui amulet.”

Xu Rucheng’s eyes flashed. He thought to himself, It’s true. He *is* trapped in the reincarnation wood. It sounds as if, if he wants to escape, he can only do it by destroying all the reincarnation wood in the vicinity.

With this guess in mind, he tentatively said, “So about the statue in the Immortal Palace...”

Tai Sui interrupted him in a sincere tone: “Cheng’er, I think that lovely head of yours is sitting on your neck just to help you carry on with little girls. Don’t try getting clever with me. Or else I’ll make fun of you and you’ll start crying again, and it’ll be very tiring for me to hold back from laughing at you.”

Xu Rucheng: “...”

This son-of-a-bitch of an evil god.

“I’ll leave it up to you how to handle it. If you’re afraid I’ll go out haunting if the divine image is gone, you can go ahead and keep burning incense for it,” Tai Sui said indifferently. “Only when you burn the incense, remember to bathe in incense ash, be sure not to have any injuries or illnesses... and you can’t eat spicy food, garlic, or preserved or cured meat, and if you violate any one of those conditions, the heart demon oath will backlash against you.”

Xu Rucheng was all at sea. He had no idea what this evil god’s problem was.

Three days later, on the night of the new moon, in a place no one knew about, bloody light lit up a slaughterhouse in Tao County.

The concealment inscriptions the slaughterhouse used were second-class. Even if an ascended spirit immortal came in person, they wouldn’t be able to break them apart silently. The evil cultivators inside the slaughterhouse had never thought that this perfectly safe place would be exposed. They were taken by surprise. And in the midst of the fierce battle between cultivators from several sides, someone took advantage of the commotion to carry off all the spiritual image dolls. This person had been prepared. Not waiting to be pursued, they immediately broke the

spiritual seals on the spiritual image dolls and made a clean getaway.

Wild Fox Country's black market strictly prohibited private fights, but until they reached Wild Fox Country, everyone had to rely on their own abilities. Evil cultivators were always killing each other and plotting for the sake of snatching treasures. This massacre could only count as an especially large incident involving especially fertile loot... and probably making the wealthy people counting on this method to open their spiritual eyes despair.

Meanwhile, Seventeen Li Town's Snake King, without any reason, suddenly issued an order forbidding anyone to worship Tai Sui again.

In the area of Wild Fox Country, perhaps the Snake King's word wasn't an imperial edict, but it was close enough.

The locals said that he had a special magic power that let him understand the speech of birds, beasts, and insects. Even mosquitoes were his scouts. If he only wanted to hear it, not even pillow talk could be hidden from his ears—but of course, this was an unfounded rumor. Even if the Snake King had been able to understand the speech of mosquitoes, he probably wouldn't have heard any news apart from "I'm going to sting you." The Snake King only had numerous lackeys and had planted over a hundred listening arrays in the streets and alleys of Wild Fox Country.

In sum, when the Snake King said they couldn't worship, no matter how unwilling the common people were, they still didn't dare to disobey. As soon as the order came down, they immediately no longer dared even to say prayers in private. The Snake King said they were forbidden to keep Tai Sui amulets, so overnight, practically all the Tai Sui amulets in Seventeen Li Town—even in all of Tao County—vanished without a trace.

And as Xu Rucheng watched anxiously, the mysterious reincarnation wood divine image showed no changes.

The sly evil god had used him and dropped him. He didn't speak to him again.

When Tai Sui had said he was a "tree spirit," he hadn't been entirely deceiving this talking club.

He had indeed been born in the reincarnation wood. Since his awareness had sprouted, he had always been trapped in the unprepossessing divine image, faced every day with the Snake King's ugly face, which made him angry whenever he saw it.

He didn't know what he was, couldn't say whether he was dead or alive, and didn't know what he was doing. Most of the time he was in a daze. Sometimes he would dream of a fragmentary scene, but before he could look at it closely, it would disappear like a bubble.

In Great Wan's Yuzhou, the Snake King had frequently brought crowds of idiots to weep and drone while prostrating themselves before him; they called him "Tai Sui."

For no reason at all, he hated this name. But it was no use hating it. Later, as people kept calling him that, he got used to it and gradually took "Tai Sui" as his name.

There was turmoil and war in Yuzhou. Tai Sui was trapped in the reincarnation wood, unaware of the passage of time—until it became popular among the people who worshipped Tai Sui to carve reincarnation wood into amulets and hang them up around the house or on themselves.

The amulets seemed to have a resonance with him. Gradually, Tai Sui found that his "consciousness" could "flow" through the

amulets into the bodies of these people, so he could get a taste of what it was to be human.

Being human wasn't very good—while Yuzhou was part of Great Wan, it was just across the river from Western Chu, and their dietary habits resembled those of the people of Chu. Their food was heavily salted and heavily seasoned, and they particularly liked pickled foods. Forced to “share in their joys and sorrows,” Tai Sui at first found it novel, but after a few days was nauseated by all the pickles and seasonings.

So he came to his first conclusion about “himself”: he didn't like to eat like humans ate.

Wood didn't have eyes. Tai Sui was like a blind man. Only when his consciousness rippled back after extending to others could he slowly work out what he was.

When his consciousness was attached to an urchin, he would get beaten along with them. The urchin would scream and cry, and he would feel a “bottom” and “palm” that he didn't have. He was more afraid of having his palm hit than his bottom; he didn't know where the thought came from, but he thought that an adult was only truly angry when they hit your palm.

If his consciousness landed in the body of an adult, it would be a little more painful. Doing the same thing over and over day after day was all right for these people, but Tai Sui's consciousness would fragment from time to time. In the lightless factories and fields, he felt wrists, backs, waists... and knees that felt like pincushions.

He knew that when humans were happy, their bodies would feel like they were floating; when they anticipated something, their chests would itch; when they were angry, their heads would heat up and their hearts would pound against their ribs. He felt the floating, the itching, the pounding along with them, but he couldn't empathize

with their emotions—there was nothing for it; his attention was always drawn by the insistently painful places on these people’s bodies.

But though this was torment, mortals could endure it, so he could also make do with it and live. At least it let him recognize all the human sense organs.

At first, this Tai Sui born of reincarnation wood didn’t understand anything. After his consciousness got a little more deeply entangled with these people, he became a little more clear-headed. While learning the Yuzhou dialect, he inexplicably “learned” another accent and dimly remembered a great deal of common knowledge...

That was before that ogre covered in snakeskin brought the Chu across the Xia River.

At that time, he still wasn’t sure how many countries there were in the world. He didn’t know who was an immortal and who was evil, and he didn’t know why the person who “worshipped” him was covered in monstrous snakeskin scars.

Then the Chu came east, Xuanyin pacified the rebellion, the immortals fought, and the corpses of the nobodies were strewn over the ground.

The people who had “believed in” him had been sold out by his “immortal envoy.” The deaths and the resentment of the dying rebounded mercilessly onto his consciousness. Again and again, he struggled. Again and again, he “died.” This continued for months. When he opened his eyes again, he had come to Chu.

Having been forced through this campaign, his consciousness, confused as a small child’s, grew up overnight. Without being

taught, he knew the terms “immortal sect,” “evil cultivators,” “Xuanyin,” “Sanyue.”

Before, the snake-skinned evil cultivator had only used him to trick others. Later, he must have figured he had been blessed. Somehow, he had begun worshipping in earnest. So at last, through the Snake King’s consciousness, Tai Sui tasted all different flavors and only then found that he didn’t dislike eating; he even thought that the flavor of Chu food was all right... he only disliked the food those people whose shoulders, backs, and knees hurt had eaten.

It was much more pleasant to attach his consciousness to the Snake King, especially after that ogre put down roots in Wild Fox Country and could have anything he wanted—Tai Sui indulged in a life of luxury along with him and sometimes remembered a few more refined, more tasteful scenes.

But these trifles were useless. He had no interest in what shop had made the Snake King’s precious stone studded belt, whatever Cui Ji or Yao Ji it was—all he wanted was to kill that ogre.

When he had been in Yuzhou, he had found that the more he sent his consciousness out, the clearer it would be when it rebounded, and the clearer it was, the stronger it was. Tai Sui had the feeling that when his consciousness reached a certain degree of strength, he might even be able to influence real people.

As more and more people in Wild Fox County worshipped Tai Sui, he started wildly sending his consciousness out—the easily frightened common people of Tao County, the trembling servants, the evil cultivators dying in battle, the extravagant wealthy people of Chu... as well as the “livestock” they feasted on. At first it was voluntary, but later, he could no longer control his consciousness. If there was someone holding his amulet and praying, he would involuntarily be drawn by it.

His consciousness, previously curled up weakly in the divine image, became stronger and stronger, but also more and more confused. He would often be trapped in the bodies of unknown people, confuse them with himself like Zhuangzi dreaming of being a butterfly. Fortunately, his desire to kill was steady enough. In five years, “kill the Snake King” had become a clear road marker, firmly holding him in place, dragging him back from the edge of madness countless times.

Until that assassin charged in.

As soon as that big idiot came in, Tai Sui’s muddled spiritual sense was suddenly touched. His scattered consciousness instantly returned to its original place. Then he found to his astonishment that there was a long-lost piece of his consciousness on the knotted bag that big idiot was carrying!

When the knotted bag got caught on the divine image, his consciousness fused, and a segment of distant memory floated up clearly. He remembered a teenage girl named A-Hua, remembered that his consciousness had once “travelled” through reincarnation wood.

He remembered that he wasn’t a tree. It seemed that he was also a cultivator. Someone had taken his consciousness from his spiritual foundation and placed it into an illusion. But his consciousness, wandering through all the reincarnation wood, had been much stronger than that of an ordinary person. He had known perfectly well that it was an illusion. Though he had gone in obediently enough, he had from start to finish been concerned about A-Hua’s fate. He had secretly snuck out a sliver of consciousness and headed against the current through the reincarnation wood to find her.

He had found the girl’s lilac knotted bag, trampled into the dirt, but he hadn’t found her. He had been going in circles in the divine

image when it was as if something had abruptly shattered his consciousness. He hadn't known anything more.

The moment his previously broken consciousness fused, Tai Sui clearly felt that his original body was held in some place he couldn't reveal, and there were heavy rules restraining him like shackles.

But he hadn't had time to think it through carefully—the big idiot had a karmic connection to the knotted bag that went down to the bone, and he had spilled his blood on the reincarnation wood divine image. He could finally talk to someone!

He could finally kill the person he needed to kill!

All at once, he realized his long-cherished wish of the last five years, but the stabilizing force on his consciousness also disappeared.

The Tai Sui amulets had long ago become a specialty product of Tao County. Even the spiritual image dolls had gone along and believed in them. When his consciousness was attached to the spiritual image dolls, it would fall to pieces along with them, then scramble back to the divine image. He'd had enough.

Luckily, the big idiot was useful and easily tricked. Using his hands, Tai Sui took care of the reincarnation wood in the area that was constantly pulling away his consciousness. At last, his scattered consciousness assembled. He could sleep.

Perhaps this time, he could dream of what had actually happened five years ago.

If he couldn't dream of it, that was fine. He'd had enough of being human these last few years. He wasn't curious about his original body at all. He wanted to rest.

Plish—

In a daze, Tai Sui was startled by the sound of water. Something was pulling his consciousness.

He went through the quiet Seventeen Li Town and “looked” in the direction of the water. He “saw” a little boat floating in the Xia River.

What the hell? Where had the big idiot gone to burn his incense?

Before he could get a clear “look,” a strange yet familiar female voice sounded in his ear: “So this is Western Chu.”

CHAPTER 74 - Indignant Cicadas (8)

Oh? Who was this?

Tai Sui's disorderly consciousness concentrated slightly and passed through the mist on the river. He "saw" that the little boat had no propeller and there was no one rowing it, but it could still travel in a straight line in spite of the rapid flow of water in the Xia River.

A tall, slender "man" was standing at the prow, holding a small pot.

"He" was raggedly dressed, with a thin layer of skin and flesh stretched over the bones of the face and a nose bridge so high it was nearly projecting. On the left side of her face, there was a scar in the shape of an arc from the corner of the eye down to the jaw—it was completely uncovered, but exposure to the elements had made it less obvious. There were several rounds of bandages tied around her neck. Perhaps because she was so thin, there really did seem to be a slight protuberance on her neck when she raised her head.

Had Tai Sui not "heard" her speak before, at first glance, he practically would have mistaken her for a man.

Her appearance wasn't especially attractive, the direct opposite of "bright and lively" or "round as pearl and smooth as jade." From top to toe, she looked like a homeless drifter, with an air of bitterness.

But somehow, at first glance, Tai Sui had a friendly feeling toward her.

This woman convincingly dressed as a man drank a mouthful of wine, took out a reincarnation wood amulet, and rubbed it a few times—this was different from the amulets popular in Wild Fox Country; it was a protection amulet with nothing carved on it.

She herself was messy, but the wooden amulet was very clean. Even the cord it hung from was new.

Tai Sui “heard” her say, “The immortal mountains have boundaries. Chu isn’t a place without a master, like the Land of Turmoil. Once I cross the Xia River, I’ll be in Sanyue territory. Your consciousness won’t be able to cross. Is there anything you want me to do for you?”

Tai Sui couldn’t hear whatever the person in the reincarnation wood answered. He saw the woman wait for a moment, raise her eyebrows, then put the amulet away. “All right, I’ve got it.”

Tai Sui looked at her in some surprise. There was wine in her mouth. She hadn’t opened her mouth to speak just now.

Was she going straight through her spirit to communicate with someone’s consciousness?

Communication devices usually didn’t have geographical restrictions, but a consciousness couldn’t casually cross a national border.

The present national borders hadn’t been determined by humans; they had been determined by the immortal mountains. The five great spiritual mountain ranges coordinated with each other and repelled each other, acting in concert with the great sects’ major arrays, making clear divisions in the mortal world. If someone ignored the boundaries and casually sent their consciousness into another country’s territory, they would have to be prepared for a backlash from the local great array. Otherwise, all of the ascended spirit and shed skin masters would be able to send their consciousnesses out to pierce through mountain and river. If they could spy on the secrets of other nations at will, wouldn’t it be a mess?

From what she said, it sounded as if the person communicating with her through the reincarnation wood wasn't in Chu—judging by her accent, they were likely from Wan.

“Strange,” Tai Sui thought. “Why would I hear this young woman on the border between the two countries speaking to someone in Wan? Because they're using reincarnation wood as a contact medium?”

This was a very peculiar feeling, as if he had accidentally opened someone else's private letter.

Tai Sui didn't rashly start up a conversation. He only watched this woman dressed as a man in secret.

She unhurriedly crossed the river and made landfall mixed in with the people coming and going between the two countries on business. Her forged documents were a little slapdash. But this close to Wild Fox Country's Great Market, Tao County frequently had all kinds of evil cultivators coming and going. The border guards didn't dare to be too strict; they all turned a blind eye.

Perhaps thinking it would be too expensive, she didn't find lodgings in Seventeen Li Town. Instead, she stayed in a rather remote part of Tao County. In fact, this place was beyond the limits Tai Sui's consciousness could reach, but for some reason, Tai Sui could still easily locate her.

She could make a boat move without wind and had what was likely an eye-opening wound on her face; she was definitely a cultivator. But she didn't act like a cultivator. Tai Sui watched her for a few days without seeing her draw a single talisman.

Every day, she walked through the streets of Tao County with a little carrying pole over her shoulder, selling Silver Tray Lottery tickets. The prizes were candy bars, cheap candied fruit, little things like purses... whatever it was, there were no lottery tickets that didn't

win anything; all of them came with a bit of a prize. There were also a few exquisite little wooden carvings pinned to her racks. The carvings were of various spiritual beasts, extremely lifelike, and they seemed to be able to run around when you put them on the ground. It was said that only one in a thousand tickets would win one. In a few days, she had a gang of ragged little kids running after her, calling her “Wei-laoban.”⁵³ Business was pretty good.

Seventeen Li Town seemed to be in the eye of a storm. The atmosphere around it became more and more tense. Only this foreigner was perfectly at ease, going to different places every day to cry out “Open the tray and see the prize!”

Tai Sui had never seen a trade like this. Having finally managed to temporarily struggle free of the endless amulets, he could relax for the first time in five years. At first, he had only casually glanced her way because his consciousness had been disturbed. The upshot was that after watching kids win prizes for a few days, it started to go to his head a little. He didn’t sleep; he would have loved to buy a handful of tickets himself.

After several days of selling Silver Tray Lottery tickets, no one had yet won one of the limited number of carvings.

This evening, Wei-laoban packed up her stall and picked a tea house to rest in. At the table next to her sat three very firmly wrapped up people; it was clear at a glance that they were covering up eye-opening wounds. They glanced at the shabby peddler and lost interest, continuing their conversation. “There’s never been an ascended spirit before, no one even thought about doing it. The most they could do in their lifetime was pour all their efforts into finding a Way of the Heart and establishing a foundation. Then you could become a solid backer for others. All you could do afterward was try to think of a way to live some years longer, put off losing your mind. Who would have expected there to be... At first when

she showed up and seemed to be doing all right, the common cultivators in all four nations went crazy. Just that I know of, several powerful established foundation masters have gone into seclusion in the last few years... I can't say whether it's a good thing or a bad thing. Aren't we going to have ascended spirits running around everywhere?"

Another person said, "That's absurd. Can the spiritual energy and resources in the mortal world support several ascended spirits?"

"That's just it," his companion said anxiously. "Before, established foundation masters didn't come forward easily, precisely because they were worried they would have to fight over resources to take the next step. Won't people like us have even less of a means of survival now? Hey, have you guys heard that she sent word saying that at the Wild Fox Country Great Market she's going to sell Xiang... that sword god's spiritual bones?"

"She's too arrogant. Will Sanyue stand for that?"

"I'm afraid the Wild Fox Country Great Market will be eventful this year..."

Wei-laoban slowly drank her tea as she listened to these people discussing the unprecedented and unrivaled evildoer. Before she had finished drinking one bowl of tea, a kid with his hair in childhood knots skipped up in front of her, chewing on a piece of straw. "Laoban, I want a Silver Tray Lottery ticket."

Then his eyes moved. His gaze went around Wei-laoban and glanced up. By coincidence, it just happened to meet the gaze Tai Sui was sending out.

Tai Sui froze. This child's face had a pair of long, narrow, upturned eyes, like the crafty eyes of an adult stuck onto a child. It looked

very strange... Most importantly, he seemed to have seen these eyes somewhere before.

Wei-laoban took his coin and offered the Silver Tray. The child picked and chose for a long time before finally taking a ticket. "Open it and see what you've won."

He opened the ticket, but it was empty inside.

Tai Sui had watched Wei-laoban sell over a hundred tickets. This was his first time seeing an empty ticket.

"Ooh, an empty ticket, an empty ticket-wicket." The strange child began to dance and gesture in joy. "Get whatever's written, get whatever you want."

Wei-laoban drank the remaining half bowl of tea in one gulp, packed up the Silver Tray, and sighed. "Very well, creditor. Let's go."

The child, skipping and hopping, took her by the hand, jumped two steps ahead, then looked back. He pulled his eyelid down with his finger and made a face at the three ignorant common cultivators who were talking on and on. "Bleh."

Tai Sui suddenly remembered—it had also been at Wild Fox County's Great Market. His consciousness had been trapped in the body of a half-puppet about to be sold, blearily baking under the scorching sun so people could examine his quality. While Tai Sui had been in a bit of a daze, he had suddenly met a pair of crafty eyes.

Just one glance, and Tai Sui's consciousness, which had nearly fused with the half-puppet, had awoken.

This had been a pale-faced and beardless middle-aged man, forgettable in the crowd, except that his eyes were like monsters

that had crawled out of some abyss. One glance could make a person feel chilled all over. Through the crowd, the middle-aged man had pulled down his eyelid and made exactly the same face toward him across the distance.

Supposing that person hadn't had a screw loose and just happened to like making faces at half-puppets... then he must have been the only outsider who had had contact with Tai Sui's consciousness in all these years.

Tai Sui was about to chase after them when his consciousness was held back by something. He couldn't go another step forward.

Just then, noises came from beside the reincarnation wood divine image, yanking his consciousness back at burning speed.

Tai Sui's consciousness was abruptly drawn back into the divine image. As soon as he opened his eyes, he smelled an acrid scent and instantly wanted to dig a hole and bury whoever was lighting the incense—Xu Rucheng had the heart demon oath hanging over him and indeed didn't dare to neglect it. He really had “bathed in incense ash.” Who knew how many jin of scent he had used? While he hadn't been eating cured meat, he had thoroughly cured himself.

Wearing snakeskin, Xu Rucheng gravely placed incense before the reincarnation wood divine image, mentally reciting the name of the evil god. Before he had stuck the incense into the censer, he heard a dour voice say into his ear: “Cheng-bao'er, if you died right now, your body wouldn't rot for five hundred years.”

Xu Rucheng's hands shook. He snapped the incense holder.

“Move, move, move, move aside. Don't light it. You're enough to keep the insects away on your own,” Tai Sui said irritably. “Say whatever you have to say.”

Xu Rucheng concentrated and said, “Senior, the Qilin Guard just came to see me.”

The Qilin Guard was Sanyue’s outer sect, Chu’s equivalent to Heaven’s Design Pavilion.

“So? You got a scare and want me to pet it better?” Tai Sui yawned indifferently. “What’s so exciting about the Qilin Guard? Wild Fox Country pays a considerable protection fee to the Qilin Guard every year. The Qilin Guard’s people come in disguise each time there’s a Great Market to look for a good deal. Their general commander is completely shameless. If he sees something he likes, he won’t even pay. He’ll just leave a note and have it sent over. All you need to do is give them a good bribe. The Qilin Guard don’t want to look at your ugly face any more than they have to. The relationship is built on trade in money and power, there’s no deep friendship. It won’t be easy for you to expose yourself.”

Xu Rucheng said, “They brought an ascended spirit master from Sanyue. They want me to hand over a map of all the inscriptions and arrays in Wild Fox Country. Wild Fox Country is only a black market where common evil*cultivators trade. An established foundation would be plenty. Why does an ascended spirit cultivator need to come in person? Unless the rumors are true, and Qiu...”

“Shh,” Tai Sui interrupted him. “If you know she might already be looking this way, how can you still dare to mention an ascended spirit’s name?”

Normally it was all right to mention an ascended spirit’s name, but supposing that Qiu Sha really did want to come to Wild Fox Country, her consciousness might very well already be scanning it—so even when going to see a creature like the Snake King, who couldn’t show himself in public, the Qilin Guard had still come under the protection of a master from their inner sect as a precaution against being “overheard” by Qiu Sha.

Xu Rucheng automatically lowered his voice: “There are borders here. Sanyue certainly won’t let her leave Chu alive. There’s going to be a lot of chaos when the time comes... Senior, have you seen Qiu Sha? How should we deal with her?”

Just then, Tai Sui fell strangely silent. Xu Rucheng waited for a long moment, then couldn’t resist saying, “Senior...”

Tai Sui hesitated, then asked, “Are you carrying something you use to contact your lord?”

Xu Rucheng froze. He pressed down on the place where his mustard seed was kept.

Tai Sui sighed. “Stupid baby, why don’t you take it out and have a look?”

Xu Rucheng, bewildered, took out the communication device and was instantly startled. “What...”

The immortal tool that had been lying safely in the mustard seed had activated on its own. There seemed to be an invisible hand using his immortal tool to contact the Luwu headquarters right before his eyes.

And if the evil god hadn’t warned him, he wouldn’t have noticed.

This person didn’t take any trouble to imitate his handwriting. The Great Wan characters were broken and crooked, starting and stopping stiffly with each stroke, as though they were being chiseled with a hatchet. When Xu Rucheng discovered it, the writing only paused briefly. Then the aggressive handwriting continued to appear, all at once writing:

Seventh month, seventh day. Help me out in Wild Fox Country, and afterward I'll lend you the Riverward⁵⁴ for one use—Qiu.

Xu Rucheng's hand shook. He nearly dropped the immortal tool.

In this infiltration of Chu, they had made their plans clear to Xuanyin Mountain. In consideration of the great disorder in Chu, all the immortal tools they had brought were "superior grade."

The skin Xu Rucheng was wearing didn't look prepossessing, but in fact it was a genuine product of Moon Plated Peak—something he couldn't buy even if he sold himself. There were sixty-four second-class inscriptions inlaid under the skin. As long as he kept his tail between his legs and didn't use spiritual energy, and the master he was facing didn't have any ill intentions toward him and didn't choose to search his body and soul, not even an ascended spirit would notice that he was in disguise.

Even that ascended spirit from Sanyue's inner sect had been fooled face to face. But there was someone here who could see through all their tricks!

"Qiu Sha is preparing to appear at Wild Fox Country's Great Market. Southern Wan's Xuanyin won't be the only ones to have sent people here. Does she want to start an ascended spirit war in the mortal world?" Tai Sui recalled the face that child had pulled and thoughtfully said, absent-minded, "I wonder who the fox in Wild Fox Country is this time. And also... what the hell is this 'Riverward'?"

Jinping's outskirts, the Sage's Road, at the horse-tying post.

Zhou Ying was reclining inside a dull grey carriage. His eyes stopped on the word "Riverward" for a moment. Then he tossed the immortal tool aside and said with a cold smile, "What an investment she's willing to make."

Bai Ling asked, frowning, "The Luwu's disguises can even fool Sanyue's inner sect. How could she see through them so easily? Who is she, anyway?"

"Most of the immortal tools the Luwu carry come from Moon Plated Peak. The things Lin Chi's disciples make can't escape his influence," Zhou Ying said slowly. "Rumor has it that this Qiu Sha is closely connected to Lancang's Hui Xiangjun. It's normal for her to see through the little toys that come out of Moon Plated Peak."

Bai Ling was startled. "Hui Xiangjun, who had her immortal bones removed eight hundred years ago because of Moon Plated Gold?"

Zhou Ying didn't answer. He suddenly sat slightly upright and pulled the carriage curtain aside a crack.

There was a carriage team coming their way, planning to switch to sedan chairs at the horse-tying post.

Leading the way on horseback was the Marquis of Yongning. The Marquis himself dismounted and took an old lady by the arm to help her out of the carriage.

There were hardly any black hairs left on the old lady's head. She seemed to be even shorter than in memory. She got out tottering, barely coming up to the Marquis's chest. She looked as though she were about to shrink to nothing.

Just the few steps from the carriage to the sedan made her pant for breath. The sound of her cane hitting the ground was very urgent. . . One wondered what she had come to ask for in person at Southern Sage Temple when it was so hard for her to walk.

Bai Ling tactfully shut his mouth.

When Zhou Ying had watched the old lady get into the sedan and disappear on the unstained Sage's Road, Bai Ling at last quietly said, "The old lady is quite energetic. She seems to be hale and hearty."

"Let's go back." Zhou Ying expressionlessly let down the carriage curtain and picked up the previous conversation naturally, as though he hadn't been silent in the meantime. "Since she's come to us, we might as well do our bit. With her acting in such good faith, I'll help her out—send a Heavenly Question to Xuanyin's inner sect. Tell all the immortals that Qiu Sha is preparing to appear at Wild Fox Country's Great Market on the seventh day of the seventh month to sell Xiang Zhao's remains. Also, contact the Luwu."

"Yes, my lord," Bai Ling agreed. Then he asked, "What does her letter mean? Forgive my ignorance, but what is this 'Riverward'?"

Zhou Ying laughed softly. "One of the most mysterious works left behind by Hui Xiangjun. Tradition has it that it can ferry you across the Wangchuan River and let you infiltrate any forbidden place on earth."

For example, the Impassable Sea.

The Luwu's Heavenly Question soon reached the Principal Peak of Xuanyin's inner sect. When the disciple who received it finished reading it and was about to report it up the chain, a hand suddenly reached over and took the Heavenly Question scroll.

The disciple turned to look and was surprised. "Lin... Lin Chi-shishu?"

The most reclusive peak master of Xuanyin's inner sect waved a hand. "Relay a petition to the Dignitary of Rites on my behalf. I want to request a token to leave the mountain."

CHAPTER 75 - Indignant Cicadas (9)

Wei-laoban—Wei Chengxiang—yanked her hand away from the “child.”

The “child” took no notice, walking two steps ahead of her while stretching out. The flesh and bones of that body expanded. Soon, this person’s height surpassed that of Wei Chengxiang, who was already very tall, and continued to grow upward.

After another ten steps, she had become a woman nearly nine chi tall.⁵⁵

If she had been standing in a crowd, she would have been head and shoulders above everyone else!

Her long hair alone was over six chi long, so black it seemed as though it didn’t reflect light. The child’s small clothes had been stretched to rags by her big frame. She didn’t care at all. Walking through the street full of people coming and going, she simply tore the rags off.

All the passersby seemed to be blind, walking right past her without even looking up. None of them saw that there was a young woman streaking right in the middle of the street. Wei Chengxiang alone had the chance to appreciate this “scenery.”

Sadly, Wei Chengxiang couldn’t quite stand this “treat for the eyes.” Her eyelids twitched a few times, and she averted her gaze, lowering her head to look at the dirt.

The young woman calmly took a light grey robe from her mustard seed and wrapped it around herself. She twirled her fingers, and her heavy-looking head of long hair coiled itself into a bun, held in place by a plain peach wood hairpin. Her outfit was extremely plain and

neat. From behind, she seemed like a nun who had gone into a monastery hundreds of years ago.

But as soon as she turned her head, she revealed a face that was so gorgeous it was almost demonic: long, thin brows, up-tilted eyes, scarlet lips that may have been natural or may have been painted. The contrast between her white face and black hair was too strong. When this face hit your eyes, it would certainly make you blink several times.

“Why are you looking down?” said the gorgeous nun with a laugh. “What I have, don’t you have as well?”

Wei Chengxiang came from a poor family. When she had been little, she could only eat and drink her fill on mixed grain flatbread and cold water. It was already a blessing that she had been able to grow to her full height. Where would she have had room to grow anything extra?

“Senior Qiu Sha,” she said helplessly, cupping her hand, “you flatter me—I really don’t.”

It turned out that this gorgeous nun was actually Qiu Sha, who had turned both the righteous and the evil cultivators upside down.

At this time, an unknown number of ascended spirit and shed skin cultivators from Sanyue were intensively patrolling the area of Wild Fox Country with their consciousnesses; they had even sent an ascended spirit master down in person. Dongheng’s great array itself would have loved to get up and walk over to sit on Tao County. Yet this woman who was being targeted by all sides openly streaked through the street in Tao County, and a whole crowd of Chu masters couldn’t catch her!

As expected, the first ever ascended spirit evil cultivator was out of the ordinary.

As for Wei Chengxiang knowing her, that was a long story.

Five years ago, during the chaos in the East Sea, she had killed White Amaranth, the chief of the Exonerators, and that bunch of mad dogs had hunted her for two whole years.

Those two years had been awful. Before refining their spiritual bones, an open-eyed cultivator mainly relied on external objects. Without immortal tools, they were as good as unarmed. And the three disciplines of talismans, arrays, and inscriptions were broad and deep; there were many people in the spiritual mountains who'd had these disciplines poured into their heads by force by their elders yet could still hardly remember any, never mind her, with no one to teach her. Even the person who had guided her in swaggering around and bluffing was gone. She didn't want to join the Kaiming Cultivators, either—everyone said that the “Kaiming Cultivators” were meant to speak on behalf of their fellow countrymen. Had her grandpa been alive, he probably would have been very pleased for her to have such future prospects. But her grandpa had died without a bit of intact skin on him, and she had no more fellow countrymen. She had nothing to say. She could only go into hiding in Demon Country, the Land of Turmoil. For her, living was cultivation.

Two years ago, she had been besieged by the Exonerators working with another group of evil cultivators and had escaped to the neighborhood of the Lancang Spiritual Mountains. She had come to the end of the road. Her meridians had been exhausted, and she had fallen into a hidden realm. When she woke up, she found that she had fallen into a patch of late-autumn red. Late-autumn red was an unusual type of tree that grew high in the mountains. It was rare in Great Wan, so it had no formal name. This type of tree was parasitic, only budding after the beginning of autumn. The leaves were dark red, like blood, when they grew in. Tradition had it that as

soon as late-autumn red “caught fire,” the frost would come. It was often seen as a bad omen.

How could a hot and humid place like this, which didn’t even have “autumn,” have late-autumn red growing in it? Before Wei Chengxiang could work it out, the malevolent vines had twined around her. Then there was a sharp pain in her head. The fiery red vines were boring into her skull like a steel awl.

She saw a big group of people appear from the late-autumn red thicket like ghosts. There was a vine with blood red leaves growing from the top of each person’s head. These people whose bodies had been snatched by the trees stood by in identical postures, observing her or waiting to welcome her as their new companion... and her meridians were exhausted. She couldn’t move a muscle. The only thing in her head was the echoing of her skull cracking.

This scene had been unbearable. Up to now, it still regularly played out in Wei Chengxiang’s nightmares.

But just when the vines began to bore inside her skull, the reincarnation wood amulet she carried that had been silent for many years suddenly heated up and sent the late-autumn red vines wrapped around her flying away.

“*Hss...*” A voice echoed among the late-autumn red thicket, sounding like someone throwing a coquettish temper tantrum. “There’s already the mark of another tree on your spirit. How annoying.”

That place was the strangest and most frightening hidden realm Wei Chengxiang had ever been in.

And Qiu Sha, the hidden realm’s master, was the most fickle monster she had ever met.

This great monster had been living off the Lancang Spiritual Mountains for untold centuries, since before Southern He had been extinguished, so she was completely clueless about the Lancang Spiritual Mountains being split up among the four nations. When an occasional unlucky wretch wandered in by mistake, she would stick a tree branch into their head.

The great monster hadn't been in a hurry to kill her. Apparently she had been in a good mood because she was soon to leave seclusion, so she had kept Wei Chengxiang to talk to and relieve her boredom.

Wei Chengxiang was on tenterhooks while dealing with her every day. As soon as her injuries improved slightly, she started looking for an opportunity to escape. The great monster was an absolute good-for-nothing. Like a cat playing with a mouse, she let her struggle, deliberately waiting until she thought she had successfully escaped to reach out a paw to hold her down.

Wei Chengxiang simply couldn't describe the despair that filled her heart the moment she heard her laughter in her ear. But just as the late-autumn red vines twining around her pulled her down, a bracelet suddenly dropped out from among the vines. By some coincidence, it fell onto Wei Chengxiang's wrist.

All the vines instantly went limp and dropped Wei Chengxiang onto the ground.

While she was dizzy from the fall, she heard a grim voice behind her say, "I've spent eight hundred years searching for it, and it would never appear. Instead it's taken a liking to a little girl like you."

This bracelet was called the Law Breaker. It was the only immortal tool in the world that had no grade. When it had been born, even the Lancang Mountains' great array had trembled. Apart from Moon Plated Gold, it was the work of the era's legendary toolmaking

master Hui Xiangjun that Lancang most coveted. Unfortunately, it seemed to have its own ideas. It only appeared before those for whom it had an affinity. When its master had died and her way had vanished, the Law Breaker Bracelet had gone out of control—Qiu Sha claimed to be Hui Xiangjun’s direct disciple, but Wei Chengxiang thought that she was just talking big. She figured that this Qiu woman was most likely a somewhat addle-brained saddle horse of the type that couldn’t take in new ideas even after eight hundred years of cultivating to enlightenment.

Because the Law Breaker Bracelet had unexpectedly chosen her as its master, Wei Chengxiang had become the first person in eight hundred years to survive the great monster’s clutches.

The great monster not only didn’t kill her, she also casually healed her injuries and gifted her a complete set of ancient books that the Lancang Sword Sect’s inner sect had used, and even shamelessly claimed to be halfway to being her teacher.

Not long after Wei Chengxiang left the Lancang Spiritual Mountains, she heard the news about the emergence of an evildoer. That great monster had deliberately left seclusion to go reach the ascended spirit stage within Chu’s borders in showy style, delivering a fierce slap in the face to Sanyue, luring them into sending down a master. Then she had killed Xiang Zhao.

Now that she was announcing all over the world that she was going to sell Xiang Zhao’s spiritual bones, Wei Chengxiang thought that she was going to play the same old trick again, though she didn’t know who her target was this time.

Qiu Sha looked her over for a moment, then clicked her tongue. “I see that you haven’t improved at all.”

Wei Chengxiang politely answered, “The same to you.”

“Damn girl. You’re really unlikeable.” Qiu Sha rolled her eyes at her. “I suppose you know what kind of ascended spirit battlefield Seventeen Li Town will become? Yet an open-eyed ant like you actually dared to come crawling over here.”

Wei Chengxiang said, “Low cultivation and going back on your word are two different things. I took your things, senior, and I owe you. Since you called me, it’s appropriate for me to come settle my debt.”

Qiu Sha said, “You see how bitter it is to be an ‘evil cultivator’ with no one and nothing to rely on? Inexplicably accumulating debt and being summoned across thousands of li to come give up your life—I said before that you should be my disciple.”

Wei Chengxiang, not turning a hair, said, “I beg to be excused. Though I owe you a debt of gratitude, senior, you must forgive me for being unable to agree with the way you conduct yourself. It would be a waste of breath for the two of us to debate our views. There is no need.”

Qiu Sha’s long, shapely eyebrows rose. “Wei Chengxiang, you dare to find fault with me. You’re quite bold.”

Wei Chengxiang said indifferently, “Supposing that I had a favor to ask of you, senior, naturally I would want to be nice to you. But now, while I am offering my services to you of my own free will, it is because you have some use for me. Wouldn’t you say that makes sense?”

Like a difficult child, Qiu Sha instantly abandoned shame and lost her temper. “I hate you!”

Wei Chengxiang figured that she couldn’t smack her to death. Not indulging her in the least, she said, “Isn’t that a coincidence? I feel the same.”

Qiu Sha: "..."

She sulked for a long time. Then her eyes turned, and she gave a mysterious smile. "You'll regret that, little devil. There's a big secret I meant to tell you, but now that you've made me mad, I'm not going to say it."

This erratic great monster hardly ever said anything sensible. If you let her get to you, you would lose. What she called a big secret was most likely something like "There's a tea leaf caught in your teeth." Wei Chengxiang, who had plenty of experience, checked her teeth and didn't take it to heart. "With my negligible cultivation, I am afraid I am unqualified to aid you in a fight, senior. I wonder what assignment you have called me here on?"

Qiu Sha waved a hand and said, "At least you have the wisdom of self-knowledge. I want to use the Law Breaker Bracelet."

Wei Chengxiang froze. She clamped a hand over her wrist.

An invisible bracelet appeared on her skinny, bony wrist, suffused with warm light by the setting sun. Because it was so exquisite, it looked out of place next to her ragged clothes.

The bracelet was made up of an inner and an outer ring inlaid together. On the outer ring were carved complicated openwork designs that revealed the inscriptions on the inner ring. Looking closely, the inscriptions were constantly changing. Looking at them made you dizzy.

"Now that Xiang Zhao has died by my hand, presumably Sanyue won't underestimate me. They're probably getting ready to turn out in full force. My resources are limited. I can't get the better of those immortals. So I've already sent letters to Kunlun and Lingyun's people. Xuanyin... Ha, Xuanyin will probably be rather on their guard

against me, though fortunately the demon they've been sheltering will bring that son-of-a-bitch Lin Chi here for me. When all four great sects gather together at once, won't that be exciting?"

Wei Chengxiang frowned, then saw Qiu Sha lift her wrist almost tenderly and stroke the Law Breaker Bracelet. At a slight touch from her fingertips, the Law Breaker's inner ring began to move quickly. Soon, an inscription floated out of it, perfectly passing through the openwork designs on the outer ring to appear.

Wei Chengxiang's spiritual sense was immediately touched; she dimly sensed the scant spiritual energy swarming in the vicinity begin to spin.

Qiu Sha smiled and stretched out her hand to take a lottery ticket from Wei Chengxiang's Silver Tray. When she tore it open to look, it turned out that inside was the "ultimate" prize that hundreds of children hadn't been able to pull.

"It's mine." Qiu Sha rudely took a wooden carving of a gold-armored zheng from her shelves and put it away in her clothes. Then she said to Wei Chengxiang, "They're all slaving over Xiangjun's relics, all of them with bad intentions. The situation will be as chaotic as you could want. But it still won't be enough. I want you to bring all of Tao County inside the Law Breaker Bracelet and make this damn place even more chaotic."

Wei Chengxiang said, "The Law Breaker Bracelet can change a place's fortunes. A place enveloped by this bracelet won't be seen by the eyes of any immortal mountain, won't be divined by any stars. All kinds of abnormal things will happen here. All natural and divine laws will loosen—incriptions will suddenly cease to be effective, arrays will leak spiritual energy in places people don't expect, the spiritual energy around one cultivator might suddenly flow to another cultivator... I can activate the Law Breaker Bracelet, but I won't be able to control what happens after it's activated."

“Obviously,” Qiu Sha said impatiently. “You stole that bracelet from me. Don’t I understand it better than you do?”

“I didn’t steal it. It was the Law Breaker Bracelet that chose me,” Wei Chengxiang retorted calmly. “After all, no one wants to end up in the hands of a deranged master—senior, don’t get angry. What I mean is that there’s no saying whether it will choose to help you or your enemies.”

Having heard this, Qiu Sha actually didn’t get angry. With a wave of her sleeves, she stood and put her hands behind her back. She looked up at the sky. For a moment, the evil air about her vanished, and there was an appearance of still pools and tranquil mountains about her. At last she seemed like an ascended spirit riding the clouds.

“Girl,” Qiu Sha said, “do you know why ascended spirit cultivators cannot emerge outside of spiritual mountains?”

Wei Chengxiang raised her eyebrows.

“Because it’s one of those divine laws. Never mind an ascended spirit, even a late stage established foundation will be observed by your Great Wan’s Xuanyin’s Sea of Stars and Chu’s Heaven Viewing Platform. That asshole ‘fate’ pushes its lackeys to leave the mountains and take down these people. At the same time, it doesn’t rest; in the shortest time possible, it brings down all possible disasters on those ants who dare to violate divine commandments, not letting the ants pass the barrier to an ascended spirit,” Qiu Sha said coldly. “If I can’t break those bullshit ‘heavenly commandments,’ I’ll be buried in Wild Fox Country.”

Wei Chengxiang wanted to say something, but when the words came to her lips, she sighed and swallowed them.

“I don’t care whose side it stands on,” Qiu Sha said. “I came here to play for high stakes, so shut the fuck up. If I die, I don’t need you to follow me into the grave.”

CHAPTER 76 - Indignant Cicadas (10)

The Wild Fox Country Great Market began on the fifteenth day of the sixth month and ended on the seventh of the seventh month.

Though it had nearly become a local holiday, the “black market” was still the “black market”; the Wild Fox Country Great Market took place at night.

On the fifteenth of the sixth month, the night of the full moon, the Snake King’s Immortal Palace would begin holding “night feasts,” admitting up to fifty people every day. During the feast, apart from a menu, each guest would also receive a “treasure list,” detailing the treasures that would be sold that night. If a guest liked something, they would check off the item they wanted and place spiritual stones and the treasure list into one of the mustard seeds prepared to hold goods at the feast; it would be up to them how much to pay.

When the night feast ended, the puppet attendants would return the mustard seeds to all the guests. If the deal was successful, the item would be in the mustard seed. If they had offered a lower price than someone else, the precise number of spiritual stones would be returned with thanks. The buyer and seller never saw each other, and the buyers at the feast had no need to haggle until they were red in the face. While the money the Snake King could make as a middleman in this way wasn’t as much as he could have made through haggling, it saved on a great deal of conflict.

For a bit of money, you could buy the night feast treasure lists in advance—though they wouldn’t necessarily be complete. Some people sold things that couldn’t stand up to the light of day and often only revealed them once they had entered the night feast.

Each night’s entry fee fluctuated depending on whether there were any “big-ticket items.” Usually it was one or two liang of jade

stamps.

As soon as the middle ten days of the sixth month began, the “admitted” sellers began sending “notes” to the Immortal Palace one after another—they chose for themselves which day they wanted to shill their wares. The slots were first come first serve, and once a particular day’s treasure list was filled up, the rest would be postponed according to the order their requests came in. The “notes” had to include a down payment in advance for the Snake King, and on the night they were to be sold, the goods had to be handed over to the Snake King for inspection. If the goods weren’t up to standard, they would be withdrawn from the treasure list. The down payments generally weren’t returned; they were used to pay back the entry fees paid by the buyers who chose those items.

All of that was big business. There was also small business.

The majority of people weren’t up to the trade at the night feasts. During the Great Market, every day when the sun set, a night market would appear in the streets of Wild Fox Country. All sorts of people mixed together at the night market, trading in all kinds of little knickknacks. There were also local commoners peddling Chu specialties. Each vendor had to buy that year’s Ghost Market Certificate from the Snake King to hold a space and guarantee their safety. It would cost anywhere from one or two liang of silver to one jade stamp stone.

Petty profits were subject to all kinds of quibbling; any coin that could be saved counted. Big business was cowardly in following the rules, not daring to be too greedy even if it meant missing out on profits. The Snake King had amassed his fortune through trickery and had built Wild Fox Country single-handed. He’d had some tricks up his sleeves—if that idiot Xu Rucheng hadn’t come in and beaten the master craftsman to a pulp, it probably really would have taken the Luwu a few years to infiltrate.

This year, Wild Fox Country began to bustle unusually early. At the start of the sixth month, before the mats had been laid for the night feasts, all kinds of vendors started coming one after another to set up their stalls. When Xu Rucheng went out for a stroll, he could feel the oppressive spiritual energy. For a moment, he became even more worried in spite of himself. He secretly had a discussion with his colleague Lao Tian: “Is there some way we can come up with to make the mortals evacuate this place? If what’s-her-name really does appear and ascended spirit masters start fighting, never mind the evil cultivators who value resources more than their lives, what will happen to Seventeen Li Town’s common people?”

Lao Tian tactfully reminded him, “The common people of Seventeen Li Town belong to Chu. I thought that our brothers from Yuzhou hated the Chu most of all?”

What does it have to do with you? Have you forgotten that you’re a spy from a foreign country?

Xu Rucheng was silent for a moment. “Yes, my whole family died at the hands of the Chu. But that was done by the Qilin Guard leading Chu soldiers. It had nothing to do with the common people. Those bastards at the Qilin Guard are all nasty pieces of work. They wouldn’t balk at exploiting mortals.”

There were many common cultivators from every country in Tao County. The mortals who did business here more or less all had some spiritual stones. The Qilin Guard would periodically buy them all up, supposedly offering less than half the price of what spiritual stones cost on the market. It was all the same if someone didn’t want to sell. Never mind that the Qilin Guard turned a blind eye on real evil cultivators; they kept an extremely careful watch over mortals attempting to sell spiritual stones on the black market.

Lao Tian then said, “Don’t worry. Since she’s announced herself so early, she won’t necessarily come—won’t she be walking right into a

trap if she comes? We recently received reliable information that that individual's traces have appeared in several places in Chu. Sanyue's inner sect masters are hunting for her all over the country right now. I think this is a feint. It's likely her goal is something else."

Having heard this, Xu Rucheng thought it made sense. He nodded hesitantly, then said doubtfully, "Isn't what's-her-name supposed to be completely on her own? How can she be in several places at once?"

Lao Tian shook his head. "Being completely on her own is information that she herself released. When she's being mysterious, she's too mysterious, and when she's being arrogant, she's too arrogant. You can't rely on rumor. But at any rate Sanyue's inner sect belongs to the orthodox path. They're different from the Qilin Guard, who don't have to answer to Ways of the Heart. The inner sect masters of any country must abstain from harming the common people. Even if there really is a clash, they'll still contain the battlefield within a mustard seed. Haven't you seen that all those evil cultivators have dared to come get in on the fun? This damn Tao County—nothing planted here grows, and whether you can get any fish from the river depends on the weather. Wild Fox Country is the only thing that's made this place turn slightly for the better. The minor merchants and peddlers have to use this month to cover the costs of their whole family's daily expenses. If you keep them from coming, do you expect them to fill themselves up drinking the northwest wind?"

Was your life more important, or was money more important?

There was no saying for sure. It depended on who you asked. No two lives had the same price.

Xu Rucheng understood only too well. Hearing this, he sighed and didn't mention it again.

As the fifteenth of the sixth month approached, the group of Luwu didn't even dare to meditate and practice their lessons anymore, because dozens of Qilin Guardsmen in disguise had established themselves at the Immortal Palace, and just from what Xu Rucheng could tell, there were a dozen inner sect established foundations and four or five he suspected of being ascended spirits. On the inside of the snakeskin Xu Rucheng wore, the inscriptions heated up painfully every day. Unless it came down to absolute necessity, no one would dare to use spiritual energy.

They were as careful as possible when sending routine reports, even having three or four people standing guard. They were already using a backup second-class encrypting inscription that they had brought along, and they changed their array and location every day.

On the fourteenth of the sixth month, the blue moon in the sky was only a sliver away from being full. The treasure list for the first night's feast had already been revealed, and the entry fee had been raised to one blue jade.

Apart from daily operations, the Snake King's Immortal Palace was basically under the control of the Qilin Guard. The treasure lists, the guest lists... all of it had to pass through the hands of the Qilin Guard before the "Snake King" Xu Rucheng got his turn.

A Kaiming Cultivator like Xu Rucheng, who came from a common background, always kept count when using spiritual stones and couldn't resist converting spiritual stones into gold, silver, and copper, then automatically thinking of how many centuries you would need to labor in a factory to earn that money, how many families it could keep well fed for how many years.

When he got the treasure list, Xu Rucheng looked at it for a while and went numb all over: a flood dragon tendon worth a hundred liang of jade stamps, a paramount grade elixir worth thirty liang of blue jade, cloth of gold armor worth ten liang of white spirits...

White spirits! Oh, mother, he'd never even touched a white spirit!

All the sellers' listings were crowded into the first few days of the night feasts; they were afraid of bumping into the great personage who would be presenting the final item in the later stage.

There was only one solitary item on the list for the seventh day of the seventh month: *Set of spiritual bones of an ascended spirit prick cultivator,⁵⁶ excellent quality for toolmaking; total cost one thousand jin of white spirits; the weight of the bones is 20 jin 6 liang, the price to be divided according to weight.*

Chu's writing and Wan's writing were similar. Many characters were used interchangeably. This seller's listing was written in Chu characters, but Xu Rucheng recognized at a glance that this was the handwriting of the person who had used his immortal tool that day.

Just then, Lao Tian ran over and said to him, "Half of the ascended spirits in the Immortal Palace just left."

Xu Rucheng quickly asked, "What's going on? Didn't they just receive Qiu... what's-her-name's listing?"

Lao Tian said, "When an ascended spirit dies, the leftover spiritual bones will weigh at least a few hundred jin. There won't only be this little bit. I hear that traces of Xiang Zhao's spiritual bones have suddenly appeared all over the place. Presumably the Sanyue inner sect doesn't have enough people... How dishonest. She's too dishonest. Can she actually have more henchmen than there are masters in Sanyue's inner sect? You must remember to report this matter to our lord."

"Oh?" Just then, the evil god Tai Sui's voice suddenly sounded in Xu Rucheng's ear. "The seventh day of the seventh month?"

In recent days, no matter how he burned incense, the evil god had ignored him. Finally hearing him speak, as soon as Lao Tian had left, Xu Rucheng hurried to ask, “Senior, is there something wrong with that date?”

Tai Sui was silent for a while.

After that mysterious young woman from Wan had sold the empty Silver Tray Lottery ticket, she had disappeared from his line of sight. Before, he had been able to find her with a thought, but now, no matter how he searched, it seemed as though there was a haze before his eyes. Someone was obscuring his vision.

Of course, Tai Sui didn’t absolutely have to see her. If he couldn’t see her, then he would drop it. No matter how anxious everyone in Wild Fox Country was, it wouldn’t hinder him in any way. He had been planning on returning to the divine image to rest. But as the Wild Fox Country Great Market drew near, all of a sudden, something fiercely prodded his spiritual sense. He suspected that if he had been human, his eyelids would have been twitching to the tune of the “Ambush from Ten Sides.”⁵⁷

“It’s nothing,” Tai Sui said slowly. “Let me give you a free bit of advice. Starting today, when you correspond with your lord, you had better write the date on your letters.”

“Why?” Xu Rucheng said doubtfully.

The communication device was only so big. Normally it didn’t matter if a message was a few words more or less. If you couldn’t write it all at once, you would send a few letters, in order of priority. But lately the Luwu had been working cautiously, going around with their tails tucked between their legs, cutting down the number of letters sent back and forth as much as possible. Each time they sent

a letter, several people had to rack their brains to stuff increasingly more information into a limited space—where would there be room to write the date?

There was only the Xia River between them; wasn't it the same day in Chu as in Wan?

Tai Sui said impatiently, "You don't have to listen to me."

This "divinity" was especially loathsome; he was only pleasant when he wanted to swindle Xu Rucheng or order him around. This was his usual behavior.

Xu Rucheng wanted to ask more questions, but there was once again silence on the other end.

Though Xu Rucheng was completely puzzled, through some mysterious urge, he still went along with the evil god's instructions that day and wrote the date in a corner.

As soon as the letter was sent, he regretted it, suspecting that Mr. Bai would think there was something wrong with his head.

Meanwhile, in a small farmyard in Great Wan's Yuzhou, a man so pale he was almost transparent had been sunning himself in the yard all day.

Yuzhou was hot and humid, and the sun of the sixth month was especially vicious, but this man seemed to be made of snow and ice that had frozen over thousands of years. The scorching sun couldn't leave a single mark on him. While the cicadas shouted themselves hoarse, not a drop of sweat fell from him.

The sun was setting in the west. His eyes were closed. A kite on a broken string fell out of the sky and landed in the yard.

The man in the rattan chair opened his eyes and saw a piece of white paper float out of the kite and change to human form. “My lord, the Luwu have sent a report.”

The man in the rattan chair—Zhou Ying—nodded to him almost imperceptibly and listened as Bai Ling went over the contents of the letter.

“The letter is in Xiao Xu’s handwriting and tone,” Bai Ling said. “My lord, since sending that letter, Qiu Sha hasn’t contacted us again. The Great Market is about to begin, and now different parts of Xiang Zhao’s spiritual bones have appeared in various places in Chu. What is she planning?”

Zhou Ying absent-mindedly said, “Lin has reached the South Sea. She will come.”

Bai Ling said, “Sanyue has sent a group of ascended spirits to hunt for her everywhere, and people have come from Northern Li and Southern Shu. Most likely they are coming for Hui Xiangjun’s relics, not to help her. I truly cannot imagine how she plans to escape.”

Zhou Ying muttered to himself for a moment. “The mist has been very heavy over the Xia River these last few days. This mist is quite strange, and I am unable to see the weather conditions on the opposite bank.. The Luwu are there—have they noticed anything unusual in Tao County?”

For safety’s sake, Bai Ling inspected Xu Rucheng’s letter once more. “Nothing... Oh, wait. For some reason, Xiao Xu wrote today’s date at the end.”

After hearing this, Zhou Ying froze, then actually sat up slightly straighter. “The date?”

Bai Ling said, “Yes, my lord... What is it?”

“Give it to me,” Zhou Ying said with interest. “Who is this Luwu who wrote the letter?”

Zhou Ying treated everyone with indiscriminate indifference. He never took any “unnecessary” care—he had little care to give to begin with. Only when he was plotting against others did he pay attention to what they were thinking. He felt very secure in handing the Luwu over to Bai Ling and normally only used them. Had Bai Ling not prevented him, he might have given each Luwu a number for a codename. This was his first time asking about one.

“His name is Xu Rucheng, a native of Yuzhou...” Bai Ling could recite the life history of each Luwu. On being asked, he briefly told him about Xu Rucheng’s background.

Zhou Ying nodded casually; it was unclear how much of it he had listened to. “He noted the date... How did he ever think of that? Xiao Bai, this batch of Luwu you’ve trained is remarkable.”

Bai Ling: “...”

Remarkable?

He thought that Xu Rucheng was fairly unremarkable. The young fellow had a broad nose and wide eyes and even a mouth twice as large as normal. Any thought that passed through his head appeared on his features. He was excessively loyal and righteous. In fact, he wasn’t very well suited to infiltrating a foreign country as an “evil cultivator.” It was only that Bai Ling had taken pity due to the debt of blood he carried and had specially approved this opportunity for him... Could he have appraised him wrongly?

While His Highness wasn’t very good at conducting himself as a person, he was quite sharp when it came to judging people. Bai Ling knew he fell short in this respect and involuntarily began to

doubt himself. He didn't dare to say anything more, only asked, "My lord, what is the use of the date?"

Zhou Ying said, smiling, "Wait and see."

The next day, the day of the fifteenth of the sixth month, reasonably speaking, the Snake King's Immortal Palace ought to have become a busy mess. But Xu Rucheng's letter seemed to come even a little earlier than usual. He detailed everything that had happened during the first night feast without reference to importance. He described Chu's Qilin Guard setting up defenses; the night feast seemed to have gone very smoothly, without any abnormalities.

But starting from the sixteenth of the sixth month, all news from the Luwu in Wild Fox Country ceased.

The seventeenth, the eighteenth... for three full days, it was as if all the Luwu had died overnight. They didn't convey a single word.

Bai Ling couldn't help starting to worry: had they been exposed? Had something gone wrong?

But in fact there had been more than one batch of Luwu sent to infiltrate Wild Fox Country, and there were even some Xu Rucheng and the others didn't know about, mixed in among the ordinary evil cultivators and acting on their own. Even if Xu Rucheng and his companions had been exposed and wiped out, how could the other Luwu not have sent any word?

Bai Ling couldn't resist saying to Zhou Ying, "My lord, why don't I go across the river and take a look?"

Zhou Ying waved a hand. "Not today."

Bai Ling stared. "Not... not today? Then what day?"

Why did he need to choose an auspicious time?

Meanwhile, it was obvious that they weren't the only ones who had lost contact with Wild Fox Country.

On the nineteenth of the sixth month, masters from every country who were waiting and watching from the sidelines could no longer hold themselves back. One after another, they went into Wild Fox Country.

At the same time, news came that parts of Xiang Zhao's spiritual bones had been found in various places in Chu. The priceless spiritual bones of the ascended spirit sword cultivator had been tossed all over the place by Qiu Sha. Piecing them all together, there were precisely 20 jin 6 liang missing.

Starting on the twentieth of the sixth month, the Sanyue cultivators who were hunting everywhere for Qiu Sha converged from all directions on Tao County, preparing to besiege the bold evildoer.

The strange thing was that the people who entered Tao County later also seemed to vanish into thin air. Whether they were established foundations or ascended spirits, as soon as they went in, there was no more news of them.

Apart from Zhou Ying, no one could hold out and keep watching from the sidelines.

At the end of the sixth month, even Lin Chi came on shore from the South Sea and proceeded alone toward Tao County's Seventeen Li Town.

And meanwhile, the Luwu in the eye of the storm felt that they were dreaming. In Wild Fox Country, from the sixteenth day of the sixth month to the seventh day of the seventh month, twenty whole days had disappeared.

Time had disappeared!

CHAPTER 77 - Indignant Cicadas (11)

The end of the sixth month to the beginning of the seventh month spanned the transition between summer and autumn. Wild Fox Country—as well as the rest of Tao County—had had neither wind nor rain, yet out of nowhere, the weather cooled; even the steam on the Xia River faded.

For ordinary people, this wasn't too big of a deal. Most of them thought some clouds had floated over and brought a cold wind. They closed their eyes, opened their eyes, and a day had passed. Whether today was the sixth month or the seventh, it didn't impact their two meals a day.

But those who were caught just on the line between life and death were stunned.

Those who had been on the point of death vanished silently: all the items they used daily were in their original places, their residences remained, and their bedding still bore a human imprint—only the people themselves were gone.

Those who had been on the point of life were tossed into the human world without warning: women who had been close to the end of their pregnancies woke up and found that their children had somehow come out—they could even open their eyes, just in time to stare back in confusion at their mothers!

But for cultivators, dates were very important.

The state of the whole universe influenced the spiritual energy in the human world at every instant. Even a person's spiritual image had a great deal to do with the time and date of their birth. The times at which elixirs, immortal tools, and other such objects could be taken from the furnace were all strictly limited; they couldn't be

disarranged. Some special inscriptions even had to be altered slightly depending on the date. So the great majority of people carried a calendar block with them.

Xu Rucheng, a half-immortal who didn't dare to meditate under the eyes of the Qilin Guard and Sanyue's inner sect masters, had to lie down and sleep like a mortal—as soon as he opened his eyes, he thought there was something wrong.

Before he could fully wake up, he heard Tai Sui's grim voice: "I was just wondering whether I would need to request a bolt of lightning from the high heavens to strike you awake. Not bad, Cheng-da-bao. Not even diamond is as sturdy as your slumber."

Xu Rucheng's tongue hadn't smoothed out yet. He mumbled, "Do you have any orders, senior?"

"Stupid baby, why don't you take a look at your calendar block?"

In a daze, Xu Rucheng looked up according to his instructions and saw that the calendar block that ought to have said "the sixteenth of the sixth month" unexpectedly said "the seventh of the seventh month"!

Xu Rucheng: "..."

What was wrong with this calendar block?

"Senior..."

"Shh, shut up!"

He was just about to speak when Tai Sui shouted at him to stop. One of his Luwu colleagues, almost disheveled, charged into the bedroom. "Your calendar block... Hey, were you saying something just now?"

Xu Rucheng gave a start and woke up completely: wait, weren't outsiders unable to hear him talking to Tai Sui?

Luckily, his colleague quickly redirected his attention toward his calendar block. "... Yours also says the seventh day of the seventh month."

"What?"

"Nearly half of the arrays in the Immortal Palace without supplemental spiritual stones 'died' because they had exhausted their spiritual stones, and quite a few inscriptions have been damaged or destroyed for no reason. Several of the spiritual beasts the Snake King kept have simply vanished. The Magpie Bridge flowers⁵⁸ nurtured with green ore in the rear court hadn't grown buds yesterday, and today there are so many flowers it's flesh-crawling... those things don't bloom until Qixi! What the hell is going on? Did we just lose twenty days for no reason?"

Xu Rucheng and his colleague looked at each other in dismay for a moment, then suddenly said "oh no" and ran for it.

The treasure list! The seventh day of the seventh month was the day Qiu Sha was planning to appear!

The Luwu, the Qilin Guard... not even the masters of Sanyue's inner sect had seen this level of combat. They were caught unawares and for a time completely at a loss.

In fact, Tai Sui was the first to have noticed something odd—and not because he had looked at a calendar block.

After taking back the piece of his consciousness that had been left behind in the knotted bag Xu Rucheng carried, he had finally

remembered that he had once been human. Along with the memories had come a peculiar sense of oppression: his original body was in some extremely secret place, and he was bound by irresistible rules that seemed determined to obliterate all evidence of his existence. Apart from those with karmic ties to him, no one could mention him.

But just now, the binding sense of oppression had vanished.

It was hard to describe this feeling. It wasn't that the force binding him had ceased to exist, it was that his connection to his distant body had been broken. He had become untethered, but within a certain range, he had also become "free."

Of his escaped consciousness, one part had been in the Snake King's divine image, and another part had been in A-Hua's relic—that knotted bag. Therefore, he had originally only been able to go to those two places.

Apart from that, Tai Sui's consciousness had only been able to roam through living people: when people believed in Tai Sui and whispered to him through the amulets, they would draw Tai Sui's consciousness to their bodies, because worship was a "tie" in itself. Only it was rather weak; the "Tai Sui" these people spoke of was after all only a construct of their own imaginations. With this weak tie, Tai Sui could only unilaterally sense their joy and pain as well as their appeals. He had no way to respond, and he couldn't act for himself.

After Xu Rucheng had destroyed all the amulets, while people wouldn't say anything aloud, when they ran into trouble, they would still repeat "Bless me, Tai Sui" in their minds. This kind of connection was even weaker. It couldn't even draw his consciousness. It only amounted to noise in his ears.

But now, Tai Sui suddenly found that, like in his vague memories, his consciousness could move at will through reincarnation wood!

But even better than in his memories, he could not only move at will, he could also control the reincarnation wood as if it were his own body!

He could move!

It had been too long since this lonely divine image had known what it felt like to be his own master. Inside the reincarnation wood, he stretched his “arms” and “legs,” all but running a few laps. For a moment he forgot what form he was in and accidentally pulled up the roots of a reincarnation wood tree, nearly bringing down the house next to him. Then he no longer dared to indulge at random.

The only inconvenience was that his existence was no longer unmentionable. If he spoke to Xu Rucheng without restraint again, the big idiot would probably be taken for a real idiot.

Tai Sui had the feeling that if someone picked up one of his amulets and spoke to him now, he might simply be able to answer... though he was worried about scaring them—Tao County’s citizens had already had enough scares today. So he hadn’t had a chance to try it out.

His consciousness circled the surroundings in a blink and found that Tao County was the limit of his freedom.

Something had cut Tao County off from the outside world.

“That Qiu Sha has some object,” Tai Sui thought.

His logic in telling Xu Rucheng to write the date had been very simple: one person couldn’t defeat the whole Sanyue Sect. If she had dared to come to Wild Fox Country, she must have been

prepared to be ganged up on. In a group fight with people whose cultivation level was similar to yours, the simplest strategy was to control the number of your enemies, ensure that you would only be facing opponents you were capable of facing; you couldn't let them get together. And there were two ways of not letting them gather: separate them in space, or create a time difference.

It was hard to meddle with space. Even if she had done it, she wouldn't have been able to keep it out of sight of the "Snake King," the local tyrant. But evidently she hadn't. So it had to be time—when she had deliberately sent the listing in ahead of time, making an appointment for the seventh day of the seventh month before the Great Market had even started, that had substantiated his guess.

Tai Sui had at first thought that the seventh day of the seventh month was a cover-up, and that she had some kind of superior immortal tool that could create an illusion related to time. That was why he had casually brought it up and told Idiot Xu to remember to mark the date when he communicated with the outside world, as a precaution.

But it seemed that it wasn't an illusion at all.

She had really thrown Tao County's time into disarray!

If this had been done by an immortal tool, what grade must it be at? Shed skin? Or was it a divine tool at the heart of a mountain, of the grade of the Bell of Tribulation?

Odd... what exactly was the "Bell of Tribulation"? Why had such a thing suddenly popped into his head?

As Tai Sui wandered through all the reincarnation wood trees in the county, getting some fresh air and exercise, he considered this "Bell of Tribulation." Suddenly, his spiritual sense gave a signal.

A reincarnation wood thicket moved on its own in answer to his thoughts, the trees collectively raising their canopies, “peeping” up at the sky. He saw that the sky, where day had just broken, was changing rapidly. The sun, which had just risen in the east, “ran” restlessly toward the western sky as though there was a steam engine attached to its ass. It leapt below the horizon, leaving a freshly-washed starry sky.

The bewildered cultivators at the Immortal Palace hadn't even finished washing their faces when the lanterns at the gates lit up!

Tai Sui caught a familiar female voice. It was saying: “In a place where the Law Breaker Bracelet is operating, there must be one fixed rule. The fixed rule here is that ‘Qiu Sha will appear at Wild Fox Country’s night feast on the seventh day of the seventh month.’ Apart from this rule, everything else here is up to the will of heaven. You’re best off helping yourself.”

The Law Breaker Bracelet?

Tai Sui scanned with his consciousness and found the mysterious young woman who had been selling Silver Tray Lottery tickets before. The prohibition preventing him from seeing her had also disappeared in the disorder in Tao County.

The young woman dressed as a man was standing facing a female “iron pagoda.” Tai Sui was in a tree, but his line of sight was level with hers. When he met those evil eyes, Tai Sui understood at once who had been blocking his vision: this was Qiu Sha!

Qiu Sha said, “Thanks. Go hide yourself. It doesn't matter if you die, but don't get in my way.”

The young woman dressed as a man called her to a halt and said, “Don't forget what you promised me. I don't care whether you want to hunt and kill shed skins or whether you want to hack apart the

Golden Hand. If you pierce the sky, pierce the bit above your own head. Don't involve the innocent."

Qiu Sha gave an affected *tsk*. "Just listen to that. Is that how an 'evil cultivator' ought to talk? Are you from that... what the hell does Southern Wan call them? Oh, right, Heaven's Design Pavilion—are you some kind of irregular salaried worker from Heaven's Design Pavilion?"

"'Evil cultivator' is a name they've forced onto me. I can't control what other people think, but I don't think I am an evil cultivator. Why should I talk like one?" the young woman dressed as a man said. "You're an ascended spirit master. Heaven and earth record what you say. If you have the audacity to renege on your promise, take care that the Law Breaker Bracelet doesn't strike back against you."

"How can a little person like you be so talkative?" With these last words, Qiu Sha turned and left.

She licked her lips, her long, narrow eyes glinting like a starving wolf's. She turned into a windstorm, swirling aggressively, tearing off half the canopy of the reincarnation wood tree next to her.

Good heavens!

Tai Sui, eavesdropping from the reincarnation wood tree, applauded the excellence of this feat. He had the feeling that she had plucked him bald, his "head" going from verdant green to chilly and bare.

This person's speech and mannerisms were precisely the way common folklore described a demon. Tai Sui had heard the young woman dressed as a man mention that Qiu Sha wanted to "hunt and kill shed skins" and "hack apart the Golden Hand"; he didn't know whether she had just been exaggerating, but when he'd heard it, even the trees had broken into gooseflesh!

He'd never even seen a living shed skin!

Without any hesitation, Tai Sui passed through the reincarnation wood thicket next to him, chasing after Qiu Sha.

But a pair of eyes appeared in the windstorm and turned his way with a false smile, looking at the reincarnation wood trees that were moving on their own.

The great monster extended a finger that was a joint longer than other people's and pulled down her eyelid, making a face at him. "Worth—less—wretch."

Tai Sui: "..."

What, I came over to watch the fun, and that's pissed you off?

After Qiu Sha finished insulting him, she laughed heartily, her laughter echoing in the sky over Tao County like thunder, scaring a bunch of babies who ought to have been in their mothers' bellies into crying... along with the babies' mothers.

Tai Sui's troublemaking voice sounded in Xu Rucheng's ear: "The monster's coming, call your colleagues, get out of the way."

While others were frozen in place by that laugh and had no attention to spare to look his way, Xu Rucheng quickly asked, keeping his voice low, "Senior, what's going on?"

Tai Sui didn't have time to answer. An ascended spirit master could turn distance into nothing. In the time it took them to have this exchange, Qiu Sha had already landed in front of the Immortal Palace's gate.

Compared to her, the subdued and dignified great gate of the Immortal Palace seemed a little poky in height. If she were to cross

the threshold, she would even have to bend her head a little!

Unfortunately, she didn't know what it meant to bend her head. She examined the glazed lantern at the gate and waved her sleeve. There was a huge sound, and the stone gate of the Immortal Palace went to pieces. The third-class inscriptions were no match for her slap. They all disintegrated.

“That's much lighter and more spacious,” Qiu Sha said, smiling. She turned her head and beckoned to a dumbstruck peddler nearby. “There's no limit on guests for tonight's feast. Why not come watch the fun?”

The peddler had gone out first thing in the morning and hadn't noticed that there was anything out of the ordinary about the date. He was peddling his three-wheeled little cart, going to sell breakfast as usual. But before he could open up shop, the sky got dark. He thought he was dreaming. Now that he had been unexpectedly pointed out by the great monster, the peddler knocked the roller chain off his cart, so scared he put both feet on the ground and ran off with the cart using brute force.

Qiu Sha cleared her throat. Imitating the tone of a peddler crying his wares, she called, “Spareribs! Cheap spareribs! Five hundred liang of white spirits per jin—”

Before she could finish her patter, a voice gave a loud shout: “You dare, evildoer!”

One of the Sanyue ascended spirits who had been left to look after the Immortal Palace was also a sword cultivator. No sooner had he spoken than his sword flashed like moonlight on snow, aiming a blow right toward Qiu Sha.

The blow seemed to split all of Seventeen Li Town in half. Never mind the place where the tip of the sword pointed; in the

aftershocks of that sword energy alone, Xu Rucheng and the other half-immortals were forced to take out protective instruments.

And the unfortunate peddler from before hadn't gotten far!

A gnarled and twisted reincarnation wood tree shot out a vine toward him at lightning speed, rolled up the petrified peddler, and tossed him aside, narrowly throwing him out of range of the wind from the sword.

The tree that was the width of a person's arm span and the three-wheeled cart were broken up by the aftershock of the sword energy. Flatbreads and dipping sauce rolled all over the ground.

The peddler fell several zhang away and heard a faint disdainful grumble in his ear: "Listen, brother, you've been having some excessive internal heat lately."

The confused peddler blankly held onto a length of reincarnation wood, rolling on the ground with his face covered in blood. He muttered, "Tai... Tai Sui?"

Almost at the same time, another one of the Sanyue ascended spirits left behind at the Immortal Palace came onto the scene. An enormous ascended spirit grade mustard seed opened up in a flash. Before the earth-shattering blow of the sword could fall, the mustard seed wrapped up the sword energy and the ascended spirits to keep them from razing all of Tao County to the ground.

As the blow from the sword fell, Qiu Sha turned into a sandstorm, dispersing throughout the inside of the mustard seed. "You're even worse than Xiang Zhao. Watch me."

Next, the sandstorm coiled up into a vortex, and a beam of cruel and forceful sword energy exploded, heading straight for the Sanyue sword cultivator. Astonishment appeared on the sword

cultivator's face. He hastily raised his sword. There was a long groan, and a chip actually broke off that vital sword!

The Sanyue sword cultivator instantly retreated several steps. "Xiang-shixiong's Xiuluo sword!"

This sword was Xiang Zhao's vital weapon. The technique was Xiuluo's authentic technique... For a moment, he had practically believed it was Xiang Zhao facing him!

The sandstorm congealed into the tall form of a woman. She beckoned, and a pitch-black sword fell into her hand.

"That's right," said Qiu Sha, smiling. "I ate him, so now the Xiuluo sword is mine."

Tai Sui had already moved from the reincarnation wood tree that had been struck down into another tree a little further away—fortunately, during the years the Snake King had been here, it had been popular among the locals to plant reincarnation wood trees. That was the reason he had room to maneuver now. That ogre had done some good after all.

But what way was this great monster cultivating?

The way of the tiangou?⁵⁹

She could eat anything, then take the place of whatever she ate?

Before Tai Sui could work it out, a very familiar hothead ran out of the Immortal Palace.

That idiot Xu Rucheng had stripped off the Snake King's skin and shoddily disguised himself at random, dressing in the clothes of one of the Immortal Palace's servants.

Just as that unfortunate wretch came to the gate, the Sanyue ascended spirit who was supporting the mustard seed took a hit from Qiu Sha, and the mustard seed slackened. Only a sliver of the horrifying spiritual energy leaked out, but for a half-immortal like Xu Rucheng, it was like a mountain flying right at his face.

His breath caught. He only had time to raise his chopper and cover his head.

Just then, a talisman full of the distinguishing characteristics of Western Chu appeared out of nowhere and shielded him, dispersing and dissolving the line of ascended spirit spiritual energy.

Tai Sui's voice sounded in Xu Rucheng's ear: "If you're tired of living, can't you go find a rafter to hang yourself from? Do you have to come here and let them cut you up?!"

"This is wrong." Xu Rucheng miserably rolled out of the bounds of the ascended spirit battlefield. "Wild Fox Country's night market only starts when the sun sets, so the minor merchants in the area come out early to set up shop and leave when it gets dark. But on this damn day, it got dark so fast that they didn't have time to get out of the way!"

As he spoke, he took to his heels and ran. He took out a signal flare and tossed it into the sky. With a sharp whistle, it exploded into a big red firework—this was the Immortal Palace's signal for an emergency evacuation, telling all unrelated people to get away at once.

Then Xu Rucheng stepped onto his chopper and flew on it to disperse the nearby crowds. When he had flown a full hundred zhang, he belatedly recalled something and said in shock, "Wait, senior, was that you just now? You... you can use talismans?"

Tai Sui said, "...Is this the time to study me?"

He was also very shocked.

He had seen this talisman inadvertently. Dongheng's Sanyue was unparalleled in talismans, arrays, and inscriptions; none of the three other great sects could match them. Here, both righteous and evil cultivators all knew some peculiar talismans and arrays. While hanging around Wild Fox Country, Tai Sui had seen many of them and had inadvertently remembered quite a few. Though he had forgotten many things, he seemed to know instinctively how to control spiritual energy. Just now, he had gotten worked up and had actually managed to send out a talisman.

These reincarnation wood trees, apart from not letting him pick up and run, otherwise really were like a real body—they let him operate spiritual energy!

"I can disperse the leftovers of ascended spirit spiritual energy with a single talisman... but my original body is still sealed in some unmentionable place?" Tai Sui thought. "I'm not also some great evildoer who can shake the mountains by stamping my foot, am I?"

He raised his sightline and looked at the ascended spirit battlefield in front of him and indignantly came up with a "Xu-ism": "What in blue blazes! That Qiu woman is so impressive, how have I ended up like this?"

Tai Sui was worried that Idiot Xu would get himself killed here—this person was a rarity; it wouldn't be easy for him to find another one so dimwitted. He followed him closely with his consciousness, watching him shouting and herding, even using talismans, gambling with his life to shoo off all the merchants and peddlers who hadn't had time to get away.

Soon, the other Luwu took his example and went out after him.

But Tai Sui suddenly frowned. A beam of spiritual energy flew out of the reincarnation wood and broke up one of Xu Rucheng's talismans.

That talisman had been carrying established foundation level power. If it had actually fallen onto a mortal, it wouldn't have pushed them away; it would have flattened them.

Xu Rucheng and the rest of this batch of Luwu, whether they kept their brains in their skulls or not, were all fairly reliable when it came to talismans. They must have trained remorselessly before coming here. But now, some of their talismans worked and others didn't, and sometimes they would incredibly surpass their cultivation levels.

Xu Rucheng had noticed it himself. He quickly drew back his hand.

"Be careful," Tai Sui said. "Time isn't the only thing that's in disarray in Tao County."

CHAPTER 78 - Indignant Cicadas (12)

“According to tradition, Hui Xiangjun had three things. One was called Gold Imitation, one was called the Riverward, and one was called the Law Breaker.” Zhou Ying, with his hands behind his back, was slowly pacing along the flagstones at the Xia River ferry crossing, the stealth talisman on his wide sleeve flickering in and out of sight. Mortals looked right through him. “The Gold Imitation Technique has already entered the mortal world. Qiu Sha reached the ascended spirit stage under the eyes of the four great sects without having been noticed before—where was she hiding all that time? My guess is that the Riverward must have played a part. Now it would appear that the Law Breaker, the most incredible of them, is also real. “

At present, all the Xia River steamships had returned to port. The riverside was forbidden territory. A seal had been put up preventing the common people from approaching. Rows of cannon shone under the sun; the gunners switched shifts every two shichen, on guard against the opposite bank. If anything unusual happened, they could open fire at any time.

This was a more or less fixed procedure in Great Wan every year during the Great Market in Chu’s Wild Fox Country.

After listening to this, Bai Ling suspected that he had been lax in carrying out his Luwu assignments—the Luwu were hidden in all four nations and ought to have had their ears open to everything, but he hadn’t so much as heard of this “Law Breaker” or “Rule Breaker” or whatever it was; he needed his lord to tell him. That was outrageous.

So he carefully asked, “Is that recorded in the ancient texts of the Latent Cultivation Temple’s Yanhai Building?”

Zhou Ying looked at him in amusement. “Of course not. Leaving aside the Gold Imitation Technique, do the other two sound like things an orthodox sect would talk about? Hui Xiangjun was the person those demons in your hometown of the Impassable Sea most loved to discuss.”

Bai Ling: “... “

Something had gone wrong with the half-demon Bai Ling; he had too much humanity, his seven human emotions more complete than in any human. He had been out of place in the Impassable Sea. He had been rejected by the demon host, and he had rejected the demons in turn. Before meeting His Third Highness, he had never spoken. Not even the heart demon had paid attention to him—there was no agreeable conversation to be had with him, and he couldn’t be eaten. Only His Third Highness, when the wind of the Impassable Sea had dropped and the demon host had disappeared, had made him come out of his seclusion, so he could briefly pass the time with this little child of royalty who had suffered so much from the pain of the demon host sucking his marrow... Now it seemed that His Highness had perhaps thought that talking to him was boring; at first he hadn’t even been able to speak smoothly, and he hadn’t understood anything.

But... a faint uncertainty rose in Bai Ling’s mind: after the demon seal on the Impassable Sea had been broken and then restored by the three elders of Xuanyin, they had sealed it even more firmly; not even members of the Zhou family could enter anymore. While the words “Impassable Sea” could appear in a text, the “demon seal” couldn’t be mentioned, and neither could any person, creature, or thing under the seal. Only people like the two of them, with their profound connection to the Impassable Sea, could hear each other speaking of it.

Except that this was after all a sore spot. His Highness usually avoided it in private. Why would he go out of his way to mention the

demon host in the Impassable Sea now?

“My lord, do you mean that the abnormality in Tao County now is caused by an immortal tool?”

“It isn’t an immortal tool. Let’s call it a ‘demonic tool’,” Zhou Ying said. “Tradition has it that where this Law Breaker is, there is only one axiom; all other cause and effect and fixed constants no longer exist. The road of an ascended spirit evil cultivator leads to death. If she wants to survive, she must rely on disorder. The Law Breaker is truly tailor-made for her.”

“Does such an immortal... demonic tool really exist?”

“Why else do you think Hui Xiangjun had her immortal bones removed? Could it really have been because of the Gold Imitation Technique? Then how could Lin Chi have made it out in one piece?”

Bai Ling hesitated for a moment. “Because Master Lin belongs to the main branch of Xuanyin’s Lin family and has backing?”

Zhou Ying was amused by him. “You... Whenever there’s something you don’t understand, without exception you explain it as ‘having backing.’ Why do you sound so much like that bunch of penniless evil cultivators?”

Bai Ling rubbed his nose. “My knowledge and experience are insufficient.”

Since taking control of the Luwu, he had mixed with people from all walks of life, and he had indeed picked up gossip from the mortal world.

“There’s no rush, you can take your time learning. You’ve only been in the mortal world for fourteen years.” Zhou Ying waved a hand. “Sanyue’s Xiuluo sword, along with Kunlun’s Wanshuang and

Xuanyin's Zhaoting, make up the three famous swords. Wanshuang and Zhaoting had both been tempered in the mortal world and risen along with their masters; only Xiuluo was a broken ancient sword. The genius of the Xiang clan was drawn into the remaining way of the sword in that ancient sword. His consciousness was trapped there. He would have perished, unless the ancient sword could be repaired and he could obtain a complete Way of the Heart. Many tool masters looked and said there was nothing to be done. Sanyue was willing to turn to anyone in their desperation, so they turned to Western Chu's special product—its 'common cultivators'—to solicit unorthodox methods in exchange for a place in the inner sect. That was the opportunity that allowed Hui Xiangjun to enter Sanyue. She had just established her foundation then, not to speak afterward, when she reached the ascended spirit stage in the Lancang Mountains and single-handedly repaired Sanyue's three great ancient relics. Had I been the Lancang sect leader, if she had wanted to dig up my ancestral tomb, I would have cleared the way for her. If she had wanted to go out slaughtering and setting fires, I would have given her my own son for a scapegoat. What does a member of the Lin family's main branch have on that?"

Bai Ling: "..."

And this is why an ambitious man such as yourself shouldn't marry and have children.

"Take a close look at her history. She spent over two centuries at Sanyue, yet she didn't formally join a lineage. She simply vanished into the crowd, ignored, as soon as she entered the inner sect. Later, when she came to Lancang, it took her only fifty years to reach the ascended spirit stage. Evidently, while she was a 'disciple of record,' Lancang Mountain in fact treated her well. I believe that the Lancang sect leader wanted to protect her, he just couldn't manage it."

Bai Ling was startled. “Lancang Mountain couldn’t even protect an ascended spirit?”

Zhou Ying raised his head and gave him a meaningful look. “That’s right. Why would that be?”

It was said that Hui Xiangjun had come from an unorthodox background and practiced heretical ways, but in flipping through classical texts, you wouldn’t find any arrogant and presumptuous words or deeds from her; there were even reports that said she had been of a kind and gentle disposition, gentle to the point of being somewhat easily bullied. When she had been forced to leave her native soil, it had been because she had rejected Xiang Zhao’s marriage proposal, and he had brought his influential connections to bear to compel her into the marriage.

All of her outstanding qualities had been in her works: the Law Breaker that the demons in the Impassable Sea had discussed with relish, the Riverward that was supposed to be able to come and go to an unreachable place three times, the Gold Imitation Technique that had allowed mortals to ascend to the skies and burrow into the earth while downgrading immortal tools...

“But I had been wondering, if such a thing as the Law Breaker truly existed, what ‘axiom’ would Qiu Sha use? It was one of your Luwu who pointed me toward the answer.”

Bai Ling said, “Time?”

“That’s right, time. She sent separate messages to me, Sanyue... and probably Kunlun and Southern Shu as well, repeatedly mentioning the seventh day of the seventh month. If my guess is correct, the axiom within that Law Breaker must be something like ‘On the seventh day of the seventh month, Qiu Sha will appear at Wild Fox Country’s night feast,’” Zhou Ying said slowly. “This way,

as long as she's there, it will forever be the seventh day of the seventh month in Tao County.”

Bai Ling's head swelled when he heard this—what did it mean that it would forever be the seventh day of the seventh month?

He couldn't resist looking toward the opposite bank. There was nothing unusual on the Xia River, but the opposite bank was wrapped in mist; an established foundation half-demon's gaze couldn't pierce it. “You mean that... Tao County... all of Tao County, is currently...”

“Likely no longer in the human world,” said Zhou Ying. “It's in the seventh day of the seventh month.”

“Wait, but on the opposite bank...”

“In the place where Tao County used to be, there ought to be only a passage to the hidden realm contained within the Law Breaker.”

Bai Ling was all at sea. He thought that the wind off the river was a little chilly.

What kind of unbelievable weapon was this? That kid Xu Rucheng must have made an unbelievably lucky blind guess—if he'd really had that kind of brain, his parents would have given up anything to send him to take the imperial examinations. How could he have wound up only starting his schooling after joining the Luwu?

“When the people inside realize that something isn't right, they'll send word outward at once, but we out here must wait until it is the seventh and the date here has caught up to them to receive the letters. Prior to this, Qiu Sha used some method to scatter Xiang Zhao's spiritual bones all over the place, sending a crowd of Sanyue masters scrambling throughout the country. I'm afraid that was so

that they would miss their chance to come charging back to Tao County.”

Bai Ling muttered to himself for a long moment. “Unless each person who enters Tao County does it at exactly the same moment, the ‘road’ to ‘get’ from their own point in time to the seventh day of the seventh month will be a different length. If they aren’t on the same ‘road,’ they won’t be able to communicate with each other. And no matter what they do after they go in, time will push them at a uniform speed toward ‘the seventh’... It’s as if she’s trapped each master hunting her in a different transport array. Neither ascended spirit nor shed skin cultivators can escape.”

Zhou Ying gave a sigh of profound emotion. “Yes. An unprecedented and unrivaled superior among ascended spirits. She’s truly insane.”

Bai Ling: “...”

Though that’s a little irreverent, the two of you seem to think very much along the same lines.

After pondering it for a long time, suddenly, Bai Ling noticed a terrifying problem. “Wait, my lord. When we’ve passed the seventh day of the seventh month, what will happen to Tao County?”

“A good question.” Zhou Ying smiled. “There are two possibilities. One is that Qiu Sha can’t hold out until the last and someone kills her. Once its master dies, the Law Breaker will be removed, and Tao County will return to the human world—from our point of view, all of Tao County will return intact on the seventh day of the seventh month, with everything as normal. The people in it will probably think they’ve had a strange dream.”

Bai Ling was a little appalled. “What does ‘hold out until the last’ mean...?”

Zhou Ying asked a question in turn: “When Tao County lost contact with the outside world, who was the first person to enter? You have eyes in the vicinity of Tao County, did you see?”

Bai Ling said, “I believe it was Sanyue’s Xiang Jing, known as ‘the one who reverses Yin and Yang with one stroke.’ This person is Xiang Zhao’s full blood brother. He was lured away to the place where Xiang Zhao’s skull appeared. When he couldn’t capture Qiu Sha, he immediately returned to Tao County. Our eyes in the vicinity of Tao County said that in the small hours of the sixteenth of the sixth month, when the mist had just risen in Tao County, before they could even report it, the Yinyang Reverser went in—he’s an ascended spirit master of inscriptions. Those proficient in inscriptions usually think they can understand the language of land and water. They feel secure facing any hidden landscape.”

“The ‘Yinyang Reverser.’ What an unusually apt nickname,” Zhou Ying said. “Those inside Tao County will be in the seventh day of the seventh month the whole time, not knowing what time it is outside. But for those who only entered Tao County after the Law Breaker was activated, before they reach the seventh, time will flow the same for them as for us. If this Yinyang Reverser was the first to enter, then he’s the furthest from the seventh and has the longest ‘road’ to travel to get to Tao County. When he reaches Tao County and encounters Qiu Sha, it will be just as we are about to reach the seventh. Qiu Sha only needs to hold out a for a while longer, and time in the outside world will overtake Tao County... and then, ha, Tao County won’t come back again.”

Bai Ling only understood the last sentence. His expression abruptly changed. “What?!”

“Within the Law Breaker, all laws are nullified, but outside the Law Breaker, cause and effect and natural law still can’t be violated. Time cannot be turned back. No one can return to their own past.

Once we've passed the seventh, no one from the outside will be able to enter Tao County again. And once that time has gone by, Tao County will also lose its connection to the human world forever. No one will ever receive letters sent out by those inside again. Even if the Law Breaker is removed, they will still be stuck in that single day. Isn't that the same as disappearing from the human world?"

Zhou Ying laughed. "Just that we know of, half of Sanyue's ascended spirit masters have gone in, as well as three people from Kunlun. Southern Shu... ha, a few little islands that raise beasts—they can't muster ten ascended spirits all together, and four or five have come. There's also our Xuanyin's precious Golden Hand. Single-handed, Qiu Sha has dug Sanyue up entirely by the roots and seriously injured all four great sects. Since the five sages divided up the spiritual mountains, has the cultivation world experienced such a heavy blow? It will be a heady draught."

Bai Ling's mind roared. "But she... Isn't she also going to be stuck inside?"

"Not necessarily," Zhou Ying said. "She also has the Riverward. The Riverward can pass through anything. Can it pass through time? We can wait here to bear witness. Will Hui Xiangjun's 'spear' be more powerful, or will the 'shield' be more powerful?"

Dong—dong—

Bai Ling gave a start and quickly raised his head—the big steam clock in town was tolling the hour. Twilight had begun; it was you hour.

It was you hour on the sixth day of the seventh month!

His Highness had known about the Law Breaker from the beginning, had guessed what Qiu Sha was planning from the beginning, but he hadn't said anything about it until now.

The Law Breaker could break all heavenly regulations and natural laws; presumably the gazes of the great spiritual mountains would also be cut off. But that wasn't the case outside the Law Breaker.

As soon as Zhou Ying spoke, it amounted to bringing the secret of the Law Breaker out into the human world; all the great sects would sense something. Places like the Sea of Stars were undoubtedly showing waves.

He had deliberately waited until the four great sects had sent all their masters inside and then deliberately exposed the secret of the Law Breaker at this moment. When they realized what was happening, there would be a seismic reaction at Sanyue; even the shed skins would be drawn out of the mountains. This way, if Qiu Sha won her gamble and used the Riverward to return to the human world, as soon as she came out tomorrow, she would run headfirst into the might of Sanyue. It was a perfect situation for someone standing on the opposite bank watching the flames burn to win an advantage.

And what was more, just now, he had first tied the Law Breaker and the demon host in the Impassable Sea together. The "unmentionable" prohibition on everything under the demon seal had become his protective umbrella. With the interference of the demon seal, the great spiritual mountains could only sense the information; they wouldn't be able to overhear their conversation!

"This Senior Qiu Sha has everything planned to the last detail. She used me to lure the Golden Hand here, and if she doesn't keep her promise when the time comes, an open-eyed nobody like me won't be able to do anything about it. I'll have to borrow someone else's strength and think of a way to get the Riverward." Bai Ling heard Zhou Ying, sighing, say in a slightly exasperated voice, "This thing can only be used three times. I hope she hasn't used it up, or else I'll have to... go part of the way with her."

In the sultry late summer evening, Bai Ling was chilled all over. He couldn't speak.

But... what about the county full of mortals?

And the Luwu caught up in this?

Bai Ling abruptly raised his head to look at Zhou Ying. His eyes were as tranquil as the Xia River at this moment.

Bai Ling's heart sank.

All the ominous premonitions Bai Ling had felt over the last five years were now coming true—His Third Highness's refined skin covered bones that had been steeped in the poison of the Impassable Sea.

And the only person in the world who could stop him was gone.

"That's... that's not for sure," Bai Ling forced his voice out of his dry throat. "Even if it is as you say, Qiu Sha has only been an ascended spirit for two years. As a still unstable early stage ascended spirit taking on a group of Sanyue's... or even of all four great sects' masters one after another, while she'll be in a somewhat better position than if they were all besieging her at once, she still won't necessarily..."

"Won't necessarily live to the end, yes, but who knows?" Zhou Ying said noncommittally, smiling. "Tomorrow we'll take the lid off the dice cup. Be patient."

At the gate of the Immortal Palace in Wild Fox Country, where it was eternally the seventh day of the seventh month, no more mortals dared to linger; it had become altogether an ascended spirit battlefield.

After leading the Luwu in dispersing the mortals, Xu Rucheng, in accordance with Tai Sui's instructions, rushed at full speed to the boundary of Tao County.

Thick fog had risen at the boundary. The Luwu Lao Tian tried tossing out a stone and didn't hear the sound of it landing. He tossed out miasma dispersing and mist clearing talismans, and they also sank like stones into the deep sea.

"I'm afraid that outside is... Xiao Xu!" After tossing out the talismans, Lao Tian shook his head with a grave expression and was about to say something else to Xu Rucheng, but when he turned his head, he found that that hothead had already walked into the fog. He was instantly so scared he broke out in cold sweat.

Xu Rucheng had tried sticking his leg in. When he drew it back and saw that his foot was still in place, he gathered his courage and charged into the fog.

He walked for a while, squeezing a small length of reincarnation wood inside his clothes—Tai Sui had told him to smear his blood on the reincarnation wood so they could temporarily speak through his spirit, to avoid him drawing suspicion by muttering to himself.

"Senior, there's nothing at all outside the boundary."

Through the reincarnation wood, Tai Sui said, "Turn back and take a look."

Xu Rucheng turned his head, and his eyes opened wide. He knew the length of his own stride; he felt that he had just walked half a li of distance. But when he looked back, Tao County was still not far behind him!

Xu Rucheng walked backward. After counting ten steps, he had already left the thick fog and returned to Tao County.

Lao Tian seized him by the shoulder and gave him a fierce scolding, but he saw that Xu Rucheng seemed not to be listening, staring blankly as he received Lao Tian's flying spit. "Tian-xiong, outside is gone..."

Lao Tian said, "What the hell?"

"Ten steps beyond the boundary of Tao County, there's total emptiness."

Tai Sui's heart sank slightly. This was about what he had guessed: in the mortal world, the sun and moon were rising and setting; in other places, the days were following their prescribed order. Only Tao County was in a hurry, striding right into the seventh day of the seventh month in one step, leaving other places far behind.

From what that young woman dressed as a man had said, it seemed that it was the seventh day of the seventh month forever here. Then how would Tao County "return"?

Tai Sui pulled his consciousness from the Luwu back to the gate of the Immortal Palace. A rain of blood came right toward him.

This place had just gone through a crushing battle of ascended spirits. The corpse of the sixth ascended spirit master had turned into a rain of blood, sprinkling Qiu Sha's plain-colored nun's robe with stains.

The Sanyue sword cultivator whose single stroke had cut down the reincarnation wood tree was already dead as a doornail. His head had rolled to the base of another tree. If no one came to bury it, it would soon turn into fertilizer for the tree. It rather spoke of the wheel of fortune turning.

The mustard seed separating the ascended spirit battlefield from Seventeen Li Town was still in place, but the mustard seed's owner was already cold.

The other four ascended spirits who had died at Qiu Sha's hand hadn't been at the Immortal Palace to begin with. Apart from Xuanyin, the remaining three great sects were all represented.

As for the established foundations and so on, Tai Sui didn't have a chance to count—generally speaking, before he could get a clear look at their faces, they would have already been taken care of by Qiu Sha.

Tai Sui found that these people all seemed to appear out of nowhere inside the Immortal Palace, and if the first words out of their mouth weren't "It's moving again," they were "I can touch things now," as if these were some prearranged code words.

In other words, previously, they had been unable to touch anything here, and everything around them had been static to their eyes.

They could see it but not touch it.

Tai Sui considered it for a while and roughly understood what the situation was for these people who had come from outside: on the sixteenth of the sixth month, Tao County had vanished from the human world and gone to the seventh day of the seventh month. During the twenty days in between, people had arrived every day and decided to run the risk of entering Tao County to investigate. What they saw after entering must have been a static Tao County at the moment that the Law Breaker Bracelet had activated. Because they weren't at the same point in time, for these outsiders, Tao County would be like a mirage; they couldn't touch anything.

At this point, an ordinary person's thinking would definitely be that Qiu Sha was playing tricks. After discovering that they were trapped, they would rush to Wild Fox Country's Immortal Palace, thinking that the mechanism for breaking free of the trap would be there. It was easy for an ascended spirit master to go into seclusion for a century; they had plenty of patience—and this place didn't require so much patience. Soon, their own time would reach the seventh day of the seventh month, and they would reach the real Tao County.

In the eyes of these outsiders, Tao County would suddenly “come to life.” Before they could catch up, they would have fallen into Qiu Sha's hands.

For the people inside Tao County, the closer to the seventh day of the seventh month that the outsiders had entered, the earlier they would appear; the people who had come in at the beginning on the sixteenth of the sixth month, on the other hand, would be the latest to arrive. When everyone had come, it would mean that in the human world to which Tao County had previously belonged, time had also reached the seventh day of the seventh month.

And then what? What would happen?

Tai Sui was appalled—he realized that when Qiu Sha had been talking about wanting to kill this person and that other one, that probably hadn't been empty boasting.

At first, the people arriving in Tao County had been the ones who had come in during the last few days; by that point, the people outside must have realized that there was a big problem in Tao County, and there would have been increasingly few people who would dare to run the risk of going in. From the point of view of the people inside Tao County, the later it got, the more outsiders would drop into the Immortal Palace. When that happened, Qiu Sha wouldn't have such an easy time dealing with them.

But she didn't need to defeat these people. If she only did her best and held out until the last person came in, Tao County wouldn't return anymore—it would be as if she had cooked all these masters at once!

Just then, as if Qiu Sha had noticed something, she raised a sword and looked up, meeting Tai Sui's gaze coming out of a reincarnation wood tree. She smiled meaningfully.

That crazy woman!

Tai Sui cursed and quickly used his consciousness to search for the young woman dressed as a man who had the Law Breaker. He quickly fixed on her: Hey, are you the one controlling that bracelet? Can you stop it? What did that great evildoer promise you? You seem pretty clever. She must have tricked you!

But just as he was about to speak to that young woman, Tai Sui paused.

Wait. If Tao County disappeared from the world... how would that harm him?

He had been locked up in some unknown place to begin with, so constricted that his consciousness could hardly move.

But now that Tao County had broken away from the human world, he could at least be a free "tree spirit" inside the county.

Tai Sui's consciousness stopped quietly inside a reincarnation wood tree. He was only a few chi away from that young woman dressed as a man, but she didn't notice him at all.

He suddenly saw the light: no wonder Qiu Sha had known of his existence but hadn't taken any care to avoid him.

That great evildoer had been certain that he would be on her side.

CHAPTER 79 - Indignant Cicadas (13)

“Bless me, Tai Sui...”

A prattling voice came from a nearby residence, stealing a thread of his consciousness.

At the door of a dilapidated residence was a stooped old woman of Western Chu, wearing glasses, carving an image of Tai Sui on a piece of reincarnation wood by starlight.

“Tai Sui, please let this chaos pass quickly. I’m scared of dying,” the old woman rambled on to herself. “These immortals and divinities come every year, and when they come, people always die. It makes me want to dig a hole in the ground and bury myself inside, then crawl back out when they’re gone...”

There was a reincarnation wood tree by the window of her house. Tai Sui went to it. Its branches rested against the lattice of her window. He thought, If you’re so scared, why don’t you move away?

Then he examined the old woman’s home. There was only one room in it, with a worn-out table, chairs, and bed inside, all missing feet and cushioned with mud. There was an oil lamp on the table, but she hadn’t wanted to waste of lighting it, instead working by the light at the door. A basket hung from a roof beam to protect it from mice. Inside the basket was half of a rice cake, and something black and pickled... It was the thing from back in Yuzhou that he would rather have died than eat. In a corner were some little things like rattle-drums, as well as a pile of wicker baskets, crudely made, much worse quality than those turned out by machines; he didn’t know who would be willing to buy them.

All right, he understood why the old lady hadn’t moved away.

“Before, when I was sick and nearly died, it was Tai Sui who saved me. I don’t believe in anyone. Whenever anything goes wrong, I only believe in Tai Sui. I have to carve the amulet in secret, because the Snake King won’t let us worship... Ah, I can’t afford to offend the immortals. Do not blame me, Tai Sui...”

Reincarnation wood was soft and well-suited to carving. She soon finished her amulet and blew the wood shavings away.

The moment the amulet was complete, a peculiar and faint attractive force came from it, but unlike in the past, Tai Sui’s consciousness couldn’t be pulled by force into other people’s bodies.

“I heard recently that some people wanted wicker baskets. I’ve been waiting for them to come every day, but they haven’t. Tai Sui, please let them come soon... Please let me get some things from Wild Fox Country this time. Last year I was late, this time I’ll have to go earlier... And please let grain be a little cheaper. My teeth are no good, I won’t be able to chew fourth-grade rice much longer...”

As the old woman chattered, Tai Sui’s consciousness continued along the little alley. He saw a bare-chested man beating some children.

This was a Chu theatrical troupe. The people along the Xia River all liked the local plays; there wasn’t anything in them about kings and princes, generals and ministers, scholars and beauties—they were all comical farces. Their distinctive characteristic was the very last scene. All the characters—including those who had just died in the play—would turn somersaults together.

Out of some strange interest, the Snake King had liked to watch people turn somersaults; he would only laugh and clap when children around ten years old turned somersaults until they were foaming at the mouth. So all the Chu theatrical troupes along the Xia

River bank had started desperately practicing somersaults and intensively studying how to make them look more impressive. The bare-chested man was probably the teacher. He was beating a group of children seven or eight years old until they screamed and wailed. The teacher, red-eyed, was wishing desperately that they could improve at once. As he hit them, he shouted, "Why are you running? Am I doing you harm by hitting you? None of you understand anything, what can you do? If you suffer hardships, you improve, don't you get it?!"

His voice couldn't rise to the pitch of the last words; in his excitement, his voice broke.

Tai Sui went past the theatrical troupe's door, sneering.

If you suffer hardships, you improve... As if it would come true if he said it loud enough.

When Tao County disappeared, the cultivation world's losses would be catastrophic.

What about the mortals?

On the ground was the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon, on the Xia River were the steamships, but those had little to do with mortals who lived hand to mouth. The greater part of people were like weeds, narrowly eking out a living in a wasteland, growing when the wind blew, withering in the autumn chill, dying easily. For eight parts out of ten of them, the county seat was the furthest place they would go in their lifetimes. What difference did it make to them whether Tao County was in the mortal world or not?

Well, perhaps there was a bit of difference. With Tao County's evil cultivators running amok, the factories that burned spiritual stones would avoid this area; without the products of the big machines, the old lady's business might improve a bit. The spiritual energy of so

many ascended spirits dying within such a short time in this little county wouldn't dissipate; maybe the soil where nothing grew would improve.

Wouldn't that be to everyone's satisfaction?

So why should he go sticking his nose into other people's business?

Did he really want to get locked back up in the divine image with no control over himself, his consciousness constantly shunted around by the joys and pains of others?

Tai Sui's consciousness dispersed among all the reincarnation wood in the county, extending to its furthest limits. With one end in the knotted bag Xu Rucheng carried and the other end in the reincarnation wood railings of Tao County's Xia River ferry crossing, he stretched himself out to the length of all of Tao County. With a thought, all the treetops began to sway gently in the exact same way. When observant common people noticed this peculiarity, they were greatly amazed, prostrating themselves in worship toward the trees one after another.

He hadn't been this happy in a long time.

Then Tai Sui turned around, quickly gathering and shrinking his consciousness. When he passed a certain place, he sent out a very slender beam of spiritual energy.

The spiritual energy made a precise stroke on the amulet the devout old woman had just carved.

The old woman gave a cry, startled into dropping the amulet onto the ground. When she looked at it again, a number of symmetrical whiskers had appeared on either side of Tai Sui's face on the amulet; the divine Tai Sui had turned into a divine cat!

Then an authentic local accent sounded in her ear: “Don’t depend on me. You got better on your own, what’s it got to do with me? Something good happens today, you plant it on me, and if something goes wrong tomorrow, you’ll plant that on me, too. My head’s covered in grass from all of you planting things on me. Wretches!”

Before his words had completely fallen on the mortal’s ears, he had already returned to the yard with the young woman from Great Wan.

Qiu Sha, a mere ascended spirit who clearly had no idea what she was doing, wanted to make arrangements for other people’s destinies.

He thought: Does she really take herself for one of the five sages?

And who cared about the five sages, anyway? They’d become gods free from the dust of the mortal world after attaining the full moon positions and gone walking off through the air, and hadn’t the mortal world they’d left behind reached its current pitiful condition?

Blazes!

He called out to the familiar-looking young woman dressed as a man: “Hey.”

The young woman dressed as a man—Wei Chengxiang—abruptly opened her eyes. It was as if she had been struck by lightning.

“I mean you no harm, don’t be nervous.” Facing someone from Wan, Tai Sui instinctively changed back to the accent he was most familiar with. “I just wanted to ask, do you know that that big idiot Qiu is planning to use you to destroy Tao County?”

Wei Chengxiang was stunned and speechless. She didn’t hear what he was saying at all.

This voice... This voice was...

She clamped a hand over the Law Breaker Bracelet. Her first thought was that this eerie immortal tool was pulling some trick. "... Uncle?"

Tai Sui: "..."

Wow, what were Great Wan's customs like now? Were all young women this polite?

"Sure," he casually agreed, since there was no point in missing out on taking advantage, "any kind of uncle will do."

Huh?

As soon as he said this, Tai Sui went blank: these words were also familiar. Hadn't he said something like this before...?

He carefully examined the young woman's thin, weatherbeaten face. He saw the eye-opening scar that looked like a tear track at the corner of her eye. Something seemed ready to come to his call.

"I didn't notice it last time," he heard himself blurt out. "How come you ended up with an eye-opening scar after all?"

Why would he say "last time"?

Which time was "last time"?

Wei Chengxiang's eyes turned red all at once.

It had been five years.

Back then, he had only told her “walk the path ahead on your own” and said they wouldn’t meet again; since then, they really hadn’t met again.

She had been terrified, had been resentful; later, she had dreamed for a time that the senior in the reincarnation wood wasn’t ignoring her, he was injured or dead. Then she had begun to worry.

She talked to the reincarnation wood amulet every day. When she was sad she would talk, when she was uncertain she would talk, and when she had reached an impasse, she would also talk... but apart from that one time with the late-autumn red, the reincarnation wood amulet hadn’t given her any response.

But as she’d talked on and on, she really had gotten used to walking on her own.

The reincarnation wood amulet seemed to have turned into a dream from her teenage years, a faint consolation.

“I must be dreaming,” she thought. “Otherwise, why would this voice be exactly the same as back then? Not even the tone has changed.”

Wei Chengxiang squeezed her eyes shut. The thin corners of her mouth trembled a few times as she struggled to raise them into a smile.

She had to behave properly. She was no longer the wet-behind-the-ears, inexperienced little girl who didn’t understand anything. She was a cultivator. She couldn’t disappoint the senior.

But when Wei Chengxiang opened her mouth, she couldn’t keep her voice steady. It reeled and slipped into a tearful tone. “I... ahem, I’m sorry, uncle... senior...”

Her mind and mouth seemed to be split, each doing its own thing. Her brain was wandering around blankly: How could I be crying? Didn't the fire in Jinping's southern outskirts burn up all my tears?

But her mouth was babbling: "I'm just... I'm just a little surprised..."

Tai Sui watched her a little helplessly. "Don't cry."

Do you know me?

So before I was sealed away somewhere, I really did exist?

Who am I?

"I'm not, no, I'm not crying." Wei Chengxiang roughly wiped away the tears that had rolled to her chin following the eye-opening scar. "I was just remembering. Senior, you said that all the musicians on the Lingyang River didn't amount to anything, and your qin could turn a donkey into a famous singer... That was true, you weren't just talking big. I've heard many famous instruments since then, and none of them could match up to yours."

The inside of "Tai Sui"'s head roared: yes, it seemed that he'd once had a qin.

The qin was named...

In all of Tao County, the quiet voices of the Chu people came through the uneven reincarnation wood trees along the roads.

Tai Sui...

Tai Sui, bless me...

Tai Sui, please help us...

The qin was named “Tai Sui.”

Wei Chengxiang took off the reincarnation wood amulet hanging around her neck. The tears from her fingers accidentally seeped into the amulet. The person residing in the reincarnation wood tree a few steps away instantly tasted salt.

Salt, like the turbulent waters of the East Sea.

In a daze, he was swept up by a salty sea breeze, swept back to the fathomless Resurrection Vortex, the lightless bottom of the Impassable Sea, and to the inside of a leaf, where the Sword that Mended the Heavens had cut his palm.

There, the demon host had met its end, the sages had broken faith, and the Bell of Tribulation had tolled for someone unknown. Amidst a huge sound, he passed through the rippling songs of the Lingyang River and the snowy skies of Flying Jade Peak; he missed a step amid all this beauty and fell to the bank of the Xia River, into an abandoned village, and as he fell became a wandering ghost... mixed in among the mortals, almost indistinguishable from their minds, congested with the flavor of pickles.

He remembered. He wasn't a great monster like Qiu Sha, far from it; he didn't deserve to be mentioned in the same breath.

He was only an eccentric young master, born in Jinping's Dangui Lane, in the deep courtyards of the Yongning Marquis Manor.

His name was Xi Ping, courtesy name Shiyong, alias Mr. Yu Gan; the most renowned specialist in elopements among the brothels, the most embarrassing rebellious disciple of Flying Jade Peak... It was all like something from another lifetime.

He had once disobeyed the three thousand paths of the Great Way, claimed the ungovernable way for his own; now that was the only

thing that hadn't changed—it turned out to be just enough.

“A-Xiang.” After many years, Xi Ping pronounced his old acquaintance's name like a sigh. “I see your taste hasn't gotten any worse, so how did you get mixed up with that goblin?”

Wei Chengxiang smiled tearfully. “But the two of you use almost the same tone when you're making fun of people.”

Constant and unfailing self-confidence that seemed to be based on nothing at all.

Xi Ping: “...”

She'd learned to talk back!

The connection between the two of them was quite marvelous. On the one hand, their fates were deeply entangled, able to bridge life and death; on the other hand, their relationship was very weak, held together only by a small reincarnation wood amulet. When it came to speaking of the past, naturally they couldn't lay out much about the sorrow of separation. Whether it came to drifting through the cracks between Wan and He, between righteous and evil, or wandering among the common people on both sides of the Xia River, these things were both profoundly heavy; light words couldn't describe them.

Xi Ping cut a long story short: “I've been in seclusion.”

Wei Chengxiang said, “I've mainly been active in the Land of Turmoil.”

The reincarnation wood tree rustled. Wei Chengxiang slowly pulled herself together and told him about the changes in Great Wan and of the late-autumn red beneath the Lancang Mountains.

Xi Ping rarely interrupted. As he listened quietly, he raked together all the odds and ends of information he had come across in the last five years: the Crown Prince had inherited the throne; the Yao family must have breathed a sigh of relief. Perhaps Ziming-xiong no longer got diarrhea.

The country was safe and sound. San-ge was also safe and sound... Putting together this Kaiming Department, he was spending Xuanyin Mountain's money to support his own people, propping himself up on the strength of many evil cultivators who believed themselves to have sentiments—wasn't that superior to the Zhou family ancestors digging around in the Impassable Sea? It was the seventh month now, time for the old lady's birthday. He would have gone back to Jinping.

Five years. The old lady would be eighty...

As soon as the thought arose, Xi Ping decisively broke it off—he couldn't go back, so there was no use in thinking about it; he would only be pointlessly depressing himself. It was better to focus on what was in front of him. “You say that Qiu Sha can use late-autumn red to kill people, and she can merge with those trees?”

Wei Chengxiang said, “That's why I always suspected she was a tree spirit.”

Xi Ping: “...”

A-Xiang had more or less introduced to cultivation by reincarnation wood, so she wouldn't think there was anything unusual about “plants with magic powers.”

In fact, supposed “nature spirits” were only dreams of the common people. The nearest thing on earth to those spirits were probably the spiritual beasts raised by the Shu. Ordinary plants and animals couldn't “cultivate to enlightenment”—not even if they were

constantly fed spiritual stones; at most you would get a bit of material for elixirs. The differences between magic plants and ordinary plants were in “Can you eat it?” and “How do you eat it?” Intelligence couldn’t appear out of nowhere.

There was only one circumstance in which you could use a plant as your own body—that was an “accompanying plant.”

Xi Ping had only learned about this after fusing Yuan Hui’s complete set of hidden bones.

A few masters, upon shedding their skins, would produce a type of plant that hadn’t existed in the world before; this plant was called “accompanying.” For example, Yuan Hui’s reincarnation wood. Even after he died, the plant could still find surroundings that were suitable to its existence and keep on growing without end.

If someone afterward coincidentally acquired a certain key inheritance, they could “succeed to” that accompanying plant.

And the strange aspect lay in the fact that all the great sects were overseen by shed skin forebears, yet Xi Ping had never heard of any of them having an “accompanying plant.” So he had thought it was peculiar to Yuan Hui.

Now it seemed that reincarnation wood wasn’t a singular instance. It was likely that late-autumn red was also a type of accompanying plant.

No wonder Qiu Sha could sense his existence. It turned out that they really were alike.

And no wonder her way seemed so strange—Xi Ping had observed a few battles. She didn’t seem to have her own weapons or techniques, but she could “swallow” the essence of a person who had died at her hands and use it as if she were the real thing. That

person's vital weapon wouldn't miss a beat; it wouldn't even know that its master had become someone else... until she had exhausted that person's essence.

Late-autumn red was a parasitic vine—looking at it that way, it did make sense.

Xi Ping said, "Let's not talk about her for now. That 'Law Breaker' has recognized you as its master? Can you turn it off?"

Wei Chengxiang shook her head. "It's known as the tool without a grade, so anyone can use it. But I think its grade is too high. Perhaps current cultivators can't understand it. I can only activate it and set the 'axiom.' I arranged with her that the Law Breaker would cease to operate when either the axiom was broken, or the axiom came true. Uncle, don't worry, I know where to draw the line. Tao County won't disappear."

Xi Ping paused. "What does it mean for the axiom to break or the axiom to come true?"

"The axiom here is that 'On the seventh day of the seventh month, Qiu Sha will appear at the night feast in the Immortal Palace.' Once Qiu Sha arrives at the Immortal Palace, the time here will be the time of the Immortal Palace's night feast. If she dies there or leaves midway, the night feast will be there, but she won't be. The condition that 'she's at the Immortal Palace night feast' will no longer hold up. That's called the axiom breaking. The axiom being realized means that the axiom will also have been realized outside of the Law Breaker. The link between the inside and the outside of the Law Breaker will naturally conclude then—in other words, when the human world reaches the Immortal Palace's night feast on the seventh day of the seventh month, the Law Breaker will put Tao County back."

But after he heard this, Xi Ping didn't stop worrying. He kept feeling that there was something wrong.

CHAPTER 80 - Indignant Cicadas (14)

There is no doubt that everyone judges others by their own standards—otherwise, they would have no basis for understanding others. But there are two circumstances in which you must carefully consider how you judge another by your own standards: one is when there is too great a difference between your positions and temperaments; the other is when there is too a great a difference between your knowledge and abilities.

Qiu Sha undoubtedly fell under the latter heading. For example, when Xi Ping had been confused and muddleheaded before, he'd had absolutely no idea that such a thing as the Law Breaker existed.

Now that Xi Ping's consciousness had been restored, if not for the fact that trees had no such capability, he would have broken out in a cold sweat—he'd actually thought he was an evildoer of Qiu Sha's sort and had been using his knowledge, which could just fill the bottom of a vase, to ponder the motives of an old monster several hundred years old!

“No, A-Xiang, you and I won't be able to work this out. We're not likely to see through what she's come up with. We don't even know whether she has some magic power similar to the Law Breaker,” Xi Ping said seriously. “You have to look at her goals. The further in time, the more opponents she'll have. All it would take is one master putting up a difficult fight, and the enemies coming in will become more and more numerous as time goes on. If the Law Breaker breaks under those circumstances and Tao County returns to the human world, anyone could be waiting out there to kill her. Won't she be in for it? If Qiu Sha genuinely intended to return Tao County intact, she couldn't have failed to consider her own plight, and she wouldn't have agreed to an arrangement with you that was going to get her killed.”

After hearing this, Wei Chengxiang stared blankly for a moment. Then she was terrified. “Yes, senior. I’ve been careless... I shouldn’t have come, should I?”

“Indeed,” Xi Ping thought.

It wasn’t that he was cold and indifferent, an advocate for not repaying kindness—it was that it sounded to him as though there was something very off about Qiu Sha letting Wei Chengxiang go.

That A-Xiang hadn’t noticed anything wrong was because her temperament was like that to begin with: stiff quills and a soft belly.

But Xi Ping considered it, putting himself in Qiu Sha’s position. If his shifu died and Zhaoting spent eight hundred years hiding from his sight, then ran off with a stranger right in front of his eyes, he might explode from anger; it would take pounding the two-timing sword and person into smithereens together to vent his resentment.

Of course, Qiu Sha wasn’t him, but the murderous aura coming off her made your head hurt when you passed by her. Could she really be more magnanimous than him on this front?

Xi Ping said, “You’re already here. It’s pointless to talk about whether you should have come or not.”

All of a sudden, neither of them was in the mood to think of or lament the hardships of fate. They put their heads together and rapidly combed through the rules of the Law Breaker several times but came up empty—Wei Chengxiang was the master of the Law Breaker Bracelet; while she couldn’t completely control the Law Breaker, all ambiguities such as “How is the boundary of the Immortal Palace’s night feast to be delimited?” and “Does it count if Qiu Sha doesn’t go in person but her consciousness is there controlling late-autumn red?” were resolved according to Wei

Chengxiang's ideas. She hadn't even told Qiu Sha what those ideas were, so she certainly couldn't rule-lawyer her way out.

Furthermore, it was sufficient for either of the two conditions, the axiom breaking or the axiom being realized, to be established; if they could both be established at the same time, then there would definitely be no problem. Wei Chengxiang had Qiu Sha neatly walled up.

Just as Xi Ping was beginning to suspect he was being too mistrustful and paranoid, his spiritual sense was touched.

A master was approaching!

Xi Ping quickly split off half his consciousness and flew out of the small yard through the reincarnation wood. He saw a man in convict's garb standing several zhang away. He was so pretty he was a little feminine, gentle and scholarly.

Oh?

There was actually a person who had entered static, timeless Tao County and hadn't followed his instinct to go find the Immortal Palace?

Xi Ping had never seen this person, but he thought there was a familiar aura around him. Through his consciousness, he said to Wei Chengxiang, "One of Xuanyin's."

Wei Chengxiang went blank: before, when the senior had talked about "Xuanyin," he would say "Xuanyin Mountain" or "Xuanyin's inner sect" to distinguish those from outer sects like Heaven's Design Pavilion. Occasionally he would let slip a "the immortal sect." To listen to him, it was clear he was an immortal from Xuanyin — only Xuanyin's own people would distinguish between this and that part of the sect.

But just now, when he'd spat out the word "Xuanyin," it had carried an indescribable chill and distance.

What had happened?

Before she could think carefully about it, the man came to the yard's gate. But he didn't knock. First, he took out a pair of glasses and put them on his nose.

There just happened to be a reincarnation wood tree behind him. Xi Ping silently bent a tree branch and looked out through the lenses from the gap between the man's face and the glasses. To his surprise, he saw that the courtyard wall was covered in invisible inscriptions.

These were prohibitions Qiu Sha had laid down.

Xi Ping had spent five years hanging around Chu's black market. He'd seen countless strange and rare instructions. But he couldn't quite get a handle on these. He could only sense through the lenses that there was a cold murderous aura about these characters.

The newcomer examined these inscriptions for a while. Presumably he also couldn't find his way around them. So he sighed, took a step back, and loudly said, "I am Lin Chi of Xuanyin Mountain. I request an audience with the master of the Law Breaker."

What, the Golden Hand?!

"Him?" said Xi Ping.

"Who?" said Wei Chengxiang.

Xi Ping: "... "

Hadn't he just said?

Then he realized something. "Wait, you can't hear him?"

Wei Chengxiang was perplexed. "Did he say something?"

Woman and tree looked at each other in dismay. Wei Chengxiang's expression became somewhat grim.

Xi Ping wiped away his freshly provoked sense of good fortune— Qiu Sha wasn't only protecting Wei Chengxiang, she was also cutting her off from outsiders. The only thing that hadn't been restricted was him, the "tree spirit" in the reincarnation wood. Qiu Sha, who also had an accompanying plant, had known that he could speak to A-Xiang directly through her spirit, and that nothing external could prevent it.

There was no doubt about it. Qiu Sha believed that, being like her, his interests would be the same as hers, and she had even been relying on him to help her from the shadows.

Lin Chi waited patiently for a while, saw that there was no response, then said, "I heard on the South Sea about the abnormality in Tao County and thought then that it sounded like the Law Breaker, but I didn't dare to believe it. Because the Law Breaker is the fussiest tool I've ever seen, capable of altering all surrounding rules, not to be found unwillingly even by a shed skin cultivator. Back then..."

At this point, he paused delicately and changed what he was going to say. "There is no way she would choose a brutal and murderous person like Qiu Sha. Fellow cultivator, the Law Breaker has chosen you, so I trust that no matter what your position may be, you must hold yourself to upright and honorable standards and keep your conscience clear in all matters. I have no ill intent. Would it be possible for you to come out and see me?"

Xi Ping conveyed this speech to Wei Chengxiang without missing a word.

Goddamned late-autumn red. It had turned him into an aping myna bird.

When he was finished aping, Xi Ping at first wanted to say something, but he suddenly noticed Wei Chengxiang's appearance —her wrists lay on her knees. She was naturally long-limbed. The knuckles of her dangling fingers protruded slightly, and there were many calluses on them.

He froze, suddenly realizing that she wasn't a little girl anymore. He swallowed his words.

Indeed, Wei Chengxiang didn't seek his opinion in a panic like she had when she was a girl. She very composedly tapped her knee with her fingers, not answering, waiting to hear what Lin Chi would say.

Not receiving a response after a long moment, Lin Chi pursed his lips, an expression of suffering appearing on his face, as if being forced to sing this ridiculous one-man comical act was torture to him. Watching him, even Xi Ping felt embarrassed on his behalf.

After a moment, Lin Chi sighed, steeled himself, and said, "You have chosen to stand on Qiu Sha's side. Naturally you are on your guard against me and likely do not trust me. In the days since I entered Tao County, I have searched everywhere and found that the Law Breaker's axiom here seems to be connected to time. I do not know whether my conjecture is correct... I would only like to inform you that time is very dangerous. As soon as a divergence occurs, Tao County may disappear forever. Am I correct in assuming that Qiu Sha has not divulged that apart from the Law Breaker, she also possesses the Riverward?"

The Riverward!

Xi Ping suddenly remembered that Qiu Sha had written san-ge a letter through Xu Rucheng, where she had also mentioned this thing.

Wei Chengxiang shook her head gently. Her fingers stopped tapping her knee. When she spoke, it was in a practiced, deep masculine voice. “Please instruct me, Golden Hand. What is the Riverward?”

Xi Ping had intended to pass these words on for her, but he saw that when she spoke, two inscription characters on the courtyard gate evaporated. Her voice passed without obstruction through the gap in the gate.

True—there were no laws inside the Law Breaker. Anything could happen. It was very random. There was of course nothing surprising about a mere half-immortal like her puncturing with a single sentence inscriptions that could hold back the master of Moon Plated Peak.

Xi Ping knew that immortal tools could repel each other due to conflicting properties, and that immortal tools of the ascended spirit grade and above could even repel people who were incompatible with their properties. But he had never seen a thing so...impossibly spirited as the Law Breaker.

For a moment, Xi Ping even felt that it was alive and had its own will.

At last getting a response, Lin Chi acted as though he had been granted a general pardon. He breathed a sigh of relief. “The Law Breaker destroys the natural laws and rules within a certain range. The Riverward, on the other hand, can convey a person to any place.”

Wei Chengxiang sat up straight. “Including taking them into or out of the Law Breaker?”

“No one has yet tried it,” Lin Chi said quietly. “The Riverward can only be used three times.”

The Law Breaker also had limits on its use—at its utmost, the largest area it could cover was basically the size of Tao County, but at least it could be used repeatedly. The Riverward, however, could only be used three times. These two immortal tools were both things that scraped the lowest levels of natural law; they seemed to be divine or demonic products, not susceptible to being distinguished by grade. No doubt the more exacting the conditions of use were, the more high-grade they became.

In other words, it was very likely that the Riverward could pierce through the Law Breaker.

Wei Chengxiang concentrated. Through her spirit, she quickly said to Xi Ping, “No, this must only be a means of escape she’s left for herself, so she can get out any time if it turns out the Law Breaker is working against her. The Riverward shouldn’t pose a danger to Tao County. When the Law Breaker reaches a certain point, it will have to conclude, because no matter where Qiu Sha is, if the axiom isn’t broken, it will be realized, and if it can’t be realized, the axiom will break, even if she uses the Riverward to leave at that point in time.”

But Xi Ping slowly sucked in a breath. “A-Xiang, that’s not how it goes... Damn it, what kind of person was this Hui Xiangjun? No wonder the five great sects joined hands eight centuries ago to kill an ascended spirit.”

“What?”

“If the Riverward really can take her to any place, she can make it so the axiom doesn’t break but can’t be realized either—she only

needs to activate the Riverward a moment before that point, so it will take her past that point in time. The Immortal Palace's night feast won't end in an instant; she'll still be at the night feast, so the axiom won't be broken, but at the instant of the join, there will be no Qiu Sha, so the axiom won't be realized."

Hearing this, Wei Chengxiang's forehead ached. Maintaining a taciturn and profound bearing in front of Lin Chi, she silently said to Xi Ping, "The Riverward can take her through time? No, wait, senior, I'm confused... That's impossible. If the Riverward was so powerful, why wouldn't she return to the past, when Hui Xiangjun was alive, and rescue her? Or simply return to before the five sages had established the spiritual mountains—wouldn't she know all of history for centuries past and centuries to come, be able to satisfy her every desire?"

"The Riverward certainly can't. Time is a fixed law of cause and effect. But..."

Xi Ping's next sentence nearly coincided with Lin Chi's.

"This is inside the Law Breaker," said Xi Ping.

"Furthermore, this is inside the Law Breaker," said Lin Chi.

Inside the Law Breaker, apart from the "axiom," all fixed laws became ineffective.

Layering the two tools on top of each, you really could reverse nature and time.

Lin Chi said softly, "When this is over, she can use the Riverward to return to the human world. If my reckoning is correct, the Riverward must have been used once before. There will be two uses left."

And Tao County would disappear, taking half of the cultivation world... as well as the Law Breaker Bracelet that had betrayed her with it.

A chill began to come up from the soles of Wei Chengxiang's feet. She bit down on the tip of her tongue. With her mouth full of the taste of blood, she closed her eyes and calmed down as fast as possible. She said to Xi Ping, "This is my fault. If Tao County truly disappears, I won't be able to atone for it with ten thousand deaths. But once the Law Breaker is activated, no one can stop it. Unless I die... Senior, on the border between the Land of Turmoil and Great Wan, there's a little village sixteen li south of what used to be Bajing County in Southern He. I gave shelter to some intelligent Turmoilers there. Because of me, they worship reincarnation wood, and they've planted many trees, you..."

Xi Ping interrupted her: "Drop the heroics. I can't do anything about it."

Outside the Law Breaker, he couldn't even leave the divine image, and here she was sending him all the way to the Land of Turmoil. She really knew how to hand out work.

"Unless you die, you said?" Xi Ping asked grimly. "Have you tried that out for yourself?"

Wei Chengxiang: "..."

True, that was what Qiu Sha had always been subtly hinting at: as the master of the Law Breaker Bracelet, she had to preserve her life; if she died, the Law Breaker would conclude.

"You can't even control that lousy bracelet while you're alive. You think it cares whether you live or die?" Xi Ping said. "Stop talking nonsense. You're a bracelet rack who's overthinking things. Hurry up and ask Lin what to do."

Wei Chengxiang accordingly turned to Lin Chi and explained the Law Breaker Bracelet's axiom and conditions of concluding.
"Master Lin, do you know what to do?"

After listening to this, Lin Chi didn't speak for a long time. Finally, he smiled bitterly up at the sky and, without a word, turned and left.

Wei Chengxiang said, "Master Lin?"

"I am no master," Lin Chi's voice came from nearby. "Compared to her, I am only a craftsman... I cannot comprehend her relics. There's nothing to be done. On the list of those Qiu Sha wants to kill, I probably rank even ahead of Xiang Zhao. That being the case, I shouldn't delay any longer."

Wei Chengxiang said, "Wait..."

Xi Ping: "..."

These two were really something. When they came to a problem, they didn't solve the problem, but on the other hand they were both quite proactive when it came to committing suicide.

In a moment of desperation, the roots of some reincarnation wood trees beside the road all came out of the ground and got under Lin Chi's feet, tripping him. At the same time, a talisman flew out of a reincarnation wood tree and slapped Lin Chi right on the back.

"Hold it right there!"

CHAPTER 81 - Indignant Cicadas (15)

Meeting with an unexpected sneak attack, Lin Chi only had time to hastily reach back and raise a thin layer of spiritual energy to shield himself from behind. The talisman of unknown origin pierced his defense and only dispersed when it hit his protective robes, giving him a violent shove forward. Adding in the tree roots tripping him up, the mighty master of Moon Plated Peak nearly fell flat on his face. Lin Chi reeled drunkenly for over a zhang and bumped into a wall.

Wei Chengxiang, who could only hear through the cracks in the inscriptions: "..."

What was that noise?

Xi Ping: "..."

Had Master Lin just swapped out his limbs? Why did they seem brand new?

He was simply astonished: was there something else he'd forgotten? He really was an established foundation, right..? The kind that had established himself without a Way of the Heart?

Back then, in the East Sea, he'd been able to make Lin Zhaoli go weak at the knees with a single beam of shifu's sword energy; just now, the established foundation cultivators who had wandered by mistake into the ascended spirit battlefield had been like drops of water on a hot pan, evaporating as soon as they fell—so how could he not only travel freely through the ascended spirit battlefield, but even dare to hit the master of Moon Plated Peak?

Lin Chi, leaning miserably against the wall, found his footing. "May I ask what manner of divinity you are?"

Master Lin wasn't a Tai Sui believer, and he hadn't poured blood onto reincarnation wood. Xi Ping couldn't speak to him directly, so he collected his disorderly thoughts and used spiritual energy to write on the ground: "Please wait, Peak Master Lin."

Lin Chi looked down. These were pure standard Wan characters... and for some reason, the handwriting looked familiar.

Before he could recall why, he saw the rapid and flourishing writing become a little more careful and restrained, continuing: "I may have an idea we can try. If Your Excellency isn't in too great a hurry to reincarnate, could you help out?"

The Immortal Palace in Seventeen Li Town—

It was clearly midsummer, the sixth month... no, the beginning of the seventh month. But as far as the eye could see, there was late-autumn red all around the Immortal Palace. The parasitic vines growing out of season had cleared away all the flowers, grasses, and trees in the vicinity of the Immortal Palace; not even the reincarnation wood had survived.

If not for the fact that the late-autumn red seemed to have some scruples and was confining its activities within the scope of the mustard seed's cover, it would have occupied all of Tao County by now.

At present, a red-eyed sword cultivator from Northern Li's Kunlun Sect was slashing in the direction of the late-autumn red.

This Kunlun sword cultivator was named Cheng Yu, a figure who had been famous in the north for a long time. When his sect had sent him to Chu to "expel evil," he hadn't taken Qiu Sha seriously—an early ascended spirit "two-year-old" who probably wasn't even steady on her level yet. The fact that Xiang Zhao's boat had

capsized in a sewer only went to show that hardly any of these southern sword cultivators knew what they were doing—coming here, he had also brought along a number of promising established foundations under a hundred fifty years old to get some experience. Who would have thought that a whole generation of virtuosos would die here because of his rashness?

With one stroke of his sword, Cheng Yu cut ten chi deep into the ground; the peculiar late-autumn red was torn up by the roots. When he saw the roots of those damned vines, his scalp prickled—the parasitic vines hadn't randomly taken root on vegetation. The protruding root systems were wrapped around human corpses, and he recognized several of the faces!

Of the established foundations who had died here, only their spiritual bones remained. Those whose flesh still was still present were all ascended spirits. Cheng Yu saw that one of the corpses near him belonged to a person who had studied under the same teacher as him.

But before entering Tao County, he had received word that this person was still on his way. How could he have reached this place before him...? What the hell was going on here?

Before he could calm his agitated brain, the parasitic vines growing on his fellow disciple's body threw themselves at him ferociously, powerful sword energy coming right toward him. Cheng Yu gave a loud cry and narrowly managed to block, a crack appearing in his vital sword. He retreated several chi in a row, panic-stricken—even with his eyes closed, he couldn't have failed to recognize that sword energy. It was the unfailingly orthodox ninefold sword of Kunlun.

The parasitic vines clinging to his fellow disciple's body seemed to have absorbed all of his essence and cultivation!

Cheng Yu's pupils dilated slightly as he scanned the late-autumn red that lay as far as the eye could see: if each cluster of vines was growing on a corpse, that was as much as to say... that all the people who had died here before had become Qiu Sha's puppets! She had an honor guard of ascended spirits!

How could that be?

Even if there was such a thing as an evil way that allowed you to swallow other people's cultivation, she was also at the ascended spirit level; how could she sustain so many essences of the same grade as her?

Just then, a slightly deep female voice crooning "The Fisherwoman of Chu" came through the faintly trembling red leaves: "The Xia runs south, on the east bank is Yu. The waves are soft, as they ferry we two—"

"I don't believe it!" Cheng Yu abruptly squeezed the sword in his hand, brazenly facing the vines growing everywhere. "Come out here!"

In response, a person walked out from among the vines. Qiu Sha was stained with blood from head to toe, holding the vital sword of a dead man. The two Kunlun ninefold swords of the same origin collided. Her singing suddenly became sharp, the tail end turning into a whistle. There was no time for Cheng Yu to react. A hole opened in the vines behind him, and a spiritual beast of Southern Shu that was controlled by the whistling snapped its jaws toward him.

Cheng Yu braced himself, the point of his sword not deviating. Without sparing a sliver attention for what was behind him, he brought the heavy sword down double-handed. The blade nearly came down on the tip of Qiu Sha's nose, the gust from the sword bringing down several strands of her long hair, and the spiritual

beast's fangs were just about to touch the top of the sword cultivator's head.

Just then, there was a shout, and a brilliant flame came out of nowhere. It didn't land; it inserted itself precisely between the spiritual beast and Cheng Yu.

The sword in Qiu Sha's hand broke. The essence in the corpse of the Kunlun sword cultivator wrapped in late-autumn red was exhausted; the corpse instantly disintegrated. And Qiu Sha, like a rusty moth, floated backward, dodging the sword gust. The aggressive late-autumn red hastily shielded her and was cut down by the pursuing frost of the Kunlun sword. The sword energy just reached her, leaving a bloody welt on the face of this demonic beauty.

When the spiritual beast she was controlling landed, its nose brushed the flames, and it roared in pain and retreated. It would no longer obey the whistled commands. It curled up inside the circle of flames and didn't dare to move again.

"A fire cage..." Qiu Sha stuck out her tongue and licked the blood on her cheek—even her tongue was longer than normal; she could easily touch the tip of her nose with it. Firelight was reflected in her long, narrow eyes, as if they were about to burst into flame. She stared scorchingly in a certain direction. "At last you dare to show yourself, coward. Have you picked out a thigh you're willing to hug?"

Cheng Yu looked in the direction of her gaze and saw a man in convict's clothes come down from the sky riding a blue luan that was the height of two people. He was paler than all the dead on the ground.

Cheng Yu had never seen such a big blue luan. The auspicious bird's eyes were a pair of translucent white spirits... It was actually a

realistic immortal tool.

“My thanks.” The sword cultivator from Kunlun rapidly evened out his breathing and saluted the newcomer. “My thanks. I am Cheng Yu of Kunlun.”

The man in convict’s clothes met his gaze for a moment, then rapidly averted his eyes. He gave a cold and formal nod. “Lin Chi of Xuanyin.”

Cheng Yu was startled. “The Golden Hand?”

Qiu Sha laughed. “Does he deserve that title?”

Lin Chi didn’t retort. He took a talisman between his fingertips and stuck it to his throat. His voice instantly spread throughout the mustard seed. “Everyone...”

As soon as he spoke, Qiu Sha threw herself at him, like a falcon that had caught the scent of blood. The blue luan spiraled upward carrying Lin Chi. Indeed, an immortal tool that burned white spirits was something out of the ordinary. Even a real blue luan couldn’t fly like this!

As fast as Qiu Sha could move, that was how fast the blue luan immortal tool could move. It didn’t need anyone to control it. It could adjust its speed and direction in response to its pursuer. Lin Chi, as though reciting a memorized text, spoke in a voice as level as the Xia River at midsummer: “We currently find ourself in the midst of a tool known as the Law Breaker. The Law Breaker has taken us all to the seventh day of the seventh month. If Qiu Sha is not dead before time in the outside world reaches the Immortal Palace’s night feast on the seventh day of the seventh month, Tao County will be unable to return to the human...”

Before he could speak the last word, the late-autumn red inside the mustard seed began to run riot, a dozen vines reaching toward the sky, each of the vines as thick as a person's arm span transforming into a Qiu Sha. Sword energy gobbled up from some unlucky sword cultivator surged from all around.

Lin Chi didn't panic. The wings of the blue luan he was riding extended and changed shape, wrapping him up like a flower bud, narrowly blocking Qiu Sha's blow.

"You—rotten—coward!" Qiu Sha didn't let up. At each pause, she set off an earth-shattering sword gust, smashing the immortal tool wrapped around him, each blow fiercer and heavier than the one before—how could this be an early stage ascended spirit!?

Lin Chi hid in the pitch darkness inside the immortal tool. Watching the great evildoer smashing a crack in the immortal tool and the white spirits becoming fainter and fainter, he neither fought back nor worried. He quietly examined the crack.

"It was your fault that she died and her way was extinguished, and you still had the face to use her things to win fame you didn't deserve. Shameless braggart of a Golden Hand, get the hell out here! Meet your death!"

Lin Chi only sighed—Xi Ping suspected that this Master Lin had spent too much time at his forge, and there was something wrong with his lungs. It was all sighs and lamentations with him, as if he were a widower whose whole family had just died.

At this time, Xi Ping had split off a part of his consciousness and was hiding in a reincarnation wood amulet in Lin Chi's sleeve.

This peak master of Moon Plated Peak was without exception the most easily bullied ascended spirit Xi Ping had ever met. When he'd told him to drip blood on the reincarnation wood amulet, Xi Ping had

had a bellyful of words prepared for haggling with him, but before he could say a single word, Lin Chi just took some blood and dripped it onto the wood, openly displaying his attitude—go ahead and plot against me in secret; plotting in the open is fine, too; I’ve had enough of living, anyway.

Now, Xi Ping couldn’t resist saying, “Peak Master Lin…”

“Alas,” said Lin Chi, “she’s right.”

Xi Ping: “…”

Who cares whether she’s right!

You can die after you’ve said what I told you to say! Just try a little, Peak Master Lin, I’m begging you!

There was a cracking sound as the immortal tool protecting Lin Chi was split open by Qiu Sha. Biting cold sword energy came right toward him. Fortunately, the other cultivators trapped in the Immortal Palace reacted now. Kunlun’s Cheng Yu’s blow was the first to come flying, shielding Lin Chi.

Next, an unknown spiritual beast from Southern Shu came flying at the same time as a talisman. The talisman swept away the fierce late-autumn red, and the spiritual beast caught Lin Chi as he fell through the air. The cultivators trapped in the Immortal Palace by late-autumn red, who had been running around all over the place like headless flies, gradually gathered.

Xi Ping was about to lose his temper. “Talk already!”

The spiritual beast carrying Lin Chi passed by a reeking wind. Master Lin finally remembered what he was supposed to be doing and continued his recitation. “The Law Breaker isn’t in her hands. The master of the Law Breaker is her accomplice, of low cultivation,

hidden at the boundary of Tao County and protected by inscriptions.”

After this, he told them Wei Chengxiang’s location. “If there are those among my fellow cultivators who are experts in inscriptions, please go have a look.”

The inscription masters among the cultivators exchanged looks and withdrew from the battlefield. Sword cultivators and talismans quickly came to fill the vacancies, holding off Qiu Sha in a rather well-coordinated fashion.

Wei Chengxiang was alerted by the inscriptions in the yard lighting up and knew that the people coming to “save her” were here.

The first step Xi Ping had planned was to get her out of the yard.

Xi Ping had guessed that while Wei Chengxiang’s death wouldn’t necessarily mean that the Law Breaker Bracelet would cease to operate, losing its master would still have an impact on the immortal tool. Otherwise, Qiu Sha would have silenced her as soon as the Law Breaker had activated; she wouldn’t have left her alive to reveal the Law Breaker’s axiom. She had certainly made a ring around Wei Chengxiang in order to protect her until the moment of the Immortal Palace’s night feast arrived.

Qiu Sha had placed A-Xiang in a yard far from Seventeen Li Town. Once the fighting in the Immortal Palace began, it was unlikely that she would be able to attend to both ends. So what would she do if Wei Chengxiang’s hiding place was discovered, or if Wei Chengxiang herself betrayed her?

Qiu Sha must have made other preparations. The great evildoer was too crafty. Xi Ping had advocated against acting rashly; they would let this bunch of orthodox cultivators go ahead and sweep for mines.

Now, a few inscription experts from Sanyue were surrounding the little yard, all their expressions very grave. They were thinking that the inscriptions on the courtyard wall were ones they had never seen before.

They cautiously consulted for a moment, then began trying to break the inscriptions. Xi Ping watched through the reincarnation wood. As soon as a single crack opened in the inscriptions on the outside of the courtyard wall, a spiritual energy cyclone swirled up inside the yard. On the walls, on the ground, and even on Wei Chengxiang were layer upon layer of inscriptions, and neither of the two of them had noticed them being laid down!

There was a huge sound. The masters were unexpectedly sent flying away by an explosion; it was unclear whether they were dead or alive. The ground at the courtyard gate had nearly collapsed into a well!

Had Wei Chengxiang herself tried to leave, she would have been standing at the gate right now. With her puny half-immortal's cultivation, she would have been broken to pieces.

The next moment, Wei Chengxiang vanished into thin air. Xi Ping said "What luck" to himself and followed her closely with his consciousness through the reincarnation wood.

As expected, his guesses had been very near the mark. Wei Chengxiang's death would have an impact on the Law Breaker, but it couldn't make the Law Breaker stop. If others tried to capture her, she certainly wouldn't approach the gate, so Qiu Sha's "backup plan" would transport her somewhere else; but if she herself betrayed Qiu Sha, the disadvantages of leaving her alive would have outweighed the advantages, so Qiu Sha would simply kill her "dismembered tail."

Wei Chengxiang, having escaped a calamity, was transported to the other side of Tao County, arriving at a place that was nearly as far as possible from Seventeen Li Town's Immortal Palace. She stumbled, then found her footing. The inscriptions on her disappeared. Her hands were still shaking.

Xi Ping scanned with his consciousness. This place just happened to be near Xu Rucheng.

Divine will!

He immediately passed word to Xu-da-bao: "Come over and pick someone up for me!"

In the Immortal Palace, Cheng Yu dodged a late-autumn red vine while holding onto Lin Chi and quickly asked, "Master Lin, how will we know what the time outside is?"

Lin Chi said, "The earlier someone entered Tao County, the later they will arrive. If I recall correctly, Tao County disappeared in the early hours of the sixteenth of the sixth month. The people who entered before sunrise that day will be the last batch to arrive. When we see them, we'll have very little time left."

No sooner had he spoken than a Sanyue cultivator abruptly became agitated. "I... I came in on the night of the sixteenth!"

"What?!"

For a moment, even Lin Chi was slightly stifled.

Xi Ping quickly asked, "How can it be so fast?"

According to his expectations, while they had no way to accurately sense the passage of time outside the Law Breaker, twenty whole days still couldn't pass in the blink of an eye. Lin Chi had only

entered Tao County toward the end of the sixth month. When he had found Wei Chengxiang, there ought to have been at least half the time remaining!

Lin Chi considered it for a moment. “I’m afraid it’s because of the Law Breaker. She doesn’t like to be broken by force and prefers ‘realization.’ Therefore, she will quietly change the rules in favor of attaining ‘realization.’ On the sixteenth day of the sixth month, no one knew what was happening. There were many cultivators who entered Tao County that day. For Qiu Sha, the closer it gets to the point of realization, the more danger there is. So the Law Breaker will try to compress time as much as possible. Also... I’m afraid it’s because of you and me, as well.”

Xi Ping, crumbling, said, “How can I have anything to do with it?”

“When that little Brother Wei told you what the axiom was, it imperceptibly added to the risk of the axiom being broken, leading to the Law Breaker compressing time a step further.”

Xi Ping: “...”

How could a lousy immortal tool have its own likes and dislikes?!
How could it make so much trouble?!

When he had been forced to receive worship for five years, who had cared that he hated eating pickled foods?

Hardly had Lin Chi spoken than the sounds of talking and cursing came from nearby.

The greatest number of people had charged into Tao County on the sixteenth of the sixth month. A big batch of cultivators had arrived, and the hidden Law Breaker was still speeding up time!

In Great Wan's Yuzhou, the sun was setting. The cicadas of late summer and early autumn were clamoring fit to boil.

Zhou Ying took out a pocket watch and glanced at it. "The people inside must be about to meet Xiang Jing... 'Xiang Zhao' and 'Xiang Jing'—those two brothers have quite interesting names. It's as if their fates lie in their names."⁶⁰

Bai Ling was a little restless from worry, repeatedly taking out his communication device to look at it. He had prepared a whole stack of paper substitutes. "My lord, Master Lin is also inside. It's said that he was once close friends with Hui Xiangjun. He must know about the Law Breaker, right? Will he be able to guess the Law Breaker's axiom?"

"Perhaps. There are few total idiots in the toolmaking path." The heart-protecting lotus at Zhou Ying's neck flashed, as if it didn't like him talking about its creator like this. Zhou Ying ignored it and continued, "So if Qiu Sha hasn't died yet, the people inside must be going crazy."

The cultivators in Tao County were in fact going crazy. The people who entered the Immortal Palace one after another reported that they had come in at xu hour on the sixteenth, at shen hour... in the blink of an eye, the reports reached noon and went on getting earlier.

In an instant, it was as if a whole shichen's worth of sand had run out.

And Qiu Sha seemed to know that the Law Breaker was helping her. She simply "dissolved" into the late-autumn red filling the Immortal Palace. She was everywhere yet nowhere!

The mustard seed containing the ascended spirit battlefield kept expanding. Now it had nearly reached the edge of Seventeen Li Town, stretched almost to breaking point. Inadvertently, Cheng Yu, red-eyed with murderous intent, lost control of his thrust, and the sword gust broke through the edge of the mustard seed.

Meanwhile, apart from Xu Rucheng and the others who had gone to test the boundaries, the other Luwu had just finished dispersing the weak and elderly from Seventeen Li Town and hadn't yet had a chance to catch their breaths.

To dodge the blow of the Kunlun sword cultivator, the late-autumn red reached out from the mustard seed. It squeezed and snapped the roots of an old reincarnation wood tree, sending it crashing down on the head of an old man who couldn't walk well.

Xi Ping said, "Fuck you, Qiu Sha!"

As the shadow came down, the old man looked up in astonishment, then saw the reincarnation wood tree about to hit his head stop in midair at a weird angle.

The old man, dumbstruck, opened his clouded eyes wide. "Tai Sui..."

"Move!" said Xi Ping.

The Luwu rushing over quickly pulled the old man away, and the tree fell with a crash.

The next moment, a bolt of lightning flashed over Tao County, striking the late-autumn red vine that had escaped the mustard seed.

The whole crowd of ascended spirit masters were startled by this bolt of lightning.

What tricks was the Law Breaker getting up to now? How could there be a heavenly tribulation all of a sudden?

Xi Ping looked up: right—Qiu Sha had sworn not to harm the innocent, or else she would suffer backlash from the Law Breaker.

Lin Chi whispered, “So if she harms mortals, she will suffer backlash from the Law Breaker...”

“Lin Chi!” Xi Ping shouted sternly.

But it was too late. Lin Chi had already said it.

“Huh? What’s...” Before Lin Chi could catch up, he saw cultivators from Southern Shu and Sanyue simultaneously attack the edges of the mustard seed.

After holding out this long, the mustard seed was already on its last legs. How could it hold out against a joint attack from so many ascended spirits? It collapsed at once, and the aftershocks of the ascended spirit battlefield sent Seventeen Li Town’s veins of the earth into convulsions.

Lin Chi’s expression altered. “My fellow cultivators!”

What are you doing? Are you finished with your Ways of the Heart?

“Tai Sui”’s cold laugh came through his spirit. “Anyway, if they can’t kill Qiu Sha soon, Tao County will disappear. As they see it, sacrificing a few nobodies in the vicinity of Seventeen Li Town to save the whole county is perfectly justified. How could that go against their Ways of the Heart? Their Ways of the Heart are doing just fine.”

Cheng Yu didn't turn his head to look outward. He slashed at the late-autumn red in the Immortal Palace.

At the same time, all the weapons held by the ascended spirits fell like rain on the vines where Qiu Sha was sheltering, and the earth shook inside and outside of Seventeen Li Town. Heavenly lightning hung above their heads and thunder rumbled, warning Qiu Sha not to violate her oath.

Qiu Sha laughed, her laughter echoing throughout the Immortal Palace, almost forming a resonance with the thunder. "Fine! Righteous, orthodox cultivators! Nicely done!"

Boom—

Ignoring the heavenly lightning, she brazenly fought back, and the lightning fell with a deafening rumble right on the late-autumn red.

Ascended spirit spiritual energy crashed together and flew outward, about to raze all of Tao County to the ground!

Just then, all the reincarnation wood trees around Seventeen Li Town began to grow madly. All the spiritual stones stored in the Immortal Palace surged toward those trees.

The late-autumn red instinctively began fighting over the spiritual energy in order to heal its wounds, but Qiu Sha stopped the restless vines with a thought. "*Cough-cough... oh, wow... cough*, had enough of watching the fun? You couldn't keep from joining in any longer?"

The bent and crooked reincarnation wood trees by the roadsides seemed to have come alive, their roots bursting out of the ground, cord after cord of their dense root systems spanning the broken earth, narrowly keeping the cracks from opening and holding up

houses on the point of collapse. The trees were wildly soaking up the spiritual energy leaking from the ascended spirit battlefield.

Qiu Sha said, smiling, “All right, you can have it.”

As the people gaped in astonishment, the poor quality reincarnation wood trees that normally only grew to a little over a zhang high grew vast and towering, as though they had cultivated spirits, surrounding the battlefield.

Next, the canopy of one of the trees shook, and without warning, a talisman flew out, knocking a Sanyue cultivator right out of the air.

Apart from sword cultivators and the like, who trained their bodies, cultivators who followed other ways weren’t especially proficient in martial arts. In battle, they relied on their spiritual senses, so when the majority of cultivators got into fights, they only had their cultivation level to rely on.

But inside the Law Breaker, the talismans these trees tossed out were like the wrath of heaven. They didn’t touch the cultivators’ spiritual senses at all.

For a moment, all the ascended spirits became like Lin Chi, who had nearly fallen flat on his face. They couldn’t work out what was happening. All the spiritual energy they had just expended was “returned” to them by the reincarnation wood trees. They were in a miserable plight.

A cicada that had perhaps been scared witless clung to the trunk of a reincarnation wood tree, not flying away even now. It fluttered its wings and gave a cry.

One of the Chu residents realized what was happening and cried out, “Look, the misty willow! It’s Tai Sui!”

“Tai Sui!”

Having survived the calamity, the people knelt.

“Tai Sui has worked a miracle!”

The late-autumn red deliberately avoided the reincarnation wood trees. Qiu Sha raised her head and looked at the sky above the Immortal Palace, eternally stuck in the evening. She smiled. “‘Tai Sui’... Ha, this place will soon be yours, and you can be the true god of Tao County. It truly makes me envious.”

No sooner had she spoken than a completely bewildered man appeared in the Immortal Palace, looking in shock at the ruins and the monstrous vines everywhere.

Xiang Jing, who had entered Tao County before dawn on the sixteenth day of the sixth month, had arrived.

The last one.

CHAPTER 82 - Indignant Cicadas (16)

Sanyue's Xiang Jing had been trapped in the unpeopled silence from the sixteenth day of the sixth month until the seventh day of the seventh month. If not for the staunch will of an ascended spirit master, he would certainly have gone mad. Now that he had landed all of a sudden among the late-autumn red, from which the reek of blood rose to the skies, Xiang Jing had no time to react in any way before familiar sword energy approached him.

Da-ge?

No, that was wrong!

Xiang Jing flew up and dodged. An obscure human figure wielding the Xiuluo sword slashed at him three times.

As he dodged in haste, he tried at all costs to see who this was. When the three lightning-fast blows fell, the Xiuluo sword shattered without warning. Xiang Zhao's essence had been consumed and completely destroyed.

The inside of Xiang Jing's head roared. His mind was shaken. He was unguarded when a crash sounded in his ear as a pair of huge cymbals from Southern Shu nearly knocked the soul from his body. Xiang Jing was frozen in place. The next moment, several late-autumn red vines pierced his torso and brow, snatching his essence away.

Then he heard a soft, low female voice in his ear: "For my late-autumn red to have taken a liking to you, you must have accumulated several lifetimes' worth of blessings. And you dare to be insolent before me? To be brutally honest, you are a mere collateral relative of the Xiang clan, who may have profited off anyone's resources to reach success, who may have entered the

Way based on anyone's precedent—if karma were truly to investigate you, would your background be clean?"

This was...

Xiang Jing's eyes nearly burst from their sockets. All his facial features were open to their full extent.

These were the wild utterances he himself had pronounced, very long ago: "For a member of my Xiang family to have taken a liking to her, she must have accumulated several lifetimes' worth of blessings. And she dares to be insolent before me? To be brutally honest, she is a mere common cultivator, who may have walked any evil path to enter the Way—if the sect were truly to investigate her, would her background be clean?"

"Dongheng's Sanyue is named Xiang, and Great Chu is named Xiang. This land belongs to my family, and so do the spiritual mountains."

"Tao County is named Qiu, and the seventh day of the seventh month is also named Qiu." Bright red lips drew close to his ear. Qiu Sha had to bend down to reach him. Her hair, knocked loose, fell on Xiang Jing like snakes. "Your essence is mine now, and so is your life... hahaha."

As soon as Qiu Sha showed her face, the ascended spirit cultivators' attacks came whistling toward her like an avalanche.

Not caring at all, she pulled Xiang Jing's corpse down to the ground and hit the raging spiritual energy with all the essence she had accumulated in the late-autumn red.

In the Immortal Palace and in the sky, the ascended spirit cultivators fell like snowflakes. Underground, the corpses wrapped in late-autumn red disintegrated one after another. She took no notice of

whether the surrounding reincarnation wood forest could absorb so much spiritual energy, and she took no notice of whether the heavenly tribulation inside the Law Breaker would burn her to a crisp.

Let the heavens and the earth cleave. Let all the gods perish. All living creatures could look after themselves. She didn't give a damn!

Unfortunately, that miserable coward Lin Chi was curled up like a tortoise in its shell, hiding in the reincarnation wood forest.

Cheng Yu was tossed into the sky by the late-autumn red and watched helplessly as a Southern Shu cultivator was half-eaten by one of Shu's own spiritual beasts. His meridians burned with pain, and his essence was nearly exhausted.

Just then, he heard Lin Chi's voice from behind: "Move aside."

Cheng Yu moved aside without even thinking. Spiritual energy like a tidal wave brushed past him. The sword cultivator from Kunlun raised his head in astonishment and saw a figure in convict's clothes flash. Lin Chi formed a double-handed seal, and a talisman slipped from his fingers.

All the spiritual energy the reincarnation wood forest had absorbed from the ascended spirit battlefield surged through that talisman to blanket the late-autumn red.

The ground of Seventeen Li Town suddenly sank. The late-autumn red occupying the whole town had been forced underground by Lin Chi's talisman!

Cheng Yu was astonished—the Golden Hand was controlling this weird reincarnation wood forest!

Xuanyin Mountain's Golden Hand rarely appeared in public. His fame spanned eight centuries. As expected, he was unfathomable!

The “unfathomable” Golden Hand shook all over, and his face became even paler. The “Tai Sui” in the reincarnation wood roared toward his spirit: “A killing stroke! Master Lin! Wasn't that a suppression talisman? Why would you want to suppress her? So you could stick her in a pen and feed her until she gets big? Pardon me for being frank, but if she gets any bigger, she'll be twice your height!”

Lin Chi's meridians had nearly been snapped by the aftereffects of the talisman. He weakly said, “That's the only ascended spirit grade attack talisman I could remember...”

“How could Luo Qingshi have let you graduate from the Latent Cultivation Temple?!”

They'd have been better off using the unorthodox talismans he'd picked up from those evil cultivators!

“Who?” said Lin Chi.

Xi Ping: “...”

He'd forgotten Lin the Bashful's age. Luo the Giant hadn't even been thought of eight hundred years ago.

Just then, Xi Ping heard a snort. He was alarmed. The spiritual energy coursing through the forest suddenly stagnated.

The blanketing reincarnation wood forest was withering without warning, parasitic flame-red vines multiplying on the withered trees. Xi Ping had no body, but for a moment he still had the feeling that his marrow was being sucked out... When had the great evildoer buried late-autumn red seeds around the reincarnation wood?!

“Isn’t it enough to be a true god in Tao County? You want to get out, too? What did Lin promise you?” The parasitic vines were constantly boring into the root systems of the reincarnation wood trees. Qiu Sha’s sorrowful voice sounded in his ear: “What bottomless greed, Yuan Hui’s successor. But... did you really think I took no precautions against you?”

Meanwhile, in a little town near the border in Yuzhou, the big clock tolled loudly, reporting the hour. Rolling steam rose from the top of the clock tower.

Bai Ling stood abruptly.

“Don’t be in a rush.” Zhou Ying didn’t so much as raise his head from looking at his pocket watch—the installations in this little place by the border had fallen out of repair. The town’s worn out clock ran fast when it had just been wound. It would only be the hour when it had struck five times.

In Seventeen Li Town, Wei Chengxiang had already reached the edge of the reincarnation wood forest, but for a moment she couldn’t take another step forward—the towering trees in the forest all had late-autumn red vines twined around them. If she flew over, she would be brought down by the vines.

Oh no. How was she going to get through?

“This damn place is about to disappear,” Qiu Sha thought. “Then all these great personages will leave the land blessed by the five sages forever and have to eke out a living under the rule of this supposed evil god.”

How fun. Anyway, Tao County was only so big and had only a little drop of spiritual energy, and yet it still seemed to be raising

venomous insects. After some years, who would eat, and who would be eaten?

She felt the Riverward she carried in her clothes burn slightly, branding a place slightly to the left on her chest, as if her heart were also burning.

Just then, she hissed and sent her consciousness to Seventeen Li Town.

A thread of smoke rose. Then, she felt a sharp, stabbing pain—a Chu resident had lit the late-autumn red on fire!

Wait, how could a mortal light her vines on fire?

Why were the flames only burning her and not the reincarnation wood?

The despairing mortals quickly found that the vines wrapped around their sacred trees were afraid of fire. Ignoring the Luwu trying to stop them, they crowded around one after another.

“Burn it! Burn it!”

After staring blankly, Xi Ping began to laugh. “That’s because we’re inside the Law Breaker.”

Inside the Law Breaker, time and space could be turned upside down, substance could be turned into nothingness, ascended spirits and shed skins could become worthless, and the rage of mortals could set white spirits and blue jades alight.

As if to validate what he had said, a wind rose among the reincarnation wood forest, where hot and cold were unevenly distributed. Xi Ping promptly added a talisman, and the obedient

wind raised the flames a zhang or more high, curling around the evil vines wrapped around the trees.

The clock in Great Wan's Yuzhou tolled for a third time: *Dong—*

Wei Chengxiang put a hand over the Law Breaker Bracelet she couldn't remove from her wrist. She couldn't sense the time, but as the master of the Law Breaker, she sensed that the Law Breaker's "point of realization" was approaching. The troublemaking bracelet was excited... She couldn't think too closely about this; how could a bracelet be "excited"?!

Wei Chengxiang paid no more attention to anything else. She threw herself in among the fire and the thick smoke. "Senior, there's no time!"

No sooner had she spoken than a reincarnation wood tree with flames running along it blocked her path. Wei Chengxiang handed herself over to him without hesitation. She ran toward the tree, speeding up.

An array appeared on the reincarnation wood tree, absorbing her entirely!

Xu Rucheng, following her, was dumbfounded. "You can do that?!"

Then, disregarding the facts of the matter, he also threw himself right in... not noticing when a branch beside him took his mustard seed off him.

The clock in Great Wan's Yuzhou tolled for a fourth time: *Dong—*

Qiu Sha's expression first chilled, then relaxed. Whatever. It was already time anyway.

A thread of thin smoke poured from her chest.

The thin smoke quickly sketched the outlines of a person—thin, with sloping shoulders and a long neck, with five or six faintly visible exquisite bracelets stacked on her wrists; she was dressed in the old traditional costume of Chu women... It had been eight hundred years. The clothes had fallen out of fashion long ago.

Qiu Sha looked up and stared at the smoke, unblinking.

Just then, something flew toward her, leaving a bloody trail in the air.

As soon as Xu Rucheng charged out of the transport array, he saw the brother who said his surname was Wei, without so much as blinking, simply chop his hand off at the wrist; then a reincarnation wood tree next to him used a talisman to toss the dismembered hand!

Xu Rucheng only had time to say the word “You” before the spurting blood, flying downwind, hit him in the face.

You must be crazy!

What kind of magical “defeating the enemy at your own expense” move was this?!

Wei Chengxiang’s dismembered hand was caught up by the talisman and hurtled straight toward Qiu Sha. Qiu Sha’s senses were all blocked by the fierce fire and dense smoke; she didn’t have time to react.

In that moment, Qiu Sha watched helplessly as the hand pierced through the thin smoke in the air.

“Qiu Sha only seems crazy. A person who is skilled in arrays can’t really be deranged. Thinking about it carefully, her arrangements are actually very thorough.” Earlier, when Wei Chengxiang had been

hiding in the yard, Xi Ping had spoken to her and to Lin Chi, who had just dripped his blood on the reincarnation wood. “Don’t listen to how she brags. If she didn’t have a surefire guarantee, she wouldn’t be gambling with her life. It won’t be easy to kill her. Let’s do this—Peak Master Lin, you go over there first, tell them what the Law Breaker is, and let those orthodox... let those people who charged in here try joining forces against her. But remember not to mention the Riverward, or anything about the axiom being realized. There’s no need for them to know about those things. If they can’t kill the monster, we’ll think of a way to snatch the Riverward from Qiu Sha.”

Lin Chi, not afraid of humiliating himself, said candidly, “I don’t think that would work. In recent years, I’ve gone increasingly astray along the toolmaking way. My cultivation hasn’t progressed. If my fellow cultivators can’t defeat her, I’ll be even more useless. As for the Riverward, she takes different forms in the hands of different people. For Xiangjun, she was an eternal spring brocade flower. Now, I don’t know. I probably wouldn’t recognize her even if you put her right in front of me.”

Wei Chengxiang added, “We can try killing her, but it would be too hard to try taking something from her. Never mind us, shed skin elders wouldn’t necessarily be able to do it.”

Xi Ping then said to Lin Chi, “Peak Master Lin, immortal tools all have their own properties. When incompatible immortal tools are put together, they’ll impede each other, right? I remember that there are some immortal tools such that when you bring them out, all the items of the same grade in the vicinity will beat a retreat...”

Hearing this, Lin Chi frowned. “There are those who say that, but ‘impeding each other’ only means that they will be a little less effective than anticipated. It’s not as severe as you say. Making all the tools of the same grade beat a retreat... Such obnoxious immortal tools are quite rare.”

Xi Ping: "..."

So there had only been a few universally loathed open-eyed immortal tools in the Xuanyin Mountains back then, and he had picked out all of them.

"The immortal tools I've brought with me have no temper at all," Lin Chi said with another sigh. "Alas, even if they did, they still wouldn't deserve to be mentioned in the same breath as the Riverward."

Xi Ping hadn't been depending on him, anyway. Master Lin's heart-protecting lotus hadn't had any problem being on friendly terms with the hither seal and the spirit-winding silk, those two unprincipled tools. His things were as easily bullied as the man himself.

Xi Ping said, "What about the Law Breaker?"

Lin Chi and Wei Chengxiang simultaneously said, "The Law Breaker?"

Lin Chi said hesitantly, "Well... I don't know about that, she... she never said that the Riverward and the Law Breaker were incompatible."

"There's something I don't quite understand," Xi Ping said. "Qiu Sha has been so thorough. Why would she put the master of the Law Breaker so far away? Wasn't she afraid that she wouldn't have attention to spare once the fighting started? This place is close to Tao County's border. I don't think she's too poor to afford somewhere closer—also, Peak Master Lin, how did Hui Xiangjun die?"

Lin Chi's expression altered abruptly, as if someone had slapped him in the face.

Xi Ping was afraid he would commit suicide on the spot and quickly added, “Wait, I wasn’t asking why she... What I meant was, the Law Breaker and the Riverward on top of each other completely defy the natural order. Qiu Sha can’t control the Law Breaker, but she can still use it to send off half the cultivation world. This... er, Senior Hui Xiangjun, she was the original master of the Law Breaker and the Riverward. Under pressure, she should have been able to send off all five spiritual mountain ranges. How could the sects capture her and put her to death?”

Lin Chi was silent for a long time, then at last caught his breath. Weakly, he asked, “You mean that it’s likely the Law Breaker and the Riverward are too powerful to coexist?”

Xi Ping said, “Have you ever seen the two of them in the same place?”

Lin Chi stared blankly.

Xi Ping said, “We’re best off taking a gamble and giving it a try.”

The clock in Great Wan’s Yuzhou tolled for a fifth time: *Dong*—

On Wei Chengxiang’s dismembered hand, a plain and unadorned bracelet appeared. It completely dispersed the thin smoke, which hadn’t yet fully taken on human shape.

The two tools were each only in too much of a hurry to avoid each other. The thin smoke flew away in desperation, instantly leaping to Wei Chengxiang’s side. Then it seemed to be startled by a whiff of the hateful aura of the Law Breaker’s master. It stopped abruptly in midair, avoided her, and threw itself at Xu Rucheng, standing nearby staring stupidly.

Xu Rucheng: “...”

What the hell? What just happened?

He instinctively reached out to grab and found that what he had caught was a tiny likeness of a person, with the apparent texture of colored glaze. But inside the transparent stone, thin smoke seemed to be billowing.

Seeing the likeness, Xu Rucheng trembled—the features were clearly identical to the great monster's!

But before Xu Rucheng could take a close look, he was picked up and tossed away by reincarnation wood vines. “Tai Sui”'s voice suddenly sounded in his ear: “This is the thing your lord wants. Take it and go!”

In Tao County, the Law Breaker Bracelet hit the ground. Outside Tao County, the tolling of the clock faded. The pocket watch in Zhou Ying's hand instantly jumped to you hour.

Before the raised corners of his mouth could form a smile, his expression froze. He raised his head and looked at the communication device Bai Ling had set aside.

Bai Ling had yet to figure out what was happening when he saw his lord, who rarely used spiritual energy, flicker in and out of sight and grab the immortal tool.

In that moment, a line of handwriting so familiar it was unbelievable flashed on the immortal tool. But it was only a shadow; it couldn't manifest entirely before it was erased.

A fierce wind surged up on the opposite bank of the Xia River, nearly loosening Zhou Ying's coiled hair.

The gunners on the bank were in an uproar. The fog that had lingered for twenty days abruptly dispersed. Tao County had

reappeared in the human world!

What had that been just now? What had been written there?!

Blood nearly dripped from Zhou Ying's eyes.

Why would a letter from the Luwu in Tao County have his aura?

Wasn't he...

The hundreds upon thousands of lines of thought in Zhou Ying's head broke off simultaneously—he suspected he was going mad.

“My lord... Careful!”

Bai Ling grabbed Zhou Ying, who seemed to have lost his soul. All the inscriptions along Great Wan's border lit up brightly. The great array far off in the Xuanyin Mountains swept along Southern Wan's buried veins and blocked the better part of the assault from the opposite bank of the Xia River.

Out of nowhere, the waters of the Xia River rose to peaks dozens of zhang high, as if a huge dragon were crossing the river. The waves hit both banks and were blocked by the inscriptions of the national border.

In the midst of his many concerns, Bai Ling glanced at the immortal tool and saw on it the slightly frantic report of the Luwu from after the abnormality in Tao County had started. Though it was frantic, the characters were still neatly written, and it was as regular as a formal document, with everything in its place. At a glance, it was clear it had been written by the reliable Lao Tian.

What was the matter?

Bai Ling was astonished. There was nothing here that exceeded His Highness's expectations.

The next instant, the half-demon's spiritual sense was abruptly touched.

Bai Ling quickly raised his head and saw that a pair of moons had risen in the sky. One was a half-moon, and one was a full moon.

And on the full moon, a human figure had been branded.

“Has Sanyue... brought out the Silver Moon?”

Sanyue's Silver Moon was just like Xuanyin's Bell of Tribulation. Taking it out of the mountains would incur a heavenly tribulation. Without a shed skin forebear standing guard, it was certain that it couldn't appear in the human world!

A shed skin had truly descended to earth!

Xi Ping had been ready. As he tossed Xu Rucheng away, without any hesitation, he dispersed what remained of the spiritual energy he had absorbed from the ascended spirit battlefield through the root systems into the earth.

Tao County—whose land was well known for its barrenness—flourished.

Even the weeds grew to over the height of a person. Not even Southern Shu's ancient Miasma Forest had ever been so lush. The earth of farmland that had been abandoned for many years glistened; its texture had something of the appearance of green ore fields.

And the reincarnation wood trees mixed in among the vegetation were no longer towering!

No sooner had he dispersed the spiritual energy than the familiar oppressive sense of shackles came upon him again. Xi Ping knew at once that the Law Breaker's axiom had been realized. Tao County had returned to the human world!

His free and easy consciousness was once again restrained—but this time, apart from Xu Rucheng's knotted bag and the divine image in the underground secret room of the Immortal Palace, he also had the reincarnation wood amulets on A-Xiang and Lin Chi to go to.

In fact, Xi Ping felt that having gone through all this, his consciousness was considerably stronger than before, but he didn't try to resist at all. He obediently returned to confinement—his spiritual sense was shouting itself hoarse telling him to run. A great personage had come. Freedom wouldn't be a good thing now.

Indeed, no sooner had his consciousness been pulled back from the reincarnation wood trees than a beam of "moonlight" fell from the sky.

When this "moonlight" fell, all the cultivators who had managed to hold onto their lives closed their eyes under the gentle light.

As the "moonlight" flowed over them like water, the unusually flourishing plants withered, and the glistening green ore fields became even duller than before. The sweep of that moonlight nearly turned all of Tao County into a desert!

Finally, the "moonlight" came to the Snake King's Immortal Palace. The menacing vines of the ubiquitous late-autumn red, as if they had been struck by frost, stiffened in midair. Bright and clear light fell on the nine-chi-tall woman.

All around was dimness. Only her form was fixed in the light. It made one think of the lights that followed the famous actors around the stages of the most resplendent performance halls in Jinping.

At this moment, the whole universe was her stage. This was her solo.

Her hand was still outstretched, her head raised, her eyes open wide, as if reaching for something wished for but unattainable. All around her was silence.

After a moment, a heavy sigh came from the skies. The woman's form, as though it were a mound of sand, scattered.

All of Tao County was deathly still. All that remained were the cries of the cicadas.

CHAPTER 83 - Indignant Cicadas (Final)

The waters of the Xia River were drawn by the moonlight like the tide, quietly rising, then falling like a sigh.

The fish underwater were suspended blankly in place. The substitute papermen planted ahead of time by the half-demon floated out of the fishes' mouth. Before they could float up to the surface, they had disappeared one by one.

Not only Tao County, but everything within a hundred li radius of Tao County was swept by the "moonlight." The papermen that had quietly infiltrated Chu riding on the bodies of mortals were also destroyed one after another.

On the opposite shore, Bai Ling seemed to be burning. If the national border hadn't stood in the way, this filthy half-demon might have been carried off by a moonbeam from the Silver Moon.

He bore the burning pain without making a sound, grabbing Zhou Ying around the waist and holding him back. "My lord, if it had only been a shed skin who had come, we could still have a chance. But the Silver Moon is the Way of Heaven. Sanyue has brought down a heavenly tribulation—everything that is outside the Way will be killed! No matter what thing you want to get, there will be ample time for it later. My lord!"

What thing could he still want..

Zhou Ying whipped his head around. "He's in Tao County."

Bai Ling stared blankly. "Who? Who's in Tao County?"

"Shiyong... Shiyong... Let go of me!"

“Huh? But...” In a moment of desperation, Bai Ling’s pupils turned white. The substitute paperman stuck to Zhou Ying to ward off disaster expanded. Taking advantage of Zhou Ying’s shaken mental state, it quickly plastered itself to his chest.

Zhou Ying was frozen in place, as if cold water had been poured into his bones.

“I deserve to die a thousand deaths.” Bai Ling pulled him back and quickly said, “If the Viscount were still living, how could he fail to return to the Marquis Manor for five years? And how could you fail to sense him? Even if his remain... remaining possessions of some kind are out there, they still wouldn’t be in a backwater like Tao County. What association can this place have with him? Never mind Chu’s border, he probably wouldn’t know where Great Wan’s Yuzhou was!”

Zhou Ying turned a deaf ear on this. He stared unwaveringly at the opposite bank.

He couldn’t move, couldn’t reach him. In that moment, he seemed to return to the bottom of the Impassable Sea—a plaything in the hands of fate, his heart full of rage enough to smash mountains, but utterly powerless.

Utterly powerless.

Bai Ling instantly understood the profound murderous rage in his eyes. He shut his mouth and knelt wordlessly.

And the desolate “moonlight” swept by.

Sanyue’s Silver Moon was a great divine tool of the same grade as Xuanyin’s Bell of Tribulation; they were both embodiments of the immortal mountains.

Xi Ping had had the “good fortune” to see the Bell of Tribulation twice, but he hadn’t had a close look at it either time: the first time, he had overplayed his hand and only avoided being crushed to dust thanks to Princess Duanrui; the second time, he had been unconscious, and when he had opened his eyes, only aftershocks had remained of the Bell of Tribulation, and the demon that dozens of generations of the Zhou clan had raised had already been pounded into the earth by the big bell.

Only now, after hastily drawing his consciousness out of the reincarnation wood, when he brushed shoulders with the “moonlight,” did Xi Ping at last understand why, for a hundred generations, from antiquity to the present, no desperate criminal had ever dared to openly challenge the Way of Heaven.

Why the Zhou clan had produced generation after generation of geniuses and lunatics but had only been able to come up with the lousy, unbecoming idea of raising demons at the bottom of the sea.

The Way of Heaven was unassailable, uncounterable, unfathomable, like a thunderstorm falling upon the earth, irreversible.

It was both omnipresent and unknown.

Those who lived within it were used to all this and thought that the sun, moon, and stars were all a matter of course; in their frivolity, they did not know to revere it. But it turned out that when a true heavenly tribulation fell, even the proudest and most unruly souls could find not the least thought of resistance.

After Qiu Sha had been wiped away by the moonlight like a shadow, everyone present was dazed. It was as if the last twenty frightening days in Tao County had been a dream.

The ascended spirits retained their wits. The established foundations’ eyes blurred. And nearly all the half-immortals’

expressions went blank.

The mortals who had burned the evil vines closed their eyes as night fell.

The Law Breaker had been an absurd dream. In the dream, they had grasped their own destinies, been wildly joyful for a span. When they woke, they would have forgotten it all and would once again be as docile as oxen and sheep.

The only exception was Xu Rucheng. The human likeness he had just grasped turned into a thread of smoke and seeped into his palm. It was as if an icicle had been jabbed into his palm. As soon as the “moonlight” swept past, he awoke and looked uncomprehendingly at the blank faces of his companions. As he was about to stand up and call to them, Tai Sui’s low bellow sounded in his ear: “Don’t move!”

At the same time, a piece of gauze fell over Wei Chengxiang.

Lin Chi’s voice came through the reincarnation wood to her eardrums: “Hide yourself, don’t look, don’t be curious!”

Wei Chengxiang gave a start. Her wits and memories were abruptly restored. Only then did her wound began to ache unbearably.

But “evil cultivators” who lived every day with their heads hanging from their belts all had a sense of proportion. Wei Chengxiang held back and didn’t cry out. She huddled under the “gauze” Master Lin had given her, not moving a muscle.

The extra full moon in the sky seemed to be getting eclipsed. It faded bit by bit, turning bronze. It still hung in the sky above Tao County.

Finally, a ray of moonlight fell like smoke and dust, then turned into a human form.

Next, rustling footsteps stepped over the ground covered in withered grass. This person slowly walked out of the forest, reaching out to touch each one of the dead reincarnation wood trees as though searching for something.

This person was tall of stature, with a build that suggested a man. There seemed to be no color anywhere on him. His head of unadulterated white hair hung loose over his back. There was no distinction between the deathly white of his robes and the hands that extended from his sleeves. On his face was a mask with the texture of paper.

This mask was very peculiar. There were no holes for breathing or looking out in it. It was plastered firmly to this person's face, as if he were a living ghost who had died from waterboarding. Features had been drawn on the paper mask with an exaggerated technique, and the drawn on features could actually move. They showed now displeasure, now happiness; the expression was constantly changing.

"He's looking for me." Xi Ping was terrified. He instantly had a kind of instinctive impulse to withdraw all his consciousness to the divine image in the Immortal Palace's underground secret room, to hide rather than face this frightening shed skin cultivator.

But his consciousness had "died" too many times attached to the bodies of mortals. Then, he had been unable to escape; he could only stay where he was and wait to endure it. The desire to flee and the action had been separated in him. The habit had become natural. Xi Ping simply didn't remember that he could move his consciousness now.

A Sanyue cultivator with only half a breath left called in a trembling voice: “Xuanwu-shishu...”

When the ascended spirits heard this name, they collectively sucked in a breath, their expressions not flickering—this was Elder Xuanwu⁶¹ of Dongheng’s Sanyue, the shidi of Sanyue’s sect leader.

Elder Xuanwu coming with the Silver Moon practically amounted to the spiritual mountains personally strolling over from Dongheng. Tao County’s landforms and climate were going to change drastically. Many people would be impacted by it in the coming year.

And this muster of force had come for the sake of a “two-year-old” ascended spirit!

Elder Xuanwu waved a hand. Faintly discernible spiritual energy swirled out of his sleeves, which floated as though in the wind. The ascended spirits felt their chests ease. Their essences, which had nearly been pushed to the point of drying up, began to flow once more.

Only then did Xuanwu say flatly: “You have all come to Chu to aid me in expelling evil. Sanyue has treated its guests inconsiderately. I hope you will forgive us.”

After his single speech, the ascended spirits apart from those of Sanyue could no longer raise their heads.

It was an absolute taboo for foreign ascended spirits to scout within another country’s borders, never mind coming in person and being caught red-handed by a shed skin elder of Sanyue.

At its gravest, a matter like this could set off a war among the four nations.

Elder Xuanwu probably didn't want to provoke chaos under the heavens, so he had set the tone as soon as he opened his mouth, saying that they had come to "help expel evil." While this was said for the purpose of smoothing things over, it sounded extremely grating at the moment—had Sanyue not brought out its great divine tool, it was unclear who would have been expelling whom.

"We shall not speak of it." The expression on Elder Xuanwu's mask landed on an angry look. He said coldly, "There is still some foreign matter here."

Xi Ping, the foreign matter in question: "..."

While the ascended spirits didn't know where the reincarnation wood trees had come from earlier, they had all seen Lin Chi using the spiritual energy the trees had absorbed to send out a talisman, so their gazes collectively fell on Lin Chi.

Elder Xuanwu's figure flashed. Almost at the same time as those obvious or concealed gazes, he landed in front of Lin Chi.

A protective tool immediately flashed over Lin Chi, faintly revealing the aura of the Dignitary of Rule High Elder behind him.

The two great shed skin elders met across the distance. Elder Xuanwu paused slightly, stopped some paces away from Lin Chi, then withdrew his hands, which were like a dead man's.

The features on the paper mask fluctuated for a moment. The look of anger changed to a slightly peculiar smile. Xuanwu nodded slowly. "You honor us with your presence, Golden Hand. We are fortunate."

Lin Chi gave the salute appropriate from a junior. "Elder Xuanwu."

“There is no need for such formality, Master Lin,” said Elder Xuanwu. “You seem to know what the foreign matter is. Will you instruct me?”

Xi Ping calculated wildly: the three Xuanyin elders who had used the demon seal to seal him were shed skins, and Sanyue’s “unsightly” elder was also a shed skin. A demon seal set down by the three elders wouldn’t necessarily be able to stand up to someone of the same grade. Furthermore, Xu-da-bao was a half-immortal who had just opened his spiritual eyes. The disparity between a half-immortal and an ascended spirit... It was probably equivalent to the disparity between a hundred or so people and an ant—Xu Rucheng couldn’t speak of his existence, but that wasn’t necessarily the case for Lin Chi.

What should he do?

Xi Ping simply went numb. He had just finished dealing with the great evildoer and that pair of unnatural tools. Before he could catch his breath, a shed skin elder had come. He wondered whether he had burned and pillaged a city in his past life; if he didn’t have eight lifetimes worth of wickedness to make up for, why would the Way of Heaven be so determined to come after him and wipe him out?

In a moment of desperation, Xi Ping finally remembered that his consciousness was comparatively more at liberty now. He instantly wanted to flee back to the Immortal Palace, but just then, Lin Chi’s fanlike eyelashes drooped, and he took something out and offered it to Elder Xuanwu. “Is this what you mean?”

Xi Ping: “...”

Huh? What?

What Lin Chi had taken out was a brush. The shaft of the brush was made of a wood Xi Ping had never seen before. It was smooth as

stone, lustrous as jasper. It must have been stroked many times; some places were so bright they reflected light.

Elder Xuanwu reached out a hand. The brush landed in his palm. An astonished expression appeared on the features of his mask. He said, "Eternal spring brocade wood? This is an ancient thing."

Elder Xuanwu tapped lightly on the tip of the brush. A thread of spiritual energy swept out of the tip, and a dead reincarnation wood tree next to them came back to life, gently waving along with the tip of the brush as if it had developed a spirit. Spiritual energy curled through the wildly shaking branches.

Xi Ping was startled. For a moment, he had the feeling that his consciousness was still in the tree.

What kind of immortal tool was this? Even Sanyue's white-haired old monster was marveling at it.. Also, why would Lin Chi shield him?

"Most ingenious," said Elder Xuanwu with an admiring sigh. Meaningfully, he said, "Using eternal spring brocade to defeat late-autumn red. As expected, the Golden Hand is a rare genius, even capable of thinking of this. But I wonder whether this item can bring out the legendary Law Breaker and Riverward?"

Before Lin Chi could say anything, Elder Xuanwu's ice cold spiritual energy flowed out through the tip of the brush, and the evidently already withered broken twigs of late-autumn red, like corpses "awakened" by that pen, stiffly churned in layer upon layer like ripples.

But while those dead evil vines plowed all of Seventeen Li Town, there was no trace of the two great divine tools that could defy space and time.

Only then did Lin Chi look down and say, more dead than alive, “This item was created by me. It is unworthy of being mentioned on equal terms with the Law Breaker.”

Xuanwu clicked his tongue rather regretfully. “While this is a good thing, eternal spring brocade is inauspicious. With it here, the Silver Moon will not be tranquil. This thing should not remain in the mortal world. I suppose you have no objection, Master Lin?”

Lin Chi didn’t respond. His fists, hidden in his sleeves, clenched.

Xuanwu had only been being polite. He didn’t really care whether he objected. The mouth drawn on the mask turned up at the corners, and the brush was destroyed.

Lin Chi didn’t move a muscle. Another part of his already scant soul seemed to disperse.

“Two great demonic tools have appeared and disappeared. This may be this world’s fate, or it may be a tribulation—the Qilin Guard have been lax in their work. The good and the bad have mixed in Tao County. We have embarrassed ourselves in front of you all. Today’s drama has concluded, and Seventeen Li Town had been turned into ruins. I suppose there’s nothing left to buy? The Silver Moon cannot remain in the human world for long. I won’t see you off.” Having said this in a loud voice, Xuanwu turned into a ball of light and disappeared where he was.

He was connected to the Silver Moon in the sky. It was as if that full moon had been spat back out by the eclipse; without warning, “moonlight” surged in all directions, for a moment so bright that no one could open their eyes.

For a moment, nearly everyone’s outlines were pressed into sketches made by the sweep of that fierce light.

Xi Ping tensed. Enduring the might of the shed skin elder, he split off his consciousness to Wei Chengxiang and Xu Rucheng. He saw that for some reason Xu Rucheng was very safe. Mixed in among the crowd of mortals, he was easily passed over by the snow bright moonlight. Presumably it was the work of the Riverward. But the fierce light seemed about to pierce the gauze covering A-Xiang. Wei Chengxiang didn't move a muscle. Her pupils contracted sharply.

It seemed that the gauze was about to be eroded by the light. It began to dissipate from above, becoming thinner and thinner... Just as the light was about to pierce through the gauze, Xuanwu must have noticed that this was only an open-eyed ant, and she was protected by Lin Chi. He lost interest in following up and let her go.

Before Xi Ping could breathe a sigh of relief, he saw a familiar object fly out from under the ground—it was the Tai Sui divine image hidden underground in the Immortal Palace!

Elder Xuanwu's voice came through the moonlight: "An evil god worshipped by the ignorant masses of the borderlands."

Xi Ping went cold all over. The divine image broke into bits in the moonlight. Before he could feel frightened, the Silver Moon and Elder Xuanwu had vanished together, leaving Tao County devastated by the full moon.

After a high elder of Sanyue had personally shown them the door, no one dared to object. Everyone collected the bodies of their disciples and companions as quickly as possible and all returned dejectedly to their respective homes, leaving Dongheng's Sanyue's people to clean up the aftermath.

That night, Xu Rucheng mixed in with the evil cultivators who had survived the calamity of Seventeen Li Town's Great Market and were leaving Tao County in a panic. When he wormed his way into the port, a paperman silently plastered itself to him. Xu Rucheng's figure

flashed. A moment later, the paperman substitute took his place in undergoing an interrogation, while Xu Rucheng himself had already silently passed through the half-demon's paperman, crossed the Chu-Wan border, and returned to Great Wan's Yuzhou.

Then he and the knotted bag he carried both saw the person reputed to be behind the Kaiming Department and the Luwu.

CHAPTER 84 - Traveler Abroad (1)

They had been ferried by the Riverward from the bank of the Wangchuan River, so upon seeing that familiar figure, like something from another lifetime, both Xu Rucheng and Xi Ping were almost simultaneously dazed.

“Mr. Bai!”

“Bai Ling-da-ge...”

Even though Xi Ping had already known that the “Mr. Bai” behind the Luwu was Bai Ling from Prince Zhuang Manor, the moment he saw him in person, he couldn’t avoid feeling a surge of emotions.

Unfortunately, he couldn’t speak, couldn’t say hello.

Once over the Wan-Chu border, Xi Ping had felt the invisible shackles on him tighten further. In Chu, it had only been that others couldn’t hear it when he spoke to Xu Rucheng, but here, so long as a third party was present, Xu-da-bao’s voice speaking to him would disappear, and the words he said wouldn’t reach Xu Rucheng’s ears.

Reincarnation wood also couldn’t act as a medium—however deep a karmic connection there was, only an item he had used to bear his consciousness could establish a connection. And as soon as Tao County had returned to the human world, Xi Ping had lost his freedom to move through reincarnation wood. There were only a few places his consciousness could reside.

Before, when Xi Ping had been misleading the idiot for fun, he had deliberately not told Xu Rucheng that his consciousness was on the knotted bag he carried. Now, however, he found that he actually couldn’t say it even if he wanted to. Never mind directly telling Xu

Rucheng, even if he wanted to obliquely hint to Xu Rucheng that there was something the matter with the knotted bag, or have Xu Rucheng take someone else's blood and try it on the bag, Xu Rucheng "couldn't hear" anything related to it.

The demon seal had his mouth tightly sealed indeed. It hadn't left him any room to maneuver.

Xi Ping scrutinized Bai Ling. Bai Ling-da-ge was no longer the paper secret guard who couldn't show himself in public. His aura had become far more restrained. At a glance, there was hardly any difference between him and a mortal. But Xi Ping could see at once that he had already established a foundation... that was good.

But for some reason, there was a crease between Bai Ling's brows now. He looked a little unsettled.

Xu Rucheng stepped forward to kneel, but before his knees could bend, Bai Ling held him up. "You've worked hard, brother."

Xu Rucheng nearly burst into tears, but thinking that he still had something important to say, he forced himself to hold back. After a simple greeting, he said, "The reason I was so bold as to ask you to ferry me back across the border is that I wanted..."

But before he could finish, he saw Bai Ling, who had been listening patiently to him, suddenly look alarmed. He abruptly stood up.

Xi Ping thought, Huh? How come after five years, Bai Ling-da-ge was less steady than he had been as a secret guard?

"There's... there's no rush." Bai Ling glanced fretfully toward the courtyard and forced himself to say to Xu Rucheng, "There's chaos in Tao County. From observing the atmospheric conditions there, Dongheng's Sanyue has left at least four or five ascended spirits to patrol, so for the next few days, don't be in a hurry to return. It's

already past zi hour tonight. I'll have someone prepare a place for you to rest. We can talk tomorrow.”

At you hour on the seventh, by the river, for some reason unknown to Bai Ling, his prince had seemed to go mad, firmly convinced that the Viscount was in Tao County. He had wanted to fly his sword across the border on the spot, right in the face of the Silver Moon. No one knew what those with a paramount spiritual sense could see; no one could know whether they had seized on a true sign or only their own deranged obsession. In sum, Bai Ling couldn't stand by and watch him go to his death, so, taking advantage of the fact that Zhou Ying wasn't on his guard against him, he had used a paperman to seal his heart meridian, temporarily restraining him.

But when the Silver Moon had swept over Tao County, Zhou Ying, with no thought for his heart meridian, had tried to shatter the paperman sealing him by force. Bai Ling had been scared out of his wits. All he could do was knock him unconscious.

And just now, he had felt His Highness dispel his paperman!

Within Great Wan's borders, Xi Ping's consciousness was limited. He couldn't probe outward. He thought there was something strange—with such a big commotion taking place in Tao County, reasonably speaking, Bai Ling ought to have been only too anxious to question Xu Rucheng about what had happened, and it wasn't as though cultivators absolutely needed to sleep... What could be more important than the great divine tool of Dongheng's Sanyue?

Xu Rucheng was also at a complete loss. “I see, but...”

But before Xu Rucheng could finish, Bai Ling's expression abruptly changed.

His Highness had just destroyed all the protective papermen on him!

This meant he didn't want him to follow. Where was His Highness going? Across the river? But he was a prince of the first rank of Great Wan... and Sanyue's ascended spirits had yet to leave!

Looking at his expression, Xi Ping suddenly realized something.

No, it couldn't be...

He shouted at Xu Rucheng: "Stop him! Hurry!"

Xu Rucheng didn't hear—with someone else present, the two of them couldn't communicate.

Xi Ping: "..."

Death by a thousand swords to Xuanyin Mountain!

Bai Ling had no more attention to spare for Xu Rucheng. He only had time for a brief word before flying off in pursuit.

If he didn't hurry, he would be too late.

Once an open-eyed cultivator's spiritual bones were complete, they would be in the consummate open-eyed stage and obtain a vital weapon and a magic power. But perhaps because his innate spiritual bones had steeped among the demon host, or for some other reason, Zhou Ying was very special. He seemed not to have a vital weapon, and the magic power of his spiritual bones was also unusual: he could vanish into thin air anywhere, easily obscuring others' senses. Cultivators of the same grade, established foundations... even some ascended spirits whose spiritual senses weren't especially sharp were susceptible to being fooled by him.

If Xi Ping had had a heart right now, it probably would have leapt out of his throat—who in the world could make Bai Ling lose his head like this? Well, who else *could* there be?

But...but it was already the eighth. How could san-ge still be here?

How would he have time to return to Jinping by the tenth?

Great Wan didn't have a custom of juniors coming travel-stained to the door. That was for hurrying home for a funeral. He would at any rate need to leave a day or two to bathe and rest... Could it be that he wasn't planning to go back?

Xi Ping went cold all over: how many more full decade birthdays could the old lady have left to her? Was she already so senile that she wouldn't be hurt, or...

He unconsciously cried out, "Bai Ling!"

Wait, tell me...

"Hm?" As soon as Bai Ling left, the prohibition on speech lifted, and Xu Rucheng "heard" his cry. "Senior, do you know Mr. Bai?"

Before, it had seemed that he had never even heard of the Kaiming Cultivators and didn't know who His Highness Prince Zhuang was.

"Of course I do. I'm about to lose my temper with you. Hurry and chase after..."

Halfway through, Xi Ping's words were cut off.

Xu Rucheng went blank, then suddenly realized: there was someone nearby!

And with his half-immortal's spiritual sense and hearing, he hadn't noticed anything.

Xu Rucheng abruptly stood up and looked all around. “Who’s there?”

“Oh?” A voice came from behind him. “And who are *you*? How did you know I was passing by?”

Xu Rucheng was taken by surprise. He jumped.

But for Xi Ping, it was as if he had been struck by lightning.

His agitated heart stopped with a crash. As Xu Rucheng turned, he met a pair of strange yet familiar eyes.

For a half-immortal, five years were as light as a breeze. Zhou Ying’s appearance hadn’t changed one bit. He seemed merely to be striking up a casual conversation in passing. His expression was relaxed and cheerful. But the look in his eyes was extremely unfamiliar. As soon as he looked their way, he made Xi Ping recall the heart demon at the bottom of the Impassable Sea, saying “How could I be qualified to be a demon if I wasn’t joyful?”

Xi Ping was stunned.

What had happened? With his spiritual bones restored, shouldn’t he be all better? Why was there less living energy about him than when he had been a sickly mortal?

“San-ge,” he called out from the knotted bag where his consciousness was trapped, “what..”

Then he noticed how far his voice travelled, making no echoes.

In all the vast universe, no one could hear him.

San-ge was close enough to touch, but he was only using that cold, fed up, lofty look to examine Xu Rucheng... to examine him.

Xi Ping, at a loss, shut his mouth.

At Xu Rucheng's rank, he wouldn't have seen Prince Zhuang before. All he saw was that the young man who had landed in front of him was dressed as a scholar, smiling brilliantly and looking very amiable. But for some reason, Xu Rucheng instinctively feared him. He kept thinking that if he said a word out of place, his life would be in danger.

"I..." Xu Rucheng opened his mouth, but the words he was about to say automatically became voiceless.

Damn it. He couldn't say it.

Zhou Ying clearly looked pleasant and kindly, but Xu Rucheng felt like a fledgling caught in a cobra's gaze. Cold sweat poured off him. Just then, a white figure flashed by. A paperman landed in a flurry and separated the two of them. "My lord!"

Xu Rucheng: "..."

Who? My lord?

His Highness Prince Zhuang?!

Oh, mother! Xu Rucheng's legs went weak.

Bai Ling quickly said, "This is the Luwu Xiao Xu who wrote the date on his letter before. I called him back to report on matters in Wild Fox Country. Please listen, my lord..."

"Oh, one of your people. Then there's no need for this." Zhou Ying restrained his smile that hid a knife and waved a hand expressionlessly. Paying no further attention to Xu Rucheng, he said

dully, "I'll go myself. I ought to be the one to collect the corpse of the one I killed."

The wheels of Xi Ping's consciousness, which seemed to have rusted, at last began to revolve a hundred years late: who was he talking about?

His mind roared: Wait...wait a moment, this couldn't be because of that letter?

In Wild Fox Country, when Xi Ping had sent A-Xiang out at the end, exhausting all the "human resources" he could figure into his plans, all that had remained was to obey the will of heaven. He had picked up Xu Rucheng's communication device and scribbled a sentence. This way, if Tao County didn't return, he would perhaps have a chance to leave a few words for Bai Ling, to warn him that the Riverward had been used up and that he should beware of Qiu Sha.

With Bai Ling's sense of propriety, even if he had realized that the letter came from Xi Ping, even if he knew... he still ought to have handled it appropriately.

Had that letter really ended up in san-ge's hands?

But afterward, Tao County had returned... Once the Law Breaker was broken, shouldn't that letter have been erased?

What did he know? What misunderstanding was he laboring under?

But, no... Were those three old geezers from Xuanyin Mountain completely useless? They couldn't even handle this trifle properly—they'd left it so that even an open-eyed cultivator could catch a trace!

Before Xi Ping could sort out his many disordered thoughts, he saw Bai Ling go to one knee and say in a low voice, almost imploring, "I

have been disrespectful to my superior. A thousand deaths will not atone for my crime. I request your punishment, my lord. Even if you want to go to Tao County in person, at least wait half a month...”

Xu Rucheng was bewildered. Hearing this, he began to quake with terror: Mr. Bai had committed a crime?

Every cultivator who had started out in the Kaiming Department was grateful to Prince Zhuang. While out and about, they usually claimed to be His Highness Prince Zhuang’s loyal followers. But if you wanted them to say they weren’t afraid of him, that would be impossible—the deepest impression Prince Zhuang had always given them was that he would be especially quick to kill.

This wouldn’t do. He had a debt of gratitude to Mr. Bai.

Having thought this far, Xu Rucheng clenched his fist. A small transparent stone like colored glaze jumped out of his palm. There was thin smoke billowing inside the stone; its form seemed to be constantly changing.

“My lord,” Xu Rucheng said, taking a deep breath and gathering his courage, “Mr. Bai brought me back so I could present the item you wanted.”

In his youth, he had been accustomed to shouting across villages and fields. When he opened his mouth, his voice came out as a bellow. Bai Ling shuddered at the sound.

Zhou Ying raised his eyelids indifferently and glanced at him, but his gaze froze on that stone.

The next moment, he floated over like a ghost and reached out to take the Riverward stone. He saw something in the smoke inside the stone. Zhou Ying’s pupils contracted sharply.

Bai Ling said, “Xiao Xu, what... what is that?”

“Oh, I was told it’s called the ‘Riverward.’” In fact, Xu Rucheng had no idea what the Riverward was. He responded ignorantly and fearlessly. “It’s the thing Qiu Sha mentioned in her letter to my lord.”

Bai Ling: “...”

Brother, is your head broken, or are my ears broken?

A shed skin elder from Sanyue descended to the mortal world, bringing with him the Silver Moon; a dozen ascended spirits from the four great sects were present—and the Riverward, held by the foremost evildoer under heaven, was carried off without anyone knowing by a mere half-immortal like you? Who are you? The Way of Heaven’s sugar daddy?

Then he heard Zhou Ying ask with some urgency, “Who said that? Who told you this was the Riverward?”

Xu Rucheng opened his mouth, but it was as if his tongue had stuck. After a moment, he let out a breath. “My lord, I cannot say.”

Bai Ling felt suffocated. “You...”

“Cannot say, cannot say...” Zhou Ying quietly repeated these words a few times, the tips of his brows moving. A fearsome light appeared in his pitch-black eyes. “The person who told you to bring this back, did he tell you what to do when you could not say?”

Xu Rucheng responded, “Say whatever I can say and let Mr. Bai figure out the rest.”

Hearing this familiar diction, Bai Ling swiftly turned his head, realizing something. He saw the corners of Zhou Ying’s mouth tremble uncontrollably.

In that moment, he was no longer joyful, no longer qualified to be a demon.

Watching Xu Rucheng, Zhou Ying asked softly, as if afraid of startling something, "Are you still in contact with him? Is he well?"

Xu Rucheng opened his mouth, then closed it helplessly.

Xi Ping's consciousness was in the knotted bag, quietly looking back.

Zhou Ying squeezed the Riverward in the palm of his hand. He was silent for a moment, then said hoarsely, "I understand. When you have the chance, tell him that everyone at home is doing well and there's no need to worry."

"Then why haven't you gone back?" said Xi Ping.

Zhou Ying couldn't hear him. He only said almost inaudibly, "I'll get him out soon."

Xi Ping suddenly realized what he wanted the Riverward for. Before he could recover, Zhou Ying had disappeared right before his eyes like the wind.

Wait, san-ge! It's been five years, I'm already used to it, a few more days won't hurt, but Grandmother can't wait for you any longer!

Go and see her first. I haven't written for five years, and if you don't come home either, the old lady will know. She isn't that senile... I'm begging you, ge!

But his words couldn't stop anyone.

Autumn came early to Jinping. At the start of the seventh month, there were already chill breezes morning and night.

The old lady of the Yongning Marquis Manor was celebrating her eightieth birthday. On account of Prince Zhuang, who was the master of the Kaiming Cultivators, and the Viscount, who was reputed to have become a disciple of Flying Jade Peak, the Marquis Manor was as bustling as a marketplace, the commotion going on until the sun sank into the west.

The married ladies and young mistresses who had joined the old lady in listening to opera had all gone. The singers had sighed, the tune had ended, and the audience had dispersed; the fan in the old lady's hand fell to the ground. She had just woken up in a muddle.

She was too old. When she was listening to opera, she would fall asleep several times. Madam Cui, seeing the old lady open her eyes, quickly stepped forward and said, "Mother, why don't you go back to your room to rest?"

The old lady shook her head. "Tell them to sing it again. I'm not sleepy. Let me see, what should I order..."

"Mother..." said Madam Cui.

"It's not dark yet. It's still early." The old lady's eyes were dim-sighted from age and took the light of the gas lamps for daylight. Chattering on, she instructed, "Bao'er and Ying haven't come home yet... Ying's... His Highness's appetite is poor. Heat up the thickened rice soup. Xiaobao... Ha, there's no need to worry about him, he'll eat anything..."

The opera singers in the rear court of the Marquis Manor sang through the night, until the gas lamps of Danguai Lane dimmed.

At the bottom of the Impassable Sea, beneath the demon seal, in the place no one could reach, the Wangchuan cut a small rift.

Zhou Ying at last came in person to the place where he had been imprisoned for over twenty years. For a time, the familiar pain seemed to surge up from the cracks in his bones once more.

As far as the eye could see lay a forest of reincarnation wood. As if they knew who the newcomer was, the trees sympathetically cleared a path.

Zhou Ying saw at a glance what was in the depths of the thicket. It was as if his feet had been glued to the ground.

CHAPTER 85 - Traveler Abroad (2)

That day, before Xi Ping's boiling brains had chilled in the breeze, Zhou Ying had simply vanished before his eyes—just like that. His spiritual sense couldn't catch up to him at all.

Xi Ping had just had it with everyone from Prince Zhuang Manor. If they weren't turning into the wind, they were turning into paper; why did every last one of them belong to this furtive, creeping type?

Putting a gate on that manor was just for decoration!

In that ignored knotted bag, Xi Ping frantically went around in circles. Had he not been restricted by the demon seal, he probably would have twisted Miss A-Hua's unfinished knotted bag into a round brocade knot.⁶² on one hand, he was worried about the old lady; on the other hand, it was clear that san-ge wanted to go to the Impassable Sea to steal his body.

Wasn't that total nonsense?! The Riverward could open the door to ferry a person, but it wasn't designed to haul goods... bah, to haul people, that was.

The demon seal at the bottom of the Impassable Sea was so big, and in total it was suppressing only two things: one demon seed and one him. If san-ge reached out and took one... Xi Ping even suspected he might want to take both.

Was it possible for the three great Buddhas at Xuanyin Mountain not to notice?

As a half-immortal, was he really planning to simply commit treason and be pursued by the Bell of Tribulation to the ends of the earth?

The whole Zhou family was like this. Normally they were happy and well-fed on whatever they ate, not even taking an extra mouthful of soup, regular as clockwork, comprehensive and reliable in everything they did—and then they would lose their minds just like that, without a single omen preceding the explosion.

Xi Ping's scalp went numb. Zhou Ying vanishing into thin air had looked very much like Qiu Sha being erased by the Silver Moon. In exasperated frustration, he abandoned Xu Rucheng and went chasing after the reincarnation wood amulet holding his consciousness that Lin Chi was carrying—he had to go to the Xuanyin Mountains.

He had no Riverward. He couldn't go down into the Impassable Sea. He couldn't even speak freely. All he could do was think of some way to observe Xuanyin Mountain's reaction and conjecture based on that what san-ge had done.

He hoped Peak Master Lin hadn't thrown the reincarnation wood away.

Lin Chi may have forgotten; he hadn't thrown that piece of wood away. He was sitting on the "wounded" blue luan immortal tool, using a leaf to whistle an unknown tune. But when Xi Ping's consciousness had just landed in the reincarnation wood in his sleeve, the tune suddenly stopped.

Without warning, Lin Chi said, "This is already less than a hundred li from the Xuanyin Spiritual Mountains. You're very bold."

Xi Ping had meant to secretly sneak in with him. He hadn't thought that the most worthless of ascended spirits was still an ascended spirit. As soon as his consciousness arrived, without him saying a word, he had been perceived by Lin Chi's spiritual sense. All he could do was brace himself and say something. "Peak Master Lin, thank you for what you did in Wild Fox Country."

“No need,” said Lin Chi. “If not for you, we would have vanished from the human world along with Tao County. We’re even.”

Xi Ping thought that this accounting was truly simple, so he babbled, “Aren’t you afraid that you’ve saved an evil cultivator like Qiu Sha, and in the future I’ll carve some other place out of the map?”

Lin Chi was silent for a moment. “The Dignitary of Fate’s lineage is prudent in action. While I’m not very well acquainted with General Zhi, I’ve heard that he’s a pretty good person. In two hundred years, he’s taken only one direct disciple. I don’t think he could have made a mistake.”

His words nearly sent Xi Ping out of the reincarnation wood.

A-Xiang didn’t know Xi Ping’s real name, and Xu Rucheng was even more clueless, not even knowing where his consciousness was hidden... how come when it came to Lin Chi, he even knew his lineage?!

Was Lin really naïve, or was he pretending to be naïve?

Xi Ping’s wariness rose at once.

But Lin Chi continued, “I remembered afterward where I’d seen your handwriting before.”

Xi Ping said, “... oh?”

Lin Chi said, “In the twenty-eighth year of Taiming... or was it the twenty-ninth year? I’m too old. I can’t remember clearly—on New Year’s Eve that year, you were the one who set off the fireworks on Flying Jade Peak, right?”

Xi Ping stared blankly for a moment. For him, New Year's Eve of the twenty-ninth year of Taiming was truly "another lifetime." With some difficulty, he spent ages recollecting before he remembered. Back then, when he had been an ignorant young master from Jinping going to the south for the first time, he had felt helpless seeing the extreme misery of the Turmoilers and had suddenly thought that shifu on his snow-capped mountain was very lonely, so he had dispatched a karma beast to deliver some small fireworks to the mountain as New Year's greetings for shifu and to relieve his boredom.

How had Lin Chi happened to see them?

Xi Ping, neither admitting nor denying, only said, "Peak Master Lin, aren't you always in seclusion? From what you say, how did you end up paying a visit to another mountaintop?"

"That wasn't the case," Lin Chi said scrupulously. "It's only that your fireworks were excessively showy. They flew up a hundred zhang high. All of Xuanyin's thirty-six peaks saw them. I heard that the north slope of Flying Jade Peak even came down in an avalanche. A disciple on Moon Plated Peak got distracted watching the fireworks and ruined a furnace full of nearly completed immortal tools."

Xi Ping: "..."

A hundred... a hundred zhang high?

He had spent five years mixed in among the evil cultivators in Wild Fox Country, picking up all kinds of talismans, arrays, and underhanded methods from evil paths. He'd learned both the things he should have learned and the things he shouldn't have learned. He truly couldn't remember what he'd drawn in that amateur array of his five years ago.

But he'd known that Flying Jade Peak's north slope couldn't take too much noise. The fireworks were supposed to have quietly laid themselves out on the snow. How come they had flown up?

And they'd taken his "great work" a hundred zhang high?!

For a moment, Xi Ping rejoiced that he was "dead."

He didn't want to go to Xuanyin Mountain alive ever again!

Lin Chi continued, "I very rarely leave seclusion, and there are many things I don't understand clearly... but I suppose that you're like this now because of the reincarnation wood? Accompanying plants are inauspicious. They are taboo to the immortal sects."

Xi Ping quickly recovered from his inexpressible shame. "Please explain, Peak Master Lin."

Lin Chi said, "Before the spiritual mountains took form, shed skin masters frequently appeared. Normally, when they shed their skins, their Ways of the Heart ought to have merged with heaven and earth, becoming one of the three thousands paths of the Great Way, providing an example for posterity. But there was a tiny minority of people whose Ways of the Heart couldn't be accepted by the Great Way. When each Way that the world couldn't abide was born, a type of 'accompanying tree' would emerge."

Xi Ping was slightly surprised—only shed skins whose Ways of the Heart couldn't be accepted by heaven and earth had accompanying plants. No wonder none of the great personages among the four great spiritual mountain ranges standing at the peak of the shed skin stage had one!

But while he listened, he didn't completely believe this. He calmly said, "I suppose you aren't all that old, Peak Master Lin. How do you know of these details?"

Lin Chi didn't respond for a long moment. "... She also had one."

Who?

"Xiangjun's toolmaking way was different from all the rest of us. She established her foundation in the mortal world, and her Way of the Heart came from one the ancient demonic gods. That ancient demonic god's accompanying plant was eternal spring brocade... You may not know this, but late-autumn red isn't actually a parasitic vine. It once lived in symbiosis with eternal spring brocade. Late-autumn red is poisonous. It could draw nutrients from the eternal spring brocade, and it could also protect it from attack by birds, beasts, and insects."

Xi Ping said, "Where does eternal spring brocade usually grow? I don't think I've ever heard of it in Wan, Chu, or He..."

"You've never heard of it because it ceased to exist long ago." Lin Chi focused on the distant horizon. The first rays of daylight were already visible there.

The Master of Moon Plated Peak in his convict's garb said softly, "Eternal spring brocade... was a very fragile tree that only grew on high mountains over a hundred zhang high with abundant spiritual energy. It couldn't be easily transplanted. If it were taken into the foul mortal world, it wouldn't grow even if it were planted in a green ore field. Starting in the spring, its exquisite flowers would be like snow. They bloomed through spring and summer. When they fell during the autumn frosts, the late-autumn red would come to life and give the trees a 'red dress' to wear amid the frost and snow. In all four seasons, its colors were the finest around. Its timber was valuable. It was very conspicuous. The places where eternal spring brocade grew had to have auspicious animals and medicinal herbs. It was very easy to find... and very easy to destroy in its entirety."

Xi Ping: "..."

No wonder even Sanyue's Xuanwu had said that eternal spring brocade wood was an ancient thing. He thought he ought to rejoice that reincarnation wood was so indiscriminating; it could grow in any nook or cranny.

Xi Ping suddenly remembered something. "Then wasn't that brush of yours..."

The last of its kind?

"It's nothing. That brush was made of eternal spring brocade. I had wanted to call it 'Hui Xiangjun,' but I felt too embarrassed to, because it was useless."

Likely Lin Chi had lived too long. No matter what he said, it was always slow and plodding, like his blue luan after being torn to shreds by Qiu Sha.

They flew east into the morning sun, which burned with the remnants of summer heat.

"It could channel spiritual energy through plants and remove the remnants of consciousness in the plants. If your cultivation was strong enough, you could make all the plants within a hundred li radius move according to your will... I had to think for a long time before I made this. Had I had this back then, perhaps I could have concealed the fact that eternal spring brocade was her accompanying plant," Lin Chi said. "But it was no use. By the time I made that brush, her immortal bones had already been removed. I don't have your quick wits. I can only act in hindsight. I only brought the brush out to imagine that time had reversed itself... It's just as well that I've used it now. I can say it didn't come into this world for nothing."

Hui Xiangjun had also had the inheritance of an ancient demonic god, and her spiritual bones had been removed on that account?

What had happened back then?

Xi Ping waited for a long moment, but Lin Chi didn't continue, and he didn't feel like he could follow up—he still remembered Lin Chi's expression when he had mentioned Hui Xiangjun in Tao County.

The blue luan flew a while longer, and all the drifting mist and fog around them dispersed. They saw the outlines of the thirty-six peaks of Xuanyin.

Then Lin Chi said, "Though I'll do my best to avoid people, the Sea of Stars is in the Xuanyin Mountains, as well as the great mountain array, and I don't know whether the three elders will notice you. Are you sure you won't leave? Why would you run the risk of going to Xuanyin Mountain?"

Xi Ping thought, To see how those three old geezers react.

But what he said was, "I want to see my shifu."

I'm sorry, shifu, but you owe me a thrashing for the fireworks anyway; too many lice don't itch, and too large a debt isn't a concern.

Lin Chi had no suspicion that he was lying. The master of Moon Plated Peak treated others with sincerity and believed whatever they said. Hearing this, he very gently said, with profound emotion, "Direct disciples truly are different. There's no one on Moon Plated Peak who... alas. I'll pass by Flying Jade Peak, but the snow-capped mountain is sealed. General Zhi has yet to leave seclusion. I'm afraid you won't get to see him very soon."

Wasn't that just perfect—Xi Ping was about to say something when someone suddenly caught his spirit. A-Xiang's voice said, "Uncle, have you ever seen this?"

Wei Chengxiang had remained in Tao County alone.

For one thing, she couldn't find the Law Breaker Bracelet—reasonably speaking, with a half-immortal's spiritual sense, whether it was the immortal tool that had recognized her as its master or her own severed limb, it should have been easy for her to fix on them, but the Law Breaker's temper was truly fierce. Perhaps the bracelet was enraged at being abandoned by its master at the last moment. It had run off and "eloped" with Wei Chengxiang's severed limb; their whereabouts were unknown.

For another thing, she thought that she had played a part in the chaos in Tao County, so she ought to stay behind to help make arrangements for the Chu residents who had been impacted. This young woman was a blockheaded gentleman, raised by a foolish scholar who had never passed the local imperial exam. In her youth she had rebelled, but the older she got, the more she resembled her grandpa. She wouldn't renege on a debt of a single copper coin. Xi Ping couldn't dissuade her, so he'd had to go after her.

Through the reincarnation wood, Xi Ping saw Wei Chengxiang holding a child's little hand. There was a small stiff scar like a fish's scale on the back of the child's hand. At a glance, it looked like there was a full moon tattooed there.

"This is the landlord's son. He has lots of spending money and was always coming to buy Silver Tray Lottery Tickets, so I know him. He didn't have this on his hand before the Great Market," Wei Chengxiang said grimly. "This isn't a mortal injury... I think it has the aura of Sanyue's Silver Moon."

Xi Ping frowned. He had never seen this. Then, using his consciousness as a medium, he had her ask Lin Chi.

After listening carefully, Lin Chi sighed and said, “Little Brother Wei’s impression is right. This is the result of the Silver Moon.”

Wei Chengxiang asked, “Peak Master Lin, can you tell me whether it will endanger his life?”

“Hard to say. Xuanyin Mountain’s Bell of Tribulation can’t go beyond the Latent Cultivation Temple except in a matter of absolute necessity—five years ago, the three elders took the Bell of Tribulation to the Impassable Sea, and the elders are still resting in seclusion to this day. That is the impact it has on shed skin elders, never mind mortals,” Lin Chi said gravely. “The Silver Moon is the same. I’m afraid that this won’t be the only disaster that comes to pass as a result of Qiu Sha appearing in the mortal world...”

Before he could finish speaking, he was interrupted by the tolling of a bell.

At this point, the blue luan immortal tool had already entered the Xuanyin Mountain Range. Xi Ping instantly had an ominous premonition. “What’s happening?”

“It’s coming from the Principal Peak,” Lin Chi whispered. “The Dignitary of Rites Elder Zhao has left seclusion... You’ve come at the worst possible time.”

Xi Ping: “...”

At the same time, his heart stopped for no reason. His spiritual sense had been touched, but he had no idea what direction the touch had come from.

Xi Ping quickly looked toward the southeast: had san-ge already reached the Impassable Sea? What had he done?!

Five years ago—

In the Impassable Sea, the three great shed skin elders of the Xuanyin Mountains had shattered the consciousness of an established foundation disciple who had trusted them and so had been willing to obediently enter the star stone and have his spiritual bones removed. All that remained was a dangerous body half a step from an ascended spirit.

The demonic god's inheritance had been cut off at this point, and the demon seed at the bottom of the Impassable Sea had also fallen silent. The calamity was done and dusted.

After Zhao Yin broke the star stone, he went on to aim a blow at Xi Ping's body.

There was a clang, and a sword gust shot out from the brow of the body with its faint aura—an echo from the shard of Zhaoting, weak yet sharp.

The Sword that Mended the Heavens had shattered because it had touched the shed skin boundary too early. The sword aura had merged with heaven and earth, and the sword gust remaining in the human world cut off Zhao Yin's blow and opened the Dignitary of Fate's eyes.

Zhang Jue dodged aside and shielded Xi Ping. His snow-white eyes were revealed. He knocked Zhao Yin away and said sternly, "Zhao-shixiong, which heavenly commandment has he violated? Don't you think this is enough?"

Zhao Yin came back to himself and abruptly drew back his hand. The shard of Zhaoting had cut a slit over a cun long in his sleeve,

and there was blood on the back of his hand.

He was instantly petrified, cold sweat pouring off him.

Zhao Yin's expression altered several times. After a moment, he restrained his murderous aura and said in a low voice, "I am ashamed of myself. The Bell of Tribulation is truly treacherous when it leaves the spiritual mountains... I failed to notice that my heart and mind were unsteady, and I was apprehensive over the demonic god's remnants. My temperament nearly altered. Thank you, Zhangshixiong."

Zhang Jue coldly said, "You should go into seclusion when you return."

Lin Zongyi resealed his mouth.

The three of them once again tightly sealed the demon seal. Before leaving, Elder Zhang Jue hesitated a moment. He had meant to pull the shard of Zhaoting from the corpse, but when he put his hand over Xi Ping's forehead, his spiritual sense was suddenly touched.

Before the Dignitary of Fate High Elder's eyes, the chaotic star paths of the Sea of Stars appeared all of a sudden, with countless ties wound among them. For a time, he couldn't see clearly, only felt that Zhaoting was denying him. Zhang Jue sighed involuntarily and at last withdrew his hand.

The Great Way has three thousand paths; heaven always leaves a last gleam of hope.

Perhaps the shard of Zhaoting was that gleam, though he didn't know what it pointed to. The Dignitary of Fate could not see it clearly.

Zhang Jue waved a hand, opening the ground, and interred Xi Ping's corpse. Then the demon seal fell, and the Impassable Sea was utterly silent, once again becoming forbidden ground. All that remained were the half-dead reincarnation wood trees.

Reincarnation wood was a "worthless" type of tree. You could scratch a mark in the soft wood with your fingernail. It wasn't proof against insects, and it wasn't especially proof against corrosion. Apart from the poor who had no choice, no one was willing to use it. It was generally used for making decorations of little value, and sacrificial offerings. But it wasn't picky about where it grew, didn't care whether the temperature was colder or hotter, whether it was by a river, on a mountain, in the wilderness, or even on the eaves of an abandoned house; it could always put down roots and sprout. Even brush fires and lightning couldn't burn it all away.

On the wide and barren bottom of the Impassable Sea, the felled and withered reincarnation wood trees quickly sprouted new shoots from rotten stumps, struggling unendingly, growing. After five years, they had once again formed a forest.

The branches reaching out from underground had bit by bit raised the person Zhang Jue had buried in the earth.

When Zhou Ying saw Xi Ping, the corpse's limbs were tangled among branches soft as willow boughs, wrapped up. Likely because the body had stepped over a major boundary in the blink of an eye, his hair was over half a chi longer than in Zhou Ying's memories, falling like a heavy curtain along with the leaves.

This reincarnation wood forest seemed to have dug deep to bring up all the remaining spiritual energy at the bottom of the Impassable Sea, offering it to this near-ascended spirit body. The trees stubbornly refused to believe that they could die, and they wouldn't believe that he could die, either.

They followed the wind and the water, growing naturally, obeying no discipline, admitting only their own logic.

Plants have roots; no wonder they are far more steadfast than the human heart, which can easily drift away.

When Zhou Ying touched the body, the reincarnation wood trees around him rustled without a breeze. Then, a beam of sword light flew from the center of Xi Ping's brow.

Likely because it sensed no malice, Zhaoting only slashed gently in warning, but after all, it was still Zhaoting.

Blood at once began to cascade from Zhou Ying's palm. He didn't even blink, bent on "plucking" that body from among the branches. His hands kept shaking—it wasn't from pain; it was because there was still lingering warmth in that body.

Blood from Zhou Ying's palm dripped along his wrist and fell onto the ground, where it was absorbed by the messily interwoven reincarnation wood trees. For an instant, the whole Impassable Sea hummed, all the demon seal inscriptions covering the ground startled awake by the blood of the demon subduers. Zhou Ying's gaze became grim.

A forebear of the Zhou clan had been able to find the demon seed and release it; he could do so as well.

He had once been shut away beneath the demon seal for two decades; each and every inscription here was as familiar to him as his own hands and feet.

He could...bring the demons into the world, destroy the demon seal from within, and use the ensuing chaos to take him away.

CHAPTER 86 - Traveler Abroad (3)

“They’ve been throwing their weight around, haven’t they?” Zhou Ying said to himself, speaking toward Xi Ping’s body. “Why?”

The hollow body didn’t answer.

Zhou Ying smiled. “The immortal sect... the immortal sect...”

Supposing that Xi Ping had been killed by the demons in the Impassable Sea, his death couldn’t have been any more just and honorable; Xuanyin Mountain wouldn’t have hidden that. Now, seeing how the reincarnation wood clung to Xi Ping, what more did Zhou Ying need in order to understand?

While his spiritual bones had been sealed on the altar, he had heard vague discussions among the demons of the ancient god’s bones in the reincarnation wood forest. He had only taken it as an anecdote, listening to it and letting it go. He hadn’t thought that many years later, he would end up entangled with that anecdote in this fashion.

It turned out that he had never escaped the Impassable Sea.

The thin smoke of the Riverward now gathered and now dispersed, following him closely. When it dispersed, it was like mist. When it gathered, it would show the indistinct form of a person. Landing beside Zhou Ying, it looked more like a living person than the one Zhou Ying had brought down from the trees.

Zhou Ying didn’t turn his head. He coldly said, “Scram.”

He sent the smoke of the Riverward scattering in alarm.

The Riverward would change its shape depending on who was using it. This unnecessary adornment meant that when it had

wrapped around Zhou Ying and taken him down into the Impassable Sea, it had nearly given him the impression that it was Shiyong himself guiding him, having once again gotten up to mischief somewhere, taking him to come to the rescue. If only Zhou Ying made it in time, he could return him intact to the Marquis Manor before the tenth.

And if he didn't make it in time, he would indeed regret it, but it would be no big problem, either. If he missed the old lady's birthday, at worst he'd send that brat to put on a show to make it up to her; he was shameless, anyway.

Except that...

“Was it really you who helped me get the Riverward in Tao County? If any bit of your soul is still in this world, will you give me some answer?”

But Zhou Ying waited amid the demon seal inscriptions on the ground for he didn't know how long, and there was only silence all around.

When a near-ascended spirit body was constantly supplied with spiritual energy, it would preserve its appearance, would even have residual warmth; it was even normal for it to have a heartbeat. But Zhou Ying couldn't sense a sliver of Xi Ping's aura; this body was “empty,” the consciousness so shattered that it had vanished without leaving a trace. Only the sword aura that cut anyone who came near still showed a bit of life.

Zhou Ying closed his eyes.

“You blame me for not blocking that selection card, right? That's fine... that's all fine, go ahead and blame me if you want. Anyway, you've never hesitated to throw a tantrum when you were mad at me.” He softly deliberated with the corpse: “Ge will smash this

damn place for you and take you home, and then you'll come visit me in a dream, okay?"

The empty shell didn't speak.

"Not even a couple of sentences?"

Not even the reincarnation wood trees were moving anymore.

As if his negotiation had fallen through, Zhou Ying, slightly helpless, gently put the warm body into the undergrowth. He rubbed Xi Ping's head with force. "Scoundrel."

Then he walked forward, following the demon seal.

Carving inscriptions was different from writing. Whoever was carving them had to do it according to standard; they couldn't exhibit their own "handwriting." Sometimes two inscriptions that looked identical to the naked eye might have completely opposite effects because one stroke was a fraction longer, or simply because they were put in different places. So the inscription characters covering the ground looked like they had been birthed by the same mother.

Many contemporary figures who claimed to be inscription masters —for example, shoddy goods of Sanyue's Yinyang Reverser's ilk— wouldn't even dare to fly over a rare first-class inscription like the demon seal at three zhang high, never mind stepping on it; but Zhou Ying was totally nonchalant.

There was only one type of person on earth to whose eyes inscriptions were different.

Princess Duanrui had asked how the world looked to a person with a paramount spiritual sense.

It looked like this: to his hearing, the fluctuations in people's pupils, the flow of their blood, their heartbeats, were as raucous as though all of them were shouting their desires through a trumpet; since opening his spiritual eyes, cultivators' probing consciousnesses and roaming spiritual senses had been visible to him; in his eyes, all inscription characters were three-dimensional, dynamic.

Even if Zhou Ying wasn't familiar with an inscription, there was still no need for him to worry that he would blow something up if he tampered with it—he could “see” how inscriptions clashed and merged with their surroundings.

This was why he had dared to learn inscriptions from the demon in the Impassable Sea. In this respect, no demon could fool him.

As Zhou Ying walked straight toward the demon seal the three high elders had sealed, the dangerous first-class inscriptions didn't move a hair, as if they were only ornamental designs on the ground.

The inscriptions on the demon seal had been carved by Xuanyin's three elders working in concert. Zhou Ying could see who had written each inscription—because to his eyes, those inscriptions were nothing alike; they even had the remnants of different people's auras.

One part belonged to the Dignitary of Rites Elder Zhao Yin, whom he had seen once; one part had a slight, faint echo of the sword energy attached to Xi Ping and perhaps belonged to the Dignitary of Fate Zhang Jue; the remaining inscriptions had mainly been written toward the end, with a faint character of holding the line and making a decision, which seemed like the work of the Lin family's Dignitary of Rule, who only spoke to pass judgment.

Inscriptions carved by different people all had subtle exclusion zones at their boundaries; this was especially clear between Zhao Yin's and Zhang Jue's.

Even more subtle was unevenness to differing degrees in the auras of the inscription characters left behind by the three elders, especially serious with Zhao Yin's; a part of the inscriptions that were near the demon seed had practically reached the point of "weakness."

As expected...

Zhou Ying stopped beside the demon seed.

When he had seen the Dignitary of Rites Zhao Yin five years ago, he had sensed a familiar aura on Zhao Yin. But back then he had only been a mortal whose spiritual bones hadn't yet been restored. He hadn't seen clearly. But when he had found that there were indications of an exposed Way of the Heart on Princess Duanrui, it had already been after he had opened his spiritual eyes.

In other words, Zhao Yin's situation was far graver than Duanrui's, who was an ascended spirit. The influence of the heart demon was coming from the top down.

Zhou Kun had gone down into the Impassable Sea twenty-nine years ago, and not long after there had been internal strife in the Xuanyin Mountains. An ordinary person would perhaps suspect the internal strife had been triggered by a heart demon seed. But afterward, Zhou Ying had carefully looked into that history and had felt that when it came down to it, the internal conflict had been caused by the Zhao and Li families having too many people; the Xuanyin Mountains only had thirty-six mountaintops—there weren't enough resources to go around; that had given the Zhou family an opportunity to go fishing in troubled waters. The people involved had all behaved very rationally; there hadn't been anyone involved who, like the Lancang sect leader, seemed to have lost their reason.

With Zhou Ying's understanding of his own lunatic father, he'd made a guess back then that had now been confirmed: from the inscriptions of the demon seal, it seemed that the Xuanyin Mountain elders had all been impacted by the heart demon. Of those three old bastards, Zhang Jue was frequently submerged in the Sea of Stars, Lin Zongyi had spent more than half his life in seclusion, and Zhao Yin, who oversaw Xuanyin Mountain's Principal Peak and had comparatively more opportunities to make an appearance, was still a rare creature that only the ascended spirit peak masters could occasionally see—what opportunity would a mortal like Zhou Kun have had to gather the three of them together?

Only one—when he was struck by heavenly lightning and the existence of the great demon in the Impassable Sea was made known.

When that happened, it was certain that the Bell of Tribulation would sound; the three high elders of Xuanyin Mountain would be certain to come to the Resurrection Vortex.

So back then, Zhou Kun probably hadn't taken the heart demon seed away at all; he had used some means to leave it on the demon seal...likely even on the head of the demon host with the unspeakable name.

When the Bell of Tribulation sounded, the Ways of the Heart of the three high elders would have to suffer questioning; the heart demon would take that opening to sneak in without anyone noticing.

The reason Zhao Yin had been the most deeply harmed among them was likely that the Bell of Tribulation was usually exhibited at Xuanyin Mountain's Principal Peak.

This was the last means of fighting back that Zhou Kun, as a mortal, had had when he had dimly sensed the fetters of the will of heaven.

It was also the true “legacy” he had left for his descendant.

In single-handedly establishing the Kaiming Department and the Luwu, Zhou Ying had originally meant to slowly bury his game pieces in the four nations, wait for the heart demon Zhou Kun had planted to mature and bear fruit, then follow the example of Renzong and provoke a war.

He had wanted to use the chaos of the four nations and everything under heaven to sound the Bell of Tribulation on Xuanyin’s Principal Peak and see which of the sages who had contracted a heart demon the tolling of the bell would carry off.

When one of the people who had laid down the demon seal was consumed by a heart demon, that would be his chance to open the demon seal once more and rip this world to shreds.

Who could have expected that Qiu Sha would give him an unanticipated surprise, let him avoid having to work so indirectly and be brought here ahead of schedule by the Riverward?

Wasn’t this destiny urging him on?

Zhou Ying half knelt and reached out to touch the demon seed.

Stimulated by the blood of the descendant of the demon subduers, the demon seed pulsed like a heart. Some inscription characters near it were immediately inundated; the other inscription characters automatically bore down, forcing the demon seed to retreat.

And while the demon seed drowned those inscriptions whose aura had already been fragile, Zhou Ying took the opportunity to calmly pour spiritual energy toward his fingertips, carve out two of the inscriptions, and quickly swap their positions.

The exquisite inscription characters were like two automatic, obedient ropes; as he pushed and pulled, the misplaced inscriptions linked together. When the wave of demonic energy had subsided, there was a new little crack in the perfectly dovetailing demon seal.

The wound on Zhou Ying's hand was torn open once more. The demon seed greedily absorbed his blood and expanded into the gap.

He took a pill from his mustard seed and swallowed it. A bit of color returned to his face. He cycled his breathing for a moment. He had deliberately picked out Zhao Yin's inscriptions as his target, cleverly avoiding the inscriptions of the other two.

And because the inscriptions that had come from three different people's hands each had their own separate functions, the inscriptions of the other two were as undisturbed as if nothing had happened.

The heart demon seed, the Bell of Tribulation, and the addition of the Silver Moon appearing in a neighboring country now—was Elder Zhao Yin still well?

Currently, on the Principal Peak of the Xuanyin Mountains, an inner sect disciple who was sweeping the floor had yet to recover from the ringing of the bell when he saw a stream of smoke fly up from behind him, heading straight toward the Sea of Stars.

The disciple stared blankly for a moment, came back to himself, and simply dropped the broom. "Dignitary of Rites High Elder?"

Shed skins couldn't spy on neighboring countries, but Xuanyin Mountain couldn't avoid being alerted when a place by the border was swept by the Silver Moon. The moment that the Silver Moon's moonlight had fallen on Tao County, on Xuanyin Mountain's Principal Peak, Zhao Yin had opened his eyes—once again, he

“saw” the “future” that he had glimpsed before through a crack in the Bell of Tribulation: society falling into disarray, the power of the immortal mountains waning, the demonic gods that had once been suppressed in throughout the world emerging one by one, causing the mountains to crumble and the earth to crack.

As if to validate his secret worries, the first ascended spirit evil cultivator in the thousands of years since the spiritual mountains had formed had towered into view. After Xuanyin Mountain’s Bell of Tribulation had rung several times within a single year, Sanyue’s Silver Moon had been forced to descend to the mortal world.

Five years ago, Zhao Yin had known that his Way of the Heart was unsteady after being shaken by the Bell of Tribulation. After this long in seclusion, there had not only not been the slightest turn for the better, his condition had become aggravated.

While on the Principal Peak, he always thought that he could hear the incessant chatter of the Bell of Tribulation in his ears, repeatedly saying to him: *The crisis in the Impassable Sea hasn’t truly calmed; it was a colossal mistake to compromise with the Dignitary of Fate back then and spare that corpse that had inherited the demonic god Yuan Hui’s tradition; sooner or later, it will lead to disaster.*

And neither before nor after that, at just that time, he suddenly sensed the demon seal being touched!

Once an inscription took shape, it would break away from its carver; only the loss of a first-class inscription, which was a matter of vital importance, would alert the spiritual sense of the carver.

Zhao Yin was startled and furious: who was it?!

The Sea of Stars was agitated by the entrance of a shed skin. The Dignitary of Fate Zhang Jue, disturbed, frowned and held down the undulating mist. “Zhao-shixiong?”

“Someone has broken into the Impassable Sea,” Zhao Yin said without preamble. “The inscriptions on the demon seal have been touched. I can’t reckon who it is. I need to use the Sea of Stars to observe.”

Zhang Jue looked at him in astonishment.

“Hurry, this is a matter of utmost importance. There can be no delay!”

Zhang Jue scrutinized him closely for a moment, not responding. He pinched his fingers together and sent out a beam of spiritual energy. Waves rose once again in the Sea of Stars. The image of the Dignitary of Rule Lin Zongyi appeared in them.

Zhang Jue asked, “Lin-shixiong, have you noticed any changes in the demon seal in the Impassable Sea?”

Lin Zongyi didn’t remove his mouth seal, but his voice came through the Sea of Stars: “No.”

“Me, neither.” Zhang Jue turned to Zhao Yin. “Zhao-shixiong, you...”

Like tying a rope knot, Zhou Ying followed Zhao Yin’s inscriptions and cleverly swapped two more characters.

Then it was as if he had been drained dry. For a time, he was a little unsteady on his feet. Zhou Ying put another pill in his mouth and saw that the inscriptions Zhao Yin had laid down were shaking even more fiercely than he was; at the edges, they were even showing a tendency to merge with the demon seed.

Zhou Ying drew close to those inscriptions and quietly said, “The Bell of Tribulation rang recently, and now the Silver Moon has lit up.

The spiritual mountains are shaking, Zhao Yin, can you feel it?”

Zhao Yin...

Zhao Yin...

The malicious demon’s voice pricked Zhao Yin’s spiritual sense from the abyss.

Can you feel it...?

“Zhao-shixiong? Zhao-shixiong!”

Zhao Yin turned and left.

“Wait.” Zhang Jue came out of the depths of the Sea of Stars and blocked his path. “Zhao-shixiong, where are you going?”

“To the East Sea to expel demons,” Zhao Yin said stubbornly. “We left behind a lurking danger back then, and now it has become a calamity. It must be expelled.”

Across space, Lin Zongyi and Zhao Jue exchanged a look, their expressions both becoming grave.

“Slow down. First take a look.” Zhang Jue swept his sleeve—the Impassable Sea had been a place that the Sea of Stars couldn’t see into, but five years ago, it had been the Xuanyin high elders who had replaced the demon seal, so with the inscriptions Zhang Jue had left behind as a thread, it peered into the Impassable Abyss.

When the “starlight” fell, the Riverward immediately became a clump of mist, covering the uninvited guest under the demon seal.

And the inscriptions Zhang Jue had left behind were all calmly lying in their original positions. When the “starlight” swept past, it showed

a scene of total tranquility.

Zhang Jue said, “You saw?”

Zhao Yin was bewildered for a moment. He abruptly closed his eyes and pinched the center of his brow.

After cycling his breathing for a moment, Zhou Ying opened his eyes and saw that the differences between the inscriptions belonging to the three of them had become even more pronounced; the other two’s inscriptions were even more obviously repelling Zhao Yin’s now.

Dongheng’s Sanyue’s Xiang family was its only big family, so no matter what foulness they got up to, no one could do anything about it; Xuanyin was fussy and full of checks and balances, with four elders working together—though there were only three left now, there was still discord among them.

The demon seal was like a dam a thousand li long, and he was a tiny termite that had crawled into a crevice and chewed it up until it was on the point of bursting.

Zhou Ying took a breath and held it, reaching toward the third pair of inscription characters. In a low voice he said, provoking, “Among the thirty-six peaks of Xuanyin, nine peaks answer to you, and besides that there are three near-ascended spirit cultivators waiting to become peak masters. The Zhao clan’s main bloodline is everlasting. Its collateral branches are spread throughout every province. The spiritual mountains are your great wall. What does a loner like the Dignitary of Fate understand?”

Meanwhile, the Dignitary of Fate Elder Zhang Jue waved a hand to disperse the starlight. “Dignitary of Rites, five years ago you were impacted by the aftereffects of the Bell of Tribulation and nearly destroyed the corpse. How has your Way of the Heart failed to

stabilize in the least after five years in seclusion? Can the corpse of an established foundation truly become a stumbling block for your heart?”

In a flash, Zhou Ying swapped a fourth pair of inscriptions. “Previously, the Lin clan was the head of the four great families. But after the decline of the Li clan, the Zhao family rose to prominence through sheer numbers. How do you think the Dignitary of Rule regards you?”

In the Sea of Stars, Lin Zongyi’s voice came from his image. He said, “Dignitary of Rites, if your Way of the Heart is swaying, you can temporarily withdraw from the Principal Peak, and the Dignitary of Fate and I can take turns minding the Bell of Tribulation.”

Zhao Yin abruptly raised his head, the area around his eyes reddening slightly. “First the Bell of Tribulation, then the Silver Moon. The demons have risen on all sides. Though the two of you have your selfish motives, ought you not place the highest value on the overall situation now? How can you still be angling for the authority to speak on the Principal Peak at a time like this?!”

Once a person walks into paranoia, they fall out of alignment with the outside world. The things they are firmly convinced of and believe to be obvious at a glance appear incomprehensible to others, totally disconnected.

Right now, Zhang Jue and Lin Zongyi thought that Zhao Yin seemed to have gone crazy: it was a great matter that the Silver Moon had come down to the mortal world, but it was a great matter for the nation of Chu. Was it connected to the Impassable Sea? How could he talk about them in the same breath? The Sea of Stars had even shown that everything was completely peaceful in the demon seal, and of the three of them, two thought that Zhao Yin was just making trouble out of nothing. Lin Zongyi had sensed that his Way of the Heart wasn’t very firm and had made the well-intentioned proposal

that he stay away from the Bell of Tribulation. How had that turned into “angling for the authority to speak on the Principal Peak”?

Zhang Jue said, “Dignitary of Rites, what are you saying!?”

Zhao Yin began to laugh coldly.

Lin Chi, who ought to have gone to the Principal Peak to return his token to leave the mountains, paused abruptly. The blue luan that was flying at a crawl suddenly leapt up, dodging the wake of a beam of spiritual energy. In the sky above Xuanyin’s thirty-six peaks, the wind rose and the clouds began to roil. A beam of black energy surged up from the Sea of Stars and swept toward the Principal Peak.

Lin Chi wasn’t the type who liked getting in on the action to begin with, and he was even less inclined to do it now, when he was carrying the reincarnation wood and had a somewhat guilty conscience. Seeing signs of a problem, he didn’t return the token. He urged the blue luan to rise. “The Dignitary of Rites? What’s the matter?”

After Zhao Yin, two figures flew out one after another, one from the Sea of Stars, and one from Xuanyin’s Yuntian Palace—the discipline hall. They followed close after him to the Principal Peak.

Xi Ping’s consciousness was hidden in the reincarnation wood in Lin Chi’s sleeve, but he could still feel the breathless sense of pressure.

“Wow, how come they’re fighting?” At first, Xi Ping was bewildered. Then he reconsidered—let them fight, the harder the better. It would be for the best if the three old men were busy clawing at each others’ faces; no one would have time to pay attention to the Impassable Sea.

Xi Ping's original body had been tightly sealed by the demon seal, or else he wouldn't have ended up not even knowing who he was for five years. But as Zhou Ying wore down one side of the demon seal, Xi Ping began to establish a weak link to his body, held by the Impassable Sea.

But Xi Ping wasn't pleased about this in the least—this wasn't a good thing. This clearly showed that san-ge really didn't just want to snatch a corpse; perhaps from the very start, he'd been coveting the Riverward so he could tear up the demon seal!

Lin Zongyi brought his long sleeves together, shielding all the nearby inner sect disciples below an ascended spirit in his sleeves. Zhang Jue opened his eyes and cut Zhao Yin off with a hand seal. “For established foundations and ascended spirits to leave the mountains, they must request a token from the Principal Peak. Shed skins cannot take a single step outside the Xuanyin Mountains without authorization; the other elders must unanimously agree. Never mind what is necessary to ring the Bell of Tribulation again. Dignitary of Rites, have you abandoned even the rules of our forebears?”

Zhao Yin grimly said, “Move—aside!”

As Xi Ping struggled to connect to the bottom of the Impassable Sea, he split off some attention for his puzzled musing: what did all of this mean? Zhao Yin wanted to carry the Bell of Tribulation off the mountain, and the other two wouldn't let him? Why was Zhao Yin the only one in a rush?

What was san-ge doing to the demon seal?

Also, wasn't the Dignitary of Rites Zhao Yin a pretty good talker? Of the three of them, the most loquacious was the Principal Peak's bell ringer; he was full of smooth patter. Why had he suddenly become unreasonable?

Did he have a screw loose...?

In a flash of brilliance, Xi Ping remembered that the heart demon at the bottom of the Impassable Sea had said that in the fifth year of Taiming, the former emperor Zhou Kun had stolen a heart demon seed, and the heart demon didn't know whom he had planted it on.

Just then, lightning fell, lighting up the carved railings and stone pillars of Xuanyin Mountain's Principal Peak's great hall. In the dazzling white light, the visages of the auspicious animals on the stone pillars were blurred. There was only one coiled dragon glowering up at the firmament. It instantly made Xi Ping remember the imperial robes Emperor Taiming had worn when Xi Ping had left home to go to the Latent Cultivation Temple.

Xi Ping gasped... A heart demon? No way!

The Zhou family's father and son had both overreached themselves!

With a burst of energy, Zhou Ying swapped the fifth set of inscriptions. His open-eyed cultivation level couldn't hold out any longer. His meridians ached fiercely, and his ears rang. He had just spat out a mouthful of blood into his palm, which had alleviated the pain slightly.

But he felt carefree. He absorbed a handful of spiritual stones through his palm and began to laugh quietly, looking toward his next target.

But just then, amid the ringing in his ears, he heard an auditory hallucination.

“San-ge!”

Zhou Ying's laughter came to an abrupt halt. The lightning above the Xuanyin Mountains' Principal Peak seemed to have crossed the vast distance to strike him.

The reincarnation wood trees behind him rustled, as if they were impatient to say something.

Zhou Ying's figure flashed, and he instantly landed beside Xi Ping and seized him by the shoulders.

But it had been too long since he had "plucked" that body from the branch. The false warmth maintained by spiritual energy had dispersed, and it was cold to the touch. Xi Ping's head drooped lifelessly as he moved him, and even the broken sword was too lazy to give him a response.

Zhou Ying stared blankly. His spine lost support, and his back bumped into the reincarnation wood tree beside him, where the bloodstains had yet to dry.

The spiritual stones he carried with him slowly scoured his dried up meridians—he had been chronically ill as a mortal, and his body was still slower to recover than those of other half-immortals. He was a bit exhausted.

So, leaning back against the tree trunk, Zhou Ying slid down, the frenzy and the hope in his eyes both going out.

But the next moment, as if he was frozen in place, he turned his head bit by bit and looked at the tree behind him in disbelief.

A familiar voice was coming from that reincarnation wood tree, distant and vague, intermittent...

The brat seemed to be scolding him.

CHAPTER 87 - Traveler Abroad (4)

Xi Ping hid inside Lin Chi's sleeve. As he listened to the world-shaking battle of Xuanyin Mountain's shed skin elders, trembling along with the thirty-six peaks, he could also clearly feel the fetters that restrained him slackening.

He went numb all over.

In fact, Xi Ping could think of a way to use Lin Chi to let Xuanyin Mountain know that the demon seal was under attack, but that would trap san-ge; but if he looked on without lifting a finger, leaving aside for the moment what would happen to san-ge afterward, how would Xi Ping have the face to speak to his shifu?

Heavens above, he was only a rotten tree spirit who couldn't fend for himself. Why did he have to be caught in such a dilemma?

Just because he hadn't thought things through and had told that Idiot Xu to take the Riverward to give to his wastrel master! Whether Zhao Yin went mad or became senile, Xi Ping would be delighted to see it, but tearing open the demon seal was no good... that was where his shifu had nearly given up his life!

Was there no one to mind him?

Xi Ping had followed Zhou Ying around like his shadow since he was little, had grown up smelling the medicinal odor on him thickening year by year. Even when scolding him, he couldn't bear to say anything harsh, so he had to readjust his aim and pour a flood of invective onto Emperor Taiming, whom he hadn't known very well—poor childrearing was the fault of the father; he had been ruthless and unfeeling himself, and he'd fathered a son without bothering to teach him properly, instead tossing him into the Impassable Sea to let the heart demon instruct him.

What a fucking dog of a father! Today he's blowing up the demon seal, and just you wait, tomorrow he'll send your ancestral tomb up to the sky like a firecracker, and it'll be just what you deserve!

Zhou Ying said, "... Who did you say is a wastrel? Who's a dog?"

All kinds of thoughts were frantically going through Xi Ping's mind. For a moment, he didn't realize who had answered him. He blurted out, "Who else could it be but Zhou Ying?"

Zhou Ying sucked in a breath. He raised a hand and gently touched the trunk of the reincarnation wood tree, then realized with a start that his hand was covered in blood and timidly drew it back.

His features seemed not to know how to arrange themselves, contorting in anger and grief both, at a loss.

Too pathetic, Zhou Ying... too pathetic.

So, as if venting his anger, he looked up and kicked Xi Ping's innocent body. "How impudent!"

A corner of the demon seal had been pried up. The sounds and images there came intermittently to Xi Ping. He just happened to see that kick. Half-bitterly, he gave a grim laugh. "Ha, guess what? It doesn't hurt at all."

Zhou Ying: "..."

Xi Ping suddenly realized something: Wait, aren't I just quietly lying there? Even if my posture is indecent, that isn't *my* fault. Why would he call me "impudent"?

Can he... hear me?

In the chaos of Xuanyin Mountain, Xi Ping's consciousness turned

into a stutterer. “San... san-ge?”

Zhou Ying forced his breathing to become extremely slow, as if there weren't enough air at the bottom of the Impassable Sea, and he needed to save each mouthful. “Don't you mean ‘Zhou Ying’?”

He really *can* hear!

For a moment, the two of them simultaneously became mute.

At the end of the twenty-eighth year of Taiming, Xi Ping had been on his way to the southern mines in the Land of Turmoil on his shifu's orders. Before leaving, he had stopped over in Jinping and gone to visit Prince Zhuang Manor, impatient to display the magic powers he had just learned.

Back then, the only kind of talisman he had learned was a contamination preventing one. Flying a sword, he was even slower than Master Lin's blue luan. And the Tai Sui Qin was still mixed in with the bones of his fingers; he only ever played vulgar tunes about people bringing dishonor on their family names... Back then, he'd thought that the most dangerous circumstance on earth was being bullied by a miserable wretch named Liang Chen.

At the start of the twenty-ninth year of Taiming, Xi Ping had by a series of coincidences fallen into the Resurrection Vortex, had seized the offering from the altar out of the mouths of the demon host. He had broken the Zhou clan's eight-century-long conspiracy in the Impassable Sea, and then, as though it was karma, when all the dust had settled, he had been buried there himself. Fancying himself clever, he had even written home to report his safety... but it turned out that he hadn't fooled anyone.

Now, over five years had passed. Seeing Zhou Ying again, Xi Ping at first forgot how to speak to him.

He was a local thug from Wild Fox Country, a cunning and irascible evil cultivator, the mystifying Tai Sui... The masks he usually switched between with the ease of practice fell out all at once, and he was flustered, feeling that none of them was appropriate to take out to show his ge. He nearly blurted out the mixed language he had picked up in Tao County.

Just then, there was a rumble, and Zhao Yin was knocked down from the Principal Peak's cliff by Zhang Jue and Lin Zongyi working in concert. The usually invisible Xuanyin great array emerged from underground. The Principal Peak's main hall vibrated, establishing a resonance with the Bell of Tribulation.

Xi Ping gave a start. He came back to himself and forced himself to find the proper accent for Jinping official language. He dully tried to make up for himself: "Just... j-just now, what was that? I-I-I was just about to say hello, I hadn't said anything yet."

Zhou Ying seemed exhausted. He sat crosslegged under the reincarnation wood tree, leaning back against the bloodstained wood, quietly gazing at Xi Ping's empty body in front of him. "No need to hold back, speak your mind. Anyway, you won't feel a beating... 'It doesn't hurt at all', right?"

Xi Ping: "..."

A loose tongue is its own punishment; the proverb doesn't lie.

"Back then, you used an established foundation pill to shatter your spirit in this reincarnation wood forest and obtained the inheritance of the demonic god. That's why they wanted to kill you, right?" Zhou Ying paused. "Where have you been?"

Xi Ping had a natural gift of gab, but now he didn't know where to start. He was speechless for a moment. "I... I was in Western Chu... Well, it's a long story..."

Zhou Ying interrupted him: "Have you been mistreated?"

Xi Ping was stunned by his question.

He hadn't thought of this question, and no one had asked him this question before.

A-Xiang, Xu Rucheng, Lin Chi, Qiu Sha... They had all either listened to his instructions or made allowances for him in their plans. Some people believed in him, some people took precautions against him. He was the "Tai Sui" hidden behind the weird divine image, not to be spoken or written of, with countless ties to the ancient demonic god, seen as a fellow creature by the late-autumn red—what relationship could he have to being "mistreated"?

That was a word to describe a child.

Xi Ping considered for a while, then responded, "No, actually."

This was the truth. In the last five years, he hadn't known that he was the Marquis Manor's Viscount, and he hadn't thought it was mistreatment to eat just enough scraps to get by every day along with the toilers of Yuzhou, hadn't thought there was anything unusual about the internal injuries and grave diseases everywhere—everyone had them.

Attached to the exiled refugees, to the spiritual image dolls in the prison, to the slaves bought and sold on the black market... he had lived and died with them again and again, fully experiencing abuse and humiliation, yet he hadn't known that this had been forced on him so he could learn by comparison; these had been the fates of other people.

He was only a person roaming through some rotten wood, accompanying them as they lived and died.

Since everyone was accustomed to this, he naturally also grew accustomed to it.

It's clear to see that there are no natural princes and nobles on earth; "delicacy" is nothing but self-pity.

"Well," Xi Ping said carelessly, "I'm just a little restricted in Great Wan. In Western Chu, it's pretty good. Isn't it all down to me that Bai Ling-da-ge's subordinate Idiot Xu successfully seized power in Wild Fox Country? Heh-heh, I'm the Snake King's backer, Tai..."

Before he could finish his bragging, he was interrupted by a long cry in the valley, almost a dragon's roar.

Next, a number of figures landed beside Lin Chi. The ascended spirit peak masters near the Principal Peak had all been alerted by the sound of the elders fighting.

Rosy Cloud Peak's Peak Master Wen Fei swished his fan open. Hurried cursive script appeared on it: *What's going on?*

Lin Chi shook his head. "The Dignitary of Rites Elder suddenly left seclusion and went down into the Sea of Stars with a strange expression. Then they suddenly started fighting. I don't know..."

"Zhang Jue! Lin Zongyi!" Beneath the Principal Peak, Zhao Yin's voice came like a shout. "I've always known that the two of you were lusting after the Principal Peak!"

Zhang Jue said, "Utter nonsense! Are you confused...? Dignitary of Rule, request the Vitex Branch from Yuntian Palace!"

The "Vitex Branch" was Xuanyin Mountain's Dignitary of Rule High Elder's foremost divine tool. Tradition had it that this was the vitex branch that the Southern Sage, on seeing living things suffering during the Great War of Gods and Demons and becoming aware of his own sinfulness, had worn on his back in penitence. When the Southern Sage had departed the mortal world, he had left the Vitex Branch in the Yuntian Palace Discipline Hall. The tail end of a lash

from this thing could scare an established foundation or below out of their wits. At the least, it could kill an ascended spirit; at the most, it would bind a shed skin.

Lin Zongyi accordingly raised a hand. A burst of purple lightning came flashing through the air. Wen Fei and Lin Chi, respectively a medicine maker and a tool maker, within their grade both belonged to the “too weak to truss a chicken” category of noncombatants. Both quickly dodged. The realistic feathers on the blue luan even stood on end!

Lin Chi waved his sleeve to clear away the hissing sparks all around. He formed a hand seal, and an immortal tool like a thin cloud floated out of his sleeve to cover Moon Plated Peak, protecting its many inner sect disciples whose names he didn't even know. Only then did the other peak masters come back to themselves and organize a defense for their peaks one after another.

The nine peak masters under the influence of the Zhao family arrived one after another. As soon as they beheld this scene, they read too much into it—after all, it was less than thirty years since Xuanyin's last internal strife. The leading peak master surnamed Zhao couldn't hold back. He asked, “Dignitary of Fate, Dignitary of Rule, could you please tell us what you are doing?”

He didn't get a response, only saw the Vitex Branch descend. There was a thunderclap in the valley like the sound of tearing silk, then the lightning rolled up a mass of turbid energy and flew out.

The Zhao peak masters exchanged looks in mingled shock and anger. Though the Xuanyin Mountains were managed by the thirty-six peak masters, anyone without the backing of a shed skin elder—the Zhou family, for example—would be hindered at every turn; they were inferior to others. If the Dignitary of Rites Elder fell, never mind the Zhao family having nine peak masters—even if all thirty-six

peaks had been under their rule, they would afterward still be reduced to mere stewards; what future prospects could they have?

The leading Zhao peak master clenched his teeth and led the others in a charge as if seeking death.

Nine great ascended spirits began to pull and tear the Vitex Branch simultaneously. The Dignitary of Rule's mouth seal floated down, and he shouted angrily, "Move aside!"

The lightning of the Vitex Branch rose angrily, and the nine of them were sent flying like fallen leaves swept by an autumn wind. But with this pause, a human form took shape within the turbid energy bound by the Vitex Branch. In an instant, it swelled to several times its previous size. It struggled free of the Vitex Branch and went east!

High among the clouds, when sudden thunder struck, what came tumbling out was always selfishness.

Wen Fei smacked his fan. A beam of spiritual energy entered snow-capped Flying Jade Mountain, which was far from the Principal Peak, and knocked on the mountain seal—*Sword god, wake up! There's a fire burning in your backyard, it's no time to sleep!*

"San-ge!" Xi Ping had no attention to spare for anything else. "Leave the demon seal without delay, hurry! There's a shed skin on the way to the East Sea!"

Zhou Ying unhurriedly finished swallowing the last pill. When Xuanyin Mountain was mentioned, his faint air of fed up indifference returned. "So you have your consciousness in the Xuanyin Mountains, too. It's two against one—how did he run away? Did some ascended spirits get mixed up in the shed skin battle?"

Xi Ping: "..."

His guess was very accurate. As soon as these mighty people showed their true colors, others could guess how they would behave. Maybe they ought to go into seclusion and reflect on themselves.

“It’s all right, it won’t be so fast. The other two will give chase,” said Zhou Ying. “Anyway, won’t it be just right if he comes? We’ll be able to witness a shed skin elder consumed by his own heart demon personally tearing open the demon seal.”

Xi Ping’s heart sank.

Since he was a child, he had heard the servants gossiping, saying that His Third Highness's ties to his blood relations were weak, that he had an inborn deficiency, that he was unlikely to live to adulthood. Everyone was living for the future, but His Third Highness had no “future”; aspirations and ambitions alike were all transient for him. Others who were frail and sickly might perhaps have other joys, could pick up a lifetime’s worth of karma with their family and friends, leave a bit of something behind in the human world, and some would think their life had been worth living. But what could Zhou Ying leave behind? Since birth, he had been only... an extraneous sack of skin attached to a set of spiritual bones.

He was a meaningless person. Meaningless people were all like legendary chaos, devouring heaven and earth not to strengthen themselves but only because they wanted to drag everything beautiful and ugly into the chaos.

In order to prove that they existed, and that their existence was justified.

“San-ge,” Xi Ping asked tentatively, struggling to calm down, “these last five years, have you not been to see Grandmother?”

Zhou Ying's expression didn't waver. "I've seen her. The old lady's doing pretty well."

Xi Ping was no more relaxed now than he had been when Tao County had hung by a thread, but his voice was still very soft. "But I haven't seen her. San-ge, cut a piece of wood off that tree and give it to the old lady. Take me to see her, please."

Zhou Ying said, "When the demon seal has been broken, you'll be free. Even if you can't return to your real body, you'll still be able to travel through reincarnation wood, right? Then you can ask Bai Ling to gift the Marquis Manor a potted reincarnation wood tree. You can go yourself."

Xi Ping: "..."

If he were still a useless layabout in Jinping, as much trouble as the cats and dogs he'd dropped of at Prince Zhuang Manor, making trouble as soon as no one was keeping an eye on him, wouldn't san-ge be a little more concerned?

Xi Ping's regrets came too late: blazes, he ought to have wailed just now, made himself sound as miserable as possible; if there wasn't enough misery, he could have just made something up. What had he been playing the big shot for?!

No... he shouldn't have accepted that selection card back then.

Zhou Ying's fingers stroked the coarse grain of the reincarnation wood. "If I insist on breaking the demon seal and throwing the world into turmoil, will you hate me?"

Xi Ping paused, not answering at first.

Zhou Ying waited for a moment, then smiled. "Oh, you've grown up.

You've even learned to hide your words.”

“I don't hate you,” Xi Ping said after a moment of silence, his voice deepening slightly—this was the tone he used as “Tai Sui.” “I know you.”

If even I hated you, wouldn't that prove that you were right?

“I was the one who brought out your spiritual bones, and I was the one who told Xu Rucheng to give you the Riverward. You being here now is something I brought about through a sequence of chance and coincidence,” Xi Ping said slowly. “Anyway, it's the same as the friend I left back in Tao County. If the sky springs a leak, I'll mend it, and if there's retribution, I'll be waiting to meet it for you. You...you go ahead and do just as you like.”

The corners of Zhou Ying's eyes twitched slightly.

“If I'd known before, I probably would have sunk the Riverward... but all the same, if you took me back to the Resurrection Vortex in the East Sea five years ago, I'd still take your spiritual bones out. Sange, even if you beat me to death, I still won't regret it.”

Zhou Ying abruptly turned his head away, his false calm breaking. He seemed unable to take any more.

“Bastard. Using all the rhetoric I taught you when you were young against me.”

Zhou Ying waved his sleeve and chopped the blood-stained reincarnation wood tree down. He rolled the tree up in his mustard seed. He raised a hand to lift Xi Ping's body and dragged it into the depths of the reincarnation wood forest. He took a pearl from his mustard seed and clapped it against the pit of Xi Ping's stomach.

The pearl merged with the body and immediately condensed into a layer of brilliance on the body's surface—this was a “dragon pearl” left behind from before the Great War of Gods and Demons, when

the water dragons had yet to be subdued and turned into animal spirits by the Southern Sage; the water dragon clan had used these pearls to protect their young during natural disasters. Even if the sky fell and the earth cracked in the East Sea, it would probably be enough to leave him with an “intact corpse.”

Then Zhou Ying turned and went back. A bag full of white spirits disappeared into his palm. One after another, he pushed the misplaced inscriptions back where they belonged.

There was no one to see when, behind Zhou Ying, sword light flashed on the brow of Xi Ping’s quiet body; soon after, everything once again became still.

CHAPTER 88 - Traveler Abroad (5)

Zhao Yin struggled free of the Vitex Branch and recklessly flew toward the East Sea.

In fact, impulses are like great joys and great sorrows; none of them will last very long. The evil flame, once gone, was gone. Zhao Yin had noticed that there was something wrong with his thoughts: even if Zhang Jue, out of consideration for Zhi Xiu, wanted to protect the descendant of their lineage at every point, Lin Zongyi still ought to have approved of expelling demons.

The moment the Vitex Branch had caught him, he had been bewildered. How had he provoked both of these people into standing against him?

However, some impulses are like writing the wrong word—you just need to cross it out; while other impulses are like killing the wrong person—once dead, they can't come back to life.

With the thirty-six peaks as witness, Zhao Yin had wished to use the Bell of Tribulation and had been obstructed, then cried out “The two of you are lusting after the Principal Peak.” What was done was done.

Upbraiding others on the basis of virtue while lacking virtue, spitting upon others while being contemptible, accusing others of selfishness while himself bewildered by selfishness—as Xuanyin Mountain's Dignitary of Rites High Elder, Zhao Yin couldn't fail to understand this obvious reasoning.

So today he had to prove that the demon seal was under attack and he was right, or else he would lose all standing and reputation after what he had said.

In an instant, Zhao Yin passed by the thirty-six peaks and arrived at the Latent Cultivation Temple, which formed the barrier between mortal and immortal.

A storm raised by a shed skin sage was no small matter. Where Zhao Yin passed, a waterspout appeared. The straw children, still performing the routine actions of repairing the residences of the disciples, collectively had their heads separated from their bodies and rose into the air.

Luo Qingshi heard the noise and thought it was someone fooling around with talismans. He stuck his head out of the Qiankun Tower ready to scold. Unexpectedly, as soon as he looked up, he was alarmed. Showing great adaptability, Immortal Luo leapt out of his chair. Before he hit the ground, he had already squeezed into a protective mustard seed. He went rolling down the Qiankun Tower's high stone steps.

The next moment, there was a faint crack as a snow bright whip cleaved the black clouds raised by Zhao Yin, trickling out like daylight.

When the dreadful "daylight" swept over it, the Latent Cultivation Temple's Qiankun Tower was cut down the middle by fierce wind, and the third-class inscriptions on the tower didn't even light up—Princess Duanrui was here!

"How lucky that I rolled quickly... My goodness, why are they fighting?" Luo Qingshi, who was usually very eager to enrich his experience, didn't even dare to stay to observe this time. He nimbly fled the Qiankun Tower, rolled up a pile of straw children with missing limbs, and began to run like mad.

Duanrui showed no mercy. As soon as she joined the battle, she delivered a killing blow. Where her vital weapon, the Remorseless

Whip, passed, the Latent Cultivation Temple's lush green vegetation instantly withered. Half the valley took on a lifeless hue.

Zhao Yin was caught off guard. The lash of her whip hindered him, giving the two elders behind him the chance to catch up.

The princess knew that however much she might be the foremost person below the shed skin level, she was still "below the shed skin level." Therefore, she didn't try to show off. She rolled up the Remorseless Whip and withdrew.

Zhao Yin gave a furious shout. The waterspout at his feet swept across the Latent Cultivation Temple. The huge valley that disciples of each year broke their legs running across to get to morning class was covered in an instant.

In Zhang Jue's snow-white eyes, the even whiter irises changed positions like the movements of the stars. There was a humming in the ears of all the people and auspicious animals in the Latent Cultivation Temple. Even the wind stagnated.

In that moment, all persons and objects lost their origins and destinations; they were severed from their own cause and effect, cast all over at random—stones that had been rolling down rose into the sky; the straw children thrown up into the sky by the wind ended up half-buried in the dirt; Luo Qingshi and his protective mustard seed "parted ways" out of nowhere, ending up over a zhang apart in the blink of an eye; Princess Duanrui's figure was snatched up to the pinnacle of the split Qiankun Tower; Zhao Yin froze in midair—the people on the ground craned their necks until they nearly broke to see his enormous sleeves, his figure as grand as the southern mountain.

The mountain was collapsing.

Lightning wrapped around inscriptions slammed into Zhao Yin like a natural disaster. He was knocked out of the clouds by the two great shed skin elders. The Vitex Branch came down, pressing directly against the spirit at the center of Zhao Yin's brow.

The Dignitary of Rites High Elder's cheeks were sunken in. There was a frightening elderliness in his face. His eyes were fit to burst out of their sockets, he glared at Duanrui at the top of the Qiankun Tower.

Under the force of three great shed skins, Princess Duanrui's breathing was rather unsteady, but she herself was very steady. With the Remorseless Whip curled up, she nodded from afar toward Lin Zongyi and Zhang Jue.

The Zhou family...

Zhao Yin thought: The Zhou family, suppressed for over a thousand years by the immortal mountains—their methods were truly excellent. On one hand, raising demons in the Impassable Sea, and on the other, cultivating in seclusion on Green Pool Peak, the immortal and demonic sides not hindering each other. Xuanyin Mountain had four great families; for the sake of equilibrium, for the last thousand years, only the Zhou clan hadn't had a shed skin, but within a single generation, they had managed directly or indirectly to pull two shed skin elders down from the spiritual mountains—what scheming!

After five years of growth, the heart demon, which had already put down deep roots, covetously enveloped the shed skin elder's Way of the Heart, neatly tying all the unrelated coincidences in Zhao Yin's mind into a conspiracy. Darkness appeared on the Vitex Branch holding his spirit.

At the bottom of the Impassable Sea, Zhou Ying came to the last pair of inscriptions whose sequence he had disrupted. He couldn't

hear Xi Ping's voice for the moment, so he took the opportunity to brush the spiritual energy extending from the weak inscriptions. As if talking to himself, he said in an almost inaudible low voice, "Power is like the tide. If you try to wash away your bad reputation, when the tide recedes, you'll be dried out on the shoal of disgrace."

Blood churned in Zhao Yin's eyes—before the Great War of Gods and Demons, there were no spiritual mountains, no immortal sects, and naturally there had also been no such thing as so-called "family protection." Each cultivator was a lost wanderer, finding their own Ways of the Heart through repeated fumbling, how far they could walk solely dependent on their individual luck and aptitude.

Only Zhao Yin had taken a shortcut.

Back then, he had been only a puny open-eyed half-immortal, stuck at the two-century threshold, already showing signs of coming to the end of his lifespan, not making the slightest progress in his cultivation, his hopes growing more and more remote. Once, when he went to sea to seek an opportunity, he happened by chance to be caught up in a struggle between masters. Zhao Yin came close to death, but his luck was good. Amid the violent storm, he survived.

When he woke up, he found that he had been thrown up onto a nameless little island. With him was half of the corpse of a master, along with that person's intact vital weapon. Zhao Yin was very surprised, because in that era, very few cultivators died natural deaths; it was vanishingly rare for a person's weapon to survive after their death. So he curiously stepped forward to investigate.

At first sight, he found that, like the most perfect inscribed memorial tablet, the vital weapon, loyal to the last, was carved with all the paths its master had walked while living—it was a polished, complete Way of the Heart!

Zhao Yin had searched bitterly without finding the threshold to an established foundation; his heart began to beat wildly. He thought, Why can't I use someone else's Way of the Heart?

He did want to find his own way, but the lifespan of a half-immortal was too limited. They were hardly better off than ephemeral mortals. He was nearly out of time!

But while he lived another day, succeeded in establishing a foundation and becoming immortal, he became for a time the laughingstock of the cultivation world.

All his fellow cultivators knew that his Way of the Heart was "stolen."

Now, thousands of years had passed, and it had been a long time since anyone had talked about a "stolen Way of the Heart." Inheriting a Way of the Heart from an elder or a deceased master was now seen as a matter of course; it was fumbling around for yourself that was rare... even a little unorthodox—if your teacher didn't have some breadth of mind, they were likely to be somewhat embarrassed.

For the Zhao family, which had been the first to implement this method, their patience at the outset had been repaid; from the laughingstock of the cultivation world, they had gone on to become one of the great families of Southern Wan, had even dared on the strength of overwhelming numbers to claim themselves as equals to the Lin clan, which had turned out so many geniuses. Everyone fell over themselves to follow their example, racking their brains to come up with a way to join the Zhao clan.

But the human heart isn't floating duckweed. Even when the direction of the wind changes, deep-rooted humiliation remains in place.

If you whitewashed the road you had climbed to turn it into a heavenly pathway to immortality, you still couldn't fool yourself after having crept up that road step by step—his Way of the Heart was stolen.

A crack opened in the Way of the Heart of the Dignitary of Rites High Elder, which had been impregnable as a fortress for thousands of years, just like a thousand-li dam bursting because of an ant hole.

Zhang Jue suddenly sensed something. He cried out, “Dignitary of Rites!”

Without hesitation, Princess Duanrui shunned the Qiankun Tower. At the same time, she tossed out a huge mustard seed, wrapping up herself and all the half-immortals in the Latent Cultivation Temple.

The next moment, an enormous impact slammed down from above. Luo Qingshi and the others like him for a time didn't know what had happened; they only thought that the sky seemed to have fallen.

The mustard seed maintained by the princess, who was half a step from the shed skin boundary, shattered at this single attack. She went to her knees on the ground, her posture very unnatural—her spiritual bones had snapped!

But she no longer had attention to spare for that.

Duanrui hastily stabilized her fractured vertebra and ribs with spiritual energy. She turned her head away, her pupils contracting sharply—what had shattered her mustard seed just now had been an astral wind.

The other two great shed skin elders had held down Zhao Yin, but they hadn't held down the fallout of his Way of the Heart being crushed. The wind that had cast heaven and earth into darkness, like a waterspout, was rushing lightning fast toward the edge of the

Latent Cultivation Temple, about to fly out carrying the irresolvable obsession... fly out into the mortal world, where even a falling brick could kill!

Damn it!

Just then, there was a drone. The Bell of Tribulation suspended over Xuanyin Mountain's Principal Peak was struck by a beam of sword energy carrying the aura of frost and snow. It resonated throughout the thirty-six peaks.

The tolling of the bell instantly smashed the better part of the waterspout with its towering resentment. The astral wind that seemed about to destroy the world was downgraded at once, changing into an ordinary hurricane, pitifully and contemptibly continuing on its way east.

Meanwhile, the demon seal in the East Sea was restored, and the excited demon seed unwillingly fell back into the abyss. But while the portion of the inscriptions belonging to Zhao Yin remained loyal to their post, the spiritual energy swarming over them, as if suddenly rudderless, became clumsy, only swept along by the inscriptions of the other two, moving mechanically.

Zhou Ying extended a hand and allowed the thin smoke of the Riverward to envelop him. Finally, he looked toward the reincarnation wood forest—without the cover of great chaos in the world, a twenty-something near-ascended spirit cultivator was too shocking. Even if he took Shiyong away by force now, he would only be another Qiu Sha, wiped away by the Way of Heaven.

It wasn't time yet...

Meanwhile, in the Xuanyin Mountains, Xi Ping, hidden in Lin Chi's sleeve, and Wen Fei simultaneously recognized the beam of sword energy that had struck the Bell of Tribulation.

Xi Ping was pleasantly surprised. “Shifu!”

But Wen Fei was so startled that his fan slipped out of his hand.

Lin Chi deftly caught the fan with the blue luan’s tail and saw a heap of disorderly writing climb over it as if flying: *I kneel before you, Zhi Jingzhai! I wanted you to come out of seclusion to have a look. I didn’t want you to clean up the shed skin battlefield! Aiming the Bell of Tribulation directly at a shed skin—General Zhi, pardon me, are you the Southern Sage reincarnated? What do you think your cultivation level is? Do you really think you’re on a par with a full moon grade divine tool from the heart of the mountains...*

The first stroke of a final line of scrambling writing had just appeared when the messy writing on the fan suddenly paused. Then it was wiped away.

Then, a few characters very slowly appeared on Immortal Wen Fei’s special fan. It looked like the dying testament of a person on the brink of death, written on a final breath, each stroke shaking.

These characters were nearly falling apart, barely holding their shape. The handwriting was scarcely discernible. It said: *Shifu is here.*

Lin Chi was slightly startled. In the reincarnation wood, it was as if Xi Ping had been struck by the heavenly calamity in the sky over the Xuanyin Mountains.

Only Wen Fei was bewildered, thinking to himself, Whose shifu is he calling himself?

It was all over. He was starting to rave.

Wen Fei took back his fan, and the three crooked words melted like snowflakes. The master of Rosy Cloud Peak waved the fan somewhat anxiously a few times and aimed it at Lin Chi: *Lin-shixiong, is there anything you can do about Zhaoting?*

Lin Chi shook his head. “Zhaoting is one of the three famous swords of the era. It won’t be so easy to repair. Moreover, there was a piece missing when Elder Zhang brought it back. Forgive me, I can’t do it.”

Xi Ping was trapped in the reincarnation wood and couldn’t put in a word. Hearing this, his mind filled with questions: Zhaoting was missing a piece—what had happened? Had the Dignitary of Fate High Elder who kept his eyes closed all the time groped around blindly and missed a piece?

No... that was wrong!

Just now, on Peak Master Wen’s fan, shifu had obviously been talking to him.

But... shifu had been sent away before the demon seal in the East Sea had descended, and he hadn’t left Flying Jade Peak in five years. He shouldn’t know what had happened after the arrival of the three elders.

By normal reasoning, supposing that his inheritance from the demonic god hadn’t been exposed, the elders ought to have tossed him back into the Xuanyin Mountains, and now he would only be a puny established foundation. In a situation like this, he would either have been gathered up into some master’s sleeves, or he would be hiding somewhere not daring to raise his head. How could he end up in company with some ascended spirit peak masters watching the fun... having specifically chosen these two, who were least able to fight?

How could shifu know he was here?

Xi Ping suddenly remembered the bloodstains on his san-ge's hand. They didn't look as though he had picked them up somewhere—they looked as if a sharp weapon had cut him. Was the missing shard of Zhaoting in his corpse?!

So when shizun had been startled awake by Peak Master Wen just now, if he hadn't convinced san-ge to stop...

Just then, he saw writing continue to pop up on Wen Fei's fan: *Five years ago, he was seriously injured, lost his vital weapon, and was forced to enter seclusion. In five years, he may just have accumulated the strength for that one blow. He's courting death!*

Before Xi Ping could finish reading, Wen Fei suddenly turned and left.

"Wait! My shifu, he..." Xi Ping's heart trembled. He hurriedly said to Lin Chi, "Peak Master Lin!"

Lin Chi was very understanding. "I'll take you over to have a look."

Just then, Lin Zongyi's voice sounded in the sky above Xuanyin's thirty-six peaks: "The Dignitary of Rites's Way of the Heart has been damaged. There is something abnormal about this. The Dignitary of Fate and I will leave the mountains to investigate. Xuanyin's thirty-six peaks will be sealed."

Zhou Ying had just been brought out the Impassable Sea by the Riverward. He had yet to leave the area of the East Sea when he heard Xi Ping's urgent voice come from the reincarnation wood he was carrying: "San-ge, Xuanyin's shed skin elders are almost here!"

Zhou Ying clicked his tongue and drew back his hand, which had been about to put the Riverward away. "It would seem that Zhao Yin

has truly gone to see the sages?”

One of the whirlpools in the Resurrection Vortex swept by, rolling up the Riverward and Zhou Ying inside it. The Riverward covered all his traces and aura; he became one with the East Sea.

Next, the slowly billowing thin smoke of the Riverward changed into a vague human form and landed beside him. It pointed a finger at him and put it to its lips—be quiet, be careful.

The consciousnesses of the shed skin elders came sweeping over.

Zhou Ying was accustomed to ditching his benefactors once he no longer needed help. He ignored the Riverward, only leaning back languidly against the thin smoke. He said to Xi Ping, “You won’t make it by the tenth. When the storm has passed, I’ll pare off a piece of reincarnation wood and have Bai Ling take it to the Marquis Manor.”

Xi Ping said, “... aren’t you going?”

Zhou Ying was silent for a moment, not answering. He only continued his instructions: “That half-puppet footman of yours is currently at the Marquis Manor. I’ll have Bai Ling explain things to him, have him think of a way to get some of the old lady’s blood—if someone’s blood is spilled on reincarnation wood that has held your consciousness, you’ll be able to communicate through their spirit, right? Be careful when you talk, don’t scare her, just say it’s a new kind of immortal tool... Oh, right, I suppose I can’t mention you to outsiders, that’ll be annoying...”

Before he could finish, his gaze froze—the human form in the Riverward’s thin smoke had come clear.

This time, the Riverward hadn’t turned into Xi Ping again. The old lady with her head full of silver hair was sitting upright nearby,

looking at him and smiling.

CHAPTER 89 - Traveler Abroad (6)

When the Riverward was activated, the smoke inside it would run everywhere, changing into all kinds of forms, reflecting the user's preoccupations like a mirror.

But, after all, it was only an immortal tool. It couldn't speak. The outcome depended on whom it turned into—mirroring Xi Ping, it was a little out of luck. The living Xi Ping didn't have so much "mysticism" to him; anything too mystical didn't look like him, but like a recollection of him after death. But when it turned into old Madam Xi, it was unusually convincing, because in Zhou Ying's impressions, this was just what his grandmother was like.

If he only went to see her, no matter when he turned his head, she would always be watching him like this. Sometimes she was keeping an eye on him, and sometimes she was looking through him to his mother, trapped in Guangyun Palace.

The old lady was very forgetful, always repeating herself, but it wasn't annoying. This was probably because she never complained, only reminisced about good things. It was like the way spring flowers always followed the same pattern, blooming just the same year after year, but no one would get tired of them.

She was clearly an old mortal woman without the strength to truss a chicken, but in her little garden, she could create a paradise like the inside of a mustard seed or an illusion, able to ease worries and cure all poisons. When he was little, Zhou Ying had been very curious—when people got old, would they all harden into a shell like this? Too bad he wouldn't live long enough to get old.

But later he no longer regretted that, because he found that people had hundreds upon thousands of ways of growing old—many

people grew old and became crafty, became deceitful, became scourges.

Zhou Ying's expression changed several times. This time, he didn't bicker with the Riverward.

He hadn't been to see her in five years, even having Bai Ling write the present list for holidays in his place; he had coldly become an ingrate, even skipping the old lady's eightieth birthday. In fact, Zhou Ying didn't dare to go, but he couldn't reveal that in front of the little brat.

Under the attention of the shed skin masters, amid the graveyard of the surging sea, this demon who had single-handedly stirred up Xuanyin's thirty-six peaks until the mountains were sealed concentrated his thoughts and dispelled his preoccupations, closing his eyes in meditation.

The last thought to slip over his spirit was a feeble notion. He thought: What if... what if after I'm done here, I go see her?

But the aftereffects of a shed skin high elder going mad couldn't be calmed so quickly.

The Dignitary of Rule Lin Zongyi's first order was to seal the mountains. It came just as Xi Ping's mind was split in two, half tied up with shizun, half hung up on san-ge, hard pressed from both sides. At first, he didn't realize what Elder Lin's intention was.

Until someone stopped Lin Chi.

"Zisheng, don't wander around," another ascended spirit surnamed Lin, a sword cultivator, quietly said to Lin Chi. "Hurry back to Moon Plated Peak and seal the mountain."

Only then did Lin Chi realize with a start that something was wrong.

Right now, apart from a few individuals who, like him, couldn't read the atmosphere, all the ascended spirit peak masters gathered near the Principal Peak had now separated into two distinct parties. One party consisted of those whose surname was Zhao, the other of those whose surname wasn't Zhao.

Nominally, the Xuanyin Mountains had "thirty-six peaks," but in reality this was an approximation. Not every mountaintop had a master. There were also positions that were empty after the original peak master had passed away, waiting to be allotted to a new ascended spirit. Apart from that, there were still three or four people of the Li clan's lineage who always kept their peaks sealed; normally, unless there was a summons by the high elders, they wouldn't go out to get in on the fun. Excluding these, as well as those who happened to be in seclusion right now, there were around twenty ascended spirit peak masters who had come over.

All nine of the Zhao family peak masters were present; the two parties were practically evenly matched—the Zhaos were obviously more highly strung, while the other party had people of Lin Chi's ilk, who didn't know what was going on, mixed in.

Xi Ping glanced at the field along with Lin Chi, thinking that if the proportions of inner sect peak masters were like this, then the proportions of the disciples under them would be about the same, and the same for the walkers in the mortal world in the outer sect.

Was there... going to be a mutiny?

"Peak Master Lin," Xi Ping dryly advised amid the atmosphere thick with the promise of battle, "I think you should stay away from them."

There was no need for him to give this advice. Without another word, Lin Chi ran away without so much as a look back. "Are they really going to fight with members of their own sect?"

Xi Ping was silent for a moment. “All inner sect peak masters have their dignity. They won’t necessarily come to blows after a single disagreement. There may be a deadlock for a few days. But..”

“What?” said Lin Chi.

Xi Ping slowly said, “I’m afraid that the Dignitary of Rule may have sealed the mountains too late.”

He tried to probe as far outward as possible with his consciousness, calling his shizun in his mind.

Shifu, how are you?

The Dignitary of Fate has gone to the East Sea. If the shard of Zhaoting you’ve left behind really is in my body, have him bring it back. Maybe Master Lin can think of a way to repair it.

You look after yourself. You can’t even keep accounts right, how can you have attention to spare to fret so much? Don’t pay attention to them, and don’t pay attention to me, either, okay?

But the demon seal was already back in place and the fetters were upon him. He had no way to make shifu hear him.

Xi Ping’s crow’s mouth had uttered a prophecy—when Zhao Yin had thrown off the Vitex Branch and flown toward the Latent Cultivation Temple, there had already been Zhao peak masters stealthily sending out the news.

Xuanyin Mountain’s Heavenly Questions connected the inner and outer sects and fell under the protection of the great mountain array; you could mention the true name on an ascended spirit or shed skin’s spiritual image without being noticed. The great mountain

array was no one's private property; according to regulations, a Heavenly Question could only be used for official business.

But Xuanyin's big families all had private Heavenly Questions and could contact their forebears in the inner sect to get word as soon as something happened.

The Zhao family's Heavenly Question instantly spread through Xuanyin's inner and outer sects. Like wild wind and driving rain, it caused chaos in the human world.

Pang Jian had said he was going to the Marquis Manor to wish the old lady a happy birthday, but he didn't make it. He was buried under news coming in from Heaven's Design Pavilion branches all over the country.

"A wind with no origin flew out of Xuanyin Mountain's Latent Cultivation Temple. While passing through Lanchuan, it rang the evil-expelling bells."

"When the wind passed Canglang, it sent stones flying and rang the evil-expelling bells."

"Ning'an is experiencing torrential rains. There are abnormalities in the spiritual energy of the Ning'an Zhao clan. They have shut their doors and won't come out."

"Zhao Wei, Zhao Qishan, and others of Guzhou's north branch have stolen immortal tools and are slaughtering fellow sect members!"

The incident had taken place behind a screen, but the disaster was spreading throughout the country.

Once again, Guzhou was the first to see upheaval, the same as five years ago. This damn place must have been cursed.

In the North Guzhou branch of Heaven's Design Pavilion, two half-immortals surnamed Zhao had "gone mad" without warning, stealing what was entrusted to their care, moving a large quantity of immortal tools without authorization. Of the walkers in the mortal world who had been guarding the storehouse that day and came first to assist when they heard the noise, one was dead and another gravely injured.

Evil cultivators were all desperate criminals. The walkers in the mortal world contended against them in wits and strength year in and year out; colleagues and comrades-in-arms trusted each other to fight back-to-back and guard each other's lives. Attacking a fellow sect member could be called deranged.

When the commander of the North Guzhou branch received the news, he flew into a rage and issued warrants for their arrest—dead or alive.

Karma beasts followed residual spiritual energy to chase down the Zhao family branch in Guzhou. The Zhao family tree was big and deep-rooted; apart from the main family in Jinping, its kinsmen were spread throughout Great Wan. Nearly each province had a branch of the Zhao family; such was their power. The commander of the north branch, out of his mind with anger, wanted to launch a search at once; how could the Guzhou Zhao family with their lofty aspirations be willing to comply with this? The two sides came to blows at once. Immortal tools and downgraded immortal tools flew wildly, unexpectedly exposing the unregistered cultivators that the Guzhou Zhao family had been supporting in private.

If these weren't evil cultivators, then who was!?

North Guzhou requested support from other branches of Heaven's Design Pavilion, but this matter was difficult to handle everywhere. There were too many Zhaos among the walkers in the mortal world.

At this clash in Guzhou, all the other branches, whether there was anything the matter or not, began to split apart and stretch taut.

Just as Pang Jian was facing this pressure, on the night of the tenth day of the seventh month, a gale blew into Jinping City.

Rickshaws carrying people ran along Jinping City's newly constructed carriage roads. The rickshaw pullers, facing into the wind, were so tired they panted for breath like oxen; their drunken pleasure-seeking customers were slapped by the furious evil wind and opened their eyes in confusion.

In Heaven's Design Pavilion's head office, the calendar block wavered wildly between the states of "clear" and "windy." The dozing karma beasts all stood up with their fur bristling.

Before Pang Jian could work out precisely what the trouble was in Guzhou, he heard that the Suling Heaven's Design Pavilion branch couldn't be contacted—the commander of the Suling Heaven's Design Pavilion branch was related to the Zhao family by marriage!

The wild wind that had reached Jinping swept over Heaven's Design Pavilion's head office. The bronze evil-expelling bells on the eaves rang with a crash.

Pang Jian's heart tensed, but the evil-expelling bells only rang once. Then the tongueless bronze bells seemed to hesitate over whether to ring or not, only shaking with a rustle, like ominous chatter.

"General commander!"

A blue-clothed walker in the mortal world flew straight into the courtyard. "The Heart Tower's Captain Zhao has disappeared!"

Pang Jian said, "Didn't I tell all of you to keep an eye on him?"

“Yes, general commander,” said the blue-clotheser, “but he had an unregistered immortal tool from the inner sect..”

Pang Jian waved a hand and interrupted him. There was no time for explanations. “The Azure Dragon Towers cannot go unattended. Go to the Yongning Marquis Manor and call Xi Yue, tell him to go oversee the Azure Dragon Heart Tower for me. Report to the court and find some brothers at once to enter the palace and protect His Majesty. Surround Jinping’s Zhao family, activate all the city defense arrays in Jinping. Call everyone from the Kaiming Department you can get to come assist, and also...”

“Yes, general commander?”

Pang Jian deliberated for a moment, then said grimly, “Send a letter to Prince... send a letter to Bai Ling. No matter what that bunch of Luwu shit-stirrers are doing, have them suspend it and return to calm the situation!”

The walker in the mortal world gave an affirmative and left.

Pang Jian took a deep breath and took from his mustard seed a box of established foundation pills and his protective talisman—the voucher Zhi Xiu had written for him when he had entered Heaven’s Design Pavilion. He used this action to calm himself down, then put the things away.

General Commander Pang hadn’t spent a hundred years in Heaven’s Design Pavilion for nothing. Apart from the news that came in on the surface, he had in fact also received two horrifying secret letters; he didn’t know whether they were true or false.

“There is a rumor that the inner sect has been sealed; the circumstances of this are unknown.”

“There is word that the Dignitary of Rites High Elder has passed away!”

A shed skin elder passing away—if that were true... if that were true...

Pang Jian shuddered. In the thousands of years since Great Wan’s spiritual mountains had formed and the nation had been founded, this was unheard of.

Hadn’t the matter in the East Sea been put down five years ago?

When Xi Yue received the order, he was sitting alone in the gate house of the Marquis Manor.

The old lady’s birthday feast had broken up, and all the guests had taken their leave. Apart from the opera still being sung in the rear courtyard, the manor had quieted down. Xi Yue had sent the servant standing watch at the gate house to rest and was reading a book of arrays by lamplight; halfway through the night, he hadn’t turned a single page, and he had curled a corner of the page into garlic skin.

When he sensed that someone was approaching flying a sword, Xi Yue abruptly raised his head. Before joy could appear on his face, he got a clear look at the newcomer’s sapphire robe, and the look in his eyes dimmed.

After hearing the blue-clotheser’s message, Xi Yue, as usual, didn’t say a word, only gave a calm and collected nod. Then he took out a handful of spiritual stones and quickly laid a circle of arrays inside and outside of the Marquis Manor. But when he came to lay arrays at the side door, he saw the Marquis standing there alone.

The Marquis of Yongning’s hair was grey, but his back was still upright. His glorious youth had passed, but his charm still remained. The night wind violently whipped his wide sleeves around. He had

his head raised, looking toward the top of the wall over the side door.

Xi Yue walked over and bowed to the Marquis.

The Marquis of Yongning didn't turn his head. Without preamble, he said, "Every time your useless big brother came back in the middle of the night after fooling around, he would only dare to use the side door. I'd be waiting here with servants to catch him. I got him every time...but not today. I'm afraid he won't be coming."

Xi Yue's long brows shook slightly. His calm expression nearly faltered.

"You have something to do, right?" The Marquis turned—he only seemed a touch elderly when he moved, his movements not as firm as before. He patted Xi Yue on the shoulder. "Go on...go on. I was thinking that this evil wind doesn't smell right. Take care of yourself, send word home when you're through to let us know you're safe, okay? Don't grow up to be like that scoundrel..."

Xi Yue was just about to say something when he suddenly sensed a peculiar spiritual energy fluctuation.

The half-puppet's sustenance was spiritual stones; he was far more sensitive to spiritual energy than humans...or even ordinary cultivators. He abruptly raised his head and saw that all the spiritual energy in Jinping City was rapidly converging on a single place—Guangyun Palace!

Xi Yue didn't have time to say anything more. He unloaded his mustard seed, pushed the downgraded immortal tools he had collected over the years toward the Marquis all at once, and hurried toward the convergence of spiritual energy, but he was cut off midway by Pang Jian.

Pang Jian grabbed the half-puppet one-handed by the back of the neck, easily lifting this body that was one third lighter than a mortal with the same physique. He pushed him in the direction of the Heart Tower. “I told you to go oversee the Azure Dragon Towers. Don’t come this way, there’s someone violating the rules and establishing a foundation in the mortal world!”

There was a pop as the wild wind shattered a gas lamp. Heavy clouds appeared above Guangyun Palace, with lightning faintly flicking through them.

Zhao Yu, the captain of the Azure Dragon Heart Tower, was inside the imperial treasury in Guangyun Palace. He had put the final fragment of the Mount Fu Mirage Drawing in place—the current emperor was restrained and frugal; his only hobby was collecting ornaments and ancient artworks. When the previous emperor had been living, he hadn’t dared to, but since succeeding to the throne he had relaxed slightly, and the flatterers all knew about it and frequently hunted high and low for him. This painting fragment was one of the items from Jingzhou’s tribute for this year.

To mortal eyes, this was only an antique worth a bit of money. After admiring it a few times, Zhou Huan had tossed it into the imperial treasury. Though it would have been easy for Zhao Yu to infiltrate the emperor’s treasury, he had never dared to act—Prince Zhuang knew that he was looking for this painting.

Fortunately, the heavens were on his side; Prince Zhuang hadn’t returned to the capital.

Zhao Yu took a deep breath and used his spiritual energy to assemble the torn up pieces. When the spiritual energy swept over the thousand-year-old ancient painting, the light and shadow drawn in it began to flow. On misty Mount Fu, monstrous shadows flickered. The whole painting “came alive”; he had taken possession of this master’s vital weapon. Zhao Yu took several deep breaths,

took out the established foundation pill he had prepared, and swallowed it.

He couldn't delay any longer. Word had come from the inner sect that the Zhao family's sky—the Dignitary of Rites High Elder—had fallen. This would be the whole Zhao clan's great tribulation. The old forebears had told them to prepare for this. Anyone who could establish a foundation should do so and not stint on the spiritual stones they normally kept hidden.

There were many downgraded immortal tools in the palace, and a great deal of blue jade in the emperor's treasury, which Zhao Yu absorbed in one gulp. He didn't even spare the elixirs and medicinal herbs that the nobles used for keeping in good health.

His consciousness became unprecedentedly fierce. It swept out from Guangyun Palace. Heaven's Design Pavilion's blue-clothed half-immortals, just arriving, all toppled off their swords as soon as they encountered him. For a time, Zhao Yu had the impression that the whole human world was only a painting, and he was suspended high above the canvas and could have complete power over it as soon as he took up his brush!

Jinping...

The next moment, he quickly located the emperor Zhou Huan in the "painting."

With a single thought, the established foundation cultivator had already cheated his way beside the new emperor, who had been startled awake by the wild wind!

Just then, an arrow that seemed to be carrying flames pierced Zhao Yu's outstretched hand. The arrow passed by the mortal emperor, leaving the stupefied Zhou Huan unharmed.

Pang Jian gave a long whistle. Several blue-clothesers landed around Zhao Yu, closely surrounding him.

Zhao Yu swung his hand slightly, and the palm that had been pierced by the Barrier Dispeller Bow healed on its own. “General commander.”

“Zhao Yu.” First Pang Jian protected the mortals with a mustard seed, then turned to his former colleague with his hands behind his back. “You joined Heaven’s Design Pavilion just after I did. We were both taught by Elder Su himself and can be considered veterans now. Not having received an invitation, you have established a foundation in the mortal world without authorization and nearly injured a mortal. That is a crime.”

Zhao Yu smiled. “Lord Pang, don’t play dumb. I know you’re very canny. Don’t you know what has happened in the inner sect? What has happened to the Zhao clan all over the country?”

Pang Jian said, “What does that have to do with you? Your Zhao family’s kinsmen and relations by marriage are everywhere. Never mind Guzhou—not even the Ning’an Zhao family can lay a claim to you through nine degrees of kinship. Have you gone mad?”

Having heard this, Zhao Yu only laughed. “What do you know?”

This Pang Jian was only a carefree watchdog whose parents had been bumpkins from some unknown mountain village, nothing you would find in a genealogical record or on an ancestral tomb. His whole life, his field of vision had been confined to the mortal world. He was the same as that Su Zhun, nominally part of Xuanyin’s outer sect, but in reality unable to even find the door to the immortal mountains.

The mushroom that grows in the morning doesn’t know the passage of time. He couldn’t understand what a “shed skin” meant to a

family.

“It is pointless to speak further.” Zhao Yu shook his head. “I know you have many tricks and have gone above your grade to kill an established foundation more than once. Come and give it a try.”

No sooner had he spoken than the two of them were already somewhere else. Pang Jian dropped into the earth without warning and emerged where Zhao Yu had just been standing. Zhao Yu had known what he would do. As soon as Pang Jian showed his head, his spiritual sense was touched; he felt as if everything around him had been gently twisted by an invisible hand. An abyss appeared behind the emperor, whom he had shielded with his mustard seed. Alarm appeared on Zhou Huan’s face. He was about to fall.

In the space of a breath, Pang Jian located Zhao Yu, but all the talismans he tossed out were dispelled in midair one after another by Zhao Yu.

The other blue-clothesers were quite well-coordinated. Some went to protect Zhou Huan, and some cooperated with Pang Jian. But presently the mountains and mists of the Mount Fu Mirage Drawing emerged around them, and Zhao Yu easily enclosed them all in the painting.

All the established foundations they had gone above their grade to kill before had been evil cultivators. Despite having high cultivation and their own magic powers, their resources were limited, after all, unable to match up to Heaven’s Design Pavilion, which had a yearly supply of weapons from Moon Plated Peak. But this didn’t apply to Zhao Yu. After standing shoulder to shoulder to defend the Azure Dragon Towers for a hundred years, the walkers in the mortal world knew each other’s cultivation and tricks better than they knew their own; when they fought, it was simply like the left hand wrestling with the right hand—and the left hand had just taken a strengthening pill!

At the same time, all of Heaven's Design Pavilion's branches activated their local city defense inscriptions. News of the Zhao clan's mutiny floated toward the capital city like snowflakes; in Xuanyin's inner sect, which was sealed up tight, the two forces at the Principal Peak had temporarily been fairly calm when Lin Chi had seen them before. He returned to Moon Plated Peak and hid for a day, then finally couldn't resist Xi Ping's repeated urgings anymore and quietly snuck out. He had just flown up behind Flying Jade Peak by a detour when a huge sound came from the Principal Peak. The blue luan's feather's nearly fell off from fright.

After a two-day standoff, they had begun to fight after all.

CHAPTER 90 - Traveler Abroad (7)

The chaos was like flying sparks, exploding throughout the country. Three major provincial seats fell out of contact one after another. The Guzhou Heaven's Design Pavilion and the local Zhao family branch fought heedlessly, triggering a local earthquake that warped a section of track between Guzhou and the capital, stopping all the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragons loaded with people or goods on their way. The summer heat of the south, which had yet to fade, quickly melted the ice; stinking sea fish covered the ground, and the fish sellers raged without daring to speak.

Soon, even Yuzhou by the border was affected. The part of Xi Ping's consciousness that was with Xu Rucheng "saw" it. Spiritual energy scattered everywhere as the half-immortals began to fight; the arrays surrounding the Moon Plated Gold gold smelters all encountered interference, and countless factories were forced to stop work. The people, like insects smelling the soil before a storm, all found somewhere to hide. The fishing boats and steamships on the Xia River all vanished overnight.

"Are all these Zhaos deranged?" Xi Ping had seen the madness inside the sect and outside of it. "Are you going to tell me that all the ones who joined the inner sect were using Zhao Yin's Way of the Heart, so the whole family is committing suicide because his heart broke?"

"In fact, the majority of them were." Lin Chi stabilized the blue luan and sighed. "That's why there are comparatively more ascended spirits from the Zhao clan."

Xi Ping: "Tsk."

No wonder. Mass-produced factory goods.

Lin Chi took another glance at the ascended spirit battlefield near the Principal Peak. He said, “The Dignitary of Code Elder Li Fengshan’s Way of the Heart didn’t shatter. The elder is still living, only nominally ‘in seclusion’, confined for a thousand years. But on that account, the Li clan, as well as the Zhang, Qi, Wu, and Tang families attached to the Li clan, all collapsed. The Dignitary of Rites Elder passing away is even more serious. We can’t know at present why Elder Zhao went mad and his Way of the Heart burst, but even after his death, the remnants of his soul were dispelled by the Bell of Tribulation. That isn’t very glorious, after all. They’re afraid.”

Xi Ping said, “Afraid of what? The Crown Pr... the emperor’s mother is named Zhang, isn’t she, but it didn’t keep her from becoming the Dowager Empress. The previous emperor was so fierce, but even he didn’t cut down just anyone.”

Lin Chi paused. “Though it isn’t stated in writing, the sect has tacitly agreed that since then, the descendants of those five families will no longer take part in Xuanyin’s Grand Selection. They’ve come to the end of the road at sunset.”

Xi Ping gave a laugh when he heard this. “Peak Master Lin, not being allowed to cultivate is the same as ‘coming to the end of the road at sunset’? So it would seem that all of you immortals know that at the feet of the immortal mountains, being human is no better than being a dog? Here I thought you all thought pretty highly of yourselves.”

Lin Chi never disputed with people. He only said, “Alas, you’re right.”

Xi Ping had failed to pick a fight, but they were already near Flying Jade Peak. While he knew perfectly well that shifu couldn’t hear him, he still shut up, swallowing all his radicalism and sarcasm. Holding his breath, he turned to go scratch at his san-ge’s spirit.

Zhou Ying had just received Bai Ling's message when he heard Xi Ping say, "San-ge, there are too many Zhaos in Heaven's Design Pavilion. Can't you bury your kills?"

"Within their capacity to provide support, the Kaiming Department can obey Pang Wenchang's orders, but don't move the Luwu." Zhou Ying, temporarily trapped in the East Sea by the shed skin consciousnesses, evenly responded to both of them at the same time. He said, "The Zhao family has come to a dead end. It's hard to guarantee that they won't request foreign aid. Shu, Li, and Chu are three wolves watching from the sidelines, just waiting to come lap up the leftovers. I'm not doing this for their benefit."

Xi Ping froze, suddenly realizing that san-ge had perhaps anticipated this situation.

Zhou Ying asked Bai Ling, "Pang Jian's Way of the Heart and spiritual bones are all complete, and his natural endowments are one in a million—is he still unwilling to establish a foundation? Is he that poor?"

In Guangyun Palace, Pang Jian said, "Damn it."

In a flash, he shielded the emperor, and a monstrous claw reaching out from the Mirage Drawing nearly tore a hole in his chest. A karma beast emerged from the subtle embroidery on the front of his blue robes. It opened its mouth and roared, and the monstrous claw only cut a hole in Pang Jian's outer robe. The karma beast vanished, and the "monstrous claw" turned into a flabby human hand—Pang Jian's Way of the Heart was "barrier dispelling"; he already knew that the monsters in the Mount Fu Mirage Drawing were all mortals Zhao Yu had snatched up at random, so he had been increasingly overcautious since the fight had begun. He would have been better off if he hadn't seen!

Zhao Yu understood him too well.

“General commander!”

At a critical moment, a walker in the mortal world tossed a mustard seed to him. Pang Jian remembered that this child was named Zhou Xi; it was said that he was... what, Zhou Ying’s little brother, with the same father. It was fucking unbelievable.

Pang Jian said, “What’s this?”

“There are spiritual stones in the mustard seed, and established foundation pills!” Zhou Xi hauled his terrified big brother the emperor away and called to Pang Jian, “The Zhao family wants to take advantage of their numbers to seize Great Wan before the immortal mountains can respond, force the immortal mountains to come to terms! General Commander Pang, everyone says you’re just a step away from establishing a foundation. A time of emergency means you can act without authorization. Stop hesitating!”

“A time of emergency means you can act without authorization.” Pang Jian spat these words out and showed his snow-white teeth in a sneer. He tossed back the mustard seed. “Little brat, that’s just what the mutinying Zhaos all think.”

No sooner had he spoken than the Mount Fu Mirage Drawing enshrouded them. An established foundation cultivator’s talismans, obviously a level higher, came toward him head on like snowflakes. Arrays rose one after another on all sides, swapping with matchless speed between reality and illusion. Zhao Yu crushed Heaven’s Design Pavilion’s token. His vital weapon, the Panguan Brush, shot out without warning, pointed at Pang Jian’s back.

Like a leopard, Pang Jian crouched down and nimbly dodged. Then, he took advantage of the instant the painting swapped truth and

falsehood to escape it. Before he hit the ground, using his body as a bow, he shot an arrow!

With an astral wind coming at him head-on, Zhao Yu gave an angry shout. Relying on his cultivation level, he dispelled the arrow by force.

“Before, I couldn’t match up to you,” Zhao Yu said with a cold laugh. At this moment, he felt that the ancient Mount Fu Mirage Drawing had completely merged with his spiritual foundation. The vast ancient inheritance inside it washed down his meridians, which had widened a hundredfold. “But one person’s strength can defeat ten people’s skills!”

“Fine, you’re a man of integrity.” Far away, beneath the Resurrection Vortex, Zhou Ying directed a taunt at Jinping’s most steadfast protector.

At the same time, Bai Ling’s scrupulously exact handwriting suddenly flashed before Pang Jian’s eyes. Bai Ling wrote: *The Kaiming Department will cooperate however it can, but the borders are insecure, and the Luwu cannot get away. We will send General Commander Pang another helper. Receive him and put him to good use.*

A helper— who?

Pang Jian didn’t know what he meant at first. He thought, If Zhou Ying dares to say the “helper” is his dim-witted little brother Zhou Xi, when I get through with this, I’ll go knock down his manor!

Then he saw the rapidly approaching Zhao Yu stop less than half a chi from him as if a freezing spell had been cast on him. Suddenly, he no longer moved.

For a moment, Zhao Yu's eyeballs seemed to get stuck. Then they began to move once more. He smiled at Pang Jian.

Pang Jian: "..."

What was wrong with him?

At the center of Zhao Yu's brow, the Mount Fu Mirage Drawing flashed. The demons and monsters, as well as the fog and the fake mountains, all disappeared. The palace maids and eunuchs that Zhao Yu had snatched up fell unconscious all over the floor. Because Pang Jian had been unwilling to use force in fighting back, these mortals were all completely uninjured.

A corner of the wretched drawing peeled off and turned into a paperman when it landed. The paperman bowed urbanely toward Pang Jian, then disappeared between Zhao Yu's brows along with the drawing.

Zhao Yu became calm and composed. With perfect etiquette, he said to Zhou Huan, "This subject is guilty of frightening His Majesty."

Having said this, before His Majesty could respond, a stream of thin smoke came from his palm, knocking His Majesty down without explanation.

Only then did Pang Jian, who was staring dumbfounded, come back to himself. "You're... Bai Ling?"

"Zhao Yu" smiled at him. "Not exactly. I am still Zhao Yu. But earlier, I didn't look closely when I established my foundation. The vital weapon I incorporated had a substitute paperman mixed into it, and I inadvertently fused that paperman with my spiritual foundation."

He was actually still using Zhao Yu's identity and tone to speak!

This scene was beyond description. The whole crowd of walkers in the mortal world collectively broke out in gooseflesh.

Bai Ling's appearance was gaunt and upright—upright as in honorable. When he wasn't speaking, he hardly had any sense of presence. Even his handwriting was somewhat more solemn than usual. He exuded austerity, an absence of selfish desire.

This was Pang Jian's first time finding that as soon as he swapped that extremely ascetic face for a different one, that deeply concealed, peculiar evil air in Bai Ling's bearing and manner was revealed... It was chillingly demonic!

Pang Jian calmed himself down. "What vital weapon?"

"Zhao Yu" said, smiling, "The Way of the Heart I have been gathering was in a weapon known as the Mount Fu Mirage Drawing. Six years ago, while investigating the case of the sleep paralysis imps, I came to see His Third Highness. His Highness treated me as a friend from the first. He bestowed a painting fragment upon me on the spot. Now I have borrowed the final painting fragment from the Jingzhou tribute, putting it all together."

Pang Jian was disbelieving. "Zhou Ying pulled such a big trick back then, and Zhao Yu didn't... wait... you didn't know? Damn it, my tongue is all tied up in knots. What the hell are you supposed to be, anyway?"

"I am the established foundation cultivator Zhao Yu, who takes his orders from a paperman," "Zhao Yu" answered evenly. "Nothing was done to the painting fragment from six years ago. For one thing, His Highness was still a mortal then, and Bai Ling had yet to establish a foundation. Second, it was a chance encounter between strangers; of course I had to take precautions. The paperman was stuck to the final painting fragment. I spent nearly sixty years

searching for fragments of that ancient painting; the matter wasn't urgent. Since His Highness knew about the Way of the Heart I was seeking, with him in the way, naturally I wouldn't act rashly. Unless it was perfectly safe or my hand was forced, I wouldn't come here to take it. Taking without asking, and from the imperial palace at that—naturally I was both happy and guilty when I saw the ancient painting come together and neglected to take a close look at it. That can be excused from the standpoint of emotion, no? Evidently it is true that for all tasks, the last bit is the hardest to complete.”

The top of Pang Jian's skull rattled as he listened to this. He gasped. “Don't say that it was your prince who arranged for that painting to come to the palace.”

Zhao Yu smiled without answering; since he had been told not to say it, he wasn't going to say it.

Pang Jian: “...”

Selling the painting to a flatterer to make money under false pretenses and having it delivered to the palace, enticing Zhao Yu to come to the imperial treasury to steal it... even the spiritual stones Zhao Yu had spent to establish his foundation had come at his older brother's expense!

However you figured it, Zhou Ying had been taking advantage at both ends!

No, the fact that he had started burying his pieces so long ago showed that Zhou Ying had expected this upheaval.

When a great family revolted, there would be internal strife in Heaven's Design Pavilion; they would be at a loose end. Reaching an impasse, they would have no choice but to request help from the independent Kaiming Department; the Kaiming Department would have a chance to expand!

Pang Jian remembered a type of oil poplar in the Land of Turmoil. The stronger a wildfire, the more obvious its fire resistant superiority became. While the plants around it were in tatters, it could take the opportunity to expand. It was said that sometimes the tree would even attract lightning to come set fire to the forest. With just one spark, it could sooner or later spread over a whole mountain!

Pang Jian said, “Zhou Ying, are you even human?!”

When would heaven open its eyes and send a bolt of lightning to take care of this great calamity? He was willing to be a vegetarian for ten years—he would even give up the Phoenix’s Perch Pavilion’s duck!

“I will certainly pass that on for you, general commander, if I have the chance.” Saying so, Zhao Yu raised his head. This established foundation body, which had merged a substitute paperman with its spiritual foundation, earnestly perused its memories, then said with a sigh, “Alas, as is to be expected, my family is rigidly stratified. Currently, the branch families everywhere will follow the directions of the main family in Jinping. No wonder I was in such a rush to establish a foundation.”

Pang Jian’s head ached. “Bai-xiong... no, Paper-xiong, have a heart, can’t you speak more normally?”

“As you command.” The paperman-controlled Zhao Yu shook his sleeve, and a Heavenly Question flew out of his clothes. “Then I will ask for everyone’s cooperation in playing dead. I’ll say that Jinping has already been taken. Let’s see what secrets this deep-rooted famous family has, and how it is any different from some nobodies on the point of death.”

The city of Jinping was mysteriously sealed.

The wild wind swept by, smashed the glass of around ten gas lamps on both sides of the Lingyang River, broke a few plaques that hadn't been hung up properly, and left Jinping City completely unharmed as it headed toward the East Sea.

Zhou Ying had not only cut down the tree, he had also laid a net under the tree, waiting to catch the fleeing monkeys and all the wealth they had accumulated over many years in one fell swoop.

Without showing his face, he had the Zhaos coming and going.

Xi Ping looked on, feeling that the Impassable Sea's false master had been nameless and faceless, wrapped in mystery, but in fact he had only been a glutton who couldn't fill himself up in eight hundred years; his "premature birth" had made a big commotion, but he'd croaked before even breaking the surface of the water. The Impassable Sea's true master had his name attached to the Xuanyin Mountains and could collect spiritual stones, elixirs, and immortal tools from Xuanyin at regular intervals; he had quietly put down roots in the human world.

Fortunately... fortunately san-ge was human, not a demon.

Just then, Rosy Cloud Peak's Peak Master Wen Fei landed at the foot of Flying Jade Peak. Xi Ping collected his consciousness and waited to hear this medicine-making expert's brilliant views.

Wen Fei glanced indifferently at the fight on the Principal Peak. His eyes didn't pause there. He opened his fan and quickly swept a line of writing onto the foot of the snow-capped mountain: *Just a trivial matter among ascended spirits. Let them fight it out. There is no need for you to exert yourself. Mind your own business.*

Xi Ping said, Peak Master Wen is right!

His wave of the fan raised thin snow on the mountain, as if someone had sighed.

Wen Fei continued to wield his fan: *Zhi Jingzhai, I'm warning you, I've been keeping an eye on the mists of Flying Jade Peak, and there are signs of burnout. If you struggle again, I'd like to see whether you reach a shed skin first or die first. Isn't Zhaoting your vital weapon? Where did you put it? You aren't dead yet, can't you pick up the shards of your sword?!*

Xi Ping said, What?!

But Wen Fei was standing too close now. Lin Chi couldn't hear it when Xi Ping spoke.

Xi Ping would have loved to climb out of the reincarnation wood and kick Peak Master Wen down the cliff—you can't even talk, and you're keeping me from talking by standing there. All you can do is get in the way!

Lin Chi looked up at Flying Jade Peak and said to Wen Fei, "Have you looked through your stock of pills?"

Wen Fei nodded helplessly. *It's no use. These sword cultivators are like beasts of burden. They have nothing to do with talismans, arrays, inscriptions, elixirs, or tools. Any pill is only an aid for them. Moreover, the boundary he's reached isn't one I can comprehend. I think we'll have to rely on you if we want to save him.*

"Zhaoting shattered for a reason. He stepped over a major boundary in the space of a breath, so the body of the sword could no longer sustain his sword aura. Even if we took all the shards and restored the sword to its original form, I'm afraid it would break again if he picked it up... Otherwise, I don't think General Zhi would have gone so far as to abandon Zhaoting and enter seclusion on his own despite getting only half the results for twice the effort."

Wen Fei shook his fan: *So in your opinion, would it help to knock him down a level?*

Xi Ping, forced to keep his mouth shut, felt the roots of his teeth begin to itch. Bullshit, what was this rotten mute thinking?!

Lin Chi said, “Don’t joke.”

Careful, his disciple is listening.

Wen Fei considered at length, then used his fan to say: *I remember now. I heard that before Sanyue’s Xiuluo sword was repaired, it was also only an incomplete broken sword. The sword aura of that ancient god’s sword was extremely aggressive, nothing that Xiang Zhao could be a match for. But precisely because the sword was incomplete, there was latitude for Xiang Zhao to refine it into his own vital weapon, and the man and the sword made do together after that, so Zhi Jingzhai and Zhaoting will certainly be able to! You’re right, Zhaoting shattered for a reason. It’s just as well it’s missing a piece—perhaps he’ll be able to refine it anew!*

Seeing these words, the bleak misery resurged on Lin Chi’s face. “It isn’t Zhaoting that’s the problem, it’s me. I’m only a by-the-book..”

Wen Fei saw that he had accidentally caused Lin Chi to cast himself into despair and hastily tried to backtrack: *No, that’s not what I meant. Hey, right, I heard that back then, when that...great master repaired Xiuluo, she used a divine tool to forge the sword.*

Lin Chi said, “The Unbound⁶³ Furnace.”

Wen Fei wrote: *Right, right, where is that thing?*

Lin Chi was silent for a moment, then nodded and said, “The Unbound Furnace was hers. After she... left, it fell into the hands of Southern He’s Lancang Sword Sect. After Lancang was destroyed, Dongheng took the Unbound Furnace away on the basis that it had originally belonged to Western Chu. It must be at Sanyue now.”

Wen Fei wrote, *I heard that that divine tool can make you one with heaven, let you perceive the Way beyond the highest heavens. Do you think there’s any hope in using it to repair Zhaoting?*

Xi Ping’s ears pricked back up.

Lin Chi shook his head. “I... I don’t know, I’m not worthy of using the Unbound Furnace...”

Wen Fei wrote, *If you aren’t worthy, then is that bunch of toads lusting after swan meat at Sanyue, who would force a woman into marriage, worthy?*

Xi Ping said, Wen-shishu is right!

His consciousness impatiently ran off, half back to Tao County, half to Zhou Ying. “San-ge, I need a favor!”

For a dazed moment, it was as if he had returned to that time when he had gotten up to mischief in Demon Country, wasted all his spiritual stones, and written a letter bemoaning his poverty and asking for money.

San-ge would take him home, and with some work, he would be able to “write letters” to his old grandmother again, would be able to see the all seasons garden at the Marquis Manor whenever he wanted.

For some reason, though the Yongning Marquis Manor was clearly only a small compound in the mortal world without divine beings or

divine instruments inside it, though it couldn't rescue him from the Impassable Sea or let him shed his skin and become a god overnight, without fear of the Bell of Tribulation or the Silver Moon, it could still give him an unusual sense of confidence in himself.

As though so long as his soul was placed there, there would be no mountain he couldn't climb, no place he couldn't go.

If only he wanted it, Dongheng's Sanyue's Unbound Furnace could also be his.

CHAPTER 91 - Traveler Abroad (8)

Zhou Ying very patiently finished listening to Xi Ping, then asked with a slightly peculiar expression, “When you were in Western Chu’s Tao County, did you see the Silver Moon with your own eyes?”

“I did,” said Xi Ping, “don’t mention it. I nearly got caught and sent off by that opera singer.”

Zhou Ying: “...”

He couldn’t quite tell whether this brat had finally learned to avoid the name of a shed skin or whether he was purely being loose-tongued.

He had seen the might of the Silver Moon and brushed shoulders with Xuanwu, yet he still dared to think like this... Amazing.

Fair enough. It was just like when he had only recently opened his spiritual eyes and knew fewer talismans than the disciples at the Latent Cultivation Temple, yet had dared to steal an offering from the mouths of the demon host and engage in a battle of wits against the heart demon at the bottom of the Impassable Sea. Now, having narrowly escaped death, he was still fearless, daring to hang around the Xuanyin Mountains right in front of the shed skin elders who had nearly killed him.

Zhou Ying sighed toward the thin smoke in the Riverward. “No matter what, I never should have let you accept that selection card.”

Xi Ping thought, If I hadn’t accepted the selection card, I wouldn’t have had a chance to go to the southern mines, and I certainly never would have found the Impassable Sea. Who would have fished up your spiritual bones? You’d be dead by now.

So he calmly took this as san-ge praising him.

Xi Ping added, “I’ll ask Lin Chi to think of something to do for disguises. There’s no need for the junk his passel of nominal disciples turns out—the skins Xu Rucheng and the others wear can only fool common evil cultivators. They’ll be easily seen through if they meet a master.”

Zhou Ying frowned. “Since when are you so familiar with the Golden Hand?”

“Everyone loves me,” Xi Ping said flippantly. “Of course it’s because he wants the Unbound Furnace even more than I do. If not for the fact that he can’t keep up in a conversation, he might even want to go himself.”

In an insipid tone, Zhou Ying poured a bucket of cold water over him. “This is so you can repair your shifu’s broken sword and help him become a shed skin? A word of warning to you. While ascended spirits are called ‘people among the high heavens’, they’re still ‘people’ in the end. At the shed skin level... well. Your luck is unusually bad. Thus far, you’ve seen quite a few shed skins. Has any one of them seemed human to you? They are bound by the Way of Heaven. They have practically become a portion of heavenly law. The one who leaves seclusion in a hundred years won’t necessarily be the person you know. If your old acquaintance changes beyond recognition and you regret it, don’t come crying.”

Without so much as thinking about it, Xi Ping said, “What would I have to regret? That’s his business.”

Zhou Ying paused.

“When it comes to lecturing on doctrine, imparting knowledge, dispelling doubts, my shizun... well, while he’s not really any good at

teaching, he's still protecting me even though Zhaoting has shattered. Shifu hasn't let me down," Xi Ping said. "As for whether he wants to merge his way with heaven and earth, what stage he wants to reach, whether he decides to keep his eyes closed or never open his mouth in the future, that's for him to take up with his Way of the Heart. Shifu didn't interfere no matter what classics I departed from or what orthodoxies I rebelled against. Can I control what he does? Anyway, that's all a question for later. Haven't we come upon the chance of lifetime here? It would be pointless not to take it. San-ge, don't you think it would be a pity to waste this opportunity?"

Zhou Ying was trapped in the Resurrection Vortex. Hearing this scoundrel say "It would be pointless not to take it," his chest began to hurt immediately. "Scram."

"Great! Then it's settled, san-ge." Xi Ping took advantage of his weakness. "I'll go consult with Master Lin!"

Zhou Ying: "..."

Xi Ping had been gone for many years and had become like a dragon's reverse scale.⁶⁴ Even a gust of wind could incite the vicious dragon's fury. Apart from when he was ruminating over his revenge, Zhou Ying normally didn't think of him; it exhausted his strength.

So had he always been this annoying?

The thin smoke of the Riverward descended and became Xi Ping... looking somewhat younger than he did now.

Zhou Ying looked at him blankly for a moment, and the taboo-like, unmentionable memories came crashing back into place, then calmly unfolded before him, brushing away the smoke and dust.

Zhou Ying, who hadn't coughed since his spiritual bones had been restored, suddenly felt his throat begin to itch.

Yes, he remembered now—he really *had* been this obnoxious!

It was night. The Zhao clan that covered all of Great Wan had received the news that the city of Jinping had been sealed and thereupon had celebrated—with the Dragon Vein and the capital under control, they had the country!

Zhao Xi, commander of the Hongyin branch of Heaven's Design Pavilion, climbed the city gate tower and looked down from on high.

Hongyin was located at Great Wan's northern border, next door to the Hong River. Across the river was Northern Li. This area, along with Suling and Ning'an, had been one of the first three provinces to fall to the Zhao family.

At this time, all of Hongyin was temporarily under curfew; no one could go out as they pleased. They held the provincial yamen and the garrisons. In the eyes of half-immortals, mortals were all made of clay, to be molded at will. They would belong to whoever took the initiative first. At present, the arrays in all the counties and regions had been altered. There were fifty large cannons aimed at Hongyin. With just a thought, they could level it.

Zhao Xi was a half-immortal and cared nothing about Ways of the Heart. If he wanted to go higher in the future, he would think about it then—after all, if you put down your butcher's knife, you could become a Buddha. He didn't believe that the shed skins and ascended spirit peak masters in the inner sect could ignore the eight million mortals in Hongyin.

The stars and moon were hidden. A letter from Heaven's Design Pavilion's head office flew up in front of him. As soon as Zhao Xi

opened it, he saw that this was the handwriting of the main family's Captain Zhao Yu of the Azure Dragon Heart Tower. When he began to read, he saw that the first line was: *Pang has been taken. The capital is secure.*

Before the smile on Zhao Xi's face could take shape, he saw that his relative in Jinping had gone on to write calmly: *The inner sect has been sealed. The shed skin elders are in the human world. You must not lower your guard. You must prepare for all eventualities.*

Zhao Xi quickly inspected himself; indeed, he had been somewhat beside himself. He quickly calmed down and tore open the attached secret letter.

The secret letter instructed him to send a portion of his family members and family property to Northern Li in case of accident. There followed a map of Northern Li, with a few places marked with special inscriptions—these were all the Zhao family's own inscriptions.

Though the points on the map were clearly indicated, without the connecting inscriptions, others wouldn't be able to find anything in those places even if they paced them flat.

There were various degrees among the powerful people of the mortal world. Those with money and connections often indirectly asked people to draw arrays in their homes, whether they were useful or not; what they wanted was to make it conspicuous that their resources were out of the ordinary; in Cui Ji's big compound in the capital, for example, there were many of these gaudy things. Those who had some kinship with the immortal sect or even had a half-immortal relative, on the other hand, believed themselves to be a "higher class" of person and viewed these people who played with arrays as "upstart amateurs"; though they had performed no service to their country, they would go against regulations to acquire inscriptions—for example, the local thugs Zhou Ying had killed on

his inspection tour of the south; their stealthily obtained inscriptions were much the same as those that the immortal mountains bestowed upon imperial kinsmen and meritorious individuals, some of them even more slipshod, all leftovers that the immortal mountains hadn't awarded to anyone—so Zhou Ying could work out how to break them even with his eyes closed.

But direct descendants of the big families turned their noses up at all of these.

They flaunted their position as so-called “true nobility with a thousand-year inheritance”; they had long family traditions and a profound store of secret information; each brick in their houses had its history, and even the cracked tiles had once borne the footstep of a person now in the high heavens. The clan had turned out countless inscription masters. Generation by generation, they had constructed a highly secret body of inscriptions that only their own family could use.

In other words, there was a whole set of secret inscriptions on earth that didn't belong to heaven and earth; they belonged to the Zhao family.

It was these special inscriptions that gave the members of the great family's main bloodline the confidence for their bone-deep sense of superiority, distinguishing them from commonplace people who shamelessly sought personal gain.

As soon as Zhao Xi saw the secret letter, he felt a chill. He thought that, as expected, the main family's considerations were profound. It was true—no matter how smoothly things were going, they should still prepare a line of retreat.

Therefore, he went to give orders for preparations to be made. At the same time, he asked the clan leader to personally write to the Zhao family's old friends in Northern Li and Kunlun.

The Zhao clan's collateral branches all over the country received more or less the same warnings and secret letters. Yuzhou in the west had always had secret passages connecting it to Chu, and Shuo Zhou and Hongyin's Zhao clans in the north arranged to meet in Northern Li, while Guzhou by the sea had already prepared ships, ready to set sail for Southern Shu's Three Islands if anything went wrong.

At the same time, with a thousand-year-old great family of Xuanyin in revolt, Northern Li's Kunlun, Western Chu's Sanyue, and Southern Shu's Lingyun were all watching closely. As soon as they received signals, they crowded around like hawks and vultures that had scented meat.

The two sides acted together—the Luwu invisibly and untraceably scattered across the three countries put on their skins and picked up the Zhao family's secret inscriptions that had been transmitted from Jinping, then anonymously acted as a Magpie Bridge for the “immortal clan” of nobles on both sides.

“Good heavens, ‘Zhao family inscriptions.’ Thank you, Paper-xiong, you’ve opened the country bumpkin Lao Pang’s eyes.” Pang Jian watched “Zhao Yu”’s series of arrangements, gaining experience along with him. Laughing, he said, “Those who have just attained enough status to put on long robes want to fasten their belts and go eat like they do in Dangui Lane, so they go give long-winded speeches at the Phoenix’s Perch Pavilion every day; meanwhile, the true wealthy and noble people have long since disdained making an issue of living expenses. What they want instead is to claim ties of blood or friendship with Xuanyin’s big families, scrambling and fighting to become farm animals that have ascended to the heavens and use a few irrelevant leftover inscriptions... Heh, after all this fuss, farm animals are still farm animals. Like a favorite concubine imitating the formal wife—nothing but a joke.”

“Zhao Yu” politely praised, “Well said, general commander.”

Pang Jian raised his eyelids and glanced at him. He said, “But the Luwu could have done this more covertly.”

With the Zhao family moving a large quantity of spiritual stones and immortal tools out of the country in so organized a fashion, the immortal mountains were sure to notice after the fact. Such open tactics didn’t seem like Zhou Ying—unless he didn’t want to gain any advantage from it.

“Zhao Yu” spoke with the force of justice: “While the Luwu shamefully act in secret, their actions are for the sake of the nation and the people. It’s enough to be secretive when facing the enemy. We ourselves are very open. How could we covet the paltry wealth of criminals? Obeying the orders of Heaven’s Design Pavilion’s General Commander Pang, the Kaiming and the Luwu are assisting Heaven’s Design Pavilion in putting down the revolt. If we take these things, we’ll have to hand over exactly the right amount to the sect when this is over. We do rely on the sect for support.”

Pang Jian gave an exclamation. “Pardon my lack of manners. Your lord truly is loyal and righteous down to his guts.”

How shameless.

“Zhao Yu” was unmoved. “We are only doing our duty.”

Pang Jian said, “What, it’s not enough for you to expand the Kaiming domestically, the Luwu is also looting the burning house? You’ve turned your noses up at the spiritual stones, so where are you trying to worm your way in while the Zhao family escapes abroad? Which sect’s possession has Zhou Ying set his mind on? What is it?”

“It might be a furnace,” “Zhao Yu” said, smiling. “You’re joking, general commander. His Highness naturally acts for the sake of Great Wan. The Kaiming and the Luwu are willing to be their country’s watchdogs. As long as Great Wan is at peace and its people can live safely and be happy in their livelihoods, what more can we ask?”

General Commander Pang commented: “Bah.”

Meanwhile, in the midst of their night of revelry, the Zhaos were silently sliding into the abyss via the ditch others had dug.

It seemed that they already had Heaven’s Design Pavilion’s head office under control. In a single night, they had left the Kaiming Department and Heaven’s Design Pavilion with no strength to fight back, sending them retreating again and again in defeat. In secret, they had also taken the opportunity to send half of their property out of the country, taking double precautions; they thought they were perfectly safe.

In Chu, the first batch of Zhaos to cross the Xia River made landfall and silently infiltrated the sparsely peopled mountains by the Xia River and matched their family’s secret inscriptions.

Among the mountains, a mobile hidden realm accordingly appeared. It opened its mouth and absorbed them.

After that came batch after batch of spiritual stones and dazzling immortal tools. Dongheng’s Sanyue’s great mountain array was soon alerted, and Sanyue soon dispatched an ascended spirit.

Under the East Sea, Zhou Ying told Bai Ling: “That’s fine. Haul in the nets.”

Early in the morning on the eleventh day of the seventh month, Jinping abruptly broke off contact with the Zhao family forces

throughout the country. All the letters burst into flames. At the same time, the smug Zhaos suddenly discovered that those Kaiming Cultivators who hadn't even washed the mud from their feet seemed to have grown up from underfoot, silently infiltrating their impregnable circles of arrays, cooperating from the inside with Heaven's Design Pavilion on the outside!

Before the Zhaos could work out what was happening, they had been caught by the throats, their spiritual stone warehouses seized.

In their haste, they only had time to send a final batch out of the country.

CHAPTER 92 - Traveler Abroad (9)

Endangering mortals was naturally directed at Xuanyin Mountain's inner sect. The shed skin elders and ascended spirit peak masters with their Ways of the Heart couldn't stand by and watch the unjust deaths of millions of mortals. The Zhao family's forces covered the whole country; the Bell of Tribulation, which would cause a three-year drought if it rang once, absolutely couldn't sound from Hongyin to Guzhou.

Mid-level cultivators and walkers in the mortal world were Xuanyin Mountain's foundation, and the Zhao family had occupied half of that "foundation." They believed that as long as they could keep things under control, they would be able to grapple with the inner sect based on the accumulated wisdom of a thousand years.

As for the Kaiming Cultivators... No one had considered the Kaiming Cultivators.

Could the "Kaiming Cultivators" count as cultivators? Could they count as human?

These country bumpkins had started out as laborers and farmers. The women were coarse and the men were vulgar. The weapons they used were each more absurd than the next, and they couldn't speak official language properly. They were like idiots. In the Kaiming Department's classes, the first thing they taught wasn't talismans or meridians, it was the *Thousand Character Classic*, a primer for small children! Really, it was disgracing yourself to give them an extra look.

Hearing that Pang Jian had requested help from the Kaiming Department, many people laughed their heads off, thinking that Jinping's mad dog had come to a dead end and was even willing to eat shit.

He dared to call them, and the Kaiming Department really did dare to come.

When the Kaiming Department joined the battle, both sides of walkers in the mortal world couldn't quite keep their countenance. It was as if two noble scholars had been matching each other's strength playing weiqi when, all of a sudden, a filthy peasant came in driving a steam-powered bulldozer and flattened everything in a billow of smoke.

Because communications had been cut off out of nowhere, everyone thought that it was only an isolated incident for them. Hearing that Kaiming Cultivators had somehow found their way into the spiritual stone warehouse, Hongyin's Zhao Xi was so disgusted he broke out in gooseflesh, as if he'd heard that the rice granary was infested with rats and thought that all the rice was dirty now.

Then he flew into a rage: the spiritual stone warehouse wasn't tangible storage like a granary or a reservoir. It was like an invisible, untouchable "hidden realm"; only using specific means and carrying a special "key" — usually a magic tool or an inscription — could you open it and enter. The Zhao family's spiritual stone warehouse needed at least three layers of keys and the inside was packed with traps; you couldn't put a step out of place. How had they gotten in?

"Investigate thoroughly! Each family's maids, pages, coachmen, crones, if their behavior is unusual, seize one and all and perform a soul-searching!"

"Commander, those spiritual stones..."

"You don't have private stores?" Zhao Xi twisted his head and coldly glared at the person who had been asking him. Red light flashed through his eyes, an indication that he might lose his mind. "Use

your own, you'll be paid back later. When we've killed off these rats, have them spit out the spiritual stones..."

No sooner had he spoken than he saw the eyes of the "Zhao family member" speaking to him flash strangely. Zhao Xi suddenly found that when this person cupped his fist in a salute, the thickness of his hands didn't match his slender physique, and the joints of his middle fingers were so crowded with calluses that they were nearly deformed...

Zhao Xi's reaction was extremely fast. He gave a shout, his spiritual sword already out of its sheath. The imposter Zhao calmly took out a big, round iron saw. The saw blades began to spin with a hum. Before the blades hit, the fierce wind had already reached Zhao Xi. This thing had previously been used to fell timber. It was very loud, making a racket as it knocked his spiritual sword aside.

The "Zhao family member" wiped his face and removed a skin as thin as a cicada's wings, revealing an honest, dark square face. Smiling, he said, "Commander, we can't spit out those spiritual stones. The Kaiming Department has kindly accepted them on behalf of the spiritual mountains. Thank you for looking after them."

No sooner had he spoken than his shadow on the ground began to move. Countless figures hidden in it appeared, surrounding Zhao Xi.

In Jinping City, "Zhao Yu" crushed the battle report he had finished reading with a twist of his fingers. He turned and said to Pang Jian, "An 'immortal clan' still needs to perform the basic functions of life. They still need people to plant crops, drive carriages, clean up after them and wait on them. There's nothing mysterious about it. The cultivators of each Kaiming Department station are born and bred locals, excellent at seeing an opportunity and taking it. Set your mind at ease, Commander Pang, they won't let the cannons pointed at their own fellow countrymen go off."

But Pang Jian's expression was grave. Shaking his head, he said, "Don't get careless. While it's true that the Kaiming Department can get in by every opening, the thousand years of accumulated wisdom of a great family of Xuanyin is nothing to fool around with. Otherwise, would the Zhou family have been incapable of raising their heads for eight hundred years?"

On Xuanyin Mountain, Xi Ping was just bringing up all kinds of unreasonable requests to Lin Chi, making Peak Master Lin, who hadn't personally created tools in centuries, look miserable as he listened. Suddenly, a warning from his spiritual sense interrupted Xi Ping's voice.

Lin Chi and Wen Fei, the latter in the middle of a unilateral argument with the snow-capped mountain in the distance, simultaneously flew up.

Their eyes met across the distance in surprise and confusion. Accumulated snow was rolling down the sealed Flying Jade Peak. The localized avalanche precisely hit the valley where the two of them had just been standing.

Wen Fei was shocked: *Hey now, Zhi Jingzhai, you've developed a temper after five years in seclusion!*

Xi Ping was astonished: "My shifu finally couldn't resist smacking that chatterbox mute?"

Lin Chi cocked an ear and listened for a moment. "No... no, it's not Flying Jade Peak. I think the thirty-six peaks are quaking."

In Hongyin Province, Zhao Xi, surrounded by Kaiming Cultivators, glanced around at the visible and concealed figures. Heaven's Design Pavilion's karma beasts no longer listened to his orders. They were mixed in among the Kaiming Cultivators, their big eyes glaring at him with hatred, as if glaring at an evil cultivator.

“Commander Zhao,” said the middle-aged-looking head Kaiming Cultivator, “the spiritual mountains protect the populace. As one of the four great families of Xuanyin, the Zhao clan’s collateral branches in the mortal world ought to take their part in defending it, yet you unworthy descendants have brought calamity upon the country and the people to this degree. It does make one sneer.”

“What the hell are you?” Zhao Xi said almost inaudibly. “Are you worthy of scolding me?”

A young and aggressive Kaiming Cultivator couldn’t resist shooting off at the mouth: “The stray dog barks in such a bombastic tone.”

Zhao Xi quietly began to laugh grimly, the red in his eyes strengthening. “Stray dog...”

Then, on the fair skin that came from a life of comfort, each and every vein popped up. The veins that ought to have been purple appeared to be a strange bright red, crawling all over his body as though they had come to life, thicker and thicker, as if trying to break through his thin skin.

A karma beast howled and jumped onto a Kaiming Cultivator’s clothes. Fur bristling, it arched its back. A Kaiming Cultivator who had been a boatman at the docks suddenly thought that the forms of those veins looked very familiar. His eyes opened wide, and he blurted out, “That... that looks like the course of the Hong River around here!”

Zhao Xi’s expression was as hideous as a living ghost’s. With a pop, a vein really did burst out of his flesh. The blood spurted several zhang away. At the same time, in the place on the Hong River that corresponded to his burst vein, the water rose and burst its banks in both directions!

Lin Chi abruptly raised his head. “The Territory Map!”

Xi Ping said, “What?”

“Great Wan has many watercourses. Tradition says that when the spiritual mountains took shape and divided the national borders, their spiritual veins flowed through the whole country, reflecting the courses of all the rivers and streams. This was called the Territory Map. The Southern Sage saw that it was created by reflecting the spiritual veins and the veins of the earth, feared that it would give rise to turbulence in the land, and wished to seal it..”

Xi Ping said, “I get it, Zhao Yin stole it.”

“No,” said Lin Chi, “the Territory Map was born from the watercourses and was by nature unwilling to be confined to a single place. It resisted fiercely and pulled a disciple who was passing by into the map. The Southern Sage had no alternative but to destroy it. He watched over it for many days, helping that disciple to comprehend its mysteries, escape it, and succeed in reaching an ascended spirit. That disciple was Zhao... Elder Zhao. The Zhao family has actually acquired a portion of the Territory Map’s authority!”

No sooner had he spoken than the blue luan trembled, and even in the reincarnation wood, Xi Ping felt that the spiritual energy around them was in chaos. It wasn’t only Xuanyin’s mountain seal that was in turmoil, even Flying Jade Peak’s seal of voluntary seclusion was in imminent danger.

The nine Zhao peak masters working together had shaken Xuanyin’s mountain seal. The disordered spiritual energy made it hard for the other peak masters to approach.

Flying Jade Peak’s fragile north slope was in imminent danger once more; the shaking of the snow-capped mountain made Xi Ping burn

with anger. Afraid that Zhi Xiu would force himself to act once more, Xi Ping quickly asked, “Peak Master Lin, where is the true Bell of Tribulation? How do you ring it?”

Lin Chi said, “The Bell of Tribulation can only be used when encountering demons. These nine shixions haven’t lost their minds to the point of becoming demons... and anyway, the person who rings the bell must have strong enough cultivation! Do you think just anyone could use the Bell of Tribulation to break up the remaining power of a shed skin?”

Xi Ping said angrily, “Is this insanity not enough to count as becoming demons?! Do what I say!”

Lin Chi was stupefied by his nominal shizhi’s lousy idea. “...huh?”

Just then, there was a huge sound. The nine Zhao peak masters had broken through Xuanyin’s mountain seal and were about to run toward the human world.

At the same time, all of Great Wan was swaying. This had previously been a year of rare favorable weather, with moderate rain. The rivers and lakes had calmly nourished all living things as the harvest approached, but now they began to roar like infuriated beasts.

The world’s rudest shizhi once again addressed a senior by name: “Lin Chi, stop dawdling!”

Lin Chi took an immortal tool like a dandelion out of his mustard seed. It scattered in the wind. The fight of the ascended spirit peak masters who had turn open the mountain seal was just sending astral winds in all directions. The fragmented “seeds” of the immortal tool were quickly blown all over the place.

Through his spirit, Lin Chi said to Xi Ping, *I never saw the Southern Sage.*

Xi Ping said, *Well, who has? The two who have seen him aren't home!*

Lin Chi said, *This...this is such disgraceful behavior!*

Xi Ping said, *Then you can sit here and watch them destroy the country!*

Lin Chi sucked in a breath. The next moment, a statue of the Southern Sage a full hundred zhang high fell out of nowhere like a mountain. The “seeds” of the “dandelion” immortal tool that had scattered in all directions spoke at the same time: “Zhao Yin lost his mind and became a demon. Heaven and earth cannot abide his Way of the Heart.”

The clamor coming from all sides merged together, vibrating among the thirty-six peaks, as if ten thousand bells were ringing simultaneously. For a time it was like a heavenly oracle descending, frightening your soul out of your body.

The Zhao ascended spirit peak masters came back to themselves. When they understood what the “oracle” was saying, their faces turned deathly pale: if heaven and earth could not abide Zhao Yin’s Way of the Heart, then wouldn’t all the disciples who had inherited his Way of the Heart become demons?

Next, a deafening tolling began to resound, identical to when the Bell of Tribulation had rung before. It was completely convincing!

Naturally an ascended spirit grade immortal tool could shake ascended spirits into dizziness. The nine peak masters’ Ways of the Heart were seriously shaken.

Only Princess Duanrui, hurrying back from the Latent Cultivation Temple, having cultivated the way of clarity to merely a step away

from its highest degree and being unmoved by external objects, turned a deaf ear and delivered a lash of the Remorseless Whip.

Xi Ping said, “Ah, at least Duanrui-shishu is reliable.”

Unlike you good-for-nothings.

Lin Chi was simply speechless.

At the ringing of the false Bell of Tribulation, Flying Jade Peak’s north slope at last had yet another avalanche, as if shizun were dropping his jaw in shock at his rebellious disciple.

Just then, a wind blew past.

This wind was no stronger than the breeze on the Lingyang River at the start of spring, but somehow, all the cultivators present felt their hearts skip a beat.

Instantly, all the ascended spirits flying hither and thither could no longer keep steady on their swords. One after another, they fell out of the sky. The wind blew past the Xuanyin Mountains and spread outward. All inscriptions dimmed, all spiritual stones escaped the arrays they were placed in.

The irregular immortal tools made of hammers, chisels, axes, and saws became true hammers, chisels, axes, and saws. The Zhao family descendants, who had never done a day’s physical labor in their lives, suddenly lost their cultivation. One person was hit over the head with a hammer, and it actually bashed his brains out on the spot.

The one who had been bashed was astonished; breathing his last, he still didn’t understand what had happened to his head.

The one who had done the bashing was also astonished.

The Barrier Dispeller Bow in Pang Jian's hands disappeared, and "Zhao Yu," controlled by the paperman, froze in place, turning into a puppet.

In that instant, all the territory within Great Wan's borders turned entirely into the mortal world. Cultivators became mortals, immortal tools became ordinary metal, and the spiritual energy departed!

Only the Riverward inside the Resurrection Vortex ignored all this, continuing to protect its master.

His communication tools lost power, and Zhou Ying abruptly lost contact with Bai Ling, but he didn't panic in the least. He only changed his sitting posture—what was the rush? When the two shed skins left the mountains, their consciousnesses could cover all of Great Wan. The two old fellows had yet to reach the East Sea, so presumably they had something to attend to.

The Zhao family had profound secrets, but what shed skin hadn't come up from the period of the Great War of Gods and Demons? They all knew each other.

It was unsuitable for shed skin sages to meddle in a fight between the ants in the mortal world, but when the ants were about to chew through the roots, could they still fail to act?

Just then, inside the Resurrection Vortex, the previously very wide Riverward suddenly contracted, its thin smoke almost clinging to Zhou Ying. The smoke quivered slightly with unease.

Zhou Ying had a thought—the shed skins were here in person.

Lin Zongyi and Zhang Jue appeared in the East Sea practically one after the other. The two of them had left the Xuanyin Mountains

together, but now they had come separately, one from the north and one from the south.

Zhang Jue said, “The spiritual veins have been severed. It will require ten days to repair them completely. Let them finish their mortal world business in the mortal world.”

Lin Zongyi nodded and pointed to the East Sea.

Then the two shed skins no longer discussed the world-shaking revolt. They quickly inspected the demon seal at the bottom of the Impassable Sea.

“There is nothing out of the ordinary. The Dignitary of Rites did indeed lose his mind.” Zhang Jue sighed and said, “Lin-shixiong, you’ve felt it, too, haven’t you?”

Lin Zongyi removed his mouth seal. “There are signs that this was brought about deliberately, but I searched through the four northern provinces without tracking down the one behind it.”

Right now, Zhou Ying, the one behind it, just happened to be in the whirlpool at Lin Zongyi’s feet. This desperate criminal seemed by nature not to know what guilt was. He lay calmly inside the Riverward, listening to the two shed skin elders discussing how to capture him.

“It is the same in the south,” Zhang Jue said. “The Zhao family has been truly disgraceful this time. How fortunate that we have the assistance of the Kaiming Department.”

Lin Zongyi was silent—he couldn’t respond to this statement; whether he spoke in approval or in opposition, as soon as the words left his mouth, they would become a judgment. He had to be extremely cautious.

After a while, he asked, “Where is Zhou Ying?”

Hearing this, the Dignitary of Fate High Elder began to divine on his fingers.

When the consciousness of the master of the Sea of Stars began to move, the Riverward’s thin smoke immediately seeped anxiously into Zhou Ying. He took on a half-transparent quality. The legendary demonic tool that was outside the laws silently resisted Xuanyin Mountain’s observation.

Zhou Ying was like an ant hidden in the fur of a huge beast, listening to the heavy breathing that could instantly blow him away. His spine tensed unconsciously, but his eyes glowed.

He was like a gambling addict. The more critical the situation was, the more excited he would become.

He waited for the Dignitary of Fate’s verdict as if waiting for the lid of a dice cup to be removed.

After a moment, he heard Zhang Jue say, “He is in Jingzhou—on the way back to Jinping from Yuzhou.”

“Very good,” said Lin Zongyi. “His relationship to the Impassable Sea is profound. I have always feared that there was something wrong with him.”

“The Kaiming and the Luwu do in fact have considerable ambitions. Fortunately this person is only a half-immortal. He can still be controlled.”

Zhou Ying *tsked*, as if half-regretful. Shaking his head, he began to laugh.

With the spiritual energy dissipated, the human world calmed down. The world-shaking battle of cultivators changed into all the local garrisons apprehending the renegades.

The evil-expelling bells on the Azure Dragon Towers, which had trembled for several days, stopped moving.

Xi Yue, looking after the Heart Tower, at last breathed a sigh of relief.

Just then, he heard the voice of the Marquis Manor's page Haozhong.

“Young Master Yue! Young Master Yue!”

His call made the roots of Xi Yue's ears go numb. For some reason, he had a bad feeling.

Haozhong didn't dare to approach the Azure Dragon Tower. He only shifted around like an ant on a hot pan.

Xi Yue raised a hand to make a hand seal, but he couldn't direct spiritual energy. Only then did he remember that all his arrays had turned into decorative designs. He had to walk to the window and reach out to open it.

Jinping City on the Lingyang River was half of the weak spot on Zhou Ying's underbelly. Normally this was hidden very deep, so no one could see—mostly it was demonstrated by the fact that even if he wanted to throw the whole world into chaos, he would still unconsciously protect the bright pearl of Jinping.

This time, apart from some quiet skulduggery in the inner courtyard of the imperial palace, everything in Jinping had been as usual. Outside, shed skins were dying, thugs were fighting for their lives, and mantises were wrestling with orioles; but in the Marquis Manor, everything was going as usual.

But while human strength could shake the fierce winds and make the veins of the earth tremble, it couldn't return a single quietly fallen flower to the branch.

On her birthday, old Madam Xi had insisted on listening to opera all night. The next day, she didn't get up.

At first the family thought the old lady was tired. They called a few times without getting an answer and went inside to look. That was when they found that she was delirious from fever. Elderly people fell ill easily. Everyone quickly turned up the pills His Highness Prince Zhuang had sent back over several years.

But the elixirs that could restore a person to perfect health overnight, like the prohibited weapons and spiritual energy, had lost effect.

In the end, mortals had their mortal fates.

CHAPTER 93 - Traveler Abroad (Final)

In Yanyang, at Jingzhou's northern extremity, Bai Ling, having just received word from the government post, was rushing wildly, driving a carriage.

The carriage roads between the provinces had yet to be opened, and the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon's tracks had been broken in several places by the earthquakes caused by the Territory Map. The waterways were jammed, and the land routes weren't clear, either. Transportation within Great Wan had nearly crumbled altogether. Immortal tools and downgraded immortal tools had also stopped working. By the time Bai Ling received Xi Yue's message from the post station after it had passed through many hands, it was already several days later.

But even if he could have put on wings and flown back, it would have been no use, because the "Zhou Ying" in the carriage was made of paper.

With Bai Ling's cultivation level, the paperman had originally been convincing. A cultivator of his level or below at least wouldn't have seen any difference between it and a real person. But now all magic within Great Wan's borders had lost effect, and the paperman had also returned to its original form. Though it was considerably finer work than casually plastered together funeral goods would have been, it still wasn't the real thing—it rustled when the wind blew, and if he wasn't careful its face would turn all the way toward its back.

This paperman was a substitute Bai Ling had created for his prince, imprinted with a spiritual image, with a drop of Zhou Ying's heart's blood inside it. If there was a social event he didn't want to attend—for example, dull occasions like the emperor's ascension to the

throne—he would send the paperman over to pass itself off as him. There were no established foundations in Jinping, anyway.

Right now, Bai Ling wasn't dragging a paperman around all over the place because he had some peculiar hobby; it was because after Zhou Ying had left, the heart's blood in the substitute paperman he had left behind had suddenly "spat" out the Riverward's smoke. The thin smoke had enlarged as it billowed, at last perfectly covering the life-sized paperman.

Right now, the half-demon had to act as coachman himself, but the Riverward enveloping the paperman didn't move a hair. Could it be that it didn't need spiritual energy to operate? Could it really keep the eyes of the shed skins away?

Bai Ling didn't know. He was currently completely collected on the surface, but inside he was so anxious he was about to catch fire—since he had lost contact with Zhou Ying, all the news from Jinping that had come to his hands had been old.

The shed skins still in the human world might descend at any time.

If the paperman had still been usable, Bai Ling might have felt some sense of security about the Riverward protecting it like this. But the Riverward couldn't keep it from rustling when the wind blew. If someone got close enough to touch it, never mind a shed skin, even a mortal would have been able to tell that it wasn't a flesh and blood body.

The half-demon who had been able to eat spiritual stones since he was born found for the first time that a mortal's road was so long, that horses were so slow, that the mail was so uncertain.

Suddenly, Bai Ling hauled on the reins to stop the horse. "Whoa—"

The road ended.

Jingzhou had the most mountains and watercourses in all of Great Wan. Falling boulders had blocked the road ahead.

“My lord,” said Bai Ling, taking a deep breath, speaking to the paperman as respectfully as though speaking to Zhou Ying, “please be patient. I will go see what can be done.”

Without spiritual energy to support it, the paperman couldn't respond. Bai Ling put on a bamboo hat and ran over like a mortal.

From the north of Jingzhou, with the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon cut off, this was the only road that could still be traveled. Bai Ling wasn't the only one being detained. There were freight shippers who had been forced to go by road after the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon had stopped, there were those going to the capital to study or find relatives... or to attend funerals.

All walks of life were mixed together. In front of them were uncrossable high mountains and huge boulders. When Bai Ling arrived, people were using their hands to clear the road. The half-demon stared blankly amid the flying dust. He could only roll up his sleeves and enter the mortal world.

Without the protection of spiritual energy, the dust treated everyone impartially. Bai Ling's elegant robes, cleaner than paper, were soon covered in dust. Not long after, it began to rain. The rain mixed with the dust into mud. Bai Ling's nose and throat were full of grit. He didn't know how it had gotten in and ground his tongue against his teeth.

He hadn't been in such dire straits even in the Impassable Abyss!

After half a day's delay, the slow-moving steam-powered truck from Yanyang at last arrived. The wild steam puffed everywhere, leaving everyone's fields of vision empty, mixing powerfully with the rain and

mud. Bai Ling felt that he had nearly turned into rotten paper pulp. His hands, after exerting too much strength moving stones, were shaking uncontrollably.

Not long after, he heard that the road had been opened. But before he could put on a happy look and report to “his lord” in the carriage, he heard a huge sound as the inconsiderate rain rolled down another pile of boulders.

Amid the steam, the people whose outlines were blurred cried out loudly. Bai Ling was swallowed up by the flood of people, involuntarily retreating. He had been a secret guard for Zhou Ying, had been a killer, had been the Luwu’s secretive “Mr. Bai.” He had never been this close to mortals. With the hands of a crowd of strangers pushing and pulling, shoving and yanking at him, he was simply a little bewildered.

A man in his thirties or forties began to wail, his voice so loud that Bai Ling gave a start. The man went to his knees and beat the earth with his hands, banging his head on the ground. He said, “I won’t be in time to see my mother, please clear the road, I’m begging you... I’m begging you...”

In his desperate need, it was unclear whom he was begging.

The people around him could only get out of the way and avert their gazes, not looking directly at him, feeling sadness well up.

Along with the other travelers going through hardships, Bai Ling could only direct his gaze, which had nowhere to rest, toward the indifferent landscape, extending to the horizon.

When he no longer knew where he had come from or where he was going, a gaze came down from the sky. The two shed skin sages whose existence was tied to heaven and earth and who were not constrained by the spiritual veins of the mortal world were returning

to the immortal mountains; they just happened to be passing by here.

Xuanyin had met a calamity this time. One of the four great families had been pulled up by the roots, and the whole country was in chaos. Zhang Jue and Lin Zongyi's expressions were both very grave. They hadn't spoken the whole way.

Zhang Jue, as if sensing something, opened his eyes, sending the gaze of his snow-white pupils toward the human world. At a glance, he saw the half-demon mixed in amidst the mortals.

Oh? The Zhou family's final set of spiritual bones was here?

For some reason, the Dignitary of Fate kept thinking that there was something wrong about the divination he had performed in the East Sea. This Prince Zhuang's spiritual bones had spent over twenty years soaking in a den of demons outside the reaches of law and civilization; the Sea of Stars had never been able to distinguish him very clearly. Great Wan was over a thousand li from east to west and even longer from north to south; its territory could be called vast. It had several hundred million inhabitants. Yet he had just happened to encounter Zhou Ying at this moment. There seemed to be something hidden stirring the Dignitary of Fate High Elder's spiritual sense.

Zhang Jue was just about to take a closer look, but when his gaze swept down, he saw the rain bringing down the mountain. The horse drawing the carriage was a little startled. Bai Ling wasn't in time to hold it, and the carriage shook. The "Zhou Ying" inside the carriage miserably flew forward, landing halfway under the seat.

Zhang Jue only had time for a quick glance when his eyes were seared by the sight of the man beside the carriage desperately kowtowing.

The Dignitary of Fate High Elder couldn't bear to watch this. He sighed, waved a sleeve, and it was as if the rain had been blocked by an invisible screen. A path opened among the mud and boulders blocking the road.

The sages had finally performed a miracle.

"The lives of the people are hard." Zhang Jue looked away and closed his eyes once more. He said to Lin Zongyi, "Let's go."

With Great Wan's spiritual veins broken, the immortals and demons outside the borders all retreated. The various spiritual beasts being kept by Jinping's wealthy families all seemed ready to go into hibernation, becoming drowsy.

The busiest person was Xi Ping.

His consciousness not only had to shuttle back and forth between the Xuanyin Mountains and Western Chu—Xu Rucheng had changed his identity and quietly mixed in among the team "receiving" the Zhaos, becoming an unremarkable page to be ordered around, and Wei Chengxiang was also waiting for her chance to act in Western Chu—apart from that, he was also afraid san-ge would get lonely, so he had to go over to the East Sea to harass Zhou Ying, tell him in real time that "the shed skin elders have returned to the mountains," "the inner sect is beginning to settle accounts," "Princess Duanrui is going to stand in as Dignitary of Rites," and other such firsthand news, as well as asking some very inconsiderate questions, along the lines of "San-ge, everything is safe over there, why won't you come out of the Riverward, is it because you can't swim?"; when he was finished asking, he would usually be shooed away from Zhou Ying's spirit and receive a complimentary "Scram."

While Zhou Ying couldn't use spiritual energy and was trapped in the Resurrection Vortex, unable to get out, his "eyes" in the Xuanyin

Mountains gave him the most commanding view of the whole situation from beginning to end.

It gave him a false impression that he was omniscient and could hold everything in the palm of his hand.

Apart from Zhou Ying, who had overheard the shed skins talking, no one knew when the spiritual veins would be repaired. Bai Ling could only travel night and day as he attempted hundreds of times to use immortal tools to send a message to Zhou Ying.

The horse collapsed from exhaustion, and the immortal tools gave no response.

Until the ninth day after the spiritual veins had been severed.

That day at sunset, the deadly still inscriptions at last showed a faint brilliance. The stagnant spiritual energy began to flow once more.

Zhou Ying was just listening to Xi Ping saying that the nine Zhao peak masters had been collectively “sent into seclusion,” with concrete arrangements to be discussed later; perhaps they would have to wait until the Heavenly Questions had been restored and listen to the opinions of Heaven’s Design Pavilion and the court.

“Had the Zhaos not thought of touching the Territory Map, perhaps this could have been passed off as a misunderstanding,” Zhou Ying said casually. “But they played their final card too quickly... oh?”

A paperman leapt from his body. Before it could open its mouth to speak, its energy was exhausted, and it flimsily lay down. Zhou Ying pinched the paperman between his fingers, feeling the scant spiritual energy at his fingertips. “The spiritual veins are beginning to circulate, the Heavenly Questions should be in position soon. You wait and see. I’m also curious about what His Majesty will decide.”

Hearing this, Xi Ping thought, What's there to see? He'll probably get out of Xuanyin Mountain's way.

He had even temporarily put Xu Rucheng and Wei Chengxiang in Western Chu on hold, gathering up all his consciousness, completely absorbed in waiting for san-ge to take him back to Jinping. He had all but trotted over with a leash in his mouth.

Zhou Ying said, smiling, "People aren't as sensitive as low-level immortal tools for sending information. For flying on swords, or for Bai Ling to use his paperman substitutes, I think it will take until daylight at least to work unimpeded."

At this point, he paused. Because he had seen that after flimsily lying down, the paperman was once again struggling to get up, clinging to his sleeve with all its limbs, seeming to be struggling... What was the matter with Bai Ling?

Zhou Ying suddenly felt uneasy, so he didn't meditate as usual. As he waited for communications to be restored, he repeatedly reviewed everything that had happened recently, considering what might have been omitted.

First, blurry writing flashed on the paperman, disappearing before it could be distinguished. Then it happened again and again... Bai Ling had sent him countless messages, exhausting the paperman. Its limbs curled up at the edges, and it rolled onto the little piece of reincarnation wood Zhou Ying was toying with.

"Hey, san-ge," Xi Ping said from the reincarnation wood, "I think Bai Ling-da-ge has filled up the front, the writing has even gone to the back, it says..."

His voice abruptly cut off. At the same time, Zhou Ying picked up the paperman.

This time, the handwriting was finally clear. What the paperman said was: *Old Madam Xi is gravely ill.*

The first autumn rain fell in Jinping. The osmanthus had already prepared its buds. The mornings and evenings were cool.

With spiritual stones unusable, at least thirty or forty percent of the factories in the southern outskirts, built around gold smelting furnaces, couldn't operate. The sky became distinctly clearer. Flocks of wild geese would soon be flying back from Northern Li.

On the emperor's orders, the Director of the Office of Imperial Physicians went in person to the Yongning Marquis Manor along with a few other old imperial physicians. They prescribed medicines and performed acupuncture. At this point, the old lady couldn't take any more medicine, and she no longer recognized anyone.

The Marquis himself saw the Director out the door. The grey-bearded old Director cupped his hand and didn't ask him to escort him any further. "You ought to prepare the clothing she will need to be changed into. Acupuncture is painful, let us not make the old lady suffer any more."

The Marquis said, "The old lady is waiting for some people. In your opinion..."

The Director waved a hand. "I have heard that all the roads have been severed outside, and letters can't get out, either. At a time like this, there's nothing to be done... Alas, there's nothing to be done."

The Director was already prepared to retire; he was very elderly. Saying this, his mind wandered slightly as he remembered somebody in the rustling early autumn. After a long moment, the old Director shakily patted the Marquis on the arm. Whether counseling him or speaking to himself, he said, "Among blood relations, there are close ties and distant ties. Sometimes they can be picked up in

the next life, and sometimes they are exhausted before the present life has even ended. You and I are both mortal. This cannot be forced, so let it go.”

Having said this, leaning on his disciple’s arm, he walked away, his stride uneven.

The Marquis watched the old Director go. After a long time, he lowered his head as if in acknowledgment of something. He called a servant. “Send someone with a letter to the palace... We should tell the Dowager Imperial Consort.”

In the west of Guangyun Palace, Yuying Palace.

As Dowager Imperial Consort Xi got older, she shunned noise more and more. Inside Yuying Palace, people usually all wore soft-soled shoes. Anyone whose clothing was likely to rustle had to keep their sleeves and pant legs tight. They spoke amongst each other in whispers. But right now, a young palace maid was running like mad.

Her soft-soled shoes made dull thuds as they hit the bluestone tiles. The sound of the footsteps was unpleasant, making the voiceless dogs inside the palace bark.

She opened the door of the inner rooms. The smell of snow wine hadn’t dissipated. The refreshing scent coolly curled around her face, and the hot sweat on the maid’s forehead instantly disappeared. She shivered from cold.

She dropped to her knees with a thud, kneeling before the drunkenly swaying Imperial Consort.

Inside the fragrant jade miasma, Dowager Imperial Consort Xi was a carefree girl. Their family had always been like this. If the boys wanted to pursue a distinguished career, of course that was great, but it was no problem if they amounted to nothing; everything was

fine as long as they didn't go out and commit crimes. And for the girls, it would be hard for them to go out and commit crimes even if they wanted to, so they were left even more to their own devices; the shrewd had their own shrewd approaches to life, and the fools were foolish.

At home, even the crooked plum blossom tree that didn't bloom once in three years and the cats and dogs picked up off the streets would become treasures if they stayed long enough, never mind a little girl carved from jade.

She had muddled through her needlework and never studied properly. Apart from coming up with new ways to get spending money out of her big brother's pockets, all she cared about were her looks. She was absolutely unrestrained. All the distinguished young ladies in Jinping wanted to be like her, and Cui Ji's young mistress had also come along to make friends... though she had found out afterward that Young Mistress Cui had ulterior motives.

Those had been the good days.

With her eyes open, the Dowager Imperial Consort was still sunk in the amber-like past when she heard someone say something like "His Majesty has permitted the Dowager Imperial Consort to leave the palace to pay a visit to her mother, to see the old lady one last time." In her confusion, she didn't understand very well. In a daze, she had her maids attend to her clothing and makeup, thinking, I'm allowed to go home?

The palace maid Xiao Song who had come to the palace with her had now become Auntie Song. She had become careless with age, accidentally knocking over a bottle of lotion. The jade bottle broke into pieces when it hit the ground. The crisp sound forced Dowager Imperial Consort Xi into wakefulness. Without warning, the young girl amid the fragrant jade miasma met the eyes of the woman in the mirror, who had passed half a century.

As if she had been frightened, she knocked the mirror on the dressing case away.

The palace maids and eunuchs knelt everywhere amid the thick fragrance. The Dowager Imperial Consort stared blankly for a moment, then wearily waved a hand. "I'm not going."

Auntie Song followed a few steps after her, shuffling on her knees. She said urgently, "My lady, they say at the manor that it won't go well this time. If you don't see her now, then..."

"I won't see her. I'm not going."

Why should she see her? To show her mother how the frail little orchid she had painstakingly nurtured had steeped in snow wine until its roots had rotted?

The Dowager Imperial Consort pulled out her hairpin, and her hair fell over her shoulders like water bursting a dyke. There was no undulation in her tone as she said, "Warm another pot of snow wine for me."

Looking out from the fragrant jade miasma, it was all the same. And anyway, Dangu Lane wasn't her home.

A lifetime's joys and sorrows were like illusions. Why would anyone want to wake up?

Why would she want to wake up?

For a moment, Xi Ping thought irrelevantly that if he were still the "Tai Sui" of Tao County, who didn't know where he came from, a spirit in some rotten wood, then couldn't he have avoided experiencing the ordeal of suffering?

Zhou Ying clutched the reincarnation wood, as if he could grab hold of Xi Ping through that piece of rotten wood.

“Don’t worry, Shiyong.” His voice was so low it was unclear whose benefit he was saying it for. “It’s not necessarily... Let me think of something.”

Xuanyin Mountain’s old fool had said “Jingzhou” before, so Bai Ling had still been held up in Jingzhou then. He wouldn’t have been able to fly after the spiritual veins had been severed. The Zhaos had touched the Territory Map without authorization, he didn’t know what state the roads were in. Bai Ling might not make it in time...

The veins stood out on the back of Zhou Ying’s hand as he squeezed the reincarnation wood. He calmed himself down and quickly sent Bai Ling a message: *Have the half-puppet make a transport array and receive something, then take a drop of Grandmother’s blood...*

Before he had finished writing the last line, the writing vanished from the paper.

These were the faint shackles of the demon seal currently under his feet—he couldn’t reveal this information.

Damn it!

Zhou Ying tore a corner of the paperman.

“San-ge.” Just then, Xi Ping’s voice sounded in his spirit. Unexpectedly, Xi Ping was very calm.

He had lingered by the Xia River for five years and was used to being calm. The “little young master in the lap of luxury” seemed only like an old piece of clothing that he could put on to relive an old dream. When he came back to himself and pulled it off, in the blink

of an eye he was once again the Tai Sui among the evil cultivators of Tao County.

“Don’t worry. If the spiritual veins start circulating tonight, then you’ll take me back tonight. If they start circulating tomorrow, then you’ll take me tomorrow. If you really can’t make it in time, that’s still...”

Zhou Ying turned a deaf ear. In a flash, he sent a sketchier message through the paperman: *Half-puppet, transport array.*

This time the message went through. Zhou Ying “composedly” said, “Bai Ling should be able to guess my general intentions, and that half-puppet was with you before, he knows about reincarnation wood, too, right?”

Xi Ping sighed. “With the demon seal operating, reincarnation wood that has held my consciousness can’t pass through a transport array. Don’t waste...”

Zhou Ying seemed to have gone deaf. Before Xi Ping could finish, the transport array was complete. Zhou Ying quickly pared a small piece off the reincarnation wood, but before he could put it into the array, the wood disintegrated and vanished in midair.

Ferocity suddenly flashed in Zhou Ying’s seemingly tranquil eyes. Xi Ping suspected he was regretting not having smashed the demon seal.

“San-ge.” Xi Ping quickly hid all his disquieting anxiety and restlessness and said, “Let’s wait together for a while. If there are no elixirs, there will still be imperial physicians. Even when she was eating a bowl of curd cheese, the old lady would leave me some. Of course she’ll wait for me. Hey, san-ge, why don’t you tell me about what’s been going on at home...”

Zhou Ying ignored him. Suddenly, he pared off another piece of reincarnation wood. A transport array took shape in his other hand. Before Xi Ping could catch up, he pierced his own finger and pinched the Riverward that was wrapped around him.

The Riverward reacted instantly to his thought, gathering in the palm of his hand, wrapping around that piece of wood that shouldn't have existed, lightly dropping it into the transport array.

At the same time, Zhou Ying, having lost the protection of the Riverward, landed at once in the Resurrection Vortex.

“San-ge!”

“Go. It won't kill me.”

Brooking no argument, Zhou Ying drove him out of his spirit. Wrapped in the Riverward, the reincarnation wood and Xi Ping's consciousness together flew toward distant Jinping. The moment they fell into Xi Yue's hand, the Riverward's thin smoke dissipated. Zhou Ying had used the last precious “ferry” on the mortal world.

Xi Yue stared blankly for a moment at the piece of reincarnation wood that still had bloodstains at its edges, suddenly realized something, then took to his heels and ran.

Is it you? You've come back... How could you have waited so long to come back!

Familiar buildings and gates flashed in front of Xi Ping's eyes. But while the carved railings were unchanging, the forms of the moss altered, the plants grew and withered, and people aged. Everything had become strange.

“Grandmother... Grandmother!”

The unfilial child who had said he would come back from the mountains after a year came knocking at the door. The dying woman's spirit was like a tottering sandcastle, constantly collapsing under the urging of time.

A light like a sudden burst of radiance before the end flashed in old Madam Xi's eyes. "Xiaobao..."

The demon seal covered up her voice. The family only saw her lips moving and drew close, uncomprehending, but they didn't hear anything.

Old Madam Xi said, "Why have you come so early?"

Xi Ping went blank. At first, he didn't know whether the old lady was confused or ironically rebuking him.

Then he heard old Madam Xi gently and quietly negotiating with him: "Grandmother knows you're lonely on your own, just wait a little longer, wait for your aunt and brother, I know my baby understands..."

Just like when he had been little, impatiently looking at the Southern Shu candies and little spiritual beasts that Cui Ji had delivered, and his old grandmother had sent someone to call her other lonely grandson out of the palace to play while coaxing Xi Ping to wait a little.

The old lady thought he had come from "the other side" to get her.

The ordinary old woman in the big compound didn't know anything, yet she knew everything.

Xi Ping curled up in her constantly crumbling spirit, wanting to tell her a funny story, but after thinking for a long time, he found that there were no funny stories. All he could do was make something

up, listening to her answering voice becoming weaker and weaker, quieter and quieter.

Then day broke, Xi Ping's vision blurred, and his consciousness returned to the reincarnation wood, just as it had rebounded back to the divine image in Wild Fox Country countless times.

He heard suppressed crying and methodical voices and knew that everything was already prepared at home.

Spiritual energy flowed through the calendar block hanging on the wall, and it lit up once again. Writing popped up on it, saying today would be clear—how curious, why was the Marquis Manor using downgraded immortal tools now?

Zhou Ying nearly tripped over the threshold of the Marquis Manor. He had climbed out of some unknown awful place. There were bloodstains on him, and his hair was still wet.

The most self-restrained and well-mannered man in Jinping City hadn't washed or changed his clothes, abandoning decorum. When he saw the Marquis Manor's servants coming to greet him, he realized something. He tried and failed to hold himself up against the courtyard wall, slowly sinking to his knees.

There had been a pair of guileless eyes in this world waiting to see him, not a prince, not an offering, not the head of the Kaiming and the Luwu, not a demon throwing the world into chaos, but only Zhou Ying.

But though they had kept looking until they were weary, he hadn't come in time for them to see him.

CHAPTER 94 - Unbound Knife (1)

After the spiritual veins were restored, the wind of the great turbulence in the Xuanyin Mountains at last blew into the mortal world, and suddenly people were saying all kinds of things: of those focused on the big picture, some said this was the Zhou clan's conspiracy, some said it was the Li clan's revenge, and some rather overthought things and said that a new full moon position might have opened up, and perhaps the shed skin sages were scheming against each other. But what worried more people was, now that one of the pillars of Xuanyin's great palace had fallen, who would come in to fill the vacancy? Would the immortal mountains build up a new clan? With half of Heaven's Design Pavilion collapsed, what would they do about the missing numbers? In a few years, it would be time for the Grand Selection again—would they expand admissions?

For each emptied seat, hundreds upon thousands of butts were itching to sit down. Instantly, the thoughts of anyone with a bit of money or a bit of influence were activated; they believed that the spring wind of renewal would blow into their own home and sang the praises of this ever more flourishing golden age.

But this excitement was all for other people.

The increasing prosperity and wild uproar outside had nothing to do with the Yongning Marquis Manor at present.

When Zhou Ying woke up, he first smelled a faint chamomile scent. He turned his head and saw a pot of chamomile tisane being kept warm by a small heater beside his pillow.

The old lady had been worried about not sleeping well at night, so she wouldn't drink much tea after noon. Normally she would only

drink sun-dried chamomile steeped in water with a bit of crystal sugar added for flavor.

People long unseen were strange to the eye, and sounds long unheard were confusing to the ear; only smells seemed capable of sticking a needle into a person's heart and following them for the rest of their life. As soon as he smelled this scent, even with his eyes closed, Zhou Ying knew he had come to the Marquis Manor.

He propped himself up and poured a bowl of chamomile tisane, but he couldn't taste it.

With a half-immortal's paramount spiritual sense attached to his sense of taste, when he put food in his mouth, he could know all the hands the dish had passed through, from making to carrying... How could it be that he couldn't taste a bowl of sweetened water? So he drank another mouthful and carefully attended to it. His numb sense of taste and his spiritual sense slowly awakened. In the water, the taste of the flower, of the sugar, of the implements, of the people... all gradually appeared to him. All that was missing was the smell of clove cream on her hands.

Zhou Ying squeezed the glittering and translucent little jade cup and quietly said, "Bai Ling."

The room was quiet—receiving the Marquis's order, Bai Ling had disrespected his superior and knocked him out. Now he didn't dare to show himself.

"I know you're there," Zhou Ying said. "Come out."

The room remained quiet. Only the distant strains of the Soul Calling Melody floated in from the mourning shed. After a moment, a distinctive whistling mixed in with the Soul Calling Melody, drawn out and sparse. Hearing it, Zhou Ying knew that Bai Ling had left.

“Shiyong.”

The whistling stopped.

Xi Ping said, “Has Bai Ling left? I have a few things to say to you, and then I’ll leave, too. I know you want to be alone.”

“All right.” Zhou Ying’s reactions seemed a little slow today. Out of nowhere, he said, “Did you make it in time? What did she say?”

Xi Ping didn’t respond.

Zhou Ying’s pupils contracted slightly. A little flustered, he pulled out the small piece of reincarnation wood hanging around his neck. “... Didn’t you?”

“I made it in time,” Xi Ping finally said. “First I’m going to talk to you about something else. I’ll tell you in a little while.”

Zhou Ying stared blankly. It was as if he had been in too much of a hurry and had left his soul back on the road. It hadn’t caught up to him yet, and his mind was empty, not very clear.

“If there’s any leftover reincarnation wood, give Xi Yue a piece for me. That way, next time information can’t flow freely, there’ll be someone here in Jinping to keep an eye on things for you,” Xi Ping said. “As for the piece of reincarnation wood my parents have, just tell them it’s something I carried around with me. They’ll keep it safe, and I’ll be able to see if anything goes wrong at home. For the rest... for the rest, it’s uncertain what the future holds, and anyway, with the restrictions of the demon seal, it would be hard for you to explain the whole story. How about you just don’t say anything?”

Zhou Ying knew what he meant. “I’ll let Bai Ling handle it.”

“Okay, good. Master Lin says he can give you some spiritual image masks that will cover the wearer’s spiritual image. There won’t be much of a problem getting around ascended spirits and below, though it’s hard to say for shed skins, he doesn’t dare to give a guarantee,” Xi Ping said. “The shed skin boundary is one that all ascended spirits can neither touch nor comprehend, apart from Hui Xiangjun... I’m going to Sanyue to search for her relics, not just to get the Unbound Furnace to repair Zhaoting.”

What was so great about immortals?

Mortals looked up to the immortal mountains, thinking that they were lofty, omnipotent, that to look too long was to infringe—but couldn’t the immortals also die terrified? Didn’t they also feel love, hate, greed, and anger? Outside the Riverward, inside the Law Breaker, couldn’t the rules of heaven be pulled apart?

He didn’t believe that the mountains couldn’t fall.

“If you want the Unbound Furnace, have Lin Chi and Wen Fei take the aboveboard path, submit a request to the Principal Peak, then contact Bai Ling. Don’t sneak around.” Zhou Ying had drunk half the pot of camomile tisane, and the empty look in his eyes had settled. “Lin Chi shouldn’t think making tools is as easy as lifting a finger. Nearly all ascended spirit immortal tools require rare materials. Once he gets started, Moon Plated Peak’s accounts won’t be so easy to balance. Then there’s the fact that after the business with the Zhao family, the immortal mountains will monitor Heavenly Questions. Don’t get your head turned by how covert you think you are. The demon seal was laid down by those two old fools from Xuanyin Mountain.”

Xi Ping knew that he had “woken up.”

Having said this, Zhou Ying was silent for a long moment, seeming to be hunting through his marrow for a bit of courage. Xi Ping was

also silent, waiting patiently.

They weren't in a rush, anyway.

After a long time, Zhou Ying at last quietly said, "What did the old lady... say to you?"

He had heard that when a person died, they could remember all the people they had known and all the events they had experienced in their life. He didn't know whether she would have remembered him for a moment, and he had never dared to think closely about whether, since he never came, the old lady might have guessed something, whether she would have resented him.

He was like a candidate for a county imperial examination who, though the roll hadn't yet been released, already knew that he had failed.

Xi Ping softly said a few sentences into his ear, then said, "San-ge, I'm going to see my dad."

Squeezing the empty cup, Zhou Ying sat alone in the shadow of the guest room's bed curtain. He waved a hand that seemed to have rusted toward Xi Ping. Then he took off the reincarnation wood and sealed it in his mustard seed, cutting off Xi Ping's consciousness.

The green jade cup shattered.

The Marquis, keeping vigil for the night in the mourning hall, was repeatedly stroking the piece of reincarnation wood only slightly larger than a game piece.

The old lady had been clutching this in her hand just before her death. It had taken ages to pry it out. According to Xi Yue, his Xiaobao had had a profound connection to this kind of wood, had used this thing as a communication device. His Highness had used

an array to send it over along with a cracked piece of colored glass... as if these were old relics.

What was inside?

The Marquis considered it, then also smeared a drop of blood from his fingertip on it. He waited quietly.

Where he couldn't see, Xi Ping's consciousness was roaming beside him. Upon seeing this, he softly called out, "Dad."

The paper money burning in the brazier crackled, and people came and went outside the mourning shed, so the Marquis didn't hear anything.

Great Wan was Great Wan. Apart from a dying person's fading spirit, where he could briefly shelter, there was no refuge for him here—and it was no wonder that the old lady had taken him for a person come from the underworld. On the point of death, people likely had some unusual sensitivity.

"San-ge said that back then, you colluded with people from Northern Li and were planning to flee to the Beijue Mountains to raise sheep. Pardon my oversight, father, you really can't judge a person by appearances. My jaw dropped when I heard that," Xi Ping said to himself. "Tsk, why didn't you go? A big bowl of fermented milk and a big chunk of mutton would be plenty. It's a delightful thought. If the Beijue Mountains had produced a rare wonder like me, all the hundred-year-old or thousand-year-old snow lotuses or magic funguses would have had to move aside. Those mountains could stand up and claim to have sturdier backs than all the rest."

Naturally no one would make a clamor around a mourning hall, and the Marquis also didn't speak, so the scene gave Xi Ping the impression that the Marquis really was quietly listening to him talk.

So he said a great deal all at once, practically all of it irrelevant nonsense—when Xi Ping came home, he would usually take off his head and hang it up along with his outer clothes, babbling about nothing to the point.

When a whole pan of paper money had been burned, outside they began to sing the Soul Calling Melody.

“Raise the casket, hang two mats, shelter it fully seven days. The Great Way touches Heaven and sends you back home—”

Xi Ping stopped talking. He suddenly remembered that when Jiangli’s bunch of self-aggrandizing little evil cultivators had been making trouble at the Azure Dragon Towers, they’d had the corpses sing precisely this tune to start it off.

Back then he had thought that the corpses wailing at midnight hadn’t come from the land of the living, and now he himself was no longer part of the “land of the living.” Hearing the song again, he actually felt a trace of affection.

“If that silly girl Chen Baishao, who was too blind to see what was right in front of her eyes, were still living, she’d have to kneel and burn incense for me. I’m the genuine ‘Tai Sui’, much more purebred than the one she blindly worshipped back then,” Xi Ping said to the Marquis. “If she’s watching from heaven, I suppose she’s happy now... If she could look after our old lady on account of me having gotten revenge for her, that would be good. I figure Grandmother would like hearing her sing.”

The Marquis was a little lost in thought, cocking an ear to listen to the Soul Calling Melody, massaging the piece of reincarnation wood, not knowing what use it was.

“Dad, I’m going far away again.” Xi Ping said to the Marquis, suddenly becoming serious again. “Can you and Mom wait a few

more years?”

Just then, a page walked in and requested instructions from the Marquis about something. The Marquis came back to himself and nodded to the page.

“Fine, it’s settled. A man keeps his word, anyone who doesn’t pay his debts is a puppy,” Xi Ping said. “I don’t have my knees or my head with me right now, I can’t kowtow, so I’ll have to owe you. One day...”

Before, he had imagined that san-ge would bring the reincarnation wood with his consciousness in it home and make a few little knickknacks, put one each in his parents’ and his grandmother’s rooms. That way, he could be a lucky charm for them like the karma beasts, guard the house and expel evil, come over when he wasn’t doing anything. Each night before they went to sleep, when they had sent the servants away, he would come to creak a bit, act cute, pay his respects.

Now he no longer wanted that.

Why?

Why, when he had been born as a mighty human, did he have to skulk around, a ghost unfit to see the light of day or speak to people?

He had lost the body he had received from his parents at the bottom of the Impassable Sea. How was he supposed to explain that?

The bailiffs had determined that A-Xiang’s grandfather was disorderly, the immortal clan had determined that the Chen family’s green ore field should belong to the Zhaos, and Xuanyin’s Bell of

Tribulation was high above it all, determining who was a god and who was a demon.

Wasn't that ridiculous?

The bailiffs and the lackeys at the former water transport and canal departments had already been thoroughly dealt with by the previous emperor, and now the Zhao family was a sinking ship that the rats were fleeing, waiting for the slaving vultures to swoop down and gorge themselves. The Bell of Tribulation's turn had come.

Xi Ping looked profoundly at old Madam Xi's memorial tablet standing to one side and engraved her image in his mind. Then he callously withdrew his consciousness.

Mom, Dad, Grandmother, forgive your child for not having the time to act cute.

There was a lump in his chest as firm as the four spiritual mountain ranges, an eternal knife that would hum ceaselessly unless it drank blood.

First he had to go make a scene.

What kind of self-deceiving lucky charm was he supposed to be, sneaking around like this?

Lucky my ass.

There would come a day when he would come to the front gate in one piece, kneel before his grandmother's memorial tablet and kowtow several times, then let his dad give him a beating with the discipline rod—for how unfilial he had been in going so far away.

If he couldn't do that... he wouldn't come back.

His spiritual sense was faintly touched. A strange yet familiar person was holding the reincarnation wood where his consciousness was hidden. Xi Yue came after him, clutching a piece of blood-soaked reincarnation wood.

The half-puppet he had abandoned along the way was red-eyed, babbling as he cursed him up and down.

“Hey, the little mute has learned to curse.” Xi Ping laughed, making Xi Yue kneel and cover his eyes, gathering blood or tears.

Xi Ping didn’t bother him. He withdrew his consciousness.

“Do not linger—”

Where no one could hear, he began to sing, finishing that Soul Calling Melody. It wasn’t to bid his grandmother farewell. He was sending himself off, full-voiced, the sound of it jubilant: “A lifetime’s joys and sorrows are like illusions. Go to the West... go to the West!”

To the West—he headed toward Western Chu.

At the end of the seventh month, the harvest was about to begin along the lower reaches of the Xia River. Wei Chengxiang, with her Silver Tray Lottery traveling bag on her back, walked over a ridge on the border of Tao County.

Reasonably speaking, the soil on both banks of the river ought to have been fertile, but there were too many cultivators coming and going in the area of the Xia River each year. Though the vast majority of them had their own spiritual stones, it was inevitable that a few impoverished evil cultivators would “pilfer heaven’s order.” As time went on, the land had become more and more barren each year. It could only sparsely grow a few half-dead rice shoots.

This year, there weren't even any sparse rise shoots. After the Silver Moon had shone, all of Tao County's vitality had nearly dried up.

Wei Chengxiang looked around and saw nothing but devastation. Nearby, a whole family was carefully turning over the earth, hoping to harvest a bit of grain—this year, they hadn't even been able to earn money at the Wild Fox Country Great Market. They would have to rely on begging to get through the winter... Many people might not make it through.

As they turned the earth, they prayed to the local forbidden evil god.

“Bless us, Tai Sui...”

“Tai Sui...”

With her spiritual sense gathered in her ears, a half-immortal could hear whispers a hundred meters away. Wei Chengxiang thought, “He doesn't like it when people call him that. He'll be mad.”

Just then, someone knocked on her spirit. She heard the senior say into her ear, “What are you up to?”

“Measuring the area of Tao County,” Wei Chengxiang answered, not showing alarm. “I want to calculate how many spiritual stones it would take to heal this earth, and I want to see how many people have suffered from the disaster... Senior, have Great Wan's spiritual veins been restored?”

“Yes,” Xi Ping said. Across the river, he was much more “free.” No matter where he was, he didn't need to worry about turning into a mute while he talked. And after the Wild Fox Country Great Market, practically all the reincarnation wood in Tao County had once held his consciousness. Though Xi Ping couldn't use spiritual energy the way he had been able to inside the Law Breaker, at least within Tao

County, his consciousness could wander all over following the people calling for Tai Sui.

“Stop measuring. Even if you measure it all, you don’t have that much money. Get ready to come with me. We’re going to Dongheng’s Sanyue to get the money.”

“But how will they get through this year?”

“This year, it was the Silver Moon that seized heaven’s order. Sanyue will allocate funds for disaster relief—and we’ve just picked up the Zhaos, so we’ll have them pay out some of their ill-gotten gains, too, cough up enough pocket lint to cook a winter’s worth of porridge. Don’t worry, I’ll look after it.”

You had to leave behind what you took. Afterward, if he found someone pilfering heaven’s order, he would keep them to use as fertilizer.

Wei Chengxiang wasn’t very sure why this senior from Great Wan wanted to look after people in Chu. “Senior, they’re calling you Tai Sui...”

Xi Ping said, “Then I *am* Tai Sui.”

Wei Chengxiang stared blankly, remembering that when she had first started to call him Tai Sui, this person had groused and shrieked as if someone had stepped on his tail. “Senior, why aren’t you angry?”

Xi Ping indifferently said, “It’s only a name.”

The fake Tai Sui had died beneath the Bell of Tribulation. Now, he was the real Tai Sui, and he was going to smash the Bell of Tribulation.

CHAPTER 95 - Unbound Knife (2)

The nation of Chu, the county of Yu Family Bend.

Yu Family Bend was located to the northeast of Tao County, somewhat higher on the reaches of the Xia River, squeezed among the mountains.

Looked at from above, there was hardly any level ground in the whole county. If there were ten mu of land, that was enough to throw together a town. If the locals wanted to borrow an onion from their neighbors, they'd have to climb several dozen steps. Thin, zigzagging mountain roads like threads linked different parts of the county together, presenting a terrifying sight, as if they would snap when the wind blew. Most people would scrape together a few bits of bare earth in their front or back yards, planting a bit of rations wherever they saw an opening. Their livelihoods, meanwhile, mostly relied on two ores. In the west of Yu Family Bend were iron ore mines, surrounded by the gold smelting factories that relied on them. It was said that one third of Great Chu's Moon Plated Gold came from here. Toward the north, meanwhile, was a big green ore mountain carved into terraced fields that produced a large quantity of medicinal herbs annually.

In this world, apart from kidnapping people for ransom and practicing evil arts, there truly weren't many professions that brought in more ill-gotten gains than gold smelting factories or green ore fields. Yu Family Bend was a piece of precious land with a foul atmosphere.

In the southwest corner of Yu Family Bend, there was a hill a little taller than the others around it that was called Longevity Peak, a name picked out by some mean person that seemed to be hinting at something—this hill was bald.

Perhaps there was something wrong with its fengshui; this Longevity Peak often attracted lightning strikes, now and then experiencing a fire, burning it full of bumps and potholes starting from midway up. There was also a dilapidated temple at the summit, of which only charred ruins remained. The ragged banner hanging at the door was blackened, sobbing when the wind blew. The local villagers avoided this place, especially at night. Everyone said the dilapidated temple was haunted.

The westering sun had already sunk amid the mountains. The evening wind was a little chilly. A young person with a big wooden case on their back went up along stone steps overgrown with weeds.

The young person took off a worn-out bamboo hat with holes in it and looked up at the inscribed board on the dilapidated temple. Empty-handed, they drew a few strokes in the air. Spiritual energy stirred at this person's fingertips, and a talisman without medium took shape and nimbly flew out. There was a crash, and the dilapidated temple, like the moon reflected in the water, was shattered by the talisman. The charred courtyard walls vanished, revealing a small building quite full of Western Chu style.

At the door of the small building stood a pair of dwarf half-puppets around three chi high. They might have been born identical twins, or they might have been altered to look the same afterward. Sticking out long, thin tongues like a snake's, they watched the visitor covetously. In unison, they said, "Welcome, visitor. Please come in."

It turned out that this was a way station specifically devoted to receiving cultivators, and it was rather haughty, too—many of the upstarts of Western Chu filled themselves up with elixirs and spiritual stones for decades to open their spiritual eyes. These people didn't cultivate; they opened their spiritual eyes purely to extend their lifespans and preserve their youthful looks. They didn't know a thing about talismans, arrays, and inscriptions. They were

more ordinary than ordinary. There was a camouflage array on the outside of the small building. You could only glimpse its true appearance if you had the skills to cut through the camouflage, clearly showing that those fake cultivators weren't welcome.

“The half-puppets get tipped with spiritual stones.” Xi Ping’s voice sounded in the ears of the young person—of Wei Chengxiang. “Give them some.”

Wei Chengxiang already felt she had wasted spiritual stones drawing a talisman to enter. “I won’t. The local customs are inappropriate.”

Xi Ping said, laughing, “Aren’t you worried they’ll put something in your food?”

Wei Chengxiang lowered her head, pretending not to see the half-puppets’ expressions. “I’m poor. They can poison me to death, and I still won’t give them anything.”

This cheapskate found a dark corner to sit in and put aside the big wooden case containing the Silver Tray Lottery. This thing was cumbersome, and it took up space. It quickly drew sidelong glances from people nearby. She took no notice, letting Xi Ping help her read through the menu written in Chu writing, which she didn’t understand very well. She memorized many characters and ordered the cheapest noodles.

In a way station specifically devoted to receiving cultivators, the food usually had medicinal herbs added to it, but the cheap dishes didn’t; they were purely for satisfying hunger. The half-puppet, not receiving a tip, had understood that this was a pauper, so he rolled his eyes and said, “Pay first. We take spiritual stones.”

“Half a qian of fourth-grade green ore.” Wei Chengxiang pointed to the unfamiliar Chu writing on the menu. Frowning, she grumbled,

“Why not just go out looting?”

Then, in full public gaze, she took out a small set of scales of the kind used in medicine shops. Barehanded, she scraped a few crumbs off a piece of low grade green ore the size of a fingernail and weighed them—no more and no less, precisely half a qian. Then she carefully gathered the crumbs into a paper bag and offered it to the half-puppet. “Here.”

The half-puppet: “...”

Xi Ping: “...”

In the field of miserliness, even Pang Wenchang would have to concede defeat.

The half-puppet recovered and snatched away the paper bag, then left, cursing.

“Wei-laoban,” Xi Ping said with a sigh, “you did after all enter the Way eating blue jade.”

“I was young and ignorant, and you didn’t warn me. If I had known back then how much blue jade cost, I wouldn’t have taken it even if it meant turning into a rotten melon.” Wei Chengxiang still grudged the cost. “Senior, couldn’t the person you arranged for me to see have gone somewhere else? Did we have to come to such an expensive place?”

If she had been on her own, she could have gotten all the way to Dongheng nibbling on a pocketful of flatbread. This meal cost enough to buy a whole cartload of noodles!

“This was the place he chose. This is an important person, very cautious, unwilling to show himself outside of his own territory,” Xi Ping said unhurriedly. “The Zhao family remnants came ashore in Yu

Family Bend, and we'll have to rely on them to get into Dongheng. This is on our way.”

Wei Chengxiang asked, “Who is he?”

Xi Ping said, “Have you heard of ‘worm masters’?”

Hearing this, Wei Chengxiang automatically looked up at the dwarf half-puppets bustling around the shop.

Having traveled widely, of course she knew what a ‘worm master’ was—it was a specific kind of toolmaking path; the materials it used weren’t spiritual beasts or spiritual stones, but living creatures.

When evil cultivators pilfered heaven’s order in a place for a long time, it would impact the surrounding mortals, especially pregnant women and small children. Newborns were often deformed, and babies would contract peculiar diseases. If they weren’t taken care of, they would soon die young. So there was an unorthodox practice that made these half-dead children into half-puppets. Well-made half-puppets even had cultivation and magic powers as soon as they were created.

Because these half-puppets were also called “earworm half-puppets,” the toolmaking masters were known as “worm masters.”

Using living people as toolmaking materials decreased one’s merit, so the profession of the worm masters had many restrictions, the first among them being that they couldn’t deliberately harm people and could only use “living ghosts”—in other words, people who had been infected by evil influence and were dying. On one hand, worm masters pulled these dying people back into the human world, performing a life-saving miracle; on the other hand, these half-puppets could only live by eating spiritual stones, and they were often taken as costly slaves and ill-used, living lives worse than death, like Xi Yue when he had been little. So it was hard to say

whether what the worm masters did was good or bad. Anyway, they were always carrying on with all kinds of evil cultivators, and in the eyes of the orthodox sects, they were all just as bad as each other.

Wei Chengxiang's heart tightened, remembering the full moon scab she had found on the child in Tao County. "What?"

"After what you said last time, I looked around and found that quite a few worm masters had come to Tao County," Xi Ping said. "The way not even a blade of grass was left growing where the Silver Moon had passed reminded me right away of pilfering heaven's order. I suspect they've all come looking for 'materials.'"

Wei Chengxiang said, "But doesn't 'pilfering heaven's order' happen in the long term?"

Spiritual energy in the mortal world was sparse and unevenly distributed to begin with. Even if the Silver Moon had drained all of Tao County dry in one gulp, there was no lid over it. The wind would soon blow spiritual energy from other places there. The frail seedlings dead in the ground would be hard to bring back to life, but the mortals shouldn't have been so easily impacted.

"I don't know... He's here, ask him."

Hardly had Xi Ping spoken than Wei Chengxiang smelled a scent of pine. Then her vision blurred, and a person seemed to appear out of nowhere across from her.

This person was wearing gloves and a brocade robe that was at odds with the surroundings; he was so ceremonious it was a little odd. He was tall and thin, with a limber figure and precisely-sculpted features, but put together, for some reason, all of this... wasn't especially attractive.

It was the kind of unattractive where you couldn't pick out anything wrong with him, but looking at him long enough was a little spine-chilling.

The half-puppet who was about to serve Wei Chengxiang all but knelt when he saw the newcomer. He turned and ran, not daring to serve the tampered-with food.

The newcomer smiled at Wei Chengxiang. His features seemed to have parted ways—only his mouth moved when he smiled. His eyes were very direct, and his voice was neither masculine nor feminine. “Nice to meet you, miss. Please pass along my regards to His Highness the Snake King and the ‘Grand Duke Tai Sui’ behind you.”

Wei Chengxiang raised her eyebrows—it had been a long time since anyone had exposed her identity.

“Fine,” said Xi Ping, “pass along my regards to the Mr. ‘Heartless’ behind this puppet.”

Wei Chengxiang was startled and furtively asked him, “This is a dummy? He’s Chu’s most mysterious worm master, Bu Zhichou?”

“Settle down,” said Xi Ping. “When he comes to Wild Fox Country’s Great Market to buy stuff, he still has to pay protection money to the Snake King’s Immortal Palace.”

Wei Chengxiang: “...”

She could guess that Great Wan’s government forces had infiltrated the Snake King’s Immortal Palace, and furthermore that they had a profound connection to this Senior Tai Sui. So she nodded coolly to the puppet and said a few polite phrases as instructed.

The puppet then said, “I know what you want to ask. It’s true, we have all come for the ‘living ghosts’ left by the Silver Moon.”

The corner of Wei Chengxiang's eye twitched.

The puppet said, "The turbid energy of the Silver Moon is heavy. The place it has swept will become a Moon Shadow. Within the next half year at least, spiritual energy won't be able to flow in from the surroundings. I'm afraid all the little ones three years old and under will turn into little dolls."

Wei Chengxiang blurted out, "Dongheng's Sanyue..."

...isn't going to do anything about it?

"Don't talk nonsense," Xi Ping interrupted her in her spirit. "Many little brats die during famine years. When the harvest is bad, people will eat their children, or bury them alive when there's an epidemic. There's nothing new about it. What does this amount to? Tell Bu Zhichou that when he comes to the Immortal Palace's night feasts, no matters what business he does, half the cost will be deducted. Ask him what to do."

Hearing this, the puppet smiled, two frightening lumps of flesh appearing on his face. As if he had been prepared in advance, he took a roll of sweet-smelling silk. "I've always said that evil cultivators aren't necessarily any more hard-hearted than parents—here, a spirit-gathering array."

Wei Chengxiang was just about to reach out to take it, but the puppet held her back. "But let me warn you, your excellency, this isn't worth your while."

Wei Chengxiang gave him a fake smile, snatched the silk, and opened it up. She saw an array meticulously drawn on the silk. As if he had been worried she wouldn't understand, he had very considerately pasted on a map of Tao County.

She only took a glance, and her heart sank: the array needed an astronomical number of white spirits.

“The spirit-gathering array needs time to gather spiritual energy. The array must be completed by the Mid-Autumn Festival at latest.” Softly, the puppet sarcastically said, “Alas, it’s already the end of the seventh month. I’m afraid there won’t be time to transport spiritual stones from the Sanyue Immortal Mountains—at any rate, I gave you the idea. You can’t take back the conditions you laid out.”

“You...” When Wei Chengxiang looked up, the seat across from her was already empty. The puppet had vanished.

Just then, the dwarf half-puppet conscientiously brought her food in a big bowl like a serving basin, accompanied by a dish of beef shank, half a jin of ham, a number of side dishes, and an extra pot of top quality Shaoxing wine whose fragrance assailed the nostrils.

But Wei Chengxiang had lost her appetite. Both of them were silent for a while.

At this time, she heard a cultivator quietly saying nearby, “... I hear there’s a branch of Great Wan’s Zhaos in Yu Family Bend. The Yu family patriarch personally received them, and someone even came from Sanyue’s inner sect.”

“So much ceremony?”

“They’re one of Xuanyin’s four big families. They carry a hidden realm wherever they go. Heavens, only the Zhaos themselves can enter it, and once they’re inside, no one can find them. The Zhao family showed themselves in Yu Family Bend because they want to make friends. Who doesn’t want to eat such a big piece of fatty meat? Thousands of years of the accumulated resources of an orthodox clan—how many good things must they have?”

Wei Chengxiang took a deep breath, forced herself to rally, and began to eat like a whirlwind, making a clean sweep. As if to distract herself, she picked up the others' topic and asked Xi Ping, "What is the Yu family? A big family of Sanyue?"

"In Chu, there are no so-called 'big families' apart from the Xiangs," Xi Ping said. "They're talking about the local thugs around here."

Chu and Wan were neighboring countries, but while there was only a river separating them, their landscapes and geography were very different.

In Wan, apart from Jingzhou, which was connected the Xuanyin Mountain Range, and some mountainous areas in Hongyin and Shuozhou to the north, the other regions were all plains. There were nine great provinces in the country in all, with prefectures and counties under them. A canal passed from north to south, transportation was well-developed. If a wind rose in one place, in a few days it would have flowed throughout the whole country. Some powers—for example, the former water transport department—were laid along the canal system; others, meanwhile, were trans-provincial associations of officials and merchants with a complex web of connections everywhere, linking up in all directions; you could talk about it for a day and a night without feeling that you had explained it all properly.

But on this side of the Xia River, Chu's local customs were far more isolationist.

There were many mountains and hills here. Before, when there had been no steam engines to cut through mountains and make roads, it would take several days riding a cart to get from one side of a mountain to the other. Both transportation and communication had been difficult. Because of this, since ancient times, Chu hadn't had big provinces, only various prefectures and counties delimited by the mountains. To come and go between different counties, you

often had to trek over mountain ranges. There was layer upon layer of obstacles. Local thugs had great power.

Above everything was Western Chu's Xiang family dominating Dongheng's Sanyue, divinities in heaven, emperors ordained by heaven; and every place also had its own local despot.

Yu Family Bend's local despots were the local big family, the Yu clan. They occupied this precious land and had overbearing riches and power. The clan leader was a half-immortal who had become so without authorization... of the sort that didn't cultivate, which didn't prevent him from living with greater pomp and ceremony than the ascended spirits and shed skins of the Xuanyin Mountains—in the county of Yu Family Bend, there were several memorial halls consecrated just to the worship of the clan leader. At the doors of the gold smelting furnaces were big statues of the clan leader over a zhang high; if you hadn't known better, you would have thought he had invented the Gold Imitation technique. It was said that this clan leader also had a granddaughter who had married a prince in Dongheng and given birth to a supposedly very promising son, who had entered the West Peak of Sanyue's three Principal Peaks—East, Central, and West.

Xi Ping added: "I think that Xiang Zhao whose bones may or may not have all been collected came from the West Peak."

"I understand. Boundless prospects," Wei Chengxiang said. Then she sighed. "Why doesn't Tao County have a local thug with such overbearing riches and power?"

If there had been one, they might have thought of a way to plunder without having to go far.

Xi Ping thought: Tao County is remote and backward, but next door isn't. And next door, a crowd from a rich and arrogant big family of Xuanyin has just arrived.

Right now, in the Snake King's Immortal Palace, the "Snake King" had become Lao Tian, while Xu Rucheng had followed orders and joined with another batch of Luwu to infiltrate the hidden realm where the Zhaos were hidden.

Today, Yu Family Bend's clan leader had entertained the Zhao clan leader. The clan leader had attended the feast with a few half-immortals from Heaven's Design Pavilion. While they were away, Xu Rucheng had quickly placed invisible spying talismans everywhere.

The Zhaos returned earlier than he had expected.

The Zhao family's young mistress Zhao Qindan had nailed her features in place to keep her face from slipping. As soon as they returned to the Zhao family hidden realm where they were temporarily staying, before she had even found her footing, her temper erupted: "Father, what do they mean by it?"

Zhao Qindan was the daughter of the clan leader of the Yuzhou Zhao clan. The Yuzhou Zhao clan was far from the main family. Though they had relied on their distance from the capital and the lack of oversight to secretly raise quite a few half-immortals in their clan, they still hadn't dared to set their sights on Xuanyin Mountain's Grand Selection. During the Grand Selection six years ago, the clan had as usual submitted the names of a few juniors of the appropriate age at random, among them Zhao Qindan.

They had submitted the names, but no one had thought anything would come of it. How could they know that this time, General Zhi would be personally overseeing the Grand Selection? No one knew what criteria this sword god had used to pick people, but at any rate, when the selection card had been delivered to Yuzhou, the whole family had been as stunned as the Yongning Marquis Manor.

Zhao Qindan's family background, appearance, natural endowments... even her luck, all of them were remarkable. In the Latent Cultivation Temple, she had been among the first few disciples to open her spiritual eyes. She had gone right onto Heaven's Design Pavilion's roster. Upon leaving the mountains, as was only to be expected, she had joined the Yuzhou branch.

There were many members of the Zhao clan in the Yuzhou branch. The assistant commander was a senior who had come from the main family in Jinping. When a young girl like this arrived, it naturally goes without saying that she was doted on in myriad ways, everyone praising her and giving way to her. Normally whenever anything good came from the inner sect, she would have first pick. She was never permitted to touch any dirty or tiring work.

She had previously believed she was a one-in-a-million proud daughter of heaven.

Who could have thought that worldly affairs could be so inconstant? The Zhao family's old forebear had fallen, and the former "great immortal clan" had become the scorn and target of all, a rat crossing the street. She had crossed west over the Xia River along with a few seniors in Heaven's Design Pavilion, from then on becoming a rootless traveler in an alien land.

The Chu were so rude. A person whose vision was limited to a mere county town had actually said right to her parents' faces that they wanted her to marry the Yu family's imperial grandson in the inner sect, whom no one knew anything about!

"What are they? Are they worth..."

Clan Leader Zhao waved a hand, interrupting her. "No matter what the mother's family background is, he is still an imperial grandson of Great Chu, and our family is only a branch family from the border. On the subject of family status, it would count as a step up for us.

Never mind that His Highness is an inner sect disciple of Sanyue's Principal Peak..”

“Ha!” Zhao Qindan gave a cold laugh. “An inner sect disciple who hasn't managed to open his spiritual eyes after eight years among the immortal mountains?”

This ridicule came from the fact that immortal sects' inner sects were all unreachably high—excepting Dongheng's Sanyue.

Xuanyin recruited one class of disciples every ten years. No matter which family the disciples came from, the Latent Cultivation Temple only let them stay for three hundred sixty days. If they couldn't open their spiritual eyes during that time, they would be sent back to where they came from; there would be no second chance. Even if you were a prince or princess, you still had to wake up before dawn.

But Sanyue had no so-called “Grand Selection.” They took disciples based on “predestination”—in other words, it depended on connections. After the disciples went there, they had to pay a tribute to their teachers. For example, the West Peak, whose “fine environment nurtured great talents,” didn't require its established foundation disciples to pay; if they performed some trifling work, they could even collect spiritual stones to use. Disciples below an established foundation were separated into four grades according to their natural endowments. For the top grade, each person had to pay three liang of white spirits monthly. Each grade down, the “private tutoring fees” doubled; the more useless you were, the more you paid.

If you could afford it, you could hang around the immortal mountains until you died of old age.

The Yu family's imperial grandson nephew was of the third class. He had to pay Sanyue nearly a hundred fifty liang of white spirits annually—what did that mean in practice? Calculating the money

value according to market prices, next door in Tao County, the entire county's annual tax revenue might amount to that much. They had been paying for eight years. A green teenager had gone in, and now he had grown a beard and was still a mortal; what willpower!

But Clan Leader Zhao paused and said tactfully, "After all, we're outsiders. If we want to put down roots in Sanyue, our best choice is to make ties of marriage with the Xiang family."

Zhao Qindan understood her father's implication and stared at him in disbelief for a long moment. "So you're agreeing?"

CHAPTER 96 - Unbound Knife (3)

“You want to marry me to a mortal,” Zhao Qindan said, her voice suddenly sharp. “What about the rest of the clan? All my shixiongs?”

Clan Leader Zhao unconsciously avoided her gaze and haltingly said, “No one can remain a mortal forever...”

This was true—it was only that the lifespans of cats and dogs weren’t long enough; if they could have lived fifty or sixty years while being fed white spirits and being stuffed full of elixirs daily despite the cost, they might also have entered the Way before the pills killed them.

Zhao Qindan, looking at her unfamiliar father, suddenly thought, irrelevantly: Turtles have long lives. Maybe someone has fed one elixirs. I wonder how many turtles the cultivation of Dongheng’s Sanyue’s so-called “inner sect” disciples would amount to.

“To enter Heaven’s Design Pavilion, you need to go through three rounds of examinations, but I didn’t, because I was the third person in my class at the Latent Cultivation Temple to open my spiritual eyes. The general commander of Jinping’s Heaven’s Design Pavilion personally exempted me from the examinations,” Zhao Qindan said quietly. “The inner sect’s Green Pool Peak doesn’t take people from our family, but when Duanrui-shi...when Princess Duanrui came to teach scripture, she said that if I could find a Way of the Heart, Green Pool Peak could give me a reception order. Aren’t I good enough?”

“Of course our Dandan is...”

“Then why don’t you think I can protect our family on my own? You’re treating me like an expensive cake being sold in exchange

for an entry ticket to Sanyue!”

“Qindan,” the clan leader shouted, expression becoming stern, “impudence!”

Zhao Qindan straightened her neck and glared at him.

Clan Leader Zhao had to make many decisions. He was beset on all sides. He suddenly ran out of patience to debate with his headstrong daughter.

Had their family had still been in Great Wan, still like the sun at noon, she could have done whatever she wanted, no one would have quarreled with her no matter what she ranted and raved about; everyone had coddled her, anyway. But things were different now. If they couldn't put down roots in Western Chu as soon as possible, the blessings of their forebears and the accumulated resources of a hundred generations would quickly turn them into a target!

A young person's character was lighter than paper. She had only slightly outdone a handful of her peers, received a few words of polite praise, and she'd simply forgotten what her own surname was. And she wanted to “protect her family” — easier said than done. Never mind her, would even Xuanyin's Princess Duanrui dare to say something like this? Among the whole crowd of ascended spirit masters, perhaps only Flying Jade Peak's Zhi Xiu would dare to say such a thing — all on his own, with no other mouths to feed, he could brag as much as he liked.

The Zhao family had fallen because their shed skin forebear had lost his mind and become a demon. Nothing would do any good but another shed skin elder arising. By the time this cicada had shed her skin, there was no saying whether there would be any cicadas left on earth.

“Marriages are the will of the parents. Where does your opinion come into it? Your spiritual imprint and horoscope card have already been sent to Dongheng via the Yu family. I have already consulted on this matter with the clan’s Exalted. For now, don’t go out and run around. Tomorrow I’ll have your mother come to make arrangements, have someone come to teach you Chu writing and the Xiang family’s history and rules.”

Zhao Qindan’s expression turned from fury to resentment. With emphasis, she said, “If worse comes to worst, I’ll return this body to the two of you.”

Clan Leader Zhao took no notice of her petty threat. With a cold laugh, he turned and left.

The girl was so spoiled she thought she knew everything. She had grown a little rotten.

A vein pulsed in Zhao Qindan’s head. She raised her sword, ready to charge outside, but two shixionsgs who had been in Heaven’s Design Pavilion before came toward her and blocked her way.

She called them “shixiong” according to Xuanyin’s rules, but in fact in the family’s generational rankings, they were older than her father, and one of them had even established his foundation while crossing the river westward. There was a major boundary between them; he could stop her with a mere raise of the hand.

“Dandan, don’t get hung up on this.” The established foundation cultivator had a hundred years of cultivation behind him; his mind and tone were both much calmer than a mortal’s. As he remorselessly placed a prohibition in front of the gate to Zhao Qindan’s rooms, he counseled her pleasantly: “This will amount to you joining Sanyue’s inner sect. You can continue cultivating in the inner sect after this. Won’t it be better than in Heaven’s Design

Pavilion? Since there's a shortcut, why should we go far afield when what we seek is close at hand? Don't you agree?"

His manner was gentle, giving Zhao Qindan the false impression that she could talk it over with him, so Young Mistress Zhao pleaded bitterly: "Shixiong, why do we have to climb up this miserable offshoot of the Xiang family? Can't we just guard our family's hidden realm? Please, talk to my father. I'll work hard to cultivate, day and night.."

The established foundation waved a hand. Smiling just as usual, he said, "What are you saying? How could our Dandan bear such hardship?"

Zhao Qindan froze.

When she had just joined Heaven's Design Pavilion, she had run up against Great Wan's unrest. Evil cultivators and common people hoodwinked by evil cultivators were everywhere. Her shixionsgs were using up bag after bag of spiritual stones and medicine to treat wounds; Heaven's Design Pavilion was short on people.

Everyone else was in dire straits, but she was protected by her shixionsgs.

Back then, they had used just this tone to say "That place is filthy, don't let Dandan go" and "Disorderly citizens are a thorny problem, don't bring her along for such dirty work.."

It turned out that pampering never came out of nowhere. When she had been a cherished delicate flower, the people responsible for her had been keeping accounts. Now the time had come for her to repay them.

With a snap of his fingers, the established foundation sent a mind clearing talisman and a sleep talisman flying into the center of Zhao

Qindan's brow, knocking her down without compromise. He collected her spiritual stones and sword. He waved a hand very gently, and a wind rolled Zhao Qindan up and took her properly back to her room. He attentively swept her room with his consciousness; the incense burner and the cooler automatically lit and opened; even the noise of the chiming clock became softer.

Then he added another prohibition outside, to make sure the person inside wouldn't be able to escape even if she had wings. He made a "quiet" gesture toward the page next to him, who had come to give something to the young mistress.

"Don't give her any more spiritual stones. She won't have any use for them for the moment." As if afraid of disturbing someone's pleasant dreams, the established foundation kept his voice very low. "Give the fruit to a maid and have it kept on ice. This damn place is too hot."

The stupid-looking page—Xu Rucheng—caught up and quickly agreed. He ran off, minding his own business. Inwardly he was sighing incessantly, feeling that this sequence matched the plots of the operas he had seen when he was a child. After all this fuss, not only were the young mistresses in the operas not free, the young mistresses in Heaven's Design Pavilion weren't free, either. The words "young mistress" didn't mean anything good.

Just then, Tai Sui's voice sounded in his ear without warning: "The Zhaos have pretty good judgment."

Xu Rucheng's face was expressionless: the uninvited guest had come again.

Great Wan had issued them mysterious wooden chips, the size of a copper coin. Nothing could be used to transport them; someone had come in person specifically to bring them across the river. If you spilled your blood on them, you could use your spirit to contact an

unfathomable “senior” whenever you wanted. Also, when it was inconvenient for you to use spiritual energy, you could go through this senior to contact other colleagues who had the wooden chips—of course, they could only be used abroad.

The wooden chips were limited. In all, they were only given to a few people in charge. When Xu Rucheng had first gotten hold of one, he had felt extremely honored. He had gone out of his way to bathe and change, recite his memorized self-introduction several times, before finally spilling his blood. Then he’d heard a familiar voice that made his head hurt: “If you’d dawdled any longer, I was about to fall asleep. Well, Xu Xiangxiang,⁶⁵ isn’t hearing from me a nice surprise?”

It had not been a nice surprise; Xu Rucheng had been dumbfounded, feeling as if the top of his skull had been cleaved by a lightning bolt on the spot: how could the senior he’d looked forward to meeting for ages be the rotten tree spirit who’d tricked him into a heart demon oath? And his lord and Mr. Bai had also been deluded by him!

He stood there watching as his colleagues were bewitched by this evil god, privately saying how reliable this senior code-named “Tai Sui” was, something about “While reticent, he has an answer for every question, so unfathomable”... Get the fuck out with that “reticent and unfathomable”!

This thoroughly wicked evil god had given him eight hundred nicknames and came over to make sport of him whenever he had free time, deliberately choosing all kinds of awkward moments to appear. Several times, he had spoken while Xu Rucheng was halfway through emptying his bladder, nearly startling him into pissing on his shoes. Xu Rucheng had hammered out the ability to keep calm no matter what he heard.

Xu Rucheng took a deep breath and adjusted his mental state. He asked, “What judgment?”

“They’ve taken a shine to the Yu family,” Xi Ping said. “I don’t mind telling you, I’ve also taken a shine to that family.”

Xu Rucheng thought, What, you also want to marry the third-rate imperial grandson?

Xi Ping said with a sigh, “One third of the whole country’s Moon Plated Gold, and medicinal herbs on top of that—how much money do you think that family must have?”

Gold smelters that refined Moon Plated Gold used spiritual stones, which the public treasury would allocate; there was a lot of shady business involved there. And if you sold medicinal herbs to the immortal mountains, it went without saying that there could be false reports, jacked up prices, and shoddy goods palmed off as quality goods. On medicinal materials that went to the black market outside the immortal mountains, you could make even more of a killing.

And the money was only one aspect. If they could keep a hold over Moon Plated Gold and medicinal herbs, their connections in Dongheng’s Sanyue must far exceed the average person’s imagination.

Zhao Qindan’s father was right. Had the Yu family not had a sense of inferiority over their lack of family history and been obsessed with finding a “pure bloodline” with which to adorn themselves, the Zhao family really would have been social-climbing upstarts in this “backwater.”

Xu Rucheng couldn’t follow his wildly bouncing crooked thoughts. He only said, “No matter how much money they have, it’s still a disgrace. This is a mighty walker in the mortal world of Heaven’s

Design Pavilion... Listen, senior, when she wakes up, will she really try to commit suicide?"

"I doubt it," Xi Ping carelessly said. "Didn't you hear her say she still wants to 'focus on cultivation and protect her family'?"

However ruthless her words, as long as she hadn't reached the point of breaking off all ties, anger was just the proper response to not being pampered, only a tantrum.

Could a tantrum draw blood?

Xi Ping went off in another direction: "But the Zhao family selling the young lady like this actually is very ugly."

Xu Rucheng felt that while this Tai Sui basically had no moral character to speak of, he could still sometimes say something just. "I heard she was exempted from the examinations to join Heaven's Design Pavilion. Ah, with one class every ten years in the Latent Cultivation Temple, you could count on one hand how many exemptions for joining Heaven's Design Pavilion there have been. What a pity. I see that her mortal parents are just in the prime of life, so she must be quite young herself. The Zhao clan's sins can't be blamed on her, but the little girl will have to bear the bitter consequences in their place."

"That's right. What would you call this?" Xi Ping pompously agreed with him, his tone softening irresistibly. "Hero, I have an idea that can save the damsel from her despondency. Do you want to give it a try?"

Xu Rucheng: "..."

He had a bad feeling about this.

When Zhao Qindan woke up, it was already completely dark.

Chu's autumn was warm. Approaching the eighth month, the crying cicadas were still screaming clamorously. But the heat couldn't intrude at all into her little courtyard. Here it was warm in winter and cool in summer, extremely comfortable, like a golden cage.

She was a bird in a golden cage, a flower in a pot. They had even taken her sword and spiritual stones.

Without spiritual stones, a half-immortal could only draw spiritual energy from the surroundings when drawing talismans. How effective it would be was another matter; this was the Zhao family's hidden realm, so if she moved the spiritual energy here, the hidden realm would immediately notify everyone.

She couldn't advance a step.

Just then, there was a creak. Her personal maid quietly came in and put the fruit tray that had been kept on ice beside her hand—for some reason, this “maid” was slouching and keeping her head down today, and walking stiffly. She put the fruit tray down with a knock, unusually clumsy.

Fortunately, the young mistress was preoccupied and didn't notice.

Expressionless, Zhao Qindan said, “They told you to come water and feed me?”

The “maid,” usually extremely clever, was startled by her sudden speech. She hemmed and hawed and didn't respond.

Zhao Qindan wasn't in the mood to bicker with her. She gave a cold laugh. “Leave.”

The “maid” didn't move.

Zhao Qindan turned her head impatiently. “I told you to leave..”

Then the “maid” suddenly took a step forward and pulled a bag of spiritual stones from her sleeve. “Young mistress, run away!”

Zhao Qindan was stunned.

The “maid” said, “I stored up the spiritual stones in secret. There’s enough for you to use. Young mistress, I know of your ambitions, why should you condescend to take what is offered for their sakes? Hurry, run!”

Her voice was forced high and thin, and she spoke so quickly that it went off key. Zhao Qindan simply didn’t understand her. “Slow... slow down, Xiuyu. What’s wrong with your throat?”

At the same time, Xi Ping was quietly saying into the ear of Xu Rucheng, who was pretending to be the maid: “If you speak in a falsetto again, I’ll curse you so you get stuck like that.”

Xu Rucheng: “...”

Life was truly hard.

Zhao Qindan opened the bag of spiritual stones and saw that it contained everything from white spirits to green ore, suitable for all occasions. It was quite thorough.

In spite of herself, the young mistress felt sorrowful: in the Latent Cultivation Temple, even the ninth princess had had to do her own hair. She’d gotten used to it, and since coming back home hadn’t especially needed a personal maid and got annoyed when there were too many people around. Adding in that she was a proud and arrogant half-immortal of Heaven’s Design Pavilion, she had nothing to say to these young maids who had never left the grand

compounds. She had always been an undemanding but unapproachable master.

She hadn't thought that a young girl she hadn't ever so much as looked directly in the face would be willing to run such a big risk for her sake.

Zhao Qindan was silent for a moment, then put the bag of spiritual stones away in her clothes. She looked up at the little courtyard she was trapped in and said with a bitter smile, "You're a good girl, thank you. But even if you stole me a whole roomful of spiritual stones, I still wouldn't be able to break the prohibition put on the gate by my established foundation shixiong, never mind that you can't get in or out of the hidden realm without alerting others."

"I've heard that if you mess around with the immortals' inscriptions, they might blow up. There are quite a few inscriptions on the inside and outside of our courtyard, young mistress, look." The little maid —Xu Rucheng— opened his hand, following the lousy idea Xi Ping had given him. In his palm was a third-class inscription carved out from the wall. "When there's a fire in the courtyard, you can run away in the confusion. When we servants go in and out, we have special tokens. Take this, you can use it to get out of the hidden realm."

Zhao Qindan was so startled she jumped. "Put it down, inscriptions aren't toys! You're going to get yourself killed!"

"Heh-heh," Xu Rucheng said like a stupid girl, "I had no problem carving it out. I've been lucky ever since I was little."

Zhao Qindan said seriously, "I've only learned a little bit about inscriptions. If used wrongly, you can hurt yourself and others— back in the Latent Cultivation Temple, one of my classmates was a shixiong who was such a genius he was going to be the first in our class to open his spiritual eyes, but he had a setback precisely

because of fooling around with inscriptions. If there hadn't just happened to be some seniors from the inner sect there, he would have flattened half the Latent Cultivation Temple's valley with his inscription—where did you carve out that character from?"

Xi Ping was briefly stupefied by this unexpected blame flying his way. He thought, That's bullshit, it was only an ordinary fireproofing inscription. Su Zhun isn't human—he stuck me with the blame for what Liang Chen did!

Having heard this, Xu Rucheng said feelingly to Xi Ping, "Tsk, how can there be so many brats who didn't get beaten enough out there?"

Xi Ping: "..."

Idiot Xu, you're done for.

"So much nonsense," the suddenly fickle evil god said coldly into Xu Rucheng's ear. "Move!"

So Xu Rucheng pretended to panic, shifting the inscription from hand to hand as if he were holding a hot potato. "Then... then what should I do... young mistress, I..."

In a moment of "desperation," he flung away the inscription, covered his ears, and squatted in place.

After hearing that this thing could blow up half a valley, his first reaction wasn't to gently put it down but to raise his hand and hurl it away. Zhao Qindan absolutely hadn't expected that there could be such an abnormal idiot in the world. She was caught off guard. "Don't!"

But it was already too late.

Though neither Xu Rucheng nor Xi Ping knew much about inscriptions, behind the reincarnation wood was His Highness Prince Zhuang. This personage even dared to disassemble the shed skin elders' demon seal, let alone the third-class inscriptions in the Zhao family's little courtyard.

Under his instructions, Xi Ping had ordered Xu Rucheng to swap the positions of the inscriptions in the courtyard. Hurling the inscription like this was like the burning of the successive camps.⁶⁶ A fiery dragon arose in Zhao Qindan's courtyard, but it didn't even sound the wind chimes hanging inside. Roaring, it charged toward the established foundation's prohibition at the gate.

Xu Rucheng said, "Hey, look, young mistress, it exploded outward. I knew my luck was good!"

Zhao Qindan: "..."

Xu Rucheng quickly gave her a guard's clothes and a token with entrance and exit inscriptions carved on it, which he had prepared in advance. "Hurry, stop dawdling!"

At this point, no matter how slow Zhao Qindan was to catch on, she still had to know there was something wrong with this maid. But there were already voices outside. Her spiritual sense told her that her shixionsgs were already here.

In a moment of peril, she didn't have time to overthink it. She followed through with her original intentions.

Xu Rucheng felt that he had done a good deed. Amid the confusion, he secretly escorted Young Mistress Zhao as she snuck out. He asked Xi Ping, "Senior, what now?"

"Change your disguise," Xi Ping told him evenly.

Xu Rucheng said, "Into who?"

"The bride-to-be."

CHAPTER 97 - Unbound Knife (4)

The *what* to-be?

For a moment, Xu Rucheng thought there was something wrong with his ears. “Is that also my lord’s command?”

His lord definitely couldn’t have ordered something so preposterous.

“It isn’t, actually,” Xi Ping said with conviction. “Before the fifteenth of the eighth month, I need to get a hundred thousand liang of white spirits.”

Xu Rucheng: “...”

Today was already the last day of the seventh month. There wasn’t even time for a last-moment change in the fillings of the mooncakes to be given as Mid-Autumn Festival gifts, and this evil god had casually pointed to the moon itself and said he wanted to eat that one!

Forgive his limited experience, but when the southern mines had conveyed shipments of spiritual stones to Great Wan with a navy escorted by half a dozen water dragons, would the blue jades, green stamps, and even green ore slag of one convoy put together have been worth a hundred thousand white spirits?

“You’ll have to be a little circumspect. We’ll need to think of a way to sneak into Sanyue’s inner sect,” this evil god who didn’t have to do anything himself pronounced. “You can keep using this identity, marry in and become part of the West Peak. It’ll be very convenient.”

“Then why don’t you...” Xu Rucheng was so mad he was steaming from the ears and nearly let his mouth get away from him. He

struggled to calm himself down and changed what he was going to say. “What do you want so many spiritual stones for?”

“Well, I want to put together a little spirit-gathering array in Tao County,” the evil god said. “Tao County’s reincarnation wood trees are my foundation. At first, thanks to Qiu Sha, I could have had free run of Tao County, but that old fool shone a light on them, and they all withered. I’ve heard that the Silver Moon leaves behind a Moon Shadow where it passes. For at least the next half year, spiritual energy won’t flow freely. Won’t my reincarnation wood trees have rotted down to the roots by then? I need to gather some spiritual energy to protect them. The array needs spiritual stones.”

Xu Rucheng’s head was pounding. “Do you think I’m stupid? Before, you told me to cut down all the reincarnation wood trees in Tao County. Now that Sanyue’s shed skin came all this way to save you the trouble, you say you’re afraid of the trees rotting and want spiritual stones?”

Before, Xi Ping had just been offhandedly tricking him. He had momentarily forgotten what nonsense he had said before. He briefly jammed. “Times change—and I wasn’t finished. To dispel the Moon Shadow over Tao County, the spirit-gathering array must be complete before the Mid-Autumn Festival. It would take too long to get spiritual stones from Dongheng’s Sanyue, so we can only rely on you now.”

With one ear, Xu Rucheng listened to the evil god shooting off plans. With the other, he listened to the uproar of voices outside the courtyard. He opened the little maid’s round eyes into copper bells. “Rely on... What the fuck does this have to do with me? You’re always lying. Why should I help you do something like this?”

“Heh.” Xi Ping calmly spat out three words: “Heart demon oath.”

Xu Rucheng: “...”

Fuck eight generations of your ancestors!

“Young mistress!”

“Dandan!”

“Qindan-shimei!”

In a blink, Xu Rucheng drew back his neck and hid behind a swing set. Before his floating hems could fall, he heard a low cry: “Break!”

The established foundation cultivator used spiritual energy to put out the flames on the third-class inscriptions by force. Fortunately, the majority of the inscriptions had been burnt beyond recognition. No one would notice at a glance that they had been tampered with.

The established foundation cultivator quickly severed the spiritual energy in the inscriptions, then charged into the little courtyard practically at the same time as his consciousness.

Xu Rucheng, covering his face, had no choice. With a jade stamp, he activated the immortal tool he was carrying. When he put down his sleeves, he grew three and a half cun, and his round face stretched slightly into an oval. He took on Zhao Qindan’s appearance.

Sadly, while the immortal tool could mimic a person’s spiritual image, Xu Rucheng couldn’t imitate the young mistress’s deportment. This big fellow amply demonstrated how someone could “put on imperial robes and still not look like a prince.” The tall and slender beauty ought to have looked like an immortal crane; with him inside, she somehow became a camel—the legs were still just as long, but the effect wasn’t at all convincing.

Xi Ping: “...”

Even the Zhaos who had charged inside stared blankly.

Xu Rucheng knew at once that he was making the young mistress seem like the idiot from the next village. In a flash, he demonstrated some quick wits. Before the others could work out what was wrong, he tossed a talisman toward the crowd. “Why do you care whether I’m alive or dead? I’ll return this body to you!”

As expected, a suicide attempt was satisfactory. No one had any more attention to spare for finding fault with the young mistress’s deportment. Xu Rucheng was afraid of saying something wrong and didn’t dare to improvise. He only repeated what he had overheard Zhao Qindan saying, crying and screaming and threatening suicide. He even knew to adjust the original words and their sequence in order to avoid seeming like a parrot just repeating what he had heard.

In the Zhao family’s hidden realm, the young mistress’s little courtyard was a shambles.

Xi Ping laughed. “Genius Xu, you’re beyond compare!”

Xu Rucheng secretly ground his teeth: Too wicked—may you die without progeny!

Having succeeded in putting Xu Rucheng in Zhao Qindan’s position, Xi Ping wasn’t concerned about his performance—this Luwu was ordinarily brainless, but in a crisis he was quite reliable.

But once his consciousness left the Zhao family hidden realm, he couldn’t manage much laughter.

Xi Ping had played it down in front of Xu Rucheng, not mentioning how fretful he was.

This supposed “hundred thousand liang” was the absolute bottom line that had come from him harassing Lin Chi and Xi Yue in the middle of the night, making them each take a look at the spirit-gathering array, then using the plans to calculate through the night with A-Xiang. For a great array like this that would cover a whole county, no array master would dare to say that there wouldn’t be wastage of twenty to thirty percent of the spiritual stones.

He didn’t know whether Yu Family Bend had so much money, and he didn’t know how much he could get.

Half a month...

It was like A-Xiang had said—it would be more practical to drive off all the people in Tao County.

In a flash, Xi Ping’s consciousness had returned to Tao County.

It was said that the Sanyue Mountains had agreed to give Tao County disaster relief funds and food. There would be no trouble getting through the winter. Therefore, while they were scraping the earth to make doubly sure, the people, well-behaved, kept their heads up and began to look ahead expectantly.

This wretched place didn’t look any different from the year before.

Say what you would, the people couldn’t leave. Transportation in Western Chu wasn’t as developed as in Great Wan. It was already a long journey to go from the town you lived in to the county seat. All the local thugs and despots monopolized the factories and farms, and everyone else had to eke out food from between their clenched fingers. Therefore, people everywhere were isolationist.

Even if a prestigious and respected person came and made the matter of the Moon Shadow known to the public, at most they would be even more despairing; they wouldn’t want to leave.

Because in previous years of catastrophe, as soon as people left their homes and became refugees, far less than half of them would survive in the end. If they stayed behind in the Moon Shadow—in the words of the many worm masters, the greater part of adults without major health problems would do well enough, only losing a decade or two off their lifespans.

Xi Ping weighed it up—if it were him, he also wouldn't have left.

After the Silver Moon had passed over the reincarnation wood, he felt very uncomfortable in the wood. There seemed to be remnants of the Silver Moon's light still inside it, pricking his consciousness like thin needles, warning him that the Way of Heaven was watching him, this established foundation ant who had an exaggerated sense of his own abilities.

“Let it look.” The pricking sent Xi Ping into something of a rage. Facing the remaining might of the Silver Moon, his natural unruliness was aroused and changed to stubbornness. He thought, “I'm staying here, and that's that.”

A group of small children were carelessly running around and playing boisterously nearby. One of them opened his mouth wide and sneezed with abandon, snot spurting half a chi long. This mighty hero indifferently tossed the snot toward the reincarnation wood tree. With a howl, he threw himself toward his companions.

Xi Ping: “...”

The “evil god” who had no fear of the Silver Moon's remaining might flew away in terror.

Passing by another tree beside the road, he saw another crowd of kids, twittering and chirping as they surrounded a young girl. As soon as Xi Ping saw the kids, he remembered the snot. He meant to keep a respectful distance, taking an inadvertent glance as he

passed by, but he saw that the young girl who was the center of the action, using flower dye, was drawing small animals on the others' arms.

Xi Ping paused—she was drawing over the full moon scabs, the frightening scabs turning into the animals' round bellies.

“I've got one, too, I've got one, too!” A child next to her raised a hand, displaying a scab like a snake scale on the back of the hand. “Draw me a little flower!”

“I want a cat.”

“Hee-hee, a cat's nothing, mine's biggest, I want a big tiger.”

“I wanted a tiger first, you can't have one! Mine's bigger than yours, let's see whose is biggest if you don't believe me!”

The ignorant children clamored and shoved, treating the full moon scabs like medals.

Xi Ping's spiritual sense was suddenly touched. He sent out his gaze and saw an old man with a veiled face standing nearby. This was a worm master.

He was staring covetously at this crowd of little “walking ghosts.”

Xi Ping sent over a thought, telling the Luwu garrisoned at the Snake King's Immortal Palace to come drive away these vultures that had smelled rotting meat.

At the Snake King's Immortal Palace, the resources had previously been quite substantial, but after Qiu Sha's antics, at least half its spiritual stones had been drained dry. Even if they put together all they had, at best it would come to one or two thousand liang of

white spirits, like trying to put out a cartload of blazing firewood with a cup of water.

San-ge's accounts all had to be aboveboard, and anyway, it was one thing to ask for a bit of pocket money—a large quantity of spiritual stones crossing the border was impracticable.

Time was too tight and the number too big; he couldn't place all his bets on Xu Rucheng, either.

Where else could he get money quickly?

As Xi Ping's consciousness roved through the scenes of devastation in Wild Fox Country, taking Great Wan's laws as his basis, he considered each outstanding criminal charge one by one, calculating where money would come in fastest.

Suddenly, he remembered how when Tao County had been enveloped by the Law Breaker Bracelet, the spiritual energy leaking from the ascended spirits had nearly turned the barren land into green ore fields.

Yes—when cultivators “pilfered heaven's order,” they stole spiritual energy from their surroundings and stored it in their essences. When these people died, the spiritual energy in their essences wouldn't just vanish.

Cultivators' corpses could also be used as spiritual stones.

As soon as Xi Ping had this thought, there was no stopping it from growing: at least before the reincarnation wood thoroughly rotted, Wild Fox Country was still his domain. No one knew that his eyes were spread throughout the trees on the walls and by the roads. As long as he could keep things under control, all the cultivators who set foot in Wild Fox Country could be his prey...

An established foundation... an ascended spirit... how many white spirits were they equal to?

Just as his thoughts were sliding in a more and more dangerous direction, there was a buzz in Xi Ping's ears, as if his consciousness had been smacked by a very thin piece of metal; the echoes quivered incessantly.

Xi Ping came back to himself at once. There was a familiar aura about the chill that had touched his consciousness... Zhaoting!

“Shifu?”

There was no answer.

Like a headless fly, Xi Ping's consciousness searched all around, but before him were only boundless hills. He couldn't see the horizon.

He didn't know why, but for some reason he suddenly felt a bit lonely. He chose a reincarnation wood tree that was growing in the river and hadn't had any brats wipe snot on it. Xi Ping curled up his consciousness and calmed his mind. For the first time in five years, he began to meditate like the disciple of an orthodox sect.

As his undulating and irritable state of mind settled, Xi Ping “saw” the demon seal's fetters on his consciousness. Going against the shackle-like demon seal, he established a faint connection to his body in the Impassable Sea.

Then he heard the murmur of the sword, knocking against his consciousness from the distant East Sea. Involuntarily, Xi Ping went searching after this weak voice. “Shi... hey!”

Once again, sword energy gently hit him. This time, he found that Zhaoting seemed to be angry.

Next, clear sword aura came to his consciousness, and Xi Ping received it in bewilderment: what was shifu doing? Teaching him swordsmanship? He didn't even have hands!

But apart from the few words on Wen Fei's fan, he hadn't had any communication from shifu in too long. He hurried to pay rapt attention.

When he had been on Flying Jade Peak, Zhi Xiu hadn't taught him swordsmanship—his young disciple had just begun cultivating; the disparity was too great, it would have been a waste to teach him, like playing the qin to a cow. But now, Xi Ping's body was at the pinnacle of the established foundation stage, and his consciousness had been honed during his wanderings on both banks of the Xia River and was perhaps even stronger than that of an average ascended spirit. The situation had changed completely. To his surprise, he found that he could “understand” shizun's sword aura now.

At first, the sword was mild and fair. Then it became more and more biting cold, more and more unrestrained. The sword was a weapon that existed for the sake of drawing blood. Without restrictions, its ferocity was overpowering. Xi Ping was terrified. If he hadn't believed from the bottom of his heart that shifu wouldn't hurt him, he practically would have turned and ran.

Then the sword's fury touched something. It clearly reflected all the thoughts Xi Ping had just had about hunting cultivators, one after another, and pushed those thoughts before his eyes all at once. It became faster and faster, blurrier and blurrier, until finally, with a bang, there was nothing before his eyes but bloody light.

Xi Ping was startled. The sword energy dispersed. There was only a faint chill touching the center of his brow, like the fine snow on Flying Jade Peak.

His consciousness abruptly woke from meditation. In that moment, he understood why heaven and earth could not abide him—he truly had no Way of the Heart.

Even the worm masters who made tools out of humans had Ways of the Heart suspended above their heads, not letting them touch ordinary people apart from “living ghosts.”

But a person without a Way of the Heart was unchecked by anything, just like the storm over the Impassable Sea that answered to no one.

He could run wild through heaven and earth, act based solely on his own likes and dislikes. What would he become?

Xi Ping realized with a start that as they had called him an evil cultivator, he had become more and more like the true evil god Tai Sui.

The mess in Tao County had been left behind by Qiu Sha, and he still thought that Qiu Sha was a monster who had brought calamity upon the people, but... perhaps there would come a day when people would look at him the same way they looked at Qiu Sha.

With your eyes blindfolded, you couldn't walk a straight line.

So shifu was always watching him.

Xi Ping let out a long breath. Fortunately the weather in Chu was warm, and there was no snow, or else he would have had to sweep all the rooftops in the county.

“But I still have no money, shifu. What do I do?”

This time, there was silence in his consciousness. The shard of Zhaoting didn't answer. Shizun was a pauper who spent a hundred

years grudging the expense of two white spirits. He was powerless to help, no matter how much he wanted to.

Wei Chengxiang moved through Tao County as fast as the wind. Senior Tai Sui had said that he would think of how to get the spiritual stones, she had to lay the array out before the fifteenth. She had put effort into learning talismans and arrays, but this was her first time handling such a big array. She didn't dare to get the least bit distracted. She wished she could eat the plans of the spirit-gathering array and hold them in her belly.

When she had just finished a stroke at the border of Tao County and was letting out a breath, her spiritual sense was suddenly disturbed.

Wei Chengxiang was startled: she had sensed the Law Breaker Bracelet!

Wei Chengxiang's left hand was obviously a shade paler than her right hand. She was using an immortal tool Master Lin had given her. She didn't have the hidden bones of the "way of death," and she wasn't a gecko. Of course her wounds could heal, but she couldn't regrow limbs, unless she had a chance to establish a foundation.

But the Golden Hand was the Golden Hand, after all. When she put on the fake hand, it was no different from her real hand, not holding her up at all when she drew talismans or made arrays—the skin was even softer than that of her real hand. Over the last few days, Wei Chengxiang had taken the immortal tool for her own hand. Only now did she suddenly remember that she still had a severed hand that had been stolen by the wicked Law Breaker Bracelet.

It seemed that the bracelet was now shadowing and spying on her.

CHAPTER 98 - Unbound Knife (5)

Wei Chengxiang's first reaction was: How much money can we get for the Law Breaker Bracelet?

No... no, that was wrong. She tossed her head: if they really tried to sell that thing, probably all they could get for it was a beam of "moonlight."

She forced herself to be rational, but her heart still began to beat wildly: the space the Law Breaker Bracelet could cover was precisely the size of Tao County, and it could even change the laws of time; couldn't it change some other things? For example, turning rocks into gold... or spiritual stones. Even if it couldn't fabricate spiritual stones out of nothing, it should still be possible to set an axiom to remove the Silver Moon's Moon Shadow, right? Without the Moon Shadow, Tao County's spiritual energy could begin to circulate once more, and they wouldn't need the spirit-gathering array anymore!

She threw caution to the wind and probed outward with her consciousness like a snake's tongue, steadily and accurately locating the Law Breaker Bracelet's aura. At the same time, she cut her finger and quickly drew a blood covenant talisman for capturing a weapon in midair. "Return!"

But before the talisman had taken shape, a terrifying scene took place: a deathly pale hand, cut off at the wrist, suddenly reached out from thin air, bearing calluses and scars that couldn't have been more familiar to Wei Chengxiang.

The severed hand knocked the half-completed talisman to pieces and made a grab for her neck.

Wei Chengxiang's reaction was extremely fast. Before she could break out in gooseflesh, she had already slid over half a chi away, narrowly dodging the severed hand. But the hand had snatched the mustard seed hanging around her neck.

A mustard seed was a cultivator's purse and usually had its owner's prohibition on it. Without the owner's permission, even a person with stronger cultivation would need the previous owner's traces to open it. But the hand reached into her mustard seed completely unimpeded, a bracelet faintly appearing on the wrist... because this was the left hand she had lost!

The severed hand greedily groped around for spiritual stones inside the mustard seed. Though the hand was still bloodless, the skin became smooth.

Wei Chengxiang was stupefied: her own hand was stealing her spiritual stones!

The next moment, the severed hand touched something and suddenly shivered. It dropped the mustard seed on the ground, along with a reincarnation wood amulet.

While Senior Tai Sui was always babbling, his behavior was very characteristically "Wan." Reasonably speaking, Wei Chengxiang was already a half-immortal; when it was inconvenient to keep it out, naturally she would seal the reincarnation wood. But despite this, except in a matter of life or death, he would practically never send his consciousness of his own accord. His consciousness would only come if she called him, or he would send word ahead like a letter from a far and wait for her to answer.

This actually forced Wei Chengxiang to put away the reincarnation wood when she needed to focus completely on something, because the senior couldn't see what she was doing when he sent her a message, and sometimes his voice would distract her.

To draw the array, Wei Chengxiang had temporarily sealed the reincarnation wood in her mustard seed, and now the severed hand had found it. The severed hand seemed to have been frightened by the wooden amulet. It dropped her mustard seed, and turned and ran out of Tao County.

Wei Chengxiang reached out across emptiness and yanked back her mustard seed and the reincarnation wood. She gave chase. “Stop!”

Xi Ping’s consciousness, far away in Tao County, was also disturbed by the severed hand. As soon as the amulet returned to Wei Chengxiang’s hands, he asked across space, “A-Xiang, what’s wrong?”

Wei Chengxiang’s consciousness swept through her mustard seed. “My hand stole 4.5 liang of green ore and jade stamps from me!” Xi Ping had just finished being instructed by his shizun and hadn’t yet finished digesting all the sword aura in his mind. His head was buzzing. “...huh?”

Was she so poor she was starting to rave?

Wei Chengxiang said, “The Law Breaker Bracelet has appeared!”

Xi Ping’s voice became serious. “I’m coming.”

No sooner had he spoken than his consciousness flowed into the reincarnation wood amulet Wei Chengxiang carried.

But the moment his consciousness arrived, the Law Breaker’s aura suddenly disappeared—and in the direction it had disappeared, there was a person.

Wei Chengxiang stopped in her tracks, leapt up, and fell out of the air.

This person was wearing a hood and close-fitting clothes for easy movement. She was a female open-eyed half-immortal. There were too many instances of evil cultivators killing each other to steal each other's treasures. Out in the wild, when two unacquainted cultivators first encountered each other, it was like a meeting of two tigers. The atmosphere became tense.

For some reason, this female cultivator didn't even have a mustard seed on her. Her spiritual stones were carried openly in a pouch.

Wei Chengxiang unconsciously glanced toward the place where her spiritual stones were kept, and the female cultivator acutely raised her elbow to shield the spiritual stone pouch, her hand falling on the sword at her waist. The two of them were temporarily deadlocked, standing several zhang apart.

Xi Ping gave a cry. "Her?"

Wei Chengxiang asked, "Senior, you know her?"

"The young mistress of the Yuzhou Zhao clan, formerly of Heaven's Design Pavilion. She just ran away from home. Perhaps she's heard of Wild Fox Country and wants to come find some handy immortal tools to use," Xi Ping said. "Don't bother with her. What's going on?"

"I think I might have to bother with her." Keeping her eyes on the female cultivator, Wei Chengxiang explained the Law Breaker Bracelet's sudden appearance, its stealth attack on her, and how it had stolen her spiritual stones. "I suppose that after all this time, the spiritual energy in my severed hand has all scattered. Other people's spiritual stones are all hidden in their mustard seeds, so it had to come to me, and just now it was scared off by the reincarnation wood. But as soon as it turned around, it ran into this blockhead

with her spiritual stones hanging out in the open. Senior, I suspect the Law Breaker Bracelet has snuck into her spiritual stone pouch.”

Xi Ping: “...”

Fine. She runs away from home, then loses all her money. What an ill-fated encounter.

“Excuse me...” Wei Chengxiang saw Young Mistress Zhao stooping somewhat unnaturally in her masculine dress and changed what she was going to say, pretending that she hadn’t noticed anything. “Excuse me, brother, I mean you no harm. I only saw that your spiritual stones were hanging out and couldn’t resist saying something. Up ahead is Wild Fox Country, where you’ll find all types. You had better be careful.”

The female cultivator—the runaway Zhao Qindan—did indeed want to put her things in a mustard seed, but the problem was that all her stuff had been taken, and the spiritual stones had been given to her by the maid. To Zhao Qindan, the “man” in front of her looked like an obvious poor evil cultivator. Never mind the ragged clothes, there was also an eye-opening scar on her face. The scar pulled at the corners of her eye and mouth, spoiling the delicate and regular layout of her features, fixing her face in a “false smile”; at a glance, she didn’t look like any kind of decent person.

Zhao Qindan’s wariness rose another two notches. She nodded expressionlessly. Afraid that her voice would give her away, she didn’t speak. She cupped her hand perfunctorily and was about to go on ahead.

Wei Chengxiang quickly called her to a halt again and put on what she thought was her warmest and most amiable smile. “I actually have some acquaintances in Wild Fox Country. If you don’t object, I could...”

Before she had finished speaking, she heard Xi Ping cry out, “Careful!”

A fierce wind came her way. Wei Chengxiang quickly flew up and retreated. A talisman came chasing after her, exploding three times in a row. Heaven’s Design Pavilion was Heaven’s Design Pavilion, after all. Wei Chengxiang dodged in a desperate flurry, and when she looked again, the female cultivator was gone.

“I was being nice...” Wei Chengxiang was bewildered. “Senior, don’t I look like a good person?”

“Why don’t you look in a mirror when you have some time?” Xi Ping sighed. He focused and dispersed his consciousness throughout all the reincarnation wood trees in Tao County and quickly caught up with Zhao Qindan, who was fleeing in a panic. Xi Ping told Wei Chengxiang her location, then said, “Keep an eye on her, I’m going to see Lin Chi.”

Among the ascended spirit peak masters of the Xuanyin Mountains, Zhi Xiu was the most popular. He wasn’t on anyone’s side, his temper was good, and he was Xuanyin’s latest ascended spirit, so even established foundation disciples with a bit of seniority were older than him. Because of this, the disciples all impudently called him “little shishu.” The most mysterious peak master, meanwhile, was Lin Chi. There were no direct disciples on Moon Plated Peak; all cultivators who practiced the way of the toolmaking went on record as his disciples. Only the shed skin elders could send him Heavenly Questions. The people on Moon Plated Peak and the members of the Lin family all had about the same chances of seeing Master Lin as other people—they couldn’t catch a glimpse of him.

But while Flying Jade Peak was the quietest among the thirty-six peaks, Moon Plated Peak was the noisiest.

Moon Plated Peak was over two hundred li from east to west and had a hundred fifty established foundation cultivators of the toolmaking way on its roll. Each person was in charge of one or more “immortal furnaces.” Each established foundation also had between a few dozen and over a hundred half-immortals under them. Downward of halfway up the mountain, immortal furnaces of all sizes worked day and night without stopping. They were scattered all over like stars and lit up brightly at night, as resplendent as a city, even brighter than Jinping in midsummer.

Practically all the immortal tools Xuanyin’s inner and outer sects used came from here.

Upward of halfway up the mountain, it was a completely different story.

This was where the peak master lived, Moon Plated Peak’s forbidden territory.

The lush, dense forest was full of arrays. No one was allowed to fly here but the master, and there was no road up the mountain. There were only a few statues of karma beasts in the outermost ring of arrays. If disciples or visitors had some business, they stood there and talked to the stones. The karma beast statues would save their voices and images for Master Lin to look at when he had the time. At his most diligent, he would respond with a few notes in three to five months. Sometimes when he was in seclusion, there would be no answer for a year or more.

It was fortunate that the death of an ascended spirit would necessarily be earthshaking. Otherwise, Lin Chi could have rotted away without anyone knowing.

As soon as Xi Ping’s consciousness stole in, he saw dark clouds massed over Moon Plated Peak. Then a bolt of lightning came right toward him.

The great “evil cultivator” sealed at the bottom of the Impassable Sea had a guilty conscience and thought that the bolt of lightning was meant for him. He nearly ran away. Only when he got a clear look did he find that the heavenly lightning had struck Master Lin’s immortal furnace.

Lin Chi ducked away from the immortal furnace out of habit, avoiding the heavenly tribulation, holding a ball of black smoke in his hand. When his spiritual sense was touched, he raised his head and sighed faintly. “You’re here.”

For an instant, Xi Ping thought he was looking at a sunburnt Riverward. “What is this?”

“A crude imitation.” Staring at the ball of black smoke, Lin Chi shook his head very pessimistically. “She said that the Riverward was like water or smoke, that it would silently blend with all living things, disappear among all living things... Naturally I can’t make a Riverward. I had wanted to use the Riverward’s principle to make a disguise for the Luwu, that would let their aura blend with the original. This way, their outward appearance, their spiritual image, their speech and mannerisms would all become as similar as possible to the original. Even a shed skin wouldn’t easily be able to tell there was anything wrong.”

Nice! Xi Ping’s eyes glowed. This immortal tool had Xu Rucheng’s name on it!

But before he could say anything, Lin Chi raised a hand and destroyed the just-completed immortal tool.

“Hey, what are...”

The spiritual energy dispersed in the vicinity, unseasonal flowers impatiently opening all over the ground, as if what had been

scattered wasn't an immortal tool but a cultivator of at least established foundation level.

Xi Ping's heart, liver, and lungs all twisted together. Lamenting, he said, "Why did you destroy it? You're..."

... throwing money away!

How many spiritual stones did it take to make that thing?!

Lin Chi waved a hand. A brocade box fell into his hand, with a stack of thin, half-transparent masks. He knocked on the lid of the box. In response, a straw child pushed a small cart along some rails, confirmed the number of masks in the brocade box, used spiritual stones to seal the box, then loaded it into the small cart and took it away.

While Xi Ping didn't especially understand toolmaking, he had the necessary cultivation level and experience. He could see at a glance that those things were about the same as the masks Xu Rucheng and the others had used before. There were no new ideas. It was only that, coming from the hand of an ascended spirit master, the grade of the immortal tools was a little higher. When those masks were put on, it would be hard for an ascended spirit cultivator of the same grade to discover them.

"If a person's identity, appearance, speech, and mannerisms all change, what do they have left?" Lin Chi said quietly. "The human heart is like water. Whatever the form of the container, that will be the shape of the heart. An established foundation or above, with their Way of the Heart to sustain them, might perhaps hold out for a while, but the Luwu are all half-immortals. This would harm them."

Xi Ping froze. He didn't know how many people outside this mountain were looking up and seeing Master Lin working his immortal furnace. With Master Lin making tools for the first time in

several hundred years and turning out this kind of thing, even using your foot to think you could imagine how disappointed those people would be.

People would be chewing over the word that “Lin Chi’s creative powers have been exhausted” for a long time.

Hearing this, Lin Chi, shame-faced, said, “My creative powers have been exhausted? Very well, they’re right. What did you want?”

Xi Ping was silent for a moment. When he spoke again, his tone had become a little more respectful in spite of himself. “Peak Master Lin, I want to ask for your advice concerning the Law Breaker Bracelet.”

Lin Chi frowned.

Xi Ping briefly explained how the bracelet had suddenly appeared, then asked, “How could an immortal tool that has acknowledged a master rebel like this?”

“While the Law Breaker and the Riverward have no grade limitation and can be used by anyone, they would certainly ‘bully’ a lower-level cultivator.” Lin Chi considered, then said, “While Little Brother Wei is the Law Breaker’s master, apart from activating the Law Breaker’s axiom, it seems he cannot otherwise control her. He had to cut his hand off in a moment of emergency before he could remove the bracelet. That must mean he couldn’t take the bracelet off.”

“...I did say she was just a bracelet rack.” Xi Ping sighed. “Master Lin, how can we get the Law Breaker Bracelet back?”

But Lin Chi hesitated for a long moment. Finally, not answering the question, he said, “It isn’t necessarily a bad thing that the Law Breaker has run away. If you want to use it to remove the Moon Shadow, I advise against it. Haven’t you thought, when the Moon

Shadow is so pernicious, why would Sanyue's Elder Xuanwu not have attempted to remedy it? Isn't he afraid that his Way of the Heart will be damaged?"

"What do you mean?"

"The Moon Shadow isn't poison left behind by the Silver Moon. It's a kind of protection," Lin Chi said. "Where the Silver Moon passes, an enormous deficit of spiritual energy will be left behind. How large the deficit is, presumably you and that Little Brother Wei can approximately figure using the spirit-gathering array. Without the Moon Shadow to cut it off, Tao County itself would immediately become an enormous sinkhole 'pilfering heaven's order.' What would happen to the surrounding counties and towns in Chu?"

Xi Ping froze at once, remembering how he had heard that there would be a three-year drought after the Bell of Tribulation rang.

"If it is only Tao County, the court can allocate some rice and grain as emergency relief for a few years. There are evildoers running wild in Tao County, the local yamen is weak. It is a turbulent place to begin with. If other areas are affected, how many people would die in Western Chu? An ascended spirit evil cultivator came into the world, causing great chaos. Two evils cancel each other out, so the Silver Moon emerged in Western Chu. To keep the harm of the Silver Moon at a minimum, they must sacrifice Tao County." At this point, Lin Chi sighed softly. "The Law Breaker has limits. She can take twenty days from Tao County, but she cannot return twenty days to Tao County. She cannot make spiritual stones out of nothing for you. Also... I don't know whether you have noticed, but the Law Breaker... the Law Breaker can sometimes be like a flower in a mirror or the moon reflected in the water. She is somewhat inauspicious. The more you want to use her to pursue something, the more unattainable it becomes."

When Wei Chengxiang had lent Qiu Sha the Law Breaker, repaying a debt of gratitude had been one aspect; in fact, she had also wanted to contain the great evildoer, limit her impact as much as possible, to avoid her involving the innocent. But in the end, she had nearly removed Tao County from the human world.

Enshrouded by the Law Breaker, Tao County had initially had a hope of achieving fertile soil through the nourishment of the ascended spirit corpses, but instead it had become a putrid land under the Moon Shadow.

Qiu Sha had wanted to use the Law Breaker, but in the end, by an unexpected twist, she had been defeated by the Law Breaker.

Lin Chi also paused, as if wavering about whether or not to go on. “Actually... I also wanted to tell you before, you had better abandon the spirit-gathering array, too. The spirit-gathering array needs to disperse a hundred thousand white spirits in an instant to offset Tao County’s Moon Shadow. There is no way such a large incident can avoid the gaze of the Sanyue Spiritual Mountains. When that happens, how will you deal with it?”

Xi Ping answered readily: “I’ll offset first and think later. At worst I’ll get pulled up by the roots again by that old monster Xuanwu.”

“Even Sanyue has abandoned it. Why do you...”

Why do you want to clean up this mess?

Xi Ping understood his implication, but he didn’t answer.

Because...

Though the people of Tao County had been swept by the Silver Moon and didn’t remember anything, while enveloped by the Law

Breaker, those mortals without the strength to truss a chicken had burned the late-autumn red for his sake.

Tao County's reincarnation wood trees put down their roots beside people's homes, struggling alongside them in life and in death.

"Also," said Lin Chi, moving on when he received no response from him, "with the Law Breaker suddenly appearing, no matter whose pocket it ends up in, the outcome will be chaos. You must be careful."

CHAPTER 99 - Unbound Knife (6)

Lin Chi's speech was unusually soft and slow. Some things sounded mystical coming out of his mouth.

Whether because he had heard these words or because something had touched his spiritual sense, Xi Ping automatically directed his consciousness toward Tao County.

And just then, by coincidence, Wei Chengxiang and the Luwu in the Snake's King Immortal Palace almost simultaneously sent him word.

"Senior," Wei Chengxiang said in puzzlement, "does that Miss Zhao have a 'hit me' talisman stuck to her?"

Lao Tian, overseeing the Snake King's Immortal Palace, sent a message: "Senior, there's a Zhao in Tao County."

In so short a time, Zhao Qindan's identity had been exposed to the Snake King's Immortal Palace?

Xi Ping's scalp bristled. He tracked Zhao Qindan down with reincarnation wood. He saw that this "walker in the mortal world" who had never walked in the mortal world was currently in an especially dire predicament, pursued and surrounded by several evil cultivators. He quickly asked Wei Chengxiang, "What happened?"

"I don't know." Wei Chengxiang was following Zhao Qindan at a middle distance, secretly observing. She hadn't acted rashly. "It's as if she knocked her spiritual sense silly bumping into something evil. Forget about going the wrong way, she charged right into a crowd of evil cultivators, all on her own, and carrying that many spiritual stones. Of course those people would start having evil thoughts. These unorthodox evil cultivators should have been no match for a walker in the mortal world, but by some coincidence, her Zhao clan

token fell off of her, and it had inscriptions for entering and exiting the Zhao family hidden realm on it. An evil cultivator just happened to catch sight of it, and the whole crowd went crazy... Everyone knows that the Zhaos have gone into foreign exile carrying strange treasures. The news is spreading like wildfire. I think all the evil cultivators in Wild Fox Country are coming to grab her now. If I hadn't been following her the whole way and didn't know she had no backup, I'd think that she was deliberately putting out a lure—it really did seem like she tossed that token out herself.”

Xi Ping saw Zhao Qindan give a quiet cry and toss out a talisman. Looking at a half-immortal with his current cultivation level and consciousness, he could see the flow of her spiritual energy. He saw at a glance that when she used spiritual stones to toss out the talisman, at least half the spiritual energy was lost, and the indistinct image of a human hand flashed in her spiritual stone pouch.

Xi Ping: “...”

The token really had been tossed out deliberately. The pestilential Law Breaker Bracelet had done it.

If the spiritual stones she was carrying were stolen, a cultivator was sure to notice. The only time she wouldn't be keeping count was when she was in battle, wildly tossing out talismans and expending spiritual stones. So the Law Breaker Bracelet had deliberately induced people to attack Zhao Qindan, so it could take advantage to steal her spiritual stones without her knowing it while she fought.

Xi Ping was terrified. This Law Breaker Bracelet had developed intelligence.

The problem wasn't whether Zhao Qindan was exposed or not, it was that Xu Rucheng was still impersonating her!

Currently, in the Zhao family hidden realm, Xu Rucheng, after making a scene to his heart's content, had quickly tasted the bitter consequences—he had never had any opportunity to come in contact with the daughters of big families, and he thought that a young mistress like Zhao Qindan was a “pearl in the palm of one's hand.” Even if she was disobedient, her family would deprive her of a meal, take her spiritual stones, or seal her meridians at worst.

Who would have thought the Zhaos could be so ruthless toward a “pearl”?

The established foundation cultivator hadn't hit him. He had simply reached out and sealed his spirit, trapping the “young mistress”'s consciousness in an illusion, not even letting him wake up!

The Zhao clan's “family discipline” far outstripped Xu Rucheng's imagination. As soon as he fell in, he was surrounded by blood and flames. In a daze, Xu Rucheng seemed to return to the chaos in Yuzhou five years ago, when he had received word and desperately rushed home, but he hadn't even been in time to bury the body...

“Xu Rucheng!” With one shout, Xi Ping woke him.

Xu Rucheng gave a start and came back to himself. He swore a string of foul oaths with his hair standing on end—this method was called the “learning regret spell.” It was a type of punishment used by Heaven's Design Pavilion that could trap a person's consciousness in the most terrifying moment of their life. It wasn't much lighter than a soul-searching.

If not for the fact that they couldn't give an idiot to the third-rate imperial grandson in marriage, perhaps they really would have used a soul-searching.

Fortunately he had the precautionary habit of hiding money in his shoes and socks. He had hidden the reincarnation wood chip and

backup spiritual stones under the Luwu mask. Otherwise, he might have died here today in obscurity.

Xu Rucheng gasped for breath. “What in blazes? Was Zhao Qindan adopted?”

“Have the Luwu in the Zhao family hidden realm pick you up and withdraw.” Xi Ping didn’t chat with him. He said seriously, “Zhao Qindan is in Tao County, and the Zhao family token she’s carrying has been discovered. She may already have been exposed.”

He’d coaxed and wheedled Xu Rucheng into putting on the young mistress’s skin to begin with. Xi Ping had thought that he would breathe a sigh of relief. But Xu Rucheng was silent for a moment inside the learning regret spell, then said, “It’s all right. I gave her a servant’s token. Even if word gets out, the Zhao family won’t suspect me for a while—but if I escape right away, then they’ll realize something’s wrong.”

Xi Ping was just about to say, “What’s it got to do with you? Have you fallen into a habit of rescuing damsels? A noble family’s beauty could beat up two of you.” Then he saw Xu Rucheng open his eyes and look at the old home he couldn’t return to inside the learning regret spell, and say softly, as though raving in a dream, “Back then, A-Hua was also forced like this... A-Hua never even got to be a young mistress.”

Xi Ping froze. Then he wasted no more words trying to counsel him. He turned decisively to Wei Chengxiang: “The rotten bracelet is playing dirty. Help me out, get her out of there.”

Then he passed word to the Luwu in the Snake King’s Immortal Palace: “Do what you can to block the information from spreading. Our people are in the Zhao family hidden realm, don’t let this matter leave Tao County.”

“Peak Master Lin,” said Xi Ping, running back to Lin Chi after he was finished making arrangements in Tao County, “in order to steal spiritual stones, the Law Breaker Bracelet didn’t hesitate to deliberately provoke a fight among cultivators. What is it up to?”

Hearing this, Lin Chi became grave. “Steal spiritual stones? How many spiritual stones has it stolen? Tell me in detail.”

With Zhao Qindan’s family background, if the Law Breaker furtively freeloaded a few jade stamps off her, she wouldn’t necessarily be aware of it, and if she did notice, she would probably think she had lost them herself; she wouldn’t necessarily take it seriously. But in offering someone else’s gifts as his own, Xu Rucheng had put everything there was in the pouch of spiritual stones he had given Zhao Qindan. Converting it into white spirits, there might be two or three liang. The Law Breaker seemed intent on going on until it had drained the pouch dry.

Xi Ping asked, “Would it take that much spiritual energy to keep a severed hand fresh?”

Lin Chi’s pupils contracted slightly. “When an immortal tool isn’t activated, it usually doesn’t require spiritual stones.”

Xi Ping said, “You mean it wants to collect spiritual stones to activate itself? Wait, wait... isn’t A-Xiang its master? A-Xiang isn’t there, so who’s activating it?”

That severed hand?

“Since Little Brother Wei cut off his wrist and threw away the Law Breaker, he hasn’t been able to sense the Law Breaker. The immortal tool may already have gone out of control then,” Lin Chi said. “There are usually two circumstances under which an immortal tool goes out of control. Either its master dies and the consciousness on it dissipates, or a person with stronger cultivation

wipes the traces of its master's consciousness away by force—there isn't a great possibility of the latter in the case of the Law Breaker and the Riverward, which can withstand a shed skin. If the Law Breaker had a new master, it wouldn't have ended up running around 'stealing' spiritual stones.”

Xi Ping said, “You mean that the bracelet itself revolted, wiped away A-Xiang's consciousness, and is activating itself... What axiom is it activating?”

“An immortal tool has no thoughts,” Lin Chi said. “It depends on whose ideas were the strongest at the moment it went out of control.”

When Wei Chengxiang had tossed the Law Breaker away, it had been the seventh day of the seventh month, the moment before the axiom was realized. On the scene had been ascended spirit cultivators he wasn't acquainted with from various nations, the bewildered Luwu, and the great monster Qiu Sha.

This was a disaster. Sanyue's shed skin had still been outside of the Law Breaker then. All the useless ascended spirits put together couldn't beat one Qiu Sha. Apart from her, whose ideas could have been the strongest?

Within the confines of the Law Breaker, the axiom was everything. Neither ascended spirits nor shed skins could avoid its rules. It was anyone's guess what kind of axiom the Law Breaker Bracelet would develop based on Qiu Sha's thoughts at the time—of course she wouldn't have been thinking anything good.

As soon as the Law Breaker was activated, there would be no need for Tao County to wait until the fifteenth day of the eighth month!

Heavens, it was one thing after another. Tao County was some place—they ought to bring in a fengshui master to fix its

topography!

Xi Ping said, “Peak Master Lin, based on your understanding of immortal tools, what should we do now? Do you have a solution?”

“The Law Breaker must be caught before it can activate.” Lin Chi’s speech nearly sped up to within normal range. “Then a sufficiently powerful consciousness must suppress and seal the Law Breaker. Once the axiom has been put into effect, it will be too late.”

As Xi Ping passed on “Catch the Law Breaker” to Wei Chengxiang and the Luwu, he counted up the people he could appeal to and said to Lin Chi, “Among the Luwu, the person with the strongest cultivation I can contact at present is an established foundation. I’m afraid that won’t work. Master Lin, help me out!”

In that moment, Master Lin’s usually immobile features didn’t manage to hide his alarm. He blurted out, “I can’t, my skills are inadequate!”

Xi Ping: “...”

Had Moon Plated Peak changed its name to “I Can’t Peak”?

“Shishu,” said Xi Ping, “you’re the only ascended spirit who can help now. It’s Western Chu territory. By the time word reaches Sanyue, the feast will be over and everyone will be going home. Are you just going to stand there and let people die?”

Lin Chi: “...”

Xi Ping said, “Qiu Sha has already gone to get a beating from the sages. You’re the living Golden Hand, and you say you can’t beat her? Of course you can do it!”

Since Lin Chi couldn't say "I'm going to stand here and let people die," but also definitely didn't think that he could do it, he was nearly stifled to death.

Using himself as a medium, Xi Ping simply dragged Lin Chi's consciousness into the reincarnation wood.

There was nothing for it. His resources were too scarce. He had to take whatever he could get.

Xi Ping considered calmly: if Lin Chi really couldn't be relied on, he would go and see just how strong the idea that had made the Law Breaker lose control was. If it really was Qiu Sha...

"She was an ascended spirit," he thought. "I'm a step away from an ascended spirit, but other people's consciousnesses rely on their bodies. I'm stronger than everyone else at my level. I might be able to make do."

So he said boastfully to Lin Chi, "Just do your best, shishu. If there's really nothing for it, I'll take over."

Master Lin suspected for a moment that there was something wrong with his ears. He said fearfully, "Wh-who will take over? Slow down, if I recall correctly... What is your cultivation level?"

Xi Ping modestly answered, "Established foundation, I suppose."

Lin Chi: "..."

In Tao County, Qiu Sha had single-handedly slaughtered ascended spirit masters in the double digits, and a mere established foundation who had entered the Way six years ago was saying that if there was nothing else for it, *he* would take over?

What was the matter with juniors these days?

Zhao Qindan was nearly taken down by a sneak attack from a machete. Her blood splashed on the plants next to her. She leapt up and dodged, waving a long sleeve, sending three dazzling talismans flying. Zhao Qindan didn't quite have enough spiritual energy to hold up, so she made a grab for the spiritual stone pouch at her waist, but instead just happened to grab a human hand.

The next moment, as if it knew it had been found out, the demonic hand vanished. The fingers even seemed to brush against the back of her hand.

This was too horrifying!

If not for the fact that Zhao Qindan's hair was too long, it would probably all have stood up on end.

In just that momentary pause, an evil cultivator rolled out of the thicket holding a short flute, playing a sharp screech.

Zhao Qindan shook, frozen in place by the sound of the flute.

No good!

The evil cultivator extended a hand toward her with a nasty grin. "The 'key' to the Zhao family's hidden realm. It makes me laugh..."

Before he could finish, a die came flying toward his face. The evil cultivator, taken off guard, reached out to grab it, and just happened to see that the number on top of the die was six.

He heard a voice say with a quiet laugh, "What good luck, sir..."

Before the voice finished speaking, a bolt of lightning flew out of the die and hit the evil cultivator right on the chin. The evil cultivator's jaw was instantly knocked backward and charred black.

The die fell and turned into flying light.

Wei Chengxiang pulled her bamboo hat down and walked out with the huge Silver Tray Lottery case on her back. "...you've won first prize—a lightning bolt."

The dried up reincarnation wood trees in the area seemed to rustle in answer. Next, seven or eight dice came rolling from all directions. The evil cultivators had become acquainted with the peculiar property of her dice and quickly dodged with their eyes fixed on them.

The dice, after being dodged, knocked together, and a light powerful enough to blind half-immortals exploded.

Apart from Wei Chengxiang, who had closed her eyes, and Zhao Qindan, whose eyes she had covered with one hand, everyone else was rendered unable to see by the dazzle of the light.

Wei Chengxiang gave over all her spiritual sense to Xi Ping, letting the consciousness in the reincarnation wood lead her to precisely locate the position of each opponent. Her hand moved, and one of the lottery beads from the Silver Tray Lottery box flashed out from between her fingers. The talisman on the lottery bead flew through the navels of the crowd of evil cultivators—including one who had been hiding in the shadows all along.

When the fierce light that had delivered a crushing defeat faded, Wei Chengxiang lowered the hand covering Zhao Qindan's eyes. She was about to speak, but before the polite smile could form on her face, a talisman came right toward her.

Had Wei Chengxiang not spent several years being hunted by the Exonerators, she would have been slapped in the face by that talisman.

In an instant, she bent backward at the waist as though she had been cut in half and flicked out a die, blocking the talisman.

The topmost face of the die was fixed on one. When it shook, the talisman turned into a puff of steam and vanished along with the die.

Wei Chengxiang put one hand on the ground and bounced up. Zhao Qindan threw her off once more, only leaving behind a chilly: “Shameless! I remember you!”

Wei Chengxiang: “...”

How was she shameless? This was a singular injustice!

Young Mistress Zhao had seen good things before. As soon as Wei Chengxiang had appeared, she had seen that this impoverished evil cultivator’s left hand was a rather high quality immortal tool. The evil cultivator had perhaps never eaten a good meal, thin as a rake, with very distinctive hands—somewhat thinner than the hands of a man of the same build, as if the bones weren’t fully developed, and fingers so thin they looked a little sharp. It was exactly the same as the demonic paw that had just been filching spiritual stones from her bag!

Zhao Qindan thought: this person was too uncouth. He had three hands, and he was attempting to trick her into trusting him!

Wei Chengxiang spoke to Xi Ping and used the omnipresent reincarnation wood to locate Zhao Qindan once again.

“She’s realized that that was your hand. You won’t wash yourself clean even if you jump into the Yellow River,” Xi Ping told her. “Don’t explain, just snatch her spiritual stone pouch and grab the Law Breaker Bracelet. The Luwu are almost there!”

Xu Rucheng had been too generous. There were too many spiritual stones in Zhao Qindan's bag. If that bracelet continued to absorb them, it would accumulate enough spiritual energy to activate itself.

Wei Chengxiang's chest ached. She felt that that damned bracelet had ruined her reputation forever.

Standing on a worn-out iron sword bought by the road, Zhao Qindan flew faster than the wind. She had a rare first-class spiritual sense. In the Latent Cultivation Temple, even King of the Underworld Luo had been pleasant to her. Now, she clearly felt a gaze following her like her shadow.

“Stop!” The uncouth three-handed thief was also chasing after her, and had obviously taken a shortcut!

Zhao Qindan's thoughts moved quickly. Someone was secretly watching her. Who was it? Where was the gaze coming from?

The next moment, she glimpsed the omnipresent reincarnation wood trees out of the corner of her eye.

It was as if Zhao Qindan's spiritual sense had been pricked with a thin needle. She understood: someone had tampered with these trees!

The young mistress came to a rapid decision. She took aim at a river and made a grab in midair, throwing off Wei Chengxiang once more, jumping into the rapidly flowing river—the current in this river was rapid, so there were no reincarnation wood trees nearby.

Her talisman hit the surface of the water, and she blended with the river, disappearing.

Wei Chengxiang immediately lost track of her. She raised her eyebrows. Just then, a big net floated out of the water, its four corners held by four Luwu whose movements were concealed by stealth talismans. With a splash, they fished Zhao Qindan out of the water.

“Thank you for your help, senior,” the lead Luwu said to Xi Ping. “We’ve caught her.”

“A coincidence,” said Xi Ping. “The Law Breaker is in her spiritual stone pouch.”

While being chased by the evil cultivators, Zhao Qindan had accidentally splashed her blood on reincarnation wood. Xi Ping had put pressure directly on her spirit, leading her to jump into the water.

“Don’t worry, senior, we’ve already released twenty copies of the Zhao family inscription token. The news of the fake tokens will soon cover up this matter,” the lead Luwu said as he and his colleagues quickly got Zhao Qindan under control. He seized her spiritual stone pouch and looked toward Wei Chengxiang, who had leapt down.

“Tai Sui told me to come help.” Wei Chengxiang didn’t have time to say much, only briefly greeted the Luwu, then cut open the palm of her hand and quickly drew a talisman. “Return!”

The accumulated spiritual energy in her palm forced the spiritual stone pouch to open. The spiritual stones inside rolled out.

But her severed hand and the Law Breaker Bracelet had vanished into thin air.

Far away, amid the corpses of the evil cultivators Wei Chengxiang had taken down, a ghastly pale hand appeared out of nowhere on a corpse’s brow.

Without the slightest scruple, the severed hand plastered itself on and absorbed the corpse's spiritual energy.

The Law Breaker Bracelet stuck to its wrist lit up.

CHAPTER 100 - Unbound Knife (7)

Xi Ping said a silent “oh no” as the first to understand what was happening—after all, he’d actually entertained the crooked notion of killing people to obtain spiritual energy.

Open-eyed cultivators had no essence and couldn’t prevent themselves from being “digested.” When Xi Ping’s gaze arrived a step ahead of the others, he watched as, wherever the severed hand flitted by, the bodies of the half-immortals became desiccated corpses. Then, because the owner’s consciousness had vanished, the mustard seeds they carried with them fell one after another like ripe cantaloupes.

The Law Breaker Bracelet took everything as it came, not wasting the stones or the people; it was quite capable.

The severed hand it hung from was more than a hundred times smoother and more lustrous than when it had been attached to Wei Chengxiang, as if she hadn’t been the one to grow it in the first place!

Xi Ping could jump instantly through the trees, but he couldn’t do anything else. The Luwu and Wei Chengxiang forgot about Zhao Qindan. They turned and ran.

Tao County was currently a spiritual energy vacuum. All living things were drooping. As the Law Breaker Bracelet stirred up the scant spiritual energy it had stolen, the dry twigs of the reincarnation wood trees in the vicinity moved without a wind, suddenly sprouting buds.

Wei Chengxiang, flying her sword, was nearly a blur. Before she arrived herself, she had already thrown out a handful of dice.

A dozen dice encircled the Law Breaker Bracelet, all of them with the number six facing up, surrounding the bracelet with lighting and thunder.

But the Law Breaker Bracelet had “eaten its fill.” It had no fear of a half-immortal’s trifling abilities. When the straight lightning bolts came within half a chi of it, they curved on their own, curving into a dazzling lightning ball with the Law Breaker Bracelet as its center. The Law Breaker casually had the severed hand pick up the final ownerless mustard seed, and the displaced lightning set fire to a desiccated corpse, the flames as rampant as a provocation.

Wei Chengxiang twisted off the fake hand on her left wrist. After all, the hand the Law Breaker Bracelet had seized was one she had grown herself. It was instinctively drawn by its owner, flying toward her along with the Law Breaker.

“A-Xiang,” cried Xi Ping, “give me your spirit!”

Wei Chengxiang was a little more special than all the others using reincarnation wood—she had been tricked by Liang Chen when she was younger and had been a “believer,” offering her spirit and flesh to the master of the reincarnation wood. Strictly speaking, she could act as a human “reincarnation wood tree.”

Lin Chi, brought along by Xi Ping, was stunned when he heard this. “But the spirit is..”

A cultivator’s underpinning.

But the next moment, Wei Chengxiang opened her spirit to Xi Ping without reservation, like many years before, letting his consciousness in.

At the same time, she grabbed her own severed hand.

The moment she touched the Law Breaker Bracelet, Wei Chengxiang's ears hummed, practically boundless thoughts surging in, submerging the open-eyed ant's consciousness with a crash.

Wei Chengxiang only had time to send a final thought to her companions: No good, the Law Breaker Bracelet has activated!

Lin Chi and Xi Ping were both surprised: however powerful Qiu Sha had been, she was still dead. How could the remaining consciousness of a person erased by the Silver Moon nearly a month ago be so strong?

In an instant, Lin Chi had no more time to think. With the consciousness of an ascended spirit, he rammed into it.

The Golden Hand had been famous for centuries. It was one thing to be meek and forbearing; no matter how cowed Lin Chi usually was, his cultivation certainly wasn't weak—when Qiu Sha had been cutting down an ascended spirit with each thrust of her sword, she had been repeatedly hindered by his presence. Xi Ping suspected he was at least at the mid-late ascended spirit stage.

If it was said that sword cultivators were the best at offense within their grade, then the toolmaking and medicine-making ways, which tracked the changes of furnaces and ranges, had the most condensed consciousnesses within their grade. Once the fire was lit in an immortal furnace, it might take several months to complete a tool, or even a few years. If the cultivator lost focus, all their work would be undone. Therefore, toolmaking and medicine-making cultivators had unrivaled powers of focus.

In addition, if there was anyone on earth who would dare to say he understood this strange "Law Breaker," it could only be the Golden Hand.

Within the little bracelet, there seemed to be a whole other set of mountains and seas, outside of the spiritual mountains... even outside of the universe. Inside, like a kaleidoscope, were three thousand worlds one within another.

For a moment, Xi Ping was dazed. Had Lin Chi not been guiding him, he would have been stuck inside at once.

As he was accustomed to doing, Lin Chi put aside everything around him, setting his consciousness directly against the core of the Law Breaker—the core of the Riverward was misty thin smoke, but the core of the Law Breaker was a ball of violent fire.

The “fire” swallowed the last pouch of spiritual stones in one gulp. Its flames rose sharply, the outlines of the blaze sketching a graceful female form. She opened her arms. There were stacks of thin bracelets hanging from her slim wrists. Her sharp jaw was raised in a disdainful posture.

Lin Chi’s consciousness immediately became the symbol of an inscription Xi Ping didn’t know and flagrantly smashed into the Law Breaker’s steeply rising blaze. The blaze shook fiercely, suppressed by the ultimate toolmaking master of the current era.

Xi Ping split off his attention to the surrounding reincarnation wood trees and saw that the delicate buds the dead trees had just grown had withered once more. He didn’t know whether he should laugh bitterly or feel relieved.

Only then did he have leisure to spare to examine the countless little worlds around him. After only a few glances, he felt that his consciousness was being sucked in, so he quickly averted his gaze and focused, calming himself.

“Peak Master Lin,” Xi Ping said, “can this immortal... can this divine tool be destroyed? It’s too dangerous.”

Lin Chi didn't answer.

Xi Ping suddenly thought something was wrong. "Lin... Lin-shishu?"

Lin Chi's voice, in an altered pitch, exploded into his ear: "Out of the way!"

No sooner had he spoken than the inscription Lin Chi had used to seal the flames split apart. The suppressed flames of the Law Breaker instantly bounced back, leaping even higher than at the start.

A cluster of golden light lit up at the center of the flames. Without needing to ask Lin Chi, Xi Ping intuitively knew that this was the Law Breaker's new "axiom," about to be completed. He already dimly sensed the power of the irresistible rule that had pulled all of Tao County into the seventh day of the seventh month.

Cultivators established foundations and became immortal through Ways of the Heart; immortal tools lost control through ideas.

"It won't work," Lin Chi said hastily amid the furious tongues of flame. "Is this really Qiu Sha's dying thought?"

"If it isn't hers, whose else could it be? Could it possibly be mine? Do you see it obeying me?" Xi Ping answered. "Whether it'll work or not, it still has to be done. No matter whose it is, this axiom can't be allowed to be completed!"

Lin Chi said, "I can't hold it!"

Xi Ping recalled all of his consciousness dispersed throughout the reincarnation wood. The moment that Lin Chi was thrown off by the Law Breaker Bracelet, relying on his "tough" consciousness that

had been tempered countless times beside the Xia River, ignoring the brutal fire, he dove right in, knocking against that golden light.

Lin Chi had thought he had experienced the pinnacle of recklessness when he had dared to ring a false Bell of Tribulation on Xuanyin's Principal Peak to fool nine great peak masters, but as he saw Xi Ping's consciousness swept up among the tongues of flame, Lin Chi still couldn't resist blurting out, "Xi Shiyong!"

Xi Ping gripped the incomplete axiom in the palm of his hand. Presently his consciousness was licked all over by the tongues of flame until it no longer resembled a human; only a vague ball remained.

But his mind was still clear. He could still rave: "My consciousness was shattered by shed skin sages, this measly little bracelet..."

The restrained thought inside the Law Breaker Bracelet struggled even more furiously, wildly breaking off his words.

But Xi Ping was already a practiced hand at being "crushed to dust." He could be crushed without dispersing. He held down the golden-lit axiom, not letting go.

Even if all five spiritual mountain ranges came down on him from above today, he would still finish bragging: "... is nothing but a lamp!"

The golden-lit axiom was firmly held in place by his consciousness. It twisted and changed shape.

Lin Chi was stupefied by the strength of this junior's consciousness. He nearly suspected that the horrifying idea in the Law Breaker Bracelet really was Xi Ping's.

The incomplete axiom was twisted into fragments of light by Xi Ping's frightening consciousness. Lin Chi automatically retreated—all toolmaking masters connected to heaven and earth amid fierce fire. Sometimes they could sense things that other cultivators couldn't detect.

For a moment, Lin Chi seemed to hear the three thousand paths of the Great Way shaking, as well as the Way that was outside of all laws, as tameless as before.

The intense idea circling within the Law Breaker Bracelet stagnated.

Xi Ping gave a "ha." He had the impression that he had a body, and that he had been splashed all over with boiling oil. Laughing coldly, he grit his teeth and said, "Now, seal it!"

Lin Chi didn't dare to hesitate. Another inscription took shape and forced itself into the core of the Law Breaker being suppressed by Xi Ping. The flaming fire was once again suppressed by these two masters working in concert.

Just then, a wail sounded in Xi Ping's ear.

Xi Ping froze, suspecting that he was hallucinating because his consciousness had been injured—this voice was extremely hoarse, extremely weary, bearing almost a hopeless exhaustion. It didn't seem like the crafty demonic tool that had sent everyone running in circles, and neither was it Qiu Sha. It sounded... faintly familiar.

Before he could recognize it, Xi Ping's consciousness was knocked aside by some irresistible force.

He was like an ant walking over a crumbling dam. Before he could even take a breath, he was swept away by the flood of wailing... no better than Wei Chengxiang had fared earlier.

Lin Chi was a genuine ascended spirit, and while Xi Ping's body wasn't up to the mark, the strength of his consciousness matched up to Lin Chi's. Right now, these two ascended spirit grade consciousness had no power to resist, tossed aside by the erupting thought inside the Law Breaker Bracelet.

Xi Ping: "..."

In fact, this wasn't Qiu Sha.

Had she been this powerful, she would have picked up a knife and stabbed it into the Sanyue Mountains!

Was this a shed skin? Did a shed skin have this kind of might?

The golden light Xi Ping had just broken condensed unstoppably. It was like the first rays of the rising sun, tearing through the dawn, spilling morning light and enveloping all of Tao County.

The irresistible axiom took effect.

A desperate thought came from Lin Chi: *It's all over.*

Then they heard countless overlapping voices babbling. They poured into their ears, gathering into a sound as huge as a large bell or an ocean wave.

Xi Ping was a contrarian who didn't acknowledge the words "I can't" or "It's over." He had never shed tears before seeing the casket. Now, when he saw the axiom irrevocably take effect, after the temporary shock had passed, he immediately changed his line of thought: before he blacked out, he was going to do all he could to hunt down the contents of the axiom, gather as much information as possible.

If there was really nothing for it, all they could do was think of some way to poke holes to break the axiom. And he wanted to see what god or sage could have such a powerful idea—

Xi Ping's wound-riddled consciousness gathered into a blade. The "sharp knife" cut away the noise and struck right at the depths of the golden light... The Law Breaker's axiom flashed before his eyes. Xi Ping saw it clearly, but he was stunned.

The axiom written in the golden light that had scattered everywhere was: *Grand Duke Tai Sui blesses and protects us, and we do not have to be fish on the chopping block or drifters in the wind.*

There was a boom. Forget about open-eyed, established foundation, ascended spirit... The consciousnesses of men and immortals were all flattened by the Law Breaker.

The thought that the Law Breaker had submitted itself to did not belong to any ascended spirit in the high heavens.

It belonged to the mortals who had trembled in the cracks amid the ascended spirit battlefield in Tao County, their lives and deaths out of their control.

On the seventh day of the seventh month, they had set fire to the ancient monster's late-autumn red, had had a dream of being heroes, which had been erased by the "moonlight." But the fight in them then hadn't been fabricated. It had been preserved forever in the Law Breaker. Once ignited, it became so strong that no one could hold it back.

The evil cultivators and the immortals couldn't do it, and not even the "god" they themselves had concocted and believed in could do it.

Zhou Ying, skimming through the reports coming in from Luwu in various countries, felt as if the center of his brow had been pricked by a thin needle. His paramount spiritual sense touched something. His fingers reached out, and Zhou Ying grasped a reincarnation wood chip. “Shiyong?”

There was no answer.

Meanwhile in Tao County, everything seemed to have gone still. All the cultivators’ consciousnesses were swept away by a powerful current. For a moment, they had no perception.

Mysteriously, the invisible and intangible axiom flew through big streets and little alleys, sweeping through the hearts of men and women, young and old. The memories washed away by the Silver Moon came crashing back into place. They remembered the night of Qixi, when daybreak wouldn’t come, remembered that raging conflagration. All the withered reincarnation wood trees in the county rustled, as if answering with some promise.

In the underground secret room of the Snake King’s Immortal Palace, the divine image that had been used to worship Tai Sui had been shattered by Xuanwu. There was already a layer of dust accumulated on the altar.

But the candle flames lit of their own accord, and the floating smoke changed into the form of many reincarnation wood trees. The shadowy trees in the smoke and the real dead trees in the county echoed each other. Amid the smoke, a human form gradually appeared.

At the same time, beneath the fathomless Resurrection Vortex, upon Xi Ping, sealed at the bottom of the Impassable Sea along with the demon seed, a light the color of flame emerged. He gradually dissolved amid the light, undetectably disappearing from the forbidden ground laid down by the shed skins.

On the altar table in Tao County, the human figure in the faint mist of the incense smoke became solid.

The body that not even the demon of the Impassable Sea had been able to steal while carrying the Riverward thus appeared thousands of li away, ferried back to the human world by a wish.

“Shiyong, Shiyong...”

Xi Ping thought that he heard Zhi Xiu’s voice in a daze and inwardly mocked himself: How come I think of shizun as soon as I get a beating? Haven’t I been weaned?

But his consciousness instinctively chased after that voice.

“Follow me, come this way.” Zhi Xiu’s voice was hoarse and profoundly weary, but his tone wasn’t urgent—he seemed to be the kind of man who, even if he had only one breath left, would still arrange everything appropriately, then smile before he died.

Xi Ping vaguely muttered, “Instead of staying in seclusion properly, you’re always going out worrying about things.”

Zhi Xiu said, “And which disappointing fiend’s fault is that...? Listen, how much do I owe you from the last lifetime?”

Xi Ping said, “Not much. Perhaps it’s two white spirits.”

Zhi Xiu, laughing, scolded, “Get out!”

The laughter was too vivid. Xi Ping’s head cleared with a start.
“Shifu?!”

Zhi Xiu didn’t answer, and Xi Ping felt that shifu’s voice had led him to an extremely familiar place, a... spirit without a Way of the Heart,

with only a qin upon it.

Before Xi Ping could react, he seemed to miss a step in a dream. He “fell” into that spirit.

In Tao County, the reincarnation wood trees quivering at the same frequency stopped one after another, from the outer reaches of Tao County all the way to the Snake King’s Immortal Palace, at last all penetrating into the underground secret room.

All the smoke from the altar table seeped into Xi Ping’s body.

With a thump, the heart that had been silent for five years beat.

In the depths of the earth of Tao County, there also seemed to be a heavy heartbeat thumping in the souls of the people, breaking through the temporary stagnation produced by the Law Breaker.

Unnoticed, the people’s faces streamed with tears.

All of this had happened intangibly and untraceably. The Sanyue Immortal Mountains knew nothing about it.

CHAPTER 101 - Unbound Knife (8)

“Bai Ling.”

In response, the paperman floated in through the crack in the window. Zhou Ying didn't look up. Profound gloom flitted over his brow. He instructed, “Ask the Luwu in Western Chu what's happened in that awful Tao County this time. I'm going to the East Sea.”

The water dragon pearl he had left with Shiyong had just been touched. Who dared to infiltrate the demon seal?

Bai Ling saw his expression, which looked as if someone had tugged on his reverse scale, and didn't dare to ask what had happened. Just as he was about to obey orders and send a letter, he happened to see a letter come in.

Bai Ling instantly stopped in his tracks.

Zhou Ying said, “Has anything changed on Xuanyin Mountain? Those two old...”

Bai Ling said, “My-my lord!”

Zhou Ying looked back expressionlessly—this was his expression of utmost impatience—and saw Bai Ling slowly raise the communication device in his hand. On it was a line of familiar arrogant writing. It said: “All is well, do not worry.”

The chiming clock in the study came to the full hour just then, releasing thin steam with a click. The karma beast carved on the clock used its head to push the gold balls on the clock face into the correct time. When the clock struck, the writing on the immortal tool had yet to fade.

This person who hadn't even been able to speak if someone else was present had broken through the demon seal's prohibition.

Xi Ping took a deep breath and put down the Luwu communication device. "The demon seal's prohibition on me has vanished."

It took all his strength to control himself and not write home.

He couldn't even look after himself right now. He truly had no surplus strength for protecting the mortals in the Yongning Marquis Manor. All he could do was stay as quiet as possible to avoid getting his family involved.

Xi Ping unconsciously stroked his hands, feeling that they were unfamiliar—these hands had long, slender fingers and came from a life of luxury. Never mind the flesh and bones, even the faint calluses that came from plucking instruments seemed to have been carved by a sculptor... There were no hangnails, no scars, no sores. There wasn't even any dirt under the nails, or any deformed joints.

Suddenly, Xi Ping realized that back when Liang Chen had "woken up" in his body, the first thing he had done had also been to stroke these hands in wonder... exactly the same way he was doing now.

What am I doing...? Xi Ping abruptly tucked his thumbs into his palms.

His consciousness had suddenly returned to his body. It was very unfamiliar—while he hadn't been there, those three shed skin elders had simply smashed his half-baked established foundation body all the way to a consummate established foundation.

As far as the open-eyed stage went, while "consummate open-eyed" and an ordinary open-eyed cultivator were both called "half-immortals," there was already a discrepancy of a hundred years of

cultivation, a colossal difference. Half-immortals basically still relied on external objects. However proficient they were in talismans and arrays, they were still limited by their cultivation level; they couldn't fight back against a higher grade cultivator. But "consummate open-eyed" meant a cultivator like Pang Jian, with a Way of the Heart completed and spiritual bones refined, only one established foundation pill and a sum of spiritual stones away from an established foundation, their strength approaching that of a true established foundation—never mind that Lin Zhaoli was an established foundation sword cultivator, if it really came to an all out fight, he still might not be able to defeat Pang Jian.

And at the established foundation stage, cultivators could personally carve inscriptions, and the world as it appeared in their eyes wasn't to be mentioned in the same breath as the open-eyed stage.

The distance between "early established foundation" and "consummate established foundation" was even further than at the open-eyed stage. There would be hundreds, or perhaps even thousands of years to walk between the two. It was simply the difference between "immortal" and "human."

Though Xi Ping had accidentally sat on his own hair, his consciousness was unprecedentedly free.

Five years ago, he had stamped a hither seal on his newly-established spiritual foundation and nearly irretrievably destroyed himself; but now, he could probe almost at will with his consciousness, using any reincarnation wood tree on earth as a medium.

He could see all of Tao County at a glance. Seeing the Xia River and the mountains beyond Tao County, he felt trepidation—the big river was like an irrigation ditch, which he could block with one hand, and

the mountains all seemed to be made of paper... No wonder shifu's single sword thrust had sent the whole East Sea boiling.

All living things were before his eyes, all become so weak. Xi Ping didn't even dare to exert any strength stepping on the white jade floor of the Snake King's Immortal Palace. He guiltily shuffled a few steps forward on tiptoe, then heard Zhi Xiu say: "...you're swinging the wrong arm."

The shard of Zhaoting was suspended in Xi Ping's spirit, on the Tai Sui Qin—the place where another person's Way of the Heart would have been suspended. Xi Ping had no Way of the Heart, only a feeble sliver of his shizun's consciousness residing in a sword shard, always watching over his unbounded soul.

"Shifu." As Xi Ping spoke, with a thought, he had already left the Snake King's Immortal Palace and arrived in the middle of Seventeen Li Town's street. It was already dark. Streetlamps were lit at the Immortal Palace's gate. Just up ahead was a cookware repairman getting ready to pack up his stall, limping over with his little pole over his shoulder, staring at him the whole way. "Someone is looking at me. Can he... see me?"

It had been too long since Xi Ping had been seen. With someone looking at him, he looked back directly, two grown men staring at each other in the middle of the street; the atmosphere was a little peculiar.

The young man in brocade robes had an extravagantly dazzling face, markedly beautiful and sharp-boned, with arrogance inherent in his features, as far as could be from "gentle and honest." The cookware repairman was a humble craftsman, belonging to the class that walked through the streets carrying poles over their shoulders. Normally, never mind staring, if he had run into such a fine young master, he would have avoided him. But for some reason, the cookware repairman kept thinking there was something

familiar about the person in front of him. Looking at this face that expressed “bad temper” with the tips of its eyebrows, not only did he not feel fear, he felt out of nowhere that he had been wronged. He accidentally bumped into a tree by the road.

But when he hit it, the reincarnation wood tree became soft and gently held him up. The cookware repairman was extremely surprised. When he looked back, the young man in brocade robes had disappeared into the misty night.

“I am also looking at you.” Zhi Xiu had to take a long rest each time he spoke, as if conserving his strength as much as possible. His words nearly made Xi Ping burst into tears.

But then he heard him say weakly, laughing, “I’ll remember all the beatings I owe you—Lin-shixiong, my inferior disciple is rude and has no sense of proportion. You have gone to a great deal of trouble looking after him.”

Xi Ping held back his tears and finally remembered that he had seized a sliver of Lin Chi’s consciousness and had yet to let him go.

He was done for. He had called the man “Lin Chi” right to his face and called him “bashful” behind his back. On their first meeting, he had tricked his blood out of him... Would Peak Master Lin have a ten-thousand-word complaint to lodge?

Lin Chi, trapped in the reincarnation wood by Xi Ping, could hear Zhi Xiu’s voice through Xi Ping’s spirit. Catching up twice as slowly as other people, he finally stammered, “Gen-general Zhi?”

“There is a shard of Zhaoting in his body. I can just about manage to use Zhaoting to have a look,” Zhi Xiu said. “I think that this place is no longer restrained by the Sanyue Spiritual Mountains... What was that power beyond the laws just now?”

“It was the Law Breaker that Xiangjun left behind.” Lin Chi had no attention to spare for enumerating complaints. He quickly asked Xi Ping, “Wh-what happened? Where is the Law Breaker? Was she activated? What is her axiom?”

Xi Ping quickly made a round of Tao County and found no trace of the Law Breaker Bracelet. That mysterious demonic tool seemed to have blended into the earth of Tao County. Even the force of the rule that only an ascended spirit could sense had vanished without a trace.

But the Moon Shadow was still there, the huge deficit of spiritual energy was still there, and the full moon wounds were also still there.

Xi Ping hesitated. Zhi Xiu said, “Lin-shixiong stands apart from worldly strife. So long as it does not go against his Way of the Heart, he will not readily involve himself in ordinary affairs.”

Xi Ping considered it. That was true. At the beginning, when faceless Xuanwu had come, had Lin Chi not protected him, then the Law Breaker Bracelet would at best have been able to steal a corpse for the people to make offerings to. So he respectfully called out “Lin-shishu,” then briefly explained the axiom he had grabbed in the core of the Law Breaker.

Lin Chi: “...”

He had wasted eight hundred years. He had never seen such a thing.

Xi Ping seemed to want to make up for his past rudeness. Stepping on a dry reincarnation wood twig to fly up to the sky over Tao County, he said, “Please instruct me, Lin-shishu. In your view, what is the current situation in Tao County?”

“Within the area enveloped by the Law Breaker, the axiom is eternal,” Lin Chi said cautiously after thinking for a long moment. “With her there, at least as long as you are in Tao County, no one will be able to perceive what you do... unless the axiom breaks, or the axiom is realized.”

“How could the axiom break or be realized?”

“For the axiom to be realized, the inside and the outside of the Law Breaker must be united—the majority of axioms cannot be realized, so we can leave that aside for the time being,” Lin Chi said. “At present, it seems that Tao County has acknowledged you as ‘Tai Sui.’ As long as you are there, so long as you do not abandon the mortals of Tao County who believe in you, the axiom will not break.”

Xi Ping froze, not knowing what to think.

In other words, under the protection of the Law Breaker’s axiom, he could escape the demon seal and conceal it from the world; but if he failed to act and broke Tao County’s axiom, the Law Breaker would naturally lose effect... and he would immediately be noticed by the Xuanyin Mountains.

What was this?

He was in a “symbiotic relationship” with Tao County now?

Five years ago, he had been brought by coincidence to Tao County by the disaster-bringing evil cultivator. Here he had become “Tai Sui,” and then changed from “Tai Sui” back to “Xi Ping.”

Five years later, his fate had been tied like this by a series of coincidences to a little town by the Wan-Chu border, like some secretly foreordained arrangement.

“Then...” Xi Ping asked after a long time, “what will Tao County become? I just saw that those hundred thousand white spirits are still missing.”

“I don’t know,” Lin Chi said very honestly. “Do you still remember, last time the Law Breaker was activated, the axiom was only a simple sentence, but as for how to interpret it, for example where Qiu Sha had to be to count as ‘at the Immortal Palace’s night feast’ and other such vague boundaries, that was all set by Little Brother Wei. Others had no way of knowing. Little Brother Wei voluntarily activated the Law Breaker Bracelet, so she would have intentionally considered some stipulations, but the trouble this time is that the people of Tao County did this unintentionally, and the idea that activated the Law Breaker Bracelet wasn’t a specific person’s idea.”

Listening to this, Xi Ping was all at sea. “Huh? In other words, what counts as ‘blessing and protecting.’ what it means not to ‘be fish on the chopping block,’ is undefined. There are no clear restrictions for me to follow like Xuanyin’s ‘three improvements and three abstinences.’ What... what should I do? Do what I see fit?”

Zhi Xiu said, “This so-called ‘axiom’ is indestructible, such that Lin-shixiong, the Golden Hand, cannot obstruct it. Yet it is also very fragile, such that Shiyong might inadvertently break it at any time?”

Lin Chi sighed. “That’s correct.”

Zhi Xiu’s voice became slightly grave. “But if this ‘axiom’ breaks, the Bell of Tribulation certainly won’t let him go—Lin-shixiong, can you think of anything?”

Lin Chi considered, then gravely shook his head. “With the Law Breaker’s axiom present, he can perhaps use the Luwu masks to shield his identity and occasionally leave Tao County, but if the Law Breaker’s axiom breaks, there is nothing I can do to hide him from the demon seal. It has been eight hundred years. That even a

mediocrity like me could become famous shows that the toolmaking path is destitute. Apart from Xiangjun, no one could escape the surveillance of the spiritual mountains.”

“That’s too dangerous. The Law Breaker’s protection is like paper over a fire.” After what he had heard, Zhi Xiu couldn’t resist saying, “Shiyong...”

As Zhi Xiu spoke, he quickly considered several places—for example, the huge ice fields with no one around for thousands of li, beyond the Slumbering Dragon Sea, north of the Beijue Mountains; or perhaps the ancient hidden realms that could hide a person... The demon seal at the bottom of the Impassable Sea was such that once you went in you couldn’t leave, but this place belonged to Western Chu, after all, and Xuanyin was currently in turmoil. Supposing that Xi Ping cast Tao County aside at once, perhaps he could escape to a relatively safe place before the Xuanyin Mountains could react.

But... if he escaped, then what would happen to the people who had placed their trust in him in a moment of utter despair?

General Zhi couldn’t speak, because to say this would violate Zhaoting’s sword heart. He couldn’t instruct his disciple to do this.

But in his eyes, Xi Ping was even younger than he himself had been when he had come to the immortal mountains. He was a child. How could a teacher like him, who had been unable to protect the innocent children at the bottom of the Impassable Sea, have the face to use himself as a standard against which to measure a child?

“Shifu,” Xi Ping suddenly cut in out of nowhere after staring blankly at Tao County for a long time, perhaps not listening to what his elders were saying, “it’s all right. I know.”

“What do you know?”

“I think I know what the boundaries of this axiom are.” Xi Ping extended a hand, and the Tai Sui Qin landed on his knees. As if he had understood something, in a brisk tone, he said, “I think... I’m also within it.”

Zhi Xiu froze. Xi Ping’s last sentence had been spoken with a Chu accent.

“Thank you, Lin-shishu, I will escort you back now. I will have to trouble you again in the future.” Saying so, skillfully using the reincarnation wood, Xi Ping sent Lin Chi’s consciousness back. He extended a hand and pushed apart the mist in the sky over Tao County. There was no sign yet of the new moon. There was only a sky full of stars.

With a twang, the Tai Sui Qin began to sound over all of Tao County. Xi Ping not very skillfully played a Chu song, quiet and tranquil, as if it could calm the souls in a hundred thousand tombs.

He had said he was “also within it”; he was also mixed in among... the ants of Tao County.

Zhi Xiu listened to his song. When the melody ended, he felt a sudden mixture of emotions. “Shiyong, if I had not let you leave the mountain back then...”

“Hey, shifu, why don’t you hurry up and go back into seclusion? What are you doing getting mixed up in this instead of recuperating properly? You don’t have any money, anyway.”

Zhi Xiu: “...”

Rebellious disciple!

CHAPTER 102 - Unbound Knife (9)

Wei Chengxiang was among the first to hear the music. Her consciousness had been flattened by the Law Breaker and her spiritual energy exhausted. She awakened to music, her wounds healing rapidly, her meridians seemingly becoming considerably wider than before.

As if she understood something, she sat and began to meditate.

Under the protection of a night of qin music, Tao County slept peacefully—the people had been woken from numbness and submission by the Law Breaker, and their blood had begun to burn, but they had also directly faced the bloody ascended spirit battlefield and the Silver Moon; but the music that reached into each person’s dreams left the fear behind in the deep night, taking only their souls.

All the cultivators passing through Tao County also had a chance to make progress. Even Zhaoting, suspended on Xi Ping’s spirit, became tranquil.

When day was breaking, Wei Chengxiang finally opened her eyes to the first rays of the morning sun and the hawking of the peddlers. “Senior, you were rusty at the beginning.”

“I’ve never played Chu songs before.” Xi Ping held down the strings. With a profound air of seniority and mastery, he sighed with feeling. “Besides, it has been many years since I last touched a qin.”

The Tai Sui Qin was his vital weapon, but sadly, since its birth, it had hardly been played. If he hadn’t been using it as a big sledgehammer to pound an immortal tool, then it had been sealed along with him at the bottom of the Impassable Sea. Only when he had said goodbye to Wei Chengxiang back then had he hastily

played for her... Fortunately she couldn't read his thoughts from his music, or else she would have heard the uncertainty and panic in his playing.

Hearing his easy tone and seeing that he was in the mood to hide out somewhere playing the qin, she knew that the matter of the Law Breaker Bracelet must have been resolved. Stretching, she relaxed. She was just about to ask about the details when she suddenly felt that something was wrong.

Xi Ping sat among the clouds, awaiting the first rays of dawn, his gaze following the dew into the mortal world. He wasn't prepared to reveal the matter of the Law Breaker Bracelet and its axiom to too many people and had already concocted a set of lies. He was ready to start by showing off in front of the young woman. Then he saw Wei Chengxiang pat herself down twice and sit up straight like a risen corpse.

Xi Ping prepared his ethereal pose and idly enticed her to ask: "What is it?"

Wei Chengxiang said, "There's two liang three qian of jade stamps missing from my mustard seed!"

Xi Ping: "..."

With the morning star hanging high in the sky, couldn't they talk about a somewhat more refined subject?

Grand Duke Tai Sui's mind, floating high among the clouds, was dragged back into this mortal world by her babbled "two liang three qian." Clicking his tongue, he idly said, "That's not possible. Count again. Maybe you just remembered wrong."

He could see all of Tao County. There wasn't a safer place anywhere. No one had come near A-Xiang. Who could have stolen

spiritual stones from her mustard seed without anyone knowing?

If they were capable of that, would they be interested in that two liang three qian?

Wei Chengxiang acted as though her personal integrity had been called into question. “How could I possibly have counted my spiritual stones wrong? I only have about twenty liang of jade stamps to begin with!”

Xi Ping: “...”

Fair enough. After all, this was the woman who had picked up scales to weigh half a qian of green ore.

Just then, the cultivators who had been immersed in the music woke from meditation one by one. Xi Ping concentrated and heard the voices coming from all sides.

“Strange, where did the two blue jades I just put next to me go?”

This was a worm master.

“The number of my spiritual stones is wrong, where are you?”

“I think I’m missing a white spirit!”

Oh, a cash cow. Xi Ping’s gaze was drawn for a moment by this cry, but he heard someone else say, “One tenth of my essence has been drained!”

There were quite a few established foundation cultivators in Tao County. Xi Ping quietly noted this one down and became even more suspicious.

Spiritual stones might have been counted wrong or lost, but how could an established foundation cultivator's essence be drained out of nowhere?

Zhao Qindan, who had been knocked out by the Luwu, also woke up and inspected her spiritual stone pouch as a precaution. Her expression was grave. After a moment, even the Luwu staying behind in the Snake King's Immortal Palace sent him a message: "Senior Tai Sui, each of us has lost about a tenth of our spiritual stones. The cause is unclear. We've sent people to make an inventory of the Snake King's Immortal Palace's stores."

In Tao County, the mortals went on as usual, but each cultivator seemed to be missing one tenth of their spiritual stones; those who didn't have spiritual stones had lost a tenth of their essence.

How strange.

Wei Chengxiang asked, "Can it be the Law Breaker Bracelet getting up to tricks?"

Xi Ping frowned. As he listened to the cultivators discussing their losses, he plucked the Tai Sui Qin.

The strings moved, but there was no sound. The spiritual energy at his fingertips spread out in all directions like waves. Xi Ping looked down and closely examined the path the spiritual energy.

With so many cultivators losing spiritual stones, the quantity wouldn't be small. A large quantity of spiritual stones gathered together would automatically attract free spiritual energy.

Xi Ping wanted to see where the spiritual energy flowed, but the spiritual energy floating from the qin strings went hardly a dozen zhang before, as if being towed, it assembled and returned to the Tai Sui Qin.

Light flashed on the qin strings among the spiritual energy, as if criticizing him for wasting his essence.

Xi Ping: "..."

His qin was a miser?

Reasonably speaking, a vital weapon was the vehicle of a cultivator's Way of the Heart. When a cultivator cultivated, they refined their Way of the Heart; after decades and centuries of diligent cultivation, the vital weapon would have become a part of their body and mind.

But Xi Ping had no Way of the Heart, so even though he had by a series of coincidences ended up as a "consummate established foundation," he actually wasn't yet very well-acquainted with his vital qin.

Everything was peculiar when it came to him. As if striking up a conversation with a stranger, Xi Ping carefully scouted out the qin with his consciousness, wanting to see what this qin's "nature" was. The Tai Sui Qin didn't react, as tepid as the heart-protecting lotus he had given san-ge; perhaps he had knocked it stupid, or it had been shut up in the Impassable Sea too long.

Suddenly, a song sounded inside the Tai Sui Qin, precisely the one he had just played. Xi Ping was startled: this was wrong. There was an inharmonious aura inside the Tai Sui Qin, as if some foreign matter had gotten into it.

He chased after it with his consciousness and quickly caught a sliver of golden light within the qin—the Law Breaker Bracelet!

The Law Breaker Bracelet that Xi Ping and Lin Chi hadn't been able to find anywhere last night had secretly hidden inside the Tai Sui

Qin.

The Law Breaker Bracelet didn't seem to want to hide from him. Before he could move, it flew toward him, wrapped in golden light, bumping right into Xi Ping's consciousness.

Next, Xi Ping's field of vision suddenly widened as his consciousness was pulled into a hidden realm.

The scenery here was all blurred. As his consciousness entered, the empty scenery solidified, transforming perfectly into the form of the rear garden in the Yongning Marquis Manor.

There was... a garden inside the Law Breaker Bracelet?

Where the winding paths met, dense spiritual energy was surging out. Xi Ping followed the spiritual energy, took a look, and was dumbfounded.

In the depths of the garden, a little fishing pavilion was stacked full of spiritual stones, everything from white spirits down to impure jade stamps. In the middle was a big, half-transparent jar, half-filled with spiritual energy in the form of essences drained from persons unknown, being separated into spiritual stones!

Xi Ping: "..."

Was this some fantasy concocted as a response to his "daily preoccupations and nightly dreams"? But then why would there be whole ones and partial ones? Was it... to increase the realism?

In his perplexity, Zhi Xiu's somewhat concerned voice sounded in his ear: "Shiyong!"

"Hey, shifu," Xi Ping, as if in a dream, thoughtlessly answered, staring at the spiritual stones, "hurry up and come slap me."

No sooner had he spoken than he heard Zhi Xiu give an exclamation of surprise. Next, a white figure with a blurred face but generally recognizable form appeared beside Xi Ping.

Xi Ping recognized at a glance that this was his shifu—he had sought for this figure high and low countless times among Flying Jade Peak’s wild winds and heavy snow. He could recognize him at a distance from his outline.

But... didn’t shifu have only a sliver of his consciousness attached to the shard of Zhaoting?

Before he could recover, the blurred human figure, upon appearing, without another word, rudely gave him a slap on the back of the head.

Xi Ping: “Ow!”

This place was strange. Having his consciousness beaten felt the same as having his physical body beaten.

Zhi Xiu didn’t have much energy. He had originally been meditating on Flying Jade Peak, but soon he had woken with a start—he couldn’t sense Xi Ping’s consciousness anymore.

“Is this inside the Law Breaker Bracelet?” In a flash, Zhi Xiu had examined the garden inside the Law Breaker Bracelet.

He was a near-shed skin, and the shard of Zhaoting was suspended on Xi Ping’s spirit. Reasonably speaking, apart from something of the grade of the demon seal, nothing could obstruct him. This place gave him a sense of being outside the real world. Where it connected, Zhi Xiu couldn’t see clearly at a glance. The Law Breaker Bracelet seemed to be able to cut off all probing—unless Xi Ping was willing to let it in.

As he spoke, the little garden slowly changed. Snow and ice appeared on the flowers and trees, and the little pavilion in the middle containing the spiritual stones took on the appearance of the cottage on Flying Jade Peak.

Zhi Xiu paused.

Xi Ping also quickly realized something. He concentrated and cleared his thoughts. The changes in the scenery stopped. Next, the “hybrid” of Flying Jade Peak and the Marquis Manor’s garden changed once more, turning into a convincing Snake King’s Immortal Palace.

“It seems I can change the furnishings here as I like...” Xi Ping said quietly. “Strange, why doesn’t the pile of spiritual stones change no matter how the place changes?”

“These spiritual stones are probably real objects.” Zhi Xiu frowned and calculated on his fingers, recalling briefly. He said, “These must be the spiritual stones those cultivators in Tao County lost. Converting them all into white spirits, you would get about two or three hundred liang.”

Xi Ping said, “... How do you know, shifu?”

“I overheard it in your spirit. I can calculate a rough estimate.”

“You can... How did you calculate that?” Xi Ping asked in astonishment. “Shifu, weren’t you a high general before? How come you can keep accounts better than Cui Ji’s manager?”

“Going to war is all keeping accounts.” Zhi Xiu waved a hand. “Or how do you think we pay for leading troops? On horseback with sword drawn, a thousand soldiers leaping forward to cut off the enemy general’s head?”

“Wait,” Xi Ping said, “wait, shifu, you mean that when I played the qin outside last night, this lousy bracelet was hiding inside the qin... secretly collecting a listening fee? And forcing the sale?”

Teacher and disciple stared at each other in dismay. General Zhi also seemed dubious—how could a sword cultivator like him turn out such an “accomplished” disciple? So he dryly said, “It seems that your proficiency in this field can indeed earn you a living. As a teacher, I am very gratified.”

Xi Ping became angry at once. He leapt up. “What does this lousy bracelet take me for? A performer who sings ballads for a living?”

Zhi Xiu stared. He hadn’t expected him to care about this, as if he had shame.

Then Xi Ping turned and said outward: “Playing half the night for two shichen, I made three hundred liang of white spirits. Then wouldn’t it take over six hundred shichen to make a hundred thousand liang of white spirits?! Why didn’t the lousy bracelet say so earlier? If it had said so earlier, I’d have played two months in a row, and wouldn’t I have a hundred thousand liang then? Now there’s only about ten days left. There can’t be any delays... Can I get more money if I sell my favors?”

He could also put on a colorful dress and dance, as long as the officials in the audience weren’t afraid of having their lifespans shortened when they were done enjoying the sight.

Zhi Xiu: “...”

General Zhi raised a hand and grabbed his disciple, who had been driven mad by poverty. “All the cultivators in Tao County added together don’t have a hundred thousand white spirits, and if you take their things again you’ll scare them all off! Come back.”

Xi Ping said urgently, “Who doesn’t want to economize, wait until the livestock are fattened for the slaughter? It’s the spirit-gathering array that won’t wait!”

Zhi Xiu said, “Have you worked out the rules this Law Breaker Bracelet uses to collect spiritual stones? Sit down.”

Xi Ping was caught by his shizun and held down among the glittering pile of spiritual stones. After calming down for a moment, he said, “It seems that the Law Breaker Bracelet only took one tenth of each person’s spiritual stones—and it only took from the cultivators. Many mortals in Tao County also have spiritual stones at home, but I didn’t hear any of them say they were missing any.”

Zhi Xiu thought about it. “With your near-ascended spirit cultivation level, you playing your vital qin has great benefits for Tao County’s lower level cultivators.”

Xi Ping said, “Well, I wasn’t playing for them... Wait, because I wasn’t playing for them, the Law Breaker Bracelet collected a fee for me?”

This place’s axiom had been made from the wish of Tao County’s mortals. Cultivators coming from outside fell outside the scope of the axiom’s protection. If they got a benefit, they had to pay the price.

Xi Ping’s mind immediately became active. His eyes spun.

Zhi Xiu knocked on his forehead. “Cultivation cannot rely on external things. It’s one thing to have an occasional fortuitous encounter that leads you to some enlightenment. If you really played the qin day and night for two months, you would drive them all mad. Restrain your evil designs.”

“I’m only...”

Xi Ping was just about to say something when, suddenly, someone shouted to him: “Tai Sui, help!”

The shout echoed throughout the whole Immortal Palace inside the Law Breaker Bracelet, like a big bell.

It was Xu Rucheng.

CHAPTER 103 - Unbound Knife (10)

“A Luwu... Hm?” Xi Ping gave his shifu a casual explanation, then went over through the reincarnation wood with a thought, planning to ask Xu Rucheng what was going on—he hadn't been expecting to meet with a slight obstruction. .

Xu Rucheng was currently trapped in the little courtyard, all his meridians sealed, unable to command a sliver of spiritual energy. He was surrounded by Zhao Qindan's father and some cultivators who had originally been part of Heaven's Design Pavilion.

Just now, these people had charged in. Xu Rucheng, seeing that something was wrong, had immediately sent a cry for help to Tai Sui, but before he could even determine whether he had been heard, even his consciousness had been confined by the Zhao family established foundation. This established foundation cultivator had used some secret technique; as soon as it fell on him, Xu Rucheng's spiritual sense seemed to vanish from his five senses. Never mind his colleagues, he couldn't even sense the reincarnation wood he carried!

“What are you doing?”

The eyes of the Zhao established foundation cultivator flitted over his face, as if he wanted to peel off the skin to look at something. He slowly said, “I've heard a rumor that says the Kaiming Department's Zhou Ying has at his disposal a group of spies called the Luwu, who began to infiltrate other countries long ago. These people wear a type of mask that can conceal a person's spiritual image, even fool the eyes and ears of an ascended spirit.. I don't know whether it's true or false.”

With professional dedication, Xu Rucheng contorted the young mistress's willow leaf eyes, as if he hadn't understood anything, but

actually he was in such a panic that his heart was about to forget how to beat.

“Shixiong, what are you talking about?”

“If you haven’t heard of them, then forget about it,” the established foundation said softly but coldly. “The hidden realm is currently the only thing we have to fall back on. We certainly cannot allow this kind of worm to creep in. In the interest of caution, each person must be investigated. Forgive me, shimei.”

No sooner had he spoken than Xu Rucheng felt his whole body grow chill. A talisman penetrated the center of his brow and a cold consciousness probed his spirit.

Xi Ping, currently in the sky above Tao County, muttered in bewilderment, “The noisy clod, how’d he end up with a lock on his skull?”

Zhi Xiu didn’t understand this coarse Chu slang, but he sensed that it was nothing good. “What?”

Xi Ping quickly cut his speech into a perfect Jinping accent and, in a display of propriety, said, “I said that this Luwu brother’s consciousness has had a prohibition placed on it.. All right, I’ll go see what I can do.”

Xu Rucheng had been completely unprepared. He had no idea where he had slipped up. He was nailed in place, and the established foundation’s consciousness was following the talisman to invade his spirit, slowly over it like water, not missing a single crack.

The Luwu were all half-immortals, and the Luwu’s masks were naturally only open-eyed grade immortal tools. When it came down to it, they were only a superior diversionary tactic. Higher level

cultivators would be fooled as long as they didn't become suspicious. But if they became suspicious and insisted on investigating, how could an open-eyed grade tool prevent an established foundation from tearing it away?

What should he do? Self-destruct his spirit?

But self-destructing his spirit would amount to confessing without being tortured. He wasn't the only Luwu in the Zhao family hidden realm. It was too late for him to contact his colleagues now...

There was no more time for him to think carefully. As a few thoughts passed through Xu Rucheng's head, the established foundation cultivator's consciousness reached the place where the spiritual image mask joined!

Xu Rucheng's mind went blank for a moment. Just then, a qin seemed to play a note in his spirit. The cold consciousness made a jump as the qin sounded, skipping over the mask's join, passing over without noticing.

Xu Rucheng: "..."

What was that sound?

Then, a familiar and revolting voice sounded in his ear: "Wow, messed up, did you?"

Xu Rucheng's legs nearly went weak. He had never before found this great evil cultivator so amiable. "Senior! Senior, they've locked my consciousness, how can you contact me?"

"You're the one who's locked, not me." Xi Ping charitably put on the airs he had been unable to display to A-Xiang in front of him. "A paltry little established foundation's prohibition... *hss.*"

Xu Rucheng was too shaken, so much so that he didn't hear that the "great evil cultivator"'s bragging seemed to be followed by an intake of breath as if he had been slapped.

He could say "a paltry little established foundation" just like that—then what was this "Tai Sui"?

For the last thousand years, Qiu Sha had been the only evil cultivator to become an ascended spirit, and that had been such a big event that it had startled the four great spiritual mountain ranges into a concerted effort to suppress her. In other words, if this "Tai Sui" was an ascended spirit, he couldn't be an evil cultivator... Could he be some peak master from Xuanyin's inner sect who had secretly infiltrated Chu?!

No wonder his lord had implicit faith in him. No wonder he couldn't reveal his true form and his consciousness always seemed to be restricted.

Xi Ping didn't know that this big brother had overthought so much in an instant. He said, "I took my eyes off you for one night, and you slipped up. What kind of disgraceful behavior have you been getting up to under the young mistress's identity, splitting the seams of your dress with a fart?"

"I didn't!" Xu Rucheng said quickly. "After they put the learning regret spell on me... bah, on Zhao Qindan, they had her mother come over to reason and plead with her. How would it be if I didn't submit even after being tortured? And I was afraid that they would come up with another move to torment me, so I said all right... then they suspected that I was a fake! What is all these Zhaos' problem, anyway? I can't agree and I can't refuse."

Hearing this, Xi Ping said in bewilderment, "Did you agree too readily?"

“That can’t be. I made her mother waste spit for half the night and then agreed as though I was enduring great humiliation for the cause,” Xu Rucheng said. “When her mother heard, at first she acted as if a burden had been lifted from her, and then she said that my mental state had experienced major ups and downs lately, which would harm my cultivation, so she had a female medical cultivator they’ve brought with them come check my pulse and take care of me. As soon as she checked, something went wrong.”

Xi Ping immediately asked, “What is there Zhao Qindan has that you don’t have?”

Xu Rucheng said, “Quite a lot.. But that medical cultivator was only a half-immortal, how could she have seen through the Luwu spiritual image mask?”

As Xu Rucheng wildly poured out his grievances to Xi Ping, in an accusatory tone, he said to the Zhao established foundation, “Are you done inspecting? Please tell me, shixiong, is there anything wrong with me?”

The Zhao established foundation frowned slightly, then said as if nothing were the matter, smiling, “Of course nothing could be wrong with Dandan. This is only for the sake of caution.”

Xu Rucheng leveled his eyebrows. “Let me go!”

But Clan Leader Zhao—Zhao Qindan’s father—waved a hand and said warmly, “Dandan, do you remember what instruction I gave you before you went to the Latent Cultivation Temple?”

Xu Rucheng: “...”

While he was speechless, he heard a female voice in his ear, whispering as if talking in her sleep: “Father said, ‘That you were able to reach this step is not because you are better than others,

but because you have the support of thousands of years of the Zhao family. Our family's members would rather be crushed to dust than disgrace the family.”

Xu Rucheng thought, “What is this shit?”

He had just been in a panic and hadn't memorized what came before, so he only recited the last part: “... Not to disgrace the family.”

While teasing Xu Rucheng, Xi Ping had also found Zhao Qindan, who was in Tao County—the young mistress had inadvertently smeared her blood on reincarnation wood. Before, when Xi Ping had yet to return to his body, he had influenced her. Now, enveloped by the Law Breaker, he could do whatever he wished in Tao County. He simply “caught” Zhao Qindan's consciousness.

Zhao Qindan only heard a qin playing in her ear and instantly became dazed, as if she had been dosed with narcotics. In her confusion, she heard her father ask her a question and instinctively answered.

Then her father asked, “Then do you remember what the clan's family precepts are?”

Zhao Qindan responded indistinctly: “The highest good is like water⁶⁷... flowing from its distant source to the deeps, it collects and becomes the ocean, and when the north wind rises, it can challenge the vast sky, swallow the kun and the peng.⁶⁸ In danger it is flexible, becoming a trickle to sink through the desperate strait. When it becomes a river, the hidden worm can at last become a true dragon.”

“Good heavens,” Xi Ping thought, “she can blurt it out even in her dreams. She must have spent twenty years eating mantou with

those words carved onto them.”

He suddenly thought that, if the Law Breaker Bracelet’s hidden realm could even draw in the consciousness of his shifu, who was close to a shed skin, then couldn’t it also work for other people?

What would happen if he pulled them in?

There was someone he could “try it out” on right before his eyes. With a thought, Xi Ping silently said to the Law Breaker Bracelet: *I want Zhao Qindan to come in.*

In response, a Zhao Qindan appeared inside the Law Breaker Bracelet, staring straight ahead of her.

The strange thing was that, when she entered, a short segment of qin music sounded inside the hidden realm. The style was a typical example of Wan music.

Xi Ping had an excellent ear for music. He thought at once that there were a few discordant notes in the music that didn’t harmonize very well. Then he saw a sliver of light flash through Zhao Qindan’s consciousness.

Xi Ping gave a cry and beckoned, capturing the thing on her in his hand. It was a tiny inscription!

There was an inscription on this young lady’s consciousness?

Xi Ping didn’t recognize it, so he quietly asked Zhi Xiu, “Shifu, what is this?”

“I heard long ago that in order to protect their direct descendants, big clans would place a special ‘protective inscription’ on their spirits, to keep their consciousnesses from being polluted by evil,

and making them keep it a secret,” Zhi Xiu said with a sigh. “I’ve never seen one before. I didn’t think it would turn out to be true.”

Xi Ping saw the light. “No wonder they saw through Xu Rucheng. They must have noticed that there was an inscription character missing from his spirit... though why would they have been inspecting his spirit?”

When the inscription on her consciousness was touched, the Zhao Qindan in the Law Breaker Bracelet gave a start and woke up.

Now that Xi Ping had connected to Xu Rucheng’s consciousness, all the puddles and ponds inside the Law Breaker Bracelet were reflecting Xu Rucheng’s circumstances. Zhao Qindan saw at once that there were several people standing in the pond in front of her. She first unconsciously took a few steps back, then opened her eyes wide in disbelief. “... Father?”

On the surface of the water, Clan Leader Zhao and some of her shixionsgs were there, surrounding a person... it was Zhao Qindan herself.

In recent years, Great Wan had invented a kind of glass mirror that reflected people perfectly, though it was usually used in places like factories. Ordinary people wouldn’t buy them for their own homes to look at themselves. Zhao Qindan had seen one once and thought it was very frightening, so she hadn’t used one again.

Looking at the surface of the water now, she seemed to be reflected in a mirror of that type. Even stranger, while the “Zhao Qindan” in the water looked at first glance exactly like her, her each and every gesture, her small expressions, were subtly different.

Through the surface of the water, the gaze of the “Zhao Qindan” in the water met the real Zhao Qindan’s. The eyes of the person in the

water flashed almost imperceptibly, making Zhao Qindan break out in gooseflesh—this imposter could see her!

Then the “Zhao Qindan” in the water, mouth unmoving, spoke from somewhere, the voice sounding all around her like a thunderclap: “Young mistress, you mustn’t come back, your family’s awful!”

Zhao Qindan: “...”

And he was a man with a voice like the ringing of a big bell, loud enough to give you a headache!

Xi Ping thought, Let’s not have Loudmouth Xu scare the perfectly nice young woman out of her wits again. So he waved his sleeve, sending Zhao Qindan’s consciousness away, then sent that inscription to Xu Rucheng.

Xu Rucheng was a Luwu after all. After he understood what had happened, he quickly calmed down and said to Clan Leader Zhao in an expressive voice, “I haven’t forgotten the family precepts, and I haven’t dared to forget Father’s instructions. You were the ones who abandoned me. What kind of important ‘main branch offspring’ am I? I’m only a product with a listed price!”

Clan Leader Zhao exchanged looks with the cultivators.

The established foundation cultivator said, “Do you know... Did you get rid of the protective inscription on your consciousness yourself?”

Xu Rucheng gave a “mournful” laugh. “Shixiong, I hope you understand that it isn’t that I cannot go far away, it is only that I cannot cast aside my gratitude to my aging parents for raising me.”

Xi Ping hissed as though his teeth hurt, feeling that he had gone a little overboard.

Indeed, the Zhao established foundation didn't put aside his doubts. He asked, "You're only a half-immortal. How could you remove the inscription?"

Xu Rucheng: "..."

Good question.

Xi Ping: "..."

He only knew how to blow up inscriptions.

Zhi Xiu sighed wearily, feeling that having picked up an unreliable encumbrance of a disciple like this, never mind going into seclusion, he wouldn't even be able to close his eyes in death. "Tell him to say he used the counterspiritual breath technique."

Xi Ping and Xu Rucheng, both ignorant, didn't understand this at all. One after the other, they repeated the words mechanically.

When the established foundation heard, his expression at last changed slightly. After a long time, as if regretting something, he said, "I remember that when Shimei first joined Heaven's Design Pavilion, her mind was very calm. At such a young age, she had the patience to read through Heaven's Design Pavilion's indecipherable ancient texts. That you can casually recite the name of such an obscure technique truly makes me blush with shame. Had our family's fortunes not fallen, your prospects would have been boundless."

Next to him, another Zhao cultivator said, "Shixiong, you have misspoken. Marrying into Western Chu's imperial family is an unspeakably high position. As soon as she is married, she will as good as enter Sanyue's inner sect. Do you not call that even greater prospects than she had back in Great Wan?"

The established foundation waved a hand and left without saying a word.

Xi Ping and Xu Rucheng breathed sighs of relief simultaneously— with the established foundation gone, even the air around them seemed to begin circulating. The other cultivators were all half-immortals. They couldn't casually touch his consciousness.

Things there had been more or less smoothed over, so as Xi Ping listened to Xu Rucheng dealing with the Zhaos, he respectfully saw off his weary shifu.

He was extremely curious about the meaning of the melody that had played when Zhao Qindan had entered the Law Breaker Bracelet— there hadn't been one when shifu had entered. So he tried using the Tai Sui Qin to repeat that melody.

When he had just finished playing, a human figure flashed before his eyes. A “Zhao Qindan” landed in front of him, just like the living person.

Xi Ping was startled and quickly extended his consciousness to look at Zhao Qindan herself. He saw her holding her forehead in confusion. She was doing just fine in Tao County. There was nothing unusual about her.

The melody... had made a copy of Zhao Qindan's consciousness inside the Law Breaker?

Xi Ping considered, then used the Tai Sui Qin to play the notes he had thought were discordant. In response, an inscription landed beside his hand. It was the one on Zhao Qindan's consciousness.

Xi Ping carefully picked up the inscription—he hadn't studied how to carve inscriptions, yet he had made one that was identical to the

original.

Perhaps because the Law Breaker Bracelet had taken up residence inside a qin, it seemed to be representing all people and things that came from outside with melodies. So... if he replayed those melodies inside this hidden realm, wouldn't he be able to copy anything on earth?

The Law Breaker hadn't made a sound when shifu had entered. Could that be because shifu's cultivation was too high, so with the Tai Sui Qin's current level, it couldn't understand him?

Xi Ping was just considering catching a few people to perform some tests when he heard a Zhao cultivator say to Xu Rucheng: "Child, it's a good thing that you have moved past this. That being the case, we will no longer conceal matters from you. Your future husband's position is valuable. Though he has great prospects, as far as cultivation goes... he is a step behind you—you know that. According to Western Chu's conventions, women who marry into the imperial family must have a Dragon and Phoenix Symbolizing Good Fortune stamped upon their spiritual images. This is their custom. We have already arranged the engagement, and in a minor matter like this, of course we have to follow the local custom. Don't you think so?"

Stamp what on the spiritual image?

Xu Rucheng didn't understand.

But Xi Ping, who had been hanging around Wild Fox Country year in and year out, took on a slightly altered expression.

This so-called "Dragon and Phoenix Symbolizing Good Fortune" had two seals, a "dragon" and a "phoenix." Nominally a husband and wife each had one end stamped on them to symbolize being "eternally of one heart." In reality, there were no restrictions upon

the one who carried the dragon stamp; he could have three wives and four concubines, just as he liked. But the one who carried the phoenix stamp could only be matched with one dragon stamp and would meet with backlash if she betrayed that person. Moreover, just like the “spiritual image brands” the Zhou family had stamped on Liang Chen and the others, it was a permanent stamp.

CHAPTER 104 - Unbound Knife (11)

In Great Wan, a “spiritual image stamp” was so deranged that speaking of it stunned Heaven’s Design Pavilion’s General Commander Su Zhun. But in Western Chu’s Wild Fox Country’s black market, where major players were clustered as densely as ox hair, they weren’t especially rare.

Many “common cultivators” who couldn’t make it on their own had this kind of stamp. They either submitted to some clan with power and influence, or they joined an organization of common evil cultivators. They received resources and protection, and gave their undivided loyalty, acting as these people’s dogs. The stamps had all kinds of names. Among them, the most pleasant-sounding was precisely this Dragon and Phoenix Symbolizing Good Fortune. The “phoenix” party often had greater natural endowments or stronger cultivation; if there was no stamp, she would be too much for the fake dragon to stomach. And with this kind of stamp, for each step the “phoenixes” took along the path of cultivation, they would only get half the results. Half of every sliver of spiritual energy they took into their bodies would be shared with the dragon stamp.

To be a person’s dog, you had to sell your life. But to have the honorable status of being a person’s “phoenix,” it clearly wasn’t enough to merely sell your life. You also had to sell your body.

A stamp on one’s face could be removed, but there was nothing to be done about one that was stamped on one’s spiritual image—back in the Latent Cultivation Temple, even Zhi Xiu wielding the Bell of Tribulation hadn’t been able to remove one. In life, the person was controlled by the spiritual stamp, and after death, as with Lü Chengyi, the stamp would emerge on their flesh and follow the person to the grave. They couldn’t be clean even in the earth.

Infiltrating other countries, the Luwu did in fact engage in an extremely dangerous line of work. But they still didn't make this degree of sacrifice.

As Xi Ping passed on word to the other Luwu in the Zhao family hidden realm, having them prepare a reception, he briefly explained to Xu Rucheng exactly what kind of seal a Dragon and Phoenix Seal was. "Dongheng's Xiang family is too much for us to deal with. Leave it, get out of there."

After listening to this, Xu Rucheng was silent a while. He didn't answer at once. He only used Zhao Qindan's identity to say to Clan Leader Zhao, "Father, don't you think this is a disgrace?"

Clan Leader Zhao avoided his gaze.

No one would think this wasn't a disgrace, even if they really had just picked this girl up by the roadside.

But in this world, there were vast numbers of people who were willing to bear disgrace in order to live. So what?

In the future, when the Zhao clan regained its prominence, who wouldn't say that the clan leader had been swallowing humiliation for the sake of the big picture?

"Mr. Bai gave each of us a paperman substitute. It wouldn't be hard for me to escape by slipping out of my skin, but we would have to think of a way to get the paperman back. Papermen have no intelligence. They can only perform a few simple actions. If it has to talk too much, it'll be seen through. Mr. Bai's methods are too particular. I'm afraid that if they discover the paperman, the Luwu will be exposed." After saying this to Xi Ping, Xu Rucheng seemed to have used up his calm. He suddenly clenched his teeth and swore ferociously, "I'm simply not fucking having this shit."

“Xu Rucheng,” Xi Ping coldly called his full name, “a person’s death is like a flame being extinguished. Young Mistress Zhao isn’t A-Hua. Are you aware of that?”

Upon the death of a loved one, eternal regrets become a pit that can’t be filled up. Given the chance, that pit will try to drag the living inside it.

In Wild Fox Country, what brainless idiot’s heart didn’t hold a few graves?

Xu Rucheng began to breathe heavily through his nose. “... yes.”

Xi Ping left behind a “take care of yourself,” then paid no more attention to him. He directed his gaze onto the “Zhao Qindan” who was currently walking around investigating inside the Law Breaker Bracelet.

This “Zhao Qindan” was essentially a melody he had played, but her gestures were more accurate than the shoddy male Luwu’s. With a sudden thought, Xi Ping appeared before that “musical person.”

First “Zhao Qindan” was startled, instinctively holding a talisman up in front of herself. Then she stared at him for a long moment and hesitantly said, “Fellow cultivator, may I ask... are you from Wan? Is your surname Xi?”

Xi Ping bent his head. “Young Mistress Zhao, you still remember me.”

At first “Zhao Qindan” displayed a hint of happy surprise at meeting a fellow countryman in a foreign place. Then, probably remembering that her family were rebels in exile in a foreign country, her happiness faded. She didn’t lower her hand holding the talisman. Zhao Qindan took half a step back and politely yet warily said, “I heard that Viscount Xi only spent half a year in the latent cultivation

temple before entering the inner sect. I wonder what official business a distinguished disciple of Flying Jade Peak can have in Western Chu?”

This reaction was too precise. Watching the subtle play of expression on her face, Xi Ping felt that this seemed entirely like a real person. If he kept answering her, they would get into a conversation.

So he didn't respond. With a thought, he simultaneously took the “musical person” and the “musical inscription” he had copied out of the Law Breaker Bracelet.

As soon as she left the Law Breaker Bracelet, the copied “Zhao Qindan” vanished into thin air like a shadow exposed to bright light.

But the inscription with spiritual energy coursing through it was still in his hand in its original form. Xi Ping examined that inscription for a moment, then rubbed away one side of it. Spiritual energy leaked out of the damaged inscription, returning to the Tai Sui Qin—his own essence had been used to carve this inscription.

Xi Ping entered and exited the Law Breaker Bracelet several more times and found that anything with spiritual energy—living things, talismans, arrays, and inscriptions, immortal tools... as well as downgraded immortal tools—would make music when he carried them into the Law Breaker Bracelet. There were long melodies and short melodies, in completely different styles. The higher the grade of an immortal tool, the longer the melody would be, and the harder the sound would be to distinguish, but if he could only play it, he could use the Tai Sui Qin to make a copy.

Stones, factory-made cloth, and the like, the Law Breaker Bracelet didn't recognize.

Apart from that, there were also some things the Law Breaker Bracelet couldn't recognize that were probably of too high a grade and surpassed Xi Ping's own cultivation: for example, his shifu's consciousness, or the precious ancient water dragon pearl san-ge had placed on him. When Xi Ping removed the water dragon pearl and shoved it into the Law Breaker Bracelet, he in fact felt a faint touch on the spiritual sense attached to his ears, but with his current cultivation level, he still couldn't hear it clearly.

As for the copies he made, the talismans, arrays, and inscriptions could be taken out. The copy would be no different from the original object. Once it was taken from the Law Breaker Bracelet, he would lose the corresponding amount of essence.

Things like immortal tools didn't work, because apart from spiritual energy, immortal tools also used different materials. Once they left the Law Breaker Bracelet, those materials wouldn't be fabricated out of thin air.

But if he had the materials, he could probably do it. Xi Ping took a bit of Moon Plated Gold from the Snake King's Immortal Palace and copied a gear from a downgraded immortal tool. When he succeeded in removing the copy, apart from the expense in spiritual energy, a bit of the Moon Plated Gold he had placed in the Law Breaker Bracelet also vanished, precisely the quantity needed to make that gear.

For living creatures, though, it didn't work at all—he couldn't even bring out a blade of grass.

Xi Ping hulled some grass seeds and put them in the Law Breaker, wishing to see whether he could use grass seeds to “manufacture” a blade of grass. The outcome was that that when he took the copied grass out, it still disappeared, and the grass seeds inside the Law Breaker Bracelet were untouched—it seemed that the bracelet wouldn't agree to copy a thing using its own seeds.

Even more interestingly, he used a bit of spiritual energy to urge a blade of grass to grow longer and took the same blade of grass into the Law Breaker Bracelet for the second time. Though the music that played was very similar, there was still a subtle difference.

Living things were changing from moment to moment.

Xi Ping considered, then played another Zhao Qindan inside the Law Breaker Bracelet.

The new “Zhao Qindan”’s expressions and movements were identical to the one before, but they seemed to have no connection —she had no idea that a few ke earlier, another her had appeared here and walked her path of cautious investigation.

This was a “living person’s consciousness” that only existed inside the Law Breaker Bracelet.

Xi Ping hid in the shadows watching her for a moment, then came up with a vague idea. He wrote Zhou Ying a letter: “San-ge, give me a paperman.”

Then he drew a transport array inside the Law Breaker Bracelet and waited.

For a moment, the array didn’t move. Xi Ping first heard music. This time, the style of the music was pressed a little “flat,” so that you almost couldn’t remember the tune, but at the end there were a few subtle shifts, the upstanding music gaining a demonic air like thin smoke.

It immediately put him in mind of Bai Ling himself.

Xi Ping’s eyes lit up: as he thought, he could use a transport array inside the Law Breaker Bracelet.

Next, a little person made of paper, palm-sized, jumped out of the transport array and urbanely saluted Xi Ping. In a monotone, it said, “I have received orders from my lord to convey a message: Just you wait.”

Xi Ping: “...”

Right. After reporting on his well-being, he had run off to do things. He had yet to explain what was going on to san-ge.

After delivering the threat, the paperman stopped and didn’t move again.

Its body was pure white, with only a vague head and trunk. There hadn’t been any features drawn on it. It was a paper embryo ready for anyone to use.

“Bai Ling-da-ge understands me.”

After this whisper, Xi Ping shouted inside the Law Breaker: “Zhao Qindan!”

Zhao Qindan was startled and quickly turned her head in the direction of the sound. Xi Ping took this opportunity to blow the paperman toward her.

As soon as Bai Ling’s paperman was attached to a real person, it would become a “paper shell” identical to that person. Carrying around that paper shell, its owner could use it to block one attack from an established foundation or below. And as soon as the owner left, the paper shell would be like a cicada’s sloughed shell; it could remain in place as a substitute, do some simple, mechanical things.

The Zhao Qindan inside the Law Breaker Bracelet truly was a “living person.” As soon as the paperman touched her consciousness, it

automatically accepted her as its master. The big-headed, thin-bodied little person made of white paper instantly stretched out and grew vivid, lifelike features and a body, perfectly fitting on the outside of that consciousness.

Xi Ping knocked the panicked Zhao Qindan unconscious with a talisman, then passed a message to Xu Rucheng: “If you’re really unwilling to leave now, you can help me out with an experiment. It might not work. If it doesn’t work, you’ll run away.”

Xu Rucheng had just finished acting as the “hopelessly apathetic” young mistress, and the Zhaos had left him a moment’s peace—the spiritual image stamp could only begin at noon. He was staring blankly. When he heard Xi Ping, he suddenly raised his head.

Xi Ping said, “Prepare a transport array and wait to receive something.”

Xu Rucheng thought, Where am I going to get a spiritual stone to draw an array?

Then he saw a gopher squeeze out of a hole in a tree in the little courtyard, stick out a little head, and stare at him.

Xu Rucheng immediately stood up with no change in his expression. Pretending that he was going out to divert himself in the courtyard, he walked up to the tree. The gopher opened its mouth and spat out a blue jade for him. From the gopher hole came the voice of one of his Luwu colleagues: “Careful.”

Then small flames leapt up on the gopher’s body, and it burned into paper ashes.

Xu Rucheng quickly used his foot to bury the ashes, feeling surprised and confused—a transport array was a basic array that all disciples who had just begun cultivating knew. As long as a person

wasn't particularly inexperienced, it would be enough to use a jade stamp or even green ore. How could it take a blue jade?

What was Tai Sui going to send him? Some great treasure that could help him go above his grade to kill an established foundation cultivator?

Xu Rucheng turned back indoors. First he cautiously inspected all the corners in the room, determining that these people had left the young mistress some basic dignity: they hadn't put "eyes" in a girl's bedroom. Despite this, he still cautiously hid behind a screen, and, pretending to be changing clothes, took off his outer robe and hung it over the screen. He quickly put together a transport array and pressed the blue jade to it.

As soon as the array connected, a dark figure practically the same height that he currently was flew out of it and fell into his arms, nearly knocking over the screen.

Xu Rucheng was startled and quickly caught the figure. The next moment, taking a clear look at the "thing" that had come through the array, he nearly let her fall—Tai Sui had used the array to transport a living person!

But everyone knew that arrays couldn't transport living creatures, not even kittens or puppies. How had he done this?!

Xu Rucheng raised the person's face and his brains tied themselves into knots. This was Zhao Qindan!

"Senior, th-th-this..."

Xi Ping interrupted Xu the Stutterer: "Is she breathing? Cold or warm?"

Xu Rucheng sucked in a breath, and his voice went up a whole octave: “She’s breathing! And, and warm!”

Xi Ping instantly sighed in relief: it had worked.

He had been most worried that as soon as she left the Law Breaker Bracelet, the copy of Zhao Qindan’s consciousness would disappear, and the paperman would turn back into paper. Now it seemed that the Law Breaker Bracelet and the transport array had both tacitly acknowledged that the paperman holding Zhao Qindan’s consciousness was another form of tool; it was paper, not human.

In other words, until the paperman’s spiritual energy was exhausted or it was destroyed, he had produced a temporary “Zhao Qindan”!

Paper was inert, but Bai Ling was an established foundation half-demon. The Zhao family’s cultivators wouldn’t be able to see any flaws in his paperman. And the consciousness inside it brought out from the Law Breaker Bracelet was “alive.” It could have a spiritual seal stamped on it.

“Have a heart. A whole village of braying donkeys couldn’t outshout you.” Xi Ping rubbed the roots of his ears and said to Xu Rucheng, “That’s a paperman.”

Xu Rucheng said, “Huh?”

How far had Mr. Bai’s cultivation advanced since he had last seen him just days ago?

This was too realistic!

Just then, the spiritual sense attached to his ears was suddenly touched. There were steps outside the courtyard.

Xu Rucheng said a silent “no good” and was looking for a place to hide this paperman that seemed too much like a living person when he heard someone knock on the door.

In a soft voice, Zhao Qindan’s mother called from outside: “Dandan, it’s Mom.”

This “paperman” seemed very sensitive to the voice of the original’s mother. She suddenly tilted her head and opened her eyes, meeting Xu Rucheng’s gaze blankly.

Meeting that gaze, Xu Rucheng’s heart skipped—an outsider wouldn’t have noticed it, but the Luwu were accustomed to using paperman substitutes. He had never seen a paperman with such a “living” look in its eyes.

Next, panic appeared on the “paperman”’s face. She pushed aside Xu Rucheng and was just about to cry out when the two of them simultaneously heard a qin play. The paperman’s gaze became dazed. She stopped moving.

Tai Sui’s voice sounded in Xu Rucheng’s ear: “Hide!”

“No,” Xu Rucheng said urgently, “senior, tell me the truth, that’s a real person, isn’t it, you..”

Xi Ping had no patience to bicker with him. He quickly played a few terrifying notes.

Having taken back the Tai Sui Qin, it wasn’t like back in the East Sea, when he had only been able to control mortals. As long as the one listening to his playing was a lower level cultivator, they would be affected by it.

Xu Rucheng instantly felt that he had become a puppet on strings, involuntarily moving in response to the music. He hid behind the

bed curtains. When he had just hidden, Madam Zhao walked in, leading a group of maids.

The “Zhao Qindan” who had been bewildered by Xi Ping’s playing was dazed and confused. She said nothing, letting the maids change her clothes. Only when Madam Zhao wiped away tears did the rims of her eyes turn red, but she stubbornly refused to shed tears. Madam Zhao met her daughter’s eyes in the mirror and was suddenly overwhelmed with grief. Covering her face, she turned her head away.

Xu Rucheng, hiding nearby, was terrified: how could a mother fail to recognize her own child? Anyway, only a real person’s joys and sorrows could be infectious. However well-made a paperman was, staring at it too long would still only make you uncomfortable.

“Don’t you know what the array you drew yourself is capable of? Is it an array that can transport a living person?” Xi Ping said. “If you’re still concerned, I’ll show you. She’s in Tao County.”

Saying so, he went through his spirit to show Xu Rucheng a glimpse of Zhao Qindan through the reincarnation wood trees. “She’s just about to... hm?”

The real Zhao Qindan put away a stack of completed protective talismans, pulled down her bamboo hat, and flew off on her sword in the direction of Yu Family Bend.

She had felt her consciousness being taken into a hidden realm, and inside it she had seen someone impersonating her... and he seemed to have been discovered by her family.

Zhao Qindan had never been so confused in her life. She didn’t know whether it was an illusion or the truth. So she had decided to go back and take a look.

CHAPTER 105 - Unbound Knife (12)

Xu Rucheng hadn't been good at arithmetic as a child, and he didn't know business like Wei Chengxiang. For a moment, he could hardly count up how many "Zhao Qindan"s were running around all over the world. At any rate, apart from him, they all seemed real.

He quickly said, "Senior, can you stop her?"

Xi Ping watched Zhao Qindan's figure recede, swift as the wind. His fingers brushed the Tai Sui Qin's strings. "Yes."

"Then don't let her come back! Isn't it enough of a mess over here?"

Xi Ping didn't move. He was silent a while, then asked in turn, "Why should I keep her from coming back?"

Xu Rucheng: "..."

"She'd have to go back eventually, if not now then in the future," Xi Ping said coolly. "If she comes back now, she'll be right in time for the start of the performance. Perfect, no?"

Supposedly Zhao Qindan was both clever and diligent. She had spent all her time in the Yanhai Building when she was at the Latent Cultivation Temple. She was one of the small number of disciples Luo Qingshi could look at without getting angry.

Though he wondered whether this young mistress was erudite enough to have heard of a "spiritual image stamp."

Xi Ping turned and passed word to Wei Chengxiang, asking her to follow in secret.

Before she had finished listening, the veins on the back of Wei Chengxiang's fist had emerged like earthworms. Gravely, she said, "Senior, set your mind at ease. I will look after her."

Xi Ping said in bewilderment, "Why would you look after her?"

Wei Chengxiang: "..."

"It doesn't matter to us whether she's going to look from afar or to get herself killed. If she's an idiot who can only mess things up, I have the means to stop her. There's no need for you to worry about it," Xi Ping instructed. "The Zhao family wants to give the young lady a stamp, so they won't stamp it stealthily behind closed doors. At least they'll let Yu Family Bend's local despots bear witness. I'm telling you to follow her to see if you can find an opportunity to feel out Yu Family Bend's foundation. But you must not advance rashly, whatever you do. Yu Family Bend is next door to a den of evil cultivators. To have been able to keep a firm hold on so many resources for so many years, they certainly can't have been relying on a third-rate imperial grandson. Be careful."

Xi Ping's reckoning was very accurate—from Tao County to Yu Family Bend, it took a full day to travel by horse-drawn carriage, but flying a sword, it took only the blink of an eye. When the sun was just about to climb to its zenith, Wei Chengxiang, tailing Zhao Qindan the whole way, arrived at the location of the Zhao family hidden realm, running right into the Yu family's carriages rumbling as they drove near. There were horse-drawn carriages, and there were also new steam carriages from Great Wan, all with red silk tied on and towing a string of boxes of all sizes.

The Zhaos had been waiting at the entrance to the hidden realm for a long time to welcome the local thugs. Yu Family Bend's upstarts were subdued by the Zhao clan's mystique as a family of immortals, and the Zhaos, seeing the Yu family's abundant property, were impatient to integrate into Western Chu's Sanyue.

The two sides agreed readily, outdoing each other for enthusiasm.

Zhao Qindan had an inscription that let her enter and exit the hidden realm freely. She cautiously drew some very unorthodox arrays on herself, concealing her traces, and snuck in through another of the hidden realm's entrances.

Inside was her home, after all. She knew every little bit of it like the back of her hand. She easily knocked out a guard patrolling on his own and blended in among the welcoming party. Wei Chengxiang, following her, did as she did. Wearing the Luwu mask that Senior Tai Sui had snatched from the Snake King's Immortal Palace, she attached herself to the end of a team of guards.

She heard Clan Leader Zhao, leading the guests inside, saying, "... yes, the sooner we get it settled, the better we'll feel. Dandan is ready. My daughter is untalented, of only average abilities. It took her nearly nine months after entering the Latent Cultivation Temple to enter the Way. She only has a slightly stronger than usual spiritual sense..."

Not one person in the household had discovered that she had run away. Zhao Qindan became increasingly surprised and bewildered. She thought, "Perhaps I wasn't dreaming, and there really was someone pretending to be me?"

Zhao Qindan had gone to Tao County wanting to buy some convenient weapons on the black market, not expecting that before she even reached Wild Fox Country, she would have been repeatedly hunted out of nowhere and lose about half of the spiritual stones she was carrying. She'd had neither food nor water for a whole day already and was in an extremely pitiful condition. She didn't know where she was injured, but at any rate everywhere hurt. This made the pampered young mistress wonder in spite of herself whether her rebellion hadn't been meaningless.

Now, returning to familiar surroundings, an uncontrollable thought emerged. Zhao Qindan thought: Is it really so unacceptable to marry into Western Chu's Xiang family? Sanyue's inner sect couldn't possibly be more dangerous than that cursed Wild Fox Country... Thinking about it carefully, her righteous indignation had only been unwillingness, unwillingness to become the kind of fine lady she had always secretly disdained.

But without her family background, without her father's coddling, would she really have been any different from those women? She had just left home, and the bloody winds of the outside world had nearly whipped her to death.

"I also won't conceal from you," Clan Leader Zhao continued, "while Yu Family Bend is a beautiful environment that breeds talent, indeed a good place, it is too close to the border. Recently, we received word from our fellow clan members in Southern Shu saying that their hidden realm had already been infiltrated by Southern Wan's Luwu. And just yesterday, we heard that tokens bearing our family inscriptions had appeared in Wild Fox Country... We've already sent people to look. Though the so-called 'inscription tokens' are fake, we have yet to understand the intentions of the person who spread this rumor. Ah, truly we must act with utmost caution, as though balancing on the edge of a cliff or treading on thin ice."

Zhao Qindan had never seen her father so obsequious. Her heart tightened.

The person from the Yu family seemed to be able to empathize with this feeling. He nodded repeatedly in response, but his eyes were floating all around the magnificent hidden realm. Hearing a gap in Clan Leader Zhao's outpouring of grievances, he saw an opening and went in: "How many spiritual stones does maintaining a hidden realm like this burn per day?"

Looking miserable, Clan Leader Zhao responded, “Ten whole liang of white spirits.”

The people who had come from the Yu family heard this and immediately began making comments right in front of his face, one after another saying “Not costly at all,” “Money-saving *and* impressive,” and so on.

The lead Yu complimented: “Our clan, in order to make our juniors make progress, has built a ‘small spiritual mountain’ for that crowd of worthless good-for-nothings at home. It cost us two hundred thousand white spirits, yet it has less of a celestial air than this hidden realm of yours. No wonder not one of those monkeys has opened their spiritual eyes.”

For a time, Wei Chengxiang had no attention to spare to look at the young mistress’s changeable expression. She and Xi Ping drew in a breath simultaneously: two hundred thousand white spirits!

Even Clan Leader Zhao’s eyelids twitched when he heard. At first, he didn’t know what comment to make.

Just then, a person ran over and told them that “The auspicious hour is nearly here, and the young mistress is prepared.”

Zhao Qindan temporarily came back from her remorse and unease. Hearing these words, she was a little perplexed. She thought: wasn’t the Yu family here to take a look at the Zhao family for the imperial grandson? Whether they were taking a look at each other or exchanging betrothal gifts, what did it have to do with her? And also... what “auspicious hour” did they need?

It was currently near noon, the time of the “utmost yin” in folk customs, with the big sun shining directly overhead. How could that be auspicious?

While doubt after doubt popped up in her mind, the Zhaos and the Yus, affectionately holding each other by the arms, walked toward the ancestral offering platform within the hidden realm.

From far away, Zhao Qindan's spiritual sense was touched. She felt that practically all the family's masters were here. Zhao Qindan, fearing that she would give herself away, didn't dare to approach rashly. She placed all her spiritual sense in her eyes, carefully avoided the consciousness of that established foundation shixiong, and glanced toward the ancestral offering platform.

Soon, she saw some maids walk over, supporting a splendidly-attired, veiled woman.

A person is always more sensitive to their own figure. When Zhao Qindan saw that "woman," she was astonished.

She almost unconsciously glanced down at herself, for a moment almost absurdly suspecting that she was the fake... Wasn't it a man passing himself off as her? Yet he could seem so much like her. What kind of divinity was he? She remembered the imposter she had seen. When he had seen her through the water, not only had he not seemed to fear being seen through, he also seemed to have a great deal to say to her. Since leaving the Zhao family, that was one of the rare gazes that hadn't looked at her with malice.

The Zhao established foundation cultivator took out a complete set of materials for prayer and divination and made a circle around the "imposter," inspecting her.

Zhao Qindan tensed. Inexplicably, she was a little concerned about the strange man who had taken her identity, afraid that he would be discovered by her eldest shixiong.

Wei Chengxiang followed her gaze and suddenly felt a bit of unease. She asked Xi Ping, "Senior, a spiritual image stamp is no joke. Is

that really a paperman?”

At the same time, Xu Rucheng, who had used the Luwu mask to change his appearance, becoming a “maid” supporting the young mistress, asked Xi Ping the same question: “Senior, I really can’t see how she’s anything like a paperman. Please check again. Just in case... If you make me stand here watching that damned stamp fall upon a living person, I’ll never get over it.”

Xi Ping responded to them both with “As if I’d let a little half-immortal like you see a flaw,” but inwardly he also felt a throb of anxiety out of nowhere. He couldn’t resist playing a note toward Zhao Qindan’s spirit. Only when he had startled her into a jump did he relax.

That was a paperman that he had made himself. The Law Breaker Bracelet and the transport array had both confirmed it.

Neither the Zhao established foundation, nor the cultivators the Yu family had brought along, nor that set of ancient immortal tools could tell that there was anything wrong with that paperman. The immortal tools showed her horoscope, the age of her bones, her abilities, her spiritual sense, put on display one by one like the teeth of horses and oxen for the Yu family to see.

The Yus were very satisfied with the “goods.” Whispering to each other, they nodded repeatedly.

Witnessing this scene, Zhao Qindan’s mind buzzed. Her faint self-reproach and indecision vanished. She looked at her own shixiong in disbelief, inexpressible humiliation submerging her for a time.

Just then, there was a dull sound on the ancestral offering platform. The big clock standing at the southwest corner had yet to reach wu hour, but it was already puffing out steam in advance, ready to report the time.

Her shixiong solemnly bowed to heaven and earth and to the ancestors, his expression grave and gloomy. Then he instructed someone to blindfold his eyes and with both hands picked up a spike three chi long or more. Its shaft was carved full of inscriptions.

Zhao Qindan's pupils contracted sharply: What is he doing?

The Zhao established foundation raised the long spike and stood unmoving on the ancestral offering platform where steam curled. The atmosphere was too portentous. All those present couldn't resist holding their breaths.

The big clock reached wu hour and gave a click. Then the sound of the clock striking resounded throughout the whole hidden realm. All at once, the established foundation cultivator pierced the long spike through the center of the brow of the "Zhao Qindan" on the platform.

As soon as the long spike entered skin, all the inscriptions on the shaft lit up brightly. The pointed end merged into the center of "Zhao Qindan"'s brow as if turning into nothing, not damaging any of her flesh... not even a strand of hair.

To the mortals, "Zhao Qindan" didn't move a muscle. She only seemed to be sitting there, letting her family put a pointed hat on her head. But all the cultivators with their spiritual senses attached to their ears heard an extremely woeful woman's scream.

Wei Chengxiang was appalled, her scalp prickling. Xu Rucheng nearly threw himself forward. The Zhao family cultivators nearby involuntarily averted their gazes.

Zhao Qindan's mind went completely blank. All that remained was something she had once read long ago in the Yanhai Building: *A spiritual image stamp must be applied at wu hour, pierced with the*

stamping implement through the spirit of the guilty slave. The slave's flesh and meridians will be undamaged. There will only remain a stamp upon the spiritual image, and the consciousness will receive a punishment as if of the hot brand.

The one who receives this punishment will never escape it.

It wasn't only the cultivators inside the Zhao family hidden realm who heard that scream; there was also Xi Ping.

Xi Ping gave a start. The Tai Sui Qin nearly tumbled from his knees.

To start with, he hadn't taken the consciousness he had duplicated in the Law Breaker Bracelet for a living person, because a living person could change, while the copy was "static." He had thought that the duplicated consciousness was something like a special portrait, but because of his superior "artistry," it could fool the eyes of idiots.

But when he heard that scream, Xi Ping suddenly realized that no matter what "she" was, no matter whether her flesh came from a father and mother or whether it had been made of paper and music, she could still feel pain like a living person.

No wonder Wei Chengxiang and Xu Rucheng had been so uneasy. A... whatever she was, never mind that—if everyone felt that she was alive, then perhaps she really was alive!

He'd messed up. He shouldn't have made a "living person."

The paperman and the consciousness wrapped up in the paperman had come from the Law Breaker Bracelet. As the established foundation cultivator branded the stamp on the paperman's spiritual image, inside the Law Breaker Bracelet, a sound like rusty iron machinery grinding against itself sounded, digging into one's ears.

Next, the paperman's consciousness appeared in the little pond in front of Xi Ping. A pitch-black, sharp spike drew a stroke on her face.

Without hesitation, Xi Ping sank his consciousness into the pond. The Tai Sui Qin sounded, interrupting the noise. With a thought, the Tai Sui Qin played like heavy rain, weaving a thin protective shield over the paperman's consciousness.

The stamping spike hit the shield, and it was as if Xi Ping had been hit right in the chest by a Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon. He went numb.

CHAPTER 106 - Unbound Knife (13)

The Tai Sui Qin wildly drained Xi Ping's essence—fortunately, when he had established his foundation, he had been at the bottom of the Impassable Sea, which had looted half of the southern mines. There was no deficit in his essence. Otherwise, he couldn't have been able to take having it drained like this.

Next, the water dragon pearl on him flashed brilliantly. On a ferry on the Xia River, a travel-worn “middle-aged scholar” and his white-haired and white-bearded “old retainer” simultaneously felt something.

The “old retainer” softly said, “My lord, there's something not quite right with the paperman I delivered to the Viscount.”

The “middle-aged scholar” —Zhou Ying, wearing one of Lin Chi's spiritual image masks—felt for the first time that the precious water dragon pearl might not be enough. The dragon kits of the past hadn't been able to make as much trouble as a certain person.

In the Zhao family hidden realm in Yu Family Bend, it took Zhao Qindan, hidden among the guards, two or three breaths to come back to herself. Instinctively, she formed a talisman in her hand.

Before the talisman was completed, a hand grasped and dispersed it. Wei Chengxiang's lips hardly moved. She passed word to Zhao Qindan's ears: “What are you doing?”

Zhao Qindan didn't pay any attention to who was beside her. She struggled hard.

She didn't know who that was on the platform now receiving the spiritual image brand in her place, and she didn't know what the aim of the power that had pushed that person forward was...but she

knew that no one would willingly accept this kind of punishment, which couldn't be escaped in life or in death. And this ought to have been her fate.

That three-chi-long stamping spike seemed to be the legendary Nu'er Hong,⁶⁹ buried on the day of her birth, with the debt of twenty years of luxury provided by the Zhao family recorded on it. It was her debt.

"Young Mistress Zhao!" said Wei Chengxiang.

Zhao Qindan gave a start and turned her head in astonishment. She heard the unknown guard who had exposed her identity say in a hushed voice, "Since you have already escaped, why have you returned? Don't get hung up on this!"

Zhao Qindan said, "Who are you?"

That's a long story, Wei Chengxiang thought. She wasn't sure she'd even be able to explain clearly how many "Zhao Qindans" there were here. So she simply cooked up some nonsense: "My Tai Sui happened to hear of your business and felt contempt for the Zhao family's conduct. He also valued your talents and ordered me to wait in the shadows to assist."

By this point, Zhao Qindan no longer believed she had any "talents." She didn't know what this unknown evil cultivator wanted with her. Since he didn't stint to push his own subordinate into a pit of suffering, then could he be any good?

Zhao Qindan laughed coldly at once and said, "You flatter me. I have nothing of my own right now, and I don't know any Tai Sui. But though I, Zhao Qindan, am nothing, I still want a clean life. I won't have others taking knives for me. From today onward, my relationship with the Zhao family is broken. You should all mind your

own business. Don't force me to yell and expose you to the Zhao and Yu families. Move out of the way!"

Wei Chengxiang stared.

A beam of spiritual energy from Zhao Qindan pushed her aside. And right now, the Tai Sui who had bragged that he could stop her didn't react at all.

Wei Chengxiang quickly said, "Don't panic, Young Mistress Zhao, that isn't a living person, it's a paperman!"

Zhao Qindan: "..."

Do I really look like an idiot?

Wei Chengxiang talked nonsense: "Look, the stamping spike is stuck!"

While Zhao Qindan didn't believe this one bit, she still automatically looked toward the platform.

Wei Chengxiang took this opportunity to press a sleep talisman to her back.

The young mistress had no real world experience, and her mind was full of wrath. Without a sound, she fell to her machinations. Wei Chengxiang quickly used spiritual energy to hold up her body as it slid down. She also stuck a stealth talisman to deceive the eyes and ears onto her.

After using these two talismans, her already not very plentiful resources became even scarcer. Wei Chengxiang grudged the expense so much the corners of her eyes twitched faintly. She casually took a couple of spiritual stones from Zhao Qindan to make

up her own loss. Only then did she look toward the horrifying ancestral offering platform.

Huh? She blinked. How come the stamping spike really had stuck?

Now, Xi Ping at last knew why a spiritual image stamp couldn't be removed after being applied. When he blocked the stamping spike by force, it boiled with rage; the ruthless sharp spike practically brought down all the fire of the most brutal burning sun of noon, nearly burning away this reckless little established foundation.

Damn it, he thought, this really is what they call "There's no hope of escape from a calamity you bring onto yourself."

While the blindfolded "Zhao Established Foundation" couldn't perceive Xi Ping's existence, he could still feel the stamping spike stagnate. And at that moment, perhaps because he had remembered that this bright and beautiful young woman had given Yuzhou's Heaven's Design Pavilion a bit of color for the last six years, or perhaps because he really had begun to feel a bit of regret for her talents, the established foundation holding the stamping spike hesitated.

This moment of softness from him gave Xi Ping the chance to catch his breath. The greater the crisis he encountered, the faster his mind worked. In a moment, everything he knew about the Dragon and Phoenix Symbolizing Good Fortune appeared in Xi Ping's mind—he knew that there was no hope in simply bearing up like this. For one thing, he couldn't hold out, and for another, that stamping spike had to place a stamp on the spiritual image. If it was obstructed out of nowhere, the established foundation cultivator would definitely think something was wrong once he'd had a chance to consider it.

In a flash, Xi Ping thought that, because each person's spiritual image was different, spiritual image stamps had to be like

inscriptions, adjusted in various ways depending on the recipient. In other words, each stamp only matched one spiritual image.

When they had inspected Zhao Qindan's horoscope, spiritual sense, and so on, it had been to check her spiritual image, to avoid hiccups; they hadn't been deliberately humiliating her.

Only one... only one spiritual image... right!

At this time, the cosmos at noon wouldn't wait for anyone. As soon as the stamping spike stopped, the accumulated heat immediately "flowed" through the stamping spike to Zhao Established Foundation's hands. The established foundation's hands sizzled as they burned, producing smoke.

Zhao Established Foundation at last recovered, and his lips moved slightly. He seemed to be sighing.

"Dandan," he said almost inaudibly, "the Zhao family owes you."

Saying this, the spiritual energy in his hands rose sharply, and he quickly pushed the stamping spike forward.

Xi Ping's hands moved so quickly they blurred. As he blocked the stamping spike with difficulty, he swiftly used the Tai Sui Qin to make two more identical copies of Zhao Qindan's consciousness inside the Law Breaker Bracelet. At the same time, he set up a pair of transport arrays in the Law Breaker Bracelet and on the paperman's spirit, directly activating it with his own essence, which was nearly drained dry.

When he divided his attention, the stamping spike instantly pierced his shield.

Xi Ping simply used his own consciousness to shield the paperman. His vision darkened.

Next, two Zhao Qindan consciousnesses squeezed into a single paperman through the array.

There was absolutely no difference between the duplicate consciousnesses. The paperman that had acknowledged Zhao Qindan as its owner didn't repel them at all. The three consciousnesses made up a triangle. Xi Ping's wounded consciousness could hardly hold out any longer. He simply withdrew it from the paperman.

He tumbled back into the Law Breaker Bracelet. His true body coughed up a mouthful of blood.

And at the same time, the stamping spike stopped in the middle of the three Zhao Qindan consciousnesses. A triangle was a very steady structure. Three identical consciousnesses pushed and pulled the spike with identical strength. This was probably the stamping spike's first time encountering such a situation. It didn't know what to do at first.

After pausing for a while, the stamping spike arrived at the same "judgment" as the paperman—there was no such thing as identical consciousnesses; these "three consciousnesses" belonged to one person... though the configuration was rather unusual.

Inside the ring of three consciousnesses, the stamping spike began to circle around. After a moment, a Dragon and Phoenix stamp took shape, like a totem, suspended among the paperman's three consciousnesses.

Then the stamping spike, starting from the tip, turned into scattered light and surged into the Dragon and Phoenix stamp.

The ceremony was complete.

On the paperman Zhao Qindan's clean and unblemished flesh, the stamp flashed like a tattoo, then sank into her snow-white oval face.

Zhao Established Foundation breathed a sigh of relief. His back was soaked in cold sweat.

He cast down his eyes and bent his head, looking at Zhao Qindan's face, so white it looked like paper. He restrained his expression by force and calmly ordered the maids to take the young mistress to rest. The established foundation turned his head, meeting the crowd of either panic-stricken or faintly expectant faces, and felt sudden loathing. He noticed that his breathing was agitated. He was showing signs of an unstable Way of the Heart. He saluted and stalked off.

Once the established foundation left, Xi Ping immediately drew in a breath and snatched up the two extra consciousnesses and the spiritual image stamp suspended among them.

The paperman fell limp in the maids' arms.

The cultivators present were still feeling the aftereffects of the scream. They didn't show it on their faces, but in their hearts they felt more or less uncomfortable. None of them said anything. Only Clan Leader Zhao, a mortal who had heard nothing, had a normal expression. That happy smile was also like a criminal brand stamped on his face.

Xi Ping's essence was exhausted. All his meridians ached fiercely. He didn't even have time to look closely at the first successfully stripped off spiritual image stamp on earth. He only tossed the thing into the Law Breaker Bracelet and reached out, groping. He didn't even have a single jade stamp on him!

There were spiritual stones hoarded in the Law Breaker Bracelet, but the hundred thousand white spirit deficit was hanging over Xi

Ping's head. He couldn't bear to use them. In that momentary hesitation, the Tai Sui Qin vanished in mid air and simply shot his consciousness out. Xi Ping couldn't even fly a sword. Covered in blood, he tumbled from the clouds.

Just then, a white form flashed like lightning. Bai Ling, coming after the water dragon pearl, caught him.

Next, a human form condensed out of the thick fog in the sky over Tao County. Zhou Ying appeared from the fog. His pupils contracted slightly.

"San-ge..." Xi Ping spent ages focusing before he finally saw the newcomer clearly. He feebly clutched his sleeve. His fingers lost strength midway and slipped down.

Zhou Ying grabbed his still bloody wrist. He didn't ask any detailed questions, only expressionlessly said, "Where are you hurt? Who was it?"

Xi Ping drew a breath with difficulty. "It was pov... poverty."

Zhou Ying: "..."

"San-ge... *hss*... I'm out of money again, give me some spiritual... san-ge!"

"Bai Ling," Zhou Ying said, letting Xi Ping's paw fall and taking out a piece of silk to wipe his hands, "drop him."

Bai Ling sighed and passed his hand over Xi Ping's brow. Xi Ping didn't struggle. He confidently passed out in his arms.

In the Zhao family hidden realm, those who had come to bring betrothal gifts and attend the ceremony for the Yu family exchanged veiled looks.

Among the Yus who had come to the Zhao home this time, the head was the eldest grandson of the clan leader, the “blood uncle” of the third-rate imperial grandson. The “blood uncle” didn’t speak rashly. First, he directed his gaze toward a young man next to him with the look of a guard.

Only then did the gathered people find that this was a white-clothed, long-faced young man, with rather delicate looks and a smile at the corners of his mouth, but a crease in the center of his brow. This white-clothed guard seemed to have a stealth talisman on him. If the “blood uncle” hadn’t looked at him, all the cultivators and mortals around wouldn’t have noticed that such a person existed.

As soon as the white-clothed guard appeared, the spiritual senses of the Zhao cultivators were simultaneously touched—this guard’s cultivation level certainly exceeded the open-eyed stage!

Even the clan leader’s eldest grandson was respectful toward him. Quietly, he asked, “What is your view?”

The white-clothed guard turned his gaze away from watching “Zhao Qindan” leave and pinched the center of his brow. The crease became deeper. Then, treasuring words like gold, he nodded to the Yus around him. “The ceremony is complete.”

Only with his statement did the Yus believe that the Phoenix stamp had been completed. The crowd of uncouth upstarts instantly let loose.

“Great, we’re all related now!”

“A joy, a great joy!”

The white-clothed guard's throat moved slightly, as if he were swallowing something. With a smile, he looked on for a moment. Then, like mist, he vanished before everyone's eyes.

People whose gazes were usually perceptive to the smallest detail automatically lost focus. Even the cultivators whose spiritual senses had just been touched forgot about this person's existence and went to cluster ignorantly around the "blood uncle."

The "blood uncle" loudly passed judgment within the Zhao family hidden realm: "This hidden realm of yours, it's celestial enough, I'll grant, but it's too conservative. Normally all the technology comes from the east, so why is this place still lit with luminous pearls and shark oil? Those things are luxurious enough, but they're not practical! Another day, I'll send you a set of gas lamps. I guarantee the night will be as bright as the day."

Saying so, he also boasted of his family's Moon Plated Gold factories and the number of workers they supported, how "if Wan and Chu hadn't had a disagreement that delayed the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon, the family would have more than a hundred thousand white spirits by now," and so on.

The feast was arranged as smoothly as flowing water. The servants unloaded the Yu family's gifts, carrying them away like ants with a bumper crop.

In the storehouse, a downgraded immortal tool burning paraffin and spiritual stones was automatically printing a long list of presents.

The music and drumbeats started up, the wine cups were handed around, everywhere was jubilation. Only no one remembered the young female cultivator who had been scorched by the burning sun on the altar.

"Senior, Senior Tai Sui..."

Wei Chengxiang tried calling several times in her mind and got no response. None of those men were reliable when it came to a crisis.

She hesitated, not daring to approach the Yus.

The Yus were uncouth in their speech and behavior, and most of them were mortals, but just now something had touched her spiritual sense, warning her not to get close. Wei Chengxiang didn't have a rash disposition. She decided to listen to her instincts and get Zhao Qindan out.

Forget it. The young mistress wasn't safe here. She'd take her out first, then consider what to do next.

Wei Chengxiang didn't have a perfect memory for what she read, but her memory for directions was very strong. She was excellent at observation—this was a skill that came from being hunted. Hauling a living person, she returned the way she had come without any hindrance, easily avoiding the patrolling guards.

Just as she was about to leave the Zhao family hidden realm, a soft laugh sounded in her ear.

Wei Chengxiang grabbed several dice at once. "Who's there?!"

No sooner had she spoken than her vision blurred. As if she had fallen into someone else's mustard seed, there was mist all around, and a tall, white-clothed person strolled over, smiling at her genteelly.

With Wei Chengxiang's acuteness, she still hadn't been able to notice his approach.

This was an established foundation... no, his cultivation was even higher than an average established foundation...

“Hello, young lady,” said the white-clothed man, exposing her identity at once.

Wei Chengxiang’s eyes fell on the Yu family emblem embroidered on his clothes. Her heart tightened. She was wearing a Luwu mask right now. Though it didn’t come from the set Master Lin had made himself, it had still managed to pass itself off under the eyes of a crowd of ascended spirits in Wild Fox Country. How had he seen through her?

“I am called Yu Chang. I am a watchdog for the Yu family. I acted under orders to come and observe this ceremony, in case the Zhao family couldn’t give up their direct descendant daughter and secretly played some trick,” the white-clothed man said, smiling. “I hadn’t expected to witness a miracle. It turns out there really is a person who can perpetuate a fraud and steal a spiritual image stamp on the spot.”

“Senior.” Wei Chengxiang’s spine stiffened. She futilely called for “Tai Sui” several times in her mind. “We’ve been seen through!” It was as if Tai Sui had gone to the grave. There was no answer.

But the white-clothed man tilted his head and narrowed his eyes. “Oh, so this master is called Tai Sui?”

Wei Chengxiang: “...”

What kind of divinity was this person? How could he hear her speaking through her spirit?

“Don’t be nervous, I mean you no harm, and for now I don’t plan on telling others about this...” At this point, the white-clothed man suddenly clutched his chest and coughed up a mouthful of blood, but it was as if he had only spat out a leaf caught between his teeth. After wiping it away, his expression unchanging, he went on with

what he was saying. “Spiritual image brand acting up, excuse my poor manners—I only want to meet this master and discuss a deal with him.”

CHAPTER 107 - Unbound Knife (14)

Wei Chengxiang stared at the man who called himself Yu Chang for a while, then suddenly showed her teeth in a smile.

Then she put Zhao Qindan aside and sat on the ground. Right in front of the man's face, she dismissed her preoccupations, emptied her mind, and began to meditate.

The spirit was a cultivator's underpinning. It couldn't be spied upon, unless someone had the ability to seize her body.

Even Tai Sui could only "see" through the reincarnation wood; he could only have a conversation when a person wanted to communicate.

There were so many ascended spirits and shed skins on earth, and she hadn't heard of any who could read minds. Who did this little pretty boy think he was?

With a bit of thought, Wei Chengxiang knew that either there was something wrong with this "mustard seed," or this man had some particular power that she had unwittingly been subject to.

He walked right up and didn't even say two proper sentences before getting up to dirty tricks trying to scare her. She could make this decision for Tai Sui—"discuss" my ass.

"The people of the Snake King's Immortal Palace are remarkable." This reaction of Wei Chengxiang's took Yu Chang aback somewhat. He raised his eyebrows. "No wonder they were able to take advantage of the chaos under the eyes of the four great immortal mountains and have easily infiltrated the Zhao family hidden realm now... don't you think so, Young Mistress Zhao?"

Wei Chengxiang had sealed her hearing. She couldn't hear him talk.

Next to her, the "unconscious" Zhao Qindan was exposed by his words. She had no choice but to open her eyes.

Zhao Qindan had a first-class spiritual sense. The more powerful a person's spiritual sense, the stronger their resistance to arts of the sleep and illusion kind, never mind that Wei Chengxiang had been unwilling to take serious measures—it wasn't from compassion and care toward women; mainly it was that the stronger the talisman, the more spiritual stones it took. Wei-laoban was stingy. While Wei Chengxiang had been dragging her out of the hidden realm, Zhao Qindan had blearily regained consciousness. She'd held back and hadn't made a sound, wanting to scout out Wei Chengxiang's situation. But her plans couldn't keep up with the circumstances. A strange Yu family member had charged in midway.

As soon as this Yu appeared, Zhao Qindan had been the most nervous. Her mind had been tense, and she hadn't had attention to spare to closely consider the confrontation between the other two. She thought, "What does 'steal a spiritual image stamp on the spot' mean? Didn't the stamp just now work?"

"That's right." Yu Chang nodded at her. "This is unprecedented. As soon as it gets out, there may be a great upheaval in Western Chu—it's true after all that a pretty girl has better luck."

First Zhao Qindan froze. Then she opened her eyes wide: this person knew what she was thinking!

"Don't worry, I have a Way of the Heart. I wouldn't listen to anything improper." Yu Chang laughed aloud. "Don't be in a hurry to start reciting scripture."

Zhao Qindan at last knew why the "fake guard" was meditating. But meditating in front of an unknown enemy was no different from a

sheep going to sleep in the mouth of a tiger. Not just anyone had the guts to imitate this move. Zhao Qindan only did her best not to think anything, using some mechanical sounds to defend against prying. But her panicked thoughts wouldn't be controlled. Thought after thought emerged: Why is this person hiding it? Who does he want to threaten? All these Yu upstarts are worthless...

"I already said I have a Way of the Heart. Never mind a Way of the Heart, even a mortal with a conscience despises this kind of behavior," this Yu Chang said. "None of us are free of compulsion... but, after all, I bear a spiritual image brand. Concealing this matter from my masters causes me considerable suffering. Young Mistress Zhao, this friend of yours won't even let me finish talking. Isn't that a little injurious to my feelings?"

Zhao Qindan's mind and mouth were united: "What's the point of telling me? I don't know her."

The smile on Yu Chang's face faded gradually. This person's emotions didn't seem very stable. His face was now gloomy, now sunny. "Young Mistress Zhao, you have only temporarily slipped away. It isn't as though there's no way to find out whether that stamp was actually stamped or not. Don't you want to be a little more polite?"

Zhao Qindan was susceptible to persuasion but not coercion. The young mistress's temper immediately flared up. With a cold laugh, she said, "As you please, Your Excellency. At worst I'll give this life back to the Zhao family. Even if they have the ability to keep me from dying, I can still self-destruct my spirit. When they're left with a mindless idiot, as long as they don't mind the humiliation, they're welcome to do whatever they like with my leftover mortal shell. What else can they do?"

Wei Chengxiang heard nothing. Not even the tips of her brows moved.

Of these two people, one had boldly slipped out of his hands, and the other was simmering with rage, using her guts to think. For a time, they actually stopped this master of unknown origin in his tracks.

Yu Chang's expression became grave, gloom appearing on his delicate face. The hands hanging at his sides moved toward the two of them. But he didn't know the capabilities of the people behind these two—especially Wei Chengxiang—so in the end he restrained himself.

After a moment's deadlock, Yu Chang waved a hand and dispersed the mustard seed, then disappeared on the spot himself, only leaving a communication token in front of the two of them. He passed word to Zhao Qindan: "Pass on to your extremely strong-willed friend that if she and the 'Tai Sui' behind her change their minds, they should come to Yu Family Bend to see me... They've been short on funds lately. Can't we work together?"

This place was already close to the border of the Zhao family hidden realm. The route Zhao Qindan chose was very out of the way. She warily held her breath and probed with her consciousness, determining that there was no one around, then finally reached out to give Wei Chengxiang a shove. "Hey, wake up."

Wei Chengxiang fell at her shove. Before her head hit the ground, her spiritual sense pulled her out of meditation. Wei Chengxiang, like a tilting doll, hung above the ground. Then she opened her eyes and lightly bounced back.

Zhao Qindan made a gesture at her, first taking her out of the Zhao family hidden realm.

The two of them bounded dozens of li in one breath, plunging into a deserted forest one after the other. Finally Zhao Qindan stopped

and turned to ask, “The Snake King’s Immortal Palace?”

Wei Chengxiang smiled winningly at her, neither confirming nor denying.

“No wonder you got your eyes on us... on the Zhao family so fast.” Zhao Qindan laughed coldly. “You were that maid who gave me the spiritual stones and urged me to run away from home, right?”

“No,” Wei Chengxiang answered, “that must have been another brother of mine.”

Zhao Qindan: “...”

How come it was a man again?! What was wrong with these people? They couldn’t go on stage unless they were playing against type?

“This place of yours truly has lofty ideals,” Zhao Qindan mocked. She tossed the communication token at her. “The guy in white clothes said you people need money and said to tell you to go to Yu Family Bend to see him... Hey, that... that Tai Sui you mentioned, can he really remove stamps without anyone knowing? You didn’t have a person take the stamp?”

Wei Chengxiang was accustomed to being cautious. She reached out the fake hand Lin Chi had given her to pinch the communication token, then used a talisman to wrap it up. “Tai Sui doesn’t do that kind of thing.”

Zhao Qindan immediately felt a heavy worry leave her. Now she was in the mood to consider other things. She took one look at Wei Chengxiang’s fake hand and immediately gave a cry. “So you were that thief?”

Wei Chengxiang helplessly and sincerely said, “Young Mistress Zhao, I believe you may have some misunderstanding concerning me. Whether you believe it or not, I truly had no interest in stealing your spiritual stones. It was an out of control immortal tool that hijacked my hand and robbed you. That is the true culprit.”

Zhao Qindan: “...”

Everything this person said was loathsome; it was oily and insincere!

But loathsome or not, since learning that she was a woman, Zhao Qindan’s wariness had still involuntarily decreased considerably, and her dislike was also within tolerable bounds. She had heard that the Luwu were all of common origin, relying on odds and ends parceled out among them to survive. It was said that if they weren’t using public funds, they wouldn’t even be willing to draw an extra talisman. No wonder she was so shabby.

So Zhao Qindan rolled her eyes, took out a small handful of blue jade, and tossed it at Wei Chengxiang. “Don’t quibble—look, if you need money, take that and use it. I know you didn’t do this to save me, it was for the sake of my identity, but I don’t like owing people. Take me to see this ‘Tai Sui.’ I’ll return the favor to you.”

This stupid girl didn’t know how to count. She hadn’t noticed that she was once again missing spiritual stones.

But since there was someone throwing out money, Wei Chengxiang wasn’t about to politely refuse. She gladly accepted and said, “If he wants to see you, he’ll be able to contact you. Otherwise, my word has no weight. There’s something I have to do first. You look after yourself.”

“Hey,” Zhao Qindan quickly followed her, “what are you going to do?”

Wei Chengxiang flitted through a big thicket of reincarnation wood, ignoring her, but not taking precautions against her.

After removing the Luwu mask, she headed straight for Yu Family Bend's Longevity Peak—the little hostel where she had met the worm master Bu Zhichou before.

As soon as the two welcoming half-puppets at the door saw her, their smiles stiffened at once. It was as if they were afraid of her but also wanted to spit at her.

But this time, this person who was so poor she would weigh green ore on scales, as if she had been body-snatched, voluntarily took out a fairly good-quality jade stamp and gave it to them. "If I might trouble you."

The dwarf half-puppets stared, took the jade stamp and sniffed it. Their manner changed at once. They politely said, "Please come in. Have you come to have a meal on your way or to stay the night? To receive a visitor or to do business?"

Under Zhao Qindan's curious gaze, Wei Chengxiang lowered her voice and said, "I *also* want to find out some information. What are the rules?"

She emphasized the "also" very firmly. A dwarf half-puppet paused, then smiled brilliantly, his eyes spinning for a moment. He said, "Please come this way."

In this kind of post station where guests came and went and all kinds of people mixed together, information was abundant. If you found the right connections and spent a bit of money, you could get what you wanted—though it wasn't so straightforward when you were the main character of the "information" that had been sold.

As soon as that white-clothed Yu Chang had heard “Tai Sui,” his first reaction hadn’t been to think of Great Wan’s Luwu, it had been to mention the “Snake King’s Immortal Palace” at once. He also knew they needed money. Evidently someone had sold the news of her meeting the worm master Bu Zhichou on Longevity Peak.

The half-puppet shuffled on his short legs, eagerly leading the two of them up to a private room in the attic. “Please wait a moment. Sir is here.”

After saying this, he said in a loud voice, “Sir, a regular is here!”

Then the wall of the attic’s inner room rotated open with a *creak-creak*, revealing a hidden room. A puppet dressed up as a fool from Chu opera “rolled” out. The dwarf half-puppet respectfully saluted him and withdrew.

The fool puppet gave Wei Chengxiang an adorable, rotund bow, then opened his mouth. Wei Chengxiang interrupted him with a false smile. “Mr. Heartless, there’s no need for you to put on such airs right after you’ve finished selling me out.”

The worm master Bu Zhichou’s voice came from the fool puppet’s throat: “My shop operates on Yu Family Bend territory. I rely on their favor to make a living. Sometimes I do not dare to offend the local thugs.”

“I see,” said Wei Chengxiang, raising her eyelids. “Then it seems the blame lies with Wild Fox Country being too far away.”

Steam spurted from the top of the puppet’s head. Shaking his head, he said, “Young lady, there’s no wall on earth that doesn’t let the wind through. We craftsmen, businessmen, and such are only looking for peace. How can we reject customers? Since I could do business with him, naturally I can also do business with you...”

With a radiant smile, Wei Chengxiang said, "If you trick a single coin out of my pocket, from now on, you and your puppets won't take another step into Wild Fox Country."

The steam coming from the top of the puppet's head paused.

Wei Chengxiang grabbed a handful of melon seeds. "You sold my information, and now you want to make money at both ends? Do I seem like I can't keep accounts?"

She seemed like an abacus that had cultivated a human form. The puppet shook twice with remorse and said obsequiously, "Then what would you like?"

"Give me and this young lady a meal each. We've gone hungry for a long time." First Wei Chengxiang knocked on the table. Then she said, "I want to know who 'Yu Chang' is."

Bu Zhichou quickly shushed her. "This is Yu Family Bend, don't mention the taboo name of a master!"

Wei Chengxiang raised her eyebrows. "Oh? How masterful is he?"

"I'm not certain. It is said that he is only a step away from an ascended spirit," Bu Zhichou's fat puppet said. "He is an ancestor given offerings by Yu Family Bend."

"Offerings?" said Wei Chengxiang.

"Yu Family Bend used to be called Precious Jade Bend. This place has mines and green ore fields, and it's far from the capital. Everyone coveted it. It used to be split up among high officials and nobles, all of them thinking that their share wasn't big enough, clashing nearly every day. You know these nobles. The descendants of the most outstanding all went to the Sanyue Sect, and the second-rate ones could join the Qilin Guard. They couldn't very well

get mixed up in the everyday matters of the nobodies, so each family secretly ‘gave offerings’ to many common cultivators—by ‘offerings,’ I mean that they used their resources and spiritual stones to support these rootless people, and the cultivators were stamped with a brand and became their master’s hired thugs. Betrayal meant death.”

Amid a cloud of steam, the puppet flexed the mechanical springs in his throat. Accompanied by the creaking of gears interlocking, he said, “The Yu family is of humble origin. One ancestor came to Yu Family Bend fleeing a famine, his history unknown. After coming here, he sold himself as a servant into the house of a noble family. Beginning as a coachman, he won the master’s trust bit by bit and became a steward. In the end, even the responsibility of recruiting and looking after the ‘offerings’ fell to him.

“This person... ha, he truly was something else. If he’d only had the chance to study and become a court official, he certainly would have become that era’s sycophantic courtier bringing disaster to the nation. Condescending to waste his talent in a little place like Yu Family Bend, he deceived his master until he couldn’t see what was in front of his face. Later, he secretly accepted quite a few ‘offerings’ who ought to have been devoted to his master’s family. After waiting patiently for forty years, not making a sound, he seized power in one day—at the time, the most capable ‘offering’ with him was this Yu... the gentleman you spoke of. It’s said that he was saved with only one breath left to him by the Yu family’s ancestor. Afterward, that gentleman continued as the Yu family’s offering. He has already gone through a dozen generations, pushing that humble clan step by step to its present position, when Precious Jade Bend has even changed its name to Yu Family Bend. You see how powerful he is!”

Wei Chengxiang said, “What is his power?”

Bu Zhichou’s puppet shook his head. “I do not know of his other power, but as you know, starting from the established foundation, a

cultivator cannot go against their Way of the Heart. But having been stamped with a brand, you become a person's dog. How is it possible not to violate your own convictions? As soon as the offerings establish a foundation, they lose their minds within a century.”

Zhao Qindan had been listening to this segment with her ears pricked up; now her expression altered.

Bu Zhichou's puppet didn't notice. He continued: “No one knows how he has managed to withstand losing his mind. I won't conceal from you, even the Yu family juniors are both respectful and frightened when mentioning him... Though in recent years, he has spent more and more time in seclusion, and each time he appears, it seems he looks worse than the time before. It is said that his temper has also become unstable. I'm afraid he doesn't have long.”

Wei Chengxiang nodded: no wonder this cultivator had been so impatient to come to them when he saw that someone could tamper with a spiritual image stamp.

Bu Zhichou's puppet remembered something else and said, “Oh, yes, I've heard that he has a secret art that can make people involuntarily speak what is in their minds. He excels in extracting confessions and cheating people, a profound schemer—but, after all, he has a Way of the Heart, and I hear that he is quite loyal. He doesn't keep the means of postponing a branded offering from losing their mind to himself. Over the years, he has saved quite a few people. Many cultivators in Yu Family Bend are profoundly grateful to him... but so what? From the day the brand is applied, you are a slave for all eternity. Ah! Ladies, the food is here. Enjoy it.”

Wei Chengxiang narrowed her eyes. She seemed to be muttering something to herself.

Zhao Qindan quietly said, “Western Chu's customs are evil.”

“Well said!” Bu Zhichou’s puppet said fawningly. “I’ve told you all that I know, free of cost. This information is Yu Family Bend’s secret history. Outsiders can’t learn of it. If someone else came to ask, it would cost them at least two liang of jade stamps.”

Wei Chengxiang nodded to him. “Understood. I will report all of this to Tai Sui.”

Bu Zhichou saluted her and swayed out, bowing and scraping.

“He was pretty helpful,” Wei Chengxiang thought and called “Tai Sui” in her mind, explaining this matter... though Tai Sui still didn’t respond.

Afternoon passed and the sun traveled west, pouring in through the window, stretching out the two young women’s shadows.

Just then, a cloud was blown past by the wind. The shadows on the ground blurred for a moment. No one noticed how, in that instant, the movements of the shadows didn’t match the people themselves.

When Xi Ping woke up, he was inside the Snake King’s Immortal Palace. He had been buried facedown in a casket of spiritual stones.

Xi Ping hissed, feeling his face being rubbed full of pits. Grimacing, he righted himself and reached out to touch his face, feeling a beard and skin as loose as a cloth sack.

Xi Ping stared blankly for ages, holding his chin in horror, before finally realizing something. He took off the Luwu mask that someone had put onto him. This edition of the Luwu mask must have been personally made by Lin Chi. It was only the size of a pill, translucent and soft to the touch, able to change shape readily. As soon as you

added spiritual energy, it could dissolve into a person's body, turning them male or female, young or old, as they liked.

Xi Ping got up and played with it for a while, coquettishly changing into several different forms. Suddenly, he was struck by a thought: since this had been personally made by Master Lin, could it change into something else?

When Zhou Ying opened the door, he didn't see Xi Ping, only a big grey rat attempting to walk on its hind legs. It was sleek and shiny, a perfect illustration of the legendary "huge rat."⁷⁰ It even squeaked at him.

Zhou Ying: "..."

His Third Highness stared at the rat for a moment, then closed the door just as he had opened it. He took a deep breath, calmed down for a moment, then turned his head and said to Bai Ling: "Discipline rod."

Bai Ling was stuck to the wall minding his own business, pretending he wasn't there. Hearing these words, he skillfully changed from paper to human and pulled a sturdy discipline rod from his mustard seed, presenting it with both hands. Then he stuck himself back to the wall.

Zhou Ying kicked open the door. "Scoundrel!"

Xi Ping—the big grey rat—gave him a demonstration of "scurrying like a frightened rat" on the spot.

When removing the mask, you needed to pour an appropriate quantity of spiritual energy through your fingertips and simultaneously press down on the acupoints on the lower jaw and

under the eyes. A rat's paws couldn't reach them. He couldn't change back!

Lin Chi had failed him!

As Xi Ping dashed under the bed, he used his consciousness to knock on Peak Master Lin's skull. "Master Lin! Didn't you consider how you were supposed to remove the mask after you became a rat?"

Unexpectedly receiving this very original appeal, Lin Chi's hand shook, ruining an inscription he was more than halfway finished carving and nearly blowing up the immortal furnace.

A mighty prince of the first rank categorically couldn't get down on the floor to hunt for a rat. For a moment, he was caught in a dilemma. He slammed a table with the discipline rod. "Bai Ling, get a mousetrap!"

Xi Ping howled, "Master Lin!"

Only now did Lin Chi realize what he had said. "Oh... you can do that?"

Xi Ping: "..."

With a thought, the Tai Sui Qin attached itself to his whiskers. The grey rat swiftly used his front paws to pluck the whiskers a few times. After a few *twangs*, a Luwu mask rolled off the rat, and the big rat turned into a human under the bed.

Xi Ping cried out "ow" as the back of his head hit the underside of the bed. He tasted many years' worth of old dust.

"San-ge... *cough-cough*, I was wrong! Don't hit me, don't hit me, I'll show you something good!"

CHAPTER 108 - Unbound Knife (15)

When more than one person entered the Law Breaker at the same time, two melodies would sound inside at the same time. Despite this, the sounds were “separate,” one near and one far, not disturbing each other.

Moreover, only Xi Ping himself could hear this music.

Bai Ling’s song was of very similar style to his paperman, but from beginning to end, it was mixed with indiscernible interference, probably the demonic part of him.

Though in terms of cultivation, Zhou Ying was only a half-immortal, he brought in even more interference than Bai Ling. Xi Ping couldn’t hear the greater part of his song, which had no tune—a paramount spiritual sense was extremely rare; there were no words to correspond to what Zhou Ying saw and heard. It couldn’t be described, and others couldn’t use their imaginations to understand it—there was only a small clear segment in the middle. It had a tune. For some reason, this tune sounded particularly familiar to Xi Ping, so he imitated it with a whistle.

When he had only whistled a couple of phrases, his back was hit with the discipline rod.

“Shut up.” Zhou Ying was examining the space inside the Law Breaker with his head lifted. As he did so, he scolded, “It’s been over a decade, and you haven’t made a bit of progress.”

In the Law Breaker, the Snake King’s Immortal Palace that Xi Ping had created was completely convincing, but in Zhou Ying’s eyes, it was obviously an illusion: outside, all things and creatures were all covered in a thin layer of radiance, the meager spiritual energy scattered throughout the world, but that didn’t exist inside the Law

Breaker... apart from the “performance fee” Xi Ping had piled up in a corner—the spiritual stones.

The area of the Snake King’s Immortal Palace was limited. Standing in a high place, you could see the boundary of the Law Breaker Bracelet. This bracelet’s boundary seemed to be connected to something. With Zhou Ying’s vision, not only could he not see it clearly, staring at it too long even made him dizzy.

After Xi Ping, speaking in torrents, had described the whole course of the Law Breaker Bracelet pulling him out from the bottom of the Impassable Sea, he waited for his san-ge’s gasps of admiration, but instead he saw Zhou Ying staring at the boundary of the Law Breaker, his brow furrowed. “San-ge?”

Why wasn’t he praising him?

Zhou Ying slowly shook his head. “Hui Xiangjun’s three great relics are the Law Breaker, the Riverward, and the Gold Imitation Technique. The Law Breaker and the Riverward both involve breaking away from the spiritual mountains. I suspect that the Gold Imitation Technique is even more of a rebellion against orthodoxy. Not the extant version of it—the true Gold Imitation Technique was likely never passed down... Oh, what’s that?”

Xi Ping looked in the direction he was looking and saw a piece of “paper” floating in midair. He smacked himself on the forehead. “Oh, right, I forgot about that.”

This was the spiritual image stamp he had snatched from the paperman. Stamped on a person, this thing was charred black, but floating untethered in the air now, it was the color of blazing fire, quite dazzling when looked at even from afar.

“This is also a new thing.” Xi Ping beckoned, summoning the spiritual image stamp by force. He was just about to grab hold of it

when Zhou Ying knocked his hand aside with the discipline rod.

When Zhou Ying got a clear look at the picture on the stamp, his pupils abruptly contracted. “A spiritual image stamp?”

“You mean the brand that the southern mines used to stamp on the spiritual images of their subordinates?” Bai Ling was also startled. “Viscount, where did this come from?”

“It doesn’t matter where it comes from,” Xi Ping vaguely put him off, then raised the stamp across empty space. Showing off, he said, “This one I’ve got here is higher grade than the ones Liang Chen and the others were stamped with. It’s called a Dragon and Phoenix Symbolizing Good Fortune, and this is the ‘phoenix stamp’ of the pair, used for engagements. After you get it stamped, you belong to a person in life and death. The spiritual energy you use to scour your spiritual bones, even the essence you refine after establishing a foundation, half of everything goes to that person. Haha, pretty heinous, huh?”

Bai Ling didn’t know what he was so pleased about. He only had a premonition out of nowhere: the Viscount was perhaps about to get another beating.

The stamp was strongly repelled by Xi Ping, constantly trying to escape from his hands; evidently no one wanted to take him to wife by force.

Xi Ping shamelessly used brute strength to trap the stamp and said excitedly, “San-ge, I have an idea. If I can even steal this spiritual image stamp in its entirety, maybe I can also remove one from a spiritual image. Think about it, there are so many rogue cultivators with seals on them in Western Chu, if they knew...”

Zhou Ying interrupted him irritably: “If they knew about this, each and every one of them would want to kill you, do you believe that?”

Xi Ping froze, the hot blood that had risen to his head knocked down by his san-ge's sentence.

Though Zhou Ying wasn't his real older brother, he had been the nearest thing to it since they were little. Seeing him was like coming home. When a person came home, they would never be as astute as they were out in the world. Moreover, unlike his mortal parents, who needed care and protection, Zhou Ying was now a cultivator himself, and a fierce personage who had single-handedly stirred up all kinds of chaos. Things were already going pretty well if he wasn't going out to destroy the world; there was no need for others to worry about him. In front of him, Xi Ping was always excessively relaxed, so much so that his intelligence degenerated somewhat. If he got hold of any new thing or learned any new skill, he would be impatient to put it on display. And because he was accustomed to reporting the good and not the bad, he would always inadvertently gloss over bad things.

True, Xi Ping thought, coming back to himself, I lost my head there.

If he dared to make a public announcement on the black market, saying that he could remove spiritual image brands, it would amount to putting up a brick wall in front of all the common cultivators who relied on "selling themselves" to join prestigious clans.

After all, the number of those who were forced into it like Zhao Qindan was small. The vast majority of people were willing when they took on spiritual image stamps. Even if some among them regretted it, they still absolutely wouldn't dare to show it. Otherwise, there were plenty of sycophants who would be only too eager to light up all the "traitors" to prove that they themselves were in the right acting as people's dogs.

Even if those established foundation masters whose Ways of the Heart were about to crumble wanted to remove their own brands,

they still wouldn't want the institution of brands to disappear—these people had been bound up with certain big clans for centuries, most of them even changing their surname to their master's; they had long ago become a part of the family. They had a brand stamped on them, and at their command they also had several toadies stamped with brands that recognized them as master, each level pressing down on the next. If the institution of brands collapsed, wouldn't everything these people had suffered for centuries be wasted?

A technique for removing spiritual image brands was hotter to the touch than the noon sun while the brand was being stamped.

As soon as it got out, Wild Fox Country would become the target of public censure.

A chill went up Xi Ping's spine. At once, he separately sent word to both Wei Chengxiang and Xu Rucheng, asking them about the follow-up.

Xu Rucheng answered quickly, saying that everything had gone smoothly. The Zhao family was currently arranging a feast, seeming intent on playing music through the night. Xu Rucheng had witnessed the stamping ceremony up close, and it had made a significant impact on him. He babbled on, repeatedly wanting guarantees that the "young mistress" was in fact made of paper, not a real person.

But there was no word from Wei Chengxiang—she seemed to be doing something it would be inconvenient to have interrupted; she had blocked off the reincarnation wood amulet in her mustard seed.

Zhou Ying saw him calm down, and, knowing that he didn't lack for shrewdness, said nothing further. He only sized up the Law Breaker Bracelet and asked, "Are there limits to the consciousnesses you can bring in?"

“The ones I can contact... oh, anyone whose blood has touched reincarnation wood will do, whether they’ve spoken to me or not.”

It had worked with Zhao Qindan.

“Whether it makes a difference where their physical body is, I don’t know yet,” Xi Ping went on after considering. “But this place definitely isn’t impacted by national boundaries, and it’s outside the surveillance of the Sanyue Spiritual Mountains. People whose cultivation is higher than mine can also come in, but I suppose I couldn’t pull them in by force. They have to be willing.”

Shifu had come in, but shifu was different from others; after all, he had a sliver of his consciousness in the shard of Zhaoting. After deliberating for a while, Xi Ping had snatched up Lin Chi to try bringing him in.

“Oh, right,” Xi Ping said, recalling what he had done since getting the Law Breaker Bracelet, “I can bring things in, but others can’t, unless while I’m bringing their consciousness inside I ‘permit’ what they’re carrying to come in with them—excepting talismans, arrays, and inscriptions stamped on the consciousness.”

Zhou Ying waited patiently for him to finish speaking. “What else?”

“If you give me enough materials, I can duplicate immortal tools that I’ve brought in... though the grade of the immortal tool can’t surpass my cultivation level.”

He could also duplicate living people whose cultivation was lower than his—that, he didn’t dare to say; he was afraid san-ge would beat him.

Xi Ping said, “That’s about it... ow!”

He had hardly finished speaking before the discipline rod fell.

Zhou Ying was extremely perceptive, and Xi Ping had borrowed a paperman from him before, then had done the unthinkable and stolen a spiritual image inscription. Having heard that much, he had already guessed most of it. From noticing that something had happened to the water dragon pearl and learning that this joker's physical body had for no reason at all ended up in Western Chu, he had traveled nonstop to cross the Xia River. Crossing the river and leaving the country, adding it all together, had taken less than a full day and night. To have been able in such a short time to do such impressive tinkering with the Law Breaker Bracelet, it was clear this rotten brat hadn't delayed for a moment. Ever since appearing in the world, he hadn't stopped looking for trouble.

Good grief, he'd been busy!

When Zhou Ying had been a mortal, he hadn't quite dared to take up arms unless he lost his temper. His heart and lungs couldn't keep up with his anger; he couldn't run through the streets brandishing a stick to drive away the dog like the Marquis. All he could do was constantly bring complaints and secretly keep accounts.

Now, with new grievances piled atop the old, he could finally even the score.

This was perhaps the only benefit cultivation had given him.

Xi Ping scrambled around, letting his san-ge beat him all the way out of the Law Breaker Bracelet, from his consciousness to his physical body.

As soon as Bai Ling came out, he skillfully hung himself on the wall and looked on indifferently, thinking: Well, what did I say?

Finally there was a *bang*; the discipline rod, unable to bear the torment of the toughness of a near-ascended spirit body, died a

natural death.

Zhou Ying tossed the discipline rod aside. His arms ached. “Go pour me some tea.”

Xi Ping flexed his neck and shoulders and glided out, feeling that this beating had been quite relaxing for the muscles and stimulating for the circulation. Afraid of angering san-ge, he still had to put on a pretense of being in a lot of pain, so he limped as he poured the tea.

Zhou Ying asked, “Apart from Xuanyin’s General Zhi and Peak Master Lin, have you seen anyone else since your true body came to Tao County?”

“Not yet.. Oh, I saw a cookware repairman, though it was only in passing,” Xi Ping said. “Don’t worry, san-ge, I understand how things stand. Right now, the Law Breaker Bracelet is like a hidden realm. I’m the only one who can open it, and it’s safe. When the Luwu want to communicate something it’s inconvenient for others to know about, they’ll be able to come here to meet up.”

Zhou Ying treated this like a mouse’s squeaking, ignoring his boasting. He turned his head and ordered Bai Ling, “Make him a Luwu fake identity.”

Bai Ling—the painted immortal—changed from a painting back into a human. “It is already done.”

Saying so, he took out a file and handed it over. Xi Ping briefly flipped through it and saw that Bai Ling had made up the story of a righteous man who had been captured by evil cultivators in his youth, had been forced to enter the Way due to his unsurpassed natural talents, and later had left the darkness for the light and become a Kaiming Cultivator.

The plot was full of ups and downs, fascinating reading—a standard romance.

“Pick a name for yourself so you won’t forget to answer when people call it. You’ll be able to act in Tao County under this identity, and you’ll be able to use this as a foundation to make other disguises for yourself.” Zhou Ying paused, then said, “The Law Breaker Bracelet can indeed act as the Luwu’s hidden realm, but there’s no need to speak of it openly. The Luwu are also people who can’t see the light of day, anyway. It’s enough for it to be a mysterious place that they can take their guesses about. You must remember to change the furnishings here. You can’t easily leave Tao County now. Since you’re at the Snake King’s Immortal Palace, it’s best not to use the Snake King’s Immortal Palace, to keep anyone observant from guessing the location of the hidden realm—you can even use Guangyun Palace as your blueprint. Remember not to reveal anything connected to you. And if you let people in later, don’t let anyone see you.”

Xi Ping could be careful when he put his mind to it, though that was only when he was forced into it. Most of the time, he was somewhat blindly optimistic—“Try now, think later” was his usual bad habit, no matter how many times he took a tumble, remembering the good and not the bad.

The Law Breaker Bracelet had taken him out of the Impassable Sea, and he had lost no time developing a bunch of new ways to amuse himself. He had even played himself into a disaster once in the process. Now, his head was full of how to use the Law Breaker Bracelet to gather a hundred thousand white spirits before the fifteenth day of the eighth month; he really hadn’t had time to make plans for anything else yet.

Xi Ping said, “... I see.”

Zhou Ying knew that he was always winging things. He continued, “Originally, to make it more convenient for you to operate in Western Chu, some of the Luwu here received reincarnation wood to contact you with. Don’t be impulsive and bring them in. It’s the same thing—you can’t let others realize that this hidden realm is connected to Tao County. Among the Luwu, no matter who tries to talk to you, ignore them all. Only let those carrying my token in here. Otherwise, there will be chaos.

“Also, Shiyong, remember,” Zhou Ying said, becoming serious, “no matter what the situation, you can’t appear under the identity of ‘Tai Sui’ in front of your motley friends or the mortals of Tao County. If you want to make friends with someone, change your identity. ‘Tai Sui’ used to be an empty figure, so let it remain empty forever.”

Xi Ping blinked. Just then, he heard Zhi Xiu’s voice in his ear: “Listen to your brother.”

When Xi Ping had stolen the spiritual image stamp and exhausted his essence, he hadn’t only disturbed the water dragon pearl; he had also disturbed Zhaoting.

Zhi Xiu wasn’t a chatterbox, and he wasn’t in the habit of talking about people behind their backs. But at the bottom of the Impassable Sea, he had seen everything Zhou Ying had done—to this day no one knew what Zhaoting would have done had Xi Ping been unable to stop his san-ge.

Seeing Zhou Ying appear, Zhi Xiu hadn’t made a sound.

Xi Ping said, “Shifu?”

Zhi Xiu softly said, “Remember what I taught you with my sword aura in the East Sea? Shiyong, many have been universally censured without being despondent. Since time immemorial, nearly all men of virtue and integrity have achieved this. But those who

have been universally praised without being persuaded are few. When everything conspires to push you to be the hero who saves the world, anyone's blood would boil... Do not be that hero, and certainly do not be a god."

Xi Ping froze, feeling that there was something hidden in his words.

But Zhou Ying seemed to sense something. Seemingly gentle, he lowered his eyelids and said with a false smile, "That's General Zhi?"

"Pass along my respects to His Third Highness," Zhi Xiu said very mildly. "No matter what cause he had for establishing the Kaiming Department, at any rate he has given the wretched of the nation a place to shelter. That is a virtuous deed."

Xi Ping: "..."

For some reason, he felt a little awkward.

Xi Ping gave a dry cough, then said, "Oh, yes, well... Shifu told me to give you his regards. He says you've done a great job with the Kaiming Department, san-ge, unprecedented before and unrivaled since, an unending virtuous achievement. You are already friends in spirit from afar, and if he gets the opportunity, he must invite you for a drink."

Zhi Xiu: "..."

Am I deaf? Or dead?

Zhou Ying knew what Xi Ping was like. He laughed and didn't take any of this to heart. Posturing, he said, "This fiend is a walking calamity. I appreciate General Zhi looking after him."

Zhi Xiu said, "As I ought to."

The immortal of the snow-capped mountain and the demon of the deep sea collided across space. Then Zhou Ying stood and beckoned to Bai Ling.

“With General Zhi here, I have no further instructions to give,” Zhou Ying said. “I’ll have Bai Ling send you a token in a little while. This place is within Western Chu’s borders. I cannot stay long... If you get over this one day, notify me in advance. I’ll arrange to have someone take you beyond the Beijue Mountains. Xuanyin Mountain may not be able to follow you there. Why do you insist on looking after this nuisance in Chu?”

Having said this, he tossed down a bag of spiritual stones. As when he had come, he dissolved into mist and left.

Zhi Xiu inside Zhaoting seemed to have used up his energy. After saying these few sentences, he went to meditate as before.

Xi Ping didn’t have anyone to speak to right now. All he could do in his loneliness was pick up the Luwu mask and start molding his face. He sent another message to Wei Chengxiang.

Unexpectedly, A-Xiang still hadn’t taken out the reincarnation wood amulet.

Strange. A-Xiang was no young mistress who used osmanthus oil all over her hair and took half a day to bathe. What was she doing?

She must be in Yu Family Bend now. Whether she was in the Zhao family hidden realm or had infiltrated the Yu family, something might go wrong at any time. Why would she block off the reincarnation wood for so long?

With a thought, Xi Ping located Wei Chengxiang, picked a reincarnation wood tree not far from her, and made the tree move on

its own—what had happened?

CHAPTER 109 - Unbound Knife (16)

All of Wei Chengxiang's attention seemed to be taken up by the ants on the mountain road. She didn't even spare the reincarnation wood a glance.

Both banks of the Xia River had entered autumn. The days were gradually growing shorter. The storm lanterns on the mountain road had lit up, casting ghostly shadows of the mountains and trees.

Enormous terraced fields of medicinal herbs were situated amid the mountains, yet there was also a clear distinction between them and the mountains. There was only one narrow path to the south, hanging treacherously between the medicinal herb fields and the nearest Sweet Cloud Peak. At its narrowest point, only two people could pass abreast. To either side was a bottomless cliff, and only crude ropes and iron chains to act as railings.

On a road like this, neither carriages nor beasts of burden could pass. They had to be taken on foot. After the herb collectors finished gathering the medical herbs, they had to carry them down from the mountains basket by basket. There were about a dozen to twenty people per group, walking side by side in two rows. The herb baskets on their backs were six to seven chi long, bearing down on them so that neither their heads nor their feet were visible. Each person held a rope, tying them together, in case they missed a step and lost their footing.

Zhao Qindan glanced over them, thinking, These people are so skinny.

Not the carefully maintained slenderness of a beauty, and not the wiry leanness of a martial artist who trained assiduously. The bony joints of the herb gatherers had thin skin like paper stretched over

them. As they moved mechanically, they seemed about to break through the skin.

Like a group of hungry ghosts suffering their punishment in the underworld.

“Splendid sight, huh?” Wei Chengxiang smiled at the young mistress. “These are the largest medicinal herb fields in the world presently.”

When a green ore field grew medicinal herbs year round, they would interact with mundane herbs, would gather in one place. Because of this, small-scale green ore fields were either surrounded by a water system or formed a small cliff. These green ore fields were too big. This was a blessed place, and also a dangerous one. After many earthquakes and landslides, they had taken on their current shape.

Zhao Qindan opened her mouth, about to say “Even if machinery can’t get through here, why don’t they use immortal tools to transport the medicinal herbs?”, but when the words came to her lips, she thought it sounded something like “Why don’t they eat meat if they don’t have rice?”, so she swallowed them.

“Immortal tools burn spiritual stones, and it’s hard to avoid wastage when an array transports things like spiritual stones or medicinal herbs,” Wei Chengxiang said calmly, as if she knew what she was thinking. “It’s not worthwhile. Comparatively speaking, human labor is cheapest.”

Zhao Qindan said, “Mortals can’t remain long in the vicinity of green ore fields. Medicinal herbs sap their vigor. In my... in Great Wan, all the green ore fields cycle between being planted and being left fallow. If they keep working like this night and day, can they live long?”

“If they’re healthy and strong enough, they should be able to live to thirty. That’s enough,” Wei Chengxiang said. “Chu’s common people aren’t waiting on Xuanyin Mountain’s Grand Selection. They won’t drag their feet on getting married until their twenties or thirties. They do it when they’re thirteen or fourteen. By the time the previous generation dies, the next generation is there to pick up.”

“What do they expect to get out of this...?”

“Money,” Wei Chengxiang said. “This awful Yu Family Bend has no land that can be planted. If you don’t work as an herb collector and go west to be a worker in the Moon Plated Gold factories, you’re still eating the Yu family’s food. Over there, an able-bodied worker’s monthly wages don’t amount to a string of copper coins. Converting to Wan currency, it’s no more than seven or eight hundred. Travel is difficult here, and grain is unbelievably expensive. A dan of millet... a dan⁷¹ of rice is close to two strings of coins. How can you get by? Working as an herb collector in the medicinal herb fields, if you’re nimble enough in your work, your monthly wage is five or six times greater. People fight over the positions.”

The young mistress who couldn’t do sums didn’t understand this at all. Never mind Chu currency, her only impression of Wan’s small coins was using them as the bases of shuttlecocks when she was little. It took her an age of calculating before she could get some idea. In spite of herself, she was disbelieving: “Just for that little bit of money? What’s wrong with saving up? You eat about half a dan of grain in one month, that’s for rice or wheat flour—and I know what millet is, don’t belittle me—if you substitute in mixed grains and millet, you’d still be able to get three or four jin per day. How many people must a family have if that’s not enough for them to eat?”

When she had been a mortal at home, once she had passed the age of growing taller, she would eat at most one or two liang of rice per

meal. Even for her father, you would still only need to add half a bowl of rice. And once you got old, you had to stop eating in the afternoon to keep in good health.

Wei Chengxiang thought she was rather cute, and she wasn't in the mood to offer an explanation, so she let it go with a smile.

Just then, a cry came to them on the wind. Wei Chengxiang's eyes grew serious. She made a "quiet" hand gesture at Zhao Qindan.

In the midst of the green ore medicinal herb fields, there was a person with a speaking trumpet saying loudly: "The immortal mountains have been merciful. Since Tao County encountered a monster this year, fearing that the people's lives will be disturbed, they want to hurry up and manufacture a batch of restorative pills to give to the common people over there before Mid-Autumn. The main ingredient, the crystalline flower, is a specialty on our mountain. For the near future, the immortal mountains will pay double the price for the medicinal herbs they receive. Our employers are generous, so they'll double your wages, too. How often does a good thing like this come around? You can make money *and* accumulate merit, help the country and the people. I bet you're all going to laugh it up!"

In the valley, there was an echo of "laugh it up... laugh it up." An herb collector, whether tired or dazed or something, was so startled by this echo that his foot slipped, and he nearly fell down from the precipice.

Zhao Qindan gave a cry, bouncing up in alarm, almost tossing out a talisman across the distance. She only came to her senses when Wei Chengxiang reached out a hand to stop her.

Luckily there were about a dozen herb collectors tied together. If one lost his footing, he would soon be pulled back by his

companions. But the basket on this person's back was knocked open, and two crystalline flowers fell to the bottom of the cliff.

The number and weight of the medicinal herbs the herb collectors carried on their backs had to be verified in the field and when they handed them over after leaving the mountain, to prevent theft. If the quantity didn't match, they had to compensate for it. But these were medicinal herbs. Dropping one little flower meant a whole year's work had been for nothing.

A half-immortal had good hearing. From far away, Zhao Qindan heard as that herb collector knelt on the ground and let out a wail like a dying cry. She broke out in gooseflesh. In that moment, she suspected that person was going to jump.

But the colleagues in his group weren't moved at all. Some were waiting with numb expressions, picking at their hands, some were annoyed that he was holding them up, grumbling and swearing at him, and some were patiently counseling him in low voices, telling that despairing herb collector that there was no use in howling. He was better off using that time to get up right now and make money.

Zhao Qindan held her breath. If that herb collector jumped off the cliff, she was ready to catch him. But that person didn't attempt suicide as she had expected. In hardly any time, he once again carefully righted the basket and tied it firmly. Limping, he went on to struggle for survival.

Zhao Qindan at last slowly let out a breath, feeling extremely disturbed. Her palms were even sweating.

But Wei Chengxiang didn't see anything unusual about this. She held down something on her chest and toward the empty air, speaking to herself, said, "Tai Sui, I've made inquiries in Yu Family Bend, and I've found that apart from distributing grain, Sanyue is also going to distribute a batch of restorative pills to Tao County.

After taking them, the people will probably be able to make it through the Moon Shadow period. Do you think there is still a need for our spirit-gathering array?”

Xi Ping had been keeping an eye on the two of them through the reincarnation wood. He knew perfectly well that when Wei Chengxiang said this, she hadn't taken the reincarnation wood amulet out of her mustard seed at all... and moreover, she normally didn't speak aloud when she contacted him.

What was she doing?

Xi Ping quickly focused on her and saw that when Wei Chengxiang finished saying there was no need for the spirit-gathering array, next to her, Zhao Qindan's shadow shook unnaturally.

Wait, what was that?

Xi Ping was about to draw Zhao Qindan's consciousness into the Law Breaker, but he thought of Wei Chengxiang's peculiar behavior and held back.

The young mistress who had just been struggling to do a calculation got a dazed look in her eyes, a thought that didn't accord with her experiences appearing out of nowhere in her mind. She blurted out: “Really? They'd even exploit their own nearest and dearest to death. Would they really care about the lives of others?”

Wei Chengxiang seemed not to have expected that she could also catch on quickly sometimes. She turned her head to look at her in some astonishment.

Zhao Qindan said, “The sages of the Sanyue Mountains have Ways of the Heart, but the half-immortals under them don't. I've heard plenty of things about how vile the reputation of Western Chu's Qilin Guard is...”

Having said this, her voice paused involuntarily. A doubt flitted past. Zhao Qindan thought: I heard... What did I hear? Where did I hear it?

A voice in her mind answered her: Naturally it was in the Zhao family hidden realm, listening to the elders' discussions.

It was as if a fog rose in Zhao Qindan's head. She was confused for a moment, vaguely remembering that something like this really had happened. That third-rate imperial grandson was a relative of the Yu family by marriage. Before the wedding, the Zhao family would certainly want to find out all about his background.

So she went on, saying to Wei Chengxiang: "I'll tell you another inside story. As medicinal herb sellers, the Yu family always treats people according to their position. They've already bought off the half-immortal herb purchasers. The herbs they sell to the immortal mountains are at top price but of second-rate quality. At least six parts of each dan is weeds. Since the immortal mountains are in such a hurry to have the materials this time, and the Yu family is even willing to double the herb gatherers' wages, it's clear they're going to reap even greater profits. The medicine makers—it's mostly open-eyed cultivators who make the elixirs given to mortals—they'll subcontract out, level after level, and in the end there's no saying what kind of lumps they'll end up with. And even so, those inferior pills will most likely eventually end up on the black market, to be sold to poor rogue cultivators like you."

Wei Chengxiang frowned and looked her over. "How do you know?"

"The Yu family nearly gave me a facial tattoo on my spiritual image, is there anything surprising about me knowing something about their dirty secrets?" Zhao Qindan raised her chin slightly, her eyes falling on the herb gatherers. Her haughty expression dimmed slightly. "In Heaven's Design Pavilion, there's a record. During Great

Wan's era of Taiming, there was a great drought one year, leaving a thousand li of barren land, and the court sent people to provide disaster relief. The outcome was that more than half the grain meant to give relief was mixed with grit. If it hadn't been discovered by a senior from Heaven's Design Pavilion who was passing by, there's no saying how long it would have been concealed. And as for this awful Western Chu—they're already doing pretty well if they have grit to eat. How can they expect elixirs? I advise you and the one behind you not to rely on that."

Just then, Wei Chengxiang's shadow also moved. Her clear gaze became hazy.

A thought arose in her mind: Right. If Sanyue could be relied upon, Tao County wouldn't have ended up with an evil cultivator as its local tyrant. If Tai Sui really does have a means for removing spiritual image brands, then isn't that an achievement of boundless virtue? When those big families who prey on the people have lost their watchdogs, how will they continue their tyranny? And those hundred thousand white spirits will be taken care of.

In fact, she ought to facilitate this business.

As she thought this, Wei Chengxiang unconsciously felt around for the mustard seed hanging in front of her chest, wanting to take out the reincarnation wood that was sealed in there. Just as her fingertips were about to reach into the mustard seed, they were knocked numb by a prohibition.

The fingers connect to the heart. Wei Chengxiang, her expression unchanging, sucked in a breath: Wait, why would I have put a prohibition on my mustard seed?

Just then, the railcar for transporting the medicinal herbs was fully loaded by the workers. It rattled and clanked, spouting steam, and began to run along the Moon Plated Gold tracks that wound like a

snake. Two huge carriage lamps swept over, making the shadows of the two young women hiding in the darkness slide quickly, as if they wanted to plunge into their bodies.

The trees nearby were shaken by the railcar and rustled a few times.

Wei Chengxiang raised her eyes, and another thought invaded her mind: I've been getting more and more paranoid over the years.

Next to her, Zhao Qindan spoke as though to herself: "Deliberately driving down the wages at the Moon Plated Gold factories, levying exorbitant road tolls, irrigating their medicinal herb fields with human vigor and blood, storing up spiritual image brands used to make slaves... I've heard that the head of the Yu family is only an open-eyed cultivator who used spiritual stones and medicinal herbs to force his spiritual eyes open and can't draw so much as half a talisman. What do they have that's so great?"

They relied only on their ancestor having been ruthless enough and lucky enough to have controlled a genius who was at that time just at his lowest point, such that hundreds of years later, a whole family of vermin could lie upon a mountain of gold tyrannizing everyone around them. And the servant who had been forced to sell himself back then had changed overnight, becoming himself a royal kinsman, a high-ranking official of a prominent family!

The lofty mansions, the tremendous wealth and rank, all depended on a single spiritual image brand.

If only...

Wei Chengxiang snapped her fingers, released the prohibition on the mustard seed, and pulled out the reincarnation wood. "Senior!"

In the most secluded little courtyard in Yu Family Bend, a pair of slightly bloodshot eyes opened. Yu Chang laughed: so that was it.

He'd been wondering how it was possible for someone to use their consciousness to communicate. It turned out that this was the communication token this mysterious "Tai Sui" used to contact his subordinates. This little girl was hardly full-grown, but she was very shrewd. She'd been forced to put on an act this whole time, and she'd been unusually hard to deal with.

But no matter how clever she was, as long as she had a desire, there would be a crack in her mind. Never mind a paltry little half-immortal, not even an established foundation could escape his Shadow Speaker technique.

Yu Chang exhaled softly. Wei Chengxiang and Zhao Qindan were unnoticeably wrapped up in a mustard seed. This time, neither of the two young women full of indignation noticed.

Wei Chengxiang involuntarily spoke aloud the words she was using to communicate through her consciousness: "... I know that stealing an incomplete spiritual image stamp isn't the same thing as removing a brand that's been there for centuries, but this Yu Chang seems to think you can do it. Senior, don't you think you should see him? Oh... all right, I know it's not convenient for you, so I'll act as intermediary. Yu gave me a communication token..."

The moonlight was momentarily blocked by the clouds. The people and the trees were submerged in darkness. Wei Chengxiang's hand holding the reincarnation wood amulet turned dark, and a "shadow" burrowed into the amulet.

"Let me see what kind of divinity this Tai Sui who has taken over Wild Fox Country is."

He chased the aura inside the reincarnation wood amulet, and at a glance saw at the end of the trail a middle-aged man who looked about the same as the Tai Sui divine image that Tao County had

worshipped before. He was inside the Snake King's Immortal Palace.

An established foundation... no, higher, a near-ascended spirit.

It turned out there was such a hidden talent in little Wild Fox Country... Wonderful.

Found you. I'll be there in no time.

Greed appeared on Yu Chang's face. His bloodshot eyes became even redder. In that moment, he seemed only a step away from losing his mind.

His figure flashed, and he flew off in the direction of Tao County.

Xi Ping, who had fashioned the Luwu mask into the appearance of the Tai Sui divine image, had no idea that he had already been spotted. After finishing his conversation with Wei Chengxiang, he took the phoenix stamp out of the Law Breaker to examine it.

The phoenix stamp he had trapped kept wanting to run off toward the northeast—northeast was the direction of Yu Family Bend. There seemed to be something there attracting it.

If his guess was right, the phoenix stamp probably wanted to go find Zhao Qindan.

A spiritual image and a spiritual image stamp were a pair. This made Xi Ping remember Liang Chen.

Back then, Liang Chen had had his mind set on removing the brand on his spiritual image, and his method had been very thought-provoking: he had gone around swindling people whose spiritual image was similar to his into being his believers, making them swear blood oaths to offer up their "life while living, body after death, what

they had grown to this day, their future spirit and primordial being,” so he could switch to a shell that had been offered up to be seized whenever he wanted to.

Even if his true body had become useless, wouldn't it have been enough to seize another body once? Why would he have to prepare so many backups?

Even with special powers that could let him seize multiple bodies, the experience certainly couldn't have been pleasant. Each time you occupied another person's spirit, your own risk of losing your mind would increase, and your consciousness would involuntarily be influenced by the body. With Liang Chen's impartiality between men and women, Xi Ping couldn't imagine how he would have changed after a whole round of seizing bodies. In spite of himself, he broke out in gooseflesh.

Just then, his spiritual sense was suddenly touched. He noticed that he had been saying what he was thinking aloud.

Xi Ping flung out a hand. “Who's there!”

The mustard seed that had wrapped around him at some point tore at once. A white-clothed man landed in front of him and smiled at him. “This extraordinary individual you mention who could seize bodies repeatedly truly did want to use this method to remove his spiritual image brand—reasonably speaking, each time he seized a body, a bit of the brand would be scrubbed away by a very similar spiritual image. After ‘rinsing’ repeatedly like this a hundred thousand times, perhaps he really could have escaped that slave's brand. Though the outcome definitely wouldn't match up to an identical spiritual image... I have looked forward to meeting you for a long time, Grand Duke Tai Sui.”

CHAPTER 110 - Unbound Knife (17)

Xi Ping's whole body was immediately wrapped in a layer of spiritual energy. Faint light emerged from all his exposed skin. The spiritual light filled and leveled all the creases and ravines in his old face. From a distance, he looked like an old eunuch who had powdered his face.

This tender-skinned Tai Sui radiated light in all directions, completely dispersing his shadow. A beam of spiritual energy within the shadow that had no place to go was forced out, brushing past him as it flew away.

However small a mosquito was, it was still flesh. Xi Ping made a grab, seizing the spiritual energy before it could disperse.

"There's a priceless treasure on Wild Fox Country's black market called the grit worm. It's said that if you put this thing in a person's shadow, you can infect a person's consciousness and spirit without seizing their body." Xi Ping's faded mustache turned up. With a fake smile, he said, "When their price is pushed up to the highest, they go for three liang of white spirits each. I suppose I've gotten off lightly today."

A near-ascended spirit evil cultivator had evaded the search of Sanyue's shed skin beside Qiu Sha's corpse. He was certainly a remarkable figure.

Yu Chang had only been probing slightly. He hadn't been expecting to succeed. With his method seen through, his expression remained unchanged. He said, smiling, "The grit worm is only a crude kind of bone-sharing talisman, even lower grade than a bone-sharing talisman. All you can do with it is use the power of the person who drew the talisman once. How well it works depends entirely on the cultivation level of the person using the talisman. Where do you get

that it can ‘infect a spirit’? Even I can’t do that, so how could those open-eyed and established foundation cultivators who need to borrow powers? That’s all claptrap made up by vile people to drive up the price. How could you believe it?”

“Perhaps carving out your own Snake King’s Immortal Palace in another person’s spirit is a little difficult for Your Excellency, but it’s all too easy for you to imperceptibly influence a person’s mind.” As Xi Ping sneered, he made the protective spiritual energy around him thicker and thicker, expanding into a human-shaped gas lamp... until he had even dazzled his own eyes.

“If a half-immortal uses this three liang of white spirits grit worm, they can change a person’s likes and dislikes unnoticed; an established foundation using it is even more remarkable—as long as they lead someone along properly, they can make the most absurd notion take root and blossom; and that’s to say nothing of you, Your Excellency. I suppose that a miser would ruin himself for you, and even a chaste woman devoted to a dead husband’s memory would fall head over heels for you?”

“Then you certainly have nothing to worry about, Tai Sui. As far as I know, your debts outweigh your fortune. As for ‘falling head over heels’...” Yu Chang eyed his radiant, precious body, involuntarily blinking several times before he could look at it directly. Politely, he said, “There will certainly be no need for that.”

Xi Ping: “...”

What was this little pretty boy playing at? Never mind playing a dirty trick as soon as he walked in, he also dared to ridicule him by calling him poor and ugly?!

Yu Chang kindly said, “I have come here because I sincerely wish to work with you, Tai Sui.”

“No deal,” Xi Ping responded coldly. “I don’t know how to remove spiritual image stamps. Even if you plant a hundred thoughts in my consciousness, I still won’t be able to do it. And if I could, I still wouldn’t help you. I can see that you’re bad news.”

Saying so, he took a bowl of tea from somewhere, raised it, and lifted the lid. A beam of austere spiritual energy bearing a sword aura rushed straight at Yu Chang’s chest.

Yu Chang actually didn’t dare to meet it head on at first. In an instant, he had retreated out the door. A long spike appeared in his hands, held out horizontally in front of his chest. There was a *clank*, as if it had knocked against a sword. Yu Chang’s hands went numb. In spite of himself, he was amazed: this person actually seemed to have slightly outdone him!

Fortunately, as the person behind the “Snake King,” Tai Sui wasn’t about to destroy his den. He had picked up the tea only to see off his guest. The spiritual energy dispersed at a touch.

Yu Chang staggered before finding his footing. He restrained his smile and said seriously, “Since Tai Sui has perceived my cultivation level, I suppose you will also be able to make allowances for the difficulty I find myself in. Had I not been forced to it, I truly would not have come as an uninvited guest.”

Saying so, he wiped his hand over his face, rubbing away a bit of camouflage over his features, revealing a pair of red eyes that seemed to be suffering from conjunctivitis. As he spoke, his features were already twitching uncontrollably. His lips were constantly turning up, as if he couldn’t suppress a smile, but the look in his eyes was oppressively violent, and his eyeballs seemed to have split up, unwilling to point in the same direction.

The most beautiful countenance couldn’t stand up to an expression like this. This originally exquisite face looked freakish and strange. Xi

Ping broke out in gooseflesh.

But Yu Chang's speech was as composed as before: "You must have perceived that I am now only a thread away from losing my mind. I must cover up the truth of this face before I dare to go out in public—my only hope is to remove the brand on my spiritual image. A person never looks very attractive when clutching at a last straw. If I have been rude, I hope very much you will be magnanimous enough to pardon it."

He seemed on the verge of collapse. Anyone with a bit of practical experience knew that a trapped beast shouldn't be captured and a cornered foe shouldn't be pursued, to avoid driving them into a dead end and causing them to hurt others as well as themselves.

Xi Ping hesitated. His tone unconsciously softened somewhat. "Go on, then."

Yu Chang saluted him in gratitude. "What you placed on the Zhao family's altar wasn't a living person but a fake person made of paper, am I correct in saying that?"

The paperman was Bai Ling's, and Bai Ling's cultivation level wasn't as high as this lunatic's. It made sense that he would have seen through it. Xi Ping smiled, neither confirming nor denying.

Yu Chang's uncontrollable features gradually displayed fierce yearning, like a wild beast that hadn't eaten flesh in a thousand years. But the wilder his expression became, the quieter and slower his voice was.

This frightening willpower truly made one tremble with fear to see.

"That paperman had a consciousness in it. I do not know how Your Excellency did it. It actually tricked the stamping spike—if not for the fact that that consciousness couldn't be invaded by the grit

worm, I nearly would have made a mistake and thought that you had used some secret art to trap Young Mistress Zhao's own consciousness inside it," Yu Chang said. "I would like to request Tai Sui to create a paperman like that, with me as a base."

Xi Ping said curiously, "Can a paperman completely remove a spiritual image brand? Even if a brand can be worn away by a similar spiritual image... even if we say that the paperman has a consciousness identical to yours... can it completely wipe clean the brand on your spiritual image?"

Yu Chang was silent for a moment, then summoned the long spike he had just used to shield himself—examined closely, this long spike was identical to the "stamping spike" used to stamp a spiritual image brand, except it didn't have as many inscriptions on it as the stamping spike.

"This is my vital weapon. Its name... its name is Engraved Heart." The corners of Yu Chang's eyes, which had before held an ominous glint, now began to twitch as though he were suffering immense pain. This made his speech somewhat incoherent. He shattered a spiritual stone and absorbed it through his palm, then finally managed to catch his breath. "Hss... I won't conceal it from you, the majority of Yu Family Bend's stamping spikes were made by me."

Xi Ping listened intently, meanwhile holding an incomplete talisman in his hand—making stamping spikes evidently violated Yu Chang's Way of the Heart. Every mention of it made his Way of the Heart undulate. Xi Ping was afraid that he would explode mid-sentence.

"The technique of making stamping spikes is called the 'piercing art.' If you want, Tai Sui, I can pass it on to you... well, as long as you aren't worried that doing too many wicked things will harm your Way of the Heart." As Yu Chang spoke, his teeth chattered slightly. "You can understand each stamping spike as a special 'bridge', specially made to match a spiritual image. This 'bridge' can only

lead to a specially designated spiritual image. At wu hour precisely, the inscriptions on the stamping spike connect to the sunlight, and the burning sun must cross the 'bridge' to be able to reach a person's spirit and consciousness and form a brand. I only need to make another stamping spike and alter the inscriptions on it to become their reverse, then at wu hour precisely, simultaneously pierce the stamping spike through myself and the paperman—this way, I will be like the midday sun, and the paperman will become the one to be branded. It ought to be able to draw away the 'raging fire' on my spiritual image in its original form... I haven't tried it, but trying it out has no downsides for you, does it?"

It took Xi Ping a great deal of effort to keep his expression serious. Inwardly, he was slapping his thigh and secretly wondering, "Can you really do that?!"

Glittering, he maintained his elderly and experienced posture and nodded, unmoved. "The thought is an interesting one, though making an identical fake consciousness sounds a little ridiculous."

Yu Chang said gravely, "Yu Family Bend will be yours."

His voice was low and deep. These words nearly echoed. Xi Ping abruptly raised his eyes.

Yu Chang stared fixedly at his subtle expressions and said, "I have wavered for many years between my Way of the Heart and my brand. My Way of the Heart has been gravely damaged. After removing the brand, I will go into seclusion to heal. I will not appear in the human world again for at least a hundred years. The offerings Yu Family Bend has supported, a map of the inscriptions and arrays at the main residence, the contents of the treasury... even my own identity, I can give it all to you, Tai Sui, just like you stealthily substituted in a false Zhao Qindan. Never mind a paltry hundred thousand white spirits, after this, you'll possess endless medicinal herbs, rows of Moon Plated Gold factories, all at your disposal."

Xi Ping's throat moved involuntarily. A hundred thousand white spirits, and he called that "paltry."

Yu Chang's words were like a heart demon come knocking, every word and sentence striking the bottom of his heart. "Yu Family Bend is a close neighbor of Tao County, and the two places can perfectly complement each other. One is rich in resources, the other has easy travel, and they'll both be yours. With your methods, perhaps you will be able to contend against the Sanyue Spiritual Mountains in the future. I want to see how far you can go."

Medicinal herbs were the basis of elixirs, and Moon Plated Gold was a nation's lifeline. Adding Tao County enveloped in the Law Breaker Bracelet... If he wanted to overturn the spiritual mountains, he could learn methods and refine his cultivation, but resources he couldn't get no matter what.

He only needed to make a paperman, only needed to let this Yu Chang come in...

Just then, there was a stabbing pain in Xi Ping's ears, making him give a start and come back to his senses, his thoughts breaking off at once—he had copied several of the "protective" inscriptions on Zhao Qindan's consciousness in advance and had hidden one on each of his eyes and ears. Now, the inscriptions in his ears had suddenly been touched, and he found that the thick spiritual energy shell around him had at some point sprung a leak!

This Yu Chang didn't use "grit projections." All he needed to do was to open his mouth and speak, and he could tamper with a person unnoticed.

Xi Ping reached out and plucked in midair. It was as if an invisible qin in the air made a sharp sound, bouncing back Yu Chang's voice with spiritual energy hidden inside it. At the same time, the spiritual

energy at his fingertips turned into a needle, picking a ball of grey smoke out of his ear. This ball of smoke was about to run away as soon as it saw the light, but Xi Ping squeezed it in his hand and dispersed it.

The spiritual energy flowing over Xi Ping's body suddenly became even thicker. As if Yu Chang had been prepared, he made a seal with both hands, setting off a dazzling talisman, knocking away the qin music, which was bearing down on him like the inescapable net of heaven.

Yu Chang laughed aloud. "Those who can resist threats are many, but those who can resist the lure of gains are few. Very well, fellow cultivator, what strong willpower!"

Saying so, he raised his hand and smoothed out his horrifying warped features; at once, he became serene. No sooner had he spoken than he was several zhang away, landing on the rooftop of one of the Snake King's Immortal Palace's halls. Ignoring the biting cold spiritual energy, Yu Chang glanced toward the northeast—the direction of Yu Family Bend—and quietly said, "That being the case, I can rest assured in handing Yu Family Bend over to you."

There was a drone, and the Tai Sui Qin's music came to an abrupt halt. Several notes that had turned into sharp blades dispersed one chi away from the white-clothed man. The spiritual energy blew aside his stray loose hairs. Two aged and weary eyes appeared on the young face. He held a yellowed volume in his hand that was called *The Piercing Art*.

Yu Chang let go, and the volume flew up in front of Xi Ping.

"For you," Yu Chang said. "You're welcome to go find someone to try out the method of removing spiritual images that I told you about. If it works, it can be the last thing I do for my brothers."

Xi Ping glanced at the book. Worried that he was playing some trick, he didn't hastily accept it.

Yu Chang ignored him, continuing to speak: "The technique of spiritual image brands has circulated among the important people of Western Chu for thousands of years. Bad habits are the hardest to break. The fact that brands can be removed must not be allowed to get out, or else it will bring you trouble. I have a group of little brothers, all of whom had no choice when they were young but to take on brands when they reached a dead end. All of these people found their own Ways of the Heart through hard work. They ought to have gone far along the path of cultivation. But with the brand, they are instead even more at risk of losing their minds than those thieves who steal others' Ways of the Heart. I'll have them swear a heart demon oath to keep them from revealing the secret. If the technique for removing the brands succeeds, help them out—you won't be helping for nothing. All these people have established foundation level cultivation. They are the 'offerings' that form the backbones of big families everywhere. They can all help you."

Xi Ping frowned. With the vulgar face of Tai Sui, he looked like a big firefly in the night.

Yu Chang sighed. "Won't you save some spiritual stones and put out your lamp for a while? You're going to give me black wind cataracts."⁷²

Holding a string of the Tai Sui Qin, Xi Ping said with a sneer, "What kind of story are you going to spin for me this time?"

"No story." Yu Chang waved a hand. "You can believe me or not. If you won't help, then let's drop it. Anyway, I've passed the technique on to you, you can handle it as you like. It's not hard to do. Even if I hadn't given it to you, you would have been able to find out about it

somewhere else. If you want to use it to commit sins, it won't be on my head."

Xi Ping's fingers relaxed slightly. He felt that this old pretty boy sounded like he was delivering his last words.

"I've spent many years working hard to prop up my Way of the Heart, and I've exhausted my resources. Even if the brand can be removed, it's already too late. I can only say that it's unfortunate I didn't meet you sooner... Sadly I can't live to see this evil practice destroyed."

"Wait," Xi Ping couldn't resist calling him back, "why did you take on the brand in the first place?"

Yu Chang had been about to leave. Hearing this, he paused. With some effort, he recalled for a moment. "It's been centuries. It's a pretty long story."

Xi Ping didn't respond. Suspended in midair, he held the Tai Sui Qin, which he had transformed into a ball of white mist, on his knees. He plucked out a few notes, as if urging him to continue.

"Back then, Yu Family Bend was still called Precious Jade Bend, split up and ruled by a number of noble families. My family background was humble. My parents were law-abiding commoners. Because my mother had the misfortune to be somewhat attractive in her youth, when I was six years old, my family met a fatal disaster."

Hearing this introduction, Xi Ping was a little disappointed. "What, a lordling coveting a common girl?"

"That's a ballad," Yu Chang said with a laugh. "What kind of lordling would look twice at a village woman? It wasn't a lordling, it was a coachman."

Xi Ping froze.

The white-clothed man went on dully: “The coachman suffered some petty annoyance in his master’s house and got drunk. In his drunkenness, he encountered my mom bringing food to my dad. He said some filthy things to her, and my dad happened to overhear. They fought. The coachman was lame. He had never been considered by a matchmaker, and he spent all day being bossed around. After leaving, he couldn’t get over it, so he found out where my house was, and in the middle of the night he brought lamp oil and set a fire. There was a drought that year, and the direction of the wind just happened to be bad. The fire burned half the village, and the coachman himself died.”

At this point, Yu Chang said with a laugh, “Masters with Ways of the Heart never deliberately imperil the common people. The ones with bottomless greed are the half-immortals. Half-immortals also rarely make trouble for mortals, unless there’s some profit in it—just like no one but small children will chase after ants to step on them. The wealthy and the noble are all racing toward the immortal mountains. Where would they find the time to torment beasts of burden? The killers are all the dog-butcherers in the neighboring village. My family, they were the butchered dogs.

“When I was on the point of death, Steward Yu just happened to be passing by with two half-immortal offerings. He ordered those two seniors to put out the fire and rescue the victims. So I lived. I had been burned so badly there wasn’t a bit of intact skin on me. My lungs were destroyed. He saw that even so I wasn’t willing to die, so he ordered them to give me half an elixir pill. But while the pill could save my life, I would still be a cripple covered in scars from then on. I knew there was only one way for me to survive. On the point of death, I desperately held him back. He placed a spiritual image brand on me, gave me a small bag of spiritual stones, and conveyed me onto the path of cultivation.”

Xi Ping was stunned silent for a moment, becoming somewhat more respectful in spite of himself. “How old did you say you were then? When did you open your spiritual eyes?”

“Six years old. I opened my spiritual eyes a little over half a year later,” Yu Chang said. “There were too many people who wanted to join Steward Yu. Mortals who hadn’t opened their spiritual eyes were only given half a year. Due to my youth, I was given a few extra months. That was already extraordinary treatment. Our lives depended on our master’s single thought. If we wanted any resources, we had to fight for them ourselves. No one dared to slack off.”

Xi Ping: “...”

Comparatively speaking, others ought to die—he ought to die, so the third-rate imperial grandson who reportedly hadn’t made a bit of progress in eight years since entering the inner sect ought to be in the lowest level of hell.

“Yu... Fellow Cultivator, yours is a singular talent, something I have rarely seen in my life,” Xi Ping couldn’t resist saying. “If not for the spiritual image brand, you would have been an ascended spirit... no, I figure you would have been a shed skin by now.”

“Without that spiritual image brand, I’d have reincarnated a couple dozen times by now.” Yu Chang laughed easily. “The brands are an evil practice, but to this day I remain grateful to Steward Yu. Had I not been pushed to an impasse, personally, I wouldn’t want to betray my master’s family... Even though their conduct in Yu Family Bend has been...”

Having said this much, he shook his head and stopped talking. His unwillingness to speak evil of people behind their backs made Xi Ping think of his shifu. Then he saw Yu Chang salute him and vanish in a flash of white.

Xi Ping momentarily felt a little lost. The Tai Sui Qin poured out a stream of notes. He reached out a hand to take that yellowed old volume.

But the moment he touched the book, there was a sudden change.

CHAPTER 111 - Unbound Knife (18)

The spiritual energy enveloping Xi Ping was wildly sucked away by that book.

He was a consummate established foundation, and he had just “eaten his fill” of spiritual stones. He had thought his essence was as plentiful as could be; he could swim from the North Sea to the South Sea in a single breath. But in the blink of an eye, better than half of it was sucked away by that lousy book.

After all these years and all the tribulations he had passed through, he still hadn't escaped his predestined fate of being sucked dry as soon as he opened a book!

Xi Ping snatched a sharp noise like tearing silk out of the Tai Sui Qin. A *twang* swept out, but it was knocked back. That note like the point of a sword stabbed right at him.

Above the ancient volume that had drained Tai Sui halfway, an identical Tai Sui Qin emerged out of thin air!

The note sliced off a lock of Xi Ping's hair. He dodged desperately, his pupils contracting slightly: on his guard against Yu Chang, he hadn't allowed the Tai Sui Qin to appear at all. He had kept the qin either hidden in the bones of his fingers or wrapped in a layer of mist, yet the book had been able to copy it perfectly like this. Even the name engraved on it was absolutely clear!

With a soft laugh, that bastard Yu Chang said into his ear, “Nice qin.”

Next, the copied qin hanging over the book sounded automatically, returning the attacks Xi Ping had just used against Yu Chang in perfect detail.

Xi Ping's killing move wasn't something he had created purely on his own. He had been imitating the sword energy Zhi Xiu had placed with him back then... It was a slipshod mockup, and, with some self-awareness, he had picked out a name for this move. It was called "Anger Shifu to Death."

But however slipshod, it was still a sword move inherited from a sword god. It was hard to say whether it would anger shifu to death, but it wouldn't have much problem slicing Xi Ping himself to death!

Apart from some motley unorthodox practices, this was the sum total of the moves Xi Ping knew, and that wicked book had stolen it. And he had to protect the surroundings. He couldn't wreck the Snake King's Immortal Palace, the bit of property it had taken him so much effort to acquire. For a moment, there was too much for him to attend to; he was truly hard pressed.

Even worse, when his spiritual energy became sparser, Xi Ping stopped being lit up!

His shadow and wrinkles, like a fire that couldn't be contained by paper, all appeared in unison as the dazzling radiance dimmed.

His shadow, infected by the grit worm, twisted and changed shape, backlashing against its originator, wrapping around Xi Ping and tying his arms behind his back.

Yu Chang imperceptibly emerged from the shadows and sent some spiritual energy out from his fingertips. All the reincarnation wood trees in sight were destroyed.

Before Xi Ping's consciousness could flee toward the reincarnation wood, he was enveloped by a mustard seed.

“I saw that young lady using reincarnation wood to contact you. In the interest of safety, it’s best to act first,” Yu Chang said directly into his ear. “Tell me, what’s special about reincarnation wood?”

Xi Ping’s mind buzzed. He nearly spoke the truth. Fortunately, the sturdiness of his consciousness far surpassed cultivators of the same level as him. He put a stop to that thought at the last moment and said with a cold laugh, “Ha, I was just thinking, how could a crooked schemer like you have a perfectly straight club for a vital weapon?”

Flustered, he revealed a trace of his original accent.

“Wow, what a genuine Jinping accent. Sounds like it comes from the lap of luxury,” Yu Chang said, laughing. “The grit projection is a minor achievement. The Engraved Heart stamping spike is only for the purpose of fooling others. Those who know of my *Discard the False and Keep the True* are no longer in the land of the living... If you sold that information, you’d probably be able to raise a hundred thousand white spirits.”

Xi Ping was stunned by his boasting. “If Your Excellency had been willing to cultivate the way of shamelessness, you likely would have attained miraculous powers by now.”

Yu Chang didn’t squabble with him to get the last word in. The shadow wrapped around Xi Ping crawled up bit by bit. The talismans Xi Ping had used, the arrays he had drawn, every sliver of spiritual energy that had passed through his meridians was dug up, displayed in perfect detail for Yu Chang to see.

“You keep yourself well hidden,” Yu Chang said feelingly. “In order to conceal your lineage and history, despite clearly having near-ascended spirit cultivation, all the talismans you use are half-immortal grade. The attention to detail is impeccable.”

Xi Ping: "..."

Disgraceful! This red-eyed rabbit hadn't only schemed against him, he was also mocking him!

Following the shadow, Yu Chang's speech seeped word by word and sentence by sentence into Xi Ping's consciousness: "The technique of removing brands is a source of disaster, and duplicating living people is an even greater taboo. Aren't you afraid that if this gets out, you'll come to a bad end? You'd be better off giving it to me. I'll go down into that hell for you."

"In exchange for such great kindness," Xi Ping said angrily, grinding his teeth, struggling fiercely as the talismans he formed in his hand were dispersed before they could take shape, "do you want me to pledge to marry you?"

Yu Chang paused strangely. His tone involuntarily became somewhat more serious. "I know you're wearing a spiritual image mask. If you really are a woman, don't joke like that."

"Are you crazy?" said Xi Ping. "You..."

As he spoke, the shadow climbed up to his face and found the connecting point of the spiritual image mask.

Spiritual energy coated Yu Chang's fingertips. He tore off the spiritual image mask.

The stooped and wizened, vulgar-faced "Tai Sui" swore; the latter half of his sentence changed pitch. His limbs abruptly unfolded. Before this person's form was visible, a scent assailed the nostrils.

Yu Chang froze. Beneath the spiritual image mask, there really was a tall and slender woman!

As if he had taken fright, he backed up several steps, putting distance between himself and “Tai Sui,” cautiously drawing back the hand he had just used to touch “Tai Sui”’s face. His eyes were drawn by that woman’s features.

This woman might have had poor vision or clumsy hands. She had blindly smeared thick makeup all over her face, red here and green there, and despite all this still looked quite human; clearly her looks weren’t bad. Yu Chang struggled to distinguish the outlines of the features hidden by the uneven powder. He thought she looked familiar. The next moment, he gave a start: how come this person seemed to be Zhao Qindan?

Wasn’t that young mistress hiding out in Yu Family Bend?

No, this was wrong, could this really also be a...

But it was already too late. In the moment that Yu Chang’s attention was distracted by that heavily made-up face, the spiritual image mask he held in his hand broke apart—there was a binding talisman behind the mask, of ascended spirit grade!

He had just successfully tricked “Tai Sui” into taking that *Discard the False and Keep the True*, and only a moment later, his fortunes had reversed.

With the binding talisman on him, all of Yu Chang’s essence instantly stagnated. He couldn’t move a sliver of it. Without a supply of spiritual energy, the *Discard the False and Keep the True* book fell right into Tai Sui’s hand. That person reached out to smack it, and the traces vanished off that book. Yu Chang felt his vital weapon “disappear” as it lost contact with him.

At the same time, the shadow wrapped around “Tai Sui” also lost power. “Tai Sui” slipped out of it and made a grab up high. There

was a low, buzzing qin note, which sliced toward Yu Chang's hand from a few steps away.

In a flash, Yu Chang, having no way out, took out a tinderbox and lit himself on fire!

This person didn't seem to be made of flesh and blood, but rather a ball of cotton soaked in lamp oil. The moment the small flame of the tinderbox, which wouldn't necessarily have lit a pipe on first try, touched his body, it leapt up with a roar into a fire taller than a man.

Yu Chang was trapped by the binding talisman and couldn't use spiritual energy, but he could use self-immolation to "cook" the spiritual energy out. This fire that used his flesh and blood for kindling instantly formed a shield. The qin notes bearing sword aura hit the shield head on and actually rebounded.

Yu Chang's hair and skin were quickly charred by the flames. In an instant, he was beyond recognition. On the point of extinction, the color of the flames approached gold. This ruthless person roared, then actually escaped the binding talisman that was of a higher cultivation level than him. A fireball carrying spiritual energy opened a line of retreat for him. The "Tai Sui" facing him seemed to be extremely averse to fire. He scrambled hastily out of the way.

Yu Chang wasn't set on continuing the fight. Once he got free, he peeled the raging flames burning him off his body and got on his sword to flee.

But the qin music wasn't willing to let him go. It came from all sides, chasing him like his own shadow.

This "Tai Sui"'s music changed from the sharp and harsh mode of a sword cultivator from before; at first, the music sounded straightforward and mild, but the final notes had a befuddling

sinister air to them. When the music began, the forms of countless “Tai Sui”s crowded around from all sides, all of them papermen.

In a moment of desperation, Yu Chang tossed out the fireball he had peeled off himself. Ring after ring of papermen surrounding him touched the fire and went up in flames, flickering in midair.

In the starless, moonless night, the ashes of burning paper filling the sky looked like they belonged to a preposterous funeral.

Yu Chang, who had nearly exhausted his essence, couldn’t go on. His vision went black, and he fell from the sky, falling into a river by the border of Tao County.

The river quickly extinguished the embers of his flames and swept him toward its lower reaches. Next he was stopped by a reincarnation wood tree laying across the water. When the coarse tree branches stopped the man who had nearly burned to coal, they tore his flesh open. Pus and blood stained the whole tree. Xi Ping’s consciousness, hidden in the reincarnation wood tree, probed Yu Chang’s spirit, which was on its last gasp.

“Caught you,” Xi Ping thought. “One hundred thousand white spirits.”

First he used a paperman to put several sleeping talismans on Yu Chang, then snatched his consciousness into the Law Breaker Bracelet. Only then did he appear in his true body to clean up the scene. Wincing, he disdainfully lifted Yu Chang’s blackened body through a layer of spiritual energy and took him back to the Snake King’s Immortal Palace. He sent word to Wei Chengxiang: “It’s all right now.”

Wei Chengxiang breathed a sigh of relief. “Reincarnation wood is also safe? That was close. There are remarkable hidden talents among Western Chu’s common people.”

The first time the reincarnation wood trees had shaken gently beside the medicinal herb fields, Wei Chengxiang had heard it and had known that Tai Sui had found her. She had relaxed and nearly given way, but fortunately she had touched the prohibition on her mustard seed.

All the things inside her mustard seed put together weren't as expensive as the mustard seed itself. Even sewing it up with needle and thread would be a waste of the thread. The only use of a prohibition was to protect the reincarnation wood amulet—she was keeping herself from using the amulet to contact Tai Sui. Though she couldn't remember why at first, as a cultivator who had moved through the lower levels of the black market for many years, Wei Chengxiang's basic principle was: if she urgently wanted to do something but was stopped by her past self, she shouldn't hesitate, shouldn't think that she was rationally weighing the advantages and disadvantages; even if there was a colossal enticement before her, she still had to turn and go back the way she had come.

She had kept to that until she heard the reincarnation wood trees giving her a second signal. Tai Sui was telling her to play along.

“You two hurry up and find a safe place to meditate. Don't do anything for now. This brat has too many tricks, I'm afraid he's left some hidden threat on you,” Xi Ping instructed. “Once I've dealt with this guy, I'll take you to a safe place to eliminate the bad luck.”

As he spoke, holding his nose, he returned to the Snake King's Immortal Palace with Yu Chang, who had been burned until he stank of reeking flesh.

The “Tai Sui” in the Snake King's Immortal Palace was also a paperman controlled by him. But when Xi Ping had made the paperman inside the Law Breaker, he had first encased it in Zhao

Qindan's consciousness, changing the paperman into her form. Then he had enveloped it in a Luwu mask.

The ascended spirit grade talisman behind the Luwu mask he had gotten at the last moment from Lin Chi. Its level was strong enough to control a consummate established foundation; the talisman only needed to be activated.

In order to keep Yu Chang distracted a little longer, Xi Ping had had a sudden thought and applied thick makeup to the young mistress's face—when a person saw a face that was both strange and familiar, they could never resist trying to recognize it. He hadn't thought that while the idea was perfect, the result would be poor. He had turned a beauty into a monster.

The last time Xi Ping had applied makeup was when he had been putting it on his own face. The outcome had been exceptional, making a sensation that drew the notice of half the Lingyang River. He had been quite regretful then, thinking that his features were too strong to be suited to makeup.

Now, he had verified a few things: first, there was nothing wrong with his looks—both light makeup and heavy makeup would always be appropriate for a beautiful man. He was only bad at applying it. In the future when he had a wife, he absolutely couldn't paint her brows for her, or else at the first stroke of the brush, the lady would become a widow.

Second, however great his self-confidence, he had to admit that his sort of "near-ascended spirit," having relied on happy coincidence to reach that stage, was as different from a consummate established foundation who had cultivated for centuries as heaven was different from earth.

Yu Chang's grit projections, which could listen in on a person through their shadow, were scary enough. If he hadn't taken enough

precautions in advance, that Yu would have had him under control in a couple of sentences. No wonder he used his own vital weapon so rarely. And as soon as that vital weapon came into his hand, it could imitate his opponent's power. Working in concert with the grit projection, it could even clearly see what talismans and arrays the opponent had used recently.

And never mind that—after Yu Chang was restrained by Lin Chi's talisman, Xi Ping had resisted showing himself, because he had suspected this person would have some backup plan at the bottom of his bag for when he reached an impasse. It was indeed as he had expected, only Xi Ping hadn't thought that this "backup plan" would be so resolute.

This person was vicious and merciless, crafty and cunning. He had so many powers it was impossible to keep up. And Young Master Xi, supposedly of the same level as him, only had one power: cheating.

Fucking ridiculous.

Though Xi Ping's face was as thick as a city wall, he still couldn't help feeling inferior. He would have loved to find a place to go into seclusion and get to work right now.

Third, Xi Ping had found that if he only had the "score," he could use his qin to play others' powers.

This was a sense that Bai Ling had given him—Bai Ling had sent him a complete paperman, and when Bai Ling himself had entered the Law Breaker Bracelet, Xi Ping had found that the paperman's melody was embedded in Bai Ling's music.

Playing the paperman melody to make a copy only worked if he was inside the Law Breaker Bracelet. If he played outside, there was no response. But when he tried to play the segment that came before

the paperman outside the Law Breaker, starting from a certain note, his spiritual energy began to be absorbed by the qin. Xi Ping immediately realized that the segment that came before the paperman might be the “score” for creating papermen.

He had tried it out while chasing Yu Chang. It worked pretty well.

But Xi Ping guessed that when the original owner used the power, he would achieve new knowledge each time he practiced it, and it would become greater and more flexible. He could only copy the general idea—though that was enough.

In other words, in the future, he could use the Law Breaker Bracelet to collect “scores,” so that next time he fought he wouldn’t only have the “Anger Shifu to Death” sword move in addition to some unorthodox low level talismans.

As he planned, Xi Ping dragged Yu Chang’s body into the secret room of the Snake King’s Immortal Palace, surrounded him in layer upon layer of prohibitions, then quietly disappeared and entered the Law Breaker Bracelet.

He wasn’t expecting to get a scare as soon as he came in—there was a fire inside the Law Breaker Bracelet!

Xi Ping’s first reaction was to check that the spiritual stones inside the bracelet were safe. Then he noticed that the fire was a part of the “set.”

In the interests of deliberate mystification, when he had tossed Yu Chang’s consciousness into the Law Breaker Bracelet, he had told the Law Breaker to change the Snake King’s Immortal Palace set to “the surroundings most familiar to the guest.”

Now, Yu Chang’s consciousness had already woken up after being thrown into the Law Breaker Bracelet. When Xi Ping heard the music

he brought in, his first thought was “noisy.”

Bai Ling’s music was like orthodox court music that went off key at the end, and Zhao Qindan’s music was in classic Wan style—but Yu Chang’s music was so disorderly that it made your head hurt. Many places seemed to have interference, like a person angrily smashing the strings, intense and irregular.

Right now, the scenery inside the Law Breaker Bracelet was a stretch of low-flying flatland among mountains. People had congregated into a big village there, built roads. There were forty or fifty families.

A man like a lunatic was standing at the extremity of the flames, flailing his arms and legs as he held up a bucket of lamp oil, screaming and cursing. The mountain wind passed through the valley and caught the lamp oil. The fire surged toward the village like the tide, greedily swallowing buildings and vegetation.

The people in the village lost their heads from fright, running out with their clothes in disarray. The nimble people in the prime of life were the first to charge out of the thick smoke. They got their family members settled, then ran back into the flames to rescue others, following the cries of their neighbors.

Xi Ping looked in the direction Yu Chang was looking and saw that he was staring expressionlessly at a family outside the circle of flames.

A husband and wife, and a child. The boy looked about five or six years old, with a big head and a skinny neck, but from the outlines of his features you could already see how he would look when he grew up. The others in the village were crying and screaming. Only this boy had his head turned to stare out of the image, looking right back at Yu Chang.

Xi Ping looked on, not showing himself, thinking that not a single word of truth came out of this brat's mouth. The mother and son were clearly among the first to have escaped the sea of flames, completely unharmed. So much for "burned so badly there wasn't a bit of intact skin on me."

Yu really knew how to make himself seem tragic.

Little Yu Chang's dad finished giving instructions to his wife and son and pointed into the distance, probably telling them to get further away. Then he wrapped himself in wet cloth, picked up a water bucket, and charged toward the flames.

The woman, shielding the child, seemed to reach out to grab someone, but there was no one there for her to grab.

The people putting out the fire went forward carrying all kinds of water containers, but the mountain wind became malicious. It abruptly brought the fire forward. Many people, as if made of paper, were lapped up by tongues of flame without coming close.

The arsonist had already been burned to ashes. All that remained were wave upon wave of ants, crying to heaven and fighting against earth, futilely attempting to protect their families.

Yu Chang's eyes were scarlet from the reflection of the flames, but he only watched quietly. This scene made Xi Ping remember the fire in Jinping's southern outskirts. As he rejoiced that A-Xiang wasn't here, he got ready to change this nightmare imagery but saw the picture change all of a sudden.

Xi Ping froze.

The fire had gone out. The quiet little mountain village had become an expanse of scorched earth. The survivors—including Yu Chang

and his mother—were all roaming the ruins with numb expressions attempting to find their loved ones, like wandering ghosts.

Little Yu Chang's tall and sturdy dad was gone. His mom's face was covered in ashes. She was holding him tightly by the hand.

Not far away, an old woman was desperately digging up a patch of scorched earth with both hands. From the splinters of a collapsed cottage, she dug up a pair of small feet, probably a grandchild of hers who had been unable to get out. She stared blankly for a long moment, then let out a heartrending wail. The cry startled Yu Chang's mother into a shiver. Her dim eyes focused. She quickly instructed her child, then ran in the direction of the cry to help the old woman dig.

But when the old woman saw her, her frightening cries came to an abrupt halt. Xi Ping got a clear look at the expression on that face and realized something.

The next moment, the old woman, like an old beast on the point of death, suddenly found the strength to knock Yu Chang's mother aside as she came to help her. Pointing to her, she began to yell insults.

The mournful scolding echoed among the ruins. Gradually, the "ghosts" wandering around all stopped in their tracks, their gazes directed at the lone and helpless woman.

The look in their eyes was like the look of living ghosts. It made you tremble from fear.

"Beguiling whore..."

Whispers rose among the villagers. At the same time, Xi Ping heard the grown-up Yu Chang outside the image quietly repeat: "Beguiling whore."

“The one who set the fire was that slut’s lover, I heard it all.”

“That whore was having an affair, her man found out and beat the adulterer, and that’s what brought this disaster on us!”

“What does your cuckolding scam have to do with the rest of us? You’ve destroyed the whole village!”

“How can she have the face to be alive... how can she have the face to be alive? My grandson was only four... These are his feet, look, open your eyes and look, these are his feet!”

There was a peculiar smile on the face of the Yu Chang outside the image. He moved his lips soundlessly, repeating what these people said, line by line.

“Get her! Get her!”

The woman was besieged on all sides, becoming the target for the survivors’ torrent of rage.

Her onetime fellows snatched away her child, spat on her, tore at her hair. They discussed whether to bring her up in front of a magistrate, but presumed that the magistrate wouldn’t care about a trifle like this, and no one wanted to get beaten into respecting the law, so public sentiment turned toward drowning her. But there weren’t many deep bodies of water in Yu Family Bend, and if they sank her, they were worried it might pollute the water. So, pooling their wisdom, using some unknown person’s idea, they came up with the notion of making her “pay with blood for blood.”

This was very high-sounding, so everyone picked up on it. The woman was placed on a bonfire.

The moment that the oil-splashed bonfire consumed the woman, a small form fought free of the villagers' hands and ran straight into the fire. The woman screamed and wailed, telling him to go, but within the fire, she could no longer shed tears. The boy climbed with hands and feet, his wet little cotton jacket spurting out black smoke. He jumped up and tore the ropes and shackles off the woman. The ropes were covered in lamp oil, and the shackles were so hot that he screamed. He missed his step and fell off the bonfire.

The fire had already swallowed his mother's figure.

The boy, dressed in flames, turned his head to glare at her killers. Somehow, he found the strength to rush at the crowd.

The people fled in a panic, hitting him with bamboo poles. The six-year-old Yu Chang let out a frightening scream. The centuries-old Yu Chang began to laugh quietly.

Inside the Law Breaker Bracelet, the sound of rusted machinery grinding against itself suddenly sounded, breaking up Yu Chang's own violent and intense music.

Xi Ping, who had been staring blankly, immediately realized: Oh no, he's about to lose his mind!

He unconsciously moved a few steps, almost appearing in front of Yu Chang. Then he quickly came back to himself: What does it have to do with me? Didn't I want to get rid of him? Isn't it convenient if he loses his mind?

But just then, he saw Yu Chang press down on the center of his brow and suppress all his thoughts within two breaths.

Inside the Law Breaker, the chaotic music representing Yu Chang sounded once again. Only the master of the Tai Sui Qin could hear

how violently the music struggled, going on indomitably, trying to fight through the rusty grinding to survive.

The expression on Yu Chang's face was identical to the one he had worn when he had charged into the bonfire at six years old.

The rusty grinding became sharper and sharper, as if it was about to snap at any moment. The sound made Xi Ping's scalp go numb.

But two phrases of music constantly repeated, tightly biting down on the rusty grinding. Though the music was now strong, now weak, though several times it nearly broke off, it still managed to pick up right away every time.

This was a battle with only one witness, but it was still profoundly stirring.

Xi Ping raised his head and realized that this was likely Yu Chang's Way of the Heart.

He gently plucked the qin strings, repeating those two phrases of music. He felt a powerful thought surge through the qin: *I will not die, I refuse. So what if fierce winds and raging fires attack me, so what if knives and hatchets cut me? If I have but one breath remaining to me, I will fight you all until the end of time—*

No wonder he had held out so many under the push and pull of the brand and had even gone as far as a near-ascended spirit...

Had even gone as far as the most hopeless position he could attain in his life.

CHAPTER 112 - Unbound Knife (19)

Witnessing a struggle like this, no one could remain unmoved, even if it was a carrion-eating hyena, even if you knew perfectly well that it was bad news.

Ardently meeting death is admittedly a solemn and heroic affair, but teeth-gritting, blood-sucking will to live is also profoundly moving.

With a single thought, Xi Ping deferred to his instincts. He plucked the qin strings. The Tai Sui Qin immediately resonated throughout the inside of the Law Breaker.

He had been very idle as a teenager, always going to provide accompaniment for dancers and singers. Now he skillfully harmonized with the two phrases of Yu Chang's consciousness that were stabilizing his Way of the Heart; the place where he joined was as smooth as a river flowing into the sea.

Yu Chang couldn't hear his own melody. He only thought that this practically flimsy music poured into his ears like cool spring water.

His chaotic consciousness cleared. Something abruptly held up his nearly collapsed and exhausted energy.

Yu Chang was a person who absolutely couldn't pass up any opportunity. Following the music, he began to climb fiercely toward the human world. This was something he had done countless times over the past centuries.

In a little while, the ominous rusty grinding became weaker and weaker, more and more distant. Finally, it was firmly suppressed by the Tai Sui Qin.

Xi Ping, as if he had been prepared in advance, put the qin away and waited for Yu Chang to catch his breath. Meanwhile, he changed the furnishings inside the Law Breaker Bracelet to the little post station on Longevity Peak in Yu Family Bend—a place they were both familiar with.

Finally, in about the time it took to drink a cup of tea, Yu Chang slowly opened his eyes.

Of the two of them, one was in the open, and the other was concealed. For a time, neither took the initiative to speak. The expression on Yu Chang's face was a little complicated. Xi Ping's emotions were also a little complicated. He suspected he had been bewitched by this old fox's lies. He inspected his spirit inside and out.

After a long time, Yu Chang cleared his throat and hoarsely said, "Forget it. I won't give up my consciousness to let you copy it, and I won't come after you again. I'll think of another way to deal with this spiritual image brand... Today's events, I won't mention them to anyone else."

Xi Ping: "..."

So that's how he was playing it—to hear him talk, it would seem that he'd been acting under compulsion, not that he had been planning to kill the witness and take the technique of removing brands for himself alone.

"Oh, wow, how scary, I wonder who could possibly have blown all this hot air," Xi Ping said mockingly. "Listen, Yu-xiong, which one of us has fallen into the other's hands right now? There are only two people in this story, and you still managed to count wrong. Maybe you're getting old?"

Yu Chang was a habitual liar. Whenever he opened his mouth, this was what came out. He only came around when he was rendered speechless by this rudeness. He thought, true, they'd both revealed their true intentions; they knew each other now. So he also quickly peeled off his human skin. As he examined and assessed the surroundings, he shot back sarcastically, "Is the reason you stayed hidden before because you were scared of getting hunted as soon as you went out?"

When these two had been plotting against each other, both had been putting on a skilled act. Now, they had temporarily called a ceasefire, so without prearrangement, each revealed his "true heroic quality": they were both assholes.

"There's a whole gang of shed skins lining up. You can go wait at the back." Xi Ping, idly plucking out a not especially elegant Chu tune, said, "Those two young ladies in Yu Family Bend. Did you do anything else to them?"

"The grit projections need to be used long term to have an effect. A couple of sentences can only make a person make a 'momentary false step.' If a half-immortal meditates and cycles their energy for a while, there won't be any aftereffects. I never use sinister methods against women..." At this point, Yu Chang rolled his eyes. He knew by now whether "Tai Sui" was male or female—the voice that sounded in this hidden realm must be this Tai Sui's original voice—which made sense; not just anyone could make up a beauty so she looked as if she'd been beaten black and blue. "I'm not as vulgar as Your Excellency."

"Haha, that's one big fart, you bastard," said Xi Ping.

"Well, it won't knock down your face," said Yu Chang.

Xi Ping couldn't leave well enough alone: "You being so merciful toward women, is that because of your mom?"

Yu Chang abruptly raised his eyes and said between his teeth:
“You’re asking for it.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Xi Ping responded. “Come and hit me, then.”

The veins on Yu Chang’s forehead pulsed. This crazy Tai Sui was actually a near-ascended spirit. No matter what, he must be some centuries old, no? Why did he act like an obnoxious little brat?

He had just struggled back from the edge of losing his mind. He really didn’t want to have another go. Therefore he took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and calmed down for a moment.

Wait. A little brat...

Yu Chang rapidly considered the whole thing and found that his greatest mistake had been to underestimate that little half-immortal in Yu Family Bend. With his cultivation level, he could see at a glance that that young girl was hardly older than twenty, a little devil who wouldn’t make up a handful, and he had placed a grit worm in her shadow. Everything she said and did, everything she thought had been under his surveillance. It was hard to avoid lowering your guard.

Now that he thought about it, that little half-immortal had deliberately wandered around Yu Family Bend, leading his grit worm to deal with her, just for the sake of revealing his methods to Tai Sui. In other words, Tai Sui could control something that, while it wasn’t on her, was present everywhere she had passed, and he could use that thing to convey simple messages to her... was it the reincarnation wood?

Yu Chang suddenly remembered a legend: in ancient times, there had been great numbers of masters. When the mighty shed skins became sages, their Ways of the Heart joined with heaven and

earth, while the masters whose Ways of the Heart could not abide within the three thousand paths of the Great Way had become “demonic gods.” When they became shed skins, their Ways of the Heart didn’t rise to heaven. They sank into the earth and created a type of “accompanying plant.”

That reincarnation wood amulet... Was it possible that it wasn’t a communication device, but an accompanying plant?

Maybe this “Tai Sui” had by some coincidence attained an ancient demonic god’s inheritance, and his cultivation hadn’t actually reached as high a level as it appeared.

Yes. When they had fought, Tai Sui had seemed to have a sword in his qin, fairly frightening, but its actual quality... The sword aura was sharp enough, but it didn’t seem to have any alterations. All that changed was the pitch of the music, obscuring the truth, that he only had one trick up his sleeve.

For Yu Chang, the really fatal thing had been the talisman on that spiritual image mask. On the one hand, it had been very precisely planned. On the other hand, that talisman had been of ascended spirit grade, and with very stable spiritual threads, certainly not the product of an “early ascended spirit” who had just crossed the ascended spirit boundary. It was even more certain that it couldn’t have been the product of Tai Sui, who hadn’t yet reached an ascended spirit. He must have gotten it from someone else ahead of time.

Maybe this “Tai Sui” really was young, and he was only putting on a false show of strength in front of him.

Yu Chang’s expression became slightly more serious. Bluffing, he said, “Our cultivation levels are similar. How could you fail to see whether I’ve done any tampering?”

Xi Ping thought to himself, Fine, I see how it is, as long as he's alive, his scheming mind is alive, too.

So then and there he openly said with a smile, "That's hard to say."

Yu Chang thought: He's quite cautious.

Then this "Tai Sui" continued: "Oh, right, I forgot to tell you. Your consciousness, I've already gotten a clear look and felt it up. You're already here, there's no need to be so polite with me. Didn't you want a paperman to use to remove your spiritual image brand?"

Out of nowhere, a chill went up Yu Chang's spine. Then he heard peculiar, raucous music. Not everyone was skilled in distinguishing melodies. Yu Chang only thought it was unpleasant. Before he could tell anything else about it, he saw "himself" land in front of him!

Since obtaining the "Dragon and Phoenix Symbolizing Good Fortune," Xi Ping had roughly known how the spiritual image brand sounded. So he had removed the grating portion of the music Yu Chang had brought in with him, which was the spiritual image brand, and had successfully copied a "clean" Yu Chang.

The copied "Yu Chang" landed in disbelief, found that the spiritual image brand that had constrained him for hundreds of years had disappeared out of nowhere, then met the similarly shocked eyes of the original.

He understood himself best. The next moment, the copied "Yu Chang," without another word, turned and tried to run out of the Law Breaker. At the same time, he struck first, his talisman hitting the original. The original Yu Chang dodged, relying wholly on instinct, and wanted to go chasing after the copy then and there, but he heard Tai Sui, watching the fun, say easily, "There's only one spiritual image brand, not enough to go around. Well, why don't the

two of you talk it over between yourselves, see who I should give it to.”

The two Yu Changs said simultaneously: “You’re wicked!”

“Pfft, who are you talking about?” said Xi Ping, making matters worse. “How can the crow call the pig black?”

When the two Yu Changs inside the Law Breaker began their contest, it was a sight worth seeing. They traded talismans, traps, and powers back and forth, each predicting the other’s movements in perfect synchrony. After watching for a while, Xi Ping even stopped playing tunes to liven things up. He reached a hand out of the Law Breaker, grabbed handfuls of peanuts and melon seeds, and started munching. He even complained, “Eh, too salty.”

Yu Chang: “...”

Though they were both consciousnesses, the copied Yu Chang had escaped the brand, while the original had been exhausted by nearly losing his mind. The original Yu Chang finally couldn’t hold out any longer. Adapting to the circumstances, he yelled, “Get out the blood covenant, I’ll sign!”

A “blood covenant” was a kind of business contract common on the black market. The evil cultivators in the black market didn’t trust each other at all. When they were involved in a major deal or hired someone to do something, the two contracting parties would sign a blood covenant. Anyone who breached the contract would suffer backlash—generally speaking, the one with the higher cultivation had the advantage; after all, the same backlash falling on an established foundation and a half-immortal would have different outcomes—but fortunately the two of them had about the same cultivation level.

Xi Ping spat a melon seed out of the Law Breaker. Lousy Chu, why did they even *have* spicy melon seeds!

He wiped his mouth. “Why couldn’t you have been this agreeable to start out with? If you place a bet, you have to take the loss, brother. You fell a move short, so I’ll be holding on to your wicked little book.”

That old *Discard the False and Keep the True* volume was Yu Chang’s vital weapon. Hearing this, veins pulsed at the edges of his forehead. He dodged his other self’s killing blow. “All right.”

“You prepare the reverse stamping spike yourself, and I’ll help you remove the brand,” Xi Ping went on. “You go out into the wide world and leave your identity in Yu Family Bend to me. Whoever reveals this, his Way of the Heart will break to pieces.”

He didn’t have a Way of the Heart, anyway.

Yu Chang roared, “My identity is being a lackey and a prisoner, anyone’s welcome to it! If I had two, I’d do a buy-one-get-one-free deal!”

As he finished speaking, a reincarnation wood amulet flew toward him, with his blood on it. It blocked the copy’s attack for him.

Xi Ping said, “You can use that amulet to contact me. Finally, I did just save your life. The favor of a drop of water must be repaid with a fountain. For the favor of a life saved, you must face all dangers, do you acknowledge it? I want you to...”

Xi Ping had been about to blurt out “perform my errands for a hundred years,” but as the words came to his lips, he stopped himself.

Since ancient times, people had kept dogs, but they hadn't kept wolves. This Yu Chang was too rotten. Even with a spiritual image brand, he dared to betray his master. Was there anything he wouldn't do?

Anyway, it was a waste of breath talking when your views were irreconcilable. He hated this person. There was no need for them to offend each other's eyes in the long term.

"Within ten years, when I have a request, you'll do three things for me," Xi Ping said instead. "They won't kill you, won't harm your cultivation, won't touch your Way of the Heart.."

They were both eminent evil cultivators. How could Yu Chang fail to understand what Tai Sui was thinking? Hearing these requests, he wasn't at all surprised. He grabbed the amulet and without even thinking about it bit through his middle finger, forcing out heart's blood to smear heavily on the blood covenant.

His hand was too quick. The blood covenant had already gone into effect when "Tai Sui" finished his sentence: "...and won't disgrace your ancestors."

Yu Chang abruptly froze and couldn't dodge a hit from the copy. Fortunately, at that moment, Xi Ping sent the copy out of the Law Breaker just in time, and his blow disappeared along with him. Inside the Law Breaker, there remained only one Yu Chang... and the shells of peanuts and melon seeds littering the ground.

Xi Ping put away the blood covenant. As a creditor delighted with his heightened status, he now looked at Yu Chang as though he were a bunch of chives that could be harvested at any time. He became positively cordial. "Good. In that case, we'll see each other at noon. I'll rely on you to handle Yu Family Bend, brother."

Yu Chang was silent for a moment, calming his ragged breathing. “Permit me to ask, Tai Sui, what do you want?”

In the shadows, Xi Ping froze, abruptly shutting his mouth.

He looked at the realistic furnishings inside the Law Breaker. Because it was currently overcast in Yu Family Bend, the “Longevity Peak” inside the Law Breaker was also overcast.

The heavens were so low they seemed to press down on your head, pressing each person to a fixed height, pressing them into a fixed track.

What he wanted to know was how lofty those noble people were that they had to make all things live according to the path they had set down.

He wanted to know whose voice, whose will was represented by the Bell of Tribulation, the Silver Moon, and the other souls of the spiritual mountains he had yet to meet.

He wanted to know to whom those heavens belonged, what lay beyond the void, why the sages had never looked back after stepping out into that void—

This was also what Chen Baishao, who had been buried in the Blissful Village, what the teenage A-Xiang, counting corpses in the southern outskirts... what many people whose characters were either noble or revolting all wanted to ask.

He also wanted to know why it was so hard to obtain the right to question heaven and earth.

At last, Wild Fox Country’s Tai Sui snorted. “None of your business. Beat it.”

Having said this, he kicked Yu Chang out of the Law Breaker and left him to take care of his own medium-well cooked body.

Then Xi Ping considered and, with a wave of his sleeve, cleaned up the trash and changed the furnishings inside the Law Breaker Bracelet to Cui Ji's little compound in Jinping.

It was said that that place was the cherished dream of all the girls in Jinping. Walking through the door, you could smell at once a refreshing fragrance. There were unique dioramas for every season. Inside was a room provided for honored guests to sit and rest. The tea and snacks were always fresh and warm. He didn't know whether Young Mistress Zhao had been there, but A-Xiang certainly hadn't. A-Xiang had lived for some years in Jinping's southern outskirts without even knowing what Cui Ji was.

Determining that the two of them had already reached a safe place, Xi Ping pulled them into the Law Breaker—actually, he was inclined to believe that Yu Chang had told the truth about not having tampered with them, but in the interests of safety, he still wanted to check.

The music A-Xiang brought in with her was about what he had expected, the tempo slightly fast, not too proper at first listen, but with a sense of steadiness that penetrated the roots of your ears. Zhao Qindan was somewhat confused, as before, but compared to the last time she had come, which had been only two days ago, her melody already had a faint change.

Xi Ping listened closely without hearing any jarring noise that shouldn't have been there. Only then did he appear inside the Law Breaker.

Using the Marquis and the Latent Cultivation Temple's Elder Su as his models, he combined the appearances of these two elderly men, and made a few changes, removing both of their excessively

distinguishing traits. In a blink, he became a middle-aged man with a gentle expression, wrapped in a thin layer of mist.

Wei Chengxiang's eyes lit up. "Senior!"

After all these years, she was finally seeing his face. He was a little more sedate than she had imagined. Though it was her first time seeing him, she felt as though she had known him for a long time.

Xi Ping smiled "benevolently" at her and didn't speak, but his slightly peach-blossom-shaped eyes said everything for him.

Zhao Qindan examined the surroundings in astonishment. "Is this a hidden realm...? Is it constructed on the basis of that Cui Ji in the capital?"

Xi Ping still didn't speak. He pointed to the honored guest hall hidden beneath a pergola among the little compound's winding paths. Spiritual stones, elixirs, and even tea and snacks were already laid out there, ready for the two of them to look after their internal injuries. Then he slightly cupped his fist toward Wei Chengxiang: *You've worked hard.*

Then he turned and left.

"Wait." Zhao Qindan hesitated. This person's cultivation was far higher than hers... even higher than that decision-making eldest shixiong in her clan, even a generation higher than her by Xuanyin Mountain's reckoning. Involuntarily, she restrained her young mistress's haughtiness and respectfully said, "Thank you for your aid, senior. What instructions do you have for me?"

But that transcendent middle-aged man only waved a hand at her. When he spoke, countless echoes were layered on top of each other inside the little compound.

“It is fated,” he tossed out obscurely, and left the two of them with only a lean rear view, instantly reaching the edge of the hidden realm and disappearing.

Though half of that unbound long hair was grey, the back still remained erect with perfect deportment. Virtue as profound as deep water, upright as a high mountain, taciturn yet reliable.

It was what she imagined a father should look like.

The rims of Zhao Qindan’s eyes turned red—but in fact she had already found that over the years, her father’s back had unnoticeably bent.

The “taciturn yet reliable old father” left the Law Breaker Bracelet and breathed a sigh of relief. He’d nearly died from stifling himself.

In fact, he had been desperate to speak just now, and also, because he had just pried up Yu Family Bend’s greatest local thug, he was very puffed up and impatient to show off to the young ladies.

But there was nothing to be done. He had been too reckless in his acquaintance with Wei Chengxiang, always speaking to her in his original accent. Zhao Qindan was a classmate who had gone to the Latent Cultivation Temple with him. They hadn’t had any chance to talk, and people’s memories for voices weren’t nearly as clear as their memories for faces... but what if?

What if because of his handsomeness, he had left an unusually profound impression on Young Mistress Zhao?

As Xi Ping saw it, this was only too likely. So just now, he had only said three words, and deliberately made the Law Breaker Bracelet add an echo for him. You couldn’t say he hadn’t been prudent.

Alas, wasn't this always the fate of natural beauties? He just had to be careful.

After a moment of admiring himself and lamenting his lot, he poured out the excess of his desire for self-expression to Zhi Xiu, babbling complacently toward the shard of Zhaoting in his spirit for the better part of half a shichen.

It was the middle of the night. Owing to General Zhi's good temper, he didn't order the shard of Zhaoting to smash him flat... though of course he also ignored him.

As day was breaking, Yu Chang saved the master of Flying Jade Peak's ears. Yu Chang's somewhat weary voice came through the reincarnation wood: "This is Yu Family Bend's main residence."

CHAPTER 113 - Unbound Knife (20)

The Yu family's main residence took up a whole valley—not the kind of valley that adjoined sheer precipices; the slopes were low and gentle. They could be descended by means of stone steps and winding roads. At the bottom of the valley was a small mountain river.

This terrain was in fact somewhat similar to the Latent Cultivation Temple, only the Latent Cultivation Temple was a “place outside the world” meant for quiet cultivation. There were few traces of human workmanship. There weren't even any streetlamps or chiming clocks. Apart from the grand instructor Luo Qingshi, there was practically no entertainment.

The Yu family's main residence was too magnificent.

Here there was no low quality timber like reincarnation wood, which could latch on anywhere and grow wildly. Xi Ping could only look out through the reincarnation wood amulet Yu Chang carried. He saw that the valley actually had a road carved out for steam carriages to travel on... Tsk, how many years had steam carriages even been around?

In the air hung a cable chain dozens of li long. Its machinery could carry small compartments from one end of the long and narrow valley to the other, with a stop every three li, where you could get off to change and rest. Servants would come aboard soundless as shadows to change the incense and refresh the food and drinks. The sound of the pipa floated out along the iron cables, and the fragrance of wine and cosmetics scattered everywhere, as if Jinping's Lingyang River had been hung up in the sky. The compartments were all carved full of wasteful third-class inscriptions. Even if there was an accident and a compartment fell from the sky, the people inside wouldn't be hurt.

The Latent Cultivation Temple had only small single-story houses in the depths of the forest, while in the Yu family's main residence, there was a full set of pavilions, terraces, and towers. In a few places halfway up the slopes, the courtyard houses could even measure up to an imperial palace for ostentation. Day had yet to break, but the valley was ablaze with light. The singing and dancing that had lasted through the night had yet to end. With a cultivator's hearing, one could hear music and teasing laughter on the wind.

Over several centuries of propagation, the upstart clan of Yu Family Bend had become numerous, but only the families of past clan leaders were qualified to reside in the main residence. Xi Ping glanced around. In this generation, nearly all those who had any power in the family were half-immortals—the kind that had gotten there relying on money and couldn't draw a single talisman. Those with any skills presumably wouldn't have stayed in the mortal world. They would all have been sent to the Sanyue Mountains or the Qilin Guard.

The only way these half-immortals differed from mortals was that they were impervious to poison and sickness, with long-lasting youth, able to enjoy the use of open-eyed grade immortal tools and elixirs. Therefore it was said that per capita they had married more wives than you could count on one hand, and they had so many children they didn't even recognize all of them.

As soon as Xi Ping's consciousness probed out of the reincarnation wood Yu Chang carried, he felt dense spiritual energy and asked Yu Chang, "Is there an array protecting the valley?"

"Naturally. There are protective arrays of many classes here. Adding up the big and the little ones, there are over a hundred in all. It's steadfast as a fortress," Yu Chang said. "If your Wan had had defenses like this back then, your cities wouldn't have so easily been trampled underfoot by Southern He. Alas, I went there myself

at the time. Devastation as far as the eye could see. I felt that it was such a pity.”

True. For a moment, Xi Ping lagged behind, thinking, Why didn't Jinping have this kind of array formation?

Then he heard Yu Chang add, “It's just a little expensive. It burns over a thousand white spirits per year. Southern Wan is not so well off.”

Xi Ping: “...”

Too rich!

Of the current four nations, Northern Li was barren, its land plentiful and its people scarce; Western Chu was mountainous, making transportation difficult; Southern Shu only had a sliver of territory on the mainland, the rest of it made up of little islands like donkey droppings; no one could match Great Wan for its wide-reaching waterways and extensive plains. Moon Plated Gold, all kinds of new technology, eighty percent of it had been brought forward by Great Wan. Because the people of Wan found beauty in what was graceful and unobtrusive, in the other nations, no matter what their previous style and culture, the landowning classes all took Wan style as the height of refinement. To take Western Chu as an example, while the people of Chu favored salty food, the restaurants here that charged a liang or two of silver or above per person nearly all made modified Wan cuisine.

When the people of Wan were abroad, even if they didn't say it outright, all upholding the legendary “Wan manners,” they secretly regarded everything around them with disdain.

Xi Ping had absolutely never thought that one day, Great Wan, the wealthiest of nations, would be pitied as “not so well off” by a rich

provincial from some backwater—and what he was saying was the truth!

That number alone was too much even for Jinping to raise, never mind the other provinces. His san-ge's Kaiming and Luwu, all of them throughout the whole country... even throughout the four nations, added together and including financial support for the injured and families of the dead, didn't spend that much money in a year!

An array formation maintained at such an exorbitant price couldn't be for the sake of ostentation. No wealthy people were so wasteful.

It could only be for the sake of protecting even greater wealth.

Each year, Western Chu's gold and silver flowed outward. The price of silver was going higher and higher, and so were the prices of commodities. The least stir in the market could make people's hearts tremble with fear. The most extravagant creepers grew in the most barren of places.

"There's nothing to be done about it," Yu Chang said. "Yu Family Bend currently has no gentle professions. If it isn't the Moon Plated Gold factories, then it's the medicinal herb fields. They have to work, whether they want to or not. When I was young, a family could still survive by farming, but over the last century that's become impossible. The mountain roads are too hard to travel, and you can't spend the spiritual stones to use downgraded immortal tools to transport Moon Plated Gold. You have to use waterpower. The hydrology of the whole county has changed. When the waste water from the factories spills, you can't plant anything."

"Even Tao County is better off," said Xi Ping.

"It's six of one, half a dozen of the other," Yu Chang answered topically.

Everywhere Yu Chang passed, draped in his loose gown, the servants, offerings, and even members of the principal Yu family stepped back and saluted.

Like some unrestrained literary celebrity, with his wide sleeves filled by the fluttering wind, he walked ahead without looking sideways.

“Wow, that’s some pose,” Xi Ping thought sourly.

So he said provocatively, “Bringing me here amounts to open betrayal. Isn’t the brand biting you?”

“Backlash? Naturally.” In a place without any people, Yu Chang quickly passed a hand over his arm, pulling back a bit of the camouflage spell on it. On his arm, where the burns had yet to fully heal, purple veins were popping up one after another, throbbing so that his whole arm shook along with them; it was a ghastly sight.

Yu Chang, accustomed to this, let down his sleeve. “The backlash from the spiritual image brand has degrees, or else you wouldn’t be able to function on a day-to-day basis—for example, if the master is in danger, and you have to push him into a well and half-drown him to save his life, how does that figure? Normally, for a centuries-old offering like me, as long as I’m not committing murder and arson in the master’s house, the backlash from the brand won’t be fatal.”

Not fatal, but his meridians would snap, his consciousness would feel as though it were burning. A life worse than death.

But this pain that others couldn’t bear precisely suited his Way of the Heart. It was a thing he could use to temper himself. For centuries, as this spiritual image brand had torn at him, it had also pushed him to the pinnacle of the established foundation stage.

There was actually such a peculiar Way of the Heart, such a special means of cultivation. But admiration was one thing—really, this joker Yu Chang was cultivating the “way of betrayal.” He could even find loopholes in a spiritual image brand over hundreds of years, so what about a mere blood covenant?

Xi Ping thought apprehensively: He promised to do three things for me within ten years. If I’m dead, he’ll be off the hook.

The corners of Yu Chang’s mouth were raised in a smile that seemed to be tattooed on. He was twirling a pair of jade balls in his hand to alleviate the pain in his meridians. He was also thinking: before, in the hidden realm, he had been interrupted by this Tai Sui’s incessant pestering. Now, though, he had a good opportunity to test his depths.

No matter what, the blood covenant was still a shackle. If he really was only impressive on the outside...

So Yu Chang idly said, “If you aren’t in a rush, I can take you around. It’s almost the fifteenth day of the eighth month. Isn’t now a good time for you to act?”

As soon as Xi Ping heard this, he knew he was up to no good. But before he could come up with an excuse, Yu Chang laughed, jumped, and landed around the middle of the mountain.

“You have to look closely,” Yu Chang said, laughing. “The Yu family holds the largest green ore fields in the world and monopolizes thirty or forty percent of the Moon Plated Gold. They’ve stood for hundreds of years without falling. The protective arrays are no joke. There are many things I can’t see clearly, but Tai Sui’s knowledge of cultivation is naturally superior to mine, so I suppose you won’t have much of a problem, right?”

Xi Ping: “...”

He had shit for knowledge of cultivation!

In Chu, day was about to break, and far away in Great Wan's Jinping, it was already well into the morning. There was even faint movement in the Yongning Marquis Manor, where there were no early risers.

Xi Yue wasn't on duty today, so he had stayed the night at the Yongning Marquis Manor.

He was halfway to being a pupil of Flying Jade Peak himself and had inherited General Zhi's good habits—he never wasted time. The Marquis and his lady hadn't gotten up yet, so he wasn't in a hurry to go pay his respects; he was meditating on his own to cultivate.

Xi Yue had just begun meditating when he suddenly heard a familiar voice in his ear: "Yue-bao'er! Help me out!"

It was him!

This voice was different from all the times before. It was more "real" than before. Xi Yue abruptly opened his eyes, having a momentary feeling that Xi Ping was standing right next to him. He automatically looked all around for him.

But the room was still. There were birds chirping in the little courtyard, but no people. The look in Xi Yue's eyes dimmed. His hand went to his neck and came up empty. Only then did he belatedly remember that reincarnation wood amulet.

Xi Yue focused. When he picked up the reincarnation wood, his voice was already calm. "What is it?"

"Quick, quick, quick," said Xi Ping, "memorize these arrays for me, and I'll treat you to Western Chu's specialty melon seeds! You

definitely can't buy them in Great Wan!"

You promise a reward the moment you open your mouth, but why don't you come back and show yourself instead...? Xi Yue's fingers tightened on the reincarnation wood. He paused. Treasuring words like gold, he said, "Fine, send them over."

"I can't send over so many! If I could send them, I could memorize them myself," Xi Ping said. "Where are you, is it safe?"

"At home," said Xi Yue, "safe..."

Before he could finish, his vision blurred, and his consciousness instantly crossed vast distances. Xi Yue sucked in a breath.

Next, he arrived outside of the three realms...inside the Law Breaker Bracelet.

Xi Ping split up the front and rear courtyards of the Cui Ji compound inside the Law Breaker Bracelet to keep from disturbing Wei Chengxiang and Zhao Qindan. He placed Xi Yue in the back garden.

When Xi Yue had just found his footing, he saw a huge pond in front of him. The water was like a mirror, clearly reflecting the Yu family's main residence at this moment.

The next instant, Xi Yue's spiritual sense gave him a warning, and he alertly stepped aside, dodging. The half-puppet fed on spiritual stones; his sense was far more acute than that of a cultivator of the same grade, and he had trained for several years alongside Pang Jian. His reactions were extremely fast. The hand reaching to pat his head came up empty.

Xi Yue stared in disbelief at that familiar hand—utterly pampered, with only a trace of calluses from qin strings; the hand whose owner would start to complain his hand hurt from chafing after only one ke

of holding a brush; the hand whose owner had shamelessly dragged him into doing his schoolwork for him countless times... Xi Yue's eyes traveled up that hand, his breath trembling incessantly.

“Heavens,” the young master said, catching up and holding down the top of his head, “what has Lao Pang been feeding you? You’ve shot up like a weed. Why don’t you share some with Luo-shixiong out of respect?”

As if the one who’d vanished for five or six years without a word hadn’t been him. As if he had only stepped out to get a pot of osmanthus oil.

How could this scoundrel be so heartless?

Xi Yue glared fiercely at that completely unchanged face, suddenly forgetting that he could speak now.

The next moment, his asshole former master and current big brother pressed down his head, turning him to face in the direction of the water. “Hey, stop looking at me, I’m the same as ever, nothing new. Hurry up and help me remember the positions of all those arrays in the water. It’s an absolute emergency, we can catch up later!”

Xi Yue took a deep breath. Almost hatefully, he turned his head to glance at the dizzying array formation in the water.

With just one glance, the young walker in the mortal world recovered his professionalism and frowned. “Where are these arrays? They’re so wasteful.”

Xi Ping bragged shamelessly, “They belong to some people who owe me money. What about them?”

Xi Yue focused and looked for a while, then shook his head. “I can only understand a part of them.”

“No problem.” Xi Ping knew that he was very naturally gifted in this area. He had a practically perfect memory for arrays. “Memorize them for now, then analyze them.”

Xi Yue ignored him, focusing all of his attention on the array formation in the water.

Xi Ping made a few circles around him, then odiously snapped his fingers and, using the extravagant dancing halls of the Yu family’s main residence as a model, created a soft chair that a person could recline in and a small table. He considered, then snatched a pile of Western Chu specialty snacks from the Snake King’s Immortal Palace—he didn’t know which Luwu was so gluttonous; these things were all over the place inside the Snake King’s Immortal Palace.

“Sit down to look.” Since he needed Xi Yue’s help, Xi Ping pressed him down onto the chair, then reached out and created a fan.

Afraid that Xi Yue’s head would overheat from memorizing such an enormous array formation all at once, he put one hand on Xi Yue’s shoulder and used the other to fan him with eager attentiveness—if you couldn’t sell your wits, you had to sell your strength.

As he fanned, looking at that calm young man’s face, Xi Ping “found comfort in his old age,” thinking, He’s much more accomplished than when he was with me...

“*Hss!*”

As he was feeling gratified and unguarded, Xi Yue, staring engrossed at the arrays, suddenly attacked. Without warning, he shook Xi Ping’s hand off his shoulder, caught it, and bit it viciously.

At the same time, he didn’t avert his gaze from the array formation!

Xi Ping: "..."

He didn't dare to exert strength to get his hand back. While it was the consciousness that came here, it was made into a tangible body by the Law Breaker Bracelet. A consummate established foundation body was too hard for a half-immortal half-puppet. If he tensed his hand, he would knock out Xi Yue's teeth.

Even more, he didn't dare to scold—that pestilential bastard Yu Chang didn't stop for a breath. If you turned your eyes away for a moment, you would miss part of the array formation. He was afraid Xi Yue would be distracted.

There was nothing else for it. Xi Ping could only inwardly curse Pang Jian: That rotten Big Dog Pang. I gave him a perfectly nice and refined little brother, and how has he raised him?

Was Heaven's Design Pavilion's General Commander spreading rabies?!

Pang Jian, on his last patrol for the morning of the Azure Dragon Towers, sneezed in the clouds above Jinping. He rubbed his nose, feeling a little perplexed. Since the new emperor had changed the laws, the factories in Jinping's southern outskirts were no longer allowed to work night and day. The smoke and fog had both decreased considerably, so why would he be sneezing out of nowhere?

Could it be someone cursing him behind his back?

Just then, there was a flap in the wind. A secret letter came to Pang Jian's hand.

Pang Jian stopped in midair on his sword, pulled out the Barrier Dispeller Bow and stuck it behind himself. He leaned back against

the bow. He saw that this was a message from the Guzhou Heaven's Design Pavilion Branch. It said: *The Luwu who infiltrated the Zhao family in Southern Shu have been exposed. There are casualties, and some whose whereabouts are unknown. Before disappearing, they notified this branch. Lingyun Mountain is likely to move soon.*

Pang Jian froze. Then his gaze fell on the words “Lingyun Mountain is likely to move soon” —Lingyun was Southern Shu's state sect.

This large-scale action of the Luwu's, while it was for the sake of pursuing the remnants of the Zhao family, was after all also an infiltration of other nations. With a group of well-trained foreign cultivators sneaking in, you didn't need to be a genius to know how vexed Lingyun would be... If this got out, Northern Li and Western Chu would certainly be on the alert as well.

This was trouble.

Pang Jiang quickly sent word to the Heaven's Design Pavilion branches by the borders, ordering them to immediately overhaul the border inscriptions and arrays. Whatever their identity, without official documents, all cultivators entering the country had to be registered and followed. They must take strict precautions against foreign cultivators entering Great Wan territory to engage in unlawful actions.

Great Wan had the Luwu. If the other countries got their own Taotie or Jiuwei⁷³ or something, that would be unpleasant.

Anyway, while others wouldn't know, the Zhao family before their betrayal had been extremely cunning. They would certainly have some understanding of the Luwu. Now that they had gone abroad, they would have to be on their guard against their movements. With an urgent assignment to deal with, Xuanyin would have rushed to

complete the updated immortal tools supplied to the Luwu. Perhaps the haste had caused a hiccup.

Communication across the South Sea was difficult. Even Zhou Ying slipped up sometimes.

Pang Jian was just planning to write a letter to Bai Ling to ask about it when his expression suddenly chilled: Wrong!

Zhou Ying had likely expected this situation from the day he had established the Luwu—before, though each of the four great sects had had their own schemes, on the surface they still got along. If not for the emergence of Qiu Sha, it was an ironclad rule that cultivators of a righteous and orthodox sect couldn't cross another nation's border without a special summons.

Which of the great masters in Xuanyin had gotten worked up and allowed that demon to entice them into sanctioning the Luwu?

Zhou Ying wasn't afraid that the Luwu would be exposed. He wanted them to be exposed. If the Luwu were captured in another country, the other three sects would certainly react. It was a certainty that they would respond in kind. When malicious cultivators from other countries crossed the borders, Great Wan would have to advance its defense expenditures. The Luwu would have an even greater opportunity to expand.

How could Zhou Ying be a righteous man acting for the nation and the people? He was clearly driving wedges and sowing discord among the four great sects.

CHAPTER 114 - Unbound Knife (21)

“Okay,” Zhou Ying said, putting down his brush, “proceed according to established practices.”

Bai Ling, used to this, lowered his head, then made to withdraw. But when his body had half turned to paper, he was called back by Zhou Ying.

Zhou Ying said, “The Luwu lack experience and preparations, and they haven’t developed a complete set of established practices. Before, they remained hidden because no one knew about them. This is their first time dealing with domestic rebels. Though there has been an incident, those involved can be seen as pioneers. Double the compensation for the families of the bereaved. Whether this affair succeeds or fails, it will be recorded as a meritorious service. The names of the dead can be entered into the Kaiming Department Memorial Forest.”

Bai Ling was surprised. He quickly turned his head, almost suspecting that the person in front of him was an imposter wearing a spiritual image mask.

Luwu and enemies alike were like game pieces in Zhou Ying’s eyes. He didn’t care if a few of them died. He was too lazy to put on a show of humanity in front of Bai Ling. He had never glossed over anything. Because Bai Ling had been alone at the bottom of the Impassable Sea with him since childhood and was like one of his limbs, and he had nothing to conceal from his own hands and feet; and also because Bai Ling, impeded by being a half-demon, had nowhere to go in the human world. He wouldn’t betray him.

Hearing this kind of news, when he was in a good mood, he would simply nod and instruct him to proceed as usual. When he was in a

bad mood, he might very well say any kind of rude remark that could drive a person mad.

So this time, why...

“Find some time to go to the Yongning Marquis Manor and ask the Marquis to write a personal letter. Northern Li is the domain of the sword cultivators, a tight as a drum, not like chaotic Western Chu. If the Luwu there hit a dead end, they can take the Marquis’s personal letter to the Beijue Mountains’ Blind Wolf King. That old cripple is cruel and vicious. Don’t stint on goods, just give him whatever he wants. That can save their lives.” Zhou Ying seemed not to have noticed his astonishment. He continued: “No need to worry about Chu, Shiyong is in Tao County, and he’s pretty reliable when he isn’t making mischief... I’m mostly worried about him getting himself into trouble—notify him, tell him that the situation is tense at the moment. Since he’s already successfully placed someone inside the Zhao family, tell him to hold off for now. No matter what he wants to do, tell him to put it off.”

Bai Ling finally came back to himself, gave an affirmative, turned into paper, and flew away. For some reason, he was feeling a little better.

He handled everything concerned with the Luwu. He had heard many people’s stories, put together many papermen for them. He could remember the names of the vast majority of them. When they died, the names would remain empty on his paper. If he could take those names out and carve them onto stone tablets, he supposed that would be a suitable arrangement.

It was rare for his lord to be thinking of them.

Zhou Ying lowered his eyes to look at the tips of his fingers. He had been about to say “The Luwu were going to be found out by the other nations sooner or later. This day was always going to come.

What can that bunch of good-for-nothings do if they don't get properly hammered into shape a few times?" — that was in fact what he thought.

But when the words had come to his lips, seeing Bai Ling's somewhat gloomier than usual expression, Zhou Ying had suddenly thought that no matter what he said, Bai Ling would only answer "Yes, my lord," and everything would remain as before. It wouldn't change anything, except that the paperman would be upset.

Just the same as it wouldn't have changed anything whether he went to the Marquis Manor to see the old lady one last time or not: mortals had their allotted lifespans, and when those ran out, they died. A person's death was like a flame being extinguished; they didn't bring with them the sorrows, joys, and regrets of the world of the living.

Except that he found it hard to meditate late at night, his thoughts always hard to calm.

That being the case, when it was a matter of nothing but flapping his lips, why should he deliberately torment a person who wouldn't betray him? As if that was the only bit of power he had.

He was no longer a bird trapped half in the Impassable Sea and half in a cage in Jinping. He might as well stop living so pitifully.

When Xi Ping received Bai Ling's message, Yu Chang had just finished making a circle around the valley in Yu Family Bend.

Xi Ping, calm and unruffled, responded to Bai Ling: "Understood, you two can set your minds at ease about me."

Then he softened his voice slightly: "Bai Ling-da-ge, look after the brothers in Southern Shu. Don't worry about the Luwu in Western Chu, just leave them to me."

Then he heard Yu Chang say composedly, smiling, “Well, Tai Sui, have you seen everything clearly? If not, shall I take you around again?”

Xi Ping turned to Xi Yue.

Xi Yue rubbed the center of his brow. “No need, I’ve memorized them.”

Good child!

If Xi Ping hadn’t been worried about getting another bite mark, he would have stepped up to slap him on the back.

He was just about to respond to Yu Chang when he heard Xi Yue continue: “There are nine core great arrays in the valley in all, connected to the other arrays throughout the valley, letting them work together and communicate amongst themselves. If the arrays in one place lose effect, the ones somewhere else can immediately make up the deficiency and organize a counterattack. He just showed a hundred and two arrays in all. That doesn’t match up with the arrangements of the core arrays. If I’ve guessed right, there must be about forty hidden arrays.. As for how to disable them, I have to do research. Many of the great arrays are too complicated, not something an open-eyed cultivator will usually encounter.”

Xi Ping: “...”

The main reason he had called Xi Yue over was that he wasn’t especially good at arrays, and most of the ones he knew were unorthodox ones he had learned in Wild Fox Country, and he couldn’t conveniently locate an immortal tool that would record these for him. He knew Xi Yue had a perfect memory and had wanted him to come act as a brain, so he could save his mental energy to focus on working out how to deal with Yu Chang.

With Yu Chang's nasty attitude, if he discerned anything about Xi Ping, he would be able to lead him to his death in Yu Family Bend a hundred times over.

Xi Ping had just thought up what to say, but his plans couldn't keep up with the changing situation. A few sentences from little Xi Yue beat anything.

Xi Yue didn't understand his expression and once again unconsciously touched his neck. The dragon-taming chain was gone, he could no longer sense the other's emotions. He felt helpless. "Is there something wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong!" Xi Ping gave him a thumbs-up.

He turned to Yu Chang and responded in an affected tone, "That's all? Fine, I don't have anything to do. If you aren't busy, let's go around again."

Yu Chang's eyelids drooped. He thought, As I thought.

Xi Ping said, "I've counted up the arrays, and there are still forty-something missing. What, are you afraid I'll get the upper hand if I see them?"

Yu Chang felt chilled.

Yu Family Bend's great arrays had centuries of history behind them. They had gone through thirty and more major alterations and countless tweaks to improve them. A famous array master from the Sanyue Mountains had even been called in to advise on them. Common cultivators who fought on their own led difficult lives; those who were especially adept at inscriptions or arrays were very few—they didn't have a chance to come upon the relevant resources.

Those hidden arrays were the Yu Family Valley's true trump card. Yu Chang had deliberately not mentioned them. On the one hand, it was a test—on the other hand, he thought it would be for the best if Tai Sui charged in ignorantly and went to his peaceful rest in Yu Family Bend, not troubling him afterward.

If Tai Sui could tell that he was holding back, his strength would have to be reevaluated. But Yu Chang absolutely hadn't expected him to state the number right away! That showed that with a single glance, Tai Sui had eaten up the whole protective array formation of Yu Family Bend... No, this person frequently revealed only part of the truth. He might even know the approximate locations of the hidden arrays!

Yu Chang immediately became cautious: "Yes, I didn't finish just now. There are also hidden arrays that don't appear on the surface, they need to be brought out with spiritual energy. It will be suspicious if I look them over for no reason. For that part, I can draw a plan."

Xi Ping inwardly ground his teeth: Why didn't you say so before, asshole?

But he only gave a meaningful laugh, as if he didn't care at all about Yu Chang's attempt and wasn't worried about whether he would tamper with the plan. His attitude said he understood everything perfectly well.

Yu Chang's heart stuttered in spite of himself. He suddenly felt uncertain.

Wait, Yu Chang thought. Before, when this Tai Sui sent that unweaned little girl to see Bu Zhichou, Bu Zhichou even had to give them the spirit-gathering array. It was as if they understood neither the immortal sect's filth nor had any skill in arrays. Starting then, Yu

Chang had somewhat looked down on this “good neighbor” who had moved in only a few years ago.

Now it seemed likely that Tai Sui had deliberately gone to see Bu Zhichou in Yu Family Bend, deliberately revealed that he wanted a hundred thousand white spirits, all in order to hook him!

Including the spiritual image brand stamping spike in the Zhao family hidden realm.

That he could swap a living person for a paperman right under the noses of the Zhaos showed that Tai Sui had infiltrated them long ago. If they had really only wanted to use the identity of the Zhao young mistress to enter Sanyue’s inner sect, couldn’t they have just substituted her after the Dragon and Phoenix Symbolizing Good Fortune had been stamped? Why would they need to run the risk of stealing the spiritual image brand right in front of his face, right in front of the faces of dozens of cultivators from the Zhao and Yu families?

They had deliberately stolen it to show him!

This thread had been buried very deep. Yu Chang involuntarily broke out in a cold sweat, feeling that all his schemes were a joke. He had even guessed that this person was an ignorant youngster. “Who are you, anyway?”

“A person who bears you no ill will.” Tai Sui seemed to be laughing. Then he said unfathomably, “Merely an old acquaintance of the immortal sects.”

Yu Chang’s pupils contracted almost imperceptibly. He thought he understood the implication behind these words—the inheritor of an ancient demonic god suppressed by the immortal mountains planning to seize power and take vengeance... another Qiu Sha!

Qiu Sha had single-handedly slaughtered a batch of ascended spirits in Tao County and caused the Silver Moon to come down to the mortal world... and when Qiu Sha had become an ascended spirit, it had also been the fifteenth day of the eighth month.

Yu Chang was silent for a moment, then adapted to the circumstances, bending accordingly. "Very well. As long as you remove my brand, apart from the blood covenant, I'll help you legitimately take over Yu Family Bend."

Xi Ping was a master at puffing himself up. He knew he couldn't say too much. If he said too much, he was sure to slip up. So he gave an elusive laugh and left Yu Chang to scare himself, breaking off contact.

Next to him, Xi Yue had heard the whole thing. Before they could start catching up, he frowned. "What are you going to do?"

"Bring in the harvest." Xi Ping waved a hand. The pool in the Law Breaker turned back into an observation pavilion. "Come here, let me have a look at you... Hey, kid, before, you and Ancestor Luo would be like brothers standing next to each other, and now you're nearly as tall as I am. If my shifu hadn't been injured in the East Sea and been forced to go into seclusion, it would have been good for him to bring you back to Flying Jade Peak. If our Yue-bao'er with his natural talents can't get into the inner sect, then what idiot is worthy of it?"

Xi Yue ignored his flattery. Not letting him off, he said, "I just heard that His Highness Prince Zhuang said that the Luwu were exposed recently and the situation in Western Chu is tense, and he wants you not to act rashly."

With exaggerated astonishment, Xi Ping said, "You remembered so many arrays at once and you still had attention left to spare? Heavens, never mind the inner sect, why hasn't the Marquis sent

you to become the Number One Scholar in the imperial exams? All our ancestral tombs would start smoking from blessings because of you!”

Xi Yue said, “Xi Shiyong!”

Xi Ping clicked his tongue and flicked Xi Yue on the forehead at a distance. “Where are your manners! Don’t go around calling your big brother’s courtesy name.”

When he had gone home last time, he had seen Xi Yue performing the salute appropriate to a family junior and known that his parents had taken this boy who had also received the name “Xi Yue” as one of the family. Now, as was only to be expected, he acknowledged it.

Xi Ping thought: “Giving him this name back then might be the best decision I’ve ever made in my life.”

With the difference in cultivation level bearing down on him, Xi Yue couldn’t dodge. He took the hit, but he only felt it as a slight cool breeze blowing by.

The headstrong and bossy young master understood propriety now. Without being taught, he had learned how to be an older brother.

“I know what’s appropriate, relax. You heard wrong just now. I wasn’t talking about anything coming up immediately,” Xi Ping said, placating him. “Don’t tell san-ge. You won’t get taller if you tell secrets—do Mom and Dad treat you well? When Cui Ji gets new products in twice a year, does Mom hang bits and bobs all over you each time and try out any new rouge color on your face first?”

Xi Yue’s eyes strung. “No, she said I have to wear the blue clothes, so I have to keep my dignity.”

“What the hell? What kind of favoritism is that?!” Xi Ping swayingly crossed one leg over the other and shook his head, saying accusingly, “Loving the new and tiring of the old. She gets a little one and suddenly she’s a stepmother...”

Xi Yue interrupted his nonsense: “Why don’t you come back to take a look? Stay a while in Jinping, show yourself. How much of your time can that use up, immortal?”

Xi Ping was speechless for a moment, not knowing where to start.

When a person has millions of words in their heart and nowhere to start, they’ll always look older, no matter how youthful their face.

“I can’t yet,” he said at last, as though nothing were the matter. “I... Well, hasn’t Xuanyin Mountain said all along that Flying Jade Peak is sealed? In fact, there’s an inside story. I still have things to do. When I’m done, I’ll come back at once. Mom and Dad are getting old, don’t make them worry.”

At this point, he paused, and added with a smile, “What am I telling you for? You’re much more reliable than I am.”

At a glance, Xi Ping was just the same as five years ago in the East Sea, without a trace of wear on his features. But as soon as Xi Yue met those familiar eyes, he felt half a lifetime’s separation.

Xi Yue lowered his voice and asked, “What do you have to do?”

“I can’t say, so don’t ask.” Xi Ping wiggled a finger at him. “If you lack for anything, ask me, and if I can’t get it, there’s still san-ge.”

Xi Yue abruptly clenched his half wooden and metal fists. For five years, he had desperately studied arrays and followed Pang Jian, changing his half-puppet body from the inside out with stroke after stroke of the knife, trying to become a little stronger, a little

stronger... This way, the next time he met stormy seas in the East Sea, he wouldn't be tossed aside with a single talisman.

But he was like Kuafu chasing the sun. When he had run until his legs were broken, he would still be further than ever from the goal he was chasing.⁷⁴

“What?” The dragon-taming chain was gone, but Xi Ping still seemed to be able to read his emotions. He said, smiling, “I’m not deliberately concealing it from you. You’re always around that old fox Pang Jian. If you fart he knows what restaurant you went to the day before. What’s the difference between telling you and notifying Heaven’s Design Pavilion? There are some things that can’t be divulged yet.”

Xi Yue said stubbornly, “Then I’ll stay with you.”

“That’s disgraceful. Don’t go on distant travels away from your parents. Can’t you pick up any of my good qualities?”

Xi Yue: “...”

Xi Ping considered. “Fair enough, apart from being handsome and elegant and especially lovable, I don’t have any other good qualities... Alas, I was born this way, there’s nothing I can do about it—all right, aren’t I asking for your help with something? Go home, I have a lot of guests here today. When you get back, copy out the arrays for me. Afterward, if you miss me, just give a shout, and I’ll bring you here to play. You can see me whenever you want.”

“You...”

Before Xi Yue could say anything, he felt emptiness beneath his feet. It was as if he had fallen from a great height.

The next moment, he woke up in his own body. He abruptly opened his eyes and looked around. He found that he had returned to the Marquis Manor in Jinping. It was broad daylight.

As Xi Ping listened to Xi Yue's curses coming through the reincarnation wood, treating it as amusement, he played the qin for a while inside the hidden realm—the Luwu had been exposed, San-ge's message had said, so Sanyue Mountain would also know. How would they react?

San-ge had only sent a message, indicating that Wild Fox Country must be comparatively safe. Because of Qiu Sha, Tao County had just been plowed by the Silver Moon. As soon as the shed skin had left, the ascended spirits had arrived. If Sanyue only had a bit of faith in their own masters, they wouldn't be too nervous about the Wan-Chu border here. At most they would send a few people to come look it over. The Luwu masks had been upgraded. As long as Xuanwu didn't come in person, others wouldn't easily be able to see through the Luwu masks.

But... it was only a few days until the fifteenth of the eighth month.

Once the spirit-gathering array was activated, Tao County's veins of the earth were certain to change. Even with the cover of the Law Breaker Bracelet keeping Sanyue from seeing clearly what was happening here, any Qilin Guard who came along would still be able to discover it.

What should he do?

Wei Chengxiang and Zhao Qindan had finished cycling their energy, so Xi Ping sent the two of them out—after all, their bodies were still in Yu Family Bend. If their consciousnesses stayed here too long, they might change.

Then he himself also left the Law Breaker Bracelet and turned into a barefoot doctor with a medicine chest on his back, appearing in the countryside in Tao County. He walked along the bleak little lanes. Perhaps it was his mistake, but Xi Ping felt that Tao County seemed to have become a little more still.

As he passed a little village, he heard a creak. He turned his head and saw a familiar-looking little boy come outside yawning and stretch sleepily. Then the kid found a big tree at the gate to his house, opened his pants, and turned on the waterworks.

The tree was a reincarnation wood tree.

Didn't this bunch of wild kids have anyone to mind them?!

Xi Ping instantly remembered that this rotten brat was the one who had wiped snot on a reincarnation wood tree. The new grievance added to the old resentment surged up in his heart.

He got his revenge at once. He used spiritual energy to gently nudge a bird in the tree. The bird, which had been laying in its nest, was immediately startled awake and dropped a big load of sky fertilizer, hitting the child's bald pate dead on.

At first, the boy didn't realize what had happened. He reached out to touch his head, brought it in front of his face, and only realized after a long while what this was. He burst into tears.

The wicked Xi Ping walked by him slowly with his medicine chest on his back. When he was near him, he deliberately pulled a face at the kid. "Oh, hey, have you got a new hat there?"

The kid howled even harder.

"Heh..." Xi Ping was amused. He was just about to continue adding oil to the fire when his gaze paused, and the corners of his mouth

froze—there was a new full moon scab on the back of the child’s hand. He remembered that it hadn’t been there when he had wiped the snot before.

Xi Ping frowned and carefully cast a beam of spiritual energy like a strand of hair into the child’s meridians and circled through them. He found that this lively-looking child’s undeveloped meridians were like a pot of grass that hadn’t been watered in a month, nearly dried-up. On the back of his hand, on his back, under his ear, on his foot... all over his body were no less than ten full moon scabs of all sizes, with an outer circle glistening like a snake’s scales and a black center, viciously sucking out his life force. It made a person’s scalp go numb to see.

“Yu-xiong,” Xi Ping immediately sent word to Yu Chang. In a grave voice, he said, “I’d like to ask you about something. If the Sanyue Spiritual Mountains have already decided to allocate a batch of pills to Tao County, why have they only come to collect medicinal herbs from Yu Family Bend now?”

On this schedule, even if Xuanyin Mountain’s Rosy Cloud Peak picked up and moved to Tao County, there would still be no time to refine enough pills for the whole county to take before Mid-Autumn. Had Elder Xuanwu gone senile from having to hold his breath all the time? Didn’t he know that Mid-Autumn was the deadline?

Yu Chang was silent for a moment, then responded, “Well—as far as I know, all the types of herbs that pill needs are actually aquatic. Yu Family Bend’s medicinal herb fields don’t produce them.”

Xi Ping said, “What?”

Then who are you turning out in such force to sell to?

“Medicine given to mortals naturally won’t be refined by inner sect immortals themselves. The high elders only issue the order to set

aside the funds and spiritual stones.” Yu Chang sighed and said, “As for whose medicinal herb field the money ultimately winds up in, that depends on the connections of the various families, not what their fields grow... I suppose there aren’t so many of these things in Great Wan. It’s a skeleton in the closet. How embarrassing.”

Xi Ping’s figure bearing the medicine chest disappeared around a corner where no one could see him. Finally, he sent Yu Chang a message: “Before noon, prepare your stamping spike and come over as fast as you can.”

That day, Xi Ping copied three Yu Changs inside the Law Breaker Bracelet. Using the same technique he had used to steal the Dragon and Phoenix Symboling Prosperity, he drew the brand from Yu Chang into midair.

It was as if Yu Chang had had a layer of skin peeled off him. His strength exhausted, he lay flat on the ground, free but wretched. He spent ages gasping for breath before he gathered the strength to laugh aloud.

He panted as he laughed, nearly going off key toward the end with an odd sobbing note. “Tai Sui, which members of the Yu family do you want to kill? Which of their things do you want to steal? For... for this, I’ll kill for you, I’ll steal for you... I can also... I can also kill the whole clan, dig up their ancestral tombs, fuck their ancestors... Over four hundred years... Over four hundred years!”

The sound of the Tai Sui Qin paused. Behind the qin, Xi Ping raised his eyes—

CHAPTER 115 - Unbound Knife (22)

This generation's Yu family clan leader was named "Zhiyuan," courtesy name "Guangbo,"⁷⁵ with open-eyed level cultivation. His appearance was fairly regular, with a small beard to demonstrate gravity. He was currently walking in a hurry, but still with a perfectly sedate bearing.

He was the sky above the heads in Yu Family Bend. He couldn't appear to panic in front of people.

The others followed behind him according to their family ranking. All their expressions were very grim.

Three days ago at noon, inside the ancestral hall in the Yu family's main residence, a decorative stone tablet on the offering mat at the door had suddenly fallen to the ground and shattered, scaring the old servant who was sweeping witless. And it seemed this had been an ill omen. Three days later, a letter came flying from the rear mountain and went directly to the Yu family clan leader.

Their family's "that gentleman" had reached the end of his days. Their "guardian beast" was going to return into the West.

Common cultivators who could cross the established foundation boundary were already as rare as phoenix feathers or unicorn horns, and a four-hundred-year-old consummate established foundation was one of a kind. As this chief offering had begun spending more and more time in seclusion, the Yus had been prepared. A century ago, they had already started looking out for offering cultivators with outstanding talents to replace him.

But that was easily said. How many people within the immortal mountains' inner sect could reach the edges of an ascended spirit?

Ascending to within half a step of an ascended spirit was perhaps not completely unheard of, but it was close enough.

Therefore, the clan leader's mood was very sorrowful. He was inwardly pondering whether he ought to get someone to upgrade the array formation in the valley or bring some more branded cultivators in... Which would be more cost-effective?

This chief offering had chosen a bad time to die. His boss's imperial grandson in the inner sect took the better part of his spending money from the clan. Now that they had made an engagement with the Zhao family, sending them north would be another major expense. Others had already begun complaining, coming repeatedly in the last few days to draw funds from the clan for their projects. There was no way dam the flow, so it looked like they would need to think of a way to expand their financial resources.

It was so hard being the head of a big family!

They reached an isolated little courtyard house in the deepest recesses of the forest. An invisible barrier blocked their way.

Quite a few of the Yu family's other offerings had come as well. They scattered and made several circles, scouting from the outside. Some were sighing, some were envying the ostentation, and some seemed to have seen their own fate. And then there were those drooling over the position of chief offering that was about to be emptied... There was more than one such person.

Clan Leader Yu passed through the crowd and said politely in a loud voice: "Ancestor, this is Zhiyuan. If you have anything to pass on, would you like to see me?"

After a moment, a black shadow spread over the empty ground at the gate and went up to Clan Leader Yu's feet like a path, inviting him to come in.

The clan leader hesitated instinctively. Each time he saw this gentleman, he always felt a little apprehensive. It was as if his family had a pet lion or tiger. While they were the ones feeding it, if you woke in the middle of the night to find that big beast crouched by your bed, slaving, you would be scared enough to burst your guts.

But the clan leader's gaze traveled around. The whole clan was watching him. He couldn't lose face, so he stepped into the shadow.

In the last hundred years, hadn't he already come here apprehensively every time? And this would be the last time.

As he thought this, he felt a little sentimental.

Pained and sentimental, Clan Leader Yu's shadow blended into the shadow on the ground, as if he had been swallowed in one gulp by that big shadow.

Then, as soon as the clan leader with his myriad concerns entered the small room, just as he had wished, he laid down his heavy burden and went to his eternal rest.

Yu Chang bent slightly and examined Clan Leader Yu's fresh corpse from above. In that moment, he seemed to be chewing over some taste. Then his eyes narrowed in satisfaction. A long, thin shadow burrowed into the clan leader's corpse and removed the assorted protective immortal tools from his body one by one. At the same time, a transport array formed in midair.

The transport array dispersed in a glare of light, and a Clan Leader Yu identical to the deceased appeared with a blank expression. After a breath, Clan Leader Yu's eyes suddenly changed, becoming lively—it was Xi Ping coming over in a paperman.

Xi Ping's first reaction after landing was to put some distance between himself and Yu Chang. Then he silently placed inscriptions on all the paperman's features and inspected his own shadow.

He glanced at Clan Leader Yu's corpse. Lowering his voice, he said, "That easy?"

For better or worse, this person was still a half-immortal. With a murder weapon like Yu Chang in the room, aimed at him, his spiritual sense must have been smeared with shit for him not to have felt it.

Xi Ping judged others by his own standards. A long string of conspiracies flashed through his mind. "Is it a trick? Does he have a substitute? Could he playing dead? Might this..."

Before he could finish speaking, he saw the shadow wrapped around the clan leader suddenly burrow into the center of the corpse's brow. A small whirlpool appeared on Clan Leader Yu's smooth brow. The flesh warped. Then it was the bone warping with a shattering sound. Then the "whirlpool" became larger and larger as it twisted. The corpse's features ran off, the eyes nearly burst from their sockets, the nose bent like a bow... and the mouth nearly turned up to the cheekbone on one side!

Xi Ping once again experienced the terror he had felt sitting astride the wall at the Marquis Manor watching the corpse of the young master next door give him a "charming smile." "Stop, stop, stop... what are you doing!"

Yu Chang breathed out softly and said seriously, "I have performed an inspection. It isn't a substitute, and he isn't playing dead. Why don't you have a look for yourself?"

Xi Ping looked at his eyes, once again starting to turn red, and said gravely, "They say that once the spiritual image brand is removed,

you're no longer in danger of losing your mind, did you know that?"

Yu Chang abruptly raised his eyes and looked into the face of the clan leader, the corners of his eyes twitching involuntarily. He took a sudden deep breath and averted his gaze. After a moment, he said almost inaudibly, "You're right."

"This kind of half-immortal practically has no spiritual sense in the end." Yu Chang didn't look at Xi Ping, only tossed the immortal tools from the body to him and put the corpse into his mustard seed. "As half-immortals, these people won't be harmed by drink and lust, so they have no self-restraint. Food, wine, and beauty will quickly numb a person, so they have to turn to snow wine, and when even snow wine can no longer make them happy, some people will even swallow talismans in pursuit of stimulation—spiritual sense? Ha... Are your people ready?"

Xi Yue hadn't been idle the last few days. He had repeatedly compared the arrays he himself had memorized and calculated against the plans Yu Chang had supplied, and he had eaten his way through all the ancient texts. At this time, the half-puppet's consciousness was inside the Law Breaker Bracelet. He could borrow a paperman to come over at any time... though unless there was absolutely no choice, Xi Ping wasn't planning on having him come.

A paperman breaking wasn't life-threatening, but the consciousness would certainly be injured. Little Xi Yue hadn't been shattered by shed skins. He wasn't so resistant to shocks.

"A-Xiang," Xi Ping said to Wei Chengxiang, "how are you doing?"

With the help of a group of Luwu, Wei Chengxiang had already completed the spirit-gathering array in Tao County. She inspected it one final time and responded, "All is ready—the waste won't exceed twenty percent."

In other words, they needed a hundred twenty thousand liang.

Then Wei Chengxiang added, “Young Mistress Zhao helped quite a bit. Standard product of the Latent Cultivation Temple. Her basic skills are solid.”

Xi Ping laughed. On the surface, Wei Chengxiang seemed not to get on with Zhao Qindan at all. In just a few words, she could make the young mistress explode from anger. She was always amusing herself at her expense. But she seemed to be rather worried that this “house cat” wouldn’t be able to survive in the wild. She kept talking about her, explicitly and implicitly, secretly wanting to win a place for her in Tao County.

Xi Ping pretended he hadn’t noticed and didn’t pick up the subject. He gave a few instructions, then contacted the Luwu.

“According to your instructions, my brothers and the spiritual stones have all been sent away. We’ve left substitutes behind in the Immortal Palace,” said Lao Tian, who had stayed back to watch the Immortal Palace. He paused, then anxiously said, “Tai Sui, may I ask, what is going to happen?”

“We can’t hold on to the Snake King identity,” Xi Ping said quickly. “The Snake King came from Great Wan to begin with. Now that the Luwu have been exposed in Southern Shu, his origins are too sensitive. We need a new identity.”

Lao Tian said, “But Wild Fox Country is already an evil cultivator black market. If we abandon the Snake King’s Immortal Palace, won’t other evil cultivators come to fill the vacancy?”

“No,” Xi Ping answered calmly, “I have a plan.”

Having said this, without turning a hair, he once again cut off the updates the Luwu were sending to Bai Ling.

Heaven favored the preservation of lives, but san-ge didn't. If san-ge knew why he was plotting at a critical moment like this, he might borrow a pagoda for trapping a river monster from Master Lin and lock him up in it.

This time, he had to cut first and get beaten later.

After making his arrangements, Xi Ping exchanged a last look with Yu Chang. They nodded at each other.

The redness in Yu Chang's eyes had yet to fade. Xi Ping thought, Can I rely on this mad dog?

So he couldn't resist saying, "Take whatever revenge you need, but for the sake of your Way of the Heart, don't kill indiscriminately. After you've crossed the great river, don't overturn your boat in a sewer."

Yu Chang put a mind clearing pill in his mouth and said dully, "There's no need for you to tell me."

Xi Ping quickly reviewed everything in his mind. For some reason, while it all looked like a sure thing, his spiritual sense seemed to have something to say. It was on edge.

But the arrow was already on the string. They had even done away with Yu Family Bend's local tyrant. They had to move forward and usurp the throne.

Xi Ping turned and walked out of Yu Chang's little compound—before Clan Leader Yu had died, Xi Ping had pulled him into the Law Breaker and made a copy of the clan leader's consciousness that he controlled. Now, the dazed controlled consciousness was inside the

paperman. Xi Ping relaxed his suppression slightly, and the paperman, under the influence of the copied consciousness, automatically assumed the posture of the original before his death.

“Those who are on friendly terms with him can go over and say goodbye,” Xi Ping said with the paperman’s pained face. With an appearance of propriety, he instructed, “But the death of a great master will cause a large commotion. This place is dangerous. Please do not linger. The rear mountain is temporarily restricted. Do not allow anyone to wander in by mistake.”

Everyone heard this and took it for granted—a near-ascended spirit master might bring down half a mountain with a hiccup or a fart. So one after another they made perfunctory bows and salutes toward Yu Chang’s compound. In hardly any time, they had all scattered, afraid that if they were a step too slow they would get dragged in.

Xi Ping: “...”

He wasn’t very popular.

“Hey, listen, Yu-xiong, even dogs won’t come near you, right?”

Yu Chang’s cold laugh came through the reincarnation wood: “If your family’s pig or dog dies of pestilence, won’t you be in a rush to burn it? Are you really going keep the coffin for seven days and wear mourning instead?”

Xi Ping: “...”

He let the body and the remaining copied consciousness take him back to where the clan leader lived. Xi Ping walked into the room and dismissed the attendants, then immediately took full control of the paperman’s body and started rifling through everything like a thief.

Yu Chang gave him a hint: “Inside the pillow.”

“Ah... ah-choo!” As soon as Xi Ping raised the bed curtain, he was decked right in the face by fragrance. The sense of smell of an established foundation cultivator could catch a lingering scent from days ago. As soon as Xi Ping stuck his head in, he smelled at least seven or eight different kinds of rouge and powder. It was so stifling that he sneezed.

As he wiped his nose, he reached out to touch the pillow. Indeed, there was a mustard seed inside. In spite of himself, he broke out in gooseflesh. “You’ve even seen what’s inside another person’s bed curtains... You really are rotten!”

Yu Chang laughed without answering.

Xi Ping jumped into the mustard seed and was nearly blinded by the superb collection of rare treasures. Even Cui Ji’s cousin involuntarily felt hatred for the rich.

On the innermost shelves were account books. Unlike the public accounts, these account books recorded Yu Family Bend’s true riches.

Xi Ping roughly flipped through a few and shut them with a bang. He took a deep breath and said to Yu Chang, “I need a hundred twenty thousand white spirits to activate the spirit-gathering array. You can do what you like with the rest, take it or destroy it, whatever, but leave at least eighty percent of the remaining spiritual stones to return to Yu Family Bend—that’s one of the things for the blood covenant.”

Yu Chang laughed meaningfully and saw an opportunity to make an attempt at probing. “Common cultivators have always been short on resources. Those like Tai Sui who know when to stop are rare.”

Xi Ping ignored him. He coldly said, “You can prepare to ‘blow up’ the rear mountain.”

When Yu Chang blew up the rear mountain to fake his death, the spiritual energy in the valley would be disordered for a brief span. They could use that time to tamper with the protective arrays.

Xi Ping sent word to Xi Yue: “Yu can’t be relied on, we have to work as quickly as possible.”

Xi Yue was just about to say something when Xi Ping’s spiritual sense was suddenly touched. Someone was approaching.

He stepped out of the mustard seed and heard footsteps like a cat’s coming from outside. Someone softly called, “Clan leader.”

Xi Ping put on his act. “Come in.”

Then a “page” came in discreetly. “Clan leader, a letter for you.”

Xi Ping reached out to take it, but the “page” took the opportunity to grab his hand and quickly brush his palm, then raised a pair of eyes like a soul summoning spell and cast an amorous glance at him. A familiar scent came from this person—it was one of the scents that had just made Xi Ping sneeze!

Realistic gooseflesh rose on the paperman. Xi Ping bristled: there was a monster taking advantage of him! Wait, no... was this monster male or female? And they were so ugly. If they didn’t have the money to buy a mirror, then couldn’t they piss themselves one?

Xi Yue: “...”

He’d been about to say something, but he’d completely forgotten the words.

Xi Ping dropped his act at once, playing a haughty old official according to his own instincts: “Did I summon you?”

The “page” hadn’t expected their flattery to go astray. They knelt sinuously and said in a delicate, soft voice, “Clan leader, Lan’er was wrong..”

Saying so, they tried to throw themselves at his shoes.

Xi Ping had been prepared and stepped back. The “page” came up empty, falling on the ground with an “ow.”

Next, the tip of a shoe smelling of the mud of the rear of the mountain raised the “page”’s chin, and a cold gaze shot toward them.

Xi Ping still couldn’t tell how this person had the face to attempt seduction—even he hadn’t attempted that! “Get out of here!”

When he had dispatched the unlucky suitor, Xi Yue said to him, “Young mast... Ge, let me come over there, I’ll cut off the arrays.”

Xi Ping pretended not to have heard him, opening the letter with “single-minded devotion.” This letter was actually sealed, with “To be unsealed by the clan leader in person” written on it. Only Clan Leader Yu himself could open it, or else the contents would be destroyed.

As soon as Xi Ping drew near, he perceived faint spiritual energy. He was a little bewildered: “Do cultivators write letters to each other now?”

Couldn’t they use an immortal tool to communicate? Or did Yu Family Bend have special customs?

Fortunately, Clan Leader Yu's consciousness was preserved inside the paperman. Xi Ping opened the letter easily. As soon as he opened it, he knew why it had to be delivered as a letter—this was a rather ceremonious calling card.

Xi Ping's spiritual sense abruptly jumped.

Written on the calling card was: *I am acting upon orders from the immortal sect to patrol the Wan-Chu border in order to guard against villains fomenting rebellion. The Zhao family hidden realm has disembarked in Yu Family Bend and has had contact with your family. I fear they have been infiltrated by "Luwu," so I shall be coming to pay a visit in one ke. Presently I am patrolling in secret, so it is not convenient to reveal my whereabouts. I hope the clan leader will cooperate. The immortal sect's personal order is attached.*

Respectfully yours, Xiang Wenqing of Sanyue's West Peak.

Xi Ping's mind buzzed. Xiang Wenqing... Xiang Wenqing...

He quickly searched for that name in the secret news he had heard in Wild Fox Country: right, this person was ranked second on the West Peak of Sanyue's three Principal Peaks; he came from a collateral branch of the Xiang family. Rumor said that this master was the one behind the Yu family. He had been the one to get the Yu family's worthless imperial grandson into the inner sect... An ascended spirit of the middle stage.

At the same time, Yu Chang also saw the calling card with his omnipresent grit worms. The two of them spoke almost in unison.

Yu Chang said, "It seems it's true that schemers have bad luck."

Xi Ping said: "You must be an unlucky star incarnate."

“Xi Yue,” Xi Ping quickly sent his thought. With his current cultivation level, he could already sense the master at the gate. “There’s been a problem, let’s not...”

Before he could finish speaking, he heard a huge sound. The rear mountain collapsed—Yu Chang had ignited the prepared array, fabricating the explosion of a near-ascended spirit cultivator’s death. In the calm valley of the Yu family’s main residence, there was a great disturbance in the spiritual energy. Arrays of all sizes were in uproar, and all immortal tools of established foundation grade or below stopped working at the same time!

Yu Chang’s voice came through the reincarnation wood: “With an ancestor in the middle ascended spirit stage here, if I play dead halfway, he’s sure to see through me. It’s better to fight a quick and decisive campaign.”

Tai Sui had clearly known that Sanyue would be sending someone soon, yet had insisted on activating the spirit-gathering array before Mid-Autumn. That showed he absolutely needed those hundred twenty thousand white spirits. Yu Chang guessed that Tao County’s safety was perhaps connected to his Way of the Heart. A hundred twenty thousand white spirits was no small number. He might only have this one shot. Could he stand to abandon it?

There was no time to lose, and the opportunity wouldn’t come again if he passed it up!

Yu Chang thought: We’ll see whether the Sanyue inner sect dog or this mysterious evil god of Wild Fox Country will take the upper hand.

If Xiang Wenqing died, he would happily applaud. If Tai Sui died, he would be even more at liberty in the future.

“Tai Sui, my assignment has been completed. I’ll hand the rest over to you.”

Xi Ping: “...”

He’d known he couldn’t rely on this bastard at the critical moment!

CHAPTER 116 - Unbound Knife (23)

After conveying the last message, Yu Chang crushed the reincarnation wood. He took out a pearl and put it in his mouth, silently “melting” into the shadows—this was the shadow transforming pearl, his last life-saving trump card.

With the shadow transforming pearl in your mouth, you could blend into the shadows of all things. He could move freely within the shadows, and he could also remain unmoving himself, letting the shadows of other things carry him along. A single beam of light could send him very far. With Yu Chang’s cultivation level, as long as no one saw him transform into a shadow, he could even avoid the notice of a shed skin.

The only shortcoming was that he couldn’t use spiritual energy, or else he would immediately give away his location.

This was something he had anonymously found a toolmaker on the black market to make by draining Yu Chang’s own essence. After it was completed, he had killed the toolmaker to keep the secret.

In the rear of the mountain of the Yu family main residence by moonlight, there were swaying shadows of trees and flowers everywhere. They concealed him perfectly.

The spiritual stones he had detonated had precisely the amount of spiritual energy that a near-ascended spirit would release upon dying. He had “lost his mind and died”; his corpse would have turned to dust. His consciousness would have been destroyed.

“I’ll ‘die’ for now out of respect.” Amid the dancing shadows of the trees, Yu Chang changed form, extending and contracting, rambling with the wind and the light. Secure in the knowledge of his own safety, he thought, “Those two can do as they please.”

Sadly, he didn't have a handful of spicy melon seeds, or else he could have spat them in that qin demon's face.

Xi Ping had been connected to Yu Chang's spirit. He could now faintly sense that traitorous mad dog's general position, but he couldn't pull him into the Law Breaker Bracelet while he was clear-headed. Yu Chang wasn't an open-eyed cultivator—in just the same way, a strong man could lift a baby with hardly any effort, but he couldn't carry off a man of the same build as himself.

In a flash, Xi Ping seemed to have come to the end of the line. But as if he had been driven mad, he suddenly laughed.

The next moment, the consciousness of the ascended spirit cultivator who was already at the gate covered them, enveloping all of Yu Family Bend County within itself.

But just before the ascended spirit consciousness covered them, the paperman Xi Ping was occupying turned and was taken away by a transport array.

Yu Chang, watching him through the grit worms that covered the whole valley, froze: was he giving up just like that?

Yu Chang was forced to gasp in admiration once more. Tai Sui was so cautious, so restrained—he stood his ground in the face of temptation and suppressed his greed when faced with a mountain of gold. Suffering defeat on the verge of victory, he could break off his tail to survive without any hesitation.

No wonder he had managed to cultivate to a near-ascended spirit without giving himself away.

“A personage like this, if he doesn't die, there's no saying how far he'll go in the future,” Yu Chang thought. “He's even more

frightening than that brash and showy Qiu Sha. Perhaps I ought to do a good deed. While he has yet to reach an ascended spirit, lead the Xiang family master to Tao County and give those two a chance to ‘make friends’...”

But that Tai Sui had after all saved his life, and helped him remove the brand.

There was a colossal difference between their histories and styles, but deep down there was a subtle similarity between them. It wasn't precisely “encountering a bosom friend by the high mountains and flowing waters,” more like “a fly and an ant meeting in a manure pit”... Maybe that was also why Tai Sui had given him a helping hand.

As he thought this, Yu Chang secretly sighed: if not for the fact that the Great Way to heaven was long and full of obstacles, and this person knew too much about him, he thought they might have gotten on pretty well.

But just as Yu Chang was for once finding his conscience, deciding “Forget it, I'll do the right thing and leave a chance for us to meet in the future,” his spiritual sense suddenly manifested with a shudder, quashing Yu Chang's rare good intentions.

Roaming through the shadows, Yu Chang suddenly raised his head: Wait, this was wrong. Why was he sensing... his own aura?!

Xi Ping thought that in destroying the reincarnation wood amulet the two of them had used to communicate, Yu Chang's intention had been to stifle him to death. Right now, he had nowhere to express his bellyful of self-satisfaction and mockery—a person who had been in the Law Breaker Bracelet, no matter how careful he was not to get brought in a second time, already had his traces preserved forever inside the Law Breaker.

“Tao County and Yu Family Bend put together make up about a hundred li of land. In a day or two, even a mortal could stroll over, never mind a cultivator. Why would it take a transport array? Hilarious.”

Yu Chang was haughty and self-important, extremely crafty. Xi Ping had to use him, but he didn't dare to trust him... and he was planning to use him to do something rather dishonest.

So back when everyone had been making their preparations, Xi Ping had copied two “Yu Chang” consciousnesses, then brought the two of them into the world through papermen—the copies were of the “Yu Chang” who had entered the Law Breaker Bracelet at the beginning. They hadn't signed a blood covenant with Xi Ping, didn't know their complete plans, and didn't know that the original Yu Chang's brand had already been removed... This was the “Yu Chang” who had known upon seeing the original that the original was planning to use him as a substitute for the brand, so he struck first in self-defense.

The copied Yu Changs were miraculous. When Xi Ping wasn't paying attention to them, they shared the original's evil designs. But as creations of the Tai Sui Qin, the two of them were also like two walking reincarnation wood trees whose spirits could be controlled by Xi Ping at any time—and they didn't know it themselves.

Privately, Xi Ping decided to call the two of them “Yu Chang the First and Yu Chang the Second.”

If Yu Chang didn't make trouble, the two papermen would be Xi Ping's avatars. If Yu Chang got up to tricks right before they entered battle, these two were there to restrain him.

The two dear friends “First” and “Second” had been born half a shichen apart and hadn't seen each other. They didn't know of each other's existence, and each thought he had been copied in order to

serve as a “vessel” for the original’s brand and had reached an agreement with Tai Sui, who “seemed to be working with the original, but was actually opposed to him”; they were scheming toward the same goal: first work with Tai Sui to kill the original, then, after replacing the true Yu Chang, try to turn around and kill Tai Sui.

Right now, Yu Chang the First had already reached Yu Family Valley a step ahead on his sword.

Xi Ping’s pretext to “First” had been, “In order to investigate Southern Wan’s spies, Sanyue is sending a master to patrol the Wan-Chu border. Their first stop will be Yu Family Bend, where the Zhao family came ashore. The original Yu Chang is planning to fake his death and escape from Yu Family Bend, hide for a while after removing the brand, then when Sanyue has left return to Yu Family Bend to get revenge.”

“A guest from Sanyue” had originally been Xi Ping’s made-up reason, used to fool “Brother First,” but it turned out that at this critical moment, Yu Chang really had summoned a great personage from the Sanyue inner sect, completely living up to expectations as a traitor on the battlefield.

It was true that schemers all had bad luck—there was nothing wrong with that statement. Yu Chang-xiong knew that very well.

Sadly, knowing was one thing—his knowledge didn’t match his actions. He kept on crawling through the pit he himself had dug.

When the original Yu Chang detonated the rear mountain and seeped into the shadow transforming pearl, Yu Chang the First, who had stealthily infiltrated Yu Family Valley, already had a “perfect understanding” of the situation.

No one understands a person better than himself. Even with his eyes closed, this Brother First could deduce the path the original

had taken to escape via the shadow transforming pearl.

Now, “First” heard Tai Sui’s “weak and hoarse” voice in his ear: “I’ve captured the Yu family clan leader... *Cough-cough*, I... I can’t leave Tao County too long, I can only help you this far.”

Yu Chang the First said, “Understood, thank you.”

But what he thought was: So his actions are limited. No wonder. He must have realized the original would betray him and simply wanted to replace him with me, turn Yu Family Bend’s dog into his dog... “I” really am asking a tiger for its skin. This person must have tampered with me. I’ll take my time working it out, and when I understand it, I’ll get rid of him.

Tai Sui cut contact with him amid a bout of almost breathless coughing.

Xi Ping, already back in the Law Breaker, held his throat, dropping soy bean skins dripping hot oil onto Xi Yue. He was even tearing up. “Are you trying to kill me with spice, little scoundrel?!”

Yu Chang the First sent out a grit worm from his fingertip, deliberately leaving a trace in the clan leader’s room. Then he went straight toward the rear mountain.

The original Yu Chang at the rear mountain had a bad feeling right away. He turned tail and ran. But there was no wind now. None of the shadows were moving, and he couldn’t use spiritual energy. Who could he outrun?

Indeed, soon after, his vision swirled, and a “him” landed in front of him. Upon meeting, without another word, a beam of spiritual energy like a knife sliced toward his shadow!

Yu Chang knew that Tai Sui could use papermen to duplicate consciousnesses, and these papermen who were identical to real people and could use transport arrays to travel. But a transport array needed two ends. He had been on his guard against this move of Tai Sui's. Though he had run off himself, he hadn't forgotten to use grit worms to keep an eye out.

But there was no transport array. In other words, the paperman had come to Yu Family Valley flying his sword—he had been prepared in advance!

He had only just now come up with a last-moment plan on seeing the unexpected appearance of a Sanyue master and knowing that Tai Sui's game was up, but that guy was always scheming; he'd never had good intentions in the first place.

This Tai Sui must be fucking cultivating the way of wickedness, no? And his conscience had just been uneasy on that fucker's account!

The world was large and full of all kinds of marvels. Even in death Yu Chang couldn't have imagined that he would one day experience the grievance of "a good person being let down."

Even worse, he had no way of explaining himself to this "self" that wanted to drive him to death, no way to communicate and incite defection—Xiang Wenqing's consciousness was already looking this way. If he spoke, he would be exposed!

After hearing what had passed at the rear mountain, Xiang Wenqing's first reaction would certainly be to go see the Yu family clan leader. Seeing that the clan leader had mysteriously disappeared and that there was a trace of Yu Chang's aura in the room, he would immediately know that Yu Family Bend's chief offering was up to no good.

“Yu Chang the First” laughed. “I only have a paperman’s body, while you...”

The original Yu Chang swore inwardly: “Only a paperman’s body” my ass! When that paperman is destroyed, let’s see whether you’ll still exist!

The ascended spirit master was approaching. “Yu Chang the First”’s killing move sliced toward the original Yu Chang in the shadow. “Let’s see whether you’ll come out!”

If he didn’t come out, he’d be beaten to death by himself. If he came out, he’d be captured by a Sanyue inner sect ascended spirit...

Yu Chang’s vision simply went dark.

But it seemed that heaven didn’t want him to die. Just then, the wind rose, and a cloud suddenly floated across the sky, covering the light of the moon and stars!

The shadow of the cloud instantly covered everything. Yu Chang hastily ducked into the cloud’s shadow, spreading himself out dozens of times larger, narrowly avoiding getting hit anywhere critical as he took “his own” hit.

In that momentary delay, Xiang Wenqing arrived and aimed a blow at the paperman “Yu Chang the First.”

Laughing, Yu Chang the First said, “Calamities last a thousand years. You have a bit of dumb luck after all!”

While Xiang Wenqing and Yu Chang the First fought, the original Yu Chang used the quickly moving cloud shadow to flit through the rear mountain. Then he spat out the shadow transforming pearl and made his escape!

The difference in cultivation level between “near-ascended spirit” and “middle ascended spirit stage” was no small thing, and what was more, Xiang Wenqing had always had a close connection to the Yu family. He had a perfect grasp of the so-called “chief offering”’s depths.

There was practically no suspense in this battle. In less than half an incense stick, the dust had settled. Seeing that Yu Chang actually dared to fight back, the master from Sanyue’s inner sect didn’t listen to his explanations at all. In a flash, he got Yu Chang the First under control and simply performed a soul-searching.

Xi Ping was astonished that Yu Chang the First had collapsed at the first blow like a mortal. At the same time, he quickly pulled out Yu Chang the First’s consciousness.

The consciousness dispersed immediately. The paperman body showed its seams.

Xiang Wenqing frowned at once. He raised his head and sent out his consciousness, instantly locating the original Yu Chang, fleeing toward the southwest.

The secret report Sanyue’s inner sect had received said that creating papermen was the power of the Luwu’s half-demon surnamed Bai. Yu Chang was colluding with the Luwu!

Without so much as thinking about it, Xiang Wenqing flew off in pursuit.

The original Yu Chang grit his teeth, viciously swallowing a mouthful of blood. He felt that all his innards were churning.

“Tai—Sui,” he said from between his teeth, “if you’re heartless, don’t blame me for being faithless. This being the case, I’ll lead this inner

sect master to Tao County to call upon Your Excellency!”

And just as the two of them left Yu Family Bend, the second paperman Xi Ping had prepared — “Yu Chang the Second” — arrived.

“First” had been to guard against Yu pulling any tricks at the last moment. “Second,” on the other hand, had been created in case of malice on Yu Chang’s part while showing him the arrays.

Xi Yue was a genius... in embryo.

He had been alive only twenty-some years, and over a decade of that had been spent as a befuddled little wretch. All told, his study of arrays had lasted no more than six years. That four-century-old tortoise Yu Chang would only need to give the arrays a give of his attention while devoted to the “way of betrayal”; he was much more experienced than Xi Yue.

If their “planted agent” made up his mind to trick them, Xi Yue wouldn’t be able to win against him.

So what Xi Ping had said to “Yu Chang the Second” was: “Your original is preparing to disturb the spiritual energy in the valley by faking his death and use that opportunity to sneak into the array hub, cut off the valley’s arrays, and appropriate the Yu family’s treasury.”

Yu Chang the Second reached Yu Family Valley slightly later than his “big brother” Brother First. He saw the might released by Xiang Wenqing from afar and didn’t dare to act rashly, rapidly passing judgment on this situation: the original must have gotten halfway through his plan, then run right into a master from Sanyue’s inner sect coming to visit Yu Family Valley... What kind of incessantly plotting unlucky star incarnate was he? The more he schemed, the more his luck betrayed him?

After a moment, Yu Chang the Second sensed that great personage leaving the Yu Family Valley, going toward the southwest.

Brother Second seemed to also understand “himself” very well. He smiled: The original is bringing the trouble to Tao County? Wonderful, let Sanyue’s inner sect’s great personage kill that bizarre Tai Sui, I’ll wait here to give him a nice surprise when he gets back.

Then, like a shadow, he slipped into the chaotic Yu Family Valley, familiarly heading straight for the center of the arrays.

Xi Ping quickly said to Xi Yue, “Didn’t you say that Yu Family Valley’s arrays are complex and profound? Watch what the old fox does closely. You can’t pass up this opportunity. Heaven’s Design Pavilion and Xuanyin’s ancient texts won’t teach you this.”

Xi Yue said, “... What did you bring me here for?”

He had thought he was here to help, but instead his soul had flown to Western Chu in the middle of the night, and he found that he had actually been kidnapped to attend class!

Xi Yue said, “So why did you have me research Yu Family Valley’s array formation beforehand, rack my brains to come up with a way to break them?”

“That’s obvious.” Xi Ping adopted the manner of a family elder and logically said, “How can learning in a quick passing glance have the same outcome as coming prepared with questions after careful study?”

Xi Yue: “...”

If he hadn’t seen the cartoon faces drawn on the classics in the study at the Marquis Manor, he would have fallen for this.

Xi Yue said, “But that Yu Chang has already reached Tao County with the cultivator from Sanyue’s inner sect after him. That Xiang family member’s cultivation level is about the same as the peak master’s, how can you still...”

“About the same as whose? Don’t insult the peak master behind his back. Concentrate, kid. You’re so full of worries. If you don’t do what I say, I’ll smack your hand.” Xi Ping held down the back of his head, turning him to face the dizzying array formation—when he was little, san-ge had pushed him toward books with this motion many times. He finally had a chance to try it out on someone else. Heh, this head was very round. It felt great!

“I’ve emptied out the Snake King’s Immortal Palace. It’s waiting for him. If he hadn’t come, I’d have had to make a ‘Yu the Third’⁷⁶ to lure him there.”

Xi Yue: “...”

Before, he’d witnessed this liar single-handedly trick Lin Zhaoli out of his wits and lead Lü Chengyi and Zhao Zhenwei to their deaths. He never would have thought that, in the years he hadn’t seen him, this person would not only have learned a pile of talismans and arrays with “saving money” as their first principle, but also gone up a level in digging holes and burying people in them!

Xi Ping laughed. “This story teaches us that in the future, when you’re with Heaven’s Design Pavilion and run into an evil cultivator like me, even if their cultivation isn’t as good as yours, you can’t think that you’ll be able to handle them. You have to go back and get Lao Pang. Heaven’s Design Pavilion doesn’t encourage one-on-one fights.”

Xi Yue acutely picked something out of his words. He abruptly knocked his hand aside. “What nonsense are you talking! What do

you mean, an evil cultivator like you!”

As though nothing were the matter, Xi Ping said, “Hey, I was just making an analogy, shh, look—”

Xi Yue struggled a few times without success. His attention was quickly drawn by Yu Chang the Second’s dizzying movements.

Xi Ping tilted his head and looked at him. He tapped the table, and a little teapot next to him automatically flew up and poured Xi Yue a cup of a Chu specialty.

Then, waving a fan, he laughed soundlessly: Your ge is a “great evil cultivator” who had to be sealed by Xuanyin Mountain’s three high elders working together, the same treatment that the demon host received. Awesome, huh?

Tao County was just like him. It only wanted to live in peace, only wanted to take back what belonged to it, but it could only work in secret, hiding itself.

It really was a disgrace.

In Yu Family Valley, with the whistling of the spiritual wind raised by the “death” of a near-ascended spirit echoing, no one noticed when the core arrays stopped.

Totally unimpeded, Yu Chang the Second passed through three layers of prohibitions and entered Yu Family Valley’s storehouse.

Xi Ping had spent all these years trapped in a little border town. He had no basis for imagining what the Xiang family was like. But he suspected that the imperial treasury in Jinping’s Guangyun Palace couldn’t match up to this. Inside were immortal tools of every grade, over a thousand downgraded immortal tools, spiritual stones heaped up in one “spiritual store” after another. Xi Ping recognized

the inscriptions for preventing the leakage of spiritual energy on the spiritual stores. The spiritual energy content of a spiritual store was about equivalent to three thousand liang of white spirits.

There were so many spiritual stores that they couldn't be counted at once.

The inscriptions lit Yu Chang the Second's face snow-white. He laughed and extended a hand to create a grit worm, ready to set up an ambush for the original Yu Chang here...

Before it could take shape, the grit worm disappeared.

Yu Chang the Second stood where he was blankly, like a wooden puppet. His consciousness dispersed. The paperman was occupied by Xi Ping.

"One, two..." Xi Ping counted carefully, pointing at one fully loaded spiritual store after another. Wherever he pointed, the spiritual stones within were all taken into the Law Breaker. "Forty."

He stopped in his tracks.

That was enough for the spirit gathering array.

CHAPTER 117 - Unbound Knife (24)

“Xi Yue,” Xi Ping said in the treasury of the Yu family’s main residence, “after joining Heaven’s Design Pavilion, you may not have another honest reason for going abroad. You can’t have come all this way for nothing. Come on, put on a paperman, bring the spiritual stones for the spirit gathering array.”

Saying so, Xi Ping picked up a dozen open-eyed grade mustard seeds inside the Yu family treasury and tossed them into the Law Breaker. “Hurry up, it’ll be too late once the Xiang family member gets to Tao County.”

Xi Yue had a bellyful of questions: the person coming from the Xiang family was a middle stage ascended spirit. A middle stage ascended spirit’s consciousness could cover half the East Sea. Couldn’t it cover Tao County? Was there a lid over Tao County?

Even if there was a lid over Tao County, could the hundred or so li from Yu Family Bend to Tao County stop an ascended spirit’s flight? He’d be there in no time. The traces of a spirit-gathering array on the scale of a hundred thousand white spirits couldn’t be dispersed. Even a blind person would know what had happened here. How was this any different from activating the array right in front of Xiang Wenqing’s face?

What do you actually want?

But the trouble was that Xi Yue’s mouth didn’t move fast enough. Before he could organize his words, Wei Chengxiang and a bunch of Luwu were swept all together into the Law Breaker. Everyone busily took a mustard seed to collect spiritual stones, moving as fast as thieves. Xi Yue was surrounded and left the Law Breaker carrying spiritual stones against his will. He had no time to speak.

Then he heard Xi Ping's order: "The Great Market has passed. This is the off season for Wild Fox Country, but there are still some cultivators there. Take care to conceal yourselves."

The spirit-gathering array had forty-nine places in all that needed spiritual stones placed on them. In the night, the half-immortals flitted over the barren earth like shadows, coming face to face with listless and sickly beasts of burden. The sparse inns had just closed up for the night. Lanterns had been lit in the tofu shops, their unsteady light now and then stabbing the abandoned little Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon station—this had originally been meant to connect to Great Wan; it had been built halfway, then abandoned. The workers then had been full of delight, thinking that Tao County would develop afterward, not expecting that events wouldn't run smoothly and that the attempt would fall through. To this day, they had been paid less than thirty percent of their wages.

Segment after segment of rusted track lay discarded along the potholed roads. They had become children's playgrounds. The children had drawn houses and plants next to them, more lively than even the Snake King's Immortal Palace. During the day, they played hopscotch among the railroad tracks. At night, they left this happy abode to be watched over by the reincarnation wood trees growing aslant.

And the waters of the Xia River flowed quietly.

Xi Ping began to croon a Western Chu ditty that wouldn't have stood up in an elegant hall. "The Xia's waters are long, so long your heart breaks. The river winds know not the wastes of Chu's hills..."

He copied out in full the array Yu Chang had used to blow up the rear of the mountain and fake his death, only even larger, embracing the whole of the Yu family treasury within it.

“... the wastes of Chu’s hills. Mountains high as the clouds cast shadows so heavy, the light doesn't shine in till noon...”

The lines of his array were decisive and sharp. The spiritual threads seemed to have been carved with a knife.

After going through the whole array without interruption, Xi Ping stopped. “Immortals in the sky rest on springtime joys, the emperor in Dongheng sits upon his throne. Gentlemen of the past, listen well, Chu's mountains are a good place, a good place...”

“Tai Sui, the spiritual stones have been put in place in the west half.”

“Tai Sui, there are extra spiritual stones, enough to make up for wastage.”

“Tai Sui...”

The reliable Luwu reported one after another.

Xi Ping lowered his eyes, sensing the location of each Luwu. In his mind, he could draw the spirit-gathering array that he knew by heart.

“Senior, the spirit-gathering array is complete,” Wei Chengxiang said at last. “Should I place the spiritual stones?”

Xi Ping didn’t answer, so Wei Chengxiang didn’t rush him. She steadily used her one real hand to squeeze the mustard seed, ignoring all the anxious or distressed gazes aimed at her.

Zhao Qindan couldn’t resist saying, “Place them, what are you waiting for?”

Wei Chengxiang raised a finger of her false hand. Zhao Qindan suddenly found that this slippery-tongued liar had unusually calm

eyes, like a pair of still lakes that had reflected many eternal partings.

“A-Xiang,” Xi Ping suddenly said to Wei Chengxiang, “Pang Wenchang is actually a pretty good person. At the beginning, if you’d gone to Jinghua Village according to his arrangements, by now you’d probably have gotten married and settled down very happily... Back then, you were young and impulsive, insisting on taking this fork in the road. I couldn’t convince you otherwise. You’ve been a vagrant for many years. You must have run out of youthful impulse by now. Are you afraid? Do you ever regret it?”

Wei Chengxiang unflappably answered, “I’ve done many wrong things in the last twenty-something years, senior. There are some I’ve paid the price for, and some... I’m slow-witted by nature, and perhaps I haven’t yet discovered what wrong I did. I would venture to say that the only thing I didn’t do wrong was going south with the Exonerators to the Land of Turmoil and pushing open the door to cultivation by stepping on White Amaranth’s head.”

Xi Ping said, “Your face has been weathered by the elements, and you have no permanent place to live. You haven’t gotten rid of your eye-opening scar, and you’ve even lost one hand. Is that very dignified? As soon as the young mistress laid eyes on you, she thought you were a bad guy.”

Wei Chengxiang raised her head and looked at the reincarnation wood trees by the road, as if meeting the eyes of that mysterious Tai Sui, wherever he was. “On my knees in the mud, I’m willing to crawl. Sitting in a fragrant carriage, I would only be carried along. I wouldn’t feel at ease. In an ant’s whole life, being able to inch forward against the wind is good enough. It beats drifting downstream three thousand li. Don’t you think so?”

“That’s right.” Xi Ping suddenly laughed. “That’s what I like to hear.”

His gaze instantly pierced the heavy mountains—Yu Chang had clearly guessed his connection to reincarnation wood. He had been avoiding Xi Ping’s line of sight the whole time. But what he didn’t know was that Tao County was enveloped by the Law Breaker Bracelet.

The moment a consciousness that had passed through the Law Breaker entered Tao County, the Tai Sui Qin moved faintly.

A vein twitched at the back of Yu Chang’s head. Out of nowhere, he felt petrified.

Xi Ping said, “Place them.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Wei Chengxiang poured spiritual energy toward her fingertips and opened the mustard seed in her hand. The last bag of spiritual stones fell onto the center of the array.

As soon as Yu Chang charged into the limits of Tao County, the spirit-gathering array took shape as if keeping step with him. If you didn’t know better, you would have thought he was the crux of the array.

Yu Chang was stupefied—ignoring for the moment how Tai Sui had gotten ahold of a hundred thousand and more white spirits without his help, he had actually dared to activate the spirit-gathering array right under the nose of the master from Sanyue’s inner sect!

Did he want to die? Hadn’t he learned anything from Qiu Sha?

When Sanyue’s inner sect brought the Silver Moon down from the mountain again, they would shine it at him, too, dry him to jerky while draining Tao County dry again. What was he playing at?!

At the same time, all those who had laid down the array stuck pre-prepared “stealth shuttles” onto themselves and disappeared into the night, scattering in all directions—the stealth shuttles were an immortal tool from Xuanyin’s Moon Plated Peak, their effect about the same as stealth talismans, able to hide people. But a stealth talisman could only fool mortals and was only slightly useful against low-level cultivators, better than nothing. This stealth shuttle could completely avoid a half-immortal, and even those established foundations whose spiritual senses weren’t particularly notable.

The spirit-gathering array that ran through all of Tao County flashed with an almost imperceptible faint light. Next, the spiritual energy of a hundred thousand white spirits was drained dry in an instant. The spiritual stones turned to powder.

All of Tao County let out a sigh. It was as if the veins of the earth were being crushed bit by bit. The veins of the earth, which had been dry for a month... no, dry for decades, even over a century, were flooded by the spiritual energy from the spirit-gathering array, rumbling as they were broken and remade.

Near the Snake King’s Immortal Palace, the withered trees that had died under the Silver Moon once again softened, even sprouting inconspicuous buds!

Xi Yue, driven away by the Luwu, suddenly sensed something. As they withdrew, they passed by a house. He automatically sent out his consciousness and saw a few small children crowded onto a single mat, sleeping soundly. Their hands and feet were laid together. One child felt an itch and drew back a hand, scratching unconsciously.

Xi Yue’s pupils contracted slightly. He saw on the back of that child’s hand a scab like snake scales, fading at a speed visible to the naked eye, gradually healing.

At the same time, all the cultivators in Tao County were disturbed by the spirit-gathering array, coming out to look one after another.

“Is it an earthquake?”

“No, I think it’s the veins of the earth...”

“Where did this spiritual energy come from, how can it be so dense?”

“This is bad!”

The one who had said “This is bad” was a worm master. As soon as Xi Yue, hidden in the dark, glimpsed this person, he instinctively bent his back. Only now did he find that there were many worm masters hiding in Tao County!

In an instant, Xi Yue’s eyes opened wide. He understood the sequence of cause and effect—no wonder that person had ignored His Highness Prince Zhuang’s warning, insisted on igniting the spirit-gathering array at this sensitive moment; no wonder he’d wanted to bring Xi Yue’s consciousness to Western Chu in the middle of the night... no wonder he’d wanted to make him personally set down a portion of the spiritual stones, personally change some people’s fates.

Xi Yue said, “Ge!”

Xi Ping didn’t answer, only laughed vaguely.

He didn’t use spiritual stones to set off his array like Yu Chang had done. Instead, he took out the old *Discard the False and Keep the True* volume that he had taken from Yu Chang. Then, not touching his own qin, he used the old volume to copy a beam of sword energy from the Tai Sui Qin.

Twang—

Boom!

Xi Ping's Anger Shifu to Death Sword could at most only match up to forty or fifty percent of what his shifu had done before, but that was enough.

A beam of sword energy swept by like a flash of lightning, piercing right through the protective inscriptions on the spiritual stores inside the treasury. Finally, it fell right at the center of the array.

Oppressive spiritual energy instantly filled up the array and activated it with its fury, blowing up all of the nearly one hundred spiritual stores remaining here.

Never mind Xi Ping's paperman body, even his true body wouldn't necessarily have been able to survive here—his paperman was instantly destroyed. It was as if his consciousness had been trampled by a hundred thousand gold-armored zhengs. It was quickly pulled back by the Law Breaker.

At the same time, Yu Family Valley became like a temporary spiritual mountain.

The spiritual energy that had been tightly sealed by inscriptions for centuries came whistling out of the storehouse, totally smashing many of the arrays, inscriptions, and immortal tools in Yu Family Valley as easily as crushing dry twigs, then flowing out in all directions like a windstorm.

The spiritual energy rose into the sky, carrying steam, coalescing into mists like auspicious clouds, covering the clear sky for thousands of li. In hardly any time, rain began to fall. In Yu Family Bend, the stagnant water in the gullies began to flow as if by miracle, soaking the dry riverbeds, all the streams augmenting each

other. Mountains on the verge of a landslide were stabilized by tree roots on the cliffs became robust. Half-dead millet and sunflowers in front and back yards straightened their spines. Faint color came into the nearly dried out faces of the young herb gatherers.

This sky-shaking spiritual energy explosion instantly spread out in all directions. Xiang Wenqing, whose pursuit had taken him to the border of Tao County, and Yu Chang, who had just arrived in Tao County, both heard it!

Xiang Wenqing took one glance and perceived the remaining sword energy that had flown out of the *Discard the False and Keep the True* book.

“Yu—Chang!”

Yu Chang’s mind buzzed: wrong, there was something wrong! Tai Sui had deliberately led him to Tao County!

In just this bit of time, Xi Ping had already returned to Tao County. The attack his consciousness had sustained was within the limits of endurance. Like a big cat skilled in bearing pain, he calmly invited “Yu Chang the Third” out using qin music.

This “Fish Cake” was even more unfortunate than his two big brothers. As soon as he came into the world, his spirit was controlled by Xi Ping. Like a puppet on strings, he once again brandished his vital weapon, the *Discard the False and Keep the True* book, copied the Tai Sui Qin, and struck the Snake King’s Immortal Palace with a beam of sword energy.

Blowing up the Snake King’s Immortal Palace didn’t need so many spiritual stones. When the qin music fell, the sumptuous... yet earthy palace was destroyed. The destructive power of a near-ascended spirit was astonishing. Inside the Immortal Palace, the “Snake King” and the Snake King’s “half-immortal lackeys”—in other words, the

group of papermen prepared in advance—didn't have time to make a sound before they were crushed to dust by the blow.

All that remained was the lingering music of the qin!

Yu Chang thought, I'll fuck your ancestors!

Go ahead and frame me, but can't you let me change my attack?!

Good grief, this is an insult!

Xiang Wenqing had yet to set foot within the scope of the Law Breaker Bracelet and therefore couldn't feel the spirit-gathering array under the Law Breaker's protection, but he wasn't deaf. With an ascended spirit's hearing, how could he not hear as loud a sound as the one made by the Snake King's Immortal Palace being blown sky high?

Without a second thought, Xiang Wenqing went chasing after the sound. As soon as he entered Tao County, he sensed that something was wrong.

Xiang Wenqing was half a step behind. By now, the spirit-gathering array had already channeled the spiritual energy in the large quantity of spiritual stones throughout the veins of the earth, leaving only the plentiful echoes of the spiritual energy. Xiang Wenqing, coming a moment late, had no way to determine where the origin and crux of the array had been. And Tao County was a harbor for evildoers. There were many evil cultivators of all kinds. The Luwu who had set down the spiritual stones had silently dispersed. He didn't know who had done this. Everything tacitly pointed to it being Yu Chang's doing.

So this ascended spirit master headed straight for the ruins of the Snake King's Immortal Palace—the aura of the *Discard the False and Keep the True* book also appeared there.

Yu Chang, overlooked by Xiang Wenqing, hid inside a shadow, all the hairs on the back of his neck standing up.

He knew that it was Tai Sui who had blown up the Snake King's Immortal Palace. At such a close distance, an ascended spirit's consciousness would have made it there already. Even if Tai Sui had a shadow transforming pearl, he wouldn't be able to escape Xiang Wenqing's search.

A cultivator at the peak of the open-eyed stage might be able to surmount a single established foundation pill and go beyond their grade to kill an early established foundation, but from established foundation to ascended spirit, you had to pass through a heavenly tribulation. Facing a middle stage ascended spirit, an established foundation cultivator who had just found their way to the threshold of an ascended spirit wouldn't be able to fight back. Even if he used a paperman substitute, Xiang Wenqing would still be able to crush his consciousness.

Now, Yu Chang couldn't see any way for Tai Sui to get out alive, but he knew that colluding with the Luwu, detonating Yu Family Bend's treasury, and the spirit-gathering array in Tao County had all been set under his name. Whether or not Tai Sui could come out on top, Yu Chang definitely couldn't come out on top!

What kind of suicidal way to frame a person was this!

Xi Ping didn't even think of dodging.

He stayed where he was. At the same time, every waking or sleeping commoner in Tao County heard a voice in their ear: *Do you want this place to become a human world?*

A true human world, without immortals or demons, without cultivators, without immortal tools whether downgraded or not,

without the lackluster favor of the immortals, cut off from the immortal mountains, cut off from the nation, henceforth standing alone.

The Law Breaker Bracelet was a parasite inside the Tai Sui Qin. It had only given the master of the qin the rights to “open the door” and “decorate,” permitting him to manage the space inside the Law Breaker Bracelet.

But Xi Ping wasn't the master of the Law Breaker Bracelet. He couldn't change any of the rules within Tao County as enveloped by the Law Breaker. If he was hunted and killed in Tao County, the Law Breaker also wouldn't care about his life... At most, when the “house collapsed,” it would move out.

If he wanted the Law Breaker hanging high above Tao County to be on his side, Xi Ping needed the “masters of the Law Breaker” who had created the Law Breaker's axiom to give him a rule.

The spirit-gathering array was only the beginning. Casually sticking Yu Chang with the blame was only a side dish. Whether this opera would go wrong in the end, whether Tao County could escape its predetermined fate, would depend on the true masters of the Law Breaker... and what road they chose.

There were still a few days before Mid-Autumn. Xi Ping had originally left enough breathing room. But that bastard Yu Chang was truly unlucky. Xi Ping had run headfirst into a master from Sanyue, forcing him to run a risk and offer up the fate of “Tai Sui” as well.

Anyway, he was a ghost from the Impassable Sea that Tao County had summoned back. So what if he placed another bet?

And Xiang Wenqing was already before his eyes. Wearing Yu Chang's skin and holding Yu Chang's vital weapon, Xi Ping struck

first, tossing out all the established foundation attack talismans he could remember all at once. Xiang Wenqing didn't even blink. Not one of those talismans could come within three zhang of him!

It was as if Xi Ping were cultivating the "way of shit-stirring." Apart from occasionally bullying those whose cultivation was lower than his, he had never directly fought anyone. He was given to feeling good about himself, Zhi Xiu couldn't stand to discipline him too sternly, and he had been spending so much time hanging out with Lin Chi. Over time, he had developed the mistaken impression that an ascended spirit was nothing remarkable.

This was the first time in his life that Xi Ping was facing a true ascended spirit master alone.

He had thought that since Yu Chang could keep up in a fight with Xiang Wenqing for half an incense stick and even make his getaway under his nose, he could at least hold out for a little while.

Only when they began to fight did he find that it wasn't that the ascended spirit was weak, it was that Yu Chang's four centuries hadn't been lived for nothing. His true strength was far greater than Xi Ping's shoddy skills!

If his teacher was too soft-hearted to beat it out of him, an outsider would come along to teach this ignorant junior how to behave.

Faced with an enraged middle stage ascended spirit, never mind holding out, Xi Ping even thought he couldn't catch his breath. His essence stagnated as though it had frozen. Xiang Wenqing tossed out a talisman he didn't recognize at all. As soon as that talisman took shape, all the wind around him seemed to turn into knives. He could hardly maintain the paperman body!

In an instant, Xi Ping drew in a breath, pulled open the *Discard the False and Keep the True* book, and took out a copied Tai Sui Qin. He

threw out three beams of sword energy from different angles, each beam stronger than the next. In a moment of life and death, the “Anger Shifu to Death Sword” nearly had something of his shizun’s true sword aura in it.

At the last stroke, the qin strings snapped, cutting his hand open. The three strokes had nearly emptied out his essence.

But the sword energy he had thought astonishing still couldn’t reach Xiang Wenqing!

Xiang Wenqing’s flowing wide sleeves bulged. He had no need to draw talismans to precisely control the direction of spiritual energy. The sword aura carried by spiritual energy fell into his hand and obediently coiled up in his palm, turning right into a gentle breeze.

Xi Ping’s brow went cold. He turned and ran. But it was already too late. The next moment, he heard the sound of tearing silk. The paperman body broke. The spiritual energy around him had become a big swamp with his consciousness stuck inside it. He could neither withdraw into the Law Breaker nor jump into the reincarnation wood.

If this had been his true body, the water dragon pearl might have been able to take a hit for him, and the shard of Zhaoting at the center of his brow might have been able to help him out, but it had to be “Yu Chang” standing here right now, and if he died, he still had to die as Yu Chang, or else all his arrangements before would be in vain.

Xiang Wenqing said with a cold smile, “Don’t use a paperman substitute in front of someone with higher cultivation than you. The consciousness dies faster than the body. Didn’t your Luwu friends teach you?”

Xi Ping even began to feel like he was “melting”...

Just then, a figure whose face was covered by a Luwu mask suddenly appeared holding a talisman gun, shooting at Xiang Wenqing like a mantis trying to stop a chariot.

Xi Yue!

Xi Ping's scalp bristled.

How could a little half-immortal dare to trespass into a battle with an ascended spirit? Are you crazy? Do you want to die?!

Without so much as looking, Xiang Wenqing aimed a blow. Xi Ping's eyes nearly burst from their sockets. He struggled fiercely. But he couldn't escape the talismans around him, which were like the net of heaven.

But before the blow could fall on Xi Yue, strings suddenly played in Xi Ping's ears. It was the real Tai Sui Qin!

He froze. The Law Breaker was moving.

The Law Breaker's masters, woken and interrogated in the middle of the night, had at last come to a difficult decision, like the teenage girl in Jinping's southern outskirts who had firmly put her traveling bag on her back and gone south—countless ants inched forward against the wind.

“We want to escape the control of the spiritual mountains, escape the patriarchal clan system, escape the sect, escape the rules and regulations that have been fixed in this world for thousands of years... henceforth to stand alone.”

They said: “Tai Sui, we want a human world.”

Within the scope of the Law Breaker, a new rule silently took shape in Tao County: there were only humans here, no immortals or demons, no cultivators, no use of spiritual energy.

The blow coming straight toward Xi Yue turned into wind... true wind.

The wind sent the person made of paper up like a kite. The paperman's magic disappeared, and the consciousnesses that didn't belong here each went back where they had come from. Xi Ping returned to his true body, and Xi Yue was deported, thrown back to Jinping.

The spiritual energy in Xiang Wenqing's hands vanished. This middle stage ascended spirit fell to the ground and stumbled, shocked and horrified—he couldn't control a sliver of spiritual energy.

He had become mortal.

CHAPTER 118 - Unbound Knife (Final)

Xiang Wenqing had opened his spiritual eyes at around twenty. He had spent nearly seven centuries cultivating. For a cultivator over seven centuries old, twenty years old was equivalent to when an ordinary person had just been born and hadn't yet opened their eyes. He had long ago forgotten what it felt like to "be mortal." When he fell from the sky into the earth, he was knocked silly.

He felt as if lead had been poured into his limbs, trapping him firmly on the ground. His arms and legs were powerless, each movement slowed down countless times because of their sluggishness. The spiritual sense that had covered all his senses was completely gone, leaving him "deaf" and "blind," only able to hear sounds within a few zhang of him. In the night, he couldn't even clearly see the birds' nests on the trees beyond ten chi away. His free consciousness was also trapped inside his skin... He clearly sensed the dense spiritual energy passing by him, but that spiritual energy had absolutely no connection to him!

The legitimate immortal sects had always looked down on common cultivators, calling them "evil cultivators." These people spent all their time dodging and hiding, struggling amongst themselves, racking their brains to win some scant resources. Did that deserve the name of "cultivation"? After a life and death struggle to establish a foundation, all they could do was count the days until they lost their minds or became the meritorious service of some half-immortal from an outer sect.

But first there had been Qiu Sha slaughtering dozens of ascended spirits, and now Yu Chang had escaped his spiritual image brand and used an unheard-of evil art to strip an ascended spirit of his powers!

Where were all these people coming from? What had gone wrong with the world? Was there a major tribulation on the way, the hosts of evil about to run wild?

Tao County's Seventeen Li Town—Wild Fox Country—was the easiest place to live in all of Tao County. People came and went here. If you set up a stall, you would be able to feed your family. It was much easier than getting up before dawn to do manual labor. But there was no such thing as a free lunch. If the money was easy to earn, you had to bear the risk. The residents of Wild Fox Country were most frightened of being woken in the middle of the night by the sounds of cultivators fighting. There wouldn't even be time to pray that you wouldn't get involved. No one had ever dared to stick their heads out and watch the fun.

But tonight, mysteriously, the people seemed to have gained some mystical courage. When the loud noises from the direction of the Snake King's Immortal Palace ceased, as if they had agreed in advance, the people pushed open the corners of their windows one after another, quietly discussing with their neighbors.

Someone said, "I just dreamed... that Tai Sui appeared to me."

As soon as these words were spoken, the people were silent for a moment, then there was a splash, one stone raising a thousand waves.

"And here I thought I'd dozed off!"

"I didn't dare to say it just now, I was afraid people would think I'd lost my marbles."

"I heard it. I hadn't finished mending the autumn clothes, I wasn't sleeping."

"Tai Sui said..."

In a place with abundant spiritual energy, all living things thrived. Even mortals who hadn't opened their spiritual eyes could sense that Tao County's night was unusually clear, as if something had changed.

If everyone had had the same dream, then... could it be real?

After a moment, a group of strong people in the prime of life spontaneously stood up and decided to go have a look. They each took a convenient defensive tool, ganged together, and went toward the Snake King's Immortal Palace, where the sounds had come from.

They were stupefied.

The Snake King's Immortal Palace, as luxurious as an emperor's palace, had been flattened. Not one of the immortals who were always going in and out was there. With such a big patch of land suddenly emptied, all the locals felt that the place had become unfamiliar.

A sharp-eyed youth called out: "Look, there's someone there!"

Everyone looked in the direction he was pointing and saw that among the ruins was a man in green clothes, with a green jade crown, with wide green sleeves. He was self-important and oppressively noble.

With style like this, could he be a Qilin Guardsman? A person next to the youth pressed his hand down in a hurry. "Great heavens, you can't go around pointing at the Qilin Guard."

With the fearlessness of youth, the young man said curiously, "Oh? Are there cripples in the Qilin Guard?"

Only then did everyone discover that the noble was limping as he walked. He wasn't precisely a cripple. He seemed to have sprained his ankle.

The Qilin Guard... could also sprain their ankles?

So in front of the ruins of the Snake King's Immortal Palace, Xiang Wenqing stared helplessly at a big crowd of the ignorant masses hefting hammers, chisels, axes, and saws.

He was a mighty administrator of Sanyue's Principal Peak, a member of Dongheng's imperial family. Even inner sect disciples didn't dare to stare him directly in the face when they met him. This was Xiang Wenqing's first time in his life being observed by a big crowd. Their stares made him bristle all over!

For a time, he had only one thought: Leave! I have to leave this place as soon as possible!

This awesomely powerful master was like an injured lone wolf who had strayed from the pack and accidentally wandered into a herd of bison, filled with dread by the dark and densely-packed herbivores. Enduring the pain in his ankle, Xiang Wenqing backed away from the crowd, heading north without daring to linger for a moment.

The villagers didn't know his history, and looking at his expression of wary haughtiness, they didn't dare to strike up a conversation. Soon, all the people in Seventeen Li Town, seeing that the others were all right, also came out one after another to take in the new sight.

The people stared at Xiang Wenqing like spectators watching a monkey. He had never known that two legs could be so inconvenient and that Tao County's roads, fallen into disrepair, could be so bumpy, so overgrown!

The other cultivators in Tao County were the same. Some tried using immortal tools, some formed hand seals for talismans over and over to no avail... Each and every one acted like they had lost a part of their body.

The calmest ones, meanwhile, were among the Luwu.

The Luwu had been Kaiming Cultivators to start with. They had been trained in haste as cultivators. Being mortal was what they were used to. On losing their powers, the vast majority only felt that it was slightly unfamiliar. They didn't feel like they had become "disabled"; moreover, these people worked as spies, and apart from the immortal tools supplied by Moon Plated Peak, they knew all the tricks of mortal spies, and they had prepared multiple identities when infiltrating Western Chu. Since Xu Rucheng and some others had been transferred to the Zhao family hidden realm, the "Snake King" had been played in turn by a group of people, while the others had created various identities of cultivators and mortals in Tao County in case of urgent need.

Some of the Luwu had only come to Western Chu as reinforcements after the Zhao family's treason, so they had experienced the ten days that Great Wan's spiritual energy had been prohibited. The second time was easier. They quickly calmed down.

None of the communication devices worked, but they could actually still use the reincarnation wood amulets. It was evident that this Senior "Tai Sui" had unfathomable depths indeed.

Tai Sui said, "If you have a mortal identity, go back to it. If you don't, hide with a colleague... *Cough-cough*, don't, don't let anyone see you."

The Luwu gave affirmatives and smoothly dispersed into Tao County's nooks and crannies, becoming a wandering troupe of performers and wandering officiants who specialized in overseeing

weddings and funerals—like Xu Rucheng had been at the start—as well as barefoot doctors, passing peddlers...

Only Zhao Qindan was still bewildered and helpless. Wei Chengxiang tugged at her. “Come with me.”

“Where?” Zhao Qindan, unwilling to give up, was still forming hand seals. There was no reaction, so she was about to pick up a spiritual stone. “I can’t use...”

Wei Chengxiang held her hand down, took off her own bamboo hat, and put it on Zhao Qindan’s head, pulling down the brim to cover her face. She said almost inaudibly, “Put away your spiritual stones. From now on, don’t reveal to anyone that you’re a cultivator.”

Zhao Qindan said, “Huh?”

Wei Chengxiang didn’t explain further. She pulled her familiarly through the lanes.

If her guess was right, this must be the Law Breaker.

Wei Chengxiang’s mind worked quickly. As the Law Breaker’s previous master, she was the only person who generally understood Tai Sui’s arrangements right now: the Law Breaker had vanished after Qiu Sha’s death, so Sanyue was certain to have sent people to make a close search for it, only leaving helplessly when they came up empty.

And a month later, Yu Family Bend’s chief offering suddenly escaped the spiritual image brand that had trapped him for four centuries, publicly betrayed his masters, blew up the Yu family’s spiritual stone storehouse, and used the Yu family’s spiritual stones to offset the Moon’s Shadow in Tao County.

Then this “great hero” used this unknowable object unbound by any laws to escape the pursuit of Sanyue’s Xiang Wenqing in Tao County. He had withdrawn after winning merit, his whereabouts unknown.

No wonder Tai Sui had told her to set off the spirit-gathering array as soon as Yu Chang had set foot in Tao County, as if keeping in step with him, making it look as if he had activated the spirit-gathering array himself.

No wonder Tai Sui had repeatedly ordered them to cover their tracks.

It turned out that everyone was either “scenery” or a “stand-in.” Tai Sui had come on stage and assigned the role of “savior” to the chief offering from Yu Family Bend.

Two years ago, on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, Qiu Sha, the first ascended spirit evil cultivator in history, had come into the world, sending the immortal sects into turmoil.

Two years later, on the eve of the Mid-Autumn Festival, this legendary chief offering had taken her relic, offset the Moon’s Shadow right in front of a master from Sanyue’s inner sect, openly slapped Dongheng’s Sanyue in the face, then escaped unscathed. It was wonderful.

After this, would the Mid-Autumn Festival become an evil cultivator holiday in Western Chu?

Zhao Qindan tilted her head doubtfully. “Did you just laugh?”

It had been a pretty malicious laugh, too.

Wei Chengxiang said seriously, “No, you heard wrong.”

Tai Sui was truly amazing.

As for the minor walk-on actors like them, the best thing to do was to tuck their tails between their legs and blend in among the mortals... Fortunately, she was only a seller of Silver Tray Lottery tickets.

Zhao Qindan was led through the complicated little lanes, quickly losing her sense of direction. After walking for half a shichen, they came up to a rundown house with a little courtyard. The neighbor's dog stood up alertly, stared at the unfamiliar Zhao Qindan for a while, then seemed to recognize Wei Chengxiang, carelessly waved its tail, and lay back down.

Zhao Qindan was just looking around in astonishment when a woven gate behind her was suddenly pulled open a crack. An old lady stuck her head out halfway.

Normally, a half-immortal could hear a pin drop a hundred meters away, but under Tao County's new rules, Zhao Qindan was currently also "half-deaf" and hadn't noticed someone approaching. She was startled by the creak of the gate and gave a quiet cry.

The old lady was very surprised. Hearing noises, she had thought there was a thief. She hadn't expected to bump into the "young fellow" next door carting home a young lady in the middle of the night!

What were public morals coming to these days!

The old lady covered her face, feeling that she was about to get styes in her eyes. She drew back her head. "Goodness gracious!"

Zhao Qindan: "..."

No, wait! Auntie, it's not what you think!

Just as Zhao Qindan was getting ready to cry out “This is a woman dressed as man,” Wei Chengxiang opened the gate of the rundown courtyard, shoved the Silver Tray Lottery machinery blocking the door away with her foot, and beckoned to Zhao Qindan.

Zhao Qindan covered her nose. “What is this awful place?”

“Oh,” said Wei Chengxiang, bending down to pick up her scattered carving knives and half-completed carvings and toss them into a rattan basket, “it’s my home—there are some odds and ends, you can make do with it for a few days. When I’ve earned enough money to rent a shop, it’ll be all right.”

Saying so, she picked up a pile of bottles and pots and looked at the young mistress’s pretty face, revealed now that the camouflaging spell had lost effect. “Come here, I’ll give you a mask that saves on spiritual energy.”

Tonight’s sole main character Yu Chang had been hidden in the shadow of a tree. When the shadow transforming pearl unexpectedly lost effect, he appeared out of nowhere on a tree branch. Without spiritual energy to hold him up, the rough twigs couldn’t stand up to the weight of a grown man... especially since this one had been left holding several hundred bags.

Before he could react, there was a *snap*. Yu Chang tumbled down along with the tree branch and nearly broke his tailbone on impact.

In a house nearby, a dog heard the noise and got up. The big yellow watchdog was so skinny its ribs had nearly broken through its belly, yet it was still pretty determined to do its job. Teeth bared, it scolded the petty thief Yu Chang for disturbing the residents.

Yu Chang broke out in a cold sweat from pain. “Beast.”

But when he glared, the “beast” wasn’t in the least bit awed by this venerable fellow’s “immortal air.” Instead, it was provoked and launched itself forward with a howl.

Yu Chang said, “You’re asking for it.”

The look in his eyes became darker. He waved his sleeve to send this mad dog off... but failed.

After a moment, the “chief offering acting behind the scenes in Yu Family Bend,” the “peak common cultivator who could stand up in battle against a master from Sanyue’s inner sect,” the “peerless genius who had opened his spiritual eyes at seven years old,” the “newly-minted savior”... whatever you called him, tonight, with no one around to care, he still suffered a crushing defeat at the paws of a country mutt.

The dog even bit one of his shoes off. Barefoot, he was chased through the night.

And the “Tai Sui” who had gotten him into this unbelievable predicament was doing no better. Xi Ping had held out and passed a message to the Luwu, then nearly fainted. His injured consciousness had been sent back to his physical body. He felt like he was dying.

In this place where the use of spiritual energy was prohibited, the protective water dragon pearl had also lost effect. Only Zhaoting felt that there was something wrong with him. It buzzed in his spirit.

Zhi Xiu was far away in the Xuanyin Mountains and couldn’t reach him, and anyway, a sword cultivator didn’t know how to heal. To keep shifu from pointless worry, Xi Ping forced his slackening mind to perk up. He whispered, “It’s all right... Shifu, it’s not so bad... Xiang Wenqing fell out of the sky and still has to walk back on his own, I... didn’t get the worst of it...”

He had used a paperman to impersonate Yu Chang at the Snake King's Immortal Palace. His true body meanwhile had been hidden in a little inn not far from the abandoned Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon station.

A few days ago, when Xi Ping had come up with this plan, he had put the Luwu identity Bai Ling had given him to use—a Kaiming Cultivator who had turned away from the dark to seek the light. His real name in Great Wan was “Cui Yugan.”

The false identity this Cui Yugan had used to enter Wild Fox Country was an unsuccessful musician who had been kicked out of a music hall because he had become a customer's rival in love. He was getting on in years, empty-handed, making a living performing and writing letters... A romantic.

After enduring for half a shichen, soaking his cotton clothes in cold sweat, Xi Ping stood up and pulled out a handkerchief, coughing up the bad blood caught in his chest. His mind, nearly delirious, finally cleared up.

He breathed out, considered, and didn't throw out the blood-soaked handkerchief—tomorrow he could use it as a prop to demonstrate a romantic's “lovesickness.”

Then he wiped his hands, and a qin appeared in them.

Because the Law Breaker Bracelet was residing inside it, the Tai Sui Qin at present was probably the only vital weapon in all of Tao County that could be pulled out, but there was no way to use it. Right now, it was only an ordinary qin.

Xi Ping also couldn't send his consciousness out, aside from two places: inside the Law Breaker Bracelet—he was still the steward of the space inside the Law Breaker and could come and go freely.

There was also the reincarnation wood.

He had guessed before that, as an accompanying plant, reincarnation wood was more like a part of him than it was a “power.” When Xuanyin Mountain’s elders had severed Great Wan’s spiritual veins, it hadn’t stopped the reincarnation wood from passing messages, so the Law Breaker’s new rules ought to have been the same—indeed, he didn’t even need to test it to know. Xi Yue, thrown back to Jinping by the Law Breaker, hadn’t stopped talking.

He was a little mute when he didn’t open his mouth. Once he started talking, he never stopped.

“Hey, hey, all right, all right,” Xi Ping said softly, saving his strength. “I’m alive, everything’s fine.”

Xi Yue said, “I’m going to report to His Highness Prince Zhuang immediately!”

Xi Ping was indifferent—the water dragon pearl had lost effect and the Luwu had fallen out of contact. Was there any need to tell san-ge? He had probably already gone to polish the discipline rod.

Xi Ping groaned weakly. “Have a heart, leave me in peace. I have a bad headache.”

These words were most effective. Xi Yue didn’t dare to speak again.

After Xi Ping with his “bad headache” finished acting frail and tricked Xi Yue into going away, he wasn’t idle.

The next moment, he used the reincarnation wood to transmit the Law Breaker’s new rule to the ears of every person in Tao County...

and to create a rough image: a Yu Chang modestly screening his face.

San-ge didn't want him to reveal his identity, and shifu didn't want him to be the hope of the people. Doing the best he could, he would give the credit to Yu Chang-xiong.

May the sages bless and protect Yu Chang-xiong, allow him to escape alive and become an ascended spirit soon.

If the sages in heaven had been able to hear him, they certainly would have sent down a tribulation to strike him dead.

Yu Chang, being cursed... no, blessed by him, sneezed, nearly sneezing out his lungs. There was a crowd of dogs behind him—the big yellow one had called over its friends.

Suddenly, his body became lighter, and his stagnating essence once again began to flow through him. It was as if his head had floated up out of deep water to the surface. He could hear and see again!

Yu Chang was surprised. He floated up and abruptly turned his head: there seemed to be an invisible boundary here, separating two worlds!

What kind of power was this?

He remembered the news that had come from Southern Wan before, that two shed skin elders had severed the spiritual veins, and all the spiritual energy in Southern Wan had stagnated for ten days. Tao County right now was a little like that. But to “sever the spiritual veins,” you had to strike directly at the immortal mountains. It would definitely cut off everywhere within the scope of the spiritual mountains. How had this Tai Sui cut off Tao County alone?

For how long had he cut it off? Also ten days? Or longer?

Yu Chang's expression changed several times: he found that the hims Tai Sui had copied, while they had all wanted to kill him, all seemed to have coincidentally saved him.

The copy at the rear mountain had blocked Xiang Wenqing for him for a moment, giving him the chance to escape to Tao County. The one in the Snake King's Immortal Palace, meanwhile, had simply lured Xiang Wenqing away as he was hunting him.

Now, spiritual energy couldn't be used in all of Tao County. Tai Sui had reckoned correctly that when he found that the spirit-gathering array had been activated, he wouldn't head inward. He would definitely be by the border of Tao County, able to run out quickly. Xiang Wenqing, meanwhile, had been lured to the Snake King's Immortal Palace in Seventeen Li Town. Without spiritual energy, he would have to walk. He would be trapped inside at least all night!

Tai Sui had landed him with the blame and had deliberately left him a night to run. But while he knew this perfectly well, he couldn't *not* run!

A peak established foundation who hadn't lost his mind in four centuries and was now no longer controlled by a spiritual image brand—even if he hadn't done all this, could Sanyue let him live?

Yu Chang thought, That's eight lifetimes of bad luck for you!

He swore and hesitated no longer. Amidst a great wind, he put the shadow transforming pearl in his mouth and flew away.

CHAPTER 119 - Eternal Flame (1)

Morning in Seventeen Li Town opened with the strains of a huqin⁷⁷ floating out from the attic of the All Comers Inn.

The All Comers Inn had once been called the Treasure Trove Inn. Some years ago, hearing that a Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon station would be built, the name had been changed to “All Comers,” planning to happily welcome “guests coming from all over.” The upshot was that the station hadn’t been completed, and the guests coming from all over had gotten lost somewhere along the way. This poor, rundown inn naturally wasn’t worthy of picking up the celestial aura of the cultivators, so only passing minor merchants gathered there to stay a while.

Wild Fox Country’s Great Market had passed. It was the off-season now. The All Comers Inn’s business was extremely sparse. Fortunately, a wandering musician had recently come in, and he had more stories than a theatrical troupe.

Since that gentleman had come, the rooster in the All Comers Inn’s backyard had stopped crowing.

Every day at the first crack of dawn, there would be a punctual *creak* from upstairs. That musician Mr. Cui didn’t sleep in. He punctually began another day’s yearning.

The strings were a little damp, the sound of the instrument mournful. If he wasn’t sighing about the pains of unrequited love, he was plucking away about the loneliness of an unrecognized genius. Sometimes he was pouring out his heart, sometimes propping himself up by playing the wronged woman. Such a small matter, but he could make so much of it.

The landlady got up every morning to the sound of his instrument to sweep and wash the courtyard, chop firewood and fetch water, direct her two waiters and one cook in their work.

The landlady's surname was Tao—Tao County's three big surnames were "Tao," "Wang," and "Xu"; seventy percent of people belonged to those three families. Elders called her "er-sao," and juniors called her "er-nainai."⁷⁸ She was a widow whose husband had died eleven years ago. She was courageous and had raised two children relying on this "dangerous business" in Wild Fox Country. The children had grown up and each gotten married, and the hair at both her temples was grey. Feeling that she had some heroic will that she hadn't yet used up, she had continued to operate the little inn.

Western Chu was nowhere near as prosperous as Great Wan, and it also seemed not to care as much about "etiquette and enlightenment" as they did across the river, especially in a borderland like this, where a man alone couldn't support a whole family—the work that paid a lot of money would kill you, and the work that didn't kill you wouldn't bring in enough to go around. Therefore, it was normal for wives to go out in public and work; it didn't provoke gossip the way it did in Southern Wan.

When Tao-er-nainai got to work, it was truly a pleasing sight. Her plump arms and legs seemed to move in a dance with a particular tempo. There was nothing sloppy about it. Though her hair had gone grey, when she brandished an axe, there was no piece of firewood she couldn't chop in three strokes. In her own little courtyard, she shouted out directions with perfect ease, like an old general who was still going strong.

Once she began to bustle, even the sound of Mr. Cui's maundering sped up involuntarily to her tempo, the sickly groaning turning into a horse racing song.

Er-nainai tossed her cleaning rag over her shoulder and wiped away sweat. She yelled upstairs: “Mr. Cui, do you want to eat?”

Mr. Cui was still bouncing his leg to the lingering tune of the horse racing song. Hearing this call, he pulled over the huqin and played her a few strains in answer.

Sadly, er-nainai couldn't read his meaning from his music. “Talk sense!”

So Mr. Cui stuck out a shame-faced head. “I'll eat whatever there is. Don't add spice.”

On hearing this, er-nainai raised her eyebrows, which were a length shorter than average, feeling that Mr. Cui was truly indecent.

Though this Mr. Cui was getting on in years a little, he still looked tall and strapping, with a healthy figure. But this person shamelessly insisted that he had tuberculosis and couldn't work. But apart from one day when he had coughed up blood, er-nainai hadn't heard him cough at all... The blood he had coughed up had dyed an entire handkerchief red. It didn't look real, especially since he was always getting it out and trembling a few times, the affected nature only too clear. One day er-nainai had accidentally washed it for him, and he hadn't managed to cough up another one.

In view of this, er-nainai had concluded that the bloody handkerchief had been a fake. Probably he had smeared chicken blood or dog blood on it.

At first, er-nainai had thought this idle Mr. Cui was a young master from a wealthy family that had come down in the world. Later she had found that this actually wasn't the case.

The day before yesterday, a thunderstorm had damaged a room on the west side of the inn, and it had been Mr. Cui who had helped her

repair it. After the repairs were done, this miser had demanded the exorbitant price of ten days' room and board for it. Once he got to work, he was in fact pretty good. At first, picking up an axe or saw or something of the kind, he was a little awkward, but once he tried it out a few times, he worked nimbly. Strange to say, his hands were soft and tender, without any calluses, but he was skilled in performing these tasks, as if he had practiced them many times in his dreams.

He could also write and do sums. He could write down any word you said. Er-nainai thought that in the whole town, you could count up the people who could reach this level on one hand. So she was very perplexed: couldn't he do something, get married and have a career? At his age, other people were getting ready to start looking out for spouses for their children, but this Mr. Cui was still wandering all over the place, spending all day clutching a lousy huqin that cost half a string of coins and daydreaming. If his head didn't hurt, then his ass did.

Mr. Cui had also brazenly gone to try playing for Chu's theatrical troupes, but they wouldn't have him, saying that this man's face looked like he was going to a funeral, and his playing sounded like a wolf howling at night. He didn't seem very auspicious. If they took him out, they were afraid of getting beaten. Only when wealthy families were holding funeral processions were the officiants willing to bring him in as accompaniment. The atmosphere was ideal. Therefore, as soon as he ran out of money, he started looking out for people holding "Riding the Crane"⁷⁹ ceremonies.

"Er-er-er-..." A voice that seemed to have gotten stuck came from the rear kitchen.

The All Comers Inn's cook was a stutterer. His brain had been damaged by a fever when he was little. His family couldn't support him and had simply tossed him out. Er-nainai had picked him up

one stormy night and called him Dayu, heavy rain, bringing him up as halfway to her own son. When he was thirteen or fourteen, she'd had him learn the old cook's trade from him. The year before last, the old cook had caught a chill, so the young cook had taken on the job. Though he was dim-witted, he did his work well.

Er-nainai said, "What?"

The cook's forehead was covered in sweat. Finally, he forced out: "The-the-the big b-boiler, it's..."

The big boiler in the rear kitchen had been found on the black market. It was a genuine product of Southern Wan that had failed to pass inspection in the factory. It was the most expensive thing in the whole inn. It was incredibly convenient for heating water and food, but it was always breaking.

Er-nainai didn't understand anything about these steam-powered things, so she called, "Mr. Cui, can you fix the boiler?"

Mr. Cui, creaking and groaning, was mourning the passing of the autumn moon and the spring flowers. He found the time to mutter, "I haven't eaten."

"You won't get anything to eat if the boiler's broken. If you can fix it, I'll deduct five days' room and board."

"Well!" Without another word, Mr. Cui flourished his long legs. He strode downstairs in two steps, headed "heartbroken" and "languishing" toward the idiot cook, and went to repair the boiler.

"Er-nainai!" one of the waiters called. "Guests coming!"

Tao-er-nainai froze, raised her head, and looked at the sky where dawn was just breaking. This early? she thought.

When she welcomed the leading guests, er-nainai understood perfectly well what was happening. She saw that while these two guests had done their best to dress unassumingly, their bearing was unconvincing—their backs were too straight; when they looked into the distance, they squinted; and sometimes they deliberately turned their heads to listen to sounds, as if their ears weren't working very well, either.

These two were immortals.

She put on the smiling face of a successful businessperson and stepped forward to curtsy. She explained that the inn's boiler was broken, so if the honored guests wished to drink tea, they would have to sit and wait for a bit.

In the past, she wouldn't have dared to imagine that she could speak to immortals with such dignity.

In running a business, she'd come into contact with people from all walks of life. She didn't get nervous in front of people. It was only immortals—especially the lords from the Qilin Guard, all with that “celestial air” about them, able to make it so you couldn't raise your head, never mind speak clearly.

But after that day the blurry Tai Sui had appeared to them and said “From now on, there will be no more immortals or demons in Tao County,” there had been a miracle! Like a dream, it had actually come true! All cultivators coming from outside became like mortals, even less agile than the mortals who were used to their clumsy limbs. There were no more magic battles of gods and ghosts in the streets. Even the moon during the Mid-Autumn Festival had been clearer than usual. Those returning home all said that Tao County was completely different from outside. Staying the night made you feel relaxed and alert.

Since then, the immortals coming to inspect Tao County openly and in secret hadn't stopped. The All Comers Inn had received several batches. These days, Tao-er-nainai could easily distinguish who was an "Exalted." She rather welcomed these people now, first because the immortals were liberal and didn't keep track of the money they spent, and second, now that these great personages who had previously been like the sun, not to be looked at directly, had lost their "celestial air," Tao-er-nainai had turned eloquent. Every time she finished responding all upright and proper to an immortal, she would be inwardly pleased with herself for ages.

Just then, there was the sound of a horse-drawn carriage outside. The two honored guests inside the inn stood up nervously when they heard.

Tao-er-nainai's heartbeat sped up: an important person.

She heard the sound of the door curtain, and a "pure white" man came in from outside.

This person's hair was white, and his clothing was white, and his skin and flesh didn't have the tiniest bit of color, either. He was also wearing a snow-white mask on his face.

The two cultivators inside the inn hastened forward to salute him, both calling him "grand-shishu."

The "white person" waved a hand and walked through the door. Loftily but without abandoning his poise, he nodded toward the dumbfounded Tao-er-nainai. The gaze that came from under the mask was like frost, coldly sweeping through the rundown little inn.

The two cultivators who had come before stood in attendance on either side. One of them spoke, asking Tao-er-nainai, "Are you the owner?"

“Indeed I am.”

The cultivator flashed a token at her, then asked, “Have you seen any strangers here recently?”

Tao-er-nainai couldn’t read whatever was written on the token. She only thought that this attitude seemed like the Qilin Guard. She answered obediently, “No, Exalted...”

Before she could finish, there was a *bang* from the rear kitchen. Everyone’s gazes were immediately drawn by the noise. The big boiler once again began to puff steam.

Then a person walked in from out back wiping his hands.

Tao-er-nainai’s heart stuttered: right, Mr. Cui had actually only come a few days ago.

But oddly enough, perhaps because of his friendly local accent or perhaps because he didn’t act like an outsider, Tao-er-nainai hadn’t noticed that he counted as a “stranger.” Now that she recalled it, she felt oddly alarmed.

The next moment, Mr. Cui met the gaze under that snow-white mask head on. He didn’t dodge. Instead, he opened his eyes wide in curiosity and gave a “wow.” Next, this man who was full of indolence from head to foot suddenly became “clever,” belatedly restraining his careless air. He bowed. “Hello, Exalted.”

Having said this, he stepped aside and found a place to sit. He quietly said, “Er-nainai, the boiler’s working, it just needed a bit of pipe swapped out.”

Tao-er-nainai calmed herself down and said unflappably toward the white mask: “Exalted, there is currently no Great Market. The only

people staying in my inn are some traveling peddlers who come and go, all of them regular guests... What will you be having?"

For some reason, White Mask was staring directly at Mr. Cui. Mr. Cui just happened to be taking a peek at White Mask. Caught in the act, he no longer dared to look, hastily retreating into a corner to mind his own business.

The standing cultivator said, "This gentleman doesn't seem like a traveling peddler who lives rough."

As though nothing were the matter, Tao-er-nainai said, "Oh, him. He's an old bachelor from the countryside, a layabout with no family and no job. He usually stays at my inn doing odd jobs to cover his room and board."

Hearing this, Mr. Cui seemed to want to protest, but he also looked like he didn't want to offend the landlady. He stood up and whispered, "Exalted, this humble one is a musician, I..."

The rest of his sentence was stopped by Tao-er-nainai's glare.

White Mask looked him over thoroughly for another moment, then finally averted his gaze. The cultivators only ordered a pot of hot tea, but they didn't touch a drop of it once it was brought. They put down money and left.

As soon as these people left, the people from all walks of life in the All Comers Inn at last relaxed and began a quiet discussion.

A coal trader staying at the inn poked Mr. Cui and asked, grinning, "A musician for 'joyous occasions'?"

"Bullshit, I was only helping out a friend." Mr. Cui turned around upon hearing this and began talking big in lively fashion, all "once played the qin beside Jinping's Lingyang River," and "even the

smoke that the steamships in Jinping puff out smells of osmanthus.”

Tao-er-nainai could hardly listen to any more of this. She tossed him a handkerchief. “Drop it, why don’t you. Wipe the ash off your face.”

Mr. Cui said, “Er-nainai, I got up early, give me an extra egg.”

Er-nainai put her hands on her hips. “I think you’re the egg.”

Mr. Cui didn’t get mad, only looked at her and smiled. This tubercular man’s features were homely, his face had a sickly pallor, his smile brought out all his wrinkles, and there was a messy little beard covering half his face. But his eyes were so passionate that it was as if he had stolen them from someone else. When he made unreasonable requests, he never winked, only looked at a person with eager directness, a layer of light floating over his eyes. Somehow, he got his way every time.

Sometimes Tao-er-nainai thought that maybe this son of a bitch really had spent time around courtesans. She said, “Listen, don’t you want to find a wife and settle down? Do you have to marry a goddess?”

“No, not necessarily,” Mr. Cui said unblushingly, “it just has to be someone a little prettier than me.”

Tao-er-nainai: “...”

If only he had a bit of shame, just a drop, what a good man he’d be.

Behind the All Comers Inn, the masked white-haired man in the carriage listened to these completely meaningless domestic trivialities and knocked on the carriage door. The carriage began to roll toward the depths of Seventeen Li Town. Tao County was too thoroughly “broken”; even he had lost his spiritual sense. Probably

only a full moon sage would be able to spot where the strangeness was coming from.

Mr. Cui—Xi Ping—picked up his chopsticks and gently tapped on the dining table made of reincarnation wood, passing a message to the Luwu: “Sanyue’s Xuanwu has come in person.”

While Xiang Wenqing had been trapped in Tao County, Yu Chang had taken the opportunity to escape abroad that very night.

As expected, this first-rate common cultivator had a few tricks up his sleeves when it came to concealing his whereabouts. He hadn’t taken a single spiritual stone out of Western Chu. By the time Sanyue Mountain had received the news, it was already too late. They had quickly contacted the other three nations, and to this day, they had yet to find a trace of him.

Yu Chang had disappeared with the Law Breaker, Yu Family Bend’s clan leader had passed away, their treasury had been blown up, and the county had turned into a mess, but they couldn’t complain of it—why would a common clan have so many spiritual stones? And where had the spiritual stones come from? That was hard to explain. There had always been countless pairs of eyes fixed on the precious land of Yu Family Bend. Now that Yu Chang had struck at their roots, the jackals and wolves all around were itching to act.

Dongheng’s Sanyue wasn’t interested in dealing with their trifles. What the immortal mountains were worried about was Tao County.

There was no doubt that the current situation in Tao County had been caused by the Law Breaker, but the Law Breaker’s whereabouts were unknown. All the common people in the county were clueless, going about their lives as usual. The immortal mountains certainly couldn’t disregard the lives of the common people and flatten this place—they were incapable of doing so anyway. Up to the present, at least five or six groups from the Qilin

Guard and Sanyue's inner sect had come. A shed skin had even come in person. And without exception, they had all become mortals as soon as they entered.

Just look at Elder Xuanwu's mask, which had turned into one with small holes.

Xuanwu's carriage drove onto Seventeen Li Town's "main road." The road had fallen into disrepair and was uneven. Whether the person sitting in the carriage was a shed skin or a god, they would be jolted like a sieve being shaken.

Suddenly, the disciple driving the carriage clumsily pulled on the reins.

He seemed to exchange a few words with someone. Then he handed something in through the carriage door. "Grand-shishu, have a look at this."

After the Snake King's Immortal Palace had been blown up, the locals had once again started using "misty willow" to carve Tai Sui amulets. This time, the face on the amulets had changed.

Xuanwu accepted it and saw that the wooden amulet was crudely made, but something of the features and their expression was still faintly discernible—this was Yu Chang.

What was "Tai Sui"?

That was hard to say. In Southern Wan, which strictly prohibited common cultivators and carried out heavy punishments against so-called "evil cultivators," the "evil cultivators" had to band together to survive, create an "idol" to serve as their symbol. Common people would try anything in a crisis; they would incorporate these bizarre "deities" into folk legend.

But in Western Chu, where the black market was halfway out in the open, the circumstances were a little more complex: some wildly ambitious big families who had prominence in one area, in order to make themselves look more impressive, would embellish a history for their own ancestors. The ignorant masses didn't know better and would put their faith in these people. Tao County had no big families. The previous local despot had been an evil cultivator very skilled in currying favor with authority. Rumor said that he had been the one to bring this so-called "Tai Sui," which was a wooden carving of unknown origin.

Last time, when the Silver Moon had come down to the mortal world to expel evil, Qiu Sha had died, but the Silver Moon had still been angry. Though later he had turned up a length of eternal spring brocade on that Golden Hand, Xuanwu's instincts had told him something was wrong with the divine image worshipped in the Snake King's Immortal Palace... If he recalled correctly, misty willow had also once been a type of accompanying plant.

But misty willow was everywhere around the Xia River. The poor all used it to carve their memorial tablets. And that hadn't been the only divine image carved of misty willow. But for no discernible reason, Xuanwu kept thinking that there was something not right with Tao County's "Tai Sui."

He clutched the wooden amulet, his completely bloodless fingers tapping softly on it: he thought that the ancient demonic god that corresponded to misty willow—called "reincarnation wood" by the people of Wan—had ultimately fallen in Southern Wan.

Yu Chang had obtained a hundred thousand white spirits from Yu Family Bend and ignited a spirit-gathering array in Tao County to offset the Moon's Shadow... The divine image carved into the reincarnation wood had taken on Yu Chang's form...

And Xiang Wenqing had said that Yu Chang seemed to be colluding with Southern Wan's Luwu.

Every aspect of this seemed to point to Xuanyin Mountain being behind it.

In that last century, two of Xuanyin's shed skins had gotten in trouble, and Zhao Yin's Way of the Heart had even broken, killing him on the spot. What were they up to?

Had their veins of the earth also been burned up by the gold smelting furnaces? Were they planning to follow in He's ill-fated footsteps?

Xuanwu's expression became slightly grimmer. "Let's return."

Openly sending spies to infiltrate other countries and run wild—the Wan had gone too far.

"Notify the Qilin Guard, tell them to establish a branch here at once. Build it right outside the scope of the spiritual energy prohibition. Within the scope of the prohibition, transfer a detachment of border troops to be garrisoned there. Have them start strictly checking anyone entering or exiting starting in the next few days, and registering all inhabitants. Place of birth, relatives, and so on must all be clearly stated, without concealment. Close Tao County's ferry crossing. Do not permit any foreign person to come ashore," Xuanwu said. "Also, have all the misty willow within Tao County cleared away, and order the common people not to worship evil gods."

CHAPTER 120 - Eternal Flame (2)

“At the beginning Sanyue must have wanted to seal off information, but there was no way for them to do it. They are unable to control the venom-spawning domestic black market. As soon as the business in Tao County happened, all the evil cultivators in Wild Fox Country ran off and made it known everywhere. My supposition is that Shu and Li must both have received the information no later than Sanyue.”

Zhou Ying nodded. “What about Yu Chang?”

“There is no word about him. He has already escaped the territory under the jurisdiction of the spiritual mountains. He isn’t within the boundaries of any nation, and he hasn’t contacted anyone,” Bai Ling said. “Right now, everyone is looking for him, including Western Chu’s evil cultivators—because the word is that he has a means for removing spiritual image brands. Since that got out, all the important people in Chu who rely on ‘offerings’ have been on tenterhooks, all thinking up other ways to control the offerings. The offerings are naturally dissatisfied, and on their end, they also all have their own designs.

“Right outside the line of Tao County’s prohibition on using spiritual energy is a new detachment of the Qilin Guard. The branch hasn’t even been built yet, but the Qilin Guardsmen came over the very day they received their orders. They are currently operating out of a mustard seed. But at present it seems they aren’t much use. As soon as they step over the prohibition line, the Qilin Guardsmen are worse off than mortals. Therefore, it’s said that Sanyue has also transferred a hundred thousand men from the North Xia Waterborne Troops, who are preparing to enter and garrison in Tao County. The ports to enter Tao County along the border have all been closed.”

Zhou Ying raised his eyebrows. “They normally don’t maintain an army, but now they want to use military force.”

Under the protection of the spiritual mountains, the standing armies of all nations didn’t need to maintain battle-readiness, be prepared at any time to defend against the invasion of a foreign enemy. Apart from assignments like honor guard, bodyguard, convoy escort, and such, the troops normally only took care of bandits and rebels. It could be said that a mortal general would have practically no opportunity in his lifetime to be promoted through meritorious service—this was precisely why Zhi Xiu’s single battle had been celebrated far and wide for two hundred years... and why the salary of a high general of cavalry who had been celebrated for two hundred years was hardly more than the “sycophantic” Marquis of Yongning’s.

But because of division among noble families, Great Wan had had constant internal strife for over a thousand years, and their army ultimately wasn’t purely ornamental.

Chu was different.

The Xiang clan stood alone, and social stratification in Chu was clear-cut. However tyrannical the local despots were in their own domains, they still wouldn’t dare to vainly challenge the imperial family. The Xiang family normally turned a blind eye to those below them. If they really wanted to crush anyone, they would only need to lift a finger. Therefore, they had no conflicts.

Safety and order throughout the country relied on the cultivators supported by the local despots, making an army even more useless. It was almost entirely dominated by individuals on the fringes of Dongheng’s political circles—originally, Tao County’s border ports had also nominally been under the control of the Xia River Waterborne Troops, but what had the outcome been? Just a bunch

of soldiers standing there while the border welcomed all comers. Having them or not having them was all the same.

Zhou Ying asked, "Which force of the North Xia Waterborne Troops has been requisitioned?"

Bai Ling said, "The Marquis of Qulong, Zheng Bin's."

"Princess Qiyang's husband, from a poor and humble background, illicitly opened his spiritual eyes after assuming his position, full of ambition," Zhou Ying slowly said. In this respect, this spymaster was quite dedicated to his work. He was as familiar with this "marginal personage" from a neighboring country as with his own family treasures. "I've heard that they're a very interesting couple. Princess Qiyang has no interest in cultivation and only wants to be a half-immortal so she can indulge in pleasure, but Zheng Bin has been refining his spiritual bones and seeking a Way of the Heart. I hear that his spiritual bones are complete, but the princess won't permit him to establish a foundation and get above her, and now he's been squeezed out to a border territory where spiritual energy can't be used. I would guess that this person's greatest wish is for his wife to die."

"I will arrange it," Bai Ling said, understanding his intention. Then he added, "Xu Rucheng has sent word that Yu Family Bend is in great disorder, and the Zhao family is currently despondent. But they cannot annul the engagement. A spiritual image stamp cannot be removed. On this score, all they can do is hold their noses and acknowledge it. Presently they must be planning to head north to Dongheng as soon as possible, use their discarded piece 'Zhao Qindan' as a stepping-stone to help them get into Sanyue's inner sect, then keep thinking. The Yu family's clan leader has died, they've lost their chief offering, and the array formation as well as the possessions accumulated in their main residence over centuries were destroyed practically in a single moment. They're very uneasy. That imperial grandson in the palace is currently their only remaining

hope. They also want to complete the marriage as soon as possible, use the Zhao family to ascend to the heavens. The two sides are in accord. They will be setting out soon.”

Zhou Ying made a noise of agreement. “Sanyue’s inner sect is different from provincial places like Yu Family Bend and Tao County. There’s a reason the Xiang family hasn’t dissipated their whole fortune yet despite being such a mess. The journey north to Dongheng must be undertaken with caution. The enemy must not be underestimated.”

Bai Ling said, “Yes, my lord. The Zhao family fears the Luwu. They have been paranoid and performed several different kinds of searches. Had ‘Zhao Qindan’ not been there to save the day, two brothers would have been exposed. In the interest of prudence, I told the Luwu inside the Zhao family hidden realm not to use immortal tools to communicate for now and to temporarily only pass word through reincarnation wood.”

With the use of spiritual energy prohibited in Tao County, communication had naturally broken off entirely as well. The communication network of all the Luwu in Tao County relied on the support of reincarnation wood amulets... and “Tai Sui.” The supplies sent over from Great Wan also currently had to go through the Law Breaker.

Xi Ping had become a “hub” for information and provisions.

“The rest is trivial, I have already handled it myself.” At this point, Bai Ling stole a glance at Zhou Ying’s expression and added, “Oh, the Viscount asked me to pass on his respects to Your Highness.”

Zhou Ying’s expression chilled. “Don’t mention that fiend to me!”

Bai Ling obeyed without any objection. “Indeed.”

Zhou Ying had his own reincarnation wood. If he didn't want to pay attention to Xi Ping, he would seal it in his mustard seed, and Xi Ping couldn't contact him.

Zhou Ying forced down his anger and gave a few more instructions as though nothing were the matter. When he was finished, he accepted the tea Bai Ling was offering.

He always drank tea according to Jinping's customs. For mid-autumn, that meant a local oolong tea meant to ease dryness and moisten the lungs. It was called "Jinping Yu Gan." Zhou Ying drank a mouthful and, because of this wretched name, thought of that wretched person. He slammed the teacup down on the table with a bang.

"Toying with Sanyue and Yu Family Bend, intercepting the Luwu's messages without authorization, flashing the Law Breaker in front of the whole world—what exceptional skills he has!"

Bai Ling used his consciousness to sneak a peek at his expression and thought, He held out for two ke this time.

Since his lord had just told him not to mention the Viscount, Bai Ling held his tongue and didn't respond. He passed a handkerchief so Zhou Ying could wipe the tea on his hands.

Zhou Ying pushed it away. "Didn't he think that Sanyue also has shed skins who have held out from the time of the Great War of Gods and Demons? Could they possibly not know about the Southern Sage killing Yuan Hui in the East Sea? If Sanyue contacts Xuanyin about this and Xuanyin turns around and inspects the Impassable Sea, what is he going to do? There are disasters of all kinds on Western Chu's border every year, there are always mortals dying by the batch at the least disturbance, what does it have to do with him? Would it kill him to mind his own business?"

Bai Ling: "..."

"If you have something to say, say it," Zhou Ying said. "What are you holding back for?"

Bai Ling said, "Well, I asked the Viscount inside the hidden realm. The Viscount said it wouldn't happen. Yu Chang was 'colluding' with the Luwu, and now *he's* preparing to steal the Unbound Furnace to give to the Golden Hand, so Xuanyin is going to fall out with Sanyue right away. There are no lovebirds on earth that can't be torn apart, never mind immortal sects with opposing interests."

Hearing this nonsense, Zhou Ying put a hand to his chest, wanting to cough out of habit. But his half-immortal's lungs weren't ready, so his coughing fit caught awkwardly in his chest. He couldn't quite catch his breath.

Bai Ling gravely minded his own business, inwardly enjoying his plight: It serves you right.

This very proper half-demon was always thinking that his lord's blood was too cold, afraid he would freeze, so he took the opportunity to fan the flames: "The Viscount also instructed me to convey to you, my lord, that you shouldn't make yourself sick from anger. He is inside the Law Breaker's hidden realm every night, and if you wish to beat or scold him, you can come any time."

Zhou Ying: "..."

Xi Ping sneezed very elegantly—his nostrils were stuck down, so he couldn't wipe his nose with force, and his fake beard was too thick—it would get in his mouth if he wasn't careful. He thought that after coming to the Law Breaker just this evening, Bai Ling must have conveyed his message; san-ge was cursing him.

Anyway, he was secure in the knowledge of his own safety: san-ge wouldn't come. Shifu was inside the Law Breaker at night.

As soon as it got dark, Xi Ping put out his light and feigned sleep, his consciousness slipping into the Law Breaker Bracelet.

Inside of the Law Breaker, there was currently a big stretch of wilderness. As soon as Xi Ping landed, he noticed something and abruptly leapt up, narrowly avoiding the inscriptions covering the ground.

Then he heard Zhi Xiu's voice coming from a vague figure on the horizon: "This belongs to an evil cultivator from the third year of the Wen Emperor, a middle established foundation, a rare inscription master who killed nine members of Heaven's Design Pavilion before escaping to Northern Li. Heaven's Design Pavilion joined hands with Kunlun's outer sect to blockade him on the Cangye Plain. They were at a deadlock for over half a month and lost a dozen outer sect half-immortals along with two established foundations who had joined them. In the end it was an ascended spirit sword cultivator from the Kunlun Sect breaking through by sheer strength that allowed them to take him down. Because this battle was unusually bitter, it was set down in the historical record by both sects. All the methods that evil cultivator used then, I've copied here. You try having a go. If you can't handle it, call for help."

Xi Ping's face fell. "... shifu, I'm not falling for that one again."

The first time Zhi Xiu had gently told him "If you can't handle it, call for help," Xi Ping had actually bought it. When he had been beaten to a pulp by the illusory evil cultivator inside the Law Breaker, he had innocently called for help.

But his lousy shifu had only hung by the horizon with his hands folded, appreciating his terror-stricken "heroic bearing" while slowly

responding, “But I am merely a sliver of consciousness within a shattered sword. Why are you calling to me?”

Xi Ping had felt his faith in the whole world collapse. “Didn’t you tell me to call for help if I couldn’t handle it?”

“I didn’t say it would do any good,” Zhi Xiu said.

This was the teaching method of his shifu, who couldn’t even explain *Detailed Account of Meridians* clearly. Even Mama Luo would have to kowtow if he saw it.

But despite his shouts, he was still doing this of his own free will.

During his brief encounter with Xiang Wenqing, Xi Ping had thoroughly understood his own abilities. For the first time in his life, without the need for anyone to urge him, he had decided to put in the work.

He wasn’t a sword cultivator, and it wasn’t practicable to start learning sword moves and formations now. Neither Flying Jade Peak nor the Latent Cultivation Temple could make him quietly study talismans and memorize arrays. So Zhi Xiu had simply stuffed the last thousand or so years of classic texts into the Law Breaker and let him fumble around for himself while getting thrashed.

After all, the Law Breaker wouldn’t harm its own “steward,” but the same wasn’t necessarily true of the outside world.

Like a sponge, Xi Ping worked madly to soak up a century’s worth of missed classes. Every night, he only left when his consciousness was exhausted—that was why the first morning strains of the huqin were so realistically tragic.

Tonight, he couldn’t struggle free of this historical evil cultivator who was like a fierce ghost. He put his foot right into the trap that had

killed Kunlun's established foundations and was thrown out by the Law Breaker. Zhi Xiu waved a hand and put away the scene, then quietly sat alone inside the Law Breaker.

In fact, Zhi Xiu's current condition couldn't sustain his consciousness in wandering outside for too long, but he would still remain until his strength was exhausted.

Because only inside of the Law Breaker, which was outside of the control of the spiritual mountains, was there a moment's peace.

Zhaoting had shattered, and he was facing the deliberation of the Way of Heaven, caught on the threshold of the shed skin barrier, always grappling with a nameless power.

The Way of Heaven was like a knife or an axe, always "pruning" something from him. Zhi Xiu couldn't clearly say what it was, but he was unwilling to yield.

The familiar pain surged throughout his body. It was a sign that this thread of his consciousness was about to disperse.

The Way of Heaven seemed increasingly impatient with his disobedience.

General Zhi smiled carelessly. Before dispersing, he grabbed a handful of Western Chu specialty snacks from the Law Breaker... and couldn't keep smiling.

"Bah, damn the salt seller."

Before returning to his own body, Xi Ping first wandered through all the reincarnation wood in the county, treating it as relaxation. Vaguely, he heard familiar voices speaking and automatically followed them.

Neither Wei Chengxiang nor Zhao Qindan were in the habit of sleeping. At most they would meditate for a while before dawn.

Now, there was an oil lamp lit in the little house. Zhao Qindan was teaching Wei Chengxiang Chu writing.

Zhao Qindan was from Yuzhou. Yuzhou bordered on Chu, so many people were proficient in Chu script. She was equally skilled in Chu and Wan script.

As she taught, Zhao Qindan let her mind wander.

The tip of Wei Chengxiang's brush paused. She looked up at her.

Apropos of nothing, Zhao Qindan asked, "Where do you come from? You're from Wan, too?"

"The sky my quilt, the earth my mat, the four seas my home." Wei Chengxiang smiled craftily and licked the tip of her brush—when she was younger, she had still spoken with a bit of a Ling County accent. After traveling for many years, you could no longer hear a trace of it. "What's wrong? The registration today gave you a scare, didn't it?"

This evening, bailiffs had come pounding on doors, going house by house and family by family to register the inhabitants. When they got hold of you, there was an interrogation, as if they would have loved to find out everything about eight generations of your ancestors. They also made neighbors vouch for each other. Anyone with the slightest issue would be taken away and strictly investigated.

Zhao Qindan had never told a lie in her life. She had nearly begun to stutter when questioned. Luckily Wei Chengxiang had received word from Tai Sui and rushed over to save her.

She had stood by, scared witless, watching Wei Chengxiang lie in front of a crowd of bailiffs. She had been unbearably worried, thinking that someone would come to expose them at any moment.

But instead Wei Chengxiang had blathered for a full half an incense stick, and no one had come out to say a word. The old granny next door who had been so disapproving of them that first night had even cringingly said, “This young lady has been here for years.”

Zhao Qindan said, “Why would she help me?”

“Being caught by the bailiffs doesn’t go well for anyone, and it costs the neighbors nothing to help patch up a lie. Even if they don’t dare to speak, they still won’t deliberately harm a person in a situation like this.” Wei Chengxiang flexed her neck and said, “Anyway, I’ve helped that old lady carry quite a bit of water. Sowing the seeds of goodness won’t bring in a bad harvest, I guess.”

“Oh?” Zhao Qindan said. “When I went to thank her with some pastries, she pulled me over and said that you were no good and told me to get over you while I was still young.”

Wei Chengxiang: “...”

What was wrong with that old woman? Why did she have to get into everyone’s business at her age?!

“Even if I hadn’t been able to cover it up, there are still the Luwu.” Wei Chengxiang gave a dry cough and changed the subject. “Making false identities is their specialty. Even though they’ve become mortal, fooling a bailiff is still no big deal. The Luwu are using your identity, so for the sake of their own people, they’ll protect you.”

Zhao Qindan didn’t respond. She inadvertently glimpsed a little bronze mirror that Wei Chengxiang used as a prize and caught sight

of herself in the mirror.

Her current alias was “Xu Dan.” Wei Chengxiang’s skills were superlative. She had only changed each of her features slightly, not affecting her ability to make expressions and not making any exaggerated scars as cover, but she looked completely different—not to be spoken of in the same breath as certain klutzes who just slopped glue on their nose.

At a glance, Zhao Qindan didn’t even recognize herself.

That common face gave her a huge sense of loss and loneliness. After a couple more looks, she almost felt frightened.

On the one hand, she and the Zhao family had mutually abandoned each other. She was in an unfamiliar place with strange people and no home to go back to, with no one beside her but an “evil cultivator” of unknown background. On the other hand, her surname was still Zhao. Though the Luwu were temporarily willing to protect her for the sake of their colleague, she still couldn’t blend into their circle.

In a few short months, she had fallen from the clouds to the human world, then become a lost stranger in foreign land.

She was coming from nowhere and going to nowhere. Her former lofty aspirations had turned to froth. In the whole wide world, there was no place for her.

In her inward turmoil, a dog’s resonant barking came from the distance, followed by shouting and the buzzing of heavy machinery.

Wei Chengxiang and Zhao Qindan exchanged a look, then stood up simultaneously—there was one bad thing about the spiritual energy prohibition, which was that all cultivators had a sense that their hearing was impaired. Without a spiritual sense attached to their

ears, sometimes they could only hear a thing when it came up to the door.

Wei Chengxiang put a hand into her sleeve. “Senior, look outside for me...”

Before she could finish speaking, Xi Ping’s voice sounded in her ear: “The army is here.”

Wei Chengxiang frowned. Now, the voices were already very close — the shuffling sound of footsteps was coming from the street behind them, mixed with the clapping of horses’ hooves and the clink of swords against armor.

“They’ve come into town in the middle of the night? What are they doing?” Wei Chengxiang pressed her ear to the wall and added, “Wait, it isn’t only men, horses, and carriages. What have they brought?”

From the reincarnation wood, Xi Ping saw the steam-spouting “long-armed” cart in the midst of the formation and slowly said, “I guess it’s machinery to cut me... to cut the trees down.”

No sooner had he spoken than a strange whirring came from the street nearby. The army had begun clearing away the reincarnation wood trees lining the street.

CHAPTER 121 - Eternal Flame (3)

Previously, Tao County's yamen had posted notices forbidding people from further distributing images of evil cultivators. Everyone had ignored them—Tao County's yamen never did anything. The only time it wasn't just there for decoration was when it was time to collect the exorbitant taxes. Each year during Wild Fox Country's Great Market, the bailiffs played dead, not daring to approach Seventeen Li Town.

No one had expected the troops to arrive in the middle of the night and start chopping down trees as soon as they got there.

The flywheels of the roaring mechanical beast spun, slicing into the big trees by the road, which had grown there for unknown decades or centuries. It was followed by a little cart with shovels attached to it that opened its grinning toothy mouth to dig up the tree roots whole.

These trees that had just struggled out from under the Moon's Shadow and sprouted a bit of greenery fell into the street with loud crashes, their branches rustling wildly, scaring all the birds into flight. In the predawn light, they looked like a metaphor.

The vegetal smell of tree sap splashed everywhere. The thundering machinery threw everyone in the area into turmoil. Like wild fowl woken by an earthquake, the people peered out from cracks in doors and enclosing walls. Many more voices sounded in Xi Ping's ears—the anxious people were beginning to take out Tai Sui amulets and pray.

Xi Ping ignored it. There were neither gods nor ghosts, neither immortals nor demons in Tao County now, and Yu Chang, suspected of being "Tai Sui," had run away with the Law Breaker. He would work no more miracles. He was only a layabout playing

the huqin and singing ditties that no one wanted to hear. Protecting homes and expelling evil wasn't his responsibility. He also didn't care about the garrisoned troops cutting down trees. While reincarnation wood was a part of him, it was like hair or fingernails. It didn't hurt to be bald. It was only that his field of vision would be slightly limited afterward. But grown up as he was, it wasn't like he didn't have legs. It wasn't a big problem—what was more, the Luwu were now scattered all over Tao County, throughout every walk of life, and each of them had a reincarnation wood amulet they had spilled blood on. At need, they could all be his “eyes” as well.

Xi Ping was only a little at a loss for how to react.

When he had been trapped in the divine image, he had fooled that idiot Xu Rucheng with a “heart demon oath” and made Da Chengzi cut down trees for him. Idiot Xu had feigned compliance but hadn't actually done it, preserving the reincarnation wood trees in Tao County to this day. He hadn't thought they would finally be destroyed at the hands of Western Chu's soldiers.

Amid the immense rumblings, Xi Ping gradually withdrew his consciousness, returning to his true body.

Tao County had been dragged free of the spiritual mountains' influence by the Law Breaker. The Qilin Guard didn't dare to enter at will, and the army composed of mortals had become the biggest threat. Now it would be a contest between the Luwu and the North Xia Waterborne Troops for control of Tao County. The Luwu didn't have a hundred thousand people, but their communications were unhindered, while the Sanyue Sect was working blind when it came to a place where the use of spiritual energy was prohibited. They would have no idea what was happening inside, and the North Xia Waterborne Troops didn't necessarily have the same goals as the sect—he figured san-ge would already have a solution in mind.

At present, there was something more pressing weighing on Xi Ping's mind: his shifu.

Every night, Zhi Xiu recreated all kinds of dazzling ancient battles inside the Law Breaker, making his little disciple flee in a panic. In fact, it was only Xi Ping cooperating with his education. Xi Ping had total control within the Law Breaker. He knew of every leaf growing on every plant... so how could he fail to notice that shifu's consciousness was becoming weaker and weaker when he entered the Law Breaker?

Through the reincarnation wood amulet carried by Lin Chi, he had secretly returned to the Xuanyin Mountains to have a look and seen a layer of ominous fog over the sealed Flying Jade Peak. Peak Master Lin had said that since General Zhi's beam of sword energy had rung the Bell of Tribulation, the sky over Flying Jade Peak hadn't been clear... The Dignitary of Fate High Elder had even kept silent on the subject of the Luwu's increasingly rampant recent activities abroad—the Kaiming and the Luwu had originally been put forward by the Dignitary of Rites Elder Zhao Yin; Zhang Jue had always disapproved. There was no way to remove the Kaiming Department, but Zhang Jue had suppressed the Luwu for several years. Had Qiu Sha, an ascended spirit evil cultivator, not emerged, leading the Dignitary of Rule to change from neutrality to favoring Zhao Yin, Zhou Ying really wouldn't have been able to plant the evil seed of the Luwu—formerly, when the Luwu had asked for money or immortal tools, the request was certain to be rejected when it reached the Dignitary of Fate. The Luwu's funds were transferred from the Kaiming Department, and because of this, the Luwu had been unable to stand alone apart from the Kaiming Department. Clearly the Unbound Furnace was a matter of urgency.

Xi Ping used the Law Breaker to deliver a batch of newly arrived immortal tools to Xu Rucheng, who was on the way north, and gave some instructions. When he returned, it was already dawn.

Today, Tao-er-nainai got up before he could pick up his huqin to express his grief. As soon as Xi Ping pushed open the window and looked down, he felt that the atmosphere was wrong. Very tactfully, he didn't touch his wretched huqin. He quietly went downstairs.

He ran right into the cook Tao Dayu. The stuttering cook was wiping snot with one hand and tears with the other. Seeing Xi Ping, he automatically turned his face away and wiped his eyes against the crook of his elbow.

“What’s the matter?” asked Xi Ping.

As soon as he asked, he heard Tao-er-nainai’s resonant voice ringing out in the little courtyard: “Let them chop! They can chop ‘em all down! If they’re up for it, let them chop off all the heads in the whole county, too! May lightning strike their ancestral tombs...”

What followed was a string of foul language. The guests were all regulars. Seeing her stance, prepared to shout halfway across the county, they quickly went to dissuade her or stop her.

“Quiet, settle down. They have swords and guns, my good madam, what do you have?”

“I’ve got a fucking axe, and I’ll use it to hack through eight generations of their family coffins!” Tao-er-nainai rolled her eyes, then gruffly said to Tao Dayu, “What’re you crying about? No one’s taking over Tao County, er-nainai says so!”

Xi Ping put an arm around Tao Dayu’s shoulders. “You hear that? Even heaven must abide by the empress er-nainai’s decree—I suppose you’re afraid if they cut down the misty willow, that crowd of cultivators will come back?”

The old charcoal dealer smoking a tobacco pipe next to him put in a word: “He was nearly snatched up to be one of those substitute

spiritual image dolls, but luckily the child was neither clever nor a quick study. They couldn't sell him. Now his calves start twitching whenever he sees that crowd of immortals. Poor thing."

Xi Ping froze. He was about to ask "Then what's he still doing in Wild Fox Country?" when he heard Tao-er-nainai start blaring orders. The young cook was once again sent scrambling to work. Xi Ping looked on for a moment and suddenly swallowed his words: it was because of er-nainai that the young cook, petrified, with his "calves twitching," insisted on staying in this place where the forces of evil ran wild. A drenched puppy would also bend its back and be inseparable from the only person it had in the world.

But matters quickly exceeded Xi Ping's expectations.

Not long after the garrisoned troops came, they had cut down most of the roadside reincarnation wood trees in Tao County. The people were enraged without daring to speak. Fear and restlessness spread through seemingly-tranquil Tao County, with only "Tai Sui" to know. When the autumn winds were howling, the late-night chatter echoing incessantly through the Law Breaker could no longer be ignored. It interfered with his training.

Zhi Xiu waved a hand and dispelled the simulated ancient battlefield in the Law Breaker. Teacher and disciple did nothing, only spent the whole night listening.

There were people repeatedly praying to Tai Sui, asking him not to let Tao County go back to the way it was before. There were people who wished for Tai Sui to work another miracle and send a big bolt of lightning to strike these ground pounders dead. There was a person who was courageous in the deep and silent night, raining curses on the Sanyue Mountains, "heretically" wishing evil on all cultivators... Fortunately, his voice couldn't get out of the Law Breaker.

Xi Ping was stupefied. He had spent over five years in Wild Fox Country and floated through the lives of all kinds of people. Everyone who could lure in his consciousness naturally had their own tragedy, but they had all had numb, nervous expressions of meek resignation. He had never heard this much anger.

It was as if, now that spiritual energy was prohibited in Tao County and had been expelled from the immortals, the demons had also been expelled. The people, quietly observing those cultivators and finding that they were also flesh and blood, seemed to have finally noticed that many natural disasters were in fact man-made.

“The internal strife in Great Wan some years ago began with an assassination in Suling. Who was killed and who killed them didn’t matter. As soon as you remove the word ‘don’t’ from ‘don’t dare to be angry,’ the whole dam will burst.” Zhi Xiu sighed quietly. “There is a storm coming.”

No sooner had he spoken this final sentence than, all of a sudden, as if he had sensed something, the sliver of his consciousness in the Law Breaker abruptly disappeared, returning to the Xuanyin Mountains. There was a thunderclap in the grim sky over Flying Jade Peak. On neighboring Rosy Cloud Peak, a disciple watching over a medicine furnace shook, ruining a whole furnace full of elixirs.

Xi Ping’s instincts told him this was bad. He thought that something was about to go wrong.

As he was distracted by anxiety, the next day—the third day of the ninth month—the Zhao family, carrying their portable hidden realm on their backs, reached Western Chu’s capital Dongheng.

Xi Ping had been to Dongheng with his maternal grandfather’s people when he was little. Now, retreading old haunts with Xu Rucheng, he practically didn’t recognize it.

In Tao County, the most advanced thing the common people got to see in their daily lives was a steam boiler. The vast majority of people still drew drinking water from wells. Forget about steam carriages and Cloud Soaring Flood Dragons—even horses would sprain their ankles on the uneven, pitted dirt roads.

But Dongheng was like a fantasyland.

The city of Dongheng was situated on one side of Dongheng's Sanyue Mountain Range, built against the mountains. At a glance, it was impossible to count how many layers it had.

Horses and oxen could only travel along special paths. There were tracks laid everywhere, with small steam-powered carriages like miniature Cloud Soaring Flood Dragons shuttling back and forth over them. Beside them, cultivators flew on their swords in broad daylight without restraint. Looking up from below, your gaze could only reach the middle of the mountain. Everything above that was wreathed in mist from the steam. Only multicolored lights shone down, making night indistinguishable from day.

The imperial palace gazed down upon Dongheng City from above, brightly lit at night, like an immense magic beast concealed amid the landscape.

Princess Qing—the mother of the imperial grandson who came from Yu Family Bend—sent people to meet them outside the city and lead the Zhaos in. Right now, there was a snow-white veil over the face of Xu Rucheng, who was impersonating Zhao Qindan. Two rows of maids, each rivaling the next for beauty, waited deferentially to help the young mistress out of the carriage.

Without the Luwu mask to help him keep up appearances, Xu Rucheng would have been astonished into exposing himself by this ostentation. He dismounted the carriage in a daze. When he set foot

on the earth of Dongheng, invisible spiritual energy spread out from underfoot.

Xu Rucheng gave a start: Dongheng's streets were covered with arrays!

"Calm down," Xi Ping reminded him, "your shoes have the Golden Hand's shielding seal on them."

Xu Rucheng swallowed a mouthful of saliva. "Tai Sui, what kind of arrays are these?"

"Surveillance." Xi Ping glanced at the imperial palace from a distance. "If you set foot on the streets of Dongheng, the Sanyue Sect will be able to track you. If they so wish, they can find out what you're doing and where you are at any time. Be careful. Dongheng's Sanyue are the world's masters in talismans, arrays, and inscriptions. You can't relax just because you have Moon Plated Peak backing you up."

Even Xu Rucheng's organs were trembling. "Hell, the whole city? How many spiritual stones does that burn? It's..."

Before he could finish delivering the enlightening views of a pauper, he heard a *whizz*. Prince Qing Manor had set off fireworks to welcome the guests.

These weren't ordinary fireworks. They were set off with spiritual stones. When they scattered in midair, spiritual energy surged into the spectators' lungs. Meanwhile, the moment the fireworks exploded, Wei Chengxiang and the Luwu in Tao County simultaneously contacted Xi Ping through the reincarnation wood: "Tai Sui, there's a problem!"

Xi Ping split off half his consciousness to return from Dongheng to Tao County. Before the reflection of the fireworks had vanished from

his eyes, he saw a corpse fallen in the muddy earth mixed with autumn rain.

The seeds of this disaster had been planted when the garrisoned troops had first entered Tao County.

At first it had been a relatively well-off family pleading with the troops not to chop down the reincarnation wood trees growing on the hill of their ancestral graves. They said that the old trees had been there for ages, to guard the graves and preserve the fengshui. They requested that the soldiers “make an exception,” accepting a financial loss in order to forestall disaster. Unexpectedly, it inadvertently showed the jackals and wolves a means of earning money.

After most of the reincarnation wood trees along Tao County’s roads were removed, they started getting their eyes on the trees on people’s roofs and within their courtyard walls—and not just the reincarnation wood trees.

It didn’t take long before a semi-public price list began to circulate among the people—how much money it would take to avoid having the army ruffians break down your door, how much money to make them leave the roots after cutting down the tree, not harm the household goods... The prices weren’t fixed; they didn’t fall, they only rose.

Still later, the garrisoned troops publicly requested all residents to hand in their implements made of misty willow to the authorities. If you couldn’t fix it up through connections, you just had to sit and wait to have your home searched and your possessions confiscated, and you would end up charged with the crime of “privately worshipping an evil god.”

Today, just past noon, a group of hungover ruffians from the army had barged into a residence that had refused to “request that an

exception be made.” First they dug up a fruit tree that had been growing in the yard by the roots, then made a search for “objects of worship” made from misty willow. Among the “objects of worship” they turned up were tables, chairs, wardrobes... even a memorial tablet!

Seeing the memorial tablet about to be thrown onto the bonfire as well, the son of the head of the household had been unable to take any more. He had flared up and pulled out a hammer, without warning bashing the soldier about to burn the memorial tablet over the head, sending his brains splattering everywhere.

Everyone had sobered up at once. After a moment’s stunned staring, with mixed anger and astonishment, the troops had wanted to take down the “murderer” at once. The people’s resentment, which had accumulated over several days, exploded at a touch.

First the neighbors around them began to speak. From patient argument to unguarded swearing, and then once again to all the men and women, young and old, who lived in the street running outside, less than an incense stick of time passed in all.

The people closely surrounded the gang of army ruffians. When Xi Ping arrived, the two sides had already come to blows.

In the harsh autumn wind, Dongheng’s Prince Qing Manor had used spiritual energy to force a whole garden of unseasonal flowers to grow, laying down a floral carpet bursting with exotic scents to welcome the honored guests.

Tao County was bleeding for the sake of a few pieces of rotten wood.

This had taken place not far from where Wei Chengxiang and Zhao Qindan were living.

Zhao Qindan pulled a sword out of the Silver Tray Lottery machinery, weighed it in her hand and found that it was still handy enough, then turned to go.

Wei Chengxiang pulled her back. “What are you doing?”

The young mistress had always been proud and arrogant, as well as a little unsociable. It wasn't that she hadn't been raised properly and was rude to people. Mainly it manifested in her unwillingness to owe anyone a favor. If a neighbor brought over a few wild bird eggs they had picked up, she would want to get something to give them in return that very day. With Wei Chengxiang perfunctorily half-listening, she could ask about it eight times within one shichen—as if those wild bird eggs were chafing her.

During the registration of residents, the neighbors she had practically no contact with had protected her. This was like a thorn pricking her flesh. Now that she had seized an opportunity, she wanted to go out immediately to return the favor.

“Don't be hasty,” Wei Chengxiang said seriously. “Do you think it's not bad enough yet? Wait.”

Zhao Qindan said, “It was those scoundrels causing trouble in the first place. In my opinion, they ought to have been beaten to death long before...”

“Do you think the law won't punish the majority?” Wei Chengxiang interrupted her. “It will.”

Zhao Qindan froze. She thought that for a moment, an unspeakable gloom had passed over that person's face.

Before she could say anything, their dilapidated house began to tremble faintly. Next, there came the sounds of shouting mixed with footsteps, followed by the firing of a hand cannon—

CHAPTER 122 - Eternal Flame (4)

The sound of the firearm discharging traveled so far through the narrow alley that even the half-immortals who kept feeling like their hearing was impaired tensed all over.

Zhao Qindan wasted no time saying anything else. She raised her sword and charged out.

An autumn rain was about to fall. The chilly damp assaulted the senses, wrapped around the smells of blood and gun smoke. Zhao Qindan's hand, hidden in her sleeve, instinctively formed a hand seal to draw a talisman—nothing happened.

She was stunned. She stopped in her tracks.

Yes—she was no longer a half-immortal of Heaven's Design Pavilion who could overturn hundreds upon thousands of people with one talisman.

There was another gunshot. The screams and angry cursing were more ear-piercing than the roar of the firearm. Zhao Qindan gave a start. The Qilin Guard didn't dare to enter where spiritual energy was prohibited, but now she, a former walker in the mortal world of Heaven's Design Pavilion, was finding out how it felt to “walk in the mortal world.”

But the next moment, her heart began to beat wildly. A rage of inexpressible origin engulfed her: for her traitorous family heading north to Dongheng, for that inglorious marriage transaction, for her baseless self-respect, stamped into the mud... and for this moment, for her true timidity and helplessness when she had nothing to fall back on.

The shots had come from the soldiers who had just been patrolling nearby and had immediately rushed over on hearing the disturbance. The patrol team's centurion had taken one look at an unruly citizen swinging a big hammer at his colleague's head and, in a moment of desperation, raised his hand cannon and shot.

But these Xia River loafers had never fought a battle, and their training had been sloppy and inferior. He had clearly been aiming at the shoulder of the person holding the hammer, but instead he hit an old man standing next to him in the neck. Even his head flew off when the cartridge connected. How could anyone have survived that? First, everyone was dumbfounded. Then the man holding the hammer forlornly cried out "Dad!", his eyes opening as wide as an ox's, his veins standing out. Shouting, he threw himself at the killer.

This time the centurion's aim was true. His shot opened a bloody flower on that man's forehead.

In the blink of an eye, two bodies were lying in front of the crowd, like a bucket of ice poured over the inflamed public sentiments. The angry crowd went quiet. No one dared to step forward again. They stood facing the soldier in the government's pay across a narrow alley.

The army ruffians who had gotten drunk and made trouble ran back to their team in terror. There was another who couldn't run back. Having "offered his life in sacrifice," he was lying at the feet of the common people.

The centurion's eyes fell on the corpse of that army ruffian. He thought that Tao County was beyond rescue. They had spent so much time with evil cultivators that the people were all abnormal. So he slammed his helmet heavily against the wall and swore a foul oath. "Resist that crowd of unruly citizens. Arrest them!"

The soldiers in the patrol team all rushed forward.

But while these people were armed with hand cannons, they still automatically avoided the strong men carrying knives and axes. Like dogs fighting over food, they charged toward the weak and elderly who couldn't run away. Though the weak and elderly were numerous, there still weren't enough of them to be fought over like this. Soon there weren't enough to go around. Two soldiers simultaneously grabbed an old woman leaning on a cane and wouldn't give way to each other. Even the old woman herself felt embarrassed along with the two of them.

Just then, the cool flash of a sword came out of nowhere, falling along with a lightning bolt from Tao County's sky. The sword cleverly passed through cracks in these two army ruffians' armor. In an instant, before the thunder came, the sword had cut off one man's arm and sliced open the other man's hand.

Even without the ability to draw talismans, a half-immortal still had muscles and bones that had been tempered countless times by spiritual energy. With one hand, Zhao Qindan supported the old woman, who was sliding down. She stamped on the hand cannons that had fallen. "Impudence!"

Wei Chengxiang had lost hold of her. When she came out in pursuit, this reprimand of Zhao Qindan's, with the particular flavor of the elite, had already been spoken.

Oh no.

It was as if the young mistress was afraid people wouldn't know there was something wrong with her background!

Wei Chengxiang had also never expected that when she had climbed so high along the path of cultivation, fate would kick her back to where she had started from—and tracing this business back to its roots, she had played a part in it!

“Senior,” Wei Chengxiang said quickly, squeezing the reincarnation wood, “the soldiers garrisoned in Tao County are distributed across twenty-five locations. The nearest army station to here has about three thousand people. At a quick march, they can come over within one ke. Not one of our neighbors will be spared today. If it was only an ordinary clash, they could spend money, call in connections, but now that people have died, it won’t be so easy to wrap it up. Hurry and get word to the young mistress, tell her to mind her mouth. If she gets dragged in, it’ll mean even more trouble!”

Before Xi Ping could respond, Wei Chengxiang added, “Also, in the last few days, I’ve found out that the army has brought ‘flying book’ machines that don’t use spiritual stones.⁸⁰ I’m not sure who those things can contact, maybe it’s the Qilin Guard outside of Tao County, maybe it’s their superior—at present, they’ve temporarily set up their general’s tent in Wild Fox Country, at the former location of the Snake King’s Immortal Palace, but it was a mortal that came, my guess is that it isn’t anyone important. There’s someone else behind them. No matter what, we can’t let the ‘flying book’ machine send word out. Sanyue is on the look-out for a reason to punish Tao County right now.”

Xi Ping said, “Understood. Have patience.”

No sooner had he spoken than Zhao Qindan, holding a sword with one hand and raising a hand cannon with the other, pointed at the centurion and said, “What fine men you all are! You accomplish nothing in pursuit of your careers or to protect your homes and your nation. All you’re capable of is extorting money from the common people. Slaughtering the old and weak, the women and children—where is martial law amidst this cruel oppression? Where are the laws of Western Chu?”

“Senior, make her shut up!” Wei Chengxiang’s mind buzzed. She didn’t know whether it was Zhao Qindan’s mouth that was too fast, or whether Tai Sui was getting on in years and starting to get tangled up in his beard, unable to pass word fast enough.

And Zhao Qindan wasn’t finished yet. Quickly as pouring out beans, she went on: “The elders here have never had the wish to rebel. They have always known their place. All they wish is to live safely. They do not even dare to make the extravagant demands of keeping warm and eating their fill. May I be so bold as to ask, soldiers, whose orders do you follow to insist on arousing the resentment of the people, forcing them to revolt? The court’s? Or the Sanyue Sect’s? Or is it your own malicious intentions that have made you turn traitor?”

Wei Chengxiang: “...”

She wanted to step forward right then, but Xi Ping unhurriedly said, “There are no cultivators nearby to hear her interrogate Sanyue’s shed skins’ Ways of the Heart, no need to worry—and she’s right.”

Wei Chengxiang blurted out, “Does being right mean she can just come out and say it?”

This question seemed to shut Xi Ping up. After a moment, he said with a laugh, “True, only children and young mistresses dare to say it so boldly. Let her say it, or else eventually, no one will even be able to see the lice on a bald man’s head. Can you use a hand cannon?”

Wei Chengxiang said, “Wh...”

The next moment, her consciousness was pulled into the Law Breaker. Two Moon Plated Gold hand cannons, obviously more compact and well-made than those Western Chu’s army was

equipped with, were thrown toward her along with a bag of ammunition.

Tai Sui said, "I will leave this place to you."

Then he sent her out of the Law Breaker.

That brief moment had been enough for Wei Chengxiang to glimpse that the inside of the Law Breaker was piled full of weaponry. Her thoughts moved quickly: "Does Tai Sui want to take Tao County? Was he prepared in advance?"

But there was no time to think carefully now. The centurion of Tao County's garrisoned troops, as expected, was infuriated by this country girl with her mouth full of "big talk." Pointing to Zhao Qindan, he said, "Fine, I see that you're a spy from Southern Wan. These unruly civilians have not only been worshiping an evil cultivator in secret, they've also been sheltering foreign spies. Get them all! Those who have the audacity to rebel will be punished under the laws on treason. Shoot.."

Before the words "shoot to kill" could leave his mouth, a sniper's shot hit him right in the back of the head. The centurion, maintaining his posture with his hand raised, stiffened where he was, with a hole clear through his head, looking helplessly at the frightened people.

The soldiers behind him didn't understand what was happening. They were still hefting their hand cannons, waiting for the officer's order. They didn't expect the officer to twitch a couple times, then fall to his knees with a thump and hit the ground facedown, as if he were kowtowing to the frightened commoners in front of him. Finally, thick blood gurgled out.

The soldier nearest to the centurion was so frightened his face turned ashen. Picking up his hand cannon, he was about to fire, but before he could move, a sniper's shot, like a reaper, gathered him in.

Wei Chengxiang passed through the dim alley like a ghoul.

Others pursuing the Way relied on intensive study of techniques and spells, questioning their Way of the Heart, using spiritual energy to scour their meridians and cleanse their marrow. She had entered the Way through revenge. Most of the time, when she wasn't killing people, she was fleeing. Immortal tools, downgraded immortal tools, even mortal firearms—she was familiar with anything that could kill.

She was no longer the child who had cried at the mouth of Rat Alley because she had nowhere to go.

The small patrol team of soldiers targeted by the “reaper” panicked, holding their heads and scurrying like rats looking for a place to hide while vainly attempting to fight back.

Wei Chengxiang took down a man with each shot, but she was only one person, after all. When the good-for-nothings in the patrol team got scared, hand cannon fire began to fly. Zhao Qindan was busy protecting the crowd of neighbors and couldn't help her.

Soon, someone seized an opportunity to blow a sharp whistle.

“Senior Tai Sui,” Wei Chengxiang said, panting as she pressed on the reincarnation wood, “how long do you need me to hold out?”

Xi Ping said, “One ke.”

Xi Ping hadn't expected the conflict in Tao County to intensify this fast, but he was indeed not entirely unprepared.

The corruption of Western Chu's armed forces surpassed his imagination. Comparatively speaking, Great Wan's officials, who spent all their time engaged in internal strife, could simply be

described as squeaky clean—fallen into the hands of this bunch of North Xia Waterborne Troops, Tao County was worse off than under the control of the Sanyue Sect. At least the immortals had Ways of the Heart. Soon Tao County would become a pit of vipers, and it would be hard to say whose dowry he had been preparing with all his running around.

Therefore, while the people's resentment, which only he could hear, had been growing louder and louder, Xi Ping had sent a warning to Zhou Ying.

A few days later, Bai Ling had sent a big batch of Great Wan weaponry, and the Luwu had prepared to face the garrisoned troops at any time.

Right away, the disruption devices for the “flying books” buried throughout the streets and lanes were simultaneously turned on.

The general's tent at the former location of the Snake King's Immortal Palace received no early warning. The first thing they heard was a mourning song in a mixture of Wan and Chu languages—a team of carriages in a funeral procession was passing through, playing music and singing.

This bunch of country bumpkins was really fucking ridiculous. The bodyguard standing watch in front of the “general's tent,” seeing the situation, immediately went forward to scold them.

He saw a tall middle-aged man playing a huqin who seemed to have received orders from the officiant. He put the huqin aside and quickly walked over.

The musician was all smiles, nodding and bowing, simultaneously reaching into his sleeve to feel around for something, as if he was looking for money to give to avoid trouble. “Coffins circle the town.

That's been our local custom for many years. We have no intention of giving offense."

The bodyguard's expression softened. "But you can't go through this way. Do you know what this place is?"

"That's right, don't blame the ignorant." The huqin player drew near as he spoke, quickly pulling something out of his sleeve. Hiding it with his hand, he passed it to the bodyguard. "Sir, you had better..."

The bodyguard was just about to reach out a hand to accept the object when he suddenly met the musician's eyes.

The corners of the musician's eyes were wrinkled into a thousand folds, but there was no smile in them.

Wait, no, this was...

The next moment, the musician cleverly flipped his hand over, revealing what was in his palm. A palm-sized pure black hand cannon shot right through the bodyguard's underbelly and bored up through his chest, but it only made a quiet *pop*.

The bodyguard went to see the kings of the underworld without making a sound. The musician calmly caught him and almost inaudibly finished his sentence: "...be on your way already."

Then he propped up the corpse of the bodyguard, and staggered with him up to the general's tent, as if they were two fast friends with their arms around each other's shoulders. He kept saying, "Sir, sir, we have to hurry up to meet the auspicious time, sir..."

The other guards in front of the general's tent, seeing the situation, approached uncomprehendingly. The funeral procession dressed in mourning clothes suddenly rose up. The totally unprepared general's tent's defenses seemed to be made of paper. Under cover

of night, the Luwu, exceedingly familiar with the terrain, drove in at lightning speed.

All the “flying book” machines in the county only crackled.

Meanwhile, Zhao Qindan, protecting the group of neighbors, dove into a back alley. She had to prop up the old and lead the young, and she had to convince the elderly, who couldn’t bear to give up their family possessions and kept trying to go back, to leave. When would the young mistress have done such a thing before? She was in a terrible fix.

They had just gone through the winding little alleys and hadn’t yet had time to breathe a sigh of relief when the ground began to tremble. The garrisoned troops drawn by that earlier whistle that had been like an arrow piercing the clouds had rushed right over on horseback, even faster than they had anticipated!

Wei Chengxiang changed her gun’s cartridge, her heart sinking. The front half of the lead rider’s horse was visible now. As if they had received word, it was wearing special bulletproof light armor.

The horse was as swift as a gale. It blocked the path of Zhao Qindan and the others. Before he was even nearby, the horse’s rider pulled out a rifle five or six chi long and shot toward the crowd.

There was a *whizz*, and a big all-encompassing net flashing with purple lightning fell.

A sparrow was just flying by and bumped right into the net. With a crackle, it became a roasted bird stuck to the net!

Zhao Qindan had meant to stab with her sword. The sword was already half-raised. She was held back by a few people who had caught on quickly. The cavalryman’s protective armor easily deflected Wei Chengxiang’s firepower. The rifle didn’t move a hair.

Wei Chengxiang had no other choice. She had to show herself. She leapt down from the canopy of an ancient tree that had yet to meet with calamity. Using her own weight, she stamped on the cavalryman.

The horse stumbled under her weighty fall. Neighing, it raised its front hooves. The rifle fell from the cavalryman's hands, but the other cavalrymen were following close behind. In a moment, countless hand cannons were pointed at Wei Chengxiang, clicking as they loaded.

At such a close distance, even with spiritual energy to protect her, a half-immortal wouldn't necessarily have been able to escape unharmed from hand cannon fire. In a place where spiritual energy was prohibited, wouldn't she be shot up into a sieve?

Zhao Qindan, held back by many hands, opened her eyes wide and struggled desperately. "Let go of..."

At this moment of imminent peril, there came another sharp whistle.

A mounted soldier with the look of one of the general's personal guards rushed over hoisting the flag of command. His voice reached them before he did: "Orders from the general. Do not disturb the civilians. Anyone who dares to discharge a weapon within the county will be punished under martial law!"

The cavalrymen with their fingers already holding down the triggers raised the muzzles of their guns just in time. Cold sweat rolled down Wei Chengxiang's concave back to her waist.

The cavalryman who had just been kicked off his horse climbed miserably to his feet. Seeing the flag of command and the token in the hands of the newcomer, he had to swallow down all his

discontent. “Reporting to the captain, our brothers have captured some armed Southern Wan spies.”

The mounted soldier delivering the order raised his chin haughtily. “Take them away. Have the general take care of them.”

In the general’s tent, the musician in mourning dress—Xi Ping—was just examining an unconscious fat man in front of him with amazement.

The North Xia Waterborne’s Troops’ Marquis of Qulong, Zheng Bin, was a half-immortal. Naturally he wouldn’t come to an awful place like this, where the use of spiritual energy was prohibited. The so-called “general” making trouble in Tao County now was only a sixth-rank officer under the Marquis of Qulong. He looked as though he weighed over three hundred jin. When he had been knocked unconscious, he’d fallen on Xi Ping’s foot, and it was still aching faintly now.

Due to his partiality toward his san-ge and his personal good opinion of Princess Duanrui, he occasionally thought that while the Zhou family was bad, Xuanyin Mountain’s treachery had come first, and the lunatics born alongside those with innate spiritual bones had also been forced into existence by Xuanyin Mountain.

But now he had suddenly realized that if Xuanyin Mountain hadn’t been keeping the Zhou family down for over a thousand years, Great Wan would be another Western Chu.

The right and wrong of it was hard to judge.

Just then, from outside the tent came the voice of a guard: “General, two female spies from Southern Wan have been captured!”

Xi Ping's eyes turned. Beside him, a Luwu who had been a mimic by profession immediately imitated the officer's voice and said:

"Understood. Lock them up for now. I will personally question them shortly."

"Yes, sir!"

This wouldn't work in the long run. There weren't necessarily a hundred thousand garrisoned troops in the country, but there were several tens of thousands, and the Luwu only had a few people. If they were exposed, no amount of skill would help.

So Xi Ping contacted Bai Ling through the reincarnation wood: "Bai Ling-da-ge, how long do we need to hold out?"

"It won't be very long," Bai Ling answered quickly. "Zheng Bin isn't a seamless egg. Also, my lord has instructed you to hide yourself. Only pass information, do not get involved."

Xi Ping: "..."

Bai Ling immediately sensed something from his momentary silence. "Viscount, where are you?"

Xi Ping silently removed the foot he had planted on the mountain of flesh that was the officer. "*Hss...* well... I may be a little close to the former location of the Snake King's Immortal Palace..."

Bai Ling said, "... You'd better enjoy your last meal."

On the fifth day of the ninth month, the Zhaos paid their respects to some important personages from Sanyue's West Peak, including Xiang Wenqing, at Dongheng's Sage's Palace, meant for worship of the sages. When they entered, a number of unobtrusive footmen were unexpectedly lit up by the inscriptions on the walls.

It turned out that the murals on all four walls of the Sage's Palace had inscriptions hidden in them. All the spiritual energy in the Sage's Palace circulated in a special way. When it passed through a human body, it would cast different shadows on the wall, projecting that person's spiritual image.

Once a cultivator's spiritual eyes had opened and their meridians had connected to heaven and earth, spiritual energy would pass through their bodies differently than it passed through those of mortals. The spiritual image masks couldn't disguise that. These footmen who ought to have been mortals were hit by the spiritual energy—it turned out that they were all half-immortals, including body servants of the clan leader. The Luwu's infiltration had reached so far!

Xiang Wenqing attacked at once, but these half-immortal Luwu had some strange immortal tools. They actually disappeared from under the eyes of a middle stage ascended spirit. In their wild rush, these Luwu "just happened" to run right into Princess Qiyang's carriage team returning from an autumn outing.

The panicked desperate criminals collided indiscriminately with the team. Amid the rapidly changing events, the Marquis of Qulong, on assignment on the distant Xia River, undertaking the important task of governing Tao County, heard the sad news of his loved one's death a thousand li away.

Meanwhile, in the Sanyue Immortal Mountains, a figure sitting upright in the middle of a lotus pond sensed something, swayed slightly, and opened his eyes.

CHAPTER 123 - Eternal Flame (5)

Ripple after ripple rose in the calm lotus pond. The lotuses were white, and the big round lotus leaves were also white. The flowers had neither pistil nor stamen, and there were no lotus seeds to be found. There was also no silt underwater. It was extremely clear. Dark red lotus roots and long stalks coiled in the crystalline water, all the more startling in comparison to the snow-white leaves, like internal organs laid bare to the light of day.

When the man in the lotus pond opened his eyes, all the lotuses in the pond curled up into buds.

This man who was the “shame of flowers”⁸¹ had a very shocking countenance—not only did he have no hair, he didn’t even have eyebrows. His willow leaf eyes, placed slightly low, seemed to sit in the middle of his face. A red-lipped mouth had been drawn in cinnabar on his forehead, so it was impossible to tell at a glance whether his head was right-side up or upside-down.

The ripples in the lotus pond rolled out to the edge of the pond and suddenly stopped at a pair of snow-white feet. When white-haired Elder Xuanwu appeared out of nowhere, the ripples immediately dispersed. The ripples on the pond stood unnaturally still all of a sudden.

Apropos of nothing, Xuanwu asked the person in the pond, “What did you see?”

The “shame of flowers” in the pond said, “One wedding and one funeral. The imperial grandson is taking a wife, and the emperor’s son-in-law is bereaved of his. Festive occasions both red and white.”

As he spoke, the “shame of flowers” turned and looked at Elder Xuanwu with his head whose top and bottom were almost indistinguishable. He asked, “Elder Xuanwu, can you guess whether my head is right-side up today?”

Xuanwu ignored him. The features drawn on his mask normally changed every moment, but facing the person in the pond, he maintained an oddly neutral expression, making him suddenly seem not so strange.

“Take a look at the future state of affairs in Tao County for me.”

“I’m not looking. Some place on the border where even birds don’t shit, what’s there worth looking at?” The bald head of the shame of flowers in the pond pushed apart the lotuses, and he swam toward Elder Xuanwu at the edge of the pond like a water ghoul. “Elder—shizun, can you guess whether my head is right-side up today?”

It was only when he moved that you noticed what was wrong: this person had no legs.

His lower body grew into the dark red lotus roots. It was hard to say whether he was a freak who had grown out of the lotuses, or whether there were flowers growing all over a freak’s body.

“It is of utmost importance,” Xuanwu said, pulling a long face... a long mask. “Zhuoming, don’t joke.”

This deranged “freak” was actually the master of Sanyue’s East Peak, High Elder Xuanwu’s only direct disciple. His name was Zhuoming. He had no surname.

The smaller mountains of Sanyue stood like trees in a forest, packed with the sons of powerful officials who spent money like water. But while these people could be said to belong to the “inner sect,” they had no say within the inner sect.

In Sanyue's inner sect, only the three Principal Peaks, East, Central, and West, had the authority to speak.

Among them, the West Peak had the most people and was the busiest. It was overseen by a shed skin elder, who had originally had sixteen ascended spirits under his command... Presently only eleven remained. Four had died at the hands of the great monster Qiu Sha, and another had been seriously wounded in the battle in Tao County. His boundary had fallen, and his cultivation had been destroyed. Each of these eleven ascended spirits had a crowd of disciples, a mixture of established foundations, half-immortals, and even mortals. Only their bloodline was pure—on the West Peak, everyone was surnamed Xiang.

The Central Peak, meanwhile, was the location of Sanyue's sect leader. It was said that the sect leader was the person in the current age closest to a full moon position. He was always in seclusion pursuing the moon. The routine responsibilities of the Central Peak were shared by his four ascended spirit disciples. The Central Peak's bloodline may not have been pure, but its threshold for entry was high. It accepted only established foundations with exceptional natural endowments. To enter the Central Peak, you had to pass layer upon layer of assessments. The more impressive the endowments, the more relaxed the requirements for birth became—it was said that when the legendary Hui Xiangjun had been at Sanyue, she had been part of the Central Peak.

The East Peak was the most special: the Silver Moon was there.

The sect leader didn't attend to business, and the West Peak's elder was responsible for the descendants of the Xiang clan and was unavoidably biased, so the East Peak's Xuanwu had become the true wielder of power in the Sanyue Sect.

Unlike the West Peak, which saw as much traffic as a marketplace, the East Peak, where the Silver Moon was kept, was a forbidden area within the inner sect. Apart from the sect leader, no one could enter or exit at will. And in thousands of years, Zhuoming was the only disciple Elder Xuanwu had taken.

No one knew where he had picked up Zhuoming. Rumor had it that he was a bastard of the Xiang clan, but his birth mother was unknown. Before opening his spiritual eyes, he hadn't been a "barren land," but his limbs had been paralyzed. He had come to the spiritual mountains lying down. In the three hundred years since he had entered the East Peak, no one had seen him again. Many of the old people had practically forgotten that such a person existed, and established foundations with shorter records hadn't even heard of him.

"How is it of utmost importance? Is Tao County a strategically important place that some military commander needs to win?" Zhuoming shot a dark look out of the water. "The population is small, their specialty product is evil cultivators, and before, when a map in Dongheng left the place off, it took most of a century before anyone noticed. It didn't bother you then."

"Inept government is neglect on the part of the court in Dongheng. Immortal sects do not attend to ordinary affairs," Xuanwu said gravely. "At present, Tao County is under the control of the Law Breaker, whose whereabouts are unknown. It has become an 'unbound' place. The spiritual mountains cannot see into it. Over time, it is sure to come to harbor all manner of evil. Wasn't the disaster of Southern Wan's Impassable Sea a lesson?"

"There are many places the spiritual mountains cannot see into. Aren't there two right here on the East Peak? Oh... I know, shizun thinks we're dirty. I keep telling you to toss some silt cleaning fish into the lotus pond." Zhuoming began to laugh. His laughter was like the aftermath of a stroke. Once the "haha"s started, there was

no end to them. He wouldn't stop. At last it was impossible to tell whether he was crying, laughing, or crowing.

Xuanwu, used to this, tossed a pill into the spirit on his forehead. A breath of clear air instantly spread throughout the whole lotus pond. Zhuoming's bizarre laughter came to an abrupt halt.

He closed his eyes, and the lotuses opened, a string of heartless white lotuses like river lanterns to mourn the dead.

After a moment, Zhuoming said in a flat voice: "There's a murmur behind the Law Breaker's axiom, as if tens of thousands of people are speaking at the same time. It's too noisy. I can't discern what the axiom is."

The features on Xuanwu's mask twisted. "That Yu Chang is still only a near-ascended spirit. Can he really hide from your observation?"

Zhuoming's eyes moved beneath his eyelids. He didn't answer.

Xuanwu continued, "Where is Yu Chang? Can you see his destiny clearly?"

"If shizun cannot find him, naturally he has already gone north over the Slumbering Dragon Sea. Why ask me?" Zhuoming said. "His destiny is entangled with the fog brought by the Law Breaker. It is hard to say where he will end up."

"Is there a means of resolving Tao County's present predicament?"

"There are only two ways to remove the Law Breaker. Either the axiom breaks, or the axiom is realized—when everywhere on earth is like Tao County, without spiritual mountains, without cultivators. When both immortals and demons have perished—then perhaps the axiom in the Law Breaker will be realized," Zhuoming said coldly. "Shizun, don't worry."

“What are you saying?!” said Xuanwu.

The corners of both of Zhuoming’s mouths, above and below, turned up. “Heaven and earth can hardly last forever, so is it worth speaking of the immortal mountains? Southern Wan’s Bell of Tribulation has tolled several times, the Silver Moon has shone upon the Xia River, the Late-Autumn Red from eight centuries ago dyed the mid-autumn moon blood red, and the Law Breaker and the Riverward, those demonic tools, have both reappeared. How far are we from the fire in the Unbound Furnace rekindling? Shizun, do you know the kind of festering sore that, once it erupts, will spread over the whole body? A terminal illness with no cure. Tao County is that open sore.”

Without a word, Xuanwu turned and was about to disappear where he stood.

“Shizun,” Zhuoming suddenly called him back. “I’m very bored. If there’s any kind of wedding or funeral in the inner sect, could I go over representing the East Peak to get in on the fun?”

Xuanwu stopped in his tracks. Having heard him mention weddings twice, he involuntarily took it to heart. His consciousness swept through the three Principal Peaks and saw that there really was a wedding coming up—a mortal disciple of the West Peak was about to marry the young mistress of the main bloodline of Southern Wan’s Zhao family.

Eight hundred weddings between a mortal and a half-immortal couldn’t interest High Elder Xuanwu, but the bride’s background gave him pause... Southern Wan’s Zhao family, coming from Yu Family Bend, and this Young Mistress Zhao had previously met Yu Chang.

Xuanwu asked, "Is there a problem with the daughter of the Zhao clan?"

"A big problem. She's..." Zhuoming heaved a loud, slow sigh. "She's a jinx on her husband."

Xuanwu: "..."

Zhuoming seemed to want to laugh again, but his face seemed to have been fixed in place by that pill from earlier. His features, unmoving, trembled incessantly. He couldn't laugh.

Xuanwu took no more notice of his ravings. He left with a wave of his sleeve, putting him out of sight and out of mind.

Zhuoming shook all over, sounds of chortling coming from his throat. All the ripples in the pond once again began to tremble.

He only calmed down after a long moment. Speaking to himself, he said, "Shizun, shizun, can you guess whether my head is right-side up today?"

Xuanwu was gone. No one answered.

"Well, you've guessed wrong again," Zhuoming said. The mouth drawn on his forehead slowly opened and stuck out a tongue, spitting out the pill Xuanwu had shot into his "spirit" whole. Then his head rotated slowly on his neck, turning over. The two mouths switched places. He reached out a hand and pulled off his nose, turned it over, and put it back.

"The bride is unlucky, the bride will be a jinx later, the bride is all made of paper. The bride is missing something, the bride has something extra... Hee-hee, the bride is here for the Unbound Furnace." Saying so, he abruptly opened his eyes. His gaze shot

swiftly through the sky like a blade of frost, as if it wanted to pierce the horizon.

“Don’t you agree, the ungovernable way’s Misty Willow... Reincarnation Wood?”

Xu Rucheng, impersonating Zhao Qindan, suddenly gave a start, for no reason waking from meditation, his heart beating like thunder.

At the same time, Xi Ping, repeatedly practicing talismans in the Law Breaker, felt his spiritual sense touched, as if a pail of ice water had been thrown right into his face. Out of nowhere, a chill went through his whole body.

Xi Ping was alone inside the Law Breaker. On the night of the second day of the ninth month, after shifu had said “There is a storm coming,” his consciousness had disappeared, and he hadn’t returned. Xi Ping didn’t know whether this was a good thing or a bad thing. He was only afraid that Zhi Xiu was at a critical moment in his seclusion and didn’t dare to rashly speak to disturb him. All he could do was worry and ask Lin Chi to keep a constant eye on what was happening at Flying Jade Peak for him. He would have loved to shove Xu Rucheng right into Sanyue for the wedding ceremony.

Xi Ping dismissed his preoccupations and focused on meditation, but that strange sensation went as quickly as it had come. He couldn’t seize on its source. He tried to divine it for a while, awkwardly imitating the text Zhi Xiu had left for him by rote, but he couldn’t divine anything... The “craftsmanship” of the Dignitary of Fate’s lineage seemed to be done for, each generation worse than the one before.

“Senior,” Xu Rucheng called to him through the reincarnation wood, “suddenly I don’t feel so well.”

Xi Ping focused. “This journey may involve twists and turns. It’s a warning for you to be careful. Although, if a master really did notice there was something wrong with you, with your half-immortal’s cultivation, you wouldn’t feel anything before you died.”

“That’s true.” Xu Rucheng was silent for a moment. “Senior, these last few days, a bunch of the Zhao family’s old women have been coming over in groups every day to torment me, openly and implicitly giving instructions about all kinds of... tricks, you know, for after marriage. They must want to get me in before the New Year.”

Xi Ping’s mind moved.

The imperial grandson’s wedding ought to have involved a good deal of unnecessary pomp, but the Zhao family had been infiltrated by spies, leading to the assassination of Her Highness Princess Qiyang, and the assassins had disappeared right out from under the noses of Sanyue’s ascended spirit masters.

This unforeseen event had shaken Dongheng’s court and its people, and it had led to two outcomes:

First, Princess Qiyang was the aunt of Zhao Qindan’s fiancé. The Zhao family couldn’t avoid blame in connection with her death. That Prince Qing Manor hadn’t fallen out with them could be counted as acting for the sake of the bigger picture. But the Dragon and Phoenix Symbolizing Prosperity stamp had already been completed. The marriage was set whether anyone liked it or not. On the bride’s side especially, the Zhao family had no opportunity for regrets. So it suddenly became uncertain whether the young mistress’s status would be as formal wife or not... At present, the two sides were still bargaining. It would depend on whether the Zhao family was willing to bear the exorbitant price Prince Qing Manor was asking for the sake of this daughter—no matter what, a grand wedding was no longer possible. Though this matter was sickening, it was a good

thing for Xi Ping. There was no more need to wait for an “auspicious date,” greatly cutting down on the time it would take.

Second, on hearing the news, the Marquis of Qulong had flown his sword through the night to return to Dongheng. So racked with grief he wished he were dead, he proclaimed that his spiritual bones were complete and his Way of the Heart fixed, and he “could not live under the same sky as those who had killed his wife.” He would hunt down his enemies to the ends of the earth to carry out vengeance.

A few days later, the Marquis of Qulong spilled his blood on a specially made token—the token had been privately designed by Lin Chi, using a special type of spiritual beast skin, with every pore in the skin inlaid with miniature inscriptions or small arrays. When the blood poured into them, it activated a specially positioned array, and through the array conducted the blood to a reincarnation wood tree far in Tao County. If a cultivator didn’t spill blood on it and tried to tear the token apart by force, the array would be destroyed. Then the Marquis of Qulong’s consciousness entered the Law Breaker’s hidden realm, where he had a friendly meeting with Zhou Ying, the power behind the Luwu.

The two of them had a night’s worth of private discussion. The next day, the Marquis of Qulong went in person to Tao County with a team of bodyguards, and, swiftly and decisively, carried out a series of punishments against the garrisoned troops.

The Marquis invited the Qilin Guard, who didn’t dare to enter Tao County without a reason, to come observe the ceremony as he stripped or changed the ranks of a crowd of officers under his command and loftily promulgated twenty-three articles of military rules prohibiting the harassment of civilians and, as an example, beheaded a batch of army ruffians on the lookout for an opportunity to make trouble, leaving a few of his close confidants to take over Tao County. He also announced that Tao County’s disaster relief

provisions for the autumn and winter would be conveyed by the garrisoned troops themselves, guaranteeing that not one grain would be missing, asking the village elders and townspeople to set their minds at ease. The trees had been cut down for the sake of repairing the roads. In the future, better trees would be planted, and there would be no more instances of soldiers trespassing into private residences.

The deaf and blind Qilin Guardsmen observed the “happy and harmonious relations between soldiers and civilians” in bewilderment. On leaving, according to protocol, they sent full detailed reports to the spiritual mountains, feeling that no sooner had the Marquis of Qulong attained his freedom than he had been unable to hold back from a major undertaking.

Like this, with the Qilin Guard bearing witness, in a place unobserved by the spiritual mountains, Tao County “openly and honestly” changed its name to Zhou.

Give him a crack, and Zhou Ying would use it to pry the spiritual mountains open, never mind Tao County, where all cultivators “couldn’t see their hands in front of their faces.” Xi Ping felt that san-ge was like a mouse fallen into a jar of rice, preening and showing off, scolding him for no reason... Of course, he didn’t dare to say that in front of san-ge.

But for this winter, Tao County was all taken care of. This tribulation had passed.

This patch of earth that had been repeatedly trampled by evildoers and treated as an abandoned child by the immortal mountains finally got a season to recuperate. The hundred thousand white spirits that had silently dispersed through the veins of the earth nurtured the fish in the water and the grass on the banks. The results were instantly visible. The migratory birds flying down from Northern Li set up housekeeping there. After Zhao Qindan was

“arrested” and released by the garrisoned troops, as was only to be expected, she was accepted by the people around her. Utterly confused, she became “one of ours” in Tao County. Someone inadvertently saw her teaching Wei Chengxiang Chu writing, and, with two strings of cured meat as tuition fees, requested that she teach their children to read and write. After this, word got around quickly, and Zhao Qindan soon had more work than she could handle. She had no more time to feel at a loss about what to do.

At this point, the good and evil initiated by Qiu Sha had temporarily come to a close. Wei Chengxiang had cleared the accounts of her conscience and was prepared to return to the Land of Turmoil—the young mistress no longer needed her to look after her, and she had people in the Land of Turmoil. Moreover, however superbly made her artificial hand was, in Tao County, where spiritual energy couldn’t be used, it could still only act as an ornament. It was truly inconvenient.

Xi Ping considered: In order to assassinate the princess, many of the Luwu who went with Xu Rucheng exposed their identities, and with the Xiang family giving them the cold shoulder like this, it’s unlikely they’ll allow “Zhao Qindan” to bring her family into the Sanyue Mountains. While there are all kinds of people mixed up in Sanyue, some, after all, have real skill. The masters won’t be interested in giving a little half-immortal like Xu Rucheng a second look, so perhaps it won’t be difficult for him to infiltrate, but looking for clues about the Unbound Furnace will be as difficult as ascending to the heavens... Can my true body really not leave Tao County?

Xi Ping always acted on a thought as soon as he had it. He remembered the good and not the bad. With a thought, his consciousness had gone to Xuanyin’s Moon Plated Peak.

CHAPTER 124 - Eternal Flame (6)

“There is someone waiting to receive you in the inner sect, codename ‘Young Master Cousin.’ He will contact you directly. We will think of other ways to enter. You must be careful. Do not act rashly.”

Wearing Zhao Qindan’s skin, Xu Rucheng unconsciously rubbed his earring—one of his earrings was made of gold, and the other was a gold-plated piece of reincarnation wood. He could receive word from his colleagues at any time.

Right now, apart from the Luwu that Zhou Ying had deliberately exposed when assassinating the princess, the others, along with the Zhao family, had taken up residence in a place twenty li from the outskirts of Dongheng City. In his capacity as “fiancée,” a small cart drove Xu Rucheng directly into the Sanyue Mountains.

For the young mistress of an important family, this was undoubtedly the greatest of insults. Fortunately, Xu Rucheng had no self-respect. He was only a little panicked.

A paperman couldn’t be used to enter Sanyue’s inner sect. Whether they were made by Bai Ling or copied by Xi Ping, the papermen were all of established foundation grade. That was fine for running wild in the border territory of Yu Family Bend, but if they’d tried using that to enter Sanyue’s inner sect, the papermen could have been used as burial goods in a funeral procession right away.

Had Xuanyin’s elders and its thirty-six peak masters been to Dongheng’s Sanyue’s inner sect? Xu Rucheng couldn’t say for sure. At any rate, below the ascended spirit level, he was the groundbreaking first.

Because of this, buried here, he could also be entered into the history books.

The improved reincarnation wood divine tool was convenient and easy to bring along. He could confer with his colleagues any time if something went wrong. While dealing with the Zhaos, even Zhao Qindan herself had acted as external support.

Xu Rucheng touched the reincarnation wood in his earring with his consciousness and asked, “What is the new colleague’s background?”

“Young Master Cousin”? Whose cousin?

Even though the Luwu didn’t like using their full names abroad, they still only went by abbreviated versions of their names, like “Lao Tian” or “Da Cheng.” Why was this person taking such a novel approach?

“Don’t ask,” his colleague told him, “it’s an established foundation senior.”

Xu Rucheng suddenly understood: oh, no wonder.

And here he had been puzzled. Using as convenient an identity as a young mistress of the Zhao family, with Young Mistress Zhao herself to provide assistance, it had been so hard for him to sneak in. How could someone else get into the inner sect a step ahead of him to “receive” him? Indeed, sneaking into Sanyue’s inner sect wasn’t like operating in the mortal world. You had to rely on a master.

In fact, even Heaven’s Design Pavilion spoke of Xuanyin’s inner sect as unreachably high, but here they had “Tai Sui” and “Young Master Cousin,” one established foundation after another stepping up to be used. Where was His Highness Prince Zhuang getting them all? He was truly unfathomable.

Hearing that he had outside help, Xu Rucheng felt a little more secure. He pushed the carriage window open a crack.

The spiritual energy in the Sanyue Sect was too dense. Before this, the place with the most abundant spiritual energy that he had been to was the Kaiming Department's training hall, built with spiritual stones for bricks, the spiritual energy even more abundant than in the Zhao family's hidden realm. But it wasn't worth mentioning in the same breath as this place.

If you said that the Kaiming Department's training hall was a cup of sweetened water whose sweetness you could barely taste, then the Sanyue Sect was honey so thick you could pick out the sugar granules.

Xu Rucheng inhaled and exhaled lightly and felt that his lungs and bones were crammed full of spiritual energy. He had never escaped the poverty of the "Kaiming" position. All this way, he'd taken every opportunity to use the spiritual stones in the Zhao family hidden realm to cultivate "on public funds." Anyone who didn't take advantage was a loser.

But now that he had truly reached the spiritual mountains, he suddenly couldn't calm down enough to meditate.

The dense spiritual energy made him feel excessively free and easy, then out of nowhere afraid... Xu Rucheng felt that he was about to be swallowed by the spiritual mountains. These spiritual mountains seemed to be "alive," coldly suspended above his head like the Silver Moon, bringing down heaven's punishment upon any ants who were unwilling to blindly go with the flow: Hui Xiangjun had been utterly discredited; Southern He's nation and people had been destroyed for misusing the Gold Imitation Technique; Wan and Chu seemed to have taken these as lessons and used the Gold Imitation Technique with great restraint, yet five years ago there had still been

the minor upheaval caused by the fire in the southern outskirts... and then there was barren and desolate Yu Family Bend.

The workers who were nearly starving to death couldn't see the light of day when they raised their heads, so they said "Moon Plated Gold eats people."

A thought appeared out of nowhere. Xu Rucheng suddenly thought: It seems that everything in the world is decided by the spiritual mountains.

The spiritual mountains differentiated mortal and immortal, demarcated national boundaries. The great divine tools that could wash away all the world's "demons" had been birthed by the spiritual mountains. The full moon divinities and the shed skin sages had been approved by the spiritual mountains. Even whether a place was barren or fertile was determined by the outstretched veins of the earth of the spiritual mountains.

Just then, the carriage stopped.

Xu Rucheng gave a start and unconsciously squeezed the earring hiding reincarnation wood, then heard the old Xiang family maidservant who had led him into the Sanyue Mountains say in a strictly businesslike way, "Knowing you had been forced to leave your home, young mistress, His Highness made ready some clever servants specifically for your use, all well-trained. Please choose some you find suitable to bring along, young mistress."

As she said this, someone pulled open the carriage door for him. Xu Rucheng raised his head and saw eight young women, each with a different type of beauty, standing in a row. They bowed to him in unison.

Where would a laborer whose ancestors hadn't washed the mud off themselves in eight generations have seen such a spectacle? Xu

Rucheng was petrified and averted his gaze. But as soon as he lowered his head, he glimpsed the nail polish on his own nails and at last remembered: Right, I'm like them.

The old maidservant sent by the Xiang family pulled a long face, her features almost dangling to her insteps. As if reciting a funeral oration, she said, "Everything is plain in the immortal mountains. Please excuse us, young mistress. According to regulations, the imperial grandson ought to be accompanied by six servants, and a formal wife can command five servants. His Highness lives simply and frugally. He is still one person short of the six person quota."

So?

Xu Rucheng, all at sea, waited for her to continue, but the old maidservant didn't go on. She stood there like a stump, keeping herself to herself.

Just then, among the eight candidates, the woman furthest to the left quickly raised her eyes and cast a glance at him.

This woman had a pair of bewitching peach blossom eyes that shone. With one look, she nearly made Xu Rucheng's face heat up. He was just about to avoid her gaze when he heard an unfamiliar man's voice through the reincarnation wood: "Don't just stand there. She's telling you to show some sense and not surpass your 'husband.'"

Xu Rucheng choked on a mouthful of steam. "You... Sir, are you the 'Young Master Cousin' senior?"

"Indeed," the person answered briefly. "There is a regular order to the mortal servants that the Xiang family sends into the immortal mountains. If you find the right connections, you can sneak in. It's on your account that this was possible. Otherwise, the next selection of servants would be ten years from now."

Xu Rucheng: "..."

Not only had he found an established foundation master, this was also an established foundation master who could stoop or stand as necessary! His Highness Prince Zhuang's powers were truly vast!

Though to return to an earlier subject, it was no wonder Sanyue had a bunch of good-for-nothings who couldn't open their spiritual eyes in eight years. Occupying the immortal mountains, these Xiangs lived mundane lives, treating the immortal mountains like their own home. What kind of lousy way could they cultivate?

Xu Rucheng asked, "Senior, who should I pick?"

"Whoever you like. Don't pick me, at any rate," the "Young Master Cousin" said. "Just pick four whose looks you think are a little worse."

Xu Rucheng was confused. He thought, If I don't choose you, how will I bring you in?

But the Xiang family's old maidservant, perhaps unhappy that he was holding things up, urged him cuttingly: "These are all servants born in Prince Qing Manor, with clean backgrounds, all bearing our family's seal. Those spies and sneak thieves certainly can't sneak in among them. Would you like them to state their horoscopes, young mistress, so you can see whether there is a clash between you?"

The spy and sneak thief Xu Rucheng thought, We're going to clash so hard it kills you.

He had no time for discussion and could only act according to the senior's directions. With difficulty, he chose four among the eight great beauties who weren't quite as dazzling and didn't choose the senior.

The Xiang family's old maidservant lowered her eyelids. She seemed to give a laugh. She waved a hand to send the beauties away.

The rest of the way, they didn't travel on the ground. The carriage took off suddenly and flew through range upon range of hills shrouded in mist. For a time, the fierce wind blew so strong that Xu Rucheng couldn't open his eyes. After about half an incense stick of time, he saw in the distance the three Principal Peaks standing abreast. It wasn't yet dark, yet a mammoth silver moon hung above the East Peak.

Xu Rucheng's pupils contracted slightly. He recognized this as the murder weapon that had turned Qiu Sha to dust with its beams.

There seemed to be a shadow on the Silver Moon... like a smiling face staring at him.

The West Peak, seen from a distance, was only an ordinary mountain, but when you reached it, it was utterly shocking: from the foot of the mountain to its crest, countless hidden realms of all sizes were layered, expanding the space on the mountain more than ten million times. Passing among them, Xu Rucheng could practically "hear" the crunching of countless spiritual stones turning to dust.

Within ten meters, you could pass by seven or eight hidden realms. They showed only one side to passersby, like one richly colored painting after another, hanging high and low in space. If you wished to enter one of those hidden realms, you had to have the matching special inscriptions. You definitely couldn't lose your way and wander by mistake into another's territory.

Xu Rucheng was dizzy from the sight. This gathering of hidden realms on the West Peak didn't seem like a place for quiet cultivation. It looked like one shrunken Dongheng City after another, each with its own form of grotesquery.

The imperial grandson's manor was at the foot of the West Peak. Yu Family Bend had already been incredibly rich and powerful in Xu Rucheng's eyes, but the imperial grandson whose position depended on Yu Family Bend could only measure up to a rather small and very unremarkable hidden realm.

The master was mortal, so there were downgraded immortal tools everywhere in this hidden realm: there were small carriages floating in midair, so mortals, too, could experience "flying a sword"; there was an enormous bellows and an ice maker, so the master could "summon the wind and rain" whenever he liked; there were lanterns inlaid everywhere that could identify the master's voice and change color according to his orders... Because they were all "downgraded," they burned spiritual stones but also spat out a large volume of steam. The whole manor was shrouded in mist.

However sloppy the proceedings, they hadn't gotten married yet, after all. In an obvious attempt at a cover up, Xu Rucheng was set up in a detached courtyard, separated from the other places in the hidden realm by a river. The riverbed was carved full of arrays and could also only be crossed using an inscription key. With Xu Rucheng's cultivation level, he couldn't understand the arrays. He only felt like a bird that had been locked in a cage.

When he went into the cage... into the courtyard to look, all his things had already been stored. Four maids had arrived a step ahead of him and were awaiting his arrival at the entrance.

Xu Rucheng took one glance and was filled with gloom—these weren't the people he had chosen. The ones standing at the entrance right now were the other four candidates. No wonder that senior had told him not to choose him. So why put on the show of making him choose? To make fun of him?

He fixed his eyes on the Xiang family's old maidservant. "What do you mean by this?"

The old maidservant had the inscription key in one hand. She seemed already to be floating on the water. She put on a perfunctory act of surprise: "What? Young mistress, are you unsatisfied with these four in any way? Didn't you choose yourself which ones you didn't want and which ones to keep?"

As she spoke, the old maidservant's figure was already becoming blurry above the water. She left behind only these words with a false smile in them: "And here I was just admiring the young mistress for her excellent insight, greatly superior to that of others from your honored home."

Xu Rucheng was about to defend himself, but the old maidservant and the carriage driver were both gone. A layer of thin fog steamed up from the arrays in the river, trapping him in the little courtyard like a curtain. All around was silence. There were only the sounds of gears turning and the sighs of steam from the various downgraded immortal tools—Xu Rucheng discovered that while he was here, he couldn't even send his consciousness out.

What a disgrace! This was house arrest!

"Young mistress, please..."

One of the four maids stepped forward to support him. When her soft and slender hand touched him, Xu Rucheng instinctively shook it off. "Don't touch me!"

This maid was a genuine mortal. The girl couldn't stand being thrown off like this. With a cry, she stumbled, and the rims of her eyes immediately reddened, but she didn't dare to say anything. She only lowered her head and got down on her knees, retreating.

Xu Rucheng's colossal anger caught in his throat. He moved his lips helplessly and nearly ran after her to apologize. Then he heard the established foundation senior impersonating a maid say, "We maids are all lowly people. We are aware that the sight of us displeases the young mistress. But we have already taken brands onto our spiritual images, and neither our lives nor our deaths are free. Otherwise, if we were capable of taking our own lives, we would not be here to offend the young mistress's eyes."

At this point, there was even the tremor of a sob being held back.

Xu Rucheng was dumbfounded, not knowing how this senior had forced out this tearful voice to speak these lines. In spite of himself, he suspected he had the wrong person.

Then he once again heard the man's calm voice through the reincarnation wood: "You are being watched from the shadows. Be careful, don't just stare at me like an idiot."

Xu Rucheng was all in disarray. "What... what is your name?"

Then this mysterious established foundation who seemed to be a reincarnated drama queen walked forward with realistic mincing steps and tentatively lent him an arm. "Entering the inner sect with a new master, we must wait for our master to grant us names. The young mistress is weary from the carriage ride. You ought to settle down first. Do not worry yourself on our accounts."

Xu Rucheng didn't dare to pick a name at random. Apprehensively, he asked through the reincarnation wood, "Senior, what should I call you?"

There was a momentary silence. "You can call me... Jiangli."

The "Young Master Cousin" who had stunned Xu Rucheng was the Luwu's real cousin—Xi Ping, using a fake voice to fool Xu Rucheng.

With Xu Rucheng's half-immortal cultivation, he couldn't just draw an array in Sanyue's inner sect to let him come over in a paperman. Anyway, Xiang Wenqing had already personally taught him that it was best for a cultivator's body and mind to remain one. The papermen at best could bully lower level cultivators. On meeting a master, his consciousness couldn't run away. If he didn't die, he would still be seriously injured, go back to being a tree spirit who didn't know his own name like he'd been for the last five years.

So Xi Ping had to think of a way to use his true body.

In order to temporarily leave Tao County, he needed to resolve a few problems: first, the Law Breaker couldn't leave. Xi Ping had tried it. The Tai Sui Qin couldn't cross the line of the spiritual energy prohibition. This meant that even if *he* could leave, he couldn't take his vital weapon with him. Though fortunately that kind "master of the way of taking the blame" Yu Chang had left him the *Discard the False and Keep the True* book, so he could bring a copied qin to protect himself.

Next, though reasonably speaking a great master's consciousness couldn't cross national borders, if a person who ought to have been sealed at the bottom of the Impassable Sea openly went out for a stroll, would Xuanyin Mountain notice something...? That was hard to say, and Xi Ping didn't dare to run the risk. He wasn't worried about going on the run like Yu Chang, but he couldn't be exposed in Tao County. That would implicate san-ge.

So, in the interests of safety, he had gone to Lin Chi to order an item made—that immortal tool that very much resembled a sunburned Riverward that Lin Chi had made and then destroyed.

This thing's spiritual sense was taken from the Riverward. It could make a person blend like water into another person's life. Physical appearance, spiritual image, habits of speech and movement—all of

it could be fixed as closely as possible to fit another person's. Lin Chi had crudely named it the Replica and persisted in thinking that it would do harm. He absolutely refused to yield and was pestered incessantly for three days by Xi Ping.

“Fine, then,” Xi Ping said when Master Lin was ready to collapse, aiming at what he believed would be Lin Chi's weak spot, “if that's the case, there's nothing else I can do. I'll have to leave Hui Xiangjun's Unbound Furnace buried in the Sanyue Mountains. Sanyue couldn't get hold of her, but they're doing well enough holding her vital weapon. Maybe they can even perform a posthumous marriage with that Xiang-what's-his-name, the dead sword cultivator.”

For once, Lin Chi looked stern. “How do you expect me to explain myself to General Zhi?”

“Well, there won't be any need for that,” said Xi Ping. “If we can't repair Zhaoting, you won't have to explain anything to him anymore, Lin-shishu. You can just burn some paper for him during the holidays.”

Lin Chi: “...”

General Zhi hadn't accepted a disciple in centuries, all for the sake of taking in this thing. Could this be the “individualistic” heroic spirit? Master Lin wasn't a hero, and he really couldn't beat this guy. Left with no alternative, he violated one of his basic principles: he took his grievance to the Kaiming Department's Prince Zhuang.

Sadly, His Highness Prince Zhuang's trump card for dealing with this fiend in human form had lost effect—before, Xi Ping had been scared of making him sick from anger; no matter how much trouble he got into, he had always left room to maneuver. Now he was no longer afraid of that. It wasn't so easy to make a half-immortal sick.

Zhou Ying ruined two discipline rods and crushed the piece of reincarnation wood he had brought from the Impassable Sea. But he couldn't keep that brat from showing up right in front of him using papermen with that traitor Bai Ling's help.

So a month later, Xi Ping got his wish and obtained the Replica.

He left a sliver of his consciousness in the century-old reincarnation wood tree in the yard of the All Comers Inn and sealed the Tai Sui Qin along with it—this way, though he was thousands of li away, he could still open the hidden realm inside the Law Breaker any time. He wouldn't hold up the Luwu's communications or arms smuggling.

Then he said a word to Tai-er-nainai and freely went on a long journey.

First, within Tao County, Xi Ping infiltrated the garrisoned troops convoying disaster relief provisions north. With a small trick, he replaced a soldier. The moment he stepped out of the prohibition on spiritual energy, he used the Replica to turn into that soldier.

As soon as he put on the Replica, Xi Ping understood why Lin Chi had been unwilling to make this thing again. The young soldier's life history, his joys and sorrows, were all laid out in front of him, as though he was transparent: his father had died when he was an infant, the scar on his forehead came from being hit on the head with a stone by his gambling drunk of an older brother. Under the gaze of his frail, powerless mother, he ran away from home to join the army, filled with ambitions of standing out. But there was nothing in the army to make him stand out. What awaited him was endless humiliation and bullying from his colleagues... Even the lopsided toe on his right foot that had been rubbed raw by his army boots was so real.

The moment he “became” the young soldier, the silently erupting rage nearly lit Xi Ping on fire. He bit the tip of his tongue and narrowly managed to stabilize his spirit. He was scared into a cold sweat.

No wonder this thing could avoid the eyes of a shed skin—he had simply inherited another person’s everything.

This thing could drive a person crazy.

Fortunately, when he had been a tree spirit and unable to control his consciousness, he had been pulled into the bodies of countless people and bled amid the fates of others. He was a practiced hand.

And when he was sleeping at night, he could pull his consciousness back into the reincarnation wood to rest.

He changed identities the whole way, the lives of these mortals like boats, ferrying him from Tao County to Dongheng. Taking the opportunity of Prince Qing Manor placing people beside Zhao Qindan, he had removed the spiritual image brand of one of the servant candidates—that girl had a lover; forced by the brand to be a nominal “maid” but in reality a “bed warmer,” she had simply been wishing she were dead, so that counted as him having saved a life—and so, he had infiltrated the Sanyue Sect with alarm but no danger.

Reasonably speaking, it was seamless... Master Lin was worthy of being called the Golden Hand. Though he modestly called it a Replica, Xi Ping thought this thing would be useful even within Great Wan, never mind in Western Chu.

But as Xi Ping, following the girl’s instincts, nimbly swept and washed the courtyard, his spine was frozen.

From the first sentence he had said to Xu Rucheng, that viper-like gaze had been stuck to him, like an ulcer on the bone.

On Sanyue's East Peak, in the lotus pond, the heartless white lotuses sticking out of the water all turned to face west like sunflowers, making their blood red stalks tangle and squirm like one greedy, starving tongue after another.

CHAPTER 125 - Eternal Flame (7)

“I saw a misty willow...”

Out of nowhere, a mouth opened on a dark red lotus root and grew lips and teeth. When the two lips touched, the voice spread through the water with a dull rumble. The seemingly stagnant pond water vibrated gently with it.

“The people of Wan call it ‘reincarnation wood.’ The people of Wan choose meaningful names.” On another root, a “mouth” also opened and picked up the conversation.

On the lotus roots of varying lengths, many mouths opened, smiling or frowning, each one speaking, holding an underwater conference.

But while they were all speaking at once, they all produced the same voice.

“I like misty willow. There’s no misty willow in the Sanyue Mountains yet.”

“Let’s keep him... keep him, hee-hee.”

“He’s too tender, only an established foundation. His bones are less than a century old. No bite.”

“Not necessarily...”

“True, he managed to crawl out of the Impassable Sea.”

The mouths on the lotus roots held an enthusiastic discussion, their flowers shaking when they laughed. They made bubbles in the water. Weird light floated on the surface of the bubbles, and there were people reflected in them. There were cultivators locked in life

and death struggles, there were tremendous natural disasters, there were men and women intimately bedding down on human skeletons, and there was a crowd of people whose flesh and blood were being consumed by a divine image, yet who nonetheless remained kneeling...

Next, a Zhuoming climbed out from the bottom of the lotus pond, like a person made out of a lotus root. His nose and eyes had run off somewhere, leaving only two mouths and a set of ears—one ear faced upward, one faced downward. As if drunk, he groped blindly along the bottom of the pond, now and then clumsily getting tangled in the lotus stalks.

In the deepest recess of the lotus pond was a black hole, about one chi square. The lotus roots densely covering the bottom of the pond seemed to automatically avoid that place. In his blind groping, Zhuoming accidentally stuck his hand into the hole.

His whole body shook, and he immediately pulled back his hand. There were slight marks of scalding on his fingertips.

At the bottom of this ice cold pond was a flame the size of a bean, using it was hard to say what as kindling, just quietly burning.

“How hateful. It burns,” Zhuoming muttered, looking at his scalded fingers after picking up his eyes in an out-of-the-way corner.

The lotus roots growing on him echoed each other one after another: “Why hasn’t she gone out yet?”

“Hasn’t gone out yet...”

“Hateful... so hateful...”

Because of that cold gaze following him like his shadow, Xi Ping, after his change of identity, had no attention to spare to entertain

himself at Xu Rucheng's expense.

As a "servant" waiting to be chosen, Xi Ping had actually entered the Sanyue Mountains a day ahead of Xu Rucheng and had been safe and sound for a day and a night. That gaze seemed to have been brought by Xu Rucheng.

But Xu Rucheng himself was befuddled. Not only did he not have the least sense of being watched, he was always attempting to talk to Xi Ping about his first experience of coming to the spiritual mountains... This might have been because Xu Rucheng's cultivation was too low, or it might have been because that guy's spiritual sense was also "third-rate"; he was naturally slow-witted.

What Xi Ping couldn't work out no matter how hard he thought about it was how this person had used Xu Rucheng to get their eyes on him.

He was certain that apart from talking to him through the reincarnation wood, all Xu Rucheng had done was give him a few extra looks. With his current flowerlike countenance, it would be stranger if someone didn't give him a second look. And no one could overhear things through the reincarnation wood—unless this person was more powerful than the three Xuanyin high elders put together. In that case, there would be no need for Xi Ping to keep struggling; he ought to hurry up and say goodbye to his family and friends and pick out a good coffin.

This infiltration of the Sanyue Sect could be called Xi Ping's most dependable action in all these years. He was backed entirely by dependable people: the Golden Hand supplied him with tools and could also give him clues concerning the Unbound Furnace; a group of Luwu could contact each other at any time, and he could overhear their discussions; for anything to do with the Zhao family, he could ask Zhao Qindan any time; most importantly, before he'd come here, Bai Ling had given him brief introductions to all the

major figures in Sanyue's inner sect... What other time had Xi Ping not been working blind, relying on guesswork, trickery, and good luck to get important information?

But somehow, this time, he had the worst feeling about it.

Xi Ping spent three days earnestly engaged in needlework in the imperial grandson's outbuilding—thanks to Master Lin's Replica, which could simply take over his hands. These three days were absolutely calm. The Zhao family and Prince Qing Manor probably hadn't come to an agreement in their negotiations yet. The imperial grandson's people hadn't come looking for trouble again.

The Sanyue Mountains were covered in so many hidden realms it was as if they were free. Never mind a "mortal servant," even an inner sect disciple couldn't walk around freely. First, unless you were proficient in talismans, arrays, and inscriptions, even if you were a reincarnated map, you still wouldn't be able to find your way around; second, as soon as you moved, you would be like a stone falling into water, raising "ripples" in the spiritual energy, the disturbance spreading outward, touching an unknown number of visible or concealed inscriptions and arrays. It seemed impossible not to leave traces.

Unless he could shuttle through reincarnation wood like in Tao County... but there were no reincarnation wood trees in the Sanyue Mountains. And it seemed that reincarnation wood wasn't safe, either.

Xi Ping found that each time Xu Rucheng contacted him through the reincarnation wood, the chill on his back became more apparent, as if the person watching him was getting excited. When they spoke normally, this didn't happen.

At first Xi Ping suspected someone had tampered with Xu Rucheng's consciousness and ran the risk of stealthily taking his

consciousness back to the Law Breaker Bracelet. The music only showed that Xu Rucheng's mental state had changed considerably of late; there was no extraneous interference.

Since there wasn't a problem at either end, then the problem could only be with the reincarnation wood. The person watching him really was more powerful than Xuanyin's three high elders put together.

But for several days, this person only watched, doing nothing.

What did that say?

Xi Ping's mind began to work involuntarily—before coming here, he had heard from Bai Ling that Sanyue had serious internal strife. This seemed to be the truth.

The richness of Sanyue's spiritual energy was such that, never mind the country Kaiming Cultivator Xu Rucheng, even Xi Ping, who had spent time at Flying Jade Peak, had been a little dizzy from it when he'd first arrived. This must be due to topography. Great Wan's terrain was more level than Western Chu's, so the immortal mountains' spiritual energy dispersed unimpeded through the veins of the earth into the mortal world, unlike Western Chu, which was filled with towering mountains, making it hard for people within the same country to interact.

These frightening resources were completely dominated by the Xiang family. It was impossible for those masters whose surname wasn't Xiang not to have some ideas.

When Qiu Sha had killed Xiang Zhao, the West Peak's ascended spirit masters had turned out nearly in full force, but the Central Peak had been as silent as though they were all dead there.

The upshot was that the West Peak had taken heavy losses, and the lost masters seemed to have "None of the Xiang clan's unworthy

descendants have talent or virtue worthy of their positions” stamped on their heads; it was shameful and frightening, making the West Peak even more wary of those from the Central Peak who came from other families.

The after-effects left behind by Qiu Sha in the mortal world had been forcibly leveled with a hundred thousand white spirits, but those in the immortal mountains had yet to disperse. The animosity between the Central and West Peaks had deepened.

Right now, on the Central Peak, the sect leader was in seclusion, and three of the four great ascended spirits belonged to other families; the West Peak was a gathering place for the Xiang family’s good-for-nothings; and the true power in Sanyue was held by the East Peak’s Xuanwu...

Xi Ping had asked Bai Ling why, when everyone else was surnamed Xiang, Xuanwu was surnamed Xuan. Bai Ling, as if he couldn’t understand a joke, had seriously told him that this “Xuan” character wasn’t one of Western Chu’s surnames. “Xuanwu” was an alias; his real name was unknown. According to the gossip of the demons back in the Impassable Sea, he was actually the sect leader’s brother, with the same mother but different fathers.

Snow-white Elder Xuanwu’s background was actually lush green⁸² —Xi Ping thought there was a metaphor here for the change of seasons; it was very profound.

What he didn’t know was this very profound Elder Xuanwu’s position—when the Bell of Tribulation had gone to the East Sea, the three Xuanyin elders who had overseen it had each spent years recuperating, but Sanyue’s Elder Xuanwu had released the Silver Moon alone yet had had to return to the hard work of wielding power; he didn’t even have a stand-in. It was evident that the

delicacy of the state of affairs in Sanyue had reached the verge of crisis; the old fellow didn't dare to loosen his grip.

So who was the person watching him scheme on the West Peak but not saying a word?

Young Master Xi came up with a daring plan.

Zhuoming lay face down on the surface of the water like a water ghoul. The surface of the water reflected the outbuilding at the foot of the West Peak. It was the still of night now. That Misty Willow's turn to clean the courtyard had come. Unblinking, Zhuoming watched that Misty Willow perfunctorily wave a broom a few times, then start wildly scribbling on the ground.

"Oh?" Zhuoming excitedly stuck out his head. "Who is he sending a message to?"

A lotus next to him also drew near. A mouth opened on its petal. "He's being so thorough about pretending to be mortal, using such a mundane method to send messages... What bad luck, I've forgotten most of my Wan grammar."

"No." Zhuoming gently pinched the lotus petal. "He's using Chu writing."

The broom wrote in flourishing cursive on the ground: *Spying on a young woman, shameless! You'll get styes in your eyes.*

Zhuoming's head stopped mid-turn. He opened his eyes wide in amazement.

That Misty Willow brandished the broom like a sword: *Enough sneaking around, come out and see me if you can.*

After Xi Ping finished writing this all at once, he calmly took a deep breath and set the broom aside. The feeling of prickles running down his back was still there. But after waiting a long moment, there was no other activity.

Xi Ping put away the broom. He couldn't work out what the person watching him was thinking. He thought to himself: If there's really nothing else for it, I'll have to abandon the maid identity, then sneak in again during the "grand wedding" with the Zhaos or Prince Qing Manor's people... It seemed that as long as he didn't use reincarnation wood to send messages, it wouldn't be so easy for this person to see through the Replica to find him.

Only that would take more time.

Xi Ping concentrated on the shard of Zhaoting on his spirit. Its light was so dim it was hardly visible.

He couldn't panic.

He closed his eyes and stood still for a moment, plucking out a tune in his spirit to calm himself down. Zhaoting seemed to sense his anxiety. Though Zhi Xiu didn't have the energy to split off his attention to come over, he still made an effort to make the sword shard let out a slight buzz, telling him that shifu was still well.

Just as he finished the song and was planning to send his consciousness back to the reincarnation wood to rest for a while, Xi Ping felt a sudden sting at the center of his brow. He pulled one hand into his sleeve and abruptly opened his eyes to look in the direction the touch to his spiritual sense had come from.

What he saw was a decorative bowl lotus in his room. Perhaps its colors had run in the water. When it had been brought, the flower had been yellow, but now both the flower and the leaves had faded to snow-white, reminiscent of Xuanwu's hair.

Then the unfolded lotus nodded its head, and the stamen in its center, like an ill-fitting hat, fell down. When the space where the stamen had been was empty, a bean-sized... human head emerged.

Xi Ping: "..."

The "barren head" that had grown out of the flower had a mouth on its forehead and another on its chin. One ear faced up, the other down. The nose seemed to have been put on wrong; it was a little crooked. The eyes and both mouths were smiling. They said: "Beauty, can you guess whether my head is right-side up or upside-down?"

"Right-side up," Xi Ping blurted out without blinking. "If it isn't right-side up, please quietly straighten it out. I can give you a chance to pretend I don't know."

The two eyes turned in a circle.

Xi Ping openly walked over and, right in front of the monster, looked at the reflection of his spiritual image mask in the bowl lotus's water. "If you don't look directly at a countenance of this grade, you must be an idiot. I'm busy, I don't have time to pay attention to idiots—those with accompanying plants also have no need to speak."

As soon as he'd seen the human head in the lotus bowl, Xi Ping had suddenly seen the light: yes, Xuanyin's three elders certainly couldn't sense his connection to reincarnation wood, but there was one person who had previously exposed his hiding place—Qiu Sha.

There seemed to be some fellow feeling between accompanying plants, especially on the side with the stronger cultivation.

The gaze that had passed through countless inscriptions and arrays of Sanyue came from the flowers in a lotus pond.

In the depths of the Sanyue Mountains was one of the successors to an ancient demonic god that the immortal sects couldn't destroy fast enough... and with at least an ascended spirit cultivation level.

Goodness, this wasn't even "harboring evil" anymore, it was comparable to the Zhou family raising demons in the Impassable Sea.

The head in the white lotus laughed aloud. "I like you. Go to the lotus pond in the rear courtyard."

Having said this, the head disappeared. The flower in the lotus bowl shriveled rapidly. In the blink of an eye, only a bare stalk remained.

Xi Ping followed without hesitation. At the same time, he sent a message to Bai Ling through the reincarnation wood: "Bai Ling-da-ge, ask san-ge for me, has he heard of an ancient demonic god whose accompanying plant was a white lotus?"

After a momentary odd silence, Bai Ling said, "I am away on official business, not beside my lord. My lord has a new piece of reincarnation wood. You can ask him yourself."

Xi Ping was immediately distracted. His heart tightened. "Why didn't you use a paperman? Why did you have to go yourself? What happened?"

"Recently, you used a little paperman to sneak into my lord's boot and built a bird's nest inside it with straw," Bai Ling said, attacking Xi Ping's conscience in his usual calm and serious tone. "To be sure, Viscount, your ideas are marvelous and awe-inspiring. But my lord has forbidden me to use papermen for two months."

CHAPTER 126 - Eternal Flame (8)

When Xi Ping came clamoring to him, Zhou Ying was being taken to task by Pang Jian.

“In one month, Guzhou, Yuzhou, and Hongyin have caught over a dozen foreign spies, and then there are ones who have slipped through the net..”

Called up in the middle of the night, Zhou Ying had a cloak loosely draped over his shoulders. Remaining calm under pressure, he adjusted his cuffs and said, “General Commander Pang has had plenty of dealings with desperate criminals. Have you forgotten how to perform soul-searchings?”

“Is there any need for me to search? Western Chu’s Qilin Guard, Southern Shu’s Dragon Subduing Knights, Northern Li’s Night Revenants—Your Highness Prince Zhuang, tell me, how will this end?”

Zhou Ying said, “If Mr. Pang can criticize me, he can also send messages to the headquarters of the three nations’ walkers in the mortal world.”

Pang Jian said, “Your Luwu started it!”

“That’s right.” Zhou Ying smiled. “But what proof do they have?”

Pang Jian: “...”

The circumstances of each nation’s walkers in the mortal world were different. For example, Heaven’s Design Pavilion had always felt ashamed of being mentioned in the same breath as those layabouts in the Qilin Guard. But on one point they were all about the same—as members of the immortal mountains’ outer sects, the walkers in

the mortal world for the most part came from the upper class. Each one was very noble, and they all cherished themselves greatly. In order to avoid having their souls searched, there were people who were willing to voluntarily confess, and even those willing to buy their lives at a high price.

The Luwu were different. When the Luwu died abroad, they had to leave behind honor and compensation for their families. Their lives were as insubstantial as their possessions, and as insubstantial as the merits and demerits that needed to be taken out and weighed. Often they could be as ruthless as evil cultivators, self-destructing their spirits before their souls could be searched. To this day, none of the other nations had managed to get anything on Zhou Ying.

Pang Jian said angrily, “Aren’t you afraid they’ll also grab a bunch of common evil cultivators? The door to your Kaiming Department is open wider than the East Sea. Aren’t you afraid other countries will send spies to infiltrate it?”

“The threshold for the Luwu is sufficiently high, and that’s enough. The Kaiming Cultivators do nothing but attend to some village duties. There’s nothing serious. Some people open their spiritual eyes without opening their minds. That’s not something I can teach them. Won’t it be for the better if foreign spies can give them some training?” Zhou Ying said carelessly. “Anyway, who would trust common evil cultivators? These people can’t come out into the light of day anywhere. If they really come into the Kaiming Department with spiritual image brands, there’s no saying whose people they’ll be in the end—unless they follow the example of the Kaiming and the Luwu’s system, and wouldn’t that be even more interesting?”

Frowning, Pang Jian said, “So the rumors are true? Western Chu’s Luwu really are in contact with that Yu Chang? You have a method for removing spiritual image brands?”

Zhou Ying smiled without answering.

Pang Jian hesitated a moment. “That’s just as well... In fact, there were voices in Heaven’s Design Pavilion before that thought the Luwu were dangerous and wanted you to put spiritual image brands on them.”

“I’m afraid that wouldn’t do. The ‘method for removing spiritual image brands’ would be angry with me.” At this point, Zhou Ying heard something. All of a sudden, his gaze slanted down almost imperceptibly. Then, as though nothing were the matter, he picked up his tea, hinting that Pang Jian could piss off. “When we truly reach the point where every nation is imitating the Kaiming and the Luwu’s system, perhaps you walkers in the mortal world will be able to legitimately establish foundations... That day isn’t far off, Mr. Pang. When you come to see me then, at least bring an osmanthus duck. Don’t come empty-handed again.”

Pang Jian thought, I’ll bring a hundred to stuff into your mouth. I hope you choke on them, you cryptic demon.

He had come seething with rage and left in a sulk. At the door, he suddenly paused, remembering Zhou Ying’s expression when he’d said “The ‘method for removing spiritual image brands’ would be angry with me.”

“Wait.” Pang Jian narrowed his eyes. “That’s not something the paperman can do. Who was he talking about?”

He stopped in his tracks and turned toward the Azure Dragon Heart Tower. Xi Yue happened to be on duty tonight. The general commander patrolled routinely, so Xi Yue took no notice, acting as usual, silently cupping his hand toward Pang Jian, who was inside the wall surrounded by frolicking karma beasts.

Pang Jian nodded and passed through a different wall: Xi Yue wasn’t meditating, and he wasn’t studying arrays. He was doing

some “light reading” — a book of Chu grammar.

The hound with the most sensitive nose in all of Jinping had sniffed something out.

Just now, Zhou Ying, on one hand dealing with Pang Jian and on the other hand not in the mood to pay attention to a certain person, hadn't responded to the voice in the reincarnation wood. Luckily, Xi Ping could automatically translate san-ge's silence into an attentive silence. Whether he got a response or not, it wouldn't keep him from thinking aloud.

Indeed, before he could finish, Zhou Ying couldn't keep not answering.

“Are you talking about... the Heartless Lotus?”

Xi Ping said, “Not exactly, it had a heart—I mean that at first that bowl lotus was normal, with a stamen, but then the stamen was pushed away by a bizarre bald head. The bald head told me to go to the rear courtyard, but the lotus pond in the rear courtyard also has ordinary lotuses growing in it..”

At this point, he suddenly stopped in his tracks. “Oh, all right, they're not ordinary anymore.”

With a peak established foundation's eyesight, Xi Ping could see the lotus pond in the rear courtyard clearly from a hundred zhang away in the night.

The originally bright pink lotuses first faded until they were half transparent, revealing the channels like blood vessels inside of them. Then, ghastly white seeped into the flowers and leaves. The colors of the flower and leaves seemed to have been forced into the stalks and roots, mixing together into a strange rusty red.

White flowers and white leaves, without pistil or stamen, and roots like fresh blood underwater.

As soon as he heard this description, Zhou Ying stood up and quickly said, “Wait, you’re saying the Heartless Lotus is in the Sanyue Mountains?”

“I can’t say for sure,” Xi Ping said carefully. “He can turn ordinary lotuses into his own white ones, I don’t know where his real body is... Damn it, why can’t I do that?”

“There’s a limited range to the Heartless Lotus’s ability to assimilate other lotuses. Even the shed skin master had a range no greater than the size of a small city. He’s not only in the Sanyue Mountains, he must be hidden among the three Principal Peaks... The Zhou family aren’t the only ones who have been raising demons.” Zhou Ying sighed softly. “This was strangest among the ancient demonic gods. It’s said that while the ungovernable way has no Way of the Heart, the Heartless Lotus has many Ways of the Heart.”

Hearing this description, Xi Ping for some reason broke out in gooseflesh. “Why would he want to collect those things?!”

“There is a rumor that the master of the heartless lotuses at first had two souls in one body. There are those who say he swallowed his own twin when he was born. Those two people conversed within a single body from childhood. When their spiritual eyes opened, it produced two consciousnesses. The two people had completely different dispositions, and their natural endowments were outstanding. Almost simultaneously, they cultivated two completely opposing Ways of the Heart.”

The average person’s Way of the Heart was an absolute secret. Apart from a teacher passing on a Way of the Heart to a disciple, no one could be permitted to know its precise contents, to avoid others injuring it—not everyone had the boldness of Pang Jian, who would

magnanimously allow people to question his Way of the Heart... and, after all, Pang Jian had yet to establish a foundation. Even if his Way of the Heart was injured, the degree of danger would be limited.

But sharing a single spirit was problematic. No one could hide from “themselves.” With two Ways of the Heart rubbing together and colliding day in and day out, a clash that left only one survivor would be getting off easy. It was possible for it to end with both sides suffering.

As Xi Ping cautiously observed the lotus pond from a distance, he asked, “Did they find a way to peacefully coexist?”

“No,” Zhou Ying said, “both of them knew that this spirit could contain one Way of the Heart at most. Not long after establishing a foundation, each got the idea of getting rid of the other at the same time. The outcome was that both of them were seriously injured, but neither died—a third consciousness appeared in their spirit.”

Xi Ping was appalled. “Wait, san-ge, you’re giving me the wrong idea here. Are you sure the two of them wanted to get rid of each other, and not... well, you know? It just sounds weird. A fierce struggle, and then a little one appears?”

Zhou Ying was used to this. He could automatically translate absurd statements into proper speech. No matter what flavor of bullshit Xi Shiyong was spouting, he would be unaffected. “The trouble was, the third consciousness didn’t just appear out of nowhere. It was the consciousness of a dead person. Things were different back then. There were very few worthless wretches like Zhao Yin. Practically all masters found their own Ways of the Heart. Many cultivators also knew that if they fought, they would shake the earth and harm the innocent, so the ‘debate method’ was a frequent method of battle—one of the current four great taboos of the cultivation sects. It involves taking your Way of the Heart and

touching it to another person's. Though it involves no clash of weapons, it's still a matter of life and death. This third consciousness was an enemy who had lost in a debate to the Heartless Lotus and died at their hands."

Xi Ping: "..."

He didn't particularly understand this, but he was very shaken—in other words, there were three people living on one spirit, and each pair hated each other!

"The Heartless Lotus's spirit was very busy. There was constant fighting. At each fierce clash, there was a chance that a new consciousness would emerge, and practically every new consciousness was an enemy—a person couldn't fight by the debate method with friends and relatives, so the Ways of the Heart they thoroughly understood would usually belong to people who had died by their hands. This actually formed a delicate equilibrium: during the struggles, the weaker Ways of the Heart would be annihilated. They... they had plenty left if one shattered, anyway. On the other hand, some consciousnesses were unusually sturdy. To prevent those from crowding out all the others, the consciousnesses with mutual enmity between them would form temporary alliances and act together. This way, the cultivation levels of the Ways of the Heart that could coexist in the long term basically all advanced side by side. After constant revisions and updates, they passed through the ascended spirit stage and finally crossed the shed skin boundary, giving birth to a special type of accompanying plant—the heartless lotus."

No wonder he could assimilate other varieties of lotus.

Xi Ping suddenly thought that this accompanying plant seemed to be a kind of metaphor.

“In other words, the person I’m about to meet, even though he’ll have the same bald head, may in fact become ‘a different person’ at any time?”

“No.” Zhou Ying was for once silent for a moment. “The ancient masters whose Ways of the Heart couldn’t merge with heaven and earth all died out when the spiritual mountains formed. The person you met must have inherited the Heartless Lotus’s Way of the Heart. He doesn’t necessarily have so many consciousnesses.”

Xi Ping said, “If he only has one consciousness, which one would he have inherited?”

“I don’t know, but to be able to inherit the Heartless Lotus’s Way of the Heart...” Suddenly, Zhou Ying softly said, “If possible, I’d like to meet him, too.”

Xi Ping was stunned. Those who were “interesting” in Zhou Ying’s eyes were usually extremely dangerous people; normally, at times like these, he would remember that he was an older brother and, like when he was younger and playing with fire or poisons, would temporarily suppress his own interest and shoo Xi Ping away.

He thought this was san-ge’s first time saying he wanted to see someone.

“If my guess is correct, this person may have a paramount spiritual sense,” Zhou Ying said slowly. “There is little recorded history concerning paramount spiritual senses. After all, the vast majority of people like that go mad and die before they’re old enough to cultivate. When one occasionally manages it, it’s still very hard to use language to describe... My guess is that this ancient demonic god had a paramount spiritual sense. Of the ancient inscriptions circulating in the world today, nearly forty percent were inherited from the Heartless Lotus.”

Inscriptions were connected to the universe and all living things, not something that could be created afresh. When today's inscription experts made innovative inscriptions, they all used ancient inscriptions as a base and made a few slight alterations.

So where had the ancient inscriptions come from?

It was likely that it was those people with paramount spiritual senses, who could see the world's other face, "translating" all that they saw and sensed.

A possessor of a paramount spiritual sense... trapped in the Sanyue Mountains, in a place where the light of day did not shine.

This description was so familiar it made you tremble.

"No," Xi Ping said seriously. "If you used a paperman to come over, your consciousness would be injured if the paperman was damaged. That baldy has stronger cultivation than mine, most likely ascended spirit, and I don't know whether he's friend or foe. If he suddenly attacked, I wouldn't be able to protect you."

"Don't use your 'Tai Sui' voice on me," Zhou Ying scoffed. "I understand my limits. You look after yourself."

Now that Xi Ping had some idea of the situation, his figure flashed, and he landed beside the lotus pond that had already become entirely "heartless."

As soon as he approached, it was as if the pond began to boil, sending up countless bubbles. There was a different person in each bubble. The surrounding spiritual energy suddenly stagnated. This person had created a small space like a mustard seed around the lotus pond.

Xi Ping felt that he seemed to have caught a glimpse of Qiu Sha in a bubble. Before he could look closely, the bubble burst.

A lotus flower swam to shore like a snake and slowly raised its head, revealing the bald head with the disarranged features. “I just saw your leaves moving. Who were you talking to for so long? Were you saying bad things about me?”

“Not yet, honored sir. I’ll have time to curse you behind your back once I know whether you’re friend or foe,” Xi Ping said calmly. “Just now I was appealing to higher authority to ask about your history.”

Two mouths opened on Zhuoming’s face. One was chuckling, which didn’t keep the other one from talking—watching it, Xi Ping felt a little envious in spite of himself.

“You’re interesting. I like you. I’m called Zhuoming. I’m High Elder Xuanwu’s direct disciple. What do you want to know? I’ll tell you.”

“Well, I always said that opera singer was no good.” Xi Ping sighed and stared into those eyes that looked the same turned either way.

Zhuoming was laughing. His pupils reflected Xi Ping’s spiritual image mask.

For a moment, Xi Ping saw something familiar in those eyes—san-ge had often been like this when he was younger, his eyes sometimes focused on a strange place, making it seem as if his gaze was wandering... Later his subtlety had grown, and he had learned to pretend.

Xi Ping suddenly asked, “Do you have a paramount spiritual sense?”

Zhuoming’s laughter came to a sudden halt. His slightly wandering gaze suddenly became sharp, as if it was about to turn into a knife

and pierce the spirit of the person in front of him. “You’re in contact with Zhou Ying.”

This freak had heard of his san-ge?

“I know him... I know him...” Zhuoming became excited, his eyes spinning uncontrollably. “The last sacrifice of Great Wan’s Zhou family... Like me... He’s like me...”

For some reason, Xi Ping felt that his thoughts on hearing this were hard to express. “Um... maybe not that much like you.”

There was a splash in the water. The lotus nearly flew up, stretching out to the height of a person and suddenly coming up in front of Xi Ping. The frightening eyes were firmly fixed on him. “What is Zhou Ying like? Does he have hair?”

Xi Ping said, “... quite a lot of it.”

Before he could finish, the lotus began to yell almost frantically. “He doesn’t pluck out his hair? He doesn’t pluck it out?”

Good heavens! Had this baldy plucked out his own hair one strand at a time?

Fortunately, this mustard seed contained sound, or else that shout might have woken the whole outbuilding... or the whole of the imperial grandson’s manor.

Xi Ping leaned back. “He wouldn’t do that!”

Before Xi Ping finished speaking, a hand reached out from somewhere in the lotus and grabbed Xi Ping by the collar—Xi Ping found that not only did he have no hair on his head, he also didn’t have a single nail on his hand!

“What does he eat? Does he eat mud? Does he cut off his own flesh and eat it?”

Xi Ping grabbed the talisman he'd drawn beforehand. He used it to send the lotus's hand flying. “Behave yourself! Great Wan's imperial family isn't so poor that they need to sink to that level!”

The lotus stared at him in disbelief, as if he wanted to find evidence that Xi Ping was lying on his face. “Does he actually spend every day fighting over power with those people? How can he be so ordinary?”

Xi Ping: “...”

There was a word he hadn't heard clearly. After all, he was a foreigner... *What* had that bald flower said his san-ge was?

“How can that be... how can that be...?” As soon as the flower became distraught, several mouths opened on it.

“How can he be so ordinary?”

“Is he insane...?”

“He's abnormal, he must be insane!”

For a time, Xi Ping had nothing to say.

Through the reincarnation wood, Zhou Ying asked, “What is the Heartless Lotus saying?”

Xi Ping said, “He says since you're not bald, don't mutilate yourself, and don't eat dirt, you must be insane.”

Zhou Ying: “...”

Just then, the veins stood up on the lotus's hands. A damp-scented wind came toward Xi Ping.

Zhuoming was screaming as though having a breakdown, his voice making Xi Ping want to throw up.

He felt all the spiritual energy in his body stop. A breath caught in his chest. The next moment, those ghastly pale arms, as slender as a young girl's, dragged him into the lotus pond, and he had absolutely no room to resist.

Xi Ping held his breath. As he'd thought, this baldy was an ascended spirit!

He spread his hand. A few qin strings appeared between his fingers. In a snap, Xi Ping sent out a beam of sword energy that hit the lotus, but it only left a white mark on its dark red stalk.

This was the difference between a near-ascended spirit and a true, undiluted ascended spirit!

CHAPTER 127 - Eternal Flame (9)

Xi Ping remembered one time a group of kids had been flying a kite beside the Lingyang River. Before the kite could rise, a blind dog had come out of nowhere and blundered into the kite string. The naughty children went after it, chasing and shouting. The dog became even more panicked and got tangled up in the kite string. It lost its footing and fell into the Lingyang River. The water birds all flew up, and the dog still couldn't get loose, turning the little swallow kite into a white streak on the waves with its thrashing.

Xi Ping felt that right now, he was like that weak and helpless kite.

The bottom of the little lotus pond in the backyard that was only a few chi deep seemed to have been connected to the East Sea. He couldn't find solid ground to step on.

Xi Ping's features were lashed by flying spray. He seemed about to reach the earth's core. The countless images in the water, like mirages, faintly brushed past him, disappearing before he could catch a clear sight of them. Wave after wave of that lunatic's shouts crashed into his spirit. All his meridians seemed to have been stretched taut, tightly binding his flesh and bones. At the limit of his endurance, Xi Ping let out a mouthful of air in the water. He was about to explode.

"Shiyong." Through the water dragon pearl, Zhou Ying sensed at once that something wasn't right with him. "The water dragon pearl recognizes you as its master. Use your essence to smash it and take the opportunity to escape. If you're exposed, so be it. We'll think of another way. Don't tangle with him."

Xi Ping could already taste blood in his mouth. He thought, Won't Xu Rucheng be trapped here, then?

“Wait, just wait...” With difficulty, Xi Ping split off his attention to send a message. “I think he’s testing me. He watched me in secret for so long and ran the risk of getting in contact with me among Sanyue’s Principal Peaks. He wouldn’t have done all that just to get rid of a spy—I don’t believe Sanyue is so extravagant that they would have an ascended spirit patrolling the mountains.”

“Don’t make any vain attempts to collaborate with the Heartless Lotus. He may harbor malice toward Sanyue, but he certainly won’t want to win a joint victory for the both of you. This kind of person would slice himself to bits for the sake of a little peace, if only he had a knife in his hand. Don’t play with fire... I do not permit it!”

“Peace”?

Xi Ping paused, seizing on this peculiar wording of Zhou Ying’s.

A rare person of his own kind, in peculiarly similar circumstances—Xi Ping suddenly thought that, while san-ge wasn’t bald and didn’t mutilate himself, while he could be rated as the most “Wan” man in all of Jinping, from a certain point of view, he still understood this lotus spirit.

Xi Ping thrust out the Tai Sui Qin. The notes he was using as a sword changed, the sharp and monotonous sword aura instantly sliding into a melody, blending seamlessly. The melody was improvised, high and rapid, ingeniously backing up the hollering Zhuoming, the tempo so closely matching it was as if he was playing accompaniment for him.

The music pursued Zhuoming’s incessant shrieks. They couldn’t escape no matter how they changed in pitch. The atmosphere turned peculiar. It didn’t sound like Zhuoming was going mad, but rather like a singer from a niche operatic style was training his voice in this remote location, with some of the beauty of the bizarre—nine out of every ten sentences Mr. Yu Gan spoke were blowing hot air,

but occasionally there was still a glimmer of honesty; he really could turn a braying donkey into a famous singer!

Zhuoming had likely never before attained this height of artistry. Halfway through shouting, he couldn't go on. He turned his head and glared at Xi Ping with a look that said "Are you crazy?"

Xi Ping regretfully pressed down the strings and opened his mouth to let out an air bubble, forcing away the water covering his nose and mouth. "Why have you stopped? You have a pretty resonant voice. Sing some more."

Zhuoming: "..."

His figure gradually lengthened, the upper half of his body at least growing to the stature of a normal man. His disorderly features also gradually returned to their original positions, the two mouths combining into one, revealing a rather tidy and indifferent face.

"Misty Willow..."

Xi Ping raised a hand to interrupt him. "Stop that, my name isn't 'Misty Willow.'"

This name always made him think of the opera actor in the Snake King's Immortal Palace.

"You may address me as 'Tai Sui.'"

The sturdiness of Xi Ping's consciousness far exceeded that of the average ascended spirit. When he concentrated especially hard, he could practically escape the influence of the Replica... but the shortcoming to this was that he'd forgotten he was still wearing the spiritual image mask of a pretty maid, making this display incongruous and a little funny.

But Zhuoming didn't laugh. After listening gravely, he nodded earnestly. "That's a good name. My name was chosen for me by Xuanwu. It's bad. I should also change my name."

Mr. Yu Gan, the specialist in elopements, casually plucked his qin. Hearing these words, he gave a zealous suggestion: "You can call yourself Lovesickness."

Zhuoming stretched out his neck in confusion, drawing close to Xi Ping. "Why would I call myself Lovesickness?"

Xi Ping plucked a qin string with a *twang*. "For example, say you wanted to kill High Elder Xuanwu. At most, others would say that an unfilial disciple had gone berserk and killed his own teacher. Is there anything interesting about that story? It'd put me to sleep, anyway. But if you call yourself Lovesickness, when people tell the story, it'll turn into 'Elder Xuanwu died through the machinations of lovesickness,' and I guarantee that your name and his will live on in the annals of history for ten thousand years. Even when the spiritual mountains are gone, the two of you won't be forgotten."

The more Zhuoming heard, the brighter his eyes became, his head drawing closer to Xi Ping bit by bit, nearly pressing against him. "Who told you I wanted to kill Xuanwu?"

Xi Ping returned his gaze unflinchingly. "It was just an example. It wasn't real. If it mirrors reality, that's pure coincidence."

A sharp laugh came from Zhuoming's throat. His neck contracted back to a normal length. He waved his sleeve, and the water around them became clear.

Xi Ping looked in the direction of his gaze and saw that after the muddy waters calmed, the top of his head was less than a chi away from the surface of the water. With a cultivator's vision, he could see the surroundings distinctly.

They were in the midst of an enormous pool. Beside it was a competition platform extended with a mustard seed. On the mountain slopes, countless palaces and magnificent buildings were inlaid like jewels in the ground, with a lofty celestial palace atop white clouds, permeated with an immortal aura, faintly discernible. It was much more presentable than the disorderly and extravagant West Peak.

Xi Ping immediately had a guess. He couldn't resist floating up a little, wanting to see more clearly. "Is this the Central Peak?"

"I advise you not to move around." Zhuoming had stopped shouting. His voice was actually somewhat deep amid the clarity. "The Central Peak is an important place. Not even a fly could get in."

Xi Ping attached all his spiritual sense to his eyes and only then discovered that the inscriptions and arrays here were omnipresent. The spiritual threads of arrays even floated through the air—only when the wind raised slight waves was it possible to see a hint of them in reflections in the water.

"Aren't they afraid of breathing arrays into their lungs?"

"It won't happen. Every person on the Central Peak is on the roll of names. Once the immortal mountains have recorded these people, the arrays will automatically avoid them—though the East, Central, and West Peaks don't have dealings with each other. If you stuck your head out, you'd breathe the arrays into your lungs and blow up like a gas bladder," Zhuoming said indifferently. "Only I can come and go freely among the three Principal Peaks, be an ear pressed to the wall on behalf of my shizun who's about to die of 'lovesickness.'"

As expected.

Xi Ping thought: He acknowledges what I said about him wanting to kill Xuanwu.

Just then, Zhuoming said, "I know you're here for the Unbound Furnace."

Xi Ping's heart jumped. Then he saw Zhuoming tilt his head back to look at the palace atop the clouds. "Two hundred years ago, Southern He was destroyed, and Sanyue obtained Hui Xiangjun's vital weapon, the Unbound Furnace. Since it was brought back, no one has seen it. The sect leader himself has kept it in his care. Then the sect leader went into seclusion... It's been nearly two hundred years now."

Xi Ping suspected this baldy had a concussion from being hit on the head by spray. "Isn't there some ambiguity in what you've just said? Why does it sound like your honored sect's sect leader is using Hui Xiangjun's relic in his seclusion? A peak shed skin using the weapon of an ascended spirit to reach a full moon position?"

How was that any different from an imperial exam candidate using a basic thousand-character primer as study material before the examination?

Zhuoming nodded calmly. "Your Chu is good."

"Is your honored sect's sect leader about to lose his mind?" Xi Ping couldn't resist asking. "Isn't there anyone to dissuade him from doing something so preposterous?"

"This matter is between heaven and earth, and Xuanwu and me. And now there's you, too," Zhuoming said. "Since you've seen the Law Breaker and the Riverward, you ought to know that the Eternal Spring Brocade cannot be limited by the grades set out by the spiritual mountains. She is an unbound person, outside the rules."

Xi Ping caught up half a beat late: “eternal spring brocade” was Hui Xiangjun’s accompanying plant, which this baldy who liked giving people nicknames was using to indicate Hui Xiangjun.

“But you’ve got one thing right—it’s true that the sect leader may be about to lose it. He’s gone the wrong way.” Zhuoming’s voice softened strangely. “With my cultivation level, I can’t understand where he’s gone wrong, but my spiritual sense can clearly see the spiritual energy about to overflow in the immortal palace above the clouds. A great master is about to fall. If not for that, Xuanwu wouldn’t have insisted on holding out under the impact of the Silver Moon instead of going into seclusion... and now, you’ve shown up. Isn’t that a coincidence?”

Xi Ping gave a start.

When he had mistakenly wound up in the Impassable Sea and encountered Yuan Hui’s hidden bones, he’d had a faint sense of some mystical force arranging things.

And Qiu Sha had said that once a cultivator who hadn’t been acknowledged by the spiritual mountains wished to step over the ascended spirit boundary, the Way of Heaven would certainly not allow it and would soon send down disasters one after another to wipe away the ant who dared to disobey the will of heaven.

Many things appeared to be mere coincidence, but considered closely, it seemed they were all being pushed by an invisible hand.

Hui Xiangjun had died eight centuries ago, and the Unbound Furnace had passed from Lancang to Sanyue without anyone wanting to use it—the way of toolmaking was unskilled in fighting and never went looking for trouble; besides that, not just anyone could use the vital tool of an unusual talent like Hui Xiangjun.

Could it be that him coming to Sanyue to steal the Unbound Furnace... had also been arranged by something?

“Heaven and earth are locked in constant struggle,” Zhuoming said, voice pregnant with meaning. “The ancient demonic gods fell and left their accompanying plants behind to search for successors, in defiance of the Way of Heaven. You inherited the ungovernable way, so you are a member of my generation. Never in your life will you be able to assimilate into the spiritual mountains’ orthodoxy. You will either hide inside the wood dragging out an ignoble existence, waiting for the Way of Heaven to find you and wipe you out, or else you will take all of Heaven’s gods and sages as your enemies, destroy the three thousand paths of the Way of Heaven, change the laws of the universe—there is no third road.”

Hearing this, Xi Ping for no reason at all felt very unwell. He thought, So what if there isn’t, I’m not going anywhere.

“It seems that I’m only a little piece in this game,” Xi Ping said unflappably. “A mere established foundation who may or may not be able to do anything while shed skins are dying and seizing power. With no one to take me, I couldn’t even leave the little courtyard on the West Peak. I’m truly unworthy of being counted in the same generation as Brother Lovesickness.”

When Zhuoming settled down, he was very proper, without any sign of his previous lunacy. “It’s a long story.”

“No problem,” said Xi Ping, “I can stay in the water for a year and a half without dying.”

“During the Great War of Gods and Demons, Sanyue’s full moon sage the Black Emperor had a lifelong enemy. That ancient demonic god had dozens of names that no one but him remembered, so he was known by the same name as his accompanying plant—the Heartless Lotus. This person was deranged, like a goblet full of

poison, constantly grappling with himself, but when he encountered a powerful foe, a part of him could escape each time. No matter what, he wouldn't die altogether.

“He lingered on, getting weaker and weaker, until the spiritual mountains were established and Western Chu's Black Emperor reached the full moon position. The other demonic gods on earth had all been blown away—he became the one and only ancient demonic god to live to see the spiritual mountains. At last, he was surrounded by the Black Emperor and some masters under his command. With the might of a full moon sage bearing down on him, the Heartless Lotus had nowhere to hide. He was cut down and fell at the feet of the Sanyue Mountains. To prevent any 'lotus seeds' from slipping the net once again, the Black Emperor sealed the Heartless Lotus's lotus pods inside the Silver Moon.

“For thousands of years after that, the Black Emperor's descendants—Dongheng's Xiang family—controlled Sanyue, but they became more and more disappointing by the generation. The sect leader reached the pinnacle of the shed skin stage, always doing whatever he could to make a breakthrough. He was too busy to manage trifling affairs, but there was no one he could use for the purpose, so he had to settle for second best and use Xuanwu, who was 'half a Xiang family member.' But he couldn't trust Xuanwu, so he placed the Silver Moon above the East Peak. On the surface, he was putting Sanyue's authority into Xuanwu's hands, but in reality it was another way to monitor him. If the high elder put one toe out of line, the mountains' great weapon wouldn't spare him.

“For hundreds of years, the high elder assiduously guarded the Xiang family's mountains on the sect leader's behalf, until by coincidence, he obtained a possessor of a paramount spiritual sense with an embarrassing background and brought him back to the spiritual mountains as his disciple. He tended to him with all his heart and soul, nursed him for a hundred years, letting this paralytic open his spiritual eyes and complete his spiritual bones, until he

could walk, sit, and lie down no different from an ordinary person and was only awaiting his shizun's test before he could inherit his Way of the Heart. Then he received a great present from his shizun... Using his own shed skin cultivation, the high elder stood guard as he sent his disciple into the Silver Moon to obtain the Way of the Heart of the ancient demonic god, the Heartless Lotus. But his own hair turned white overnight. He only recently left seclusion after nursing his injuries for a century. This teacher's favor can be called as weighty as Sanyue's three Principal Peaks, as deep as the South Sea."

At first, listening to these ancient secrets, Xi Ping had been relating them to Zhou Ying through the reincarnation wood. But in the end, he was dumbfounded, with no attention left to spare to repeat Zhuoming's words.

"So the lotus seeds inside the Silver Moon grew mold... er... sprouted?" Xi Ping remembered Qiu Sha, turned to dust by the moonlight in Tao County, and in spite of himself felt deep veneration for Zhuoming for appearing reasonably intact before him. "How did you survive that?"

"All thanks to my shed skin shizun," Zhuoming said softly. "Shizun used half of his essence to sustain me. If he ever takes it back, I'll be snuffed out by the Silver Moon. But at the same time, I have become the new Heartless Lotus, with my life tied to the Silver Moon. Among the Sanyue Mountains, I am like half of the great divine tool. Through me, he controls the Silver Moon, which the sect leader hung around his neck like a noose. The Silver Moon, me, and shizun—none of us can leave the others. Isn't that a superb story?"

"Amazing!" Xi Ping praised.

"I don't believe that the sect leader wouldn't have made preparations for the aftermath of his death. When the time comes, the two of them will have a test of strength," Zhuoming said.

“Rumor has it that the Unbound Furnace can hold a shed skin’s essence. The unbound object that produced the Law Breaker and the Riverward can block a great divine tool. I can help you take the Unbound Furnace, but I want to have first use of it. I want to escape the Silver Moon.”

Xi Ping considered and said, “The Unbound Furnace is actually under your honored sect leader’s ass. We wouldn’t have thought of that in a million years, or else we wouldn’t have wasted time coming — apart from agreeing, I see no other choice.”

“You can also abandon the Unbound Furnace and get away now,” Zhuoming said, smiling. “I suppose you’re still capable of that.”

CHAPTER 128 - Eternal Flame (10)

“What?!”

From Lin Chi to Bai Ling—right down to Xu Rucheng and the rest of the Luwu—practically everyone taking part in this affair was shocked upon hearing that the Unbound Furnace was in the hands of Sanyue’s sect leader.

Lin Chi’s first reaction was very honest: “Sanyue’s sect leader doesn’t cultivate the way of toolmaking.”

Xu Rucheng temporarily forgot that he was a cultivator: “Is it because it’s too cold being in seclusion on top of a mountain, and he wanted to bring the furnace with him to make fire?”

Bai Ling asked a penetrating question: “Viscount, why is it that whenever you’re involved in something, no matter how unremarkable it seems at first, in the end it always ferments into something world-shattering?”

Xi Ping: “...”

When Hui Xiangjun died, her cultivation wouldn’t have exceeded the middle ascended spirit stage. Ordinarily speaking, even members of outer sects like Zhao Yu, who sought Ways of the Heart in relics of predecessors, would think that middle ascended spirit stage cultivation was a little low—especially when one couldn’t consult the person they inherited from. Sanyue had taken the Unbound Furnace over two centuries ago, and no one had heard of anyone using it to create anything. Everyone had assumed the Unbound Furnace was gathering dust in some storehouse in Sanyue.

“Stealing a dusty antique from the Sanyue Mountains” and “blowing up the peak shed skin sect leader’s immortal palace” were two

completely different things!

“Tell the Luwu to preserve their disguises and take no action—you withdraw,” Zhou Ying said decisively after listening in on the proceedings. “If what the Heartless Lotus says is true and Sanyue’s sect leader and Xuanwu are about to have a battle, that isn’t something for an outer sect to handle. I will send a Heavenly Question to Duanrui at once and have Xuanyin Mountain do as they see fit.”

Xi Ping didn’t answer.

Gritting his teeth, Zhou Ying said, “Xi Shiyong, you won’t rest until you’ve angered me to death, is that it?”

“Hey, hey, I’ll withdraw, I’ll withdraw,” Xi Ping casually fobbed him off, then changed the subject. “San-ge, I have a question. How did Hui Xiangjun actually die?”

This was something he couldn’t understand no matter how he thought about it. At first, Xi Ping had thought of Hui Xiangjun as a commoner female version of Lin Chi, gentle and easily bullied, persecuted wherever she went. But each time he encountered one of her relics, every time he got near to rumors about her, another layer of mysterious fog appeared over this toolmaking master. Now it seemed that even Lin Chi hadn’t altogether understood her.

Also, why had Zhuoming said she was an “unbound person”?

“At first I thought the reason she couldn’t escape was because of the clash between the Law Breaker and the Riverward, but that Zhuoming said that with the Unbound Furnace, you would have no fear of the Silver Moon. If that baldy isn’t just messing with me, then what did Hui Xiangjun have to be afraid of back then? As I see it, isn’t *she* the one ‘closest to the full moon positions’? Her works are

so magical, and her vital weapon is so magical. How powerful must she herself have been?”

“Hui Xiangjun practiced the way of toolmaking. People belonging to the medicine making and toolmaking ways, unless their tempers are peculiar, don’t have much opportunity to engage in battle with others. Hui Xiangjun may very well never have fought with anyone... at any rate, neither the records nor the rumors mention that she did. Until she left for Southern He, no one even knew she had an accompanying plant—otherwise, my guess is that Sanyue’s sect leader wouldn’t have allowed the Unbound Furnace to remain in Lancang for so long.” Zhou Ying paused, then continued, “Rumor has it that when the five great sects hunted her down, Hui Xiangjun didn’t resist at all. She used the Riverward to send away Qiu Sha, who was her personal maid at the time. The whereabouts of the Law Breaker were unknown. And the Unbound Furnace was beside her.”

Xi Ping said, “Beside her?”

“Yes, Lancang Mountain specifically recorded it. She hadn’t put away the Unbound Furnace, so those hunting her thought she was brandishing her vital weapon in order to resist. But for some reason, she didn’t use it.” As he spoke, Zhou Ying personally wrote a Heavenly Question and waved a hand to send it to the Xuanyin Mountains. “In my view, she was waiting to be captured.”

Xi Ping frowned—the Riverward had been able to take Qiu Sha away then and let her hide for eight centuries, then reappear in the world as an ascended spirit. So why hadn’t Hui Xiangjun gone with her?

Even if there was some inside story that hadn’t been passed down to later generations, if she had wanted to sacrifice herself, she could very well have killed herself. Once the spirit was blown up, the consciousness would be destroyed. It was so fast you wouldn’t feel

the pain, much more convenient than a mortal slitting their throat or hanging themselves. Why would she have waited to be interrogated and sentenced—didn't it hurt to have her spiritual bones removed?

It was as if... she could no longer feel pain, and the body she had left for the spiritual mountains was only an old robe she hadn't bothered to put away.

Xi Ping returned to the maid's room and meditated, as usual withdrawing his consciousness to Tao County, patrolling through the reincarnation wood trees that hadn't been dug up.

The garrisoned troops had already obtained the relief provisions. The poorest of the old and sickly now had some prospects. With spiritual energy to nourish all things, the towns with farmland had plowed the earth and seen hope, and had begun to discuss planting something together. The bleak business of the minor merchants had improved out of nowhere, because the cultivators had discovered one benefit of Tao County: this damn place treated everyone the same.

Whether an ascended spirit or a shed skin, once they entered, they would have to ride a horse or equip a carriage. Immortal tools, whether orthodox or evil, couldn't be used. No one had better think of taking advantage of their higher cultivation to bully others. As long as you bribed the garrisoned troops, business would be even safer than it had been at Wild Fox Country's Great Market.

Zhou Ying had seen through these cultivators' ideas from the start. Before they had caught up, he had straightened out all the restaurants and inns within Tao County. He had bough into each one and left someone permanently stationed there, eyes and ears placed to wait to receive the guests coming from all over. At the same time, he had reopened the ferry crossings on the Xia River after reorganizing them. He had used the steamships that had belonged to the waterborne troops to hire a bunch of cultivators to

oversee the transport of medicinal herbs and materials from the spiritual beasts of Southern Shu's Three Islands, publicly selling common materials used for downgraded immortal tools. As expected, Western Chu's court believed that the garrisoned troops were in their own hands and paid little attention to them, only secretly sending a note to the garrisoned troops to take three Qilin Guardsmen into the fleet. And so the first Common Cultivator Water Transport Escort Group, made up of nine Luwu and three Qilin Guardsmen, was formed. When Xi Ping passed by the docks, he saw the dock workers unloading cargo in the middle of the night. On the ship, two Luwu were playing cards with the Qilin Guardsmen, one pretending to be foolish about money, one helping the Qilin Guardsmen cheat, mutually sighing about how difficult it was for a common cultivator to make a living.

Zhao Qindan wasn't resting yet—fortunately, while she couldn't use spiritual energy, a half-immortal who had opened her spiritual eyes still didn't need much sleep. It was enough to meditate for one ke at dawn.

Those who came to study with her during the day were young children who didn't need to work. The adults worked hard all day and only had time after dark. But evening after all was an unsuitable time; all those who came were women. She didn't charge them money. Many people came with items that needed mending to borrow the lamplight. Listening to the disguised "Xu Dan," "Sir Xu," explain things from all over the world, or learning a few characters, wouldn't hold up the work.

Xi Ping didn't approach them, only listened from afar to Zhao Qindan composedly teaching astronomy. Today, Tao County's sky was as clear as if it had been rinsed clean, the starry sea resplendent. The young mistress was in fact well-learned; she understood astronomy and geography, as well as the history of the cultivation sects, and she could deftly explain the profound in simple terms.

Suddenly, he heard a young woman say, “Young Sir, you say that the sages have Ways of the Heart devoted to the world, and when they pierce the void and walk through it, that means they go up to heaven to become gods, is that right?”

Zhao Qindan froze. “I suppose that must be right.”

“So which are higher, the gods in heaven, or the gods on earth?”

Zhao Qindan knew that she was talking about “Tai Sui.” Tai Sui was made-up nonsense to start with, and the one who could answer the prayers of the county’s people was in fact a “master from a cultivation sect,” with cultivation unfathomable to her eyes. But however unfathomable, he must at most be an ascended spirit or a shed skin. Zhao Qindan knew that her neighbors were biased, so she didn’t respond.

Next to her, an old woman picked up: “Of course it’s the ones in heaven who are higher. Those in heaven are officers of the court, while those in the human world are their envoys.”

So the young woman said, “So why can a god on earth turn cultivators into humans, but the gods in heaven can’t?”

Publicly discussing gods had an unavoidable hint of heresy. Everyone became quiet.

Then the young woman’s clear and melodious voice alone sounded from afar: “Everyone says that spiritual energy nourishes all things, but most of the spiritual energy is in the immortal mountains. Who do the immortal mountains nourish? There’s only a bit of spiritual energy in the human world, and it’s divided up among all those demons with their factories and medicinal herb fields, making it impossible for the people to make a living. So hasn’t spiritual energy become the root of trouble?”

Everyone quickly tried to stop her. The older people scolded her one after another, telling her “Do not speak recklessly, careful not to let the Exalted hear.”

The fierce young woman said, “I’m not scared. What can they do if they hear? I’m not leaving the county, anyway. The Exalted are all deaf as posts here. No one can strike another person dead with a bolt of lightning. They have to talk things out.”

No sooner had she spoken than someone else quietly said, “A couple of days ago, I saw some soldiers capture a person and escort him out. I heard that was an Exalted.”

“My man is a waiter at an inn. The Exalted also have to eat, drink, and defecate. Those white-clothed Exalted also sweat, and they also stink if they don’t change their clothes for a few days. Some of them smell rancid, but they don’t notice it themselves.”

One after another, the people marveled at this. No longer caring what was or wasn’t taboo, they lowered their voices to discuss all kinds of gossip.

Zhao Qindan listened in now and then, turning her face toward the sky. Suddenly, she remembered that Luwu who had undertaken her fate and gone to Sanyue Mountain saying in casual conversation, *Everything is decided by the spiritual mountains.*

Xi Ping also looked toward the starry sky. It was no god in heaven sustaining the paradise of Tao County, and no immortal. It was the Law Breaker.

The Law Breaker itself was a special hidden realm immortal tool. It clearly laid down the laws inside the hidden realm; why was it called the “Law Breaker”?

Suddenly, a faint guess appeared in his mind.

Ripples spread through the lotus pond in front of Zhuoming. A heartless lotus flower petal floated in front of him. Brash writing flashed over it: *Deal*.

Zhuoming stared expressionlessly at the writing, until the writing and the lotus petal along with it had burned to ashes.

“Haha,” a voice came from somewhere in the lotus pond.

Next, insuppressible giggles and laughter came from all sides.

Until Zhuoming himself stuck up a finger and brought it to his mouth: “Shh—”

“The little Misty Willow said that he and the master of the Luwu are collaborators,” a lotus whispered, drawing in front of Zhuoming.
“Liar.”

“Liar...” There was an echo from the water. Another mouth opened on a lotus root and said, “To use an accompanying plant to communicate requires blood as a medium. If he can reach him at any time, it shows that Zhou Ying always carries a piece of wood he’s spilled his blood on. Doesn’t that mean his actions can be observed at any time? Zhou Ying must have a profound connection to that Misty Willow.”

“Zhou Ying may be a little abnormal, but how could the possessor of a paramount spiritual sense lay his heart bare to anyone...?”

Another mouth opened on a lotus leaf and joined in the discussion.
“How could that be? What’s so special about him?”

“I want him, too.”

“Want him... want him...”

“Let’s keep him and bury him in the lotus pond.”

Zhuoming, sitting upright in the water, listened to the discussion among the flowers and leaves and slowly closed his eyes, the corners of his mouth gradually turning upward. His thin lips turned up all the way to the roots of his ears, tearing when they split too wide. Blood fell into the lotus pond. The lotus flowers and leaves instantly threw themselves at it like dogs fighting over food. Before the blood could disperse, it was all lapped clean by the many mouths.

On receiving word, Princess Duanrui’s response was lightning fast. She announced that Xuanyin’s inner sect would send someone to oversee this matter. The Luwu were to aid them in crossing the border.

Xu Rucheng had just received a message from a colleague telling him that the senior from the inner sect had already crossed the river when Bai Ling ordered all the Luwu to stand by where they were and look for an opportunity to withdraw. The Luwu were secret agents. They shouldn’t reveal themselves even to their own people from Xuanyin’s inner sect.

But before he could breathe a sigh of relief—

It was the sixteenth day of the tenth month, with the full moon rising into the sky as usual. When it had just passed the treetops, an enormous seismograph inside Dongheng’s imperial city shook. The full-moon-shaped machine spat out a Moon Plated Gold bead from one end that travelled along its track and bumped against the gears with a *click*.

The huge indicator on the seismograph pointed to the northwest. An alarm resonated throughout the imperial city.

There was an earthquake to the northwest!

Dongheng City felt considerable tremors. All the inscriptions around the houses of the wealthy were disturbed.

The residents of Dongheng ordinarily went to bed late. Now it was early evening in the city, when the lanterns had just been lit. No one was asleep. The common people living at the bottom of the valley had no inscriptions to protect them. None of them dared to stay under roofs. One after another, they poured out onto the street. Among the shouting of guards, someone cried out fearfully, "Look at the moon!"

At the same time, Xuanwu appeared out of nowhere on the summit of the East Peak. At the summit, the Silver Moon, like the moon in the sky, was plated with a layer of bronze. It seemed a little fretful, droning as it shook. The motley moonlight seemed to be attracted by something to the northwest.

The features on Xuanwu's mask settled into a look of anger. "The moon has been stained with blood, and the great mountain array is unstable. An evil cultivator has become an ascended spirit. Two years ago, it was Qiu Sha. Who is it this time?"

From the Silver Moon came Zhuoming's calm voice: "There is a tidal wave in the Slumbering Dragon Sea to the northwest, a sign of catastrophe."

Xuanwu abruptly raised his head. "Is it Yu Chang?"

Just then, a fluttering sound suddenly came from the direction of the Central Peak. A messenger peacock dragging its long tail on the ground threw itself in front of him. It spoke in a human voice: "High Elder, the great mountain array is leaking spiritual energy

everywhere. May we request that the Silver Moon stabilize the situation?”

Hardly had it finished speaking than another peacock flew over. “High Elder, Southern Shu sends word. They wish to know why yet another evil cultivator has become an ascended spirit in our country.”

“The Xuanyin Mountains say that the sect leader has been in seclusion for two hundred years, and of late evil has frequently emerged here. They are concerned that the spiritual mountains are unstable and ask whether we require assistance.”

“A pack of nonsense!” said Xuanwu.

The brows on his mask pinched together, then were forced apart. The features drawn on the mask changed unnaturally as this happened.

Xuanwu lowered his voice and flatly said, “Qiu Sha absorbed the spiritual stones of the Land of Turmoil and only came to Chu to become an ascended spirit due to her resentment toward the Sanyue Mountains. Yu Chang is indeed from Chu, but the Slumbering Dragon Sea is not within our country. The sect leader is well. Sanyue’s spiritual veins are clear. We have no need to trouble our fellow cultivators to fret on our behalf. We request the cooperation of all the spiritual mountains in arresting the evil cultivator Yu Chang..”

No sooner had he spoken than the surroundings suddenly dimmed. The messenger peacocks raised their heads in astonishment. The Silver Moon had darkened. A wild gale rose, blowing so hard that the stars and moon vanished.

The immortal mountains once again began to quake—aftershocks from the Slumbering Dragon Sea?

No! Wait!

Xuanwu abruptly turned his head and saw dense clouds amass over Sanyue's Principal Peak and combine with the ominous bloody moon, seeming to form an enormous vortex whose edges were illuminated red by the moonlight.

A series of lightning bolts fell, striking directly at the immortal palace where the sect leader was in seclusion, one bolt after another.

The inscriptions on the Principal Peak lit up like a rising fire. This was adding frost to snow for the great mountain array that had been damaged by the earthquake. With a *boom*, a fireball fell out of the sky. Smoke began to rise from the sect leader's immortal palace!

The features on Xuanwu's mask stiffened: was the sect leader losing his mind at a time like this?

CHAPTER 129 - Eternal Flame (11)

All the spiritual energy in the Sanyue Mountains began to run wild. The hidden realms on the West Peak that relied on spiritual energy collapsed into chaos. Halfway up the mountain, cultivators flew up one after another on their swords. Looking up, the sky was full of people, like a plague of locusts.

The third-rate imperial grandson was raised on a stretcher and carried outside on servants' shoulders—in Xu Rucheng's view, given the imperial grandson's physique, this was completely unnecessary; it would have been enough to roll him up and stick him under your arm—with two delicate maidservants next to him, their lips blue and their faces deathly white, one fanning and the other stuffing elixirs into the mouth of the fainting imperial grandson.

Though right now, Xu Rucheng had no time to rejoice at becoming a “woman widowed by her betrothed.”

Spiritual energy was like water. A timely rain could nourish all living things, but it wasn't a good time when the floodwaters burst a dyke and rose over your head. The overflowing spiritual energy of the Sanyue Mountains had simply become a disaster, congesting the insufficiently wide meridians of the half-immortals. Xu Rucheng felt that he had become a sponge cake soaked in water, stifled by the spiritual energy blocking the seven apertures of his head until he could hardly breathe.

Just then, a small ceramic bottle flew toward him. That “taciturn” Young Master Cousin senior landed beside him.

“What is...”

“An eye-sealing pill, to seal your spiritual eyes for a time,” the Young Master Cousin said. “Don't be in a hurry to take it, wait until you

really can't stand it. Having your spiritual bones rinsed once here amounts to twenty years in the mortal world. You won't find another opportunity like this."

"Thank you, senior." Xu Rucheng gasped for breath and indeed couldn't bear to take the elixir. "Is Xuanyin Mountain also like this? Right now, I... I think that it's a joke that the market price of spiritual stones is a hundred liang of gold."

"Xuanyin? It doesn't match up to this." Wearing the spiritual image skin of a beautiful girl, Xi Ping clasped his hands behind his back. The flood-like, brutal spiritual energy ruffled the hem of his skirt. "There is only one Sanyue on earth. So do you know why Sanyue's sect leader is the person in this world closest to a full moon position?"

Xu Rucheng said, "Senior, what should we do now? The person from the inner sect hasn't come yet. What are my lord's and Mr. Bai's orders?"

"Why wait for orders? This is a one-time chance that can't be passed up." Xi Ping quickly instructed, "There are arrays and hidden realms all over Sanyue. A bird that flew in and flapped its wings wrong would be remembered for ten thousand years. Right now, the great mountain array is unstable, and everyone is running around. Why not seize the opportunity to sneak in? Where else will you find such a good opportunity to fish in troubled waters? Prepare to meet the other Luwu, use the chaos to record all the checkpoints... I'll leave this beauty's identity to you, as well."

"Huh?" said Xu Rucheng. "Record..."

Xi Ping said, "To resell at a higher price to the other three sects in the future, stupid baby!"

Xu Rucheng: "..."

Wait, why was this odious tone so familiar? Had that staid and silent senior from before secretly been swapped out for another person?!

Xi Ping gave a laugh. With a flicker, he vanished into the surging tide of spiritual energy.

Apart from Tao County, the activity at Sanyue had disturbed all of Western Chu. All the borders were in turmoil. The waters of the Xia River rose all at once, crashing against the border inscriptions of Great Wan's Yuzhou. The local Heaven's Design Pavilion and Kaiming Department immediately became tense.

Zhou Ying reached into his mustard seed and took out his reincarnation wood. "I told you to withdraw from Sanyue. Have you withdrawn?"

"Yes," Xi Ping responded lightly and cheerfully and repeated the assignment he had just arranged for Xu Rucheng. "And I left my identity to the Luwu. That's all right, isn't it, san-ge?"

Scoundrel! Lying through his teeth! If he really *had* withdrawn, he never would have let the Luwu go in!

Zhou Ying's veins all stood out. "Where are you?"

Xi Ping raised a hand, and the spiritual energy wrapped him up, sticking to him like a film. He leapt up and jumped into the lotus pond in the rear courtyard.

From the silt in the lotus pond, a long, slender, dark red lotus stalk reached out and wrapped around his wrist, abruptly pulling him down. A large mass of dark red lotus stalks sprouted from the bottom of the pond like an explosion, coiling seamlessly around Xi Ping. It was as if he had been swallowed by the dense lotus stalks!

Meanwhile, Elder Xuanwu hadn't gone to attend to the splitting great mountain array. He had come directly to Sanyue's Central Peak.

The frantic spiritual energy shattered Xuanwu's hair crown. He passed through a bolt of lightning, all his snow-white long hair seeming to become one with it, but the white paper mask on his face didn't move a hair, as if it was embedded into his face.

The enormous Silver Moon had swallowed his shadow, slowly following him to the Central Peak.

With a huge sound, half of the summit of the Central Peak collapsed. The carvings made of white spirits over a zhang tall fell rumbling onto the towers below, their gilded pinnacles tumbling down along with the dust. The Silver Moon's chilly white light shone on the Principal Peak's statue of the Black Emperor. On the lean and solemn face of Sanyue's founder, the light and shadow suddenly deepened, inexplicably producing a mocking smile.

“Disciple Xuanwu, come to inquire after the wellbeing of my shixiong the sect leader.”

As soon as Xuanwu spoke, he broke by force through the constant thundering. His calm voice echoed throughout the Sanyue Mountains. When the clamor subsided, the restless spiritual energy had actually been suppressed by him.

He inquired three times in a row, and the turbulent spiritual mountains calmed. Following his voice, the congested spiritual energy flowed toward all the damaged arrays. The arrays began to repair themselves.

Xi Ping, having silently slipped into the lotus pond on the Principal Peak, went cold—Xuanwu's cultivation was no less than Xuanyin's Dignitary of Fate or Dignitary of Rule and so forth... but hadn't

Zhuoming said that he had used half of his essence to tie his disciple to the Silver Moon?

Before, the impression Xuanwu had always given off was of excessive ambition and crude methods, without the immortal air of a master with a complete Way of the Heart who had seen through all worldly things—within half a year, he had taken two trips to the human world; it simply made him sound cheap. It was hardly possible to imagine such a thing happening to the Dignitary of Fate or Dignitary of Rule, such that Xi Ping had always thought he wasn't even Zhao Yin's equal.

But these three successive inquiries into the sect leader's wellbeing had poured a bucket of cold water over him.

How could this white-haired opera singer be so powerful?

“Because a Way of the Heart is far more complex than you imagine. What do you think a Way of the Heart is? Benevolence, righteousness, courtesy, wisdom, and faith? The virtuous cause of the nation?” Zhou Ying's voice sounded in his ear. “Starting from the day the Sanyue Spiritual Mountains formed, they have been different from Xuanyin. The spiritual mountains determine the lay of the land, then determine the nation and its structure. They influence the inclinations of the whole sect's Ways of the Heart. You've never studied properly, not since you were little. All you can do is get up to your little tricks. Get the hell out of there already!”

That was true, Xi Ping suddenly realized. Wan strove for “reticence” and “equilibrium,” with “discipline and self-restraint” as its ideal. Therefore, the Dignitary of Rule was cautious in speech, the Dignitary of Rites was careful in action, and the Dignitary of Fate could certainly never pry lightly. There were limits imposed on the imperial family, the thirty-six peak masters held each other back, and the sect's regulations and taboos filled up a whole wall of

writing, so hard to memorize that it made disciples want to hang themselves.

Typical Chu cultivators, meanwhile, were like Yu Chang, striving against heaven for their destinies, unreconciled unto death. The Sanyue Mountains stood alone and scornful—winner take all. Under the towering trees, the insects and grasses were permitted to mingle. It was survival of the fittest, using force to bring peace and stability.

Xi Ping had been born in Jinping. Despite being spoiled into a disgraceful rich brat by his family, he was still Wan down to his bones. Naturally he had a great deal of dislike for Chu's manners—but when you came to think of it, why couldn't a shed skin be ambitious? Did initiative violate heaven's commandments?

Why couldn't a shed skin go to the human world? Was engaging in worldly affairs really so much more contemptible than rejecting the mortal world?

Xuanwu's methods were crude; he calculated only the overall losses and gains—that was only because the stabilizing force of the Xiang clan could suppress all turmoil.

“San-ge, do you know what the most useful lesson the people of Chu have taught me is?” Xi Ping waved a hand to wipe away the beauty's face. In an instant, he turned into an unremarkable low-level disciple of the Central Peak. Before Sanyue's array formation had been fully repaired, he slipped in like smoke. “Cultivation isn't sailing against the current, it's climbing up a cliff against a waterfall, staking your all on a single throw. If there's a shred of a chance, go after it with all your might, never mind how unattractive your posture.”

Zhou Ying: “...”

A feral dog picking up bad behavior from feral pigs.

“Xi Shiyong,” Zhou Ying said gravely, “aren’t you afraid that I’ll write a letter to the Marquis Manor, let your mother and father know what kind of crazy antics you’ve been getting up to out there?”

Xi Ping, surrounded by dangers that might erupt at any moment, felt a little like laughing. What kind of hot air was he blowing? He hadn’t even dared to visit the Marquis Manor for several years. Xi Ping had no weak spots in front of san-ge; all the weak spots were in His Highness’s chest.

But to avoid infuriating Zhou Ying, he still put on a completely insincere act of dread: “Oh, don’t, san-ge! I’ll do what you say, I’ll do anything you say, just let me...”

Before he could finish babbling, there was a huge sound. Xuanwu was about to force his way through the inscriptions of the immortal palace on the summit. At the same time, a beam of spiritual energy, oppressively savage, burst from the immortal palace. The two sides collided. Sanyue’s Central Principal Peak actually shook!

Next, an enormous human figure seemed to emerge from underground and extended for dozens of li, enshrouding the better part of the Sanyue Mountain Range. With an indescribable oppressive force coming right at him, for a moment, Xi Ping choked. Despite being a near-ascended spirit, he seemed to turn into a tiny ant.

From the depths of that enormous figure, a person walked out.

With a cultivator’s eyesight, it was possible to see clearly from the foot of a mountain to its summit. But when this person walked out, everyone, including Xi Ping, automatically averted their gazes.

As if looking at him would make their eyeballs explode.

But Xi Ping only averted his gaze for an instant. The next moment, he kicked aside his instinct and stubbornly looked.

Sanyue's sect leader, Xiang Rong, was said to be the Black Emperor's direct disciple, and the man presently closest to a full moon position. He was of similar stature to Xuanwu, with grizzled temples, though his face looked no older than that of a person in his twenties or thirties. It was a narrow face, bony, an appearance typical of the people of Chu. His irises seemed nearly to have merged with the whites of his eyes.

Xuanwu had fallen entirely under the might of that enormous figure. The features on his white paper mask no longer moved. He turned his false face toward the newcomer and calmly inquired for a fourth time: "Disciple Xuanwu, come to inquire after the wellbeing of my shixiong the sect leader."

Xi Ping had a bad feeling and immediately passed word to the Luwu: "Get on your swords, don't stay on the ground."

"I am well." The next moment, Xiang Rong spoke, but his voice didn't come from his throat; it was the whole of the Sanyue Mountain Range speaking. "Thank you for your concern. I have failed to satisfy your expectations. I did not perish during my seclusion."

With each word he spoke, the trembling of the cliffs and the ground increased, until it was resonating through the meridians and internal organs of the people on the ground.

When Xiang Rong finished speaking, quite a few of the Central Peak disciples with slightly lower cultivation had already fainted from injuries sustained in the shaking—and the minimum threshold for entering the Central Peak was an established foundation!

Xuanwu seemed to lower his head to glance down. The Silver Moon slowly approached, the moonlight shining on the enormous figure. There seemed to be a piece missing from the huge person's chest.

“What can the sect leader mean by this?” Xuanwu spoke, suppressing the trembling of the mountain, saying in a voice loud enough for all of Dongheng to hear, “Two hundred years ago, my shixiong the sect leader went into seclusion. I have looked after Sanyue in accordance with the sect leader's orders, working hard night and day, with no thought for my own cultivation, hoping for the sect leader's success in his aspirations to a full moon position, that he might soon...”

“Utter hypocrisy!”

Without warning, Xiang Rong attacked. A huge inscription appeared in the sky.

At the same time, an identical inscription appeared on Xuanwu. Like a sack of flour being drained, he rapidly shriveled and bent out of shape, even his flesh and bones changing into the form of the inscription, held in the palm of Xiang Rong's hand.

The next moment, Xiang Rong let go, but there was nothing but smoke in his hand.

Xuanwu appeared out of nowhere a zhang away from the immortal palace. “Sect Leader shixiong, have you lost your mind?”

Hearing this, everyone in Sanyue burst into commotion.

Just then, the West Peak's Elder Xiang Ning was cleaning up the West Peak in a hurry. His voice came from afar: “The sect leader must have reached a critical stage of his seclusion. Being impacted by the blood moon and the alterations in the Silver Moon, his energy temporarily went astray! Xuanwu-shixiong, the sect leader has the

greatest trust in you. On entering seclusion, he even entrusted the Silver Moon and Sanyue to you. What are you doing?”

The mouth drawn on Xuanwu’s paper mask turned down. He swore inwardly: That good-for-nothing from the West Peak became a shed skin thanks to his family background—he’s no good for handling business or cultivation, but he’s an expert when it comes to bad-mouthing.

Now that these words had been spoken, he would bear the blame for the lunatic sect leader.

If the sect leader killed him, it would be “He was bewildered by the blood moon, his energy temporarily went astray”; by the time Xuanwu came back on the seventh day after his death, the sect leader could just express “regret for his past deeds.” But if he tried to do anything to the sect leader, it would substantiate Xiang Ning’s nonsense: the sect leader hadn’t lost his mind at all; it had been Xuanwu who had injured him. If he didn’t die today, then his reputation would be utterly destroyed.

No wonder Xiang Rong had chosen this critical moment to lose his mind... if he *had* chosen it?

Somewhat hard pressed, Xuanwu dodged Xiang Rong’s attack, then abruptly turned his head to look at the Silver Moon.

A blurry, smiling face flashed over the Silver Moon.

Wait. It had been Zhuoming who had told him that the sect leader was declining by the day, that he was about to lose his mind; it was also Zhuoming’s interpretation that the blood moon was pointing to an earthquake to the northwest in the Slumbering Dragon Sea, and that Yu Chang had reached an ascended spirit—but in fact, as a “moon on earth,” the Silver Moon could influence the moon in the sky up to a point.

That traitorous beast—he really thought he was ready to spread his wings!

“Sect Leader Shixiong, you and I have been brothers since the spiritual mountains formed. We have never been at odds. How is it that after only two hundred years apart, you have developed a misunderstanding about me?” Xuanwu’s figure “dissolved,” transforming into dozens, hundreds of avatars. The avatars kept duplicating constantly, filling the sky with snow-white figures flying here and there, as if a fog had risen over Sanyue’s Central Peak. “I cannot escape blame for this. After I have aided you in expelling your heart demon, I request to seal the East Peak and go into seclusion for five centuries.”

Xiang Rong ignored him. He gave a low shout, and all the arrays in the mountains moved according to his will. An astral wind rose, tattering the “Xuanwu fog,” heading straight for Xuanwu’s true body!

The next moment, Xuanwu’s true body and all the avatars vanished into thin air, and Xiang Rong came face to face with the Silver Moon—in the blink of an eye, that excellent Elder Xuanwu had just woven an illusion that could take in a peak shed skin.

Sanyue’s sect leader’s fierce attack hit the divine tool of the mountains.

In an instant, all of Sanyue was lit as bright as day. Some towers located nearby around the middle of the mountain turned into melting candles, softly deforming, “trickling” down the slopes.

And the moon in the sky had disappeared behind thick clouds.

The array formation Xuanwu had just repaired slightly collapsed altogether. The Central Peak disciples fled for their lives. Even the

West Peak's elder was holed up amid the array protecting the West Peak, not daring to move a muscle.

There was only a shadow like a dandelion passing lightly through the darkness where the Silver Moon's light couldn't reach.

Some days ago, Zhuoming had said to Xi Ping, "Even if the sect leader is about to die, Xuanwu is still no match for him. When the time comes, that shizun of mine's first reaction will be to lead over the Silver Moon and use it to deal with the sect leader—my life is tied to the Silver Moon's, and I have half of Xuanwu's essence protecting me. Not even the sect leader will be able to differentiate. He'll take that half of his essence for Xuanwu, and I'll become shizun's stand-in. And the Silver Moon is a divine tool of the mountains. Even if it kills the sect leader on the spot, it can be put down to the will of the spiritual mountains, nothing to do with Xuanwu. The sect leader facing the divine tool of the mountains will certainly be earth-shaking. All the talismans, arrays, and inscriptions of the Central Peak will collapse. Will you dare to sneak into the sect leader's immortal palace of seclusion in the midst of a battle of shed skins?"

If mortals dared to set fire to monstrous vines in the midst of a battle of ascended spirits, if a half-immortal dared to cut off her own hand to interfere with a divine tool, what was there that he, a peak established foundation and a practiced hand at being crushed to dust, wouldn't dare to do?

Xi Ping said, "Enough nonsense. Show me the map."

Zhuoming immediately drew all the hidden realms and passageways throughout the Central Peak in a three-dimensional map that he pressed into Xi Ping's consciousness. "Remember, when Xuanwu is hiding in the shadows, in order to avoid being discovered by him, you must not use spiritual energy. You can't fly a sword. Half a step from an ascended spirit, with your physique, it will only take you a

moment to climb to the summit. Half of my shizun's essence will hold out that long. The oppressiveness of a shed skin battle is nothing you can imagine. Lower level cultivators can be driven mad. There will be many bewildering inscriptions and arrays along the way. When the time comes, seal your senses and keep your consciousness withdrawn. Don't listen to anything, don't look at anything—let your consciousness take you along the map.”

Xi Ping didn't fly a sword, but he also didn't seal his senses as Zhuoming had said.

Not only did he not seal them, he was even looking all around and listening to everything, on one hand transmitting all the exquisite arrays he could lay eyes on to Xi Yue, on the other hand facing the huge force of the clash between the shed skin and divine tool of the mountains, almost greedily noting every detail of the battle that he could see, deciphering as much of it as he could.

Even Xu Rucheng couldn't stand to take the eye-sealing pill—how could he stand to close his eyes?

At the same time, Xi Ping had something else on his mind. As he dashed toward the summit, he was constantly pressing small pellets of green ore and low-grade jade stamp fragments into cracks in the mountain.

He was so busy that his spirit ached fiercely, tears of blood leaking uncontrollably from the corners of his eyes. Zhaoting, standing guard over his spirit, was droning constantly.

But Xi Ping was like a wicked cat that would get onto the roof if you took your eyes off it for a moment, spoiled and conceited, remembering only the good and not the bad, without the least sense of shame or fear.

Following in Zhou Ying's footsteps, Zhi Xiu quickly found that cautioning him, scolding him, and threatening him were all completely useless.

The light of the shard of Zhaoting blazed, enclosing Xi Ping's whole body, but Xi Ping pushed it back—this was Xi Ping's first time resisting with his consciousness. Far away in Xuanyin, Zhi Xiu was astonished. His young disciple was always laughing and joking carelessly, yet his consciousness, after being shattered and rebuilt, was unexpectedly so strong.

CHAPTER 130 - Eternal Flame (12)

“Shifu, you can’t even talk. You can only make Zhaoting buzz. You’ve nearly turned into a mosquito. Why don’t you take care of yourself? Stop trying to protect me with a shard of your sword.”

In all his years, this was Zhi Xiu’s first time becoming a mosquito. It took him two whole breaths to react. Zhaoting’s quivering became different from usual—Xi Ping guessed that perhaps this was an off-key cry of “rebellious disciple.”

“When I get the Unbound Furnace and have Master Lin repair Zhaoting, you can beat me.” A fierce beam from the Silver Moon swept toward him. Xi Ping reacted extremely quickly, hiding behind a white spirit statue. “Don’t worry, I’ll be sure to run.”

Zhi Xiu: “...”

Just you try to run when the time comes!

Zhaoting was held back by Xi Ping’s consciousness, but Zhi Xiu didn’t withdraw his line of sight. The vast majority of the time, he was unable to have contact with the outside world. He was tightly bound by the vast will that wanted to swallow him, unable to move. Sometimes whatever Xi Ping was doing wasn’t distracting him, it was helping him recognize over and over who “the sword cultivator Zhi Xiu” was—he had a tie to the human world; because there were young eyes watching him, he had to constantly inspect himself, force out his greatest courage, strive to show his junior where the boundaries lay.

After he was through angering shifu, Xi Ping simply withdrew his spiritual sense from his vision and attached it to the rest of his senses. His hearing, naturally several times more sensitive than normal, at once became acute to the extreme. He heard the faint

creaking of the huge spiritual stone statue behind him. Its spiritual energy seemed to be constantly being drained, but not in the direction of the battlefield. Instead, it was pointing toward the immortal palace where the sect leader had been in seclusion.

Xi Ping took a deep breath, forced down his desire to probe outward with his consciousness, put an eye-sealing pill in his mouth, then used the Replica spiritual image mask to take on the appearance of the young soldier that had taken him out of Tao County at the very beginning.

He became a convincing imitation of a mortal.

A mortal's spiritual eyes hadn't opened. Like plants and other still life, their bodies could only absorb a negligible drop of spiritual energy over time. The spiritual energy surging toward the immortal palace brushed past him, having nothing to do with him. Xi Ping had practically become one with the rubble and splintered wood among the ruins, but on the other hand he could now more clearly "see" the direction of the surging spiritual energy.

As Zhuoming had expected, Xuanwu had indeed pushed his disciple forward to act as his scapegoat. So now, where would the vanished Xuanwu have gone?

It seemed that it could only be the immortal palace where the sect leader had been in seclusion.

If Zhuoming knew of the Unbound Furnace's unusual property, then Xuanwu couldn't be ignorant of it.

Following the general direction of the surging spiritual energy, Xi Ping climbed up to the collapsed part of the immortal palace. As expected, he caught a trace of a plant scent.

This was a very particular floral fragrance... supposing you could even call it a “fragrance.” It was harsh and deep, mixed with complex moisture and vegetal reek. It was the fragrance of the heartless lotus, which Zhuoming had made him memorize a few days ago.

“The heartless lotus has a very faint smell, easily masked by the smell of water. The average person wouldn’t notice it. You probably can’t smell it either, right?” At the time, the Zhuoming in the lotus pond had been telling him in a very normal tone of voice how to take precautions against Xuanwu. At this point, he suddenly held his fingers together like a knife and cut a piece of flesh off his arm. Had Xi Ping not dodged quickly, the blood would have spurted all over his face.

A “fragrance” dozens of times stronger than that of the lotuses in the pond surged up. Zhuoming, having an attack with no warning, issued a fervent invitation: “Here, this is the smell, do you want to have a taste?”

After being tactically turned down by Xi Ping, who looked as if he had a toothache, Zhuoming rather regretfully ate the piece of flesh raw, and even carefully licked the blood clean.

“Apart from some medicine cultivators and specific beast-taming cultivators, other cultivators—especially ascended spirit masters and above—think that smell is a secondary sense. This is because even with a paramount spiritual sense, the sense of smell is only effective when you can distinguish odors. Without special training, when those who are accustomed to sight and sound smell an unfamiliar scent, it will be very hard for them to judge it. And also it is because while the eyes and ears are connected to the mind, the mouth and nose are connected to the desires. Smell will sometimes disturb a person’s intellect. Most importantly, cultivators are like mortals—if they live somewhere that reeks, over time, they won’t be able to notice the stink anymore. The sense of smell will go numb.

They practically can't smell their own bodies—for example, my shizun, who's spent hundreds of years soaking in the scent of the lotuses on the East Peak. But you can smell it. Remember this smell. You can use it to avoid him... or follow him.”

In other words, Xuanwu had indeed gone in this direction.

Xi Ping wiped the blood off his face and followed the sad and bitter scent of the lotuses.

There were many incomprehensible things about Xuanwu—it was very easy to comprehend why Xuanyin Mountain's Dignitary of Fate or Dignitary of Rule would want to respectively cover his eyes or seal his mouth, but why would the holder of true authority in Sanyue wear a shroud over his face? Could it be possible that a high elder in the Sanyue Mountains also had a disfiguring eye-opening wound? Would a man several thousand years old care about his looks?

Then there was the abnormal relationship between teacher and disciple.

Never mind a teacher and disciple, a person would be upset for a long time if even a potted plant they had painstakingly tended to withered and died. Xuanwu had taken no other disciple. For three hundred years, there had only been this one living creature to keep him company on the forbidden East Peak, day in and day out, to the point that the high elder's sense of smell had lost the ability to perceive the scent of the heartless lotus. Could he offer him up for the slaughter just like that?

What kind of Way of the Heart did a ruthless person like Xuanwu have?

Suddenly, the scent of the heartless lotus became a little heavier. Xi Ping paused.

Xuanwu was hiding in the darkness. While he probably also didn't dare to set his consciousness free, Xi Ping didn't know how acute the hearing of a shed skin would be.

While he was hesitating slightly, a deafening boom of thunder exploded over the summit. A bolt of lightning practically brushed against the back of Xi Ping's head as it fell. He didn't have time to withdraw his spiritual sense from his ears and was nearly deafened. Blood immediately poured from his ear canals.

Well done, Zhuoming!

Xi Ping's first reaction wasn't to protect his ears, but to fly under cover of the enormous noise.

Zhuoming must have guessed his plight. The Silver Moon was fighting the sect leader with increasing ferocity, constantly heading in the direction of the immortal palace. The immortal palace was on the point of collapse. Roof beams, pillars, and huge stones fell one after another. The inscriptions all over the ground were in disarray. Xi Ping simply concentrated all his spiritual sense in his nose and took the opportunity to infiltrate all the way to the inner palace—the place where Xiang Rong would have meditated during his seclusion.

Then he saw that the depths of the inner palace were shrouded in a faint gauzelike mist.

This mist was so thin it seemed like it wouldn't obstruct your line of sight. He saw a very deep pool just up ahead. The railings on both sides of the white marble steps were carved with the phases of the moon. The pool had to be some dozens of zhang deep. As for what was at the bottom of the pool, you could only see it if you came close.

Xi Ping concentrated. He could faintly hear minute sounds of crackling coming from the bottom of the pool, like a furnace burning firewood.

Could it be... the Unbound Furnace?

Ridiculous. Could the Unbound Furnace's fuel possibly be charcoal?

Could Xu Rucheng really have been right? Had the sect leader brought along a furnace to warm himself by its fire?

Xi Ping's steps paused slightly. For some reason, he was very frightened of that thin mist. His spiritual sense was frantically holding him back. But the scent of the heartless lotus was at its strongest here, as if Xuanwu had also hesitated here for a while.

Just then, there was a sudden huge sound outside the immortal palace, and another big part of the outer palace collapsed. Someone had struck a fierce blow. Its aftershock swept right into the inner palace. Xi Ping, taken unawares, lost his footing and was pushed into the thin mist by that aftershock.

The fragrance of the heartless lotus instantly disappeared, and the earth-shaking sounds of battle abruptly quieted. Xi Ping's mind swayed. In that instant, he felt that the thin mist was like an irresistible, overpowering consciousness, swallowing everything around it.

It was as if lead had been poured into Xi Ping's limbs. His tensed mind seemed to miss a step. Out of nowhere, a feeling of bone-weary exhaustion crowded into his chest. Xi Ping froze blankly where he was, a clear thought floating up in his mind: Cultivators refining their Ways of the Heart, working hard to cultivate, what is it all for?

As soon as this thought appeared, there was no stopping it. The thin mist seemed to pour into his consciousness through the seven apertures of his face.

Fighting was for the sake of spiritual stones and resources. Obtaining spiritual stones and resources was for the sake of higher cultivation, in order to increase your chances of success in a fight.

Those who died along the road of cultivation, though they lived some centuries longer than mortals, spent nearly all those centuries trapped in the spiritual mountains, cultivating day after day, their work becoming futile when they finally died; and for those who walked on, there would come a day when all their companions had turned to dust, and they would be left to walk alone. What was it for? To prove that your Way of the Heart was more correct than everyone else's? Everyone was dead—who were you going to prove it to?

The lives of ants were ephemeral, with no one to care. What was a life for?

Mortals rushed around and worked hard, each of their destinies like a leaf floating on the ocean, trembling with fear as it drifted with the tide. What was a life for?

The spiritual mountains saw him as a monster, not to be abided by the world. So what was a life of struggle for?

No... Xi Ping pinched his palm hard. There was something strange about this mist.

He tried his hardest to retreat, but when he turned his head, he discovered that he couldn't find the way he had come anymore!

The voice in his mind that he couldn't banish wouldn't let him go. It pounded incessantly on his spirit, which had no Way of the Heart:

What is your life for? You want to get the Unbound Furnace to reforge the Zhaoting Sword and save your shifu—and what is your shifu’s life for?

Encounters between people were fleeting. Teachers, friends, even relatives, even soulmates—in the end, they would all leave. What was the point?

What was the point...?

“San-ge, say something to me!” Xi Ping automatically sought for another’s voice. “Shifu...”

He found that his voice couldn’t get out.

Even Zhaoting, always hanging on his spirit looking after him, didn’t respond.

Xi Ping suddenly realized that the voices constantly pulling him down like a marsh were his own thoughts.

These insuppressible thoughts were constantly draining his essence and his strength. Xi Ping practically felt that even drawing breath was wearying. He put a mind calming pill into his mouth.

The pill dissolved as soon as it entered his mouth. His eyes and ears, injured by the shaking, cleared at once, but the voices circling in his mind didn’t weaken one bit.

The uncontrollable thoughts said self-mockingly, What’s the point of taking a mind-clearing pill? Mind-clearing pills dispel illusions. Is life itself a hallucination you deceive yourself with?

Raising his foot like raising a thousand jin weight, Xi Ping struggled to take a step forward.

“I’m like a donkey,” he thought. “The poor farmers’ skinny donkeys in Yuzhou that pull millstones to grind soybeans also don’t know what they’re doing, but they work as hard as they can, when in fact they’re just turning circles in place. Since all efforts are futile, what am I doing looking for hardships to bring onto myself? Why don’t I just lie down and let it all come to an end?”

Xi Ping’s knees suddenly weakened. He nearly knelt.

“I should go ahead and kneel. The full moon sages are no longer in the human world. Isn’t not being in the human world the same as dying? Why am I still fighting?”

Xi Ping was carrying no burden, yet even so all his veins stood out. With difficulty, he steadied himself, stamped a foot on the ground, and actually crushed the white marble tile on the floor of the immortal palace. The flying shards of tile had inscriptions on them, which scraped the exposed back of his hand. The sharp pain made the deadly voices in his mind lighten.

Xi Ping instinctively grabbed a shard of tile with an inscription on it and fiercely cut into his own palm.

Like a drain, the cut skin and flesh seemed to be able to release the deadly voices. The pain immediately gave him a sense of himself, and his sense organs also regained their sharpness. He even smelled the vanished fragrance of the heartless lotus. Xi Ping gave a start and wrapped the wound with his sleeve, suddenly understanding why Zhuoming plucked his own hair and ate his own flesh.

But the sharp pain faded quickly. The body of a near-ascended spirit cultivator needed only the blink of an eye to heal a little wound like this. Xi Ping’s senses were once again benumbed, and the irresistible thoughts surged back.

Xi Ping held the sharpest string on the Tai Sui Qin in his palm, the back of his hand tensing abruptly; but he didn't press down.

The next moment, he suddenly raised his head and looked at the path ahead. He opened his hand and released the string. He took a step forward.

He wasn't Zhuoming.

Within two steps, the thoughts drowning him made him forget why he was walking forward. The questioning voices became louder and louder, his limbs heavier and heavier.

But as his legs moved, in his mind, almost emptied by the mist, a thread of life force kept struggling from beginning to end.

Xi Ping simply concentrated his remaining strength in his legs.

“Where are you going?”

“Forward.”

“Where are you going forward to? What is the point?”

“I'm not going anywhere. My legs are long!”

After about ten zhang, Xi Ping seemed to have been walking for a lifetime.

At last, all of a sudden, amid the noise, the faintly discernible fragrance of the lotus once again touched his sense of smell. Xi Ping blinked away the sweat on his eyelashes and found that without noticing it he had come to the edge of the deep pool.

At a glance, he saw at the bottom of the pool a big, blazing cauldron, and beside the cauldron, a person—Xuanwu.

The moment he saw Xuanwu, the mist congesting his mind seemed to vanish all at once. The burden abruptly lifted from Xi Ping. He immediately remembered who he was and what he had come for.

No good, what was he doing? Wasn't getting this close to a shed skin asking for death?

Xi Ping broke out in cold sweat that soaked his back. He grabbed hold of the Tai Sui Qin and prepared to take a beating.

But Xuanwu, standing beside the fire, still had his head down, muttering something to himself. At such a close distance, he actually hadn't noticed that there was someone on the platform.

After a moment of anxiety, Xi Ping saw that Xuanwu seemed to have gone deaf and blind, and his all-encompassing guts returned to his belly. He crouched down and carefully approached the edge of the pool, peering down. He saw the mist that had just nearly killed him flowing steadily out of the big cauldron. Xuanwu was endlessly reciting something to himself.

“What is my life for? What is life for...?”

As he spoke, Xuanwu suddenly raised his head and gave a laugh. He pulled the white paper mask off his face.

Xi Ping craned his neck, clinging to the tiles of the platform, pretending to be a broken tile himself.

Then he saw Elder Xuanwu's true face.

It turned out to be... a typical Chu face, neither handsome nor ugly, without any scars.

It was only that, apart from the snow-white skin and colorless brows, he and Sect Leader Xiang Rong seemed to have been made in the same mold!

Xi Ping held his breath. Suddenly, doubt appeared in his mind: was that the Unbound Furnace?

Why wouldn't the sect leader have taken the furnace with him instead of leaving it here, waiting to be stolen?

CHAPTER 131 - Eternal Flame (13)

The fire in the furnace constantly belching out smoke reminded Xi Ping of the smokestacks of the factories in Jinping's southern outskirts. The smoke seemed to contain a powerful will that swept across everything in its vicinity. Even the shed skin Elder Xuanwu had been trapped in it. It truly was a powerful magic tool.

But evidently, it wasn't as powerful as he had imagined.

However good an opinion Xi Ping might have of himself, he still didn't believe that he was really mightier than a shed skin. If even he could easily... well, it was overstating things to call it "easily" — but at any rate, if he, a person who hadn't even crossed the boundary to an ascended spirit, could succeed in struggling free of the trap, then how long could the furnace restrain Xuanwu?

He kept feeling that any moment now, Xuanwu would burst out and clear his head. There was so little distance between him and the shed skin that it basically amounted to standing on the man's eyeballs and doing a jig.

But he'd come all the way here and laid eyes on the thing, so he absolutely couldn't withdraw. What should he do? Was there anything that could block the sight and hearing of a shed skin...?

Xi Ping suddenly had an odd thought: since the Luwu masks could turn you into a mouse, then couldn't this Replica, which was of higher grade than the Luwu masks, turn him into something else?

As soon as he had the thought, his body immediately stiffened and gradually disappeared. He really had become an irregularly-shaped big tile, blending among the tumbling ruins of stone and brick.

Master Lin was worthy of being known as this era's legendary Golden Hand—he could even make something out of this good-for-nothing!

When he was finished, Xi Ping, gasping in admiration, quietly conveyed the appearance of the big cauldron to Lin Chi. “Master Lin, have a look for me, is this the legendary Unbound Furnace?”

At the summit of Moon Plated Peak, since giving Xi Ping the Replica, Lin Chi had been laden with anxiety, worried that the dangerous immortal tool he had made would ruin General Zhi's disciple. Hearing these words, he had no more care for anything else. He tossed aside the unknown spiritual beast materials he was holding and gripped the reincarnation wood. “Bring my consciousness over, hurry!”

There was no reincarnation wood in Sanyue, but there was some on Xi Ping. A small twig the length of a finger joint emerged from the pile of rubble as Master Lin, who hadn't left Moon Plated Peak for centuries, traveled to Western Chu for the third time within a single year.

As soon as his consciousness arrived in the reincarnation wood, Lin Chi's mind buzzed. It was as if he was being choked.

Before he could clearly work out what was happening, he heard a couple of notes from a qin in his ear, promptly dispelling the smoke that had curled around him.

“What was that just now...?” Lin Chi came back to himself and was just about to speak, not expecting that as soon as he looked out, the first thing he would see would be the shed skin at the bottom of the pool.

Master Lin's heart stopped for a moment. “Xi Shiyong, you're going to get yourself killed... Where are you?”

Xi Ping had no mouth with which to speak. He could only communicate with his consciousness. He responded, “Do you see that pile of broken stones next to you? I’m there. This damn place is as colorless as Xuanwu’s head. All the stones without inscriptions are blank, but I have carvings on me. Just find the tile with the twin lotuses carved on it!”⁸³

Lin Chi: “...”

Once again, the Master of Moon Plated Peak was struck dumb by his own creation.

Xi Ping said, “It’s all right, Master Lin. After my last experience, I’ll be able to take the spiritual image mask off despite not having hands—stop studying me, look at that smoking furnace. Why do your toolmaking furnaces make so much smoke? Do you all have problems with your lungs?”

Lin Chi felt that there wasn’t much wrong with his lungs, but his heart was very tired.

He finally managed to get down the breath that had been caught in his throat. It was as if his head had crashed into a wall. When he turned toward the blazing cauldron, he spoke only after a long moment: “That... really is the Unbound Furnace, but it isn’t the way I saw it when she had it. You shouldn’t be able to see flames from the outside of the Unbound Furnace... Who lit that fire? What are they making?”

“It must have been their sect leader. It was burning when I got here,” Xi Ping said. “I don’t know what he’s making. It sounds to me like he’s burning firewood.”

“Don’t joke,” Lin Chi said feebly. “All toolmaking furnaces have fireproofing inscriptions in them.”

Xi Ping was astonished: “Fireproofing? Your whole profession uses furnaces you can’t light a fire in?”

When toolmaking cultivators were working on a large project, it could easily take them several months or even some years. They couldn’t even use their toolmaking furnaces to boil some water or cook some rice?

“What the fire in the toolmaking furnace burns is the toolmaker’s essence. When the Way of the Heart of a toolmaker is complete, they obtain an extra sense that other cultivators don’t have, called the ‘seventh sense’ —the ‘seven’ is homophonous with ‘tool.’⁸⁴ The seventh sense is connected to the fire in the toolmaking furnace, communicating with the materials inside. Only when the person outside the furnace has a spiritual connection to the item in the furnace can they keep the fire stable. When even a toolmaker with a seventh sense encounters a material they can’t communicate with, the furnace fire will go astray. Sanyue’s Sect Leader Xiang doesn’t cultivate the toolmaking way, how could he have ignited the Unbound Furnace?”

Before, all Xi Ping had known about toolmaking was that if you got the money and the resources, then gave a cry of “Master Lin,” the materials would automatically turn into immortal tools. He’d had no idea there were so many underlying contrivances.

“In other words, if you want to ignite a toolmaking furnace, you need to be able to communicate with the things inside the furnace.” Xi Ping seized the central point, then quickly inferred by analogy. “That doesn’t necessarily take having a special sense. If it were me, I’d toss in a couple of chips of reincarnation wood. Reasonably speaking, wouldn’t I also be able to ignite the furnace then? I know,

Sanyue's sect leader doesn't have anything as evil and unorthodox as an accompanying plant—but what about if he was cooking himself in the cauldron?”

Lin Chi said, “Don't joke!”

Just then, Xuanwu, who had been driven to bizarre ravings by the mist, gave an angry shout. The fire in the Unbound Furnace was suppressed. The flames instantly shrank, going from golden red to cold purple blue. He also dispersed the smoke with one strike.

“What is my life for?” Xuanwu said, practically squeezing the words out from between his teeth. “Don't you know?”

The fire in the Unbound Furnace seemed to want to launch a counteroffensive. As if locked in a struggle with something, the color of the flames kept changing from cold to warm.

“The mighty master of Dongheng, striving for the full moon boundary, yet relying on the tool of a junior! Ha! Xiang Rong, have you once in your life walked on your own two legs? As I see it, you were only born with legs so you could sit more elegantly!”

As Xuanwu's voice fell, it extinguished the fire in the Unbound Furnace. The spiritual energy in the immortal palace converged, and a long string of inscriptions rushed from his palm to press right against the Unbound Furnace.

Amid the spiritual energy that had nearly converged into an astral wind, Lin Chi opened his eyes with difficulty and gasped: Xuanwu wanted to wipe out the Way of the Heart in the Unbound Furnace!

Xi Ping had also realized this. While he had never collected predecessors' Ways of the Heart, he had seen others trading in them in Wild Fox Country's black market.

From every vital weapon left behind when its owner died, the original owner's Way of the Heart could be collected, though the Ways of the Heart of cultivators who had only reached an established foundation had no value; the buyers were usually only interested in the vital weapons themselves. Some people didn't want the remaining Way of the Heart to disturb them, so they would request that the traces remaining on the weapon be wiped away—by first embedding a set of inscriptions into the weapon to act as a medium, then pouring in a large quantity of spiritual energy to disperse the original traces. Then the new owner's consciousness would be branded onto it.

The inscriptions from Xuanwu's hand were cast into the Unbound Furnace like silver beads falling into a tray. The smoke he had just dispersed attempted to congeal and was once again knocked apart by Xuanwu. In the blink of an eye, the inscriptions were attached to the walls of the furnace, and a nearly pure gold flame flashed. Through the reincarnation wood, Lin Chi sensed the aura belonging to Hui Xiangjun. His eyes nearly burst from their sockets.

Xi Ping, however, was faintly surprised. He thought, After two hundred years, why hasn't Xiang Rong wiped away Hui Xiangjun's Way of the Heart?

But no matter what, all he and Lin Chi could do now was watch.

Essence belonging to a shed skin slid into the Unbound Furnace through the inscriptions. Spiritual energy that could level the whole of Western Chu poured into the Unbound Furnace. Not a thread of it leaked out, but Xi Ping and Lin Chi were both wedged in place by a sense of suffocation.

The capacity of the Unbound Furnace must have been immense. It greedily absorbed Xuanwu's essence, until the body of the furnace began to shake faintly. Xuanwu's eyes, identical to the sect leader's,

abruptly opened, their pupils taking on the shape of the Unbound Furnace. He had stabbed his consciousness into it.

Then there was an abrupt reversal. Xuanwu screamed and fell backward, as if someone had shot him through the head with a hand cannon.

Thunder like the tolling of an enormous bell came from the Unbound Furnace. Spiritual energy that could nearly have contended with that of all of Sanyue burst out, surging straight upward.

In the immortal palace, the ceiling of the main hall, covered in first-class inscriptions and connected to the great mountain array, was pulverized like tofu by that spiritual energy. The sky appeared within the hall. Entirely unobstructed, that spiritual energy surged straight toward the horizon, even breaking apart the flashing and thundering dense clouds in the sky above the Central Peak!

The Silver Moon dimmed and faded. All the roofs seemed to be trembling.

“I... blazes...” Right now, Xu Rucheng, dumbfounded, was lying in an irrigation ditch at the foot of the Central Peak.

After obeying orders to meet up with a group of Luwu colleagues and infiltrate Sanyue’s West Peak, he had run headfirst into cultivators fleeing from the Central Peak. Each one of them was scared witless. No one noticed him. Xu Rucheng, a “country Kaiming” who had been cultivating for less than a decade, got into his head an impulse to rise above the tumult and look at the sky.

So he gathered up all his courage and went against the tide toward the Central Peak.

The arrays surrounding the Central Peak had been smashed to pulp, letting this little half-immortal easily slip in, just in time to witness

this scene.

For a time, Xu Rucheng was speechless. While his body hid in the ditch, his mind was nearly crushed by the vast explosion. Unconsciously, he used his consciousness to convey everything he saw through the communication device he had received from Xuanyin's inner sect.

Xuanyin Mountain, Luwu everywhere, Zhou Ying, and Bai Ling simultaneously received the intermittent images.

In the Sea of Stars, the Dignitary of Fate High Elder Zhang Jue's sleeves, beard, and hair were all stirred by the violently unstable stars. He suddenly opened his eyes. "A new full moon divinity has been created!"

At the summit of Sanyue's Central Peak, the immortal palace had turned entirely to ruins. The reincarnation wood twig Lin Chi was occupying flew up like dust.

In that instant, Xi Ping only had time to push Lin Chi's consciousness out and send him back to the Xuanyin Mountains. The water dragon pearl on him flashed brilliantly, then turned to ashes.

But precisely because the water dragon pearl had protected him, the slab with the twin lotus carving that was Xi Ping didn't immediately turn to powder but only broke in half.

Never mind how that felt—the Replica enveloping him hadn't broken, so reasonably speaking he was still a whole person and could still feel his whole body, but the upper half and lower half had each gone in its own direction, one part remaining on the platform, one part flying over a zhang away and getting caught in a crack in the stone. Xi Ping's head and feet had never been so far apart.

“Shiyong!”

“Ge!”

“Senior...”

Bzz—

His ears were instantly filled with the worried voices of friends and family all over, but he had no time to attend to them. After the earth-shaking burst from the Unbound Furnace, a might he had never before seen seeped out bit by bit from the furnace, its force overpowering all the shed skins Xi Ping had ever met in his life.

Xi Ping seemed to hear a sigh from the Sanyue Mountain Range. For a moment, he had the impression that the spiritual mountains had a soul—that they had “come to life”!

Xuanwu was bleeding from the seven apertures of his face, having been thrown a hundred zhang away and embedded in the mountain by the spiritual energy suddenly surging out from the Unbound Furnace.

Then the dense clouds above the Unbound Furnace gradually formed the shape of a person, as big as the statue of the Black Emperor on the cliff. Xi Ping took only one glance, and his stone-shaped head cracked. His vision went dark, and he nearly fainted.

But in just that one glance, he had seen clearly that the giant in the furnace smoke also had Xiang Rong’s face.

Xi Ping had a splitting headache. The Sanyue sect leader fighting inseparably with the Silver Moon outside looked like this, Xuanwu looked like this, and the giant that had come out of the furnace now also looked like this—was this face the sect’s public property?

Just then, Xi Ping realized that the mountain-rending noise the Silver Moon and Xiang Rong had been making had stopped.

“Senior.” Xu Rucheng gathered up his wits with difficulty and squeezed the reincarnation wood chip in his palm. It was unclear whether he was making a report or speaking to himself. “I, I’ve ended up at the Central Peak somehow, I think I saw... the Silver Moon ‘go out.’”

“*Hff...* Tai, Tai Sui-xiong... are you still alive?” Almost at the same time, Zhuoming spoke, nearly on his last gasp—prior to this, the two successors of ancient demonic gods had exchanged items. Zhuoming had given Xi Ping a length of lotus stalk, and Xi Ping had given him a length of tree branch in exchange, so they could convey information when needed.

“Just now, fighting with the Silver Moon, it wasn’t Xiang Rong’s true body.” Laughter gradually mixed in among Zhuoming’s almost fragmentary breaths. “Ha... hahaha... the sect leader knew all along... the sect leader knew all along that Xuanwu was using me to spy on the Central Peak... ‘Getting weaker by the day’ was a joke he was playing on Xuanwu... hahaha...”

Xi Ping said, “... What?”

The giant that had come out of the Unbound Furnace spoke. His voice echoed throughout the Sanyue Mountain Range.

“On the road to a full moon, I needed this tribulation, shidi,” he said to Xuanwu, who had turned into a relief sculpture. “I used an avatar to test you, and as expected you couldn’t hold back.”

The cracks on Xi Ping’s stone body deepened.

If what had overpowered Xuanwu and had been on an even footing with the Silver Moon was only an illusory avatar, then the cultivation

level of Xiang Rong's true body must be...

Xu Rucheng heard "Tai Sui"'s voice from the reincarnation wood—this time, he didn't even bother disguising his voice. "Leave the Central Peak, hurry!"

"Xi Shiyong!" Lin Chi, having been thrown back to the summit of Moon Plated Peak, scrambled to catch the piece of reincarnation wood that he had let slip. "What just happened? How are you? Answer me!"

"Master Lin," Xi Ping whispered, bearing up under the fierce pain, "guess what? I got it right just now. Xiang Rong really was cooking himself in the big cauldron... The 'material' the Unbound Furnace was burning was his true body."

The rusty red of the blood moon in the sky faded bit by bit, revealing clean, chilly white light. The white light was constantly strengthening; soon it was impossible to look at directly, brighter than the sun, so dazzling no one could open their eyes—

Throughout the four nations on the continent, all the roosters responsible for crowing in the dawn were struck dumb as wooden chickens. In the middle of the night, the sky was as bright as noon.

"You... didn't lose your mind," Xuanwu, embedded in the cliff face, spat out. "A full moon..."

"My natural endowments aren't high. Only because the Sanyue Mountains are foremost in the world, the environment surpassingly favored by nature, was I by good fortune able to come before all my fellow cultivators present." Xiang Rong's voice was mild and dignified. There wasn't a trace of having lost his mind. "But blessings can bring disaster. Neither my talent nor my virtue were enough to merit the position, my heart and mind unable to keep up with my cultivation, my time limited. So I took a risk and entered

seclusion with the Unbound Furnace, using this unbound article to glimpse the boundaries of the spiritual mountains, hoping that I could find a gleam of hope for survival. After two hundred years, the chance began to take shape, but the essence I had cultivated for thousands of years had nearly all been cooked away in the furnace. If I used the flow of spiritual energy in the spiritual mountains, I would have had to consume the vigor of the mountains, bringing disaster upon the nation and the people. Would that not have violated my Way of the Heart? I thought at first this was the will of heaven—that I was unworthy of becoming the first person in thousands of years to reach a full moon position. I had meant to create an avatar to go out and make arrangements for after my death. But the will of heaven is unpredictable. It turned out that my shidi was willing to use his essence to take me part of the way.

“You and I...” The first master of this age to have attained a full moon position sighed softly. “...share a common origin.”

What did he mean by a “common origin”?

Xi Ping had nearly cracked into eight pieces. Under the enormous pressure, he was barely managing to keep his consciousness clear. His thoughts raced: Does he mean that they have the same mother? Blood relations are usually said to be “born from the same roots.” I’ve rarely heard anyone call it a “common origin.”

But Xuanwu, on hearing these words, seemed to go mad. The mountain where he was “embedded” creaked as it trembled. He gave a low cry and pulled his head up from the cliff face.

“A common origin,” Xuanwu said quietly. “That’s right, sect leader shixiong. You still remember.”

“My mother the empress was lost in the chaos of battle and unluckily fell into the hands of a demonic god... and had you.” Xiang Rong drew back the voice that echoed throughout the mountains

and spoke in a soft voice that could only be heard at the summit of the Central Peak. “Then the imperial family wanted to dispose of you, and it was I who did all I could to prevent them. I thought at the time that no matter what your background, you were after all still my brother.”

“That’s right. A life debt, brother,” Xuanwu said almost inaudibly. “Haven’t I repaid it?”

Xi Ping placed all of his remaining spiritual sense in his ears and heard Xuanwu say, “Before shizun chose his direct disciples, you were attacked by a peer. Your meridians were damaged, and you were on the point of becoming a cripple. But you were the eldest son of the Xiang clan of Dongheng, with your rare innate spiritual bones—such gifts and promise. The hopes of the whole clan were vested in you. How could they allow this to happen? Then a genius among the clan thought up the Spirit Splitting Technique. It required a person whose spiritual image matched yours to undertake the spiritual energy that your meridians would be unable to handle when your spiritual eyes opened...”

The more Xi Ping heard, the more familiar it sounded. Then he suddenly realized—wasn’t this precisely like the spiritual image dolls that had been popular in Wild Fox Country’s black market?

“But where could one go to find a substitute whose spiritual image would match you, with your innate spiritual bones?” Xuanwu laughed. “Did the mercy you had shown in your youth not find recompense then?”

CHAPTER 132 - Eternal Flame (14)

But this scandal that could shock a cultivation sect didn't shake Xiang Rong's face. He didn't lose his head one bit, only said in a nostalgic tone, "Yes, I also thought that inappropriate. Before the spiritual mountains formed, my Xiang family produced talented individuals in great numbers, many stars shining bright. Even if I couldn't become shizun's disciple, I might still have found some other opportunity to move forward in cultivation. I had no need to resort to a method for instant success like that. But, shidi, if I recall correctly, it was you who insisted on it. Back then, I refused over and over, sent many messengers to speak to you. It was you who simply went around me and asked the clan elders to let you 'save' me..."

Xuanwu interrupted him. With a cold laugh, he said, "Yes, when a sage encounters a business like this, how could he fail to decline politely at first?"

"Declining politely is a Wan tradition. We in Chu aren't so fastidious," Xiang Rong picked up, his expression unchanging. "I agreed in the end because I found that you had been stealing the clan's spiritual stones to pour into your spiritual eyes."

Xuanwu's laughter came to an abrupt halt.

The eavesdropping Xi Ping also suddenly understood. "Oh, I see."

The first time he had heard about Xuanwu's background, he had thought it was strange. How could the Xiang family not only have raised a product of adultery like this but also have placed him under the Black Emperor's tutelage, letting him become one of the great masters of the present age?

What kind of broadmindedness did that take? The mind would have to be more vast than the South Sea.

It turned out that Xuanwu had taken this opportunity to enter the Way.

The reason that spiritual image dolls were all doomed to die was that the evil cultivators who sold them cared only for profit; they wouldn't waste a single grain of green ore nourishing those children who had never eaten a square meal in their lives. Once the owner they were bound to opened their spiritual eyes, a great quantity of spiritual energy would surge into those small bodies whose flesh and bones had yet to finish growing, like a tidal wave crashing against the shore crushing a little gully in its path—the gully was sure to collapse.

But the “spiritual image doll” Xuanwu was different. For one thing, he had been born before the Great War of Gods and Demons, when spiritual energy was everywhere, and to hear Xiang Rong talk, he had also pilfered the Xiang family's resources to pour into his spiritual eyes. When he went to take part in the Spirit Splitting Technique, while naturally it would have been dangerous, and more dangerous with a possessor of innate spiritual bones than with an ordinary person, it wouldn't have been a matter of almost certain death. Moreover, if he survived, he would be a half-immortal and could afterward legitimately step into the cultivation sect.

“What's your position in Western Chu? Are the family affairs of a shed skin and a full moon sage for you to settle?” Having listened to his “rational and comprehensive” analysis, Zhou Ying simply wanted to dig Xi Ping's brain out and give it a rub with the insecticide powder that had recently come out in Great Wan—this unreliable wretch had told Xu Rucheng to leave the Central Peak, but he himself had not only kept listening, he was listening with relish!

Even Bai Ling was perplexed. He couldn't understand what attraction elopements, adultery, and fights over family property could have. How could people since time immemorial have been so wildly interested in these petty affairs?

“I'm just listening as long as I'm here. My Chu is too good, what else am I supposed to do...? *Hss*, I'm stuck. It's all right, san-ge, it's not a big problem, I'll think of something!”

In fact, Xi Ping wasn't devoting his whole heart and soul to eavesdropping. Right now, his main concern was dealing with his own awkward predicament: when the Replica was put on, it could turn you into a convincing imitation of the original. In other words, right now, he was a broken tile. A tile couldn't get up and walk on its own. He would have had to take off the Replica. But he was currently split in two, the part connected only by the Replica. Even with Xi Ping's guts, he still didn't quite dare to imagine what would happen if he removed the spiritual image mask under these circumstances.

In view of the fact that he was currently a stone, Xi Ping couldn't even really determine where he had broken—if it was below the ass, that was all right; he had those special hidden bones and could regrow his legs if they were broken. Even if he had to be paralyzed for a year or so, he could take that. But if he had broken at the torso, then that was a big problem. Wouldn't he get his guts wrapped around his neck and be sent scrambling to pick up his own liver, spleen, and kidneys in front of Sanyue's two big shots?

Xi Ping had already consulted with Lin Chi on this subject, scaring Master Lin ashen pale with his questions. Xi Ping felt that there was no hope of anything from him, so he had to strive to save himself.

The lucky thing was, the reincarnation wood branch Lin Chi's consciousness had occupied earlier had only broken; it hadn't been crushed to bits. While the two big shots sent the spiritual energy on

the Central Peak's summit surging wildly in the wind, Xi Ping took the opportunity to carefully send a bit of his consciousness into that piece of reincarnation wood, moving the twig over next to the stuck lower half of his stone body and using that short twig to gently tap on the stone.

Among the little eddies of spiritual energy swirling around it, the reincarnation wood cautiously pried the stuck stone out bit by bit. Like a carpenter doing delicate work, Xi Ping would do a bit of tinkering, then stop and observe the surroundings, ensuring that he hadn't disturbed anyone who oughtn't to be disturbed.

Despite the mess he was in, he was used to traveling through the reincarnation wood and was an expert at multitasking. He didn't miss a word of the two Sanyue masters' confrontation.

Xiang Rong tranquilly continued: "After I tacitly accepted this, I was always unhappy about it. I knew that you had high aspirations, so I went and asked shizun to take you from the clan to cultivate along with me. Even after shizun ascended to heaven, I accorded you the position of disciple of record without permission. My Way of the Heart watches over me, Xuanwu. Have I ever wronged you?"

The stuck half of Xi Ping's stone body finally loosened. He breathed a sigh of relief and quickly made the tree branch change its angle and keep prying—there was a slope next to him; he was planning to work through the reincarnation wood and use spiritual energy to push that half of his body down the slope to meet up with the other half, bring the two together, use reincarnation wood and spiritual energy to plaster up the wound, make it out alive, then recover after getting away.

At the same time, amid all his other business, he mentally made an irrelevant judgment about these two brothers: there really was no fault to find with what Xiang Rong had done.

Except that...

Xi Ping thought: The better part of White Hair's essence was drained by the Unbound Furnace, taking the sect leader over the full moon boundary. That looks like an "odd coincidence," "reaping what you sow."

Then he heard Xuanwu say with a cold laugh, "When you took me from the clan, wasn't it because after the Spirit Splitting Technique, the spiritual eyes that came of the same origin meant that not only was my spiritual image similar to yours, my outward appearance also came to resemble yours more and more? In the early years, the Xiang clan was rife with power struggles. You were afraid someone would use me to humiliate you, and you were afraid that I, your 'shadow,' would slip from your control..."

Xiang Rong was utterly unmoved, only calmly repeated, "Have I ever wronged you?"

"Ha!" In a moment, all the indignation from Xuanwu's youth that he'd had no way to vent surged up. Like the eternally unchanging youthful countenances of cultivators, this feeling was as fresh thousands of years later as it had been at first.

Living up to his name, Xiang Rong⁸⁵ was the glory of his generation of the Xiang family. His parents were both unusually talented cultivators. Even before opening his spiritual eyes, he had demonstrated transcendent comprehension, and he had a set of innate spiritual bones to rival those of the East Sea's clan of demon subduers.

He was the favored son of heaven. The only blemish on him was that "brother" with his inglorious birth.

But when his mother killed herself and the prince wanted to preserve her remaining flesh and blood, who could criticize him? Who wouldn't say that His Highness was benevolent?

As for the "blemish" himself, it was already all that could humanly be asked of the Xiang family to leave him alive. It was only natural to bring him back to live with the slaves and work like a beast of burden.

Thousands of years ago, the area around Dongheng had still had the old custom of keeping slaves. Slaves weren't human—their master could kill and sell them off as they liked; their children and grandchildren could never be free of that low background. They had no way to resist; the fury nested in their hearts, fomenting into poison, all of it venting onto the half-grown child who was called "young master" but in reality was trapped in the same morass as them.

He had tasted of every kind of torment and humiliation imaginable.

He was the offspring of a demon; persecuting a demon was naturally just. What did it matter whether it was cruel?

To begin with, like his half-brother, he'd had the innate spiritual bones that appeared in one in a hundred million people. Even as an ordinary commoner—even if he had truly been born a slave—there would still have been a master who would have seen him. But as the Xiang family's "hidden young master," no one would go near that kind of bad luck.

Amid his lightless days, he didn't even have any hope.

Had that benevolent brother of his been willing to extend a single foot toward him, he would have been willing to lick Xiang Rong's foot.

But he spent fourteen years in the Xiang family, during which Xiang Rong saw with his own eyes as he washed stone steps in the freezing rain, barefoot, bearing festering sores; even happened upon a servant rushing him, yet he shut his eyes to it all, as if refusing to acknowledge him.

And each time the prince walked by without a sideways glance, all the cruelties inflicted on him would become even more excessive—it was like some tacit agreement.

“You have never wronged me.” As if he had gone mad, Xuanwu laughed loudly. “It was I who wronged you, shixiong... da-ge—a shadow like me actually dared to delude myself with the hope for affection from my own flesh and blood. It was I who overestimated my own worth...”

The stones trembled. The veins of the earth seemed about to boil over.

With Xi Ping’s cleverness, he could in fact roughly guess what the circumstances had been after hearing this much. As far as sentiment went, he was willing to feel sympathy for Elder Xuanwu. But he truly couldn’t endorse what Xuanwu had been getting up to.

When the earth shook like this, it sent the lower half of his stone body, which had nearly been prized free, flying away—he failed just within reach of success!

Dizzy and disoriented, Xi Ping was swallowed up by a big pile of rubble and fell from the platform. This time there was no more water dragon pearl to protect him. Half of his stone body broke into an unknown number of pieces.

Xi Ping lay facing upward, mentally paying his respects to eighteen generations of Xuanwu’s ancestors.

Zhou Ying immediately turned to Bai Ling. “Who has Xuanyin’s inner sect sent to Western Chu? Then there are the Luwu on the West Peak. I need them to go...”

“A half-immortal would be going to their death here,” Xi Ping interrupted him from the reincarnation wood. “I won’t pass that message for you.”

In a tone that didn’t waver, Zhou Ying said, “The Luwu have their own communications. If you’re afraid of getting your little friends killed, then please could I trouble you to learn to think before you act in the future?”

“San-gel!”

“My lord...” said Bai Ling.

When Zhou Ying was truly angry, his tone became softer and softer. “The lead Luwu is named Xu Rucheng, right? A good name, record it. The full names of the other Luwu, what family members they have, what unfulfilled desires and unresolved regrets they have, record it for the Viscount. Don’t leave anything out.”

“I...” Xi Ping got halfway through saying this when an enormous rumble came from the ground, sending his bits and pieces rolling all over. Suddenly, he caught a glimpse of golden light out of the corner of his eye. The “biggest piece of Xi Ping” had coincidentally rolled near the Unbound Furnace!

Just then, Xuanwu gave a long cry, and a curved blade like a crescent moon appeared in his hand. He hacked at Xiang Rong.

But Xiang Rong seemed to have turned into an illusion. The curved blade slipped effortlessly through the illusion and landed on the enormous shadow, only splitting the illusion in half.

That blow nearly overturned the Central Peak's summit. Only the area around the Unbound Furnace remained intact. But as the mountain toppled, it began to slip toward one side.

Xi Ping once again slid away from the Unbound Furnace.

And Xuanwu's second blow had already connected.

This time, the tip of his blade provoked the light of the Silver Moon. The Silver Moon's moonlight gathered itself into a bundle and cascaded down like magma, merging with Xuanwu's crescent moon blade.

Xi Ping heard a stifled cry of pain from Zhuoming.

“What...”

“He wants...” Zhuoming's voice was intermittent. “...to take back the half of his essence he left with me...”

Before he could finish saying this, Xi Ping was already another four or five chi further away from the Unbound Furnace.

“Do you know that they forced Mother to her death...” The blood from the seven apertures of Xuanwu's face had yet to dry, becoming the only color on that face like white paper. “...sect leader shixiong?”

The giant-like Xiang Rong in the sky raised a hand. A curved blade that looked extremely similar to the one in Xuanwu's hand appeared out of nowhere and met Xuanwu's blade. Where the two curved blades joined, sparks spurted out with a crackle. Under the moonlight that was like the light of day, it was as if a series of bolts out of the blue had been set in midair.

“She only wanted to live as an ordinary person to raise me in an out of the way place. She didn’t want to come near your struggle between immortals and demons. And there was no need for you to confer so many self-flattering titles on her after her death... You did everything you could to protect my life. Sect Leader shixiong... da-ge, I was a fisherman’s child poling for fish and picking water chestnuts by the river. What crime had I committed that called for you to condescend to spare my miserable life?!”

Furious spiritual energy exploded with a crash from the crossed blades. Xi Ping’s half of a stone body rolled, but it once again changed direction. This time, he was again sliding toward the Unbound Furnace.

“I have a way to escape. Luwu, stay hidden on the West Peak, don’t come meddling!” For the latter sentence, he simply went around Zhou Ying and used the reincarnation wood to knock on the consciousnesses of all the Luwu. When he had just finished speaking, he had already rolled his closest to the Unbound Furnace, less than a chi away!

Xi Ping concentrated his gaze and decisively tore off the Replica he was wearing.

At such a short distance, even if he coiled his guts up into a bun, he would still be able to fly over!

The Replica obediently turned back into black smoke, and Xi Ping’s half of a body was exposed beneath the light of the stars, moons, and blades. Only now did he find that he had broken in a very high place—his guts had no part in it; right now, he only had his head and most of his left upper body.

The left upper body had an arm connected to it. That was plenty.

Xi Ping didn't dare to look closely at his body. The moment he freed himself of the Replica, he immediately felt himself on the point of death.

Fortunately, even if a person was cut in half, they still wouldn't die instantly. With his remaining left hand, Xi Ping pushed off firmly against the ground and rose into the air, falling into the Unbound Furnace.

Only then did his blood spurt out, covering half the furnace!

Xi Ping abruptly lost awareness of his own body. He seemed to have returned to his time as a "tree spirit," half his consciousness in the furnace, half outside the furnace, the two halves linked together. As if he had struck two pieces of flint together, the Unbound Furnace that had fallen still after Xiang Rong had left it was lit!

The flames seemed to be burning his blood. They were pure gold in color. Xi Ping couldn't feel the burning. The segment of his body that had sunk into the furnace was wrapped up in golden flames.

Xiang Rong sensed something, his consciousness and his gaze simultaneously shooting toward the ruins of the immortal palace, but the Silver Moon controlled by Xuanwu gave him no chance to divide his attention. The moonlight that had turned Qiu Sha to dust disobeyed the will of heaven, surrounding the freshly-minted full moon sage.

Inside the Unbound Furnace, time and space were warped. The flames seemed to contain a whole world. Xi Ping's consciousness outside the furnace knew very well that only the space of a breath had passed, but the part of him inside the furnace had experienced hundreds of generations in the blink of an eye!

CHAPTER 133 - Eternal Flame (15)

Inside the furnace, Xi Ping was swept up into countless cycles of birth and death, losing all sense of time.

Outside the furnace, Xi Ping could see the long river inside the Unbound Furnace at a glance, flowing from the wild ancient era before the spiritual mountains had formed all the way to the present day. In that long river into which all eternity was compressed, there were noble people and low people, good people and bad people... as well as flowers, birds, fish, and insects, all with his own face.

On the two banks of the river, desolation and prosperity mingled; growth and decay, winter cold and summer heat coexisted.

Sages wrapped in their swaddling clothes wailed, masters learning to walk stumbled, demons tirelessly pursued cultivation with self-restraint, unhappy couples were still in their period of tenderness and affection, solemn pledges of love wearing away along with the mountains and seas.

A boy forced by the servants to wash stone steps amid freezing rain instantly grew a head of white hair and reached out to point to the sky; cold moonlight swept through the ditches he was unwilling to give another close look to.

Brothers born from the same stem joined hands to withstand the trials of heaven and earth, then fell out over that same heaven and earth, becoming locked in a mortal struggle.

Xi Ping's consciousness inside the furnace was stretched out to the length of millions of years, from the ancient past to the present. Before he could recover, he was thrown staggering up onto the bank.

A fresh and tender fruit fell. He grabbed it, but its sweet fragrance only lingered at the tip of his nose for a moment before it instantly came to full ripeness and decayed, the thick fragrance turning rotten, the fruit becoming putrid liquid in his hand.

Finally, sweetness and foulness both disappeared. He was left empty-handed, holding a handful of nothingness.

And the golden light drawing him into the furnace was still racing wildly toward the infinite future.

The Xi Ping inside the Unbound Furnace relied on his point of view outside the furnace to remain clear-headed and rational.

The Xi Ping outside the Unbound Furnace was so full of the thousands of sensations within the furnace that all his senses went numb.

Only an instant of real time had passed. None of the sounds from the outside world had had time to reach his ears. So in that moment, he had lost all companions—teachers, kin, enemies, and friends were all out of reach.

There was only himself, watching himself.

Xi Ping watched that guiding golden light and didn't rashly chase after it. He stayed where he was and calmed himself down, slowly let out a breath, and thought, So this is the magic of a toolmaking furnace. If I'd gone to Moon Plated Peak, I may have ended up in the toolmaking path along with Master Lin. Ah, isn't this much more interesting than my shifu spending all day chipping away at ice with a sword?

Just then, he heard a soft laugh in his ear, startling the rebellious disciple who had just mentally criticized his shizun into a jump.

This was a slightly hoarse female voice. Xi Ping looked in the direction it had come from and saw that the golden light that had flown far away had at some point returned before him. The golden light was so resplendent it was dazzling, as hard to look at directly as the scorching sun. Xi Ping narrowed his eyes and saw a vague human form amid the light—a woman of middle height, with an unusually slender frame, a handful of bracelets stacked on both wrists... He had a very profound impression of this figure. When the Riverward had been in Qiu Sha's hands, it had formed into this figure, though unfortunately it had been dispersed by the Law Breaker before it could fully take shape.

Was this an image Hui Xiangjun had left behind?

Xi Ping's mind was shaken. He cupped his hands toward this person. "Senior."

In fact, only a living person or a living consciousness could hold a conversation. Ways of the Heart left behind in weapons were inert matter and vestiges—even if some vestiges contained realistic images, they were still like old paintings that you could see but not touch.

It was a little silly to be saluting a "painting," but she was truly too lifelike; Xi Ping decided that no one could fault him for excessive politeness.

The woman inside the golden light beckoned to him, her bracelets briskly clinking against each other. "Come."

Xi Ping had never seen what a proper Way of the Heart looked like—Yuan Hui's false one didn't count. He was a little curious, curious about Hui Xiangjun's Way of the Heart, and also curious about why after two hundred years Xiang Rong had yet to wipe away the Way of the Heart of the Unbound Furnace's original master, so he followed immediately.

Eight hundred years ago, Chu's bold and innocent folk customs probably hadn't been as hypocritically fussy as Great Wan's. The hand stacked full of bracelets pulled him over without any sense of taboo and pulled his head down. Then the woman in the golden light stood on tiptoe and pressed her forehead to Xi Ping's.

Xi Ping automatically closed his eyes. When he opened them, he saw that everything around him seemed to have turned into an exploded painter's palette.

Plants and beasts were all laid out in their basic essences. Observing the world from this strange angle, there was for a time too much for his eyes to take in. Then he learned that in the fragrance of fully ripe fruit was a scent that shared a common origin with flowers, that the spiritual energy around a vital weapon presented an identical shape to its owner's consciousness at the moment it separated from their body...

Xi Ping immediately understood that this was the world through the eyes of a master of the toolmaking way.

All creatures and all things had hidden connections. These sounds, colors, and spirits either combined in her hands or formed a delicate equilibrium because they repelled each other. Time... as well as she herself, everything was only another kind of material. She used her hands to mold a bizarre and jumbled world.

Xi Ping understood it intuitively, deciphering the first level of the eternal spring brocade's toolmaking way: all forms were illusory, all appearances were inconstant, all things were subject to dissolution and reconstruction; toolmakers were the creators of the universe.

This was linked to the Law Breaker's hidden realm suspended over Tao County. It wasn't hard to understand. Xi Ping thought it was

very interesting, but he didn't think it was surprising, so he asked, "Is there more?"

In the golden light, two long, narrow eyes opened and met his gaze, their corners curving slightly. The next moment, that bizarre and jumbled world vanished.

Inside the Unbound Furnace, a multicolored human figure dashed by, surrounded by a fragrant breeze.

Xi Ping was startled by this big bright bird coming out of nowhere. He quickly turned to let the figure pass and took a close look. The skirt that had been torn because it was hard to walk in was very familiar, and he recognized that this individual was himself, having shocked the whole Lingyang River with his flight at the House of Overflowing Splendor.

Xi Ping suddenly found that his mortal self's running footsteps were very heavy. Though he was young and lively, his each and every movement looked subtly uncoordinated to his present self. The sparse spiritual energy brushed shoulders with him and went by as though it had nothing to do with him. First he smelled rouge and powder, then the "human odor" under the cosmetics—a trace of sweat, not yet unpleasant, but which would undoubtedly begin to stink in a day or two if left unwashed.

Next, the "big bright bird" stepped onto a sword, the eye-searing gauze dress removed, the cosmetics vanished. Xi Ping saw himself fly up on a sword and become a half-immortal. Spiritual energy passed through his spiritual eyes and meridians and was once again set free. There was a faint layer of spiritual light over him, constantly peeling off the dust and stains that settled on him.

Then Xi Ping saw his sword-flying self change once again, a qin that shared an origin with him appearing in his hands. His hair suddenly grew longer, and his aura suddenly deepened, connecting like a

whirlpool to the surrounding spiritual energy; he turned his head carelessly to look back—this was his current appearance.

Xi Ping was stunned. He found that his sense of “physicality” was disappearing bit by bit.

The body of a mortal was like the fruit he had held in his hand when he had landed in the Unbound Furnace, flesh and blood that could age and rot. There were always parts of that body being worn away and renewed. It would stink if unwashed, the skin would have blemishes, the tips of the hair and fingers would dry up. That terror of the possibility of deteriorating at any moment was precisely that “physicality,” exceptionally vital because it was at death’s door.

In comparison, a timeless and unblemished established foundation immortal was like a cold white spirit statue. Even with several parts broken off his body, his flesh and blood spilled all over the Unbound Furnace, he still no longer had that physicality.

Just then, golden light flashed before Xi Ping’s eyes. The surging spiritual energy slowed hundreds upon thousands of times in his eyes and was magnified hundreds upon thousands of times. After breaking apart and reconstructing sound and color, the Unbound Furnace was taking aim at “spiritual energy.”

After slowing and magnifying, Xi Ping saw that so-called “spiritual energy” consisted of countless tiny points of light held in the wind.

Mortals, plants, and beasts also contained those points of light. Just a few fragmentary bits were enough to allow them to grow and multiply without end. And that little bit was all they wanted. No matter how dense the points of light around them, they couldn’t seep into their bodies.

But a half-immortal could voluntarily draw in and expel spiritual energy. The “points of light” traveled through their meridians. The

vast majority of them were once again released into the surroundings, but a small amount of the spiritual energy light points would stay behind within their flesh and bones, lighting up the dim mortal bones bit by bit—this was the most important aspect of an open-eyed half-immortal’s cultivation: cleansing and refining their spiritual bones.

And at the established foundation level and above, a cultivator’s whole body was soaked in the light points of spiritual energy, with their own internal cycle of it. As they insatiably absorbed new spiritual energy to merge with their essence, their essence became richer and richer, but the cultivator’s boundaries became blurred, gradually trending in the direction of merging with the spiritual energy outside of them.

Xi Ping had just felt faint discomfort when he saw a hand glowing with golden light reach over and gently touch his eyelids.

The light points of spiritual energy once again slowed and magnified. Xi Ping was startled: he found that these points of light were formed of minute inscriptions clumping together.

Though he had never deliberately studied, he still had some experience. After all, the Sanyue Immortal Mountains were known as the foremost home of inscriptions in the world. On his way, he had seen many inscriptions of all grades, but he hadn’t seen a single one of these miniature inscriptions!

The next moment, the golden light flashed again. The person in front of Xi Ping disappeared, and the immortal mountains rose sharply from the earth.

Sanyue, Xuanyin... the bodies of the mountains were transparent, flooded with those tiny inscriptions. A part of them were stuffed into the spiritual stone mines within the mountains, and a part

permeated the veins of the earth, spreading outward to the whole country.

Xi Ping abruptly raised his head and said to the woman who couldn't answer, "Senior, do you mean that the higher your cultivation gets, the more you'll be assimilated by the spiritual mountains?"

The woman didn't respond, smiling silently.

Xi Ping waited a moment, saw that she didn't react, then knew that he had probably misunderstood.

"No?" A little frustrated, he pinched the center of his brow, frowning as he scrutinized the spiritual energy flowing past him. "I'm a hopeless amateur when it comes to inscriptions. I wish san-ge were here..."

As he whispered, he idly scooped with his hand. He scooped up a handful of the tiny inscriptions in the spiritual energy light points. Then Xi Ping gave a sudden cry—he found that those miniature inscriptions were repelling him. First they tried to slip out of his hand. Then they were absorbed by force by the powerful essence of an established foundation cultivator, unwillingly merging into his palm.

Only then did Xi Ping find that there were all different kinds of inscriptions among the tiny ones in the spiritual energy light points, but they were all out of place next to the spiritual energy inside him. After being absorbed by him, the external spiritual energy inscriptions were first assimilated as they struggled, and only then were channeled into his meridians.

Xi Ping's thoughts moved quickly: Yes, his way wasn't among the three thousand paths of the Great Way. Even using spiritual energy didn't seem so legitimate; there was an extra step involved.

This time, when Xi Ping looked up at the images of the spiritual mountains, he saw Sanyue and Xuanyin flooded with the three thousand paths of the Great Way, all taking different roads to reach the same end. At the roots of the mountains there was also an enormous spiritual seal, composed of countless identical tiny inscriptions. Through the veins of the earth, they permeated out toward the whole country, obeying the terrain of the mountains and rivers, outlining the borders of the spiritual mountains.

Xi Ping turned to the woman next to him: “Whose way lies at the roots of the spiritual mountains? Is it that of the full moon sages?”

Almost imperceptibly, the woman nodded.

So that was it. This was just what Zhuoming had said—“Heaven and earth are locked in constant struggle.”

The way of the spiritual mountains was the way of the sages. In the Great War of Gods and Demons, all cultivators had been struggling for power. Afterward, with their Way of the Heart as a basis, the winners gathered countless spiritual stones in one place and constructed the spiritual mountains, got a hold over the territory through the veins of the earth, grasping all of creation in the palms of their hands.

What the ancient sages and demonic gods had been struggling over was authority!

There hadn't been a full moon sage on earth for thousands of years, because the spiritual mountains were already in control. The present shed skins could only spend their remaining years drawing ever closer to the ways of the sages. But no matter how they were pruned, even if their Way of the Heart had been inherited from the sage to begin with, the course of their lives being different, after hundreds and thousands of years, there would always be slight

deviations, so they could never completely merge with the spiritual mountains.

“So the reason Xiang Rong cooked himself in the Unbound Furnace was so that he could reconstruct his Way of the Heart to match the Black Emperor’s!”

No wonder he hadn’t wiped away the traces of Hui Xiangjun’s Way of the Heart after all these years.

Xi Ping said, “Senior, will a melon picked out of season still serve?”

The traces in the golden light couldn’t answer him. Perhaps it was Xi Ping’s mistake, but the woman’s figure seemed to become a little clearer. He saw her face... Her features looked very similar to Qiu Sha’s, just a little more delicate. Perhaps Qiu Sha had been imitating her looks.

“Then... what is your true Way of the Heart?”

Dissolving everything, reconstructing everything?

If she hadn’t come to a premature end, would she ultimately have been able to refine all the great spiritual mountains, unifying all of creation, renaming it “eternal spring brocade” in its entirety?

For some reason, perhaps because his heart wasn’t one with the spiritual mountains and he was purely seeking knowledge, Xi Ping kept thinking there was something wrong.

He had a powerful intuition that this Unbound Furnace... was missing something.

“Senio...”

Before Xi Ping could finish, a hurricane unexpectedly arose in the Unbound Furnace, sweeping away the woman in the golden light.

At the same time, it was as if he was shredded to pieces. It turned out that after a moment, Xiang Rong had already discovered the change in the Unbound Furnace. With a single thought, this new full moon sage could mobilize any spiritual energy within Western Chu's borders.

Xi Ping's body outside the furnace... and even that reincarnation wood branch that was less than a thumb's length were turned to powder simultaneously. The fire inside the furnace abruptly went out!

The scenes inside the Unbound Furnace disappeared with a rumble. The boundlessly extended time collapsed backward, unifying with the outside world.

Xi Ping didn't even have time to react. His body and form scattered entirely.

When he had been shattered by Zhao Yin at the bottom of the Impassable Sea, his consciousness had been dreaming inside the star stone. There had been no pain. A thread of his consciousness had ended up in Yuzhou, and when he woke up, he didn't remember anything. This time, the part of him that was hidden inside the Unbound Furnace knew exactly what had happened. He well and truly "died" this time.

When pain reaches a certain point, it can overwhelm a person's mind. In an instant, all of Xi Ping's thoughts flew away. His mind was a complete blank.

But a dark red lotus stalk stretched outward from the small segment of his body inside the furnace, crawling up the nape of his neck like a tattoo.

CHAPTER 134 - Eternal Flame (16)

When the furnace fire went out, it meant that the Unbound Furnace's protection over Xi Ping was also gone. Never mind one of those two masters dealing him a blow, even a breeze could have crushed him to bits.

But when the lotus stalk crawled out, a weak flame once again kindled in the depths of the Unbound Furnace's big cauldron.

It wasn't as flashy as when Xi Ping had jumped in. The flames of the furnace fire that Zhuoming had lit were very subdued, only a thin layer spread over the bottom of the furnace, which was as deep as a person was tall. They didn't even disturb the inscriptions on top of the Unbound Furnace.

Twining around Xi Ping's injuries, the lotus stalk hid inside the thin fire as if curling up underwater in a pond. It touched Xi Ping's blood and paused for a moment. Then the blood disappeared at the sharp tip of the lotus stalk, as if it had been absorbed by this long stalk that was like a parasitic vine.

Then the lotus stalk seemed to succeed in controlling its instincts. It gave up on burrowing into the wound and quickly crawled over to the center of Xi Ping's brow.

“Hey—”

In chaos, Xi Ping heard a voice, but he truly had no strength to respond.

“...wake up...”

Who?

“Are you waking up...”

“Wake...”

“Tai Sui!”

The name “Tai Sui” provoked a soft sound from the Tai Sui Qin. The music flitted through Xi Ping’s hopelessly shattered consciousness, struggling to pull him together, leading him to follow the sound to its origin. In the midst of this to-and-fro struggle, Xi Ping abruptly trembled—the blood red lotus stalk had relentlessly pierced the center of his brow, even making a hole in his skull. Then the lotus stalk pressed an unknown talisman directly onto Xi Ping’s spirit.

He was like a person who had already stopped breathing shocked back upright by a bolt of lightning. His consciousness abruptly curled up.

“Has he come back to life?” he heard Zhuoming whisper to himself. “Tsk, I don’t think that was enough. Again.”

Xi Ping thought, Da-ge, don’t...

But before he could respond, Zhuoming’s lotus stalk, which had come out of nowhere, gave him another blow, as nimble as when he was cutting off his own flesh.

Xi Ping blurted out a Jinpinging curse.

Zhuoming only heard him vaguely groan something and said, “I don’t understand. I’ve forgotten all the Wan I learned when I was little. Translate it for me.”

Xi Ping said, “... May your ancestral tombs burn.”

“Did your wits boil away?” Zhuoming retorted. “I don’t even have ancestors, never mind tombs.”

Xi Ping: “...”

“You’re very reckless. If I hadn’t left a portion of my consciousness with you beforehand, those two would have cooked you soon enough.” The insane bald flower was having one of his intermittent normal periods. He sighed. “Right in front of the only true full moon god in the world, you lit a towering fire in the Unbound Furnace, as if you were worried no one would notice. Listen, are you crazy? Fortunately, your life is not yet meant to come to an end. I, Lovesickness, was here to awaken you...”

“Stop it, I was wrong, I, I-I’m crazy.” Xi Ping felt that if he got a reputation for being “awakened by lovesickness,” he really would be better off dying here. He quickly took a breath and weakly forced a change of subject. “You didn’t say before that the sect leader might reach a full moon position!”

“Are you joking?” Zhuoming retorted sternly. “High Elder Xuanwu didn’t even realize it, so how could I have? Am I an eclipse...”

The speed of Zhuoming’s speech didn’t change at all, but the final word “eclipse” seemed to tear his throat. His voice came to an abrupt halt before he could finish. The lotus stalk twined around Xi Ping’s wounds loosened.

Xi Ping quickly used his single remaining left arm to pull the lotus stalk back. “Hey, Lovesickness, what’s going on? Why did you go off key?”

But Zhuoming didn’t speak again.

On the summit, without hesitation, Xuanwu drained away all of the essence his disciple’s survival depended on. The blood-colored

Silver Moon lit up strangely, backing his curved blade.

And in the lotus pond on the East Peak, the lotuses congesting the pond all burst into bloom in unison. Inside every white lotus that lacked a stamen, Zhuoming's face appeared, turned upward.

Next, the lotus flowers, lotus leaves, and Zhuoming's faces all seemed to be burned by the moonlight. Wounds like full moon scabs were constantly expanding. Zhuoming was entirely unmoved. In the blink of an eye, most of the skin on his faces had been corroded, revealing blackening bones beneath. Still wearing a strange smile, he said to himself, "Shizun..."

He had been born an invalid, his mother a mistress kept by an unworthy son from a collateral branch of the Xiang clan. His bones were soft, able to bend into any shape, but he couldn't stand upright or walk.

His mother was a plaything meticulously trained from childhood. The only expression she knew was "smiling." She would smile when beaten, keep the corners of her lips unmoving when humiliated; she had worn a dimpled smile right up to her death. After she died, for the sake of reputation, his father's official wife had brought him home.

His paramount spiritual sense had sniffed out the heavy scent of death on one of the retainers. From kindness, he had smiled regretfully at this person.

That person died that same night, so a rumor somehow got started that he was a monster. Whoever he smiled at would die. The nobles couldn't keep far enough away from him. The servants couldn't avoid him and also didn't dare to offend him, so they developed all kinds of "methods" for dealing with him.

“Don’t talk to him, don’t meet his eyes. No matter what he does, act like you can’t see.”

Every time someone caused offense and was assigned to look after him, they would receive the well-meaning instructions of their seniors.

After that, indeed, no one else died, so everyone became even more convinced that these methods were effective. Therefore, he became a person who “didn’t exist.” He lay there every day, neither tears, nor laughter, nor anger, nor cursing getting the least reaction. Gradually, he learned without being taught how to use people’s fear; he “cursed” a menial worker into falling seriously ill. At last, he could command them.

He was like his mother, having only one expression. She had only known how to charm, and he only knew how to frighten.

Until the Immortal Xuanwu descended from the skies to the mortal world.

While the whole household didn’t dare to raise their heads, seeking to assert his presence as usual, he raised his soft, deformed legs to rest on his shoulders, and spat out a “heresy,” like a big spider: “Exalted, can you guess whether my head is right-side up or upside-down?”

Immortal Xuanwu looked out from behind his also very peculiar mask, gazed at him for a moment, then calmly responded, “Right-side up. Why don’t you put those down?”

That gaze taught Zhuoming how to wail.

Afterward, he went up the immortal mountains, learned the whole gamut of human emotions, learned to express his own sensations like an ordinary person—this wasn’t easy; after all, no one knew

how the world looked to his eyes; the words and sentences he could construct were limited. So he studied all the formalized languages in the world, for the sake of gathering some appropriate words from among them, to tell shizun what he saw, what he comprehended.

He opened his spiritual eyes and was able to run and jump, but he didn't care to go out to travel and see something of the world. Because he had to cultivate all kinds of powers night and day, desperately refine his spiritual bones, to win a drop of praise from his taciturn shifu—he had become addicted to that.

Except that... it turned out that what shifu had been praising wasn't him, and his expectations hadn't been directed toward him, either. It was because the poisonous lotus seed in the Silver Moon would soon have a new sacrifice.

“Shizun.” Beneath the fatal moonlight, Zhuoming's tongue couldn't move nimbly; his voice became slurred. “Can you guess whether my head is ride-sight up or upside-down?”

Xuanwu had no time to attend to him. These words floated out lightly, like when he was young, getting no reply.

The Silver Moon had nearly seized the brilliance of the white moon in the sky. The divine tool that had been corroded for thousands of years by the demonic god's seed seemed to have betrayed the spiritual mountains, coating Xuanwu's curved blade as it slashed at Xiang Rong.

“Your head?” Just then, the Misty Willow's voice sounded in Zhuoming's ears. “What's wrong with your head now? Look at the state of things, can we stop fiddling with your head already?”

“It's nothing. I'm just dying.” Zhuoming came back to himself. Looking at the pond full of lotuses being turned to ashes along with

his true body by the “moonlight,” he smiled slightly. With something of the madness of looking death calmly in the face, he said softly, “Shizun has taken his essence from me. My true body has already rotted in the silver moonlight. All that’s left is a remaining bit of consciousness. Without a bit of consciousness left outside, you can’t light the furnace. There’s nothing for it, you’d better prepare yourself. I’ll count down. Ten...”

Xi Ping: “...”

Don’t be so sudden about it.

But before he could start thinking up countermeasures, the fire in the Unbound Furnace was once again extinguished. The astral wind from Xuanwu’s blade mercilessly swept toward him!

Xi Ping howled, “Weren’t you counting down from ten?!”

“One. I said it was a countdown, not that it was a countdown of ten digits.” The lotus spirit who didn’t know how to count gave a rueful sigh, as if giving it up. “Everyone below a shed skin is an ant. In a cultivation sect, might is indeed everything. You and I, the two of us, ha...”

The astral wind crashed against the edge of the Unbound Furnace. The Unbound Furnace was sent flying.

On the bottom of the furnace, Xi Ping, covered in blood and gore and tangled all over with lotus stalks, flew up. Inescapable murderous intent condensed over their heads.

“Who are you calling... part of ‘the two of us’?!”

In a flash, at the foot of the Central Peak surrounded by chaos, in the cracks in the stones, on the cliffs, even in the rivers and streams — countless hidden green ore pellets simultaneously split open.

Each green ore pellet contained a reincarnation wood seed. Xi Ping had hidden these on his way up the mountain.

The seeds were activated by the almost untraceable bit of spiritual energy in the green ore slag, putting down roots and sprouting in every nook and cranny!

Xi Ping's consciousness instantly filled the whole of the Central Peak. When the gust from the blade had nearly reached his hair, the fire in the Unbound Furnace once again began to burn.

Once again, a hidden realm cut off from the outside world formed inside the furnace. The Unbound Furnace rolled away and landed with a bang.

Xi Ping took a big breath and fell onto the bottom of the furnace. "I don't believe it."

The end of his sentence was covered up by a loud sound. The curved blade, wrapped in the light of the Silver Moon, came down on Xiang Rong.

Xiang Rong didn't try to dodge. His gigantic form brought its palms together, catching the curved Silver Moon blade between them.

Two identical countenances faced each other in the moonlight. Next, the full moon sage's consciousness pressed down with a will like the spiritual mountains, trying to wash away the "blemish" on the Silver Moon.

The moonlight at the tip of Xuanwu's blade dimmed. The bloody light of the Silver Moon became weaker and weaker—

The Sanyue Mountains resonated with the sect leader's angry shout, like the tolling of a large bell: "Silver Moon, return to position!"

The Silver Moon under Xuanwu's control trembled. As if waking from a dream, it abruptly broke away from Xuanwu's blade.

The curved blade—Xuanwu's vital weapon—broke.

Xuanwu's flesh seemed unable to contain the surging spiritual energy within him. Starting at his hands holding the blade, his flesh began to crack. He flew away like a snow-white kite whose string had snapped.

But the features that were already obscured by blood wore a strange smile.

Inside the Unbound Furnace, Zhuoming's dying consciousness looked out from the limp lotus stalk at the Misty Willow... with his remaining head and half a shoulder.

Outside the furnace, the sky was falling and the earth was cracking, but Xi Ping turned a deaf ear onto it. Not very skillfully, he controlled the fire of the Unbound Furnace, making the fire burn on his wounds.

Time inside the Unbound Furnace once again disconnected from the outside world. Constellations revolved and stars moved within the furnace. The distant golden light circled above him, wildly surging spiritual energy steadily pouring in, merging his body. New bones grew bit by bit from his wounds.

He held Zhuoming's lotus stalk in his hand. Zhuoming could feel that this young Misty Willow was as tense as iron all over, but he didn't make a sound.

Suddenly, he felt the Misty Willow's "leaves" moving. He seemed to be having another chat with someone.

Zhuoming identified the direction the Misty Willow's "leaves" were swaying in. "...Zhou Ying?"

"I'm..." Xi Ping's sweat evaporated in the fire of the Unbound Furnace as soon as it fell. "I'm asking him to help me calculate, how many sp... spiritual... spiritual stones I need to become an ascended spirit. This time... I... can make a big profit... cultivating with public funds."

The next moment, there was a rumble. A bolt out of the blue fell on the Unbound Furnace—but no one cared, because lightning was striking everywhere on the crest of the Central Peak.

After thoroughly stripping itself of the Heartless Lotus and returning to position on the summit of the Central Peak, the Silver Moon was blazing brightly. The Unbound Furnace was struck by the "moonlight" with a bang.

But the flames lit inside the furnace by Xi Ping held out without extinguishing. In this brief moment, he had grown a right arm. The circulation of spiritual energy linked up in his upper body.

Next came his thorax, abdomen...

Outside the Unbound Furnace, the light of the Silver Moon had mercilessly turned on Xiang Rong!

Xuanwu's off-key laughter echoed among the mountains. "Sect Leader shixiong, did you think that the Silver Moon was hostile toward you because of the Heartless Lotus? One set of spiritual mountains can only have one true full moon god. In your futile attempt to wipe away the traces of His Majesty the Black Emperor and become the master of Sanyue, what did you think the Silver Moon would take you for?"

The rest of his words were drowned in the sound of thunder as dense as rain.

But Zhuoming still heard him clearly—he could always hear the voices others couldn't hear.

“Starting from the day a set of spiritual mountains forms, they carry a curse. Xuanyin will sink into ceaseless internal strife, while in Sanyue, this single-plank bridge leading to heaven, there will ultimately be a falling out between teacher and disciple, between brother and brother. The spiritual mountains left behind by the Black Emperor want to eliminate Xiang Rong, Xiang Rong plots to make Xuanwu expose his ambitions, while Xuanwu has spent three hundred years looking after me and has finally found a use for me... They really are boring, aren't they?” The successor of the Heartless Lotus used his remaining consciousness to keep an unwavering watch on Xi Ping, almost greedily listening to the creaks of his new and old joints grinding against each other. He softly said, “Allow me to give you a hint. While the fire in the Unbound Furnace can indeed block the moonlight, jade must be cut and polished before it can have worth. Without a heavenly tribulation, an established foundation cannot ascend his spirit. That is a fixed rule.”

To go from an established foundation to an ascended spirit, you had to make all kinds of preparations. Even disciples in the spiritual mountains with elders watching over them had to make ready to face near-certain death. Was there really a person who could simultaneously endure reconstructing his bones and flesh *and* a heavenly tribulation?

Zhuoming's voice became a little more serious. “For the sake of safety, you had better not be in such a hurry to become an ascended spirit now. Let's...”

Before he could finish, the lotus stalk was abruptly pulled up by Xi Ping and tossed into the fire on one side of the furnace.

Then the furnace fire protecting them opened a crack, and a bolt of lightning struck perfectly through that crack, directly hitting Xi Ping.

He had by now grown an upper body. His legs were still bone. The new flesh was instantly charred. The fragile leg bones broke with a snap and burned to charcoal and ashes.

It seemed he had spent his whole life snatching chestnuts out of the fire. He didn't know how to write the word "safety."

An ascended spirit would at least have a chance of survival. If he remained safe and held on to his life now, when these two were finished fighting, where could he run to?

Moreover, he had to bring the Unbound Furnace back with him today, or else what would remain of all these gods?!

The furnace fire had opened a crack to allow the heavenly lightning to pass through, yet it burned all the more lavishly.

A thin qin string appeared at Xi Ping's fingertips and skillfully sliced away at the charred, rotting flesh. Spiritual energy flowed into the Unbound Furnace like a river. New bones and flesh were growing rapidly from his wounds, but the second bolt of heavenly lightning was coming!

Zhuoming laughed quietly. "The ungovernable way."

At the same time, the sound of the Silver Moon wrestling with the new full moon sage even overwhelmed the sound of thunder. An angry shout came from Sanyue's veins of the earth: "I said, Silver Moon, return to position—"

The Silver Moon in full bloom was suppressed.

The flashing lightning lit Xiang Rong's face snow-white. Drained of color, he looked even more like Xuanwu.

The spiritual mountains were thousands of years old. Amid the cries of distress of generation upon generation of the people, the mountains had rotted and become decrepit. Western Chu, this patch of earth where winner took all, seemed about to become the possession of a newly born divinity.

CHAPTER 135 - Eternal Flame (17)

To keep the ascended spirit heavenly tribulation from cooking Zhuoming's remaining consciousness, Xi Ping entrusted the heartless lotus's stalk to a small cluster of flames far away at the bottom of the Unbound Furnace.

So right now, the safest place in all the Sanyue Mountains was occupied by a slender lotus stalk.

Zhuoming curled up like a snake. As he changed his point of view to look on as the spiritual mountains passed to their new owner, he smelled cooked flesh up close.

"Doesn't smell good at all," he judged regretfully. "Maybe there's not enough oil."

Xi Ping: "..."

How annoying. His jaws were locked; he couldn't open his mouth to curse.

There were no more people left on the Central Peak now. The Silver Moon was struggling to the death in Xiang Rong's hands.

In the imperial city in the capital of Dongheng, eighty-one coiled dragon columns trembled. No one in the whole country dared to go to sleep. Winter had already started, but the temperature was like at midday during the hottest days of summer. A hot wind swept along the Xia River, charged over the snow-wrapped mountain range at the very north of Western Chu, and collided with a cold wave from Northern Li and vapor from Southern Wan. All along the borders, winds rose and clouds scuttled. The sky seemed to be falling. It was raining everywhere. The Xia River, after a summer of calm, seemed ready to rise!

“My goodness, the winter thunder is rumbling. A new full moon sage has appeared in Sanyue. What will happen now? Truly, I feel bad on behalf of the other shed skins,” the lotus stalk chattered on with some glee at the misfortunes of others. “Before, Sanyue, the venom-breeding sect of the divine mountains, hoarded all the resources in the country. Will it be looking to combine the five great spiritual mountains into one now? When only one range of spiritual mountains remains, those at their summits will truly be able to touch the heavens. Do you think those shed skins will want to dispose of this new full moon sage as though he were a great demon, or will they try to become the next full moon sage as soon as possible, by hook or by crook? If it’s the latter, that will be quite a sight to see. After all, the other spiritual mountains don’t have Sanyue’s bottomless greed. They haven’t saved up a whole nation’s spiritual energy in their own backyards to use as they like. The fur will really fly, won’t it?”

Xi Ping didn’t respond, because just then, the second bolt of heavenly lightning fell, even stronger than the first, baking him into a piece of coal.

“How fortunate that I can’t breathe right now, or I’d blow you away.” Zhuoming *tsked*. The lotus stalk carefully avoided the sparks splashing everywhere and said, sighing, “As I see it, the appearance of a full moon sage is a hundred times worse than the great demon in the Impassable Sea coming back to life. Demons give immortals a chance to affirm their righteousness, while sages drag people down to the level of demons—hey, do you think the Silver Moon will win, or Xiang Rong?”

Before the third bolt of heavenly lightning could fall, Xi Ping quickly shook the ashes off himself. He was a quick study, becoming more and more practiced at regenerating after being crushed. The fire in the Unbound Furnace strengthened steadily. The speed at which his flesh and bones regenerated was constantly reaching new heights.

When the first bolt of heavenly lightning had fallen, Xi Ping had been struck so hard he had been even worse off than when he'd first jumped into the Unbound Furnace, unable to keep a human form; when the second bolt of lightning fell, while his flesh was burned black, his bones had held out; such that before the third bolt of heavenly lightning could fully ferment, he had already reconstructed himself into a human shape and could even move—with difficulty, he pulled out a pill and swallowed it.

Zhuoming had never seen this kind of pill. Curiously, he asked, “That isn't a protective pill... and it isn't a lightning repelling pill, so what did you just take?”

Xi Ping's newly grown throat made a noise like rusty iron grinding against itself: “...mind calming.”

The mind calming pill was an open-eyed grade elixir that could be used by mortals. Its function was to clear and invigorate the mind, little better than strong tea.

Zhuoming, who had been the direct disciple of a high elder since beginning to cultivate, had naturally never seen it, so he asked, “Does it taste good? What does it do?”

“Calms...*hff*, the mind... and... steadies the... emotions... ugh... you're annoying me to death!” Before Xi Ping could finish, the third bolt of heavenly lightning fell.

Zhuoming was stunned. This bolt of lightning was stronger than the previous two put together, making a sound that vibrated through the Unbound Furnace for a long time, like a mountain collapsing.

Xi Ping, who had just been talking to him, was pounded into a pile of fragments.

The heartless lotus's stalk backed away. "Hey, listen, isn't there something wrong with this heavenly tribulation of yours?"

Zhuoming had made off with the heartless lotus inside the Silver Moon and had entered what practically amounted to a monster's way, yet when he had become an ascended spirit, there still hadn't been such a major event. If not for the special hidden bones belonging to the ungovernable way, those three bolts of lightning would have finished off the Misty Willow here and now.

The heavenly tribulation didn't seem intent on "testing" him; it seemed to want to strike him dead.

Sparks kept burning on the fragments of flesh and bone scattered throughout the furnace, connecting to the fire of the Unbound Furnace. The fragments "circulated" among the flames as though they were floating in water. In the blink of an eye, they had once again gathered into a human form.

"I think you must have too much bad karma to be suited for passing through a heavenly tribulation." Zhuoming spoke a little faster.

"Stop, you..."

Rumble—

Before he could finish, the fourth bolt of heavenly lightning spilled onto Xi Ping without leaving him even the time to take a breath to speak, and the fifth bolt of heavenly lightning was following hard on its heels, already overhead.

Hidden bones didn't mean you couldn't die, or else Yuan Hui wouldn't have passed away in the East Sea. The ungovernable way wouldn't give any better treatment to an ordinary young man a thousand years later.

Especially since Xi Ping's hidden bones were attached to his consciousness. A consciousness wasn't inextinguishable.

The fourth bolt of heavenly lightning stamped out the fire in the Unbound Furnace—this meant that Xi Ping's awareness had wavered; his consciousness was in danger.

The first two bolts of heavenly lightning had given him the impression that he could pass through the tribulation. The third and fourth bolts had strengthened precipitously, simply crushing his awareness, not giving him a chance to hide in the fire of the Unbound Furnace. The fifth bolt meant to kill him... It wasn't that it "seemed" that way; the heavenly lightning was deliberately coming for his life!

As soon as the furnace fire went out, the light of the Silver Moon quickly shone in. The lotus stalk was forced to cling to the side of the Unbound Furnace. Zhuoming was so dazzled by the lightning that he could no longer see what state Xi Ping was in. The deadliest bolt of lightning fell.

In that moment, even a paramount spiritual sense couldn't see how he could survive. This mere ascended spirit tribulation was actually more shocking than the spiritual mountains changing hands.

A thought crossed Zhuoming's mind: What a pity...

But just then, by coincidence, the Silver Moon, having been subdued by Xiang Rong, started a fresh round of resisting to the death. The Sanyue Mountain Range... even the better part of Western Chu's territory began to shake and tremble.

Mountain ridges split apart, lofty towers folded like paper. Without its furnace fire, the Unbound Furnace had lost its foundation. It was lifted and sent flying by the roiling mountain wind, just missing the heavenly lightning.

The lotus stalk was tossed up along with the Unbound Furnace. Next, a charred hand reached out and grabbed the end of the lotus stalk. The fire in the Unbound Furnace once again kindled.

Zhuoming was dumbfounded. He finally caught his breath. “Misty Willow, I think you ought to acknowledge Xiang Rong as your benefactor!”

The fingers covered in coal dust were unbelievably nimble. Upon hearing these words, they tied the heartless lotus’s stalk into an enchanting knot at a speed too fast for even an ascended spirit to perceive.

Zhuoming didn’t bother bickering with him. “The Unbound Furnace’s fire can block heavenly lightning. Now, while your consciousness is still holding out, break off the ascension... what? Did you just say something?”

“I said... sit down... and... hold on tight!”

Hardly had these words been spoken than the fire in the Unbound Furnace once again went out altogether. The whole cauldron of the Unbound Furnace rolled down with the collapsing cliff. The moment was perfectly chosen. It perfectly sidestepped the sixth bolt of heavenly lightning.

After dodging two bolts of lightning in a row, Xi Ping's rapidly-repairing hidden bones had already come together. He actually stood up in one piece.

“You can do that?” Zhuoming came back to himself. In the gap between the lightning flash and the moonlight, he began to laugh. “My mistake. With the filial piety Xiang Rong has shown, he’s the one who ought to acknowledge you as his benefactor!”

The disintegrating spiritual stones of the spiritual mountains were caught up by the Unbound Furnace like moths drawn to a flame and turned to dust before they could even touch Xi Ping.

Following his previously established pattern, Xi Ping once again extinguished the fire in the Unbound Furnace, allowing the furnace to tumble into the valley.

When the seventh bolt of heavenly lightning fell, he could already get out the Tai Sui Qin. This time, a soundless image of a sword flew straight out and struck the cliff. The spiritual energy became a hurricane, pushing the Unbound Furnace hundreds of zhang away.

Xi Ping's newly grown hair floated up in response to the heavenly lightning near at hand.

And at the same time, Xiang Rong made a two-handed seal and cried out for the third time, "Return to position!"

That vital curved blade of his that so resembled Xuanwu's suddenly appeared as though cutting through empty space, slashing at the Silver Moon, smashing this most honorable divine tool that no one had dared to face directly in thousands of years against the Central Peak.

The Central Peak snapped.

The Slumbering Dragon Sea and the South Sea roared as they crashed against the land. The Xia River instantly burst its banks. At the borders of Li, Wan, and Shu, the walkers in the mortal world had evacuated, and ascended spirits were holding the line. The shed skins, who had descended en masse to the mortal world, stabilized the wavering border inscriptions. The waters of the rivers and seas were frozen in midair.

As the sky fell and the earth cracked, the Unbound Furnace was buried by the broken mountain. The enraged heavens threw down an eighth bolt of lightning, which smashed all the spiritual stones within dozens of zhang!

This buffer had been plenty. Xi Ping didn't light the furnace fire. The Tai Sui Qin entered close combat with the heavenly lightning. Xi Ping's hand bones and spine shattered along with the heavenly lightning but were once again restored after a breath. His tongue and throat at last healed up entirely in the struggle. "Come at me!"

The fire in the Unbound Furnace was kindled once more. Zhuoming opened his eyes amid the dazzling lightning. Xi Ping had actually jumped out; all that remained in the furnace was a piece of reincarnation wood with his consciousness attached to maintain the flames.

A bronze-colored bloody shadow flitted over the white moon in the sky, but it was only for an instant. Then it was masked by the light that had surpassed the blazing sun. And the other "moon" on earth had just now been pushed against the broken Central Peak by the new master of the spiritual mountains.

A hand as lustrous as a white spirit steadied the incessantly vibrating Unbound Furnace.

Zhuoming heard Xi Ping's voice come from the reincarnation wood through his consciousness: "I don't give a rat's ass whether the old geezer or the big lamp wins. I only hope they'll fight even harder... If they don't knock a few cracks in the sky, won't we all be crushed to death?"

As he spoke, the ninth bolt of heavenly lightning illuminated his face and caved in a corner of the spiritual mountains. Everything seemed to pause.

The spiritual mountains let out a sigh like a dying breath. Xiang Rong at last had the Silver Moon at his feet. The moonlight of that great divine tool was being steadily drawn away by Xiang Rong. The enormous statue of the Black Emperor on the cliff had already been destroyed. Xiang Rong hefted his blade one-handed and raised his head, divinity covering his expressionless face.

The consciousness of the full moon sage who had vanquished the spiritual mountains fell on Xi Ping at the same time as the final bolt of heavenly lightning.

The heavenly lightning struck Xi Ping's body, rebuilt after being destroyed, but it didn't strike as fast as he could reconstruct. No sooner were his meridians rent apart by the lightning than they reconnected, suddenly widening.

His already concentrated consciousness was transformed. His field of vision widened. In an instant, he felt the whole world become perfectly clear.

The movement of the Silver Moon, the movement of the spiritual mountains, the spiritual energy surging through the mountains, all of it was incredibly distinct.

In his eyes, the spiritual mountains, and even the whole of Dongheng, had become smaller—all of Western Chu had become smaller. His consciousness covered half of Western Chu in one sweep, touching distant Tao County.

The people of Tao County were gathered outside, gesticulating as they observed the sky, which had lit up in the middle of the night. Suddenly, they heard qin music coming from somewhere... It was genuine Chu music, loud and uncivilized, pushing and shoving.

Having avoided the Way of Heaven's deadly blow, the most bizarre ascended spirit in the world had emerged in the supremely lofty

Sanyue Mountains.

He had torn open a corner of unfathomable fate. Xi Ping met Xiang Rong's eyes. From afar, he made a vulgar hand gesture toward Xiang Rong, of the kind that only a country farmer would understand.

The fatal moonlight fell, but Xi Ping and the Unbound Furnace had already moved. There was only a reincarnation wood sapling left behind. The tree was crooked and bent, maintaining its previous occupant's vulgar posture as it was dissolved by the moonlight.

Before, Xi Ping had only been able to move his consciousness through reincarnation wood. After becoming an ascended spirit, he had learned without being taught how to simply swap places with his accompanying plant—he himself “grew” out of a little creek on the Central Peak.

Only then did the thunder, half a step behind the lightning, finally arrive, its ear-splitting torrent of abuse echoing through the mountains.

The next moment, Xi Ping once again disappeared from the water. Only a reincarnation wood tree remained. The little sapling was turned to ashes by the moonlight as soon as it appeared in the water, dissolving when the wind blew. Xi Ping, meanwhile, appeared on a cliff.

The moonlight clung to him like his shadow.

Before he could play the same trick again, there was a stab of pain in Xi Ping's spirit. All the reincarnation wood he had left throughout the Sanyue Mountains disappeared. Xiang Rong knew who he was!

Xi Ping said, “Baldy, if you keep playing dead, you're going to die for real!”

Xi Ping knew now that Zhuoming was all right—an ascended spirit’s true body could switch places with their accompanying plant; when Zhuoming had been “killed” by the Silver Moon, the lotus stalk with his consciousness in it had already been hidden in the Unbound Furnace’s fire.

In other words, that bit of lotus stalk had already quietly become Zhuoming’s true body.

Zhuoming said: “Water!”

Without so much as thinking about it, Xi Ping, holding the Unbound Furnace under his arm, jumped into the lake next to him. The lotus stalk inside the Unbound Furnace swam out and changed into human form. He instantly turned all the plants in the water into heartless lotuses, wildly growing a big tangle of dark red stalks and leaves, narrowly blocking the light of the Silver Moon for a moment.

Zhuoming took this opportunity to press his hand to the bottom of the lake. A series of inscriptions that had been concealed at some point exploded with a rumble. Before the moonlight could pierce through all the stalks and leaves, he swept Xi Ping into the veins of the spiritual mountains.

Xi Ping’s vision blurred. Countless inscriptions flashed before his eyes. He seemed to touch the heart of the Sanyue Mountains.

The next moment, the two of them emerged from the lotus pond on the East Peak.

The lotus pond was full of the “corpses” of heartless lotuses. Though they were plants, they still gave off an acrid smell of blood.

Zhuoming, unmoved, waved a hand. The withered plants came back to life. At the same time, the full moon god’s spiritual energy

struck the East Peak's prohibition.

Once the Silver Moon had given him its allegiance, Xiang Rong had the whole of the spiritual mountains in his hands, apart from the East Peak—the prohibition on the East Peak had been built by Xuanwu over three centuries. It was enough to hold Xiang Rong up for a moment.

Xi Ping said, “Did you bury inscriptions throughout the whole water system of the Sanyue Mountains ahead of time? Do you have any other secret passages?”

Zhuoming pushed him underwater, out of the way of an astral wind that could have beheaded him. “No, that's it!”

Xi Ping blew an air bubble that exploded in Zhuoming's face. “So what do we do?”

Unwilling to be bested, Zhuoming also sprayed out an air bubble to return the explosion in kind. “Rely on Xuanwu. The East Peak is Xuanwu's domain!”

“Does Xuanwu still have a backup plan left at this stage? What is it?”

“How would I know? Do you think he wears me over his heart?” Zhuoming howled. “The water's so hot I've nearly been cooked. Stop spraying! Aren't you from Wan? Why don't you have any manners?”

The two ascended spirits sprayed back and forth in the tiny lotus pond, the air bubbles boiling the pond water.

“Who's got time for manners? We're about to cash in! If you don't know anything, how could you dare to...”

Boom—

CHAPTER 136 - Eternal Flame (18)

After Zhuoming pulled him down to hide at the bottom of the lotus pond, Xi Ping didn't know what was going on outside, but he felt that the East Peak was also on the verge of collapse.

He felt that this whole business was very chancy. First of all, Xuanwu must have had no idea that the sect leader might reach a full moon position, or else White Hair wouldn't have offered himself up as fuel; second, no one had ever fought with a living full moon sage before, and if Xuanwu himself, wielding the Silver Moon, could still be flattened by Xiang Rong, then could a "backup plan" left behind by a shed skin who might already be dead be any use?

If it could be, then why hadn't Xuanwu used it already?

Just then, the lotus pond tilted. At the same time, the two of them heard an ominous snap from the depths of the mountain ridge. Next, the whole mountain began to topple to one side.

Xi Ping had the same feeling as when he had knocked down the precipice while learning to fly a sword on Flying Jade Peak's north slope. But this time, shifu wasn't here to catch him.

Xi Ping had used his consciousness to cover up the shard of Zhaoting in his spirit back when he had been broken into several chunks—the high general had spent his life bound by responsibility, with a heart as heavy as the spiritual mountains; if he had been permitted to see the chaotic scene within the Unbound Furnace then, he might have lost his mind on the spot. Unfortunately, Xi Ping's consciousness had nearly shattered in the meantime. He had fainted briefly. So he really had no other choice now; he was deliberately putting on a show of arrogance for Zhaoting, pretending that he had everything under control. If not for that, when Xiang Rong's consciousness had swept toward him, he would have run off

in terror rather than provoke a full moon god as if he had nothing better to do.

He wanted to fly up, but he soon found that it was a waste of his strength—it was clear that all the spiritual energy in the Sanyue Spiritual Mountains now belonged to the Xiang family; he couldn't control it.

This was the force of a full moon divinity against mere ascended spirits; he simply had the two of them stifled, turning them into mortals!

The water in the pond was in total chaos. Xi Ping threw off the reeking lotus roots wrapped around him. “Does Sanyue have another exit?”

“Yes,” said Zhuoming, “but where are you going to go?”

Xi Ping: “...”

Good question.

“Apart from Xuanwu's prohibition on the East Peak, which can hold out for a little while longer, never mind the Sanyue Mountains, there's no corner of Western Chu you could get to ahead of Xiang Rong,” Zhuoming responded calmly. “Comparatively speaking, this is the safest place you can be. Can't you stop flopping around and quietly stay in the water for a while?”

Hardly had he finished speaking than “the safest place” also experienced a landslide. The boulders beside the pond, bound by ancient trees, dropped off the high cliff. Falling rocks made plops throughout the pond.

A monstrous plant like the heartless lotus couldn't survive in the mortal world to begin with. The aquatic plants Zhuoming could

assimilate were limited to a space the size of the Sanyue Mountains. Xi Ping's reincarnation wood, on the other hand, was all over the world. In his current ascended spirit condition, he could even instantly retreat to Tao County. But he didn't dare. Any place an ascended spirit's consciousness could reach, a full moon sage's would only be faster than him, with greater range. He didn't dare to test whether the Law Breaker would be able to withstand a full moon sage. And even if the Law Breaker really could do it, as soon as Xiang Rong caught him trying to escape to Tao County, a hundred thousand soldiers of Western Chu's army would turn around and stamp it out.

Shifu, san-ge, the Luwu, the young mistress, er-nainai, the cook, and the minor merchants who made idle chat with him every day... Countless people swarmed into his mind.

Was there anything that could still impede Xiang Rong?

Boom—another loud rumble; the lotus pond began to fall in the other direction.

As they rocked left and right, Xi Ping could already clearly feel the mountain ridge snapping. If there was another shake, they would be splashed down the cliff!

“A little devil less than a hundred years old.” A little exasperated, Zhuoming batted aside the fragmentary bubbles Xi Ping had stirred up with his flopping. He sighed. His features were normal now, his expression very calm, as if he wasn't in a tight spot, about to be crushed by the spiritual mountains, but only waking up after an afternoon of meditation, filled with enlightenment.

His eyes emptily reflected Xi Ping. He suddenly tilted his head and asked, “How many people *are* there in your head?”

Xi Ping automatically leaned back, getting a little further away from him.

“Oh, don’t be nervous, I’m not that ‘shadow’ who ran off from Yu Family Bend. I can’t make people say what they’re thinking aloud.” Zhuoming gesticulated at his temples, as if he didn’t know how to express himself. “I can just vaguely see...”

Xi Ping knew that his san-ge could even use some method to determine others’ Ways of the Heart. He waved a hand to interrupt Zhuoming. “That’s not important! We’re going to die, let’s think about how to...”

“Stop thinking. Do all you can, then resign yourself to fate—you’ve already done all that any two people could do. Why not wait and see?” Not letting him off, Zhuoming changed the subject back: “How many people do you know?”

“Wait for who? That shizun of yours is fit to be carried out in a coffin. You want to wait for Xuanyin’s people?” As if they were arm wrestling, Xi Ping once again wrenched the subject back. “Xuanyin only has two shed skins left now. Those two old men are getting on in age. They might not be able to defeat Xiang Rong. Anyway, with my country’s wretched attitude, if the two of them come, there’s no saying whether they’ll deal with Xiang Rong first or get rid of the two of us first...”

“Wow, you’re so annoying.” Zhuoming interrupted him once more and asked yet again, “Do you know many people?”

Xi Ping was just about to say something when he suddenly met Zhuoming’s earnest eyes. Instantly, he realized that this lotus spirit had spent three hundred years in Sanyue, and it seemed that the only person around him had been Xuanwu.

“Since you can travel through Sanyue at will, why don’t you go find someone to talk to when you’re bored?”

Zhuoming’s mouth opened to an arc that human mouths couldn’t easily attain. He softly said, “I’d scare them to death.”

The mountain ridge shook fiercely once again. Xi Ping was flung out and tossed toward the stones beside the lotus pond.

The lotus leaves immediately gathered together to cushion him softly.

Xi Ping said, “Can’t you just not scare them?”

At the same time, he added the baldy in front of him to the pile of people troubling his mind. He thought, After all his dealings with Xuanwu, his background can’t be called either orthodox or evil. What will happen to him?

As soon as this thought appeared in his mind, Zhuoming immediately “saw” something. His willow leaf eyes opened to a horrifying size, and his neck twisted.

But before he could say anything, the East Peak couldn’t hold out any longer. The thunderclouds pierced the prohibition and burned the mountaintop black. Then a bolt of lightning took aim at the lotus pond!

The heartless lotuses wildly grew over a zhang in length at once, holding the two of them underwater. The flowers and leaves didn’t unfold entirely. The lotus roots that had gathered into a cluster were cut apart by the astral wind.

Xi Ping was thrown several chi away and couldn’t catch his breath at first. He futilely attempted to put a substitute paperman over himself.

But faced with ultimate power, all flourishes were jokes. Seven or eight layers of paperman broke at once. Several huge lotus leaves flew over to shield him, and they were no sturdier than the papermen. The lotus leaves taller than a person fell one after another, only sealing Xi Ping inside them, blocking his line of sight.

As he was busying himself, the summit of the East Peak, on the point of collapse, suddenly quieted. The chilling wind around him abruptly stopped.

Xi Ping said, “What...”

The next moment, sudden harsh light pierced the layers of lotus leaves covering him and stabbed into his eyes. For a moment, Xi Ping lost the use of all his senses. His mind was a blank, with only one thought remaining: the Silver Moon!

After managing to make it through to an ascended spirit, was he really going to be wiped out and turned to dust by that malicious moonlight like Qiu Sha?

Why?

Why did a weapon that could be tamed by a human represent the will of heaven? Why did it determine who was a sage and who was a demon? Why had it destroyed a year’s provisions that a whole county had worked hard to produce? Why had it burned full moon scabs onto innocent little children whose lives had had to be bought back for a hundred thousand white spirits?

Was it just because it could bully those who were weaker but feared those who were stronger?

Xi Ping unconsciously curled up, futilely using his hands to shield the center of his brow—the shard of Zhaoting was still in his spirit...

Wait—hands? How come he still had hands?

With difficulty, Xi Ping opened his eyes and found to his astonishment that his limbs were all intact and hadn't been dissolved by the Silver Moon.

Now that the incomprehensible harsh light had passed, everything around him was pitch-black. With a thought, the spiritual energy in the area immediately came to crowd fawningly around him, removing the lotus leaves pressing on him. That feeling of being bound, as if he were suffocating, had also vanished. The sky was as clear as if it had been rinsed clean. After burning all night, the moon seemed to have exhausted itself. It was hidden behind the clouds. And dawn had yet to break. The Sanyue Mountains were as peaceful as if nothing had happened.

Xi Ping briefly exchanged a blank look with Zhuoming, who had fallen dozens of zhang away.

Like a snake, Zhuoming's neck stretched out to the height of a room, sending out his head with its paramount spiritual sense to scan the surroundings for a long moment. "Xiang Rong's aura seems to have disappeared."

"Huh?" said Xi Ping.

"Look for yourself."

Xi Ping tentatively extended his consciousness and glanced around. He saw that the empty Sanyue Spiritual Mountains were full of ruins. All the good-for-nothing Xiang family "masters" were hiding outside of the spiritual mountains. Tonight, if the common people in Dongheng City looked up, they might be able to see more immortals than streetlamps.

And Xiang Rong... that huge gas lamp of full moon divinity, was gone without a trace.

Just then, he heard yet another crack from the mountain ridge. Xi Ping immediately floated into the air on a fallen lotus leaf.

Then he found to his astonishment that the stones that had snapped off earlier were rapidly returning to position, the cracks closing up—in hardly any time, the summit had once again firmly come together.

Next it was the West Peak, the most heavily damaged Central Peak... The tumbled boulders were being drawn by some invisible force to resume to their original positions; the collapsed palaces and towers were methodically restored; among the spiritual mountains, the great mountain array that had burst altogether automatically “sewed itself up,” and the ruined inscriptions and arrays all returned... Finally, the Silver Moon slowly ascended above the Central Peak.

The great divine tool of the mountains was whole and unharmed, as if it had never been wedged into the middle of the mountain. Now that it had stripped off the heartless lotus, it even seemed “cleaner” than before.

The wounded spiritual mountains seemed to have obtained plentiful nourishment. They were healing themselves in an orderly fashion.

What was nourishing the spiritual mountains?

Xi Ping remembered what he had seen inside the Unbound Furnace, and a possibility suddenly occurred to him. He turned to look at Zhuoming. The senior inside the furnace had shaken her head at him then, so he'd thought he had guessed wrong—

Zhuoming sighed softly. “As expected. Once the full moon sage has vanquished the spiritual mountains, the next step is to be absorbed by the spiritual mountains.”

“Wait,” said Xi Ping, “I remember that the full moon sages before didn’t disappear as soon as they crossed the boundary. Especially your sect’s founder, the Black Emperor. After the spiritual mountains formed, didn’t he go have a bout of wrestling with the Heartless Lotus?”

The corners of Zhuoming’s mouth once again extended a little further toward the roots of his ears. A voice came from behind Xi Ping. “My guess is that’s because the sages didn’t barbecue their Ways of the Heart.”

Xi Ping turned and dodged a lotus flower that had suddenly grown a mouth and started talking. The lotus brushed against him as it returned to the pond. Its petals were ice cold and slippery, as if there was some sticky liquid on them.

“The full moon sage came first, then came the spiritual mountains,” a lotus leaf said softly. “The spiritual mountains were born because of the full moon sage. So after the sage has ascended, if along comes another new full moon sage with a Way of the Heart perfectly copied from the first one’s, will the spiritual mountains take him for their new master? Or will they take him for a part of themselves?”

“Heeheeheehee,” a lotus flower laughed so hard that water sprayed all around it. “I made a bet with the lotus leaves, and I won.”

“You already knew...” said Xi Ping.

“I didn’t know. The flowers and the leaves made a bet. I was just waiting to see. You, me, the Late-Autumn Red... people like us always have to bet if we want to win, don’t we?” Zhuoming took a deep breath. “Ah, how grateful I am to the sect leader for giving

himself up to the spiritual mountains. Sanyue's spiritual energy is even denser than before."

"I'm so happy!" said the mouth on the leaf.

"So happy..." Countless quiet voices sounded in the lotus pond, the clamor making layer upon layer of echoes. The echoing made Xi Ping break out in gooseflesh.

He watched as the Sanyue Spiritual Mountains were repaired as good as new in hardly any time. The towering shadows of the mountains still fell, impenetrably black, on Dongheng City. This was still the most well-favored place on earth.

Even though Sanyue was chaotic and preposterous, geniuses still came from all over to gather here. In a hundred years, in a thousand, perhaps another person would overcome their rivals and become the person in the immortal palace on the Central Peak who was closest to a full moon position... The cycle would have come full circle.

"You have what you wanted, and I also have what I wanted." Zhuoming had his back to Xi Ping. He waved a hand at him. "We can call this collaboration a success. Oh, right, I still have a question."

Xi Ping hadn't caught up yet. "Sure, what is it?"

Zhuoming said, "I sensed that you were thinking about me just now. What were you thinking?"

Xi Ping froze. "Oh, with your shifu being carried out horizontally and Sanyue in the state it's in, I was wondering what you were going to do in the future."

Zhuoming, with his back to him, didn't move a muscle.

“But with your cultivation level, without Xuanwu controlling you, you can hold yourself upright no matter where you go.” Xi Ping also landed back in the lotus pond and pulled the Unbound Furnace out from the water to put it into his mustard seed. As if he meant nothing by it, he asked in passing, “You mentioned Qiu Sha just now. What, did you know her?”

On Zhuoming’s face, turned away from him, the features gradually disappeared, until only one mouth remained. His eyes had quietly moved onto a lotus leaf and were scouting outward from layer upon layer of leaves, peering at Xi Ping’s back. His ears had moved separately onto lotus stalks underwater. With the densely packed flowers and leaves to screen them, they slowly drew near to Xi Ping’s ankle, listening to the beating pulse in his leg.

Vivid and warm...

“I did,” his mouth said. “As soon as the Late-Autumn Red entered the country, the Silver Moon sensed her. She was a parasitic vine, living by absorbing the essence of others. She was very weak right after becoming an ascended spirit and urgently needed to ‘eat her fill,’ get some useful powers.”

Xi Ping paused, slowly straightening up in the water.

“I also ‘fed’ Xiang Zhao to her.” Zhuoming, with his neck stretched out to practically half the height of an Azure Dragon Tower, slowly turned around, “looking” down from on high at Xi Ping—though there was only a mouth left on his face. “She gave me something just as good in return. Do you want to see it?”

A chill crept up Xi Ping’s back, but after going through the ascended spirit tribulation and being pursued by a full moon sage, his spiritual sense was unavoidably a little blunted. Its warning came too late now. There was a sharp pain in his chest. His newborn ascended

spirit body split open from the inside as bloody lotus stalks bored through it.

The lotus stalks spread over his whole body, firmly trapping him within themselves like a spiderweb, then mercilessly pierced the center of his brow.

Xi Ping's consciousness immediately tried to flee, but the next moment, it was as if he had hit an invisible net. His consciousness ached like it had when Xiang Rong had smashed his body outside of the Unbound Furnace; it felt as though he had been struck by lightning.

A flower said, "I know where your hidden bones are attached."

A lotus leaf, giggling, said, "Caught you."

All at once, the lotus stalks wrapped around Xi Ping dragged him down underwater. Hands as icy cold as a dead person's reached out to cup his face. "When the Luwu came to this country, Sanyue sent people to investigate the Luwu's background. I saw the portrait of Zhou Ying that they obtained. Why do the lower halves of your faces look so much alike?"

Xi Ping couldn't speak, but he involuntarily recalled scenes of himself going to Prince Zhuang Manor as a child to tease the cats and dogs and make himself obnoxious.

"Oh, I see, it comes naturally," a lotus flower grimly said in a low voice. "He has so many things by nature, has you by nature. How hateful."

Soul...searching...

"It's not soul-searching, and it isn't those low-grade grit projections," a mouth on a lotus root said.

Xi Ping had already been pulled down to the bottom of the lotus pond. From the corner of his eye, he saw a cluster of cold flames.

A flame burning in the water?

“Yes, that’s it.” Zhuoming gave a profound sigh. “This is what I got from the Late-Autumn Red. The heart of the Unbound Furnace.”

CHAPTER 137 - Eternal Flame (19)

The Unbound Furnace...also has a heart?

“It does.” Zhuoming’s voice was a little dull in the water. “Only the Late-Autumn Red knew... but that madwoman was a hothead who only knew how to fight and kill. She didn’t understand a thing about toolmaking. She couldn’t give me a clear account of where this furnace heart came from.”

As he spoke, the lotus stalks raised Xi Ping’s hand.

Pressing his hand down, Zhuoming reached into his mustard seed and took out the Unbound Furnace, which he had just put away.

“I’ll show you.” Like a child showing off his toys, Zhuoming excitedly swam several circles around Xi Ping. Below the waist, he was wrapped in layer after layer of long stalks. “The fire of this furnace heart can’t be put out with water or sand. If you crush it under ice blocks, it can keep burning inside the ice... While it’s useful, the way it just keeps on doing exactly what it wants is very loathsome to me. All four great spiritual mountains had the wool pulled over their eyes. On the day that Lancang got the Unbound Furnace, it was incomplete.”

A lotus stalk bored into the flames. The calm flames didn’t so much as tremble before they had “melted” the lotus stalk.

Next, the furnace heart’s fire changed color. Before Xi Ping could get a clear look at what was inside the flame, he was pulled by Zhuoming into the big cauldron of the Unbound Furnace. The golden light inside the Unbound Furnace burned brightly—but this time, what was inside the golden light wasn’t an image of a woman, but a view over the thousand peaks of the Sanyue Mountain Range, and then, visible at a glance from this ultimate height, the

Slumbering Dragon Sea, which touched the sky; the better part of Western Chu's territory was right before your eyes.

Xi Ping: "..."

What the hell? A complete view of all the scenic spots in Western Chu, welcoming visitors from all around?

Presently, this newborn ascended spirit at last belatedly realized that the territory within the furnace just happened to be about the range that an ascended spirit's consciousness could cover—this was Zhuoming's point of view!

In other words, this baldy could use the furnace heart's fire to merge his consciousness into the Unbound Furnace without anyone knowing. It was as if Xiang Rong had been "seeking enlightenment" in Zhuoming's spirit.

That wretched old man had spent every day strenuously seeking, "bowing and scraping" to the cauldron, coming up empty for two hundred years; then, just when he was on the verge of falling apart, he had suddenly "had a flash of inspiration" and found the exit on this path leading to a full moon position... and the upshot was, the "inspiration" was a load of crap made up by his monstrous nominal shizhi!

Spying from the mountaintop next door, Xuanwu had thought that the sect leader was pretty much cooked, and he could at last resurface with the Silver Moon in his grasp.

Inside the pot, Xiang Rong had thought that he was doing great and had deliberately put on a show of nearly expiring for Xuanwu's benefit, luring him into exposing his ambition, tricking him out of half of his essence, preparing to remove future troubles forever...

After all the work those two great personages had done, grappling with heaven for their destinies and with others for power, it turned out that it had all been a puppet show put on by the East Peak's bald orphan.

And Xi Ping's part in this had been to act as the pollinating bee that had brought the Heartless Lotus into the Unbound Furnace!

Zhuoming was completely rotten!

Zhuoming laughed and batted away the Unbound Furnace. "Eight hundred years ago, Xiang Rong turned a blind eye on Xiang Zhao and those other good-for-nothings and let Hui Xiangjun slip away. That 'potted heart demon' at Lancang had an even more mystical intellect. He spent centuries holding on to the Unbound Furnace and didn't even manage to boil eggs, then ended up dying confused and bewildered at the hands of a mortal. Finally, this sect leader of ours got shoved up to the pinnacle of the shed skin stage by the Sanyue Mountains. Once he reached that boundary, he realized that he had lost something. After all that hard work, he had brought back the Unbound Furnace without its furnace heart. He spent every day strenuously immersed in it... Oh, the spiritual mountains, with all their incessant ostentation—have they gone blind? They've ended up with a crowd of idiots filling the highest positions. Haha!"

The lotus stalks that had burrowed into all of Xi Ping's meridians pushed and pulled, shaking him constantly like a puppet on strings in time to Zhuoming's laughter. He paid it no mind. While Zhuoming expressed his cynicism, Xi Ping's injured consciousness took the opportunity to quickly retreat to his spirit—he still had Zhaoting.

He really didn't want to alarm shifu, but...

But as soon as he extended his consciousness toward Zhaoting, he was once again attacked by a pain like being ripped apart. Xi Ping's vision darkened.

If a consciousness had physical form, his would probably have been rolling around on the floor by now.

“Oh, I guess you can’t find your shifu. What a pity.” A snow-white lotus leaf unfurled above Xi Ping’s head, and Zhuoming’s features emerged on it. “I dare not provoke the Master of Xuanyin’s Flying Jade Peak, who cleaved the East Sea with his sword. Luckily you’ve already cut him off yourself. However worried General Zhi is, I suppose he still couldn’t bear to hack at his own disciple’s consciousness with Zhaoting?”

Xi Ping had just given his shifu a performance of being completely in control of the situation. Naturally he wasn’t going to let Zhi Xiu see him scuttling around the mountain pursued by a full moon sage. But he had used his own consciousness to block Zhaoting’s line of sight. Why wouldn’t shifu know that he had been trapped?

But before he could think carefully about it, Xi Ping felt the invisible cage holding his consciousness draw tighter and tighter. All his fine hairs stood on end.

That baldy was jealous of his long hair and was trying to snatch his body!

“Nonsense, I don’t do that kind of thing!” Zhuoming resolutely denied, pulling a long face. “Who wants your smelly skin sack? There’s nothing fun about plucking hair, I got tired of it ages ago. I...”

The sharp pain of his consciousness tearing ran through Xi Ping for the second time that day!

Finally, Xi Ping could take no more. He screamed aloud.

Zhuoming’s eyes curved. “I just want to move you to a nice place...”

Snatching a body meant an external consciousness forcing its way into someone's spirit to seize their skin sack; the Heartless Lotus, however, could simply steal a person's consciousness.

While the consciousness could be sent out, its "roots" remained with the true body. Even when it was probing somewhere else, temporarily separating itself from the true body, the inextricable connection was always there. It was like a person's gaze, which could be sent far away. What Zhuoming was doing amounted to simply gouging out his eyes.

When his body had been destroyed by the heavenly tribulation, the pain had only lasted a moment; there had been a limit. The pain of his consciousness being torn, however, was a hundred times harder to endure.

The moment he was wrested from his spirit, Xi Ping "saw" a small lotus seal appear over each of his features. He understood—

He hadn't been taken in while inside the Unbound Furnace. The Unbound Furnace was only a sanctuary that had protected him from the impact of the battle of the great masters. His flesh and bones could regrow themselves because of the hidden bones; that had little to do with the Unbound Furnace. Zhuoming had had no chance to tamper with that. Anyway, in order to light the furnace fire, he had activated the reincarnation wood seedlings he had left on the Central Peak. The better part of his consciousness had been dispersed outside. It would have been hard for Zhuoming to trap him.

But just now, he had been trapped by Xiang Rong within the Sanyue Mountains, and all the reincarnation wood in the vicinity had been wiped out. He hadn't dared to send a sliver of consciousness outward, and he hadn't dared to let shifu see. The moment Xiang Rong had merged with the Sanyue Mountains, Xi Ping had thought

he was about to be swept by the Silver Moon. His mind had been shaken, his senses failing. Zhuoming had taken advantage of that moment to plant the lotus seal over his senses without him noticing. That damn baldy of a Heartless Lotus could simply become a parasite within his consciousness. No wonder Zhaoting hadn't noticed!

This was just retribution. He had used Xiang Rong to dodge the heavenly tribulation, and now someone else had used Xiang Rong to deal with him.

But his understanding came too late.

The next moment, Xi Ping's consciousness left his body altogether. His body folded up lifelessly, the spiritual light around it vanishing.

Zhuoming took a deep breath. Joy appeared on his face. Then he unfolded his hands. There was a new white lotus flower bud cupped in them. He cautiously peeled apart the still furled petals slightly and glanced inside. At the empty heart of the flower, a tiny Xi Ping was lying unconscious.

The leaves and flowers in the water drew near one after another, growing eyes to peer inside.

“Shh—” Zhuoming batted aside a lotus root that was hesitantly reaching out. Very gently, he replaced the flower petals. “Don't disturb him. Be calm.”

“Be calm...”

“Quiet...”

The flowers and leaves passed the word on among themselves.

“Zhou Ying is going to hate me. What should I do?” Though Zhuoming was saying “What should I do?”, he still couldn’t hold back a quiet laugh. “Hahaha, what should I do? He’s mine now.”

The lotus stalks continued to drag Xi Ping’s body downward, then abandoned him without regret, burying his body at the bottom of the pond. Blood stained half the lotus pond red.

Just then, Zhuoming sensed something. He floated out of the lotus pond, craned his neck, and concentrated on something in the distance. Then his features began to twist chaotically. He whispered “Annoying,” hid the new lotus bud inside his clothes, and retreated into the water.

The stone sides of the lotus pond began to quiver. The uppermost layer turned down, revealing layer upon layer of inscriptions hidden beneath it, then slid into the water. Then the whole lotus pond rolled up like a painted scroll and shrank into the earth, burrowing into the East Peak.

Its original location became deserted.

After about an incense stick of time had passed, the West Peak’s Elder Xiang Ning finally descended on the East Peak along with the Central Peak’s four great ascended spirits, the West Peak’s Xiang Wenqing, and other such people.

The whole crowd, grim-faced, released their consciousnesses and patrolled the surroundings.

“Shifu,” Xiang Wenqing spoke first, “the East Peak’s prohibition has been nearly destroyed. There’s no sign of anyone here.”

Another West Peak ascended spirit said, “I remember that Elder Xuanwu... that Xuanwu had a direct disciple who never showed himself. Where has he gone? Is he also dead?”

The chief disciple of the sect leader from the Central Peak scanned Xiang Ning's expression and tentatively asked, "May I be permitted to ask, elder, what abnormality is there about the Silver Moon?"

Xiang Ning ignored him.

He didn't respond until Xiang Wenqing put in a word from beside him: "Shifu, what should we do now?"

Then Xiang Ning finally said, "The spiritual mountains have already repaired themselves. The only change is in the Elders' Hall on the Central Principal Peak. The sect leader's life tablet is intact, but the writing on it has all disappeared. Xuanwu's life tablet is still there, but it has cracked and dimmed, indicating that his boundary has dropped. He has fled to escape punishment. His whereabouts are unknown."

Xiang Wenqing said, "If the sect leader were injured or... His life tablet ought to have cracked or turned to dust. How could the stone remain intact while the writing disappeared?"

Xiang Ning raised his head and looked toward the valley. At present, the moisture in the valley was a great deal more plentiful than usual, and the spiritual energy was nearly overflowing. Xiang Ning already had his guesses, he just didn't mention them. He said, "That's right. If his life tablet hasn't broken, then he is well. As for the writing—the venerable sect leader has become a full moon sage, the only full moon sage among the four great spiritual mountains. Can common reason contemplate his state? Our founder the Black Emperor also left no life tablet in the Elders' Hall."

None of the ascended spirits were stupid. They all had their own thoughts. As soon as they heard the elder's excuse, they knew this boded ill for the sect leader's condition. But there were threats at all the borders, and Sanyue, protecting such precious territory, had lost

two of its great masters at once and was left with only the West Peak's Xiang Ning, who wasn't very stable at his boundary. The West Peak's elder himself felt uncertain. Apart from pretending to feel secure in his backing, what else could he do?

“Issue a notice saying that Xuanwu has lost his mind and become a demon. After being injured in battle with the sect leader, his boundary dropped. He has betrayed the spiritual mountains. In order to consolidate his level, the sect leader has gone into seclusion and will not be seeing visitors from the outside in the near future. We hope that our fellow cultivators coming to make inquiries will understand.” Xiang Ning paused. Gently grinding his teeth, he said, “There is plenty of time ahead. When the sect leader leaves seclusion, he will certainly—return their visits.”

All the ascended spirits went to obey orders. Xiang Ning turned back to glance at the grim and desolate East Peak. His lips were tightly pursed. After a moment, he said “fiend” with a quiet sigh and soared off into the clouds.

On the deserted summit of the East Peak, a cluster of grass slowly turned dark red and moved on its own, beginning to shiver. A juvenile auspicious creature, a spiritual sparrow, must have thought that there were worms in the grass and dove in, hopping around all over in search.

Suddenly, like snakes emerging from their holes, blades of grass whose color had changed wrapped around the spiritual sparrow. Without even having a chance to cry out, the little sparrow was rapidly torn in half by the malicious grass. Blood and feathers were blown far away by the wind.

“Xuanwu didn't die...” said a whisper in the grass. “Xuanwu actually didn't die.”

In the lotus pond that had sunk into the mountain, Zhuoming grabbed a lotus stalk extending from his waist and fiercely bit into it. The lotus stalk began to bleed. The flowers and leaves around him began to holler in chorus.

Zhuoming's features contorted, whether in pain or in anger. He wildly ravaged the flowers, stalks, and leaves in the lotus pond, until he inadvertently came to the white lotus bud holding Xi Ping. The lunatic froze. The hand squeezing the flower bud shook for a moment as though convulsing. Then he screamed, tossed the flower bud aside, and violently smashed his own head against the edge of the lotus pond.

Boom—boom—boom—

Xi Ping awoke to the sound of dull thudding. The acrid reek of blood nearly made him throw up.

As soon as he opened his eyes, he found that he was inside a “palace,” surrounded by dazzling whiteness. When he took a look, he found that the “palace” had no roof beams, and the “ground” and “walls” were covered with indistinct channels.

These seemed to be... flower petals!

He was inside an enormous lotus flower.

Xi Ping at first wanted to sit up, but as soon as he moved, he felt as if he had been wrenched apart. He fell back down.

After Zhuoming had uprooted him from his body, he felt that every last joint was in the wrong place.

Mentally paying his respects to eighteen generations of Zhuoming's ancestors, Xi Ping crawled a few chi forward, gritting his teeth.

A consciousness unprotected by a body was extremely fragile. It would break at once if something pressed on it. At the same time, it was also extremely “pliable”—if he could only imagine his own appearance, he could make his consciousness appear human.

Enduring intense pain, he got back his hands, feet, limbs, and neck in the process of crawling. As he moved, his twisted and deformed joints returned to their original positions bit by bit. When he had crawled seven or eight zhang away, Xi Ping had finally “put himself back together” in full.

He had truly exhausted all his energy. He lay where he was to rest. Before he could catch his breath, the flower bud palace suddenly experienced an “earthquake.”

Before, when Zhuoming had an attack of madness, he could be forced into calm by a pill from Xuanwu. But this time there was no one to attend to him. His fit went on and on. He had already smashed his bald head into a bloody pulp. He had no hair left to pull out, so his fingers embedded themselves in his scalp, as if trying to plow something out of the flesh and blood. Flesh and blood flew everywhere, but he had yet to vent his spleen. He grabbed a lotus next to him, opened his mouth, and bit it.

The stalk of the lotus flower snapped at this. He tore the flower petals to pieces, and they sank in the pond. A stream of bloody foam began to spread outward.

Inside the lotus flower, Xi Ping heard horrifying shrieks coming from all directions. With a splash, blood seeped into the cracks of the “flower bud palace,” pushing a bunch of bubbles roiling through the blood toward him. Each bubble was the same size as him.

Xi Ping, having just put himself back together, was caught off guard. A bubble came crashing right into his arms and broke when it hit.

From out of it fell a person with wide open eyes, bleeding from the face, and nearly kissed him!

“Fuck!” said Xi Ping.

He was so startled that all his limbs became nimble. He scrambled to his feet and scuttled back several chi at once. Recovering from his shock, he looked over. The figure of the devil that had tried to take advantage of him flickered, then disappeared in the blood.

Each of the bubbles amid the blood burst, and each one contained a person dripping with blood. There were those with missing limbs whose deaths had been unusually brutal, who disappeared as soon as they saw the light, and there were those who seemed not to have fully died when they left the bloody bubble, and only disappeared after struggling for a while.

Xi Ping stepped in blood and felt unbearable disgust, but he was only a consciousness right now. He had no powers. He couldn't fly. He could only turn tail and run deeper into the “flower bud temple.”

Suddenly, he caught a glimpse of dark red out of the corner of his eye. Xi Ping turned his head and saw that at the depths of the “ground” inside the “palace” was a blood-colored “tunnel” connecting it to the underground.

That... ought to be where the stalk grew.

The place where the flower bud was connected to the stalk had just enough space to let him pass through. It was pitch-black below, the bottom invisible. He didn't know what was there.

Xi Ping hesitated for a moment and approached. But it turned out that there was sticky fluid around the stalk. It was so slippery that he couldn't get any purchase on it. He missed his footing and

toppled backward, slipping down right past the join between the flower and the stalk.

These tied-together lotus stalks were very long. He fell for ages. Xi Ping rolled this way and that through the narrow lotus stalks while outside Zhuoming was wailing and shouting in his fit. Suddenly, he heard a strong heartbeat from one side. Xi Ping immediately kicked in the opposite direction, tossing himself into one side of a fork, rolling toward the source of that heartbeat.

With a *bang*, Xi Ping bumped into something and nearly got his spine snapped. He flew straight out and fell into gloom.

Everything here was smooth and slippery, with many openings big and small. Xi Ping struggled to his feet and realized that this might be a segment of lotus root.

Each opening contained a “person.” There were men and women. From their attire, the majority of them were from Sanyue’s inner sect.

These people were doing all kinds of things. Some were attacking thin air; some were tracing hand seals, as though drawing talismans; some were deranged, seeking sensuous pleasures, making all kinds of lewd motions... Each was doing their own thing. When Xi Ping made so much noise falling in, no one gave him a glance.

Xi Ping passed through the crowd. He saw that these people had vacant looks in their eyes. Each and every one was like the folk legend about stone tape ghosts, the dead who couldn’t accept their own deaths recorded in stone and played back, repeating the same motions over and over.

“Hey.”

Xi Ping tried holding back a man who was just wielding a sword empty-handed, but the man didn't react. He maintained his original posture, stabbing forward. As soon as Xi Ping let go, he completed his sword move according to pattern.

Xi Ping thought that this scene was exceedingly strange. "Are they real or fake...?"

"Real," a somewhat familiar voice responded.

Xi Ping abruptly turned around and saw an unusually tall figure leaning against a nearby opening in the lotus root, with pitch-black hair as long as an ordinary person was tall hanging behind her. This figure that stood out above all the others still seemed to be exquisite and tasteful—

Xi Ping quickly backed up half a step. "... Qiu Sha."

Qiu Sha, whom he had seen crushed to dust by the Silver Moon with his own eyes.

CHAPTER 138 - Eternal Flame (20)

Qiu Sha looked him over from top to bottom. Her manner was fairly polite. “You’re a good-looking young fellow. You look like you’re from Wan. Which of Xuanyin’s mountains are you from? Have you seen me before?”

Xi Ping: “...”

In Tao County, he had arranged for her scheme to fail at the last moment. He had been prepared to take a beating, but it turned out that he had worried for nothing. She didn’t recognize him.

That was fair. Thinking back, Qiu Sha hadn’t seen his true appearance. The reason she had easily been able to discover his existence back in Tao County was that they were both inheritors of accompanying plants, and at the time, her cultivation level had been higher than his.

Now they were both in this half-dead condition, and they had both been ascended spirits “while living.” If she hadn’t happened to see the reincarnation wood earlier, it in fact wouldn’t be so easy for her to recognize him.

“I have heard a great deal about you. There is no one among the four great spiritual mountains who hasn’t heard your name.” Xi Ping gave an embarrassed laugh, then added, “I am a disciple of Xuanyin’s Flying Jade Peak. You may not have heard of it, fellow cultivator.”

If he had gone right to mentioning his shifu, due to Southern He’s Lancang, Qiu Sha probably would have known of him. But as far as she was concerned, Flying Jade Peak was too “young.” It had only obtained a master after Zhi Xiu had become an ascended spirit, and

furthermore, because of its master's laziness, the mountain had never been formally opened.

“Just as long as it's not Moon Plated Peak. It's all this mountain and that mountain over there at Xuanyin, I can't tell them apart.” As expected, Qiu Sha had absolutely no understanding of Southern Wan, where late-autumn red didn't grow. Among all the Xuanyin Mountains, the only person she knew of was Lin Chi. She waved a hand. “Why has someone from Xuanyin come all this way, and how did you end up in that bald donkey's hands?”

Xi Ping said, “Well, Sanyue's sect leader became a full moon sage and fought with the East Peak's High Elder Xuanwu...”

“What?” Qiu Sha suddenly straightened from her indolent slouch. “You're saying Xiang Rong is a full moon sage?”

Xi Ping had a thought: Qiu Sha didn't know, which mean that her not recognizing him wasn't because she'd just happened not to see the reincarnation wood; it was because she had no connection to the outside world at all.

In other words, all those mouths everywhere didn't belong to the consciousnesses of Qiu Sha and the others the Heartless Lotus had swallowed... they were the result of that baldy babbling on his own.

Truly insane...

But that was just as well. This way, he would have room to maneuver.

Not turning a hair, Xi Ping picked up: “Right. The sky lit up in the middle of the night, and Western Chu's borders began to shake. Each nation's shed skins are already holding the line along the borders, and my colleagues and I were the first group to infiltrate the Sanyue Mountains on orders from the sect.”

Then, keeping an eye on Qiu Sha's reaction, using nine parts truth and one part falsehood, he described the whole series of events concerning Xiang Rong's battle with Xuanwu and Xiang Rong merging with the spiritual mountains, omitting all of his own improbable actions in the Unbound Furnace. He only said that he had been hoodwinked by Zhuoming, that he had collaborated with that bald lunatic in order to infiltrate the Sanyue Mountains and taken the Heartless Lotus into the Unbound Furnace, the upshot being that after managing to escape with his life, the bald donkey had attacked him from behind, and so on and so on—using Lin Zhaoli as a model, he turned himself into a naive idiot from the remote depths of the inner sect.

Qiu Sha didn't speak for a long moment after hearing this. Finally, she gave a quiet laugh and said, "That deranged little whelp really knows what he's doing. To think that the furnace heart can be used like that."

Seeing Xi Ping glare at her, Qiu Sha slowly coiled up her hair, of which there was too much to get your hand around. "Do you suppose that just anyone who snuck into the Unbound Furnace would be able to trick Xiang Rong? Those old bastards have longer lives than tortoises. They spend all their free time facing the wall and examining themselves. If a thought that flashes across their spirit has a trace of wrongness about it, they'll notice it at once. That kind of work is painstaking, full of risk at every step. The Heartless Lotus truly is a monster with a thousand hearts and a thousand faces... It seems that I was right to give him the furnace fire."

"Well, regardless," Xi Ping said, "I think we ought to think of a way to get out. We can't stay..."

He shut his mouth, because Qiu Sha was giving him a strange look of wonder and ridicule.

“Listen, young fellow, what way are you cultivating? The way of the decorative vase? Have all your brains gone into looking pretty?” Qiu Sha said. “You’re already dead, haven’t you realized it yet? ‘Think of a way to get out’ –and go where? To your ancestral tombs?”

“What do you mean?” said Xi Ping. “Hey, where are you going, wait!”

After listening to his miserable experiences and foolishness, Qiu Sha had determined that this little pretty boy wasn’t very bright. She had suddenly felt extremely bored and lost interest in talking to him.

She crouched down and squeezed into the opening in the lotus root.

Xi Ping quickly followed.

Inside the lotus root’s long opening, there were even more “stone tapes,” some of them with half their bodies already merged with the lotus root, leaving only a segment dangling out, like freakish sculptures.

Aside from Xi Ping, with his hidden bones attached to his consciousness, when an ordinary cultivator’s body was destroyed, their consciousness would also be destroyed. Only when the consciousness had been concentrated to the ascended spirit level could it live outside of the body—that was precisely why this level was called “ascended spirit.”

But even an ascended spirit consciousness couldn’t survive long unless it could snatch a body. Any random nobody who came along to do battle could send them off by drawing a bit of spiritual energy and making waves. And even if they snatched a body, they could still only “cling to life.” After getting a new body, with their original body’s spirit destroyed, they would never again be able to cultivate,

and their lifespan would be a little shorter than even an ordinary mortal's.

While this “rash and thoughtless” young ascended spirit seemed quite dim-witted, there was still a difference between a good-looking fool and an ordinary idiot; after all, one could act as a decorative vase, while the other could only serve as a spittoon.

Though Qiu Sha held him in some contempt, watching him shamelessly tail after her, she actually didn't get angry.

Perhaps because she was already “dead,” she was a little milder than she had been “in life.” She actually said more: “The consciousnesses that the Heartless Lotus collects are completely severed from their original bodies. Even if you return to your body, your cultivation will still be lost. It would amount to possessing yourself—and anyway, you can't get back. This portion of your consciousness has already been subsumed by the Heartless Lotus. Rather than saying that you are yourself, it would be more accurate to say that the current ‘you’ is only a split off portion of consciousness in that baldy's mind... If he wants, he can know what you're saying or doing at any time. I advise you to be a little more careful about what you say.”

Xi Ping: “...”

Making an inference by analogy, he quickly realized that while the “Qiu Sha” in front of him could be called the remaining consciousness of the already dead Qiu Sha, she could also be called a consciousness split off by Zhuoming!

On the surface, it currently appeared that he was talking to Qiu Sha. But in reality, it could be seen as a conversation between two Zhuomings.

“Don’t be scared,” Qiu Sha soothed him, insultingly. “That baldy would rather watch you organize a bunch of stone tapes to stage a rebellion against him than control your consciousness. A consciousness is an extremely fragile thing. If he so much as touches it, your consciousness will be completely destroyed. What would be interesting about that? Here, look around, all of these are consciousness he’s keeping around.”

Just in time, Xi Ping bumped into a hand dangling down from overhead. When he looked up, there was a consciousness like a hanged ghost staring fixedly at him, half its face merged with the lotus root wall.

“Of the consciousnesses that come into the Heartless Lotus, mortals can live ten or twenty years, half-immortals thirty or forty. I’ve heard that an established foundation with an especially firm consciousness once lived for a hundred years. As for ascended spirits... there’s only you and me here, so I don’t know. While ‘living,’ some of them raised cries of lamentation or swore all day, and others had delusions of trying to escape like you. Still others gave up and abandoned themselves to despair. No matter what they did, that baldy hasn’t interfered. Only when these consciousnesses die altogether will they be slowly digested by the lotus root.”

Xi Ping felt the part of his scalp that the hand had touched go numb. “So what’s so interesting about this?”

“I don’t know what’s so interesting about it. My guess is that he can’t stop.” Qiu Sha spread her arms. Her arms and legs were truly too long; each and every one of her movements had an unusual kind of grace. “You must have heard of the ancient demonic god called the Heartless Lotus. He was crazy, his head as cracked as a pomegranate, and he had a paramount spiritual sense who would get lines mixed up while reading. Supposedly this baldy was stuffed into the Heartless Lotus by his deadbeat shizun so he could either inherit it or die. Though he managed to make do and survive, it was

still rather forced—he doesn't actually have such great natural gifts. He was born with only one consciousness. After inheriting the Heartless Lotus, he was cut apart into many pieces. So my guess is that maybe he's desperately collecting consciousnesses to try to fill in these lotus hearts."

As she spoke, Qiu Sha had already familiarly walked into the depths of the lotus root. She muttered, "Only when there are other people in the lotus hearts to act as contrast can he find himself, even if the people he grabs spend all day saying they'll fuck his ancestors... Forget it, if you don't understand lunatics, then you don't understand. You seem harmless and naive. You don't even seem to understand ordinary people very well—ah, you were right, he really has got the Unbound Furnace!"

Xi Ping followed the direction of her gaze and saw that in the depths of the lotus root was a very big empty space. The heartbeat he had heard before seemed to be coming from here. The blood red "wall" throbbed rapidly, and there was even a mural on it. The mural was of a flame the height of a person, with the vague figure of a person inside it.

The figure belonged to a Chu woman of average height. She was only tall enough to reach Qiu Sha's chest, so Qiu Sha bent down and drew close to the mural, unblinking, as if she wanted to dig that figure out of the wall.

"She has a form now, doesn't she?" It was unclear whether Qiu Sha was talking to Xi Ping or to herself. "She didn't before... Look at her, you can even vaguely see her features!"

Xi Ping said, "Who? What is this?"

"It's the projection of her Way of the Heart." As if afraid of startling the person in the mural, Qiu Sha kept her voice very low. "After the Heartless Lotus swallows a consciousness, he'll digest the Way of

the Heart very slowly. This way, the projection of the Way of the Heart will remain on the lotus root. That useless baldy can't even eat shit while it's warm. He's too slow. It's been over two years since he got the furnace heart from me, and he still hasn't fully grasped the furnace fire. Now that he has the Unbound Furnace itself, I see that he's finally understood a bit."

Xi Ping's eyes flashed slightly in the darkness. Putting on Lin Zhaoli's constantly clueless expression, he asked a string of questions: "What? This is Senior Hui Xiangjun's Way of the Heart? Shouldn't her Way of the Heart be in her vital weapon, the Unbound Furnace? And what do you mean by 'hasn't fully grasped the furnace fire'? He even sent a full moon sage to his death, how can he not have fully grasped it? So in order to fully grasp it, would you..."

"You're so noisy. Shut up." Annoyed by his clamor, Qiu Sha shushed him.

She sat down cross-legged in front of the mural to watch that image on the mural with its indistinct features, waiting for the image to become reality, like a farmer waiting for the right weather conditions.

Xi Ping, as if he couldn't pick up social cues, once again opened his mouth to make himself annoying: "If her Way of the Heart has always been in your hands, why didn't you find her a suitable successor in the toolmaking way?"

Without so much as looking around, Qiu Sha softly said, "Scram."

There was a sinister glamor about her, oppressive, like a monstrous knife that had just been dug up from a fierce ghost's coffin. A figure that was too tall could easily give the impression of being "clumsy" or "big"; when others mentioned her, they always remembered how she "cut people down like melons" or acted "deranged and

arrogant” but forgot how she had nearly killed off half the ascended spirit masters in the cultivation world.

A-Xiang accidentally getting the Law Breaker had already been enough to make Qiu Sha want to kill her. Since she knew how important the furnace fire was, how could she have handed it over so easily to Zhuoming for the sake of killing Xiang Zhao?

Unless...

Xi Ping’s gaze fell on her back: she had expected that it would come to this.

She had known that if she kicked up such a big fuss, whether she succeeded or failed, Sanyue’s great divine tool would be certain to descend to the mortal world. She had known that she was certain to die, yet she had still staked everything on one throw. The lotus root heart of the Heartless Lotus was the grave she had prepared for herself.

This was no hothead who only knew how to fight and kill. This was an eight-century-old fiend.

“Senior,” Xi Ping said after a moment’s silence, imitating her soft voice, “since ancient times, no evil cultivator has become an ascended spirit. With you standing out like that among all the rest, you were sure to meet with resistance. Why didn’t you take it slow and steady from the start?”

Qiu Sha was silent for a while. She asked, “Did you just become an ascended spirit?”

Xi Ping agreed vaguely.

“Mortals hold opening your spiritual eyes to be the threshold for cultivation and believe that establishing a foundation completely

separates mortal from immortal. So do you know what an ‘ascended spirit’ is?”

Xi Ping really didn’t know. No sooner had he endured the ascended spirit heavenly tribulation than he had been hunted by a full moon sage. He hadn’t been crushed to death by the mountain, but instead he had been eaten by the lotus root. He hadn’t even had a chance to say a few words to his shifu. Where would he have found the time to stop and appreciate his cultivation level?

As soon as he thought this, he immediately felt very dejected. So he lowered his head and abandoned himself to self-pity.

But Qiu Sha thought that lowering his head meant he was at last feeling ashamed. She sneered. “How did you even end up as an ascended spirit?”

Xi Ping told the truth: “A shed skin elder pushed me through.”

Qiu Sha clicked her tongue on hearing this, only taking this to mean that he was of high birth.

But with her age and experiences, she wasn’t especially inclined to feel righteous indignation about injustices—these were the facts, resentment was only worthless self-pity.

While she sat upright facing the wall, the monstrous air about her faded considerably. Her figure wrapped in its plain robe was like a high mountain of jade. “Though an established foundation also has a Way of the Heart and an essence, only when you have passed the ascended spirit boundary can you be qualified to listen to heaven and earth, touch the Way of Heaven—rather than allowing your elders to feed them to you or reading the contradictory truisms in those useless ancient texts that have been copied this way and that.”

So that was what “putting inquiries to heaven and earth” meant!

When Xi Ping had just been starting out cultivation, he had boldly said to shifu “Everyone is always putting inquiries to heaven and earth, heaven and earth must be sick of it”... but it turned out that there were only a few people on earth who were qualified to ask.

“Let me ask you, who was it that said evil cultivators have been unable to become ascended spirits since ancient times?”

Xi Ping recalled what Beacon Luo at the Latent Cultivation Temple had taught. “It’s because common cultivators often lack resources...”

“Don’t talk nonsense,” Qiu Sha impatiently interrupted him. “Do you know how many cultivators there have been in the world these past thousands of years? If you had thrown a needle into the East Sea when the spiritual mountains formed and had each of those people scoop up a basin of water at random, they would have scooped up that needle by now. Is it so hard to become an ascended spirit? You haven’t seen any for yourself, so you’re that certain that there aren’t any? Do you think that those people are all as dim-witted as you?”

Xi Ping: “...”

Fair enough. He was a mighty ascended spirit, yet he was still parroting the established foundation Luo from the Latent Cultivation Temple. He had utterly humiliated Flying Jade Peak. He instantly didn’t dare to speak again.

“That cats and dogs live for a few decades, that mortals live for a hundred years, that spring flowers have an end, that evil cultivators are not acknowledged by the spiritual mountains and can only reach an established foundation,” Qiu Sha said, lifting her chin slightly, “these are all the sayings of heaven, the sayings of the spiritual mountains—like the ‘axioms’ of the Law Breaker.”

Xi Ping's eyes opened wide. In an instant, he was filled with enlightenment: the axioms of the Law Breaker were absolute, unless an axiom was broken!

If the spiritual mountains were an enormous Law Breaker, if these heavenly rules were like the Law Breaker's axioms... then that meant that if someone could only evade that rule and succeed in becoming an ascended spirit, the "heavenly rule" would be broken and lose effect!

"I was sure to die when I became an ascended spirit, but just you wait. After my death, ascended spirit evil cultivators will spring up like bamboo shoots after a spring rain. The blood moon will hang in the sky all the time. The Way of Heaven will collapse, and it will have started with me... That was her original intention in making the Law Breaker and the Riverward," Qiu Sha said softly but sonorously. "Late-autumn red is the guardian of eternal spring brocade. My Way of the Heart would follow wherever she desired—like fuck I'm going to take it slow and steady! Do you think I'm like you assholes in the spiritual mountains, only in it for personal gain, doing nothing but climbing toward the carrot the Way of Heaven has put in front of you?"

Xi Ping's scalp instantly prickled.

He had suddenly realized that Zhuoming was wrong. Late-autumn red was eternal spring brocade's accompanying plant; how could Qiu Sha fail to understand Hui Xiangjun's relic?

She understood only too well.

From the day she had come out into the world from the hidden realm, she had known what road she was going to walk, known how she would die... It was just like a cicada growing for years

underground then crying out as soon as it broke through the earth, singing its loudest no matter how destitute its circumstances.

Zhuoming had said that “heaven” and “earth” were locked in constant struggle. “Heaven” was the disciples of the full moon sages, and “earth” was the demonic gods that had lost by a narrow margin. Hui Xiangjun had inherited the eternal spring brocade’s Way of the Heart, so it seemed that she ought to belong to the “earth,” but... was that the truth?

Why was it that while the Unbound Furnace clearly had a furnace flame, Lin Chi had never seen it?

Why wasn’t Hui Xiangjun’s Way of the Heart in her vital weapon?

Xi Ping asked, “What kind of person was she?”

Hearing this, Qiu Sha raised her head, facing the vague figure in the mural across a distance of eight centuries.

They had asked why she had died and where her relics were, asked what way she had cultivated, asked what wonders her Unbound Furnace possessed, asked why her furnace flame could burn within ice and water... and at last someone had asked what kind of person she was.

“She was... a very patient person.” Unconsciously, Qiu Sha’s voice became a little indistinct. She narrowed her eyes, as if her gaze were piercing through the lengthy ages.

Qiu Sha didn’t know her own background, but she probably hadn’t come from a wealthy family. A wealthy family wouldn’t have abandoned a newborn child on a deserted mountain.

A few eternal spring brocade trees were growing on that mountain, so the late-autumn red was everywhere. There hadn’t been a “late-

autumn red” among the ancient demonic gods to begin with; this was a half-puppet that the frail toolmaking cultivator had made themselves.

This parasitic vine grew alongside the eternal spring brocade, and it grew in too great profusion. The finicky main tree couldn't supply the nutrients that such a large expanse of late-autumn red required, so it would eat decaying flesh, hunt down defenseless insects, birds, and animal cubs... and abandoned infants.

Late-autumn red was the accompanying plant of a half-puppet. When it came into contact with living things that had spiritual eyes, it would extend into the spiritual eyes and turn the human or spiritual beast into a puppet growing from its vines.

As far back as Qiu Sha remembered, she had been fighting over living space with other people just as uncivilized as her, and even spiritual beasts, struggling to maintain her own awareness.

Until one time, the eternal spring brocade on the mountain suddenly blossomed. The accompanying plant had a new master.

All the vines cheered. Only Qiu Sha was afraid. Her mind was connected to the late-autumn red vines. She instinctively knew that late-autumn red, this parasitic vine, belonged to the eternal spring brocade, and the new owner was certain to clean up this tangled skein of late-autumn red like pulling up weeds, get rid of all the disorderly minds in it, and either take over it herself... or have a half-puppet in her keeping take over it.

Xi Ping softly asked, “Did she choose you?”

“Late-autumn red was everywhere in Western Chu then, not just on that mountain. I don't know how many consciousnesses there were inside it. The vast majority of them were incomplete. How could she choose?” Qiu Sha shook her head. “It was a trash heap hiding all

kinds of evil, even more of a mess than this lotus root heart. The most reasonable method would have been to wipe out all those vines that had been stuffing themselves for hundreds or thousands of years at once.”

Did the remnants of consciousnesses inside the vines feel and reason? Did those fragments count as people? Or were they only an annoying blight on the trees?

Xi Ping imagined it and thought it was very hard to say. If it had been him, he probably wouldn't have wiped them all out, but it would have been so much trouble that he probably would have just left it alone.

“So she...”

Qiu Sha said, “She spent a hundred twenty years lecturing to the late-autumn red vines.”

Xi Ping said, “What?”

“She irrigated the vines with spiritual energy and lectured. Who could have understood? We didn't even know human speech then,” Qiu Sha said. “For the first eight years, she was just talking to herself. Every time she opened her mouth, there would only be frightened and angry noises in the late-autumn red, no reaction, but she didn't care, only kept lecturing... Have you ever met a person like that?”

Doing precisely what she wanted, day after day, caring nothing for feedback, caring nothing for the outcome.

“I hadn't. I'd never met a person like that,” Qiu Sha said almost inaudibly. “Educating a bunch of wild vines, as if she only wanted to try and see whether if she had enough patience, a miracle would be sure to happen.”

For the consciousness struggling within the parasitic vine, this was a vague thread of hope. She spent eight years struggling to get a grasp on the Chu language, connected to spiritual energy following Hui Xiangjun's lead, constantly trained her consciousness. When it came to the twentieth year, she gave the eternal spring brocade her first stammering response.

Qiu Sha remembered that Hui Xiangjun had paused slightly then, cocked her ear to listen for a moment, then smiled.

A clear thought had suddenly emerged. She had thought: I want to look like that, too.

She was the first flower to open on the late-autumn red. When she drew spiritual energy into herself, she cleared away all the noise in the vines and became the master of the late-autumn red. She fell to the ground and cultivated a human body, making her face look like Hui Xiangjun's.

And then she had walked a riotous road that could dye the moon at the center of the heavens blood red.

"Zhuoming got the furnace flame, but he could never get hold of Senior Hui Xiangjun's Way of the Heart," Xi Ping said after sitting with her for a long moment. "I understand now."

Qiu Sha froze. Her long, thin eyebrows lifted. "What do you understand?"

"What do you understand?" came Zhuoming's demonic voice from the depths of the lotus root.

Just then, Xi Ping finally realized that the violent heartbeat had at some point leveled out.

On the lotus root wall, a human face emerged beside the mural of Hui Xiangjun and stared fixedly at Xi Ping.

Zhuoming gave him a very strange look. “You woke up so quickly. You didn’t have to sleep for several months. And you found your way here... I’ve never seen a newborn ascended spirit with such a resilient consciousness.”

Xi Ping calmly smiled at Zhuoming. “I did want to have a lie-in, but there was nothing for it. After all, I’m in a rush.”

The corners of Zhuoming’s eyes twitched.

Qiu Sha suddenly realized something. “Who the hell are you?”

Xi Ping didn’t answer. He cupped his hands toward her. “I came specifically to see you. When we parted in Tao County, there were many things we hadn’t had time to discuss. Thank you for your guidance today, senior.”

No sooner had he spoken than he—or rather, his consciousness—shattered without warning, leaving behind only a cluster of person-shaped heartless lotus stalks. As his consciousness collapsed, these also turned to mist and seeped into the lotus root.

CHAPTER 139 - Eternal Flame (21)

A consciousness caught by the Heartless Lotus was like a handful of water, and the lotus stalks carrying consciousness were like vessels for “drawing water.” Though the vessel wouldn’t usually affect the taste of the water, the direction the water flowed in and its shape would be almost entirely determined by the vessel.

To begin with, the “bowl of water” that was Xi Ping had been sealed up nicely in a “bottle,” and right in front of Zhuoming’s face, he had turned into vapor in the blink of an eye. The constantly babbling heartless lotuses all froze. For a moment, the heart beating in the depths of the lotus root stopped. Zhuoming thought that he was dead.

No, that was wrong.

Zhuoming quickly caught on. It was exceedingly painful to destroy your own consciousness. It couldn’t be that straightforward—this seemed more like the Misty Willow pulling back a portion of his consciousness that he had sent out.

In the depths of the East Peak, the Heartless Lotus was like a giant enraged beast. His tendrils reared up and began to roar.

Impossible!

They both had accompanying plants. Of course Zhuoming knew that he would have left a portion of his consciousness behind in an accompanying plant somewhere else before coming to Dongheng. But that was before he had become an ascended spirit—the Misty Willow’s hidden bones were attached to his consciousness; with bolts of heavenly lightning coming right at him and him bearing up under the double pressures of the ascended spirit tribulation and

the reconstruction of the hidden bones, he wouldn't have had attention to spare for such a distant place.

No matter where he had left his consciousness, when his hidden bones had been reconstructed, he must have called it back to the vicinity of the Unbound Furnace. After that, he had been hiding desperately under the eyes of the full moon sage. Where would he have found an opportunity to flee?

Moreover, the Heartless Lotus was one hundred percent certain that he had picked that person's consciousness out of his body in its entirety! This was impossible!

Zhuoming twisted. Dozens of lotus stalks, like vipers coming out of their caves, dove all at once into the bottom of the pond.

Then there was a flash of snow-bright sword light as those ferocious lotus stalks were chopped off by a slash. Xi Ping "broke through the soil."

When he had seen the so-called "Hui Xiangjun" in the Unbound Furnace, Xi Ping had felt that something was very wrong.

First of all, Hui Xiangjun was the Eternal Spring Brocade. Her Way of the Heart had been inherited from an ancient demonic god. Even though an individual's understanding would cause the Way of the Heart to deviate somewhat from its initial condition... and the deviation seemed quite large in the case of Hui Xiangjun, it had still been her starting point, after all. She had entered the Way because of this. The Way of the Heart branded onto her vital weapon would have to have signs of this origin. But the so-called "Way of the Heart" in the Unbound Furnace had been like a "Law Breaker Manual," without any traces of the eternal spring brocade. That was too unusual.

The second thing that had aroused Xi Ping's suspicion had been the manner of recounting all things being "made of inscriptions." For him, this segment had been only too familiar. If it hadn't been a pretty young woman standing in the golden light in front of him at the time, he practically would have thought it was san-ge speaking to him.

But if you thought about this carefully, you would know it was wrong. It wasn't that there was no possibility that Hui Xiangjun had had a paramount spiritual sense, but the possibility was miniscule.

When an exception had been made for her to enter Sanyue's inner sect, she had been only an established foundation, only qualified to be a disciple on the Central Peak. A disciple's natural endowments would be carefully investigated when they entered the sect. Sanyue would have a record of any particular talents. Paramount spiritual senses were extremely uncommon, and it was even more rare for a person who had one to be able to maintain their basic common intellect and enter the Way. They were practically incompatible with the medicine and toolmaking ways, which had such high requirements for "steadiness." If Hui Xiangjun, possessing a paramount spiritual sense, had succeeded in entering the way of toolmaking, that would have been a miracle. Sanyue couldn't have attached so little value to her.

Everything he had experienced in the Unbound Furnace had given him a strange feeling, and with Xi Ping's negligible cultivation at the time, caught half a step from an ascended spirit, it wasn't very likely that either Xiang Rong or Xuanwu would have let him feel a sense of strangeness—if he really had faced the two of them, there probably wouldn't even have been time for a thought to flash through his mind before he was utterly destroyed.

So... it could only have been Zhuoming who had tampered with the Unbound Furnace.

Zhuoming, who at the time had seemed prepared to resign himself to his fate.

In the Unbound Furnace, Xi Ping had briefly explained his ideas to his san-ge, from the ancient demonic god of the heartless lotus, to Zhuoming being able to change other plants within the Sanyue Mountains into heartless lotuses, and further to Xi Ping having seen Qiu Sha's face in a bubble in the water... Putting all of it together, the two of them had arrived separately at the same guess, that the Heartless Lotus's power was likely reverse body snatching: kill the body, imprison the consciousness.

That was a big problem. They both had accompanying plants, and to Zhuoming's eyes, everything Xi Ping did with reincarnation wood was crystal clear. That baldy had a paramount spiritual sense, and his cultivation was higher than Xi Ping's. If he said anything to san-ge, the Heartless Lotus's omnipresent eyes would catch it. No one knew how the "reverse body snatching" worked or how to protect against it.

But one thing Xi Ping was certain of. If Zhuoming had malicious intent, with his amateur level, making a fake consciousness or something like that certainly wouldn't take him in.

"If I were the Heartless Lotus, the whole of the Sanyue Mountain Range, even Dongheng City, might not have any blind spots for me. No matter where you hid your seed, I would be able to tell at a glance—apart from inside yourself," Zhou Ying had said to him then. "The shard of Zhaoting dares to light up to oppose shed skins. No one would want to alert your shifu. But I know that, in order to protect him, you would confine his line of sight to within your spirit. I would also use that to avoid him. In your spirit, beside the shard of Zhaoting, is the only place I wouldn't touch."

Therefore, Xi Ping had wrapped up his last reincarnation wood seed in a mind clearing pill and swallowed it.

This lowest grade of elixirs had gone straight to his spirit and calmed his perturbed emotions amid the flashing lightning and booming thunder. At the same time, it had also hidden a silent seed beneath Zhaoting's light.

During the time Xi Ping had spent talking to Qiu Sha, the seed had naturally sprouted. To the accompaniment of Zhaoting's urgent and angry trembling, the sliver of his consciousness hidden in the seed had reappeared within his spirit as the seed had sprouted. "Shifu, this time I might be able to trick my way into another new power... ow!"

Zhaoting had hit him.

Next, the seed was completely annihilated by Zhaoting's light, and Xi Ping's consciousness struggled entirely free from inside the seed and was completely restored within his body. In the blink of an eye, he had removed the remaining heartless lotus traces from his senses.

Xi Ping violently pushed Zhuoming away with sword energy, swept out with his hand, then put the Unbound Furnace away in his mustard seed and made a grab for the furnace flame in the water.

He had been worried before that Zhuoming had completely controlled the Unbound Furnace. Now it seemed that he still had a chance!

But he couldn't grab the furnace flame. It stayed where it was, not moving a hair. Instead, it burned his hand.

Xi Ping didn't turn a hair—never mind a scalding, even getting cooked crispy on the outside and tender on the inside would be like a gentle breeze compared to Zhuoming tearing out his

consciousness. Next, he saw a human figure flash inside the flame; without any hesitation, he sent his consciousness into it.

Zhuoming was going crazy. As the successor of a demonic god himself, he knew that without a full moon sage to intimidate him, the moment Xi Ping's consciousness had been restored, he would certainly have poured it into countless reincarnation wood trees, like a drop of water falling in the ocean. He wouldn't be able to catch him again.

“Die!”

His rage was like the volcanoes on the various islands of Southern Shu. As soon as it erupted, his already inadequate reason simply couldn't put a stop to it.

When Zhuoming had been young, an unknown little bird had flown into his home by mistake. Its plumage had been as splendid as though it had dressed itself in a whole spring and summer. He had been wild with joy, had meticulously mended a little cage. He had loved the little bird so much he hadn't known what to do with himself.

Unfortunately, his heart had always been worthless. That little bird had first beaten itself bloody against the cage, then refused to eat. Very soon it had died.

Ever since, Zhuoming had hated all winged things.

Everything he trusted, liked, admired, wished to keep... all of it would desert him, without exception. No matter what innovative freakishness he came up with, no one would give him a second look.

It seemed that he was destined to have nothing, his only companions those rancid, stinking lotus roots.

The consciousness Zhuoming had left inside the furnace fire attacked like an avalanche. Though the lotus roots couldn't withstand a single blow from the sword energy, he was also a force to be reckoned with when it came to consciousnesses. The beams of consciousness Xi Ping had sent into the water were throttled as soon as they met him. The blazing flame in the water pulled in his whole arm. The constant injury to his consciousness was making his temples ache fiercely.

But there was no time to waste on the lunatic. If they kept flailing like this, they might summon back Xiang Ning.

Xi Ping quickly abandoned his contest of consciousnesses against Zhuoming. He pulled out the Tai Sui Qin one-handed and played a few incisive notes that went in pursuit of Zhuoming's main body.

A paralyzed ascended spirit like Zhuoming, who spent every day ripping himself apart, wouldn't have very strong fighting skills. Before, he had only kept Xi Ping down by relying on his higher cultivation level. Now they were both ascended spirits; Xi Ping could have given him a big bump on the head just by taking a swing at him with the Tai Sui Qin. The notes coming in at different angles sliced off half the heartless lotuses, sending Zhuoming dodging desperately all over the place, forcing his true body all the way to the vicinity of the furnace flame. Xi Ping unexpectedly pulled the Unbound Furnace out of his mustard seed and tossed the two of them along with the flame into the Unbound Furnace's big cauldron.

As soon as the furnace flame entered the furnace, the originally bean-sized flame flared up with a roar, the fire expanding the cramped space inside the furnace until it was boundless, with space to hold mountains and swallow seas. Then it flung Zhuoming's consciousness away as well, and it vanished in the universe within the furnace.

Xi Ping shook his arm, tossing away the scorched, truncated limb. Bone quickly grew from his torn sleeve, then agile meridians along with flesh and blood wrapped up the bones at dazzling speed. In the blink of an eye, it was as good as new.

The heartless lotuses below Zhuoming's waist had turned into ordinary human legs. The two of them glanced at each other across a distance of dozens of zhang. Zhuoming abruptly flew off in a certain direction.

Xi Ping turned his head and saw that in the distance was a mountain covered in late-autumn red, toweringly high, with a cluster of a particular kind of ancient tree growing at its summit.

Unlike the reincarnation wood, which usually lay chaotically all over the place, these trees were as tall and straight as if they had been drawn with a ruler. They were over ten zhang tall. It was clear at a glance that this was hardwood. Layer upon layer of broad leaves blotted out the sky. Exquisite white flowers that had yet to entirely fall mixed with the clouds. It was unclear at first look what was flower and what was cloud.

Growing on the summit, it was as if the mountain had grown another mountain.

Clear music sounded in the distance. A blue luan flitted through the trees, its long tail, like the hems of a dress, leaving a rainbow in midair.

Living alongside late-autumn red, growing high among the clouds, auspicious animals appearing around it... could this be the legendary eternal spring brocade?

Xi Ping hadn't realized it at first, because he really hadn't expected eternal spring brocade to look like this. Lin Chi and Qiu Sha had both said eternal spring brocade was "fragile." Both had lowered

their voices when speaking of it, as if eternal spring brocade were a dandelion that they might blow away if they used too much breath speaking. After that, who could have expected that this big tree would be about as “fragile” as the Azure Dragon Towers?

Was there something wrong with those two?

Zhuoming had already flown toward that summit a step ahead of him.

It was already too late to chase after him. The little lotus seal once again flashed before Xi Ping’s eyes; he was again trapped by the heartless lotuses.

Damn it! Just looking at that monstrous baldy could get you on the hook!

Zhuoming knew that his consciousness was already dispersed and he wouldn’t be able to catch him. He only trapped him in place for a moment. When Xi Ping had cleared away the heartless lotus’s seal and escaped, the heartless lotus’s roots had already stabbed into the trunks of the eternal spring brocade like leeches.

Zhuoming had acquired the furnace flame from Qiu Sha for the purpose of plotting against Xiang Rong; he wasn’t very interested in Hui Xiangjun, who had been dead for eight centuries—those with a paramount spiritual sense often had a kind of arrogance and world-weariness, as if they had seen through everything, and didn’t bother to listen to others’ teachings—so while he had acquired the Unbound Furnace, he had only casually put it away at the bottom of the lotus pond and hadn’t been in a hurry to look at it.

But if the Misty Willow wanted to steal it, that was a different matter.

In an instant, the vast information passed on from the ancient demonic god nearly drowned him. Eternal spring brocade was the

way of toolmaking. Unlike the way of the sword, which staked everything on one throw, the way of toolmaking was extremely complex, able to attempt fathoming all of nature, one twig and one leaf at a time.

Like the surface of the ocean absorbing water, Zhuoming greedily gobbled up this Way of the Heart in big gulps. There was more than his sense organs could bear; they had torn from the strain. His face was covered in blood, his mouth split open to the roots of his ears—if he couldn't capture the Misty Willow, then he would completely digest the Unbound Furnace, the thing he wanted most, make him sit there watching how the thing he had faced the might of a full moon sage desperately trying to get disappeared!

Just then, Xi Ping finally caught up. Before he got there, the qin music swept over.

Zhuoming dodged. Laughing, he said, “Why do you only know this one move?”

“Does it matter?” Xi Ping let off three strokes in a row without pause, sealing off his line of retreat. “It just needs to be able to cut you down!”

Zhuoming simply didn't dodge. Like a ghost, he seeped straight into the trunk of the eternal spring brocade. The Tai Sui Qin's sword energy rushed straight toward the tree!

Xi Ping jumped. With a flicker, he arrived in front of the eternal spring brocade's trunk, hastily blocking the sword energy flying toward it. He was tossed dozens of zhang away by the sword energy he himself had played. His back collided with another eternal spring brocade tree.

A large quantity of lotus stalks exploded from the eternal spring brocade, twining around his limbs like thick cords, breaking the

fingers he used to play the qin. The next moment, an established foundation fire talisman knocked the lotus stalks away.

But the talisman couldn't injure the lotus stalks.

Though Xi Ping was at an ascended spirit cultivation level, his talismans were still of a lower level—these were the results of his cramming from before. Otherwise, basically all the talismans he could readily use were of half-immortal grade, which might have made Zhuoming's lotus roots die of laughter.

Xi Ping quickly turned his head and saw more and more eternal spring brocade polluted by lotus stalks. This represented Zhuoming quickly encroaching on the Way of the Heart within the eternal spring brocade.

Once the Heartless Lotus had complete control over the Unbound Furnace, the Unbound Furnace would be useless. Even if Lin Chi swallowed up Rosy Cloud Peak and became a shed skin or a full moon sage overnight, he still wouldn't be able to control the Unbound Furnace... so wouldn't everything that had come before have been for nothing?

Xi Ping was afraid of harming the eternal spring brocade and held himself back, not daring to use shifu's attacks in the forest. In desperation, he was simply ready to try anything; without hesitation, he used all the methods he had crammed recently.

But all the powers he had crammed then were established foundation grade, and he hadn't even had any time to gain a thorough understanding of them. His arrangements were a complete mess.

Zhuoming dodged and blocked skillfully. The more panicked Xi Ping became, the more excited that damn baldy was, stopping and

starting inside the eternal spring brocade forest as if playing to an audience.

“Where did you learn that move? Doesn’t Xuanyin Mountain teach basic talisman skills?”

“Nicely done, but it’s useless, hee-hee!”

“Why don’t you appeal to higher authority at the last moment, learn another couple of sword moves from your shifu? General Zhi, who snatched the name of Sword of the South away from Xiang Zhao as soon as he became an ascended spirit, only taught his disciple a single move, *tsk-tsk*, and he’s nearly all used up. Zhaoting’s technique will become a lost art... Ah, you’re worked up.”

Xi Ping had nearly drained his own essence dry in one breath. His vision darkened briefly. But he still couldn’t clear the heartless lotus from the eternal spring brocade.

The next moment, there was a buzzing in his ears—the heartless lotus’s lotus seal had at some point once again seeped into his ears. Xi Ping was once again trapped in place.

His figure stiffened. A lotus stalk pierced through his chest.

Boom—

Yet another eternal spring brocade tree was wrapped up entirely in lotus stalks. Leaves fell in droves, leaving only solid and hard-pressed bare branches.

Zhuoming curled up inside the eternal spring brocade forest, exposing only his head. With malicious enjoyment, he watched Xi Ping’s staring face.

“You’ll never get the Unbound Furnace now.”

As if he thought this wasn't enough, the heartless lotus stalk piercing Xi Ping's chest turned into an ashen pale hand that rummaged around breaking ribs for a moment, then seized Xi Ping's heart.

"I can't catch you," said a mouth that had opened on the back of that hand, softly and with emphasis, "can't kill you, can't have you.

"But I can make you wish you were dead! Hahaha..."

The laughter produced countless echoes. Zhuoming's sinister expression once again twisted his features, sending them running all over his face. He crushed Xi Ping's heart—

"Huh?"

Wait, this didn't feel right.

Zhuoming froze. The echoes of his laughter were still resonating through the valley. Underneath them was an indistinct sound of tearing paper.

The features of the "Xi Ping" whom he had turned into a human skewer faded. His body drooped limply, fluttering in the wind like a kite... It was a paperman that had been tangling with Zhuoming all this time.

The real one had vanished long ago.

A ke earlier, Xi Ping had sent out a paperman and simultaneously contacted Lin Chi to learn an ascended spirit talisman at the last moment. Using that talisman as soon as he learned it, he had burrowed into the mountain.

The inside of the mountain was even more magnificent than the outside. The tangled and complex parasitic roots of the late-autumn red were like a maze. Xi Ping carefully avoided touching the savage vines. He explored inward, following the parasitic roots... and then he saw the most stunning trees he had ever beheld.

The exposed trunks of the eternal brocade were ten zhang tall, but the root system underground was as long as the mountain was tall, reaching from the clouds all the way to the earth.

Xi Ping tentatively reached out to touch it. He felt that this tree root was more solid than all the valuable timber he had ever seen. The feel of it even put him in mind of Moon Plated Gold, which had the greatest hardness.

He raised his head, attached his spiritual sense to his ears, and looked into the heart of the mountain—there was a flame the height of a person there.

Xi Ping walked over. The surrounding earth and stone automatically moved aside, making a small space for him and the fire. “I knew I would be able to meet you here.”

No sooner had he spoken than a human figure appeared in the flame.

This was a young woman, attired in the garishly bright and colorful ancient Chu fashion, but her eyes contained a kind of serene benevolence. She observed Xi Ping, the uninvited guest, with a smile, so vivid that she seemed to still be alive... Compared to her, the “Hui Xiangjun” Zhuoming had copied inside the Unbound Furnace was a crude and simple charcoal sketch.

The Hui Xiangjun in the flames also couldn't answer—she wasn't a living person, either. The flames turned to nothingness when Xi Ping

tried to approach. She was like an eternally untouchable flower in a mirror, the moon reflected in water.

Xi Ping considered. He sat down at approximately the distance of a tea table away from the flame and placed the Tai Sui Qin across his knees. “My guess is that the Way of the Heart in the eternal spring brocade at the summit is the eternal spring brocade’s Way of the Heart. It isn’t you.”

The woman in the flames tilted her head slightly as if responding to him: But I am the eternal spring brocade.

“What’s wrapped up inside the fire in the furnace actually isn’t the Way of the Heart you inherited from the ancient demonic god, right?” Xi Ping said softly. “Master Lin said there was no flame in the Unbound Furnace. The Unbound Furnace in fact didn’t have a flame. If my guess is correct, this ‘fire’ is the last work you created before your death.

“Its raw material was you yourself.”

CHAPTER 140 - Eternal Flame (22)

The moment Xi Ping exposed the origin of the flame in front of him, a very mystical thing happened.

The inextinguishable flame dissipated without warning, and Hui Xiangjun stood before him as though she were a living person.

She was too close. Even her eyelashes and the fine freckles on her face were complete to the smallest detail. When she bent down, her long braid fell on Xi Ping, who was sitting there... then passed through him.

Out of nowhere, Xi Ping felt a twinge of regret: still only a shadow.

“Shh.” She raised a finger. “Don’t ask questions. I can’t answer you, I’m already dead. Just listen to me.”

Xi Ping looked at her in bewilderment—the legendary Hui Xiangjun had spoken...and he couldn’t understand her!

Over the last century or two, because of the gradual development of transportation, there had been frequent trade between the nations of Wan and Chu, and their languages had mingled considerably as well. They had borrowed both grammar and lexicon from each other. For a person from Wan, the Chu language had become a foreign language it was relatively easy to learn the basics of... a completely different story from Ancient Chu!

Moreover, Hui Xiangjun spoke very fast. How fast? For example, if she and Lin Chi split the difference, the two of them would both be normal.

Out of a whole long speech, Xi Ping only understood the beginning and the end.

No wonder Qiu Sha hadn't understood what she was saying for eight years.

"I don't know which country you come from or how many years have passed," Hui Xiangjun said, smiling. "If you can find me, it must mean you've already seen the Law Breaker and the Riverward, right? I left the Riverward to Xiao Qiu, but I couldn't give her the Law Breaker. Once I'm gone, Xiao Qiu will have no restraint. If she and the Law Breaker get together, it'll mean big trouble. I want to have the Law Breaker find a firm and steady master. Is that you?"

Xi Ping's ears were ringing. He could only just pick out a few words like "firm and steady," which sounded like they didn't have much to do with him.

"Lin-shishu, help!" Xi Ping had no more extra reincarnation wood on him, but fortunately he was already an ascended spirit. It was much easier for him to swap places with reincarnation wood. He put his fingers together and cut off a strand of his own hair. When it landed in his palm, it became a reincarnation wood twig.

At this moment, flying Heavenly Questions filled the sky over the Xuanyin Mountains. There seemed to have been a major disturbance in Western Chu's Sanyue. The Luwu didn't dare to approach; news had yet to be verified. Xi Ping had only said a few words before running off every time, and he hadn't said anything clear. Lin Chi simply couldn't keep up with General Zhi's mad dog of a disciple. All he could do was use his consciousness to flip through all the talisman texts on Moon Plated Peak, stuffing everything he saw into his head indiscriminately, afraid that Xi Ping would suddenly appear and ask him for something else.

Pity the toolmaking genius of the age. When his consciousness arrived in the reincarnation wood, he was still nervously reciting to himself offensive talismans he would never use in his life.

“What is it now?! I have a few talismans here, but I’ve never used them and I don’t know what the results will be, you must..” When Lin Chi got halfway through saying this, Xi Ping raised the “tree branch translator” in front of the image. The Golden Hand was dumbfounded. For a time, he lost his powers of speech. He mumbled, “You... She...”

The voice and expressions of the person before his eyes were the same as before, like an unfading dream.

Lin Chi held his breath involuntarily, scared of waking up—waking, he couldn’t even hold on to a piece of wood.

But Hui Xiangjun wouldn’t recognize her old friend again. Her eyes, looking out from eight hundred years before, couldn’t see anyone, and they certainly couldn’t see a hastily broken off twig. She continued speaking: “I hope that you won’t use the Law Breaker to do anything cruel and ruthless. Even the spiritual mountains will receive backlash from mortals, never mind me and her. My power is very limited. It can’t withstand the enmity of millions of people united. It might go out if that happens... Ah, but I suppose I’m just scaring myself over nothing. The Law Breaker contains unbound stars. She understands destiny and the trends of affairs. She will choose the most suitable master and the best moment to appear—I don’t know how many of my old friends are still living. I’d like them to have a look at the future in my stead.”

“What... what is she? How can she be here?” Lin Chi asked Xi Ping in alarm, his mind a blank. “What does she mean?”

“Shishu,” Xi Ping said, sighing. Whenever he used this form of address when not being supervised by General Zhi, it would be followed by something unreasonable eighty percent of the time. “If I understood her, why would I be asking you?”

Only then did Lin Chi realize that a young person wouldn't be able to understand Ancient Chu very well and gave him an incoherent translation of her general meaning. Even talking himself breathless, he still couldn't keep up with the speed of Hui Xiangjun's speech. He could only pick out a few key words from every sentence. Fortunately, Xi Ping had spent many years in Chu. If he listened very attentively, he wasn't completely incapable of understanding. Following Lin Chi's prompting and making guesses, he could get the gist.

Perhaps Hui Xiangjun's mind was too quick. Not only was her speech so fast it exhausted Lin Chi, she also got off topic very easily. After getting halfway into explaining the Law Breaker, she changed the subject and went off to ask after her friends from the past—Xi Ping hadn't heard of the majority of the people she mentioned. Likely they were from the Lancang Mountains; presumably their bones were already cold.

During this interval, Xi Ping let her keep playing automatically and quickly refined the story of his theft of the Unbound Furnace to dump on Lin Chi all at once.

After hearing it, Master Lin Chi didn't make a sound. He was choked.

“Though Xiang Rong got tricked into his grave by Zhuoming, he did in fact succeed in reaching a full moon position, so in other words, the principles I saw in the Unbound Furnace at the beginning were true—if it had been pure nonsense, Sanyue's sect leader wouldn't have fallen for it,” Xi Ping said at a speed comparable to Hui Xiangjun's. “Adding in what Qiu Sha told me, that ‘the spiritual mountains are a big Law Breaker,’ I have a guess. All spiritual energy has a master. The spiritual energy released by every spiritual stone that comes within a country's borders automatically receives the spiritual mountains' brand.

“Within the scope of the spiritual mountains’ authority, anyone cycling spiritual energy to cultivate, or even anyone breathing in order to live, has to use spiritual energy branded by the spiritual mountains. You end up beholden to whoever feeds you—no matter who it is, they’ll all be controlled by the spiritual mountains’ ‘rules’... Do you remember during the Zhao family treason, when all the spiritual energy within Great Wan was prohibited? With just one order, apart from the shed skin elders who represent them, the spiritual mountains made it so no one else could use spiritual energy.

“But my san-ge had the Riverward then, and he could still use it, which means that the Law Breaker and the Riverward don’t use ‘spiritual energy that has a master’—especially the Law Breaker. Within the scope of the Law Breaker, not only can it remove the mark of the spiritual mountains from spiritual energy, it can also put its own axioms in place, becoming a small spiritual mountain itself. So the question is, where does the ‘masterless spiritual energy’ the Law Breaker and Riverward use come from?”

Lin Chi finally caught his breath and mumbled, “Before the spiritual mountains formed, all spiritual energy was masterless... Yes, a long time ago, she told me so, but I didn’t understand it then. I thought she was only speaking metaphorically to mock the spiritual mountains for controlling the human world... What she said was always so bold and unrestrained...”

“If the principles of the Law Breaker and the Riverward are so simple, why has no one else been able to make them? Why did she only leave behind these two things? Why is there a limit on the Riverward’s number of uses, and a limit on the Law Breaker’s range?” Xi Ping said. “Also, before her death, she used the Riverward to send Qiu Sha away and told Qiu Sha to hide under the Lancang Mountains for eight centuries so she could accumulate enough cultivation to become an ascended spirit, then break the law that ‘evil cultivators can’t be ascended spirits’ as soon as she

emerged. But she herself offered no resistance. I haven't been able to understand that no matter how I thought about it. Until I saw that furnace flame that could burn within water or ice—I think that she couldn't use the Law Breaker and the Riverward.”

Lin Chi said, “... What?”

“When she mentioned the Law Breaker just now, she said ‘my power is limited.’ My guess is that she herself is sustaining the Law Breaker and the Riverward.” Xi Ping softened and slowed his voice slightly. “She had an accompanying plant. She used the Unbound Furnace to refine herself into the furnace flame. The furnace flame is the source of the Law Breaker and the Riverward’s power.”

In the human world controlled by the spiritual mountains, she had lit herself into a flame that would never go out, prying up a rift in the impenetrable spiritual mountains. That was why the Law Breaker and the Riverward could be truly activated, why Qiu Sha could become an ascended spirit, why Tao County could become a place where spiritual energy was prohibited.

That was why a hole could open in the fine meshes of the net of heaven.

She was... the wedge stuck in the crack, the person who had opened up an opportunity to live, the person who could never be saved.

“I heard that when she was captured, she offered absolutely no resistance. Even an ant clings to its lowly life, let alone an ascended spirit elder at Lancang. You heard her read off a whole laundry list of friends. Clearly she was well-liked in Lancang back then. If it really came to blows, those people might very well have been willing to let her slip away. But my guess is that she had already become the furnace flame by then and prompted the Riverward to take Qiu Sha away. All that remained was a drop of her consciousness inside a

shell to make arrangements for after her death. She wouldn't have had any more powers."

Lin Chi's consciousness was shaken. Even the twig he was residing in began to quiver slightly.

Just then, this woman who was reputed to be capable of talking to herself for a hundred twenty years said, "Oh, right, there's also that kid Lin Zisheng."

There was no need for a translation now. Xi Ping understood, too.

Hui Xiangjun paused, then began to laugh. "That kid is pretty full of ideas, but the Lin family has kept him too pure. He's timid and shy. He certainly won't go out of his way to make trouble. If nothing has gone wrong, I suppose he's still living? How is he now? Did Xuanyin Mountain let him out in the end?"

Xi Ping felt that even Lin Chi's consciousness was trembling and was afraid his Way of the Heart would go amiss. "Lin-shishu?"

"No... no, that's not..." Lin Chi said almost incoherently. "The Gold Imitation Technique was a disaster of my own making. If not for me... if not for me..."

Hui Xiangjun's voice perfectly interrupted his babbling: "If you get the chance to see him, tell him for me—don't be afraid."

Lin Chi abruptly shut his mouth.

Through the reincarnation wood, he met Hui Xiangjun's narrow eyes. The form of her features was the same as Qiu Sha's, but there wasn't such a stark contrast between black and white. With a change of color, the difference in temperament was colossal.

Hui Xiangjun's eyes were rather light, like two limpid pieces of colored glass. Her brows were pale, and so were her lips. There was a moderate amount of flesh on her bones; her outlines didn't seem as fierce as the tall and sturdy Late-Autumn Red. It made her seem far gentler. She was a good-looking but not dazzling young woman.

This was his elder, his dear friend, his guide, a wild fantasy forever out of reach.

The fifth year after Lin Chi had entered the way of toolmaking, he had received no less than a thousand rebukes from his shizun to "act within the rules, do not indulge in fantasy." Each day was painful. He suspected that he had chosen the wrong Way of the Heart. Just then, all the great sects were sending specialists from the toolmaking way to visit the great nation of spiritual beasts, Southern Shu, to inspect spiritual beast materials. Xuanyin sent him and another shixiong so they could see something of the world along the way.

Someone must have been having bad luck that year. A rare accident took place at the spiritual beast market: due to improper safety measures, some giant clam monsters escaped and just happened to destroy the array of the great roc animal spirit. The great roc went out of control, stirring up a revolt in the spiritual beast market. A disaster swept through the South Sea; the whole island was in utter confusion. The cultivators were all temporarily trapped there.

It was then that they just happened to meet Hui Xiangjun.

At the time, Hui Xiangjun was already an ascended spirit in Lancang. She had become the way of toolmaking's hero of the moment. As a senior, she was helping to maintain order and protect the established foundations and half-immortals.

His shixiong was extremely excited. When the situation calmed slightly, he dragged Lin Chi over so they could pay their respects.

It cost Lin Chi a great effort to do this. This was an ascended spirit senior, a guest elder at Lancang. All his life, his greatest fear had been this kind of authoritative senior. At home, he feared his father, and once he entered the spiritual mountains, he feared his shizun. On seeing his family's Dignitary of Rule ancestor, he would turn mute on the spot—and since the Dignitary of Rule also couldn't readily open his mouth seal, each time the two of them met, their greetings and exchanged good wishes were all silent, like two shadow puppets that had forgotten to bring their accompaniment.

And what was more, Elder Hui was a woman. Lin Chi had a timid disposition, and his upbringing had been strict. The tendons of his legs would twist themselves into knots if he spoke to any woman apart from his own mother.

She clearly filled the requirements of both types of people Lin Chi feared most, yet she was also completely different.

There was nothing in her manner of a senior or a master. Her behavior and bearing seemed to belong to a teenager who would never grow up. It wasn't crude, thoughtless childishness—it was as if she always had inexhaustible patience and curiosity.

The unchanging clear breezes and bright moon, the Southern Shu fruits that all tasted about the same, the useless common objects of others... all of them could give her pause. No matter how stupid the nonsense a junior asking instruction of her said, she could always find a point of interest in it, then use plain layman's language to "ask for instruction" concerning the junior's thoughts; often, within a few words, she could "ask" them back onto the right track, and make them feel as if she hadn't taught them the answer, they had worked it out for themselves.

For some reason, she liked Lin Chi on sight. During the days they were trapped on the island, she was always coming over to tease

him.

In the space of only a few days, without realizing it, Lin Chi had said everything he hadn't dared to say in front of his shifu to her. The ideas his shizun had denounced as "sheer nonsense" were all proper and reasonable to her. The way of toolmaking, which had made him so sick at heart, drew him in like a kaleidoscope.

For the first time, Lin Chi gathered up his courage and exchanged communication devices with another person. After that, every time he had an insight, he would write a letter to the Lancang Mountains right away, and at latest he would receive a response the next day. Sometimes it would hit the nail on the head and pierce through his perplexities, and sometimes it would come back with many even more bizarre ideas that were far off topic.

Though cultivators were unaging, time would still leave its invisible traces. Those seniors who had spent hundreds of years jolting around between heaven and earth, even if they had baby faces, still made you bow when you saw them. Only Hui Xiangjun, who had roamed over the earth and turned her back on her home, still behaved the same as ever, untouched by the elements. Lin Chi often forgot that she was an ascended spirit senior. Without realizing it, he began to address her by her given name, then realized with a start that he had already been rudely calling her that for a long time... Unavoidably, in the Xuanyin Mountains, where spring breezes were forbidden, there was still soil where beautiful notions could sprout.

Lin Chi was in an utter panic, not daring to utter a single word to betray his feelings. Because they were in the immortal mountains, a marriage alliance would be legitimate, but pining was disgraceful. Marriage was open and aboveboard under the justice of heaven and men, while sentiment was unsightly baseness and depravity.

There were no marriage alliances between different immortal mountains, and even if there had been, there would have been no chance for a minor disciple like him.

So he madly buried himself in cultivation, boiling up all his brains asking Hui Xiangjun all kinds of tricky and abstruse questions, deliberately measuring the distance between a genius and a mere craftsman from her light and casual responses, over and over, using this to flog his own wishful thinking. Unexpectedly, it made him stand out among the toolmakers of his generation.

In Xuanyin's inner sect, established foundation disciples were often sent out to run errands. His shizun knew that he was scared of people and wanted to train him whenever a chance came up. Wherever Great Wan had immortal tools that required servicing, he would order him to go. Anywhere that required the inner sect to service immortal tools or arrays, there had to be a major natural disaster that walkers in the mortal world couldn't handle. Within a few short decades, Lin Chi witnessed all the misery of the mortal world. This gave the pampered young master the greatest shock. Because of this, he conceived an idea: it would be a good thing if everyone in the world could use spiritual energy like the people of the cultivation sects.

Amid the towering floods of the Xia River, he casually jotted this thought down, as usual sending it to Hui Xiangjun squashed in among some other disjointed notions. But for once she waited a long time before responding with a letter he didn't really understand at the time.

“All my life it has perplexed me, why heaven should be heaven, and if the roof were to collapse under the weight of the plants pressing down on it, which way it would fall. With this idea from my young friend, it is as though I have been filled with sudden wisdom. I send this item as a gift. Be sure to use it well.”

In the package that accompanied the letter was an item that brought about disaster.

CHAPTER 141 - Eternal Flame (23)

This was a solid ball made up of soft metal, almost the same color as steel, softer than pure gold. The rich play of spiritual energy surging over its surface was practically visible to the naked eye. This gave the originally silver-white ball a faint coating of golden light.

Lin Chi found to his astonishment that it could conduct spiritual energy like a cultivator's meridians.

The Moon Plated Gold of later generations could also conduct spiritual energy. The “downgraded immortal tools” the nobility played with were all constructed based on this particular property. But the spiritual energy Moon Plated Gold could sustain was extremely limited. When it burned a spiritual stone, nearly all the spiritual energy was wasted for nothing. The amount that could be put to use through Moon Plated Gold was in reality less than one ten thousandth; if there were any more, it would fuse. It couldn't even activate the absolute most basic half-immortal talisman.

Downgraded immortal tools were both expensive and impractical. They were little used and little made. Because different arrays on gold smelting furnaces could smelt Moon Plated Gold that was either soft as gauze or a hundred times harder than steel, it had many uses. It had later been taken to mortal factories to make all kinds of machinery.

This was also an inviolable rule—established foundations had no right to “listen to heaven,” half-immortals had no right to “conduct inscriptions,” and mortals, even if they burned up a whole mountain of spiritual stones, could at most set off some relatively large fireworks; they couldn't budge the threshold of the spiritual mountains.

But the spirit-conducting gold Hui Xiangjun had sent him could preserve fifty to sixty percent of the spiritual energy in a spiritual stone it activated.

This meant that, reasonably speaking, it would only take having a quantity of spiritual stones equivalent to twice the essence of an ordinary ascended spirit cultivator for a mortal who hadn't cultivated a day in their life to use the appropriate immortal tools to do whatever an ascended spirit could do.

If it had been Xi Ping in his place, always wandering on the border between righteous and evil, his first reaction would certainly have been to marvel at the heresy of this thing: this lark-like young woman couldn't be judged by appearances any more than his sange—she was also the type that might bring the sky tumbling down any moment.

But the innocent and shy young master who found himself in that position had grown up reading holy texts and listening to the teachings of the immortal mountains. He was whole-heartedly devoted to following in the Southern Sage's footsteps, cultivating with his mind full of "bringing peace to all living beings"—as if he himself didn't belong to "all living beings."

Lin Chi had been wild with joy.

While he once again had the feeling of gazing up at a tall mountain, with the keenness of a toolmaker, countless uses for this thing leapt to mind: no longer would farmers need to wait with their faces in the dirt and their backs to the sky for heaven to bestow its favor, no longer would craftsmen need to travel far and wide carrying boulders of hundreds of jin on their backs; henceforth, all natural and manmade disasters could be dealt with; it wouldn't take even a full day to fly from Jinpinging to Yuzhou... Wasn't this a great achievement that would change the whole world?

Lin Chi, loving this little metal ball too much to part with it, began to study and analyze it. Only once he began did he discover the disparity—he couldn't find the trick for it no matter what.

Expending tremendous efforts, he repeatedly carved metal-refining arrays, but his copies were all failures, vastly unlike the original. Though they were successful in activating spiritual stones, the spiritual energy they could use was minuscule, as if there were an invisible upper limit, and no matter how he tried, he couldn't overstep that boundary.

He knew that he was missing a very important step, but Hui Xiangjun's letter hadn't explained anything, and after sending this thing to him, she had gone into seclusion, planning to create some great work; she had set up a "do not disturb for one hundred years" array.

Lin Chi spent nearly a full sixty-year-cycle working hard on his own. Fortunately, the Lin family had great resources and could support such a waste of spiritual stones. In the end, he didn't manage to copy the "spirit-conducting gold," but his efforts to the neglect of all else couldn't have been called wasted, either. He had cultivated from an early established foundation to a peak established foundation, raising his level at a speed unprecedented within the Xuanyin Mountains, far surpassing his peers, putting his name down with the Dignitary of Rule ancestor. Even his always stern shifu ceased to meddle with him.

When the Dignitary of Rule High Elder had already announced that Moon Plated Peak would be assigned to him, letting him take his position as one of the thirty-six peak masters as soon as he became an ascended spirit, a great fog suddenly rose in the Sea of Stars. Soon after, hundreds of meteorites fell in the East Sea. Strange phenomena appeared in the skies. Nearly half the moon became bloody. All signs pointed to the south.

The four other nations had no idea what was happening. They sent a flurry of messages to ask Southern He for an explanation, but the Lancang Mountains only said that they had no comment to make. For a time, rumors flew everywhere. Some said a highly placed person in Lancang was carrying on evil arts—turning living people into puppets, using blood sacrifices to create spiritual energy... and much more along those lines.

After hearing about this, Lin Chi was very worried and wrote Hui Xiangjun yet another letter, not expecting that he would receive a response only a few days later. She had left seclusion ahead of schedule, and she said she had made two interesting little toys, one called the “Law Breaker,” the other called the “Riverward,” both inspired by him. She asked him to be sure to come Lancang to have a look when he had a chance... but in the end, he never did embark on that journey south.

That year, the strange phenomena were only the beginning. It dimly seemed that something had enraged the Way of Heaven.

There were frequent natural disasters in the five nations. Within Great Wan, there was first a great earthquake in Ning’an, the likes of which hadn’t been seen for several centuries, which nearly broke Jinping’s Dragon Vein. Then it was the whole country, large-scale droughts in the north and flooding in the south. A fatal pestilence rose over the sea; the epidemic spread wildly. The spiritual mountains were everywhere putting out fires, having more business than they could attend to. Lin Chi, an established foundation disciple who was so valuable in the eyes of his elders, certainly couldn’t escape.

Not long after he received Hui Xiangjun’s letter, he was sent along with others from the sect to Guzhou, which was adjacent to the South Sea, to clear away the pestilence. The pestilence was even denser than they had imagined. Before they could come to a decision as to how to act, there was a tidal wave in the South Sea.

A wall of water like a mountain stood straight up from the sea and charged toward the shore, instantly flattening three of Guzhou's cities. None of the crowd of walkers in the mortal world and inner sect established foundations had time to react.

If it had only been a tidal wave, when everyone recovered, they would perhaps have been able to deal with it. The trouble was that the seawater crashing against the shore carried a heavy pestilence, which was about to pour inland through the waterways. Even worse, under the water were hidden a bunch of monsters that had come out of nowhere; with a premeditated plan to take advantage of the chaos, they took the opportunity to charge onto the shore and wreck the border inscriptions and arrays.

Faced with the huge beasts and the tidal wave, the South Sea Navy may as well have been made of paper. There was nothing to be hoped for from them. The cultivators also had never seen this kind of spectacle before. As soon as they solved one problem, another came up; for a time, there was more than they could handle.

Lin Chi was swept away from his fellow sect members and surrounded by seven or eight monsters breathing pestilence. In these dire circumstances, he suddenly heard people shouting for help about ten li away from him. He split off his consciousness to look and saw that there was a Widows and Children Village there—Guzhou could be said to have the most rigid and conservative folk customs of all of Great Wan; women very rarely remarried after being bereaved of their husbands, and to avoid being caught up in malicious gossip, they would move to high ground and form communities with other widows to look after each other.

The floodwaters had submerged everything around them. The former high ground had become an island in imminent danger. There were at least ten households in this village, half of them with small children or solitary old women. Some monsters were watching

the tender-skinned children, already throwing themselves toward the crowd with their bloody maws open.

Lin Chi saw that the situation was bad, but never mind saving them, as soon as he split off his attention, he himself was clawed by a monster. There was also no time to ask his fellow sect members to come help. In a moment of desperation, Lin Chi waved his long sleeve and tossed an immortal tool toward that little village.

This was a little boat he had made in his idle moments during the last decades while studying the spirit-conducting gold without results, using the “true gold” that Hui Xiangjun had sent him. As long as it had spiritual stones to burn, no matter what the cultivation level of the user... or even if they had no cultivation, they could still activate the established foundation grade array on the boat.

That boat saved the lives of thirty-six people, young and old, in that village, using ten liang of blue jade; there were no casualties in the whole village. Lin Chi’s situation, on the other hand, was desperate. His essence had nearly been hollowed out by the monsters. Fortunately, masters from Chu, Shu, He, and Wan, the four nations surrounding the South Sea, arrived one after another and took over the situation before he fell off his sword.

Lin Chi thought that help had come at last and fainted confidently.

By the time he woke up, that life-saving “boat of great merit” had already fallen into the hands of these four great sects.

There was no praise and no honors. Lin Chi had never expected to open his eyes to find himself on trial.

They questioned him: where had this heretical evil object come from?

The Sanyue Mountains' Elder Xiang Ning sent spit flying as he spoke: a bunch of women from a mountain village, who couldn't even write enough words to fill a basket, had actually activated an established foundation grade array without understanding anything about it—and fortunately Lin Chi himself couldn't make anything above the established foundation level—if the array on that evil object had been of ascended spirit grade, or even shed skin grade, then couldn't any random nobody shake the mountains and rock the seas? It was appalling!

Someone from Southern Shu's Lingyun said that it was no wonder it had been one disaster after another lately, strange phenomena appearing continuously; it was because this evil object that could throw ethics and virtue into turmoil had emerged.

Xuanyin Mountain stood their ground to defend him, but their words were empty and lacking in confidence; they clearly also knew that their own junior had caused great trouble.

Lin Chi was an awkward speaker and couldn't explain himself clearly at all. He couldn't offer up Hui Xiangjun, and he was stunned by the enormous injustice; he simply held his tongue and said nothing. Sanyue and Lingyun insisted overbearingly on performing a soul-searching on him. Xuanyin's Lin clan absolutely wouldn't permit it, and the people from Lancang must have sensed something; they stood vaguely on Xuanyin's side. The four great sects argued themselves into a mess, finally alerting Li far to the north.

The high priest of Northern Li's Kunlun set the final tone: spiritual energy entering the mortal world was inauspicious; this thing must be destroyed. If the one who had done this work did not proffer his methods and arts, it must be that he had an errant heart and ought to be punished with a soul-searching and removal of spiritual bones.

That was when Hui Xiangjun descended from the sky.

Whatever she had been doing, her energy was greatly injured; there was practically an elderly lack of agility in her every movement. Light as air, she reached out to pat Lin Chi on the shoulder and placed a silencing talisman on his throat—making him stand there and watch as she carried off the blame and left him with the title of “The Golden Hand.”

When she died, the spirit-conducting gold of that boat shattered. The so-called Moon Plated Gold that had come down to later generations was only the failed experiment Lin Chi had made in imitation of the true gold... so he persisted in calling the art of refining this metal the “Gold Imitation Technique.”

Over eight centuries, he had won fame through deception and borne unpardonable guilt. He had shut himself up on the summit of Moon Plated Peak, waiting for the Law Breaker and the Riverward to come into the world once more, waiting for Qiu Sha to come after him to take revenge.

Since becoming an ascended spirit, he hadn't taken a single step further along the way of toolmaking.

Later, his fellows in the toolmaking way had ingeniously designed many instantaneous communication devices, so you could practically have a conversation in realtime across vast distances, much more convenient than before.

But the letter he was waiting for would never again come flying toward him. There was no one to supply him with riddles to solve... and no one to understand what he said.

He only did his duty at the Xuanyin Mountains, counting the days and waiting until his essence was exhausted, brazenly holding on to the position of one of the thirty-six peak masters without doing a bit of work, accustomed to being silent and dull. If he hadn't accidentally gotten stuck with the walking disaster of a disciple from

next door, he would probably have forgotten the feeling of sorrow and joy by now.

But that “Don’t be afraid” in the Unbound Furnace smashed the years of accumulated frost that covered him.

Lin Chi’s consciousness was curled up in the reincarnation wood twig. Back at the summit of Moon Plated Peak, there were tears streaming down his true body’s face, containing eight centuries of accumulated salt.

The image couldn’t hold a conversation with others. Hui Xiangjun’s gaze was only fixed mechanically on the empty space in front of her. It couldn’t follow people around.

In that moment, while Xi Ping didn’t know anything about what had happened, he very tactfully didn’t ask any questions, only brought that twig before the image’s eyes, not letting Lin Chi miss her gaze.

So Hui Xiangjun “looked” into the depths of Lin Chi’s consciousness and, just as if she were speaking directly to him, said, “Don’t be afraid, Zisheng, and don’t listen when those idiots tell you to blame yourself. It wasn’t your fault. I knew that the opportune moment hadn’t come then. It wasn’t yet time for the spirit-conducting gold to appear in the world. But if that had not happened, the opportune moment would never have come. If I had wanted to hide it, I wouldn’t have sent it to you.

“Whatever people fear will become their desire. When they punished me then, each of them already had ulterior motives in mind. In the future, they won’t be able to hold back. They’ll have taken out all those little things you made, right? The copied spirit-conducting gold is limited by the rules of the spiritual mountains, it can only use a drop of spiritual energy. But even a tiny step is still going forward. This will cause turbulence in the world. If the movement doesn’t come in a hundred years, it will come in a thousand years. When

you see the Law Breaker and the Riverward again, that will be when true spirit-conducting gold comes into the world.

“Jiejie won’t be there then. You take care of it.”

After saying this, Hui Xiangjun sighed. “The spiritual mountains...” She shook her head and faced forward. The furnace flame that had disappeared before abruptly began to burn brightly around her.

With a wave of her wide sleeves, she sat down in midair in the Ancient Chu fashion, upright as a bell. In that moment, she was no longer smiling. All her mildness and amiability vanished without a trace. Her gaze was like a knife, stabbing at Xi Ping.

“Youngster, though you hold the Law Breaker, if you wish to take the furnace flame, you must first answer my questions.”

Xi Ping said, “... huh?”

Lin Chi recovered and with an effort managed to restrain himself in front of his junior. Hoarsely, he said, “This is called the Heart Examination, a very ancient toolmaking ritual—when the original owner of an immortal tool doesn’t want to let just anyone use their item, they will leave some questions on the tool, so only a successor whose answers accord with the original owner’s intentions will be qualified to use it.”

“Wait, wait... I need to speak Ancient Chu, too? I don’t know how!”

Xi Ping was very panicked. Not only did he not know the language, he also didn’t know a single thing about the way of toolmaking. He had only just learned how the furnace fire was lit. What if this toolmaking master asked him what you would get if you cooked Xiang Rong and Xuanwu together in a pot?!

Lin Chi cautioned him: “Language has its own spirit, regardless of what language it is. Starting now, you must speak cautiously. Once the Heart Examination starts, every word that comes out of your mouth will be viewed as your answer.”

As if to corroborate what he said, though Hui Xiangjun was still speaking in difficult-to-parse Ancient Chu, Xi Ping could suddenly go around the language itself to understand her meaning directly. She asked, “Do you know where my Way of the Heart comes from?”

Xi Ping frowned. Just then, he had felt the paperman he had put together before coming here break.

Zhuoming had caught up!

“I know, senior,” Xi Ping blurted out before Lin Chi could stop him, “your Way of the Heart was inherited from the ancient demonic god of the eternal spring brocade. You cultivate the mysterious and dry as dust way of toolmaking.”

“Be careful...” said Lin Chi in alarm.

Sadly, the questioner and the questioned seemed to be competing to see whose tongue was more nimble. Before Lin Chi could get a couple of words out, the two of them had already come to the next round of question and answer.

Hui Xiangjun asked, “And what is an ancient demonic god?”

Xi Ping didn’t take any time to think. “One of the masters who lost out to the five sages during the battle for the full moon positions. They died, but their ways weren’t extinguished. Their accompanying plants remained in the human world, waiting for an opportunity to seize power.”

Hui Xiangjun said, “Where is the Way of the Heart I inherited from the eternal spring brocade now?”

Xi Ping said, “In the Unbound Furnace.”

The Heart Examination seemed to find his answer too broad and suspected him of trying to muddle through. Once again came the cold question: “Where is it?”

Xi Ping met her eyes directly for a moment. “In the hidden realm inside the Unbound Furnace, inside the trunks of the eternal spring brocade... by now it may already have been swallowed by a stupid naked egg.”

Lin Chi went numb all over. “Xi Shiyong, what are you babbling...”

Hui Xiangjun said, “It isn’t in the furnace flame?”

Xi Ping said, “No.”

Lin Chi: “...”

Sword god, if you can hear me from Zhaoting, can’t you control your disciple?!

Zhuoming’s consciousness had already reached them, just in time to hear Xi Ping calling him a “stupid naked egg.” He gave a furious roar. The heartless lotus’s stalks instantly pierced through the mountain. Silt fell with a rustle, hitting the furnace flame.

Xi Ping didn’t so much as turn around. He pressed a talisman to the ground, temporarily stabilizing this small space.

A trace of an indecipherable smile appeared on Hui Xiangjun’s face. “If you can’t even get my Way of the Heart, how are you going to get my vital weapon?”

Xi Ping said, “Is a Way of the Heart really that important?”

The lotus stalks that had penetrated into the mountain smashed Xi Ping’s talisman head on. Xi Ping played a note and tore apart the lotus stalks.

Lin Chi finally had a chance to put in a word: “She’s the one questioning you, don’t ask questions back!”

“Cultivators spend their lives cultivating a Way of the Heart and can only inherit a senior’s vital weapon by obtaining their Way of the Heart—that’s also a rule of the spiritual mountains..”

This ignorant answer of his sent Lin Chi into a breakdown. “Good heavens, no it isn’t! It was like that before the spiritual mountains formed! The ways of the ancient demonic gods are also..”

The wildly flying notes of the Tai Sui Qin locked with the lotus stalks of the heartless lotus. There was a rumble, and countless intertwined eternal spring brocade and late-autumn red root systems disintegrated. The mountain was collapsing from this fight between the two great ascended spirits.

“Fine, so it’s a rule of heaven and earth,” Xi Ping said, changing his wording without turning a hair. “So what? Even if right this moment, all the shed skins die off and the spiritual mountains collapse, the plants spread and the demonic gods ascend, all that will happen is that some new spiritual mountains will rise in the mortal world. Mortals, cultivators... everyone will keep on chasing spiritual stones, keep on killing each other for the sake of spiritual stones..”

Zhuoming, with his features all in disarray, had thrown himself at Xi Ping, the lotus stalks surrounding them from all sides, penetrating the furnace flame just the same as when they had swallowed up the eternal spring brocade.

Xi Ping said, “We don’t give a rat’s ass about the struggles of heaven and earth and Ways of the Heart.”

No sooner had he spoken than the Hui Xiangjun in the furnace flame disappeared. The lotus stalks stabbing through the furnace flame instantly turned to ashes. Zhuoming gave a cry of pain. The flame shrank until it was the size of a bean, then sank into the reincarnation wood twig in Xi Ping’s hand. As soon as that happened, the illusory hidden realm inside the Unbound Furnace collapsed—

CHAPTER 142 - Eternal Flame (Final)

Zhuoming clearly sensed the Unbound Furnace escaping his control altogether; the furnace flame began to backlash against him.

Xi Ping's voice drilled into the thousand holes of his lotus root hearts.

“Heard you gobbled up the eternal spring brocade? Heh, there was so much of it. All of Western Chu's sheep piled up together couldn't eat as much as you! I'm impressed!”

“Did you taste it? Can you hold that much? How curious, why do you think this furnace won't listen to you anymore? Maybe you've eaten too much and can't digest it?”

Had Zhuoming had a single remaining strand of hair, it would have stood straight up from anger.

Xi Ping took the opportunity to send a note slicing toward Zhuoming —tragically enough, it was only now that he was getting the chance to properly experience the difference between “near-ascended spirit” and a true ascended spirit. His meridians and essence were hundreds upon thousands of times wider than before. With no full moon sages or shed skins next to him to hold him down, he had the feeling that he could flatten Sanyue's East Peak with one move...

Of course, one move was all he knew.

“Finally I get to roll up my sleeves and thrash that damn baldy to my heart's content,” Xi Ping said to Lin Chi in the reincarnation wood. “Lin-shishu, give me that talisman you mentioned before!”

Lin Chi: “...”

His emotions had been rising and falling wildly just now. He hadn't yet had time to recover. The talismans he had learned by rote before coming here had by now returned to Moon Plated Peak.

Xi Ping came up empty and had no choice but to use one and the same sword move for the however-many-thousandth time. "Can't you do anything, master? I'm in a really embarrassing situation here!"

Lin Chi acknowledged that he couldn't do anything when it came to fighting. After all, he was only a blacksmith. At the same time, he thought that there was really no need for Xi Shiyong to be embarrassed; it was Sword God Zhi who ought to be embarrassed.

However unskilled Zhuoming was at hand-to-hand combat, he was still a veteran ascended spirit. He had practically learned this sword move by now and easily found an opening to dodge it, escaping the Unbound Furnace.

Xi Ping chased him, sweeping the Unbound Furnace up in his mustard seed while he was at it. He simply brandished the Tai Sui Qin like a sledgehammer, slamming it down on Zhuoming's "tail" — the pond full of lotus roots and stalks.

Had the Tai Sui Qin had its own mind, it would certainly have rebelled against its master on the spot. The body of the qin hummed and its strings quivered wildly. The spiritual energy it raised was like pummeling fists, striking Zhuoming and the heartless lotus without any method. The technique was faintly reminiscent of what Xi Ping had used back when he had put a sack over Big Dog Wang and beat him up.

Zhuoming had never experienced this kind of "magic power" before. His reaction was a beat slow. He got a black eye.

Zhaoting... Zhaoting couldn't make a sound, anyway. It was pretending that it was no longer in this world.

Zhuoming gave a low shout, and a handful of lotus seals sealed Xi Ping's features, trapping his consciousness.

Xi Ping's consciousness wasn't entirely in his body now; he wasn't afraid of being caught. He was just getting ready to escape and backhand Zhuoming's face into a pancake when he found that Zhuoming was luring his consciousness toward the West Peak.

No good! He gave a start: the Luwu!

Xi Ping didn't have time to notify the Luwu to evacuate through the reincarnation wood. The heartless lotuses had already assimilated a patch of grass and swallowed up Xu Rucheng, who was hiding there; they were just about to strip off his consciousness!

It was too inconvenient that there was no reincarnation wood on Sanyue's mountains. Xi Ping couldn't reach.

So he came to a rapid decision. He knocked a crack in the summit of the East Peak and stroked the *Discard the False and Keep the True* book. A beam of spiritual energy with Yu Chang's aura hit the Silver Moon over the Central Peak.

Yu Chang was an authentic evil cultivator. The smell of evil cultivator around him could enrage quite a number of great divine tools.

The Silver Moon's light swept out at once. Before that, Xi Ping had quickly switched places with a reincarnation wood tree a thousand li away, leaving Zhuoming behind—he couldn't move easily in Sanyue, and Zhuoming couldn't move easily outside of Sanyue. Who didn't have a weak spot?

The activity on the East Peak quickly drew the notice of all of Sanyue. A shed skin consciousness immediately arrived. “Who’s there?!”

Zhuoming had no more attention to spare for matching his strength against some half-immortal ants. The moment the moonlight fell, all the heartless lotuses in the pond turned to ashes.

Next, all the flowers in all the lotus ponds in the Sanyue Mountain Range turned into heartless lotuses. It was only for a flash; before they could blossom, they were cleared away by the moonlight.

Sanyue was full of low level disciples who hadn’t worked out what was going on. The Silver Moon couldn’t kill them along with the heartless lotuses. The “moonlight” scattered into several concentrated beams, selectively sweeping only over the lotus ponds.

The moment the lotus ponds were lit up by the “moonlight,” a peculiar inscription formed just where the Silver Moon fell. The Sanyue Mountains gave a fierce shake. For a moment, the Silver Moon’s light was reflected back.

The “moonlight” quickly suppressed the inscription, but in that interval, Zhuoming and the heartless lotuses had vanished.

All of this had transpired in a matter of moments. All the Luwu were stunned. Xu Rucheng hadn’t even realized until now that he had taken a stroll at the border between life and death. He heard Tai Sui’s voice in his ear: “Everyone, put on your Luwu masks. There was a possessor of a paramount spiritual sense in Sanyue. I’ve lured him away for you. The rest are all good-for-nothings, you should be able to get along fine from now on. Do good work.”

After saying this, Xi Ping turned around and sent Lin Chi’s consciousness back to Xuanyin and simply used the Replica to give

himself Xu Rucheng's appearance. He took out an authentic Luwu token and weighed it in his hand. Whistling a tune, he retired in the direction of the rising sun after winning merit, ready to return to Tao County and think of a way to send the Unbound Furnace back to the Xuanyin Mountains.

Just then, the token suddenly warmed.

Xi Ping froze. Then his spiritual sense was suddenly touched. He heard Bai Ling's voice in his ear: "The representative from Xuanyin's inner sect just touched the Luwu's communication network. They must be coming your way. Be careful."

Out of nowhere, Xi Ping had the feeling that the newcomer was an ascended spirit.

This must be a delicate perception belonging only to those who had reached an ascended spirit. A high level cultivator would certainly be restraining their aura while in another country. A low level cultivator wouldn't have noticed them now. Never mind the spiritual sense, they might even have mistaken the person for a mortal while standing face to face. Xi Ping's spiritual sense was touched, but he didn't feel a very great sense of danger. He swiftly checked his Replica mask and calmed down—though this was a little unexpected, it wasn't a big problem. An ascended spirit of the same grade wouldn't be able to see through Master Lin's immortal tool.

Xi Ping continued to walk as though nothing were the matter. Then a cool and refreshing morning breeze blew his way, dispersing the morning mist. A human figure appeared out of nowhere at the end of the faint mist.

Xi Ping: "..."

Damn it, the newcomer was Princess Duanrui!

Wait, this wouldn't have given him a sense of danger? Was his spiritual sense broken?!

Wasn't Princess Duanrui the acting Dignitary of Rites? Wasn't she busy? Why would she come to Western Chu in person to take over the Luwu's assignment? Didn't she think it was beneath her?

Countless thoughts instantly flashed through Xi Ping's mind. His hands even went numb—perhaps it was because Liang Chen had used the princess to scare him the first time he had seen her, but compared to the shed skin elders, Xi Ping was inexplicably more scared of her.

He had to put every bit of his wits into play to maintain his expression: he couldn't lose countenance. Bai Ling evidently also hadn't expected who the newcomer would be; he had only said "Xuanyin's inner sect" just now, and the Luwu, who were of common backgrounds, wouldn't be able to recognize a great personage like this. The way of clarity and unfeeling eschewed frivolities, was without desires and without adornments. Her attire was plain and colorless, and she had restrained her aura. If he had been Xu Rucheng, he would be likely to think this was only an inner sect established foundation.

Xi Ping didn't deliberately relax his tensed shoulders. Maintaining this not excessive nervousness, he bowed convincingly to this "unfamiliar inner sect disciple." "Shijie."

Duanrui didn't quibble over the form of address. "The Luwu tokens are nearly all in the vicinity of the Sanyue Mountains. Only you have snuck away."

Xi Ping reconsidered: it would be just as well if she took the Unbound Furnace back; that would be open and aboveboard, and guaranteed to be safe... and if it wasn't safe, that was all right, too. The furnace flame was in his hands, anyway. Anyone who used the

Unbound Furnace would be as good as doing it right under his nose. He could spread his consciousness into it any time.

“Yes, because I encountered a slight unexpected circumstance.” Then he explained what had happened in Sanyue, mixing truth and falsehood. “Then for some reason, there was a loud sound from the East Peak, and the Silver Moon started chasing after the lotuses to shine on them... I just happened to be near the East Peak and saw to my surprise that something had been left behind in the lotus pond after it was swept by the Silver Moon, so I just snatched it up.”

Saying so, he quietly put the Unbound Furnace into a little half-immortal mustard seed and offered it to Duanrui along with the mustard seed. “It’s this. Please have a look, shijie.”

Duanrui sometimes seemed like a stone statue that had grown legs. Hearing that Xiang Rong had become a full moon sage and then passed away, her brows didn’t move at all, as if only one of Sanyue’s dogs had died. And the Unbound Furnace didn’t cause her a sliver of surprise, either. When she accepted it and swept it with her consciousness, like a machine calling a roll, she appraised it indifferently: “The vital weapon of Lancang’s Elder Hui Xiangjun, the Unbound Furnace.”

Xi Ping made joy flash over Xu Rucheng’s face, then suppressed it, “steadying” himself by force. “My lord’s assignment for us in coming to Sanyue was to investigate the whereabouts of the Unbound Furnace. I didn’t expect the Southern Sage to be looking out for us like this. By coincidence, we’ve actually gotten it. Please take it back to the inner sect, shijie!”

Duanrui agreed. Suddenly, she raised her head and looked at him. She asked, “How long since you began cultivating?”

Xu Rucheng had entered the Way during Great Wan’s internal strife, about a year later than Xi Ping himself. So Xi Ping answered

ambiguously, “Five or six years.”

The corners of Duanrui’s lips moved slightly, as if she were smiling.

Then Xi Ping heard her say, “An ascended spirit after five or six years is unheard of. It seems that the world truly is changing.”

Xi Ping’s mind buzzed. A breath caught in his lungs.

She had seen through him?! How could she have seen through him?

Hadn’t Lin Chi said that the Replica could even fool the eyes of shed skins? Could the Golden Hand be relied on?

Instantly, Xi Ping had an instinct to escape back to Tao County through the reincarnation wood, then forced himself to stop in his tracks—the Replica spiritual image mask had been made by Lin Chi, and the Luwu had been built up by his san-ge single-handedly; now that he had been discovered by Duanrui, neither of them could escape responsibility.

But Princess Duanrui had saved his miserable life. Except as a last resort, Xi Ping would never want to try his qin against her... and anyway, what was he bluffing about? The princess could bring him to his knees with two lashes of her whip.

For a time, Xi Ping was caught between a rock and a hard place.

“It seems that that ancient demonic god’s way has fallen entirely into your hands,” Princess Duanrui said calmly. She seemed to have no intention of getting out her whip—though of course that was hard to say, since she didn’t seem particularly excited when she was cutting people down, either. “He was sunk in the Impassable Sea for so many years. Nearly every generation of Zhous who went into the Impassable Sea set their minds on him, but for over eight

centuries, those bones didn't move even once, so they thought that there was no more Way of the Heart in that skeleton."

Xi Ping thought, In fact, there wasn't a Way of the Heart in that skeleton. They were looking for the wrong thing.

"Your Highness," Xi Ping said, "I became an established foundation at the bottom of the Impassable Sea and was sealed by the three high elders. After escaping illegally, I went on to become an ascended spirit in Sanyue, all without receiving permission from any spiritual mountains. I'm even more of an evil cultivator than that Qiu Sha, who disturbed the four great spiritual mountains. Aren't you going to 'expel evil'?"

Through the spiritual image mask, Duanrui looked into his eyes. But Xi Ping was no longer the disciple in the Latent Cultivation Temple who had trembled with fear while letting her examine him. Unflinching, he looked back at her and said, "No matter who is caught in the middle, relations between Xuanyin and me will not improve."

"That is correct. Dignitary of Fate and the Dignitary of Rule may not be wholly without regrets now." As if she hadn't heard the provocation in his words, Princess Duanrui continued as evenly as before, "They misunderstood cause and effect. They thought at the time that the tolling of the Bell of Tribulation and the strange phenomena were all the result of the ancient demonic god appearing in the world. They did not think that the waves of tribulation had already risen, and the demonic god's way was reborn to answer that tribulation—had you left the mountains some years later, perhaps they would not have punished you."

Xi Ping gave a somewhat sarcastic laugh.

"Time and fate are not things you can understand merely by sitting in the Sea of Stars. When such things ought to come, neither you

nor Xuanyin Mountain can defy them,” Duanrui said dully. “Even though you have obtained the Unbound Furnace to repair Zhaoting, your shifu will still not leave seclusion at once. Since ancient times, shed skins have had to join their hearts with heaven and earth. If he remains unwilling, there will be even more push and pull. If I were you, I would not hide in Tao County.”

The corners of Xi Ping’s eyes twitched slightly. How had she guessed even his connection with Tao County?

“The rule that evil cultivators cannot become ascended spirits has been broken. The world will become more and more chaotic in the future. Evil cultivators everywhere will be like bamboo shoots after spring rain, all breaking through to become forces to be reckoned with. But none of them will be your friend,” Princess Duanrui said. “Your foundation is too shallow. Tao County is a tiny flame. Whether it burns or goes out in the end will depend on how great a wind you can raise. It is impossible for you to rest content, warming yourself by that candle flame. You ought to understand this.”

Xi Ping was silent for a long time.

Duanrui waved a hand at him and put away the mustard seed holding the Unbound Furnace. Her figure flashed, and she was already dozens of zhang away, her white clothes merging with the mist.

“Duanrui-shishu, wait!” Xi Ping suddenly called her to a halt. “Zhou Kun buried a heart demon seed in the Impassable Sea, and then it was brought back to Xuanyin by the Bell of Tribulation. The Dignitary of Rites Zhao Yin must have lost his mind on account of that. You must be care...”

“Unless humans go extinct, the demon host will live forever,” Duanrui’s voice came from afar. “One ought not to treat one’s

shadow as an enemy. If one's Way of the Heart is clouded with dust, then perhaps that is dust one has stirred up oneself. Thank you."

No sooner had she spoken than she disappeared into emptiness.

In order to pin down the Zhou clan, the Xuanyin Mountains had pushed the Zhou family's genius who took after her ancestor into the way of clarity and unfeeling, cutting away her selfish motives. The way of clarity and unfeeling viewed all things equally. If there was no difference between oneself and others, then what difference would there be between immortals and demons?

She was a near-shed skin, her Way of the Heart nearly perfected. It didn't belong to the Zhou family, and naturally it didn't belong to Xuanyin either.

Over eight centuries ago, Hui Xiangjun had opened up the skin of the spiritual mountains and buried an inextinguishable seed of flame. A wind from beyond the bounds of the laws had blown, and the Zhou clan had snuck into the deep sea.

Now, there was an answer to all these portents.

The bright sky tore the mist away bit by bit. Then the morning light seemed also to shine through Xi Ping's body. He disappeared where he stood, scattering into countless lowborn reincarnation wood trees.

BOOK 4 - Overturning the Mountains

CHAPTER 143 - The Storm Begins (1)

Southern Wan, the fourteenth year of Jiahe.

As before, it was late spring. As before, it was the year of the Grand Selection.

Xuanyin Mountain's Grand Selection had originally been held once every ten years, in order to coordinate with those sent from the inner sect to service Jinping's Dragon Vein. Starting in the ninth year of Jiahe, it had changed to once every five years. Some said that Heaven's Design Pavilion was short on manpower after the fall of the Zhao family; some said that the Kaiming Cultivators were expanding too quickly, and the inner sect had a mind to restrain Prince Zhuang; still others said what other reason could there be for the increased enrollment of Xuanyin's Grand Selection—the world was not at peace.

Indeed, the world was no longer what it had been.

When the new emperor had assumed the throne, a rebellion had arisen within Great Wan. How long since that had been suppressed? And in the sixth year of Jiahe, a shed skin elder had passed away, and the Zhao clan had betrayed the nation, dragging nearly half of Heaven's Design Pavilion down with it and leading to spiritual energy being prohibited throughout the country for ten days.

And none of the neighbors along the borders were without their worries.

The most absurd of all was the near neighbor Western Chu. At present, Western Chu had two major local specialties: pickled foods and evil cultivators.

First they had lit up a blood moon twice within half a year, more frequently than other places set off fireworks. Before anyone had time to be astonished about this, the East Peak's High Elder Xuanwu and his heretical disciple had openly betrayed the Way—a shed skin betraying the Way sounded about the same as “an emperor in revolt”!

The whereabouts of these two exceptional individuals were still unknown, and the “fabricated” full moon sect leader hadn't made a peep. The only shed skin remaining to the Sanyue Mountains was Xiang Ning, left all on his own to keep down a crowd of great ascended spirits who all had their own designs; he couldn't do it. Those surnamed Xiang and those not surnamed Xiang openly split into two camps. As the reflection of the immortal mountains in the mortal world, Dongheng City saw its political circles in a bewildering state of change. The days of the Xiang family unilaterally laying down the law had gone forever. Faced with the enormous lure of the spiritual mountains, the forces of evil ran wild throughout the country without any sense of propriety.

Since Western Chu had become the forerunner for ascended spirit evil cultivators, it had been like a contagion. Great evil cultivators hidden in Southern Shu and Northern Li cropped up one after another. In Northern Li, the many sword cultivators of Kunlun had always engaged in suppression through force; taking swift and resolute action, they promulgated nine edicts to strictly control evil cultivators inside and outside their borders. This had reached the point of overcorrection—“expelling evil” had become a means for people to frame each other.

The situation in Southern Shu was even more complex. In Shu and on its three islands, there were eighteen tribes in all, generally separated into two clans. The people of these two clans could be distinguished by their appearances. Apart from using Zhaoye's official language in common, each also had their own language; slight conflicts between them were longstanding. Since an

ascended spirit evil cultivator had emerged, the clash between orthodox and evil had been added to the rifts between the clans; they spent all their time in confused civil strife.

The Land of Turmoil, which no one had looked after before, went without saying. This was an exceptional place for sheltering wrongdoing. In less than a decade, three great evil cultivators had become ascended spirits in rapid succession, and they had actually found the hidden realm Qiu Sha had left behind. They had teamed up to infiltrate the Lancang Mountain Range and conspired in vain to seize the southern mines. Had the four great immortal mountains not realized what was happening and joined hands to suppress them, these individuals might have founded their own country.

Compared to this, the common people of Wan were quite fortunate. Southern Wan had firmly expelled its evil cultivators when the Kaiming Department had been established and adhered rigidly to strict precautions within its borders. Therefore, Xuanyin Mountain was the only place that could hold its head up now—on the surface, at least, only Great Wan hadn't splashed dog's blood on the moon.

But with the circumstances as they were, no one could think only of themselves.

The border inscriptions had been upgraded several times but still couldn't prevent malevolent incursions. There was nothing else Xuanyin Mountain could do; they sent established foundation disciples from the inner sect to oversee each of Heaven's Design Pavilion's branches. At the same time, they promulgated an epoch-making edict: permission for walkers in the mortal world who fit the criteria to establish foundations.

In this way, Heaven's Design Pavilion's General Commander Pang Jian at long last legitimately established a foundation.

Still wearing the sapphire robe with a silver belt, his bandit-like unruliness considerably restrained, he was as usual escorting a new class of disciples to the Latent Cultivation Temple.

Almost sixty percent of the disciples no longer belonged to noble families. They all came from families of ordinary government officials. Having gone through layer upon layer of selection, their natural endowments were considerably better than before, but they didn't especially understand the rules—Pang Jian extended a hand, and a roll of coarse paper flew out from one disciple's luggage. The vague words "So-and-so Bulletin" were printed on it. He meant to deliver a brief rebuke but saw that the disciple smuggling the newspaper was already scared ashen-faced, so he swallowed his words... Fair enough. It wasn't everyone who was as audacious as that little brat Xi Shiyong.

Pang Jian nodded to the cultivator who had come to receive them, then turned and sank into the ground.

That newspaper was also called a "toilet bulletin," because it had been printed on toilet paper to begin with.

This was a long story.

Several years ago, Western Chu's Xiang clan had obviously lost power, and the hyenas had begun to drool and grind their teeth in the direction of the Sanyue Mountains. Someone had come along to fish in these troubled waters, printing some complete nonsense on toilet paper, giving people something to amuse themselves with when they went to the latrine. These were called "Embellished Toilet Papers"; they treated the masters of Sanyue's inner sect like opera characters, having them play out whole scenarios. They frequently featured appalling headlines like "Xuanwu Contracts Lovesickness, Peeps on the Sect Leader in His Bath"; the contents were extremely vulgar.

These were shameful secrets about immortals. All at once, no one wanted to read out of date stories about eloping courtesans or cuckolded princes anymore. Everyone knew perfectly well that it was all nonsense, yet they still listened to it with keen pleasure. For a time, whenever a public letter writer went to the latrine, he would be followed by a crowd of illiterates with a craving. The winding stream⁸⁶ parties of the learned were admittedly refined, but the common people passing paper around while squatting in the latrine had an appeal all its own.

The Embellished Toilet Papers continued in Chu despite being banned, because while each fresh “ban” made a lot of noise, there was a lot of wind and not much rain; the bans weren’t properly implemented—these things only toyed with the Xiang family, and there were too many people waiting to watch the Xiang clan’s drama.

After that, other ill-intentioned people had started printing them as well, making the waters even muddier.

Embellished Toilet Papers had turned into toilet bulletins and become an industry in Western Chu—in Southern Wan, no matter how fiercely the great families fought, they would still present a dignified face to the outside world; it was only in an absurd place like Chu where a malignant tumor like this could develop.

Sanyue had suffered at the hands of the Xiang clan for a long time. At the highest level, it was the monopolization of the immortal mountains, and at the lowest it was corruption in the imperial examinations; mid- and low-level cultivators readily fell in with humble students in wishing to force the Xiang clan to cede their position, allowing people to be promoted on merit. But once the matter grew too large, they could no longer control it.

At first, several groups continued the vulgar style of Embellished Toilet Papers, attacking and defaming each other, fabricating disgusting gossip. Bit by bit, as circulation spread like a plague and more and more people entered the fray, the contents began to vary. Some people publicly called into question why the Sanyue Spiritual Mountains should belong entirely to the Xiang family, some people revealed the fact that local thugs everywhere were keeping cultivators and imprinting them with spiritual image brands, and unexpectedly there were even a couple of articles explaining the history of the cultivation sects and the basics of cultivation in plain and easily understood terms, and these contained practically no errors; while they were quickly destroyed, once these things came out, there would immediately be scholars making copies and disseminating them, and word of mouth couldn't be stopped.

This all seemed like Sanyue reaping what it had sown in its internal strife. But who had started the Embellished Toilet Papers? Apart from those wicked Luwu, Pang Jian couldn't think who else it could be.

Zhou Ying wasn't in this for the fun of it. Each and every one of his dirty tricks for adding fuel to the fire was intended to deal a fatal blow. In a few short years, the Sanyue Immortal Mountains, which had held themselves above the masses for thousands of years, had been pulled down into the common dust by the flying spit of the people, altogether losing face.

By the time Sanyue realized what was happening, it was too late. The toilet bulletins were in vogue throughout the country; they had become a distinctive type of print culture, and they were starting to spread abroad. Northern Li responded the fastest. In the early years, they had declared that those privately printing toilet bulletins would be found guilty of "conspiring against the state"; if they were caught, their whole families would be executed.

Great Wan had also prohibited them, but after going through internal upheaval and having the Kaiming Cultivators gain power, they certainly wouldn't dare to imitate the north in enacting such severe penalties against the common people. Anyway, the Grand Canal, the Xia River, and the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragons that covered the whole country had too great a reach; there was no way to control them all—hadn't that ignorant junior even brought the thing into the Latent Cultivation Temple?

Pang Jian was very weary. When he glanced at the headline, which said "Torrential Rain Breaches Dike, Lin Clan's Water-repellent Inscriptions Banish Floodwaters, Instantly Destroy 10,000 Mu of Fertile Land," he became even more weary.

The rotten waste paper of the toilet bulletin turned to ashes in his hand. Pang Jian turned and went to Elder Su's Chengjing Hall.

The Latent Cultivation Temple's Su Zhun was a former general commander of Heaven's Design Pavilion, Pang Jian's guide. Nowadays, while Pang Jian's cultivation was higher than his, he still called him "shixiong" very deferentially.

"Heaven's Design Pavilion has given you quite a bit of trouble these last couple of years, shixiong," Pang Jian said to Su Zhun, taking a seat and declining tea. "Before, the Latent Cultivation Temple would have one year of activity and nine years of rest, but now it doesn't stop."

The Xuanyin Mountains kept a very strict watch on established foundations temporarily residing in the mortal world. They had to keep independent accounts of their allotted spiritual stones; to recover from wounds or to go into short-term seclusion to seek enlightenment, they had to go to the Latent Cultivation Temple; and they had to go through a fixed annual inspection every year—to examine whether their Way of the Heart was intact, whether they

had touched any spiritual energy they shouldn't have touched, and so on.

The calm valley deep in the mountains had instantly turned into the inner sect's distribution center, people coming and going throughout all four seasons every year without cease. If the temple's guardian treasure Luo Qingshi wasn't spending all day being enraged by new idiots, he was watching the idiots he had taught before being brought back to the oven to be cooked again. In no time, his temper had risen another length; it would soon be standing shoulder to shoulder with the Qiankun Tower.

But Su Zhun laughed. "A little activity is nice. When a person gets old, doesn't he want to have some people around?"

His hair had turned whiter, his elderliness increasingly obvious. As a half-immortal, the end of his lifespan was almost here.

Pang Jian couldn't resist asking, "Shixiong, why won't you establish a foundation?"

Su Zhun shook his head and said, laughing, "I'm old! Even if I established a foundation now, I wouldn't get very far. I'd only be wasting spiritual stones. Anyway, in my life, I've had my merits and demerits, and I've been obedient and rebellious. I have nothing to cling to and no unfinished business. It's been a worthwhile journey. I don't have an immortal's Way of the Heart."

Pang Jian wanted to speak but stopped himself.

Su Zhun said, smiling, "What? Human affairs change like the tide. Can't you see which way the wind is blowing, which way the water is flowing?"

"That's not it, it's just... such a mess that it makes me weary." Pang Jian pinched the center of his brow. "I thought before that if you had

the good fortune to become a cultivator and live a century or two longer than others for no reason, and gained some privileges, you ought to restrain yourself and keep watch over your heart. Rules are rules, and walkers in the mortal world could only be half-immortals. All these years, I haven't dared to take a step out of line. No matter what I encountered, I held out and didn't touch that established foundation pill... But now it's all right. Once the outer sects were allowed to have established foundations, there was no more boundary between us and the immortal mountains. Whenever a half-immortal with slightly higher natural endowments completes their spiritual bones, people will immediately provide them with a Way of the Heart and resources from the shadows to rope them in. Unless they already have their own Way of the Heart, refusing would make it seem like they didn't know what was good for them—look, shixiong, now that the wind has turned in this direction, hasn't my holding fast before become a joke?"

Su Zhun listened to this patiently, then, pinching his beard, said unhurriedly, "That depends on what you've been holding to."

Pang Jian froze briefly. He thought this over for a long moment, then said seriously, "Yes, thank you for your instruction, shixiong. I..."

Just then, a ring on Pang Jian's hand heated slightly—this was Heaven's Design Pavilion's newly-equipped communication device, faster than the previous edition, with an inscription chip inside it that could be replaced periodically. They were all supplied by Moon Plated Peak; they sent letters faster and with greater secrecy.

Pang Jian reached out to touch it. He quickly glanced at the letter. His expression was a little surprised.

Su Zhun said, "Where is the problem now? Go on and deal with it, then."

“It isn’t anything major,” Pang Jian said after a moment’s silence. “Dowager Imperial Consort Xi has died.”

Su Zhun didn’t realize who “Dowager Imperial Consort Xi” was. “Who?”

“The Kaiming Department’s Prince Zhuang’s birth mother,” Pang Jian said. “Zhou Ying has natural spiritual bones. He was born without the need to spend a century refining his bones. As long as he opened his spiritual eyes and acquired a Way of the Heart, he could establish a foundation any time. Since establishing a foundation became open to the outer sects, I hear that all of Xuanyin Mountain has had their eyes on him. Up to now, he’s always put it off, saying his mother was still living, his bonds to the mortal world yet unbroken. Now he has no more excuse.”

Su Zhun said curiously, “Put off establishing a foundation?”

“That demonic star doesn’t want to be constrained by a Way of the Heart. Before, if the Luwu went out of bounds, there would be people in the immortal mountains to oppose them, but in recent years the storm of evil cultivators has become increasingly intense. The borders are unsafe. There’s nothing to be done. So the inner sect has been wanting to bring him into some peak and pin him down with a Way of the Heart.” Pang Jian sighed. “Once the mourning period has passed, if he is still unwilling to accept a Way of the Heart and establish a foundation, I’m afraid he won’t be able to justify it... I suppose that’s just as well.”

In Prince Zhuang Manor in Jinping, there was an endless stream of visitors coming to offer their condolences. “Prince Zhuang” received them cautiously and without imagination, not putting a step out of place—none of the mortals or outer sect cultivators present could tell that this was only an unfeeling paperman.

A cool breeze blew through the manor draped in mourning, making its way right into the rear courtyard.

The rear courtyard was extremely peaceful. White paper lanterns hung from the ends of the simple pavilion. Only in the south study was there a light burning.

A pot of snow wine was steaming on a small stove. The sweet, cloying scent floated throughout the room.

This was his first time tasting this thing. It was said that drinking a single cup could make all your worries vanish. Xi Ziyi had spent the better part of her life steeping in snow wine. Even when she died there had been a tranquil smile on her face.

He very much wanted to know what kind of paradise there was to be found in snow wine.

But while it had a heavy aroma, it was dull to the taste. After drinking two cups, he hadn't tasted anything. Some images like floating lights flashed before his eyes, but he didn't bother to look closely—these things were even more false than worldly affairs; they couldn't fool him.

The only benefit was that when he drank it, his senses became a little hazy. Perhaps if he had another cup, he would know the clarity of the deaf and blind.

Bai Ling was plastered in a corner. He wanted to counsel him to stop, but he didn't dare. As Zhou Ying raised the third cup, he glimpsed a miniature reincarnation wood tree at the corner of the desk move on its own. The half-demon relaxed.

“Busybodies,” said Zhou Ying without looking up, “both of you.”

A bone hand reached out of the miniature tree. Looking closely, there were many cracks in the joints, and they were all misplaced. But in just a flash, the skeletal hand repaired itself and was quickly covered by muscle and flesh. By the time it reached Zhou Ying, it was already good as new. It deftly took away his white jade wine cup.

Zhou Ying was dazed. For an instant, the miniature landscape became the real person... still faintly looking the way he had at seventeen or eighteen when he had been picking fights with a fat cat, each clawing the other in provocation.

After his momentary blankness, he saw the white jade wine cup disappear briefly; when it was handed back, more than half of the snow wine still remained in it.

Bubbles were floating on the surface of the snow wine that could make a person live in a dream; they formed a line of writing: "No taste, add a scoop of sugar."

All the illusions in front of Zhou Ying's eyes instantly vanished. He came back to himself, rubbed his temples, and extinguished the furnace warming the snow wine with a snap of his fingers. "Scram, go put in your order somewhere else."

The hand put the white jade cup down. The fingers tapped lightly on the rim of the cup. In time to the tapping, the snow wine in the cup turned into a roly-poly puppy that began to gambol around on the desk, obnoxiously leaving a trail of sopping wet footprints.

Pulling a long face, Zhou Ying said, "Aren't you in seclusion in the Land of Turmoil? What have you come out for now? Other ascended spirits often go into seclusion for a century. What's going on with you? You're always stepping out for fresh air. Have you got carbuncles or something?"

“San-ge, I’ve heard something,” the puppy made of snow wine said in a human voice, wagging its tail. “Can you guess what it is?”

CHAPTER 144 - The Storm Begins (2)

When the three Xuanyin elders had sealed Xi Ping in the Impassable Sea, it had amounted to forcibly suppressing information about “the ungovernable way” and “the Zhou family raising demons,” but there was no such thing as a wall that didn’t let the air through. The tolling of the Bell of Tribulation in the East Sea couldn’t hide anything from the other immortal mountains. If someone with their mind set on it took a look at the chaos within Great Wan, they would get some idea.

While Qiu Sha was dead, Xuanwu and his disciple, as well as Yu Chang, who had escaped Tao County bearing the blame for all manner of things, were still living. For those who ought to know, reincarnation wood was no longer a secret.

The fact that Xuanyin Mountain had never said anything about it came down to rather complicated reasons.

One important reason was that an ascended spirit of the ungovernable way was fully fledged and wouldn’t be so easy to get rid of anymore. Never mind that they couldn’t catch him to begin with, even if they did catch him, they might end up having to request the aid of the great divine tool of the mountains. Xi Ping’s crimes didn’t merit that. Anyway, Xuanyin couldn’t afford to lose him.

For another reason, on the surface, Xi Ping was still to this day a formal disciple of Flying Jade Peak.

Among the reasons it had needed the Unbound Furnace to repair Zhaoting was first that Zhaoting had broken under very special circumstances, and of the extant members of the way of toolmaking, none had such high cultivation; also, it was missing a piece. It was incredibly dangerous for a divine tool of this grade to

get chipped or cracked, never mind simply getting a hole in it. And in the end, while General Zhi clearly knew that he would die if his vital sword couldn't be repaired, and that Xi Ping's true body had already escaped the Impassable Sea, so that shard could be taken back any time, the shard of Zhaoting still wouldn't come out... Fortunately, the Golden Hand was dependable. In the end, he had succeeded in repairing Zhaoting, reforging it a sliver thinner than before.

At this point, Zhi Xiu's attitude was very unequivocal.

He would perhaps be the youngest shed skin in history, a future pillar of Xuanyin.

There had by now been a serious reshuffling within Xuanyin. Zhao Yin was dead, and the positions of both the Dignitary of Fate and the new Dignitary of Rites were very ambivalent... And on top of that, while Xi Ping himself said that he couldn't let the matter between him and Xuanyin rest, he wasn't an orphan—his parents, as well as his maternal family, with many members and a large business, were all in Jinping, and even if another century passed and his ties to the mortal world more or less severed, there was still Zhou Ying, and there was still Zhi Xiu. If he truly did want to rise in revolt, the shard of Zhaoting in his spirit wouldn't necessarily shield him.

At any rate, owing to all of the above reasons, Xuanyin Mountain had simply left the matter unmentioned, pretending to the outside world that no such thing existed. They only secretly placed many eyes in the vicinity of the Yongning Marquis Manor.

"I won't guess. Wait a moment." Zhou Ying shot a talisman at the dog's head. The droplets of snow wine immediately froze solid. He flicked the frozen dog so it rolled a couple of times on the table, no longer spilling all over the place. "I thought you'd gone to the Land of Turmoil to catch up with that friend of yours. What damn place

are you using for your seclusion, anyway? How can you still have an ear out for everything?”

“A-Xiang? Why would I want to catch up with her? She’s so poor she rattles, and she’s got a family to feed. She doesn’t even know where her own next meal is coming from... Well, that’s not important.”

Zhou Ying was looking at him expressionlessly.

Xi Ping: “...”

Well, he’d better make a clean breast of it.

Back in Western Chu, Xi Ping had first thoroughly smeared Xuanwu, Xiang Rong, and Zhuoming; they had all died or fled, anyway, so even if any of them saw it, they wouldn’t be able to come take it up with him for the moment. Then he had examined himself and thought that this was rather improper; after all, an ascended spirit getting his revenge by spreading rumors could be called a singular unprecedented act since the beginning of time.

If he went on like this, when shifu came out of seclusion in a hundred years, the first thing he would do would be to kick him out of his peak.

So he had foisted the Embellished Toilet Papers, that miracle it sullied the ears to hear of, onto san-ge, while he himself, following A-Xiang’s clues, had run off to the Land of Turmoil with the Unbound Furnace’s furnace flame to search for the hidden realm Qiu Sha had neglected. Qiu Sha had left behind quite a few of Lancang’s ancient texts. “Tai Sui,” the “self-made genius” who had learned from a bunch of evil cultivators in Wild Fox Country, at last had an opportunity to cram some orthodox cultivation.

But, after all, Qiu Sha had split this hidden realm open. There were people other than Xi Ping who coveted it—it wasn't long before those three ascended spirits of the Land of Turmoil who had nearly founded a nation had also found their way to it following some clues.

Zhou Ying said, “And here I was wondering how, with the four great immortal mountains besieging them, those three evil cultivators could still run away. It turns out that you had a hand in it.”

“It was nothing,” Xi Ping said modestly, “no trouble at all.”

Zhou Ying: “...”

This scoundrel could turn any sarcastic remark into praise for himself.

“I didn't do it for their sakes. Since A-Xiang killed the Exonerators' White Amaranth, over the years, the division of power in the Land of Turmoil has basically stabilized. If those three got carried away with their success and all died at once, the other evil cultivators would be racking their brains to fill their positions, and the Turmoilers would have an even harder time of it. Don't worry, I didn't reveal myself, and I didn't leave any traces,” Xi Ping said. “But once that hidden realm was completely exposed, there was certainly no way to stay there, so there was nothing else I could do. I had to follow those three home.”

Zhou Ying unconsciously tilted his head. He suspected that he was so drunk on snow wine that his ears were ringing. “You had to what?”

The dog Xi Ping—who, because he was frozen, had his head half-turned awkwardly, as if he had a stiff neck—said from this uncomfortable posture, “I went to their den to scrounge spiritual stones. My true body was hidden in a reincarnation wood seed. I

found a corner in one of their hidden realms and put down roots. These great ascended spirit evil cultivators are so rich. They've saved up so many spiritual stones. Shouldn't they pay back the favor of saving their lives with their bodies... no, I mean, with a fountain of favor?"

As if his hands were stiff, Zhou Ying slowly massaged his palm in order to keep himself from slamming that dog flat. In a reasonably calm tone, he asked, "When did this happen?"

Xi Ping said with immense self-satisfaction, "The seed I buried has grown as tall as a person."

Zhou Ying said, "Are the three ascended spirit masters of the Land of Turmoil so ill-informed that they haven't heard that the ungovernable way has a master now?"

"Of course they've heard. They've pulled up all the reincarnation wood trees within a twenty li radius," Xi Ping said. "I didn't say I was a reincarnation wood tree. They think I'm a crooked scatter-leaf poplar."

The scatter-leaf poplar was a common type of tree. The texture of its wood was about the same as reincarnation wood, similarly soft and making for poor timber. This tree was easy to grow, and it had an auspicious name, making people associate it with "branches spreading and leaves scattering far and wide";⁸⁷ when there was a newlywed couple in the house, people usually liked to plant a few of these trees in the yard—unlike reincarnation wood, which only made people think of dying and reincarnating, and was used specially for memorial tablets.

The only problem was that the reason the scatter-leaf poplar was called the scatter-leaf poplar was that this tree's leaves separated

into petals like a flower. It was very distinctive. The reincarnation wood's coarse rotten leaves were nothing like that.

"It's no big deal," Xi Ping said. "My true body is inside the tree. When it grows new leaves, I just cut them into little flowers myself. Anyway, we soft trees all have more or less the same kind of trunk. They aren't carpenters. They can't tell the difference."

Zhou Ying: "..."

Here was an ascended spirit who'd said he was going to "go into seclusion," but he hadn't sealed himself into a mountain or set up an array. Instead, he was spending all his time in someone else's courtyard, eavesdropping and cutting his own leaves... even cutting them one by one.

He was cultivating shit!

The two cups of snow wine Zhou Ying had just drunk evaporated right out of his eyes and ears. He was no longer dizzy or deaf. He slammed his palm down on the dog, smashing it to steam.

The thick aroma of the snow wine instantly became so strong it was stifling. Bai Ling had been ready for this. He stuck himself outside the window, matching the nearby white paper lantern as though they were a pair of memorial couplets.

Xi Ping's voice came from the reincarnation wood: "Tsk, otherwise I'd have to meditate and do daily lessons. What's the difference between cutting leaves and meditating? They both refine the mind and temper the will. You're being such a stickler, san-ge. Ah, it's clear you don't normally apply yourself, either."

Bai Ling was afraid his lord would once again uproot the miniature tree in a fit of rage. Xuanyin Mountain didn't permit reincarnation wood to grow in Jinping. When the time came, he would once again

have to go to some coffin shop in the middle of nowhere. He quickly interjected from outside the window: “So what important news did you hear in the Land of Turmoil, Viscount?”

“Right, san-ge keeps interrupting me,” Xi Ping said. “The powerful evil cultivators are preparing to form an international alliance.”

Zhou Ying froze.

“Before, those three dear friends thought no one was paying attention to the Land of Turmoil, so they got excited and provoked the immortal mountains and nearly went to their graves. Now they know what they’re up against. And lately there’s been reliable information that after the business last time, the four great spiritual mountains seem to be getting ready to join hands to clean up the Land of Turmoil...”

“Slow down,” Zhou Ying interrupted him. “Even I haven’t received word of that yet. It’s clearly an inner sect secret. How did it reach your ears over there?”

At this point, he thought of something. His brows moved slightly. “Did it come out of the inner sect of Southern Shu’s Lingyun?”

Xi Ping wasn’t in the least taken aback. The strange thing would have been if san-ge couldn’t guess.

Apart from Southern He, which had been destroyed, the prevailing attitudes of the four nations toward evil cultivators were all very clear; it was only their methods that were different: Kunlun’s “severe penalty” was suppression; evil cultivators would be executed at once. Xuanyin’s “severe penalty” was considerably more refined; they would first convict the evil cultivators of all kinds of crimes of “extreme wickedness.” Because Sanyue was lax in its administration, they had coexisted with evil cultivators in the long

term... but that was still only a problem of domestic affairs; in all sincerity, they didn't view evil cultivators as human.

It was only Southern Shu whose circumstances were a little complicated.

Shu had two clans. One was called the Xiuyi, the other the Miah.

The Xiuyi were experts in controlling large beasts—such as the gold-armored zheng. Shu's imperial Li clan belonged to the Xiuyi. The Xiuyi worshipped the Lingyun Sect's founder, Tianbo-zhenren. Their stature was similar to those of people from Chu and Wan, and their appearance was somewhat similar to neighboring Chu. Only they themselves could tell the difference.

The Miah, meanwhile, were more skilled in the way of medicines and poisons, and the way of toolmaking... and they often kept small and unremarkable little beasts that nonetheless had particular uses. It was said that some Miah cultivators could also communicate with plants. The majority of them were short and slight. When occasionally some of them were tall, their frames would all be very slender, as if they hadn't finished growing, with high cheekbones and big eyes. There were different tribes within the Miah, with such complicated bloodlines that outsiders couldn't get the hang of them at all. They could only tell that there were some differences in their hair and eye colors. The Miah also paid tribute to Ancestor Tianbo, but they only regarded Tianbo-zhenren as the founder of their nation. Different tribes each had their own faiths. Flowers, plants, mountains, and rivers could all be gods that they worshipped.

On the main peninsula, the population of Xiuyi was slightly larger, but the three islands in the South Sea were inhabited almost entirely by Miah. The Xiuyi thought of themselves as the mainstream of Shu; they believed the Miah to be uncivilized savages and discriminated against them. The Miah thought that they were the true roots of

Southern Shu, and the Xiuyi were a foreign mixed breed; they were hostile toward the Xiuyi.

In Southern Shu, the situation wasn't that each side claimed to have reason on their side, putting them in the right; they had only one rule for handling affairs: my clan is in the right.

But this time they really weren't in the right—the ascended spirit evil cultivator who had come out of the South Sea was Miah. He was very mysterious. He called himself Wangge Luobao.

The principles of heaven collided with the principles of the clan: should they aid the spiritual mountains in expelling evil and defending righteousness, or should they shield their clansman from the multitude of Xiuyi, defend the reputation of the Miah? The Miah of the Lingyun Immortal Mountains were mixed in their views. It was normal for there to be “leaks.”

“Wangge Luobao is leading the way. In his own words, he's ‘uniting the warriors of the mortal world who have stood up with the weight of the mountains on their backs.’ He's sent all the great evil cultivators he could find an invitation. I have one, too—they buried it at the roots of a reincarnation wood tree in the north of Shu,” Xi Ping said. “At the beginning of the fifth month, in the South Sea hidden realm. I figure many people will go.”

Unlike the other evil cultivators, who eked out a living under the oppression of the immortal mountains, this Wangge Luobao of Southern Shu likely had the support of Lingyun's Miah. This person's resources and ambitions were inestimable. While they were all ascended spirits, people like the country bumpkin ascended spirits in Demon Country couldn't be mentioned in the same breath.

Zhou Ying said, “What are you planning?”

“I want to see what the South Sea hidden realm looks like and whether I can get myself something like it,” Xi Ping said. “All these great evil cultivators have hidden realms, but I don’t. Neither the Impassable Sea nor Sanyue are my territory. Every day I’m scrounging food all over the place. I’ve nearly lost face for all evil cultivators...”

“Be reasonable.”

“Master Lin has nearly created true spirit-conducting gold,” Xi Ping said seriously. “He’s gone over the few remaining steps hundreds upon thousands of times. He doesn’t dare to act rashly in case he attracts strange phenomena. I need a safe place. While of course Tao County is good, after all, there are many people watching there —san-ge, you can also go if you want to do anything unsuitable to be done in public. That way you won’t have to have eight hundred people watching you if you so much as use a handful of spiritual stones.”

At first, Zhou Ying froze. Then, lowering his eyes, he said, “If you can handle your own little affairs, that’s good enough. Don’t mind me. Bai Ling, the Marquis is getting on in years, there’s no need for him to take the trouble to entertain those idlers. Ask him to come to the guest room for some rest... and move this pot of grass over there.”

Xi Yue had tried planting reincarnation wood at the Marquis Manor. The next day, he had received a hint from Pang Jian, and in a few days, he had indeed found that the seeds wouldn’t sprout. The Marquis Manor’s gardener couldn’t make heads or tails of it. How could these trees that grew anywhere at all not be able to acclimatize themselves to Jinpinging? He was perplexed about it for a long time. From then on, Xi Yue had known that they couldn’t plant reincarnation wood in the Yongning Marquis Manor, and he didn’t dare to casually take the amulet out of his mustard seed.

Only at Prince Zhuang Manor, with a possessor of a paramount spiritual sense present, would these gazes not dare to pry overmuch. Therefore, over these last several years, the naturally cold and aloof Zhou Ying, as if he'd had a change of personality, had taken to visiting his relatives. He would call at his uncle's house during all the holidays, and he would often invite the Marquis to come pay a short visit.

He would only visit. The "tree" in the flower pot and the amulet in Zhou Ying's sleeve didn't dare to speak at will... After all, mortals were transparent before immortals.

Following orders, Bai Ling took the potted reincarnation wood to the guest room. When he returned, he saw his lord gazing emptily at the remaining snow wine in the cup, so he said softly, "I didn't speak out of turn and let the Viscount know that the inner sect wishes you to establish a foundation, my lord."

"It's fine," said Zhou Ying. "He refuses to stay in seclusion and goes around collecting information. He must have guessed it himself."

He had even taken the initiative to think of a line of retreat for him.

With an apparent trace of impatience, Zhou Ying waved a hand and pointed at the disorder on the desk. "Clean this up for me."

The Yongning Marquis Manor didn't mingle with major military or political affairs, no one had ever gone short of clothing or food, and elixirs were available in whatever quantity you needed. The Marquis was still quite hale and hearty. He ate well and slept soundly. Only his left knee often ached on rainy days.

While he was napping, Xi Ping carefully passed a narrow sliver of spiritual energy, like silk thread, through the bones of the Marquis's knee, dispelling the cold and strengthening the bone. He thought of his mother.

He could see the Marquis occasionally, but he rarely got to see Madam Cui. A wife living in the depths of a compound couldn't always be going out and showing her face in public, and it wouldn't even be appropriate for Xi Ping to have san-ge give her a package of rouge... anyway, she didn't use rouge anymore.

With this silent accompaniment, the Marquis of Yongning woke from his afternoon nap. He felt as if his whole body had been renewed. All his bones and muscles felt younger.

As if he hadn't fully woken up, he quietly sat on the little bed for a while, watching the receding sunlight out the window and thinking about something, until the page boy keeping watch outside the door knocked and asked if the Marquis required service.

Finally the Marquis responded, straightened his clothing, washed up and drank tea, then went to see Prince Zhuang.

Before leaving, as if carelessly, he lightly stroked the miniature tree on the little table. Where his wide sleeve passed, a small pouch embroidered with a brocade carp was left behind in the flower pot.

Looking at the fine stitches and well-chosen colors, it was clear at a glance that this was Madam Cui's handiwork. Inside the pouch was a wellness talisman.

CHAPTER 145 - The Storm Begins (3)

Just a little more, and Xi Ping would have turned the miniature tree into his true body and gone chasing after.

However...

The little brocade bag holding the wellness talisman disappeared in the flowerpot, and the Marquis's gaunt figure, hands behind his back, disappeared at the end of the guest room's corridor. The warm light gave his white hair and mourning clothes a soft edge.

When he encountered the pages and guards of Prince Zhuang Manor paying their respects to him, he nodded politely to them. His step wasn't especially robust, but at any rate it was light.

He didn't look back a single time. Perhaps he was afraid that his gaze would be like a hook and might catch on someone's boots.

However, the fact that Xuanyin Mountain was willing to turn a blind eye, not announce his existence to the public, not send anyone to hunt him down, didn't mean that he could openly appear in Great Wan. They wouldn't touch his mortal relatives; they only hoped that Xi Ping could have some tact, keep his mouth shut and not go looking for trouble.

Xi Ping abruptly withdrew his consciousness, leaving Prince Zhuang Manor, instantly crossing a vast distance, leaving behind the nine provinces of Great Wan, brimming with all that was familiar to him.

He arrived directly on the opposite bank of the Xia River.

The water level of the Xia River had risen slightly. Both banks had already entered the off-season for fishing. There was still an endless

stream of pleasure boats on the river, sending muddy waves flying; it stank a little.

Tao County had undergone a dramatic change.

A hundred thousand white spirits had restored the fertile soil along the riverbank to what it ought to have been. Farming and fishing had recovered overnight and quickly developed. No longer would evil cultivators come to pilfer heaven's order.

Behind the Xia River Waterborne Troops garrisoned in Tao County were the Luwu. What had once been a crowd of disgraceful army ruffians had in Zhou Ying's hands changed beyond recognition: military discipline was in good order, each and every soldier properly turned out. No one dared to publicly feign compliance while disobeying in private—the Chu army didn't know of the "Luwu"; they only knew that the eyes of their superiors were everywhere, like mosquitoes. If anyone loafed on the job or violated discipline while on duty, when they opened their eyes the next morning, they were sure to find a slip of paper with a military penalty on their pillow. They would have to take that slip of paper to the barracks to announce their own guilt and take their punishment. No one wanted to find out what the outcome of destroying the slip of paper or putting off receiving punishment would be. Many people had married in Tao County and already had families, and the army encouraged bringing over wives and children. Over the years, through imperceptible influence, what had once been the North Xia Waterborne Troops had become Tao County's garrisoned troops; three years ago, they had formally changed their name.

Spiritual energy being prohibited meant that no one had to be on guard against another's hidden powers any longer. Public safety in Tao County had improved. The whole county had become a large-scale "Wild Fox Country," attracting large numbers of cultivators who couldn't face the light of day. Outside, these immortals all ate large quantities of spiritual stones. Upon entering, they couldn't

even walk, sit, or lie down with ease; naturally they needed people to wait on them. These people didn't care at all about the money that went toward clothing and food expenses. They spent money like water. The traders had all come to life; a large number of traveling traders had even been drawn in from outside.

The dramatic changes were naturally not unconnected to the outside world—

In order to balance the books for his spirit-conducting gold, Lin Chi would, at Xi Ping's periodic reminders, hand over some items in order to fool people. This included the improved Gold Imitation Technique he had developed in recent years.

The spiritual stone wastage of gold-smelting furnaces had instantly decreased by forty percent. The output of Moon Plated Gold had soared, while its quality had only improved.

The Golden Hand had "come back to life" after his lengthy self-imposed isolation and kindled the furnace fires on Moon Plated Peak; it seemed he had also kindled the nation's "ingenuity." The enthusiasm of the skilled craftsmen of the mortal world reached an all-time high. They soon used the new edition of Moon Plated Gold to improve mining equipment. Previously unknown iron and coal... and all kinds of natural resources came into the world all together, which in turn propelled the mortal world's iron smelting technology.

Lin Chi had carelessly tossed the thing out and forgotten about it, but this single stone unexpectedly raised thousands of waves. The year after the new edition of Moon Plated Gold came out, mundane iron appeared in the mortal world that could perfectly substitute Moon Plated Gold in making machinery.

This meant that the mortal world's industry no longer needed to rely on spiritual stones. It now had its own development cycle.

As long as it would save spiritual stones, the immortal mountains and the courts of each nation would gladly support any effort. The forest of factories in Jinping's southern outskirts "infected" even the most conservative Northern Li's Yanning.

As for whether the rivers stank or not, whether fog would clog people's nostrils... well, that was someone else's problem. A dust dispelling talisman was only a basic open-eyed talisman.

Unnoticed by either mortals or immortals, the great age of steam had quietly commenced. Large-scale construction was in progress everywhere.

A big iron bridge spanned the Xia River, towering as the city walls of an imperial capital, with government troops standing guard at both ends to inspect passports.

The Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon tracks on the bridge, constructed entirely of mundane iron, reflected dazzling light. Every day there were two direct trips to Tao County.

Tao-er-nainai's wish had come true.

Zhou Ying had originally refused to allow the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon to come to Tao County, because Tao County was Xi Ping's protection. It was a place where spiritual energy was prohibited. There were eight million pairs of eyes fixed on it. The situation was already chaotic enough; if transportation developed further, wouldn't the people there become even more jumbled up? He advocated in favor of governing Tao County like a sealed drum, storing up over a hundred years of resources, creating a self-sufficient manufacturing system, then excavating the underground and filling it with munitions, turning anyone who came their way into a firecracker.

Xi Ping spent half a year wearing him down, pestering him endlessly. Every time, no matter what they were discussing, he would in the

end come around to the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon.

Zhou Ying was annoyed to death. For a time, he didn't want to speak to him. Xi Ping then deliberately came in the middle of the night to play ditties for his san-ge and read out freshly-printed editions of the Embellished Toilet Papers. So Zhou Ying turned up an ancient illusion array and placed it in all kinds of places where it couldn't be guarded against, trapping Xi Ping's consciousness in a little black room, then sending a pile of Kaiming Cultivators who were just cramming grammar to read at him.

This battle of wits and valor between the two brothers went on for several rounds, neither getting the upper hand over the other. When they were both physically and emotionally exhausted, Xi Ping at last brought about a ceasefire by saying, "San-ge, when the tidal waves rise to the sky, the roc doesn't dare to move, and even vast mansions are in danger of toppling. Only those who are the waves themselves do not fear the waves. You are the waves yourself. Do you really want me to be a sandcastle?" Both sides yielded somewhat: the Kaiming and the Luwu secretly promoted the Wan-Chu railroad, while at the same time, Zhou Ying did indeed excavate the earth beneath the garrison and fill it with munitions.

In this way, Tao County became one of the most important hubs of the central plains area.

What had once been a backwater so destitute that it had needed alms from Sanyue and nearly lost a whole generation became a major center on the central plains all at once. The population rose sharply, and land prices soared. Tao-er-nainai was even able to entrust her little inn to her adopted son and live comfortably in her old age relying on her rents.

Xi Ping passed through the rows of reincarnation wood trees on both sides of Tao County's main street, brushing past jingling trams.

The trotting steps of newsboys in the street mixed with the sounds of voices and vehicles. The clamor was nearly at a boil, yet it all seemed to have nothing to do with him.

He squeezed into an alley and walked out of a reincarnation wood sapling planted in the yard of “Cui Yugan” — some years ago, the old bachelor Cui Yugan had finally happened upon some dumb luck and put together a small fortune, managing to settle down in advance of Tao County’s soaring housing costs. The neighbors all knew that he wasn’t a bad person, just weird. He was always rambling around elsewhere. He would come crawling back to stay for a while when he encountered some difficulty.

The Tai Sui Qin would startle the whole county if it played, so Xi Ping didn’t touch it. He only took the dust-covered huqin down from the wall and produced a long sigh from it.

The huqin had gone out of tune from damp. He didn’t tune it. Hoarse creaks came from it like an emotional knot that wouldn’t unravel. The racket was inexpressibly lonely.

In a flash, over a decade had passed. The Marquis had grown old, his grandmother was dead, and the aunt he had last seen as a child was also dead. Underneath her gorgeous burial garb, she had been as faded and white-haired as an ordinary old woman. He couldn’t remember how she had looked before. All that remained was the dry description “like a goddess,” formless and empty.

Had he not become a cultivator, presumably he would also have married and had children, been changed entirely by the wear and tear of time.

Being broken and crushed all the way, he had struggled up to the high clouds and seemed to have left the common lot of humanity—birth, old age, sickness, and death—far behind him. But while the

dark clouds of oblivion and death had scattered, they were still omnipresent.

For long-lived cultivators, wasn't change the same as omnipresent "death"?

Xi Ping's hand trembled, and one of the strings snapped. Without spiritual energy to protect him, it left a red mark on his hand. Then from the door came Tao-er-nainai's still resonant voice: "Hey, Lao Cui, have you come back after yet another heartbreak?"

Xi Ping forced himself to calm down. He let out a sigh. Truly one couldn't trust in folk legends. All this business of "a snapped string means a soulmate to listen"... it was nonsense.

He had yet to put on Cui Yugan's makeup, so, putting on a frosty look, Xi Ping called outside, "You'd better not stick your head in! I'm not dressed, I won't be responsible if you get your eyes stung!"

Tao-er-nainai spat. "Shameless thing."

Xi Ping laughed in spite of himself, the gloom in his mind lessening slightly. He was just about to go get his disguise kit when he heard Tao-er-nainai say from the door, "Your huqin playing doesn't sound like you got dumped by a woman today. What have you been up to?"

Xi Ping paused, then answered, "Went home for a funeral."

"Whose?"

"My aunt's."

Tao-er-nainai gave a cry. She first delivered some condolences accompanied by despairing sighs, then asked, "How old was your late aunt when she passed?"

When she heard the answer, she said, "That's about the same age as me. You can't say she died young. At our age, it's all the same if we die tomorrow."

The old lady had a loose tongue. Her words once again made Xi Ping feel heavy-hearted. "That's nonsense, do you have to mention..."

"If I don't mention it, does it mean I won't die, blockhead?" Tao-er-nainai clicked her tongue. "If you don't die in the future, can you say you're living today? You'd become a dumb rock like that crowd of undying immortals."

Xi Ping froze abruptly, remembering that he had received similar enlightenment in the Unbound Furnace, but he had hurried past it before having the time to comprehend it. But now that it had been casually spoken by an old mortal lady who could only read account books, it pricked his heart.

Another neighbor to the east heard and couldn't resist saying, "Er-nainai, that mouth of yours is amazing... How can you be passing judgment on the immortals again?"

"Ha," Tao-er-nainai laughed heartily, "I'm already buried up to the neck in the earth. What have I got to be afraid of? There aren't any immortals in Tao County anyway!"

The neighbor said, "Just get a load of that heresy. You've been going out to listen to that crowd of idle blockheads in the teashops 'debating' again, eh? Let me tell you, they're all shiftless students who couldn't manage to get any scholarly honors or rank in the examinations, and they won't go out and get a job to make some money. They've filled up all the children's heads with nonsense."

Xi Ping came back to himself and couldn't help laughing. He wiped the dust off the huqin, then, calmly fiddling with his face, he listened to Tao-er-nainai talking to the neighbor to the east.

There had been all kinds of work in Tao County in recent years—roads being repaired, houses being reroofed, ditches being dug and canals being laid... everywhere was in need of accounting and overall planning. There was too much work for the garrison's people to do, so a crowd of cultured gentlemen had been hired to come do odd jobs, attracting a number of down and out impoverished scholars who had been unsuccessful in their careers.

When there was work, the scholars acted as foremen. When there wasn't work, they sat around idly in the tea shops and wine shops disdained by cultivators. At first, they would only get together to chat about music, chess, calligraphy, and painting, but once someone had gotten drunk and, slamming the table, had come out with "We're all born human, aren't we? I'd bet all those immortals pissed their pants when they were little." Instantly, the crummy wine shop had fallen silent... but after a long moment, nothing had happened.

The soldiers patrolling in the streets walked by, turning a deaf ear to it. The shopkeeper balancing the books didn't even look up. No bolt of lightning fell, and no Qilin Guardsman reached out across empty space to slap the speaker in the face.

The scholars were uneasy for several days, then found that not only did the immortals of Tao County have no powers, they also seemed to be a little deaf. So their nerve grew little by little until they dared to say anything, such that later people would deliberately come to Tao County for its debate culture, turning it into an institution. If a "well-known commentator" were coming, the shopkeeper would even announce the time and place in advance, sticking it up beside the menu for public notice. When the event occurred, toilet bulletin

printers from all over would sneak in, waiting for shocking statements to relate.

Tao-er-nainai, who was richly experienced, commented: “It’s just talk. Some people talk quite well, and some people’s words are nothing but impudence. If you listen enough, you’ll know who to cheer for. As I see it, none of them are as good as Sir Xu.”

Xi Ping plastered down his eyelids; his eyes became triangles half their original size. Hearing these words, he paused: Zhao Qindan?

Tao-er-nainai’s praise of Zhao Qindan went on at length. She said that she knew astronomy and geography, that she was practically a goddess of literature incarnate. “... she can quote chapter and verse from the classics, and she’ll tell you clearly which edition and which page she’s referring to, so the ignorant will know where to look. She never speaks without consideration, and when she speaks, she shuts all those pedants right up. Just look now, do those dolts who call her a clucking hen dare to heckle her?”

The neighbor to the east said helplessly, “No one’s calling her a clucking hen, they’re saying she’s a ‘hen crowing at daybreak’...”⁸⁸

Xi Ping stuck on his messy fake beard, snapped his fingers and disappeared, then floated out through the reincarnation wood.

The soft sound of a qin came to the ears of the meditating Zhao Qindan, so she opened her eyes and said, “Have you returned to Tao County, senior? I was just going to speak to you.”

She was one of the few who maintained the “three improvements and three abstinences” of Xuanyin Mountain’s life of quiet cultivation. During these eight years, the former young mistress had left her country and her instructors and broken with her clan, and was living no differently from mortals, but she hadn’t abandoned

asceticism, study, meditation, or daily lessons. It wasn't that she still wanted to cultivate; it was just that these were the only roots that remained to her after she had bid farewell to the past, and she feared that if she lost them, she would be entirely incapable of finding herself.

But little by little, Zhao Qindan had found Tao County overturning her previous understanding: that open-eyed cultivators couldn't hold spiritual energy within themselves but had to "refine their spiritual bones," which couldn't be done by lying down and idling—they had to constantly fly, draw talismans, make arrays, and follow other such patterns, leading spiritual energy to scour their limbs and bones. Even if they were in good physical condition, they still had to be diligent... and most importantly, only with enough spiritual stones to spend on drawing talismans and making arrays could a half-immortal rinse their spiritual bones before their lifespan ran out.

But Tao County was different. There was no way to draw talismans here. She spent all day mingling with mortals, doing the work of teaching, and the spiritual energy would pass as naturally as breathing through the spiritual eyes she had originally thought useless. At dawn, she would meditate and examine herself. Every time she made progress, her body would naturally become a little more graceful—Tao County was actually automatically refining her bones, even faster than if she had been burning spiritual stones outside.

Sadly, there were few cultivators willing to settle down in Tao County and live like "crippled" mortals. Those who came from outside only wished to escape from this place where they could only use their two legs to walk as soon as their deal was done, and the Luwu weren't about to go around blabbing about it all over the place. In eight years, apart from their own people coming to cultivate for fixed periods, very few people had discovered this.

Receiving her response, Xi Ping sent his consciousness into the reincarnation wood tree in her yard. Seeing her, he gave a cry. “Your spiritual bones are complete. So fast?”

Zhao Qindan saluted toward the tree. “I think I have a Way of the Heart.”

“Did you get it from arguing in tea shops?”

“Pretty much,” Zhao Qindan said, smiling, then said, “Senior, I want to find a place where I won’t impact heaven’s order to establish a foundation. Can you instruct me? Approximately how many spiritual stones does it take to establish a foundation?”

Xi Ping thought, After all, she’s the daughter of a noble family. If she wants something, she always thinks of saving up the money for it herself. She won’t consider crooked thoughts at all.

“No need,” said Tao County’s most mysterious protector. “I’m just on my way somewhere. You can come with me.”

CHAPTER 146 - The Storm Begins (4)

Southern Shu—

Shu was divided into two parts. The main peninsula bordered on Western Chu; it was the tail-end of the western part of the continent. The national capital Zhaoye and the Lingyun Spiritual Mountain Range were both on the main island.

Crossing the Goddess Strait to the south, you arrived at the famous Three Islands of Southern Shu.

These three precious islands were named for Shu's three auspicious beasts. The two islands to the west neighbored each other, one north and one south. The northern island was named Scarlet Ibis, and the southern island was named Sable Sheep. The eastern island was long and narrow; therefore, it had been given the name Waking Dragon.

On Sable Sheep Island, there was sweltering heat year-round, but in the north of Scarlet Ibis Island there were projecting mountains with snow often floating on their towering peaks. The wind swept among the three islands. When it hit the depths of the range of hills along Waking Dragon Island's east side, it let out a lengthy whistle, harmonizing with hundreds upon thousands of spiritual beasts. The weather was very changeable here. It was known as "a different sky every three li." From Kunlun to Lancang, throughout the whole continent, practically all species of plants could be found on Southern Shu's Three Islands.

It was said that long ago, even eternal spring brocade had grown here.

Of the spiritual beast materials used by the ways of medicine and toolmaking, approximately sixty percent came from Southern Shu's

Three Islands. The Miah were divided into nine tribes. Under the protection of beast-taming cultivators and arrays, they constantly lived alongside all types of spiritual beasts.

Toward evening, on a beach on the west coast of Waking Dragon Island, the sea waves gently struck the reef, letting off light like fragmentary gold. There was a splash. The sea birds flew up in surprise, several flying fish leapt joyfully, and then, a “big python” thick enough for several people to wrap their arms around unexpectedly emerged from the sea and “flew” over a zhang high.

This big python had skin like satin, with a rich play of light flowing over its whole body. When it leapt into midair, the python’s body became insubstantial. The sunset glow passed through it. First it became partially transparent, and then, like a beautiful dream, it dispersed into spray and merged into the seawater along with the vapor, leaving only a rainbow behind in midair.

This kind of miraculous sight could probably have scared a passel of mainlanders out of their wits, but the Miah children playing on the reef banded together in delight, chattering excitedly as they lined up holding hands and piously made wishes in the direction the big python had disappeared—that python-shaped spiritual beast was the waking dragon itself, a very docile type of sea-dwelling spiritual beast. It never spontaneously attacked people. When it left the water, it could turn into a rainbow. When it dispersed into spray, the sparkles could travel over a hundred zhang away.

The east island had been named for the waking dragon. The locals believed that the waking dragon was the beloved pet of the sea god, and seeing a waking dragon turn into a rainbow could give you ten days of good luck; any wish could come true.

The waking dragon that had become a rainbow appeared in the distance. Its long, muffled cry reverberated from the seabed. In the

sunset glow, a human form hung indistinctly above the sea, affectionately patting the big python's head.

On the shore was a small and skinny Miah boy wearing a visor palm-leaf fan on his head. He looked like a bean seedling that had just sprouted. The bean seedling's eyes widened as he looked toward that person. Excitedly, he struggled free of his companions' hands. "Look, it's the sea god!"

All the children stood up on tiptoe.

"Where?"

"Where is he?"

"Right there, next to the waking dragon!"

But his little companions seemed to be blind. No matter how he pointed, they couldn't find the person. The little bean seedling was so worked up he flailed his arms and jumped.

"There's no one there," said a slightly older child. "He's just a babbling parrot. He's always making up lies to get attention. Liars have bad luck. It's no wonder your family's always unlucky."

"He really is there..."

"Lying parrot! Liars have rotten luck!"

Children follow an older child's example. A crowd of kids noisily surrounded the bean seedling. The gaudy bean seedling ran away crying.

The bean seedling was extremely aggrieved. "I'm not a liar, he's right there..."

Just then, he heard a soft laugh in his ear. A slightly low masculine voice said, “Shh—”

The bean seedling looked through his tears and saw the sea god in the distance, like a shadow, lift a finger toward him.

“Don’t cry, you were telling the truth. If others don’t believe you, it’s because they’re incredibly ignorant. Why should you cry over others being slow-witted?”

The sea god was speaking!

The bean seedling’s dark green eyes became round.

“I only appear to special people.” The sea god’s voice resounding in his ears was like the gentlest breeze of dusk. “I only took one gift with me when I went out today, to give to the best child. What wish did you make to the waking dragon just now?”

The bean seedling stammered, “Sea god, can you save my dad?”

The sea god tilted his head. “Oh?”

“My dad went out to gather herbs, and his foot got bitten by a crawling ghost. His foot turned black, and the apothecary uncle said they’ll have to cut off his leg...”

The sea god gave a cry. “That must hurt.”

There was a faint trill in his voice. These words made the child cry.

The skinny Miah bean seedling stood alone on the reef by the sea. As he sobbed, he brokenly explained his family’s melancholy circumstances. His father had a high fever and was always crying out in pain... He was too little; under the influence of mingled surprise and fear, his words were incoherent, but the sea god wasn’t

the least bit impatient. He listened to him vent for the space of a whole incense stick.

Only when the setting sun had sunk into the surface of the sea did the little boy finally cry himself to exhaustion. With eyes like peaches, he looked with difficulty at the human form that had nearly blended into the setting sun.

The sea god said, “Turn around. Count five steps backward with your cute little feet and have a look at what’s under that triangular rock.”

The boy turned his head in surprise. Indeed, five steps away, he saw a triangular rock. When he walked over and looked, he saw that there was a small bottle hidden under it. The tight seal couldn’t seal off the fragrance within.

The sea god had bestowed a magical elixir!

The boy was ecstatic. He cautiously picked the little bottle up with both hands and wanted to thank the sea god, but when he looked back, the waking dragon and the man had both vanished.

Like the waking dragon’s spray scattering into the air, as if they had been a dream.

On the calm sea bed of the South Sea, the enormous waking dragon passed through coral and shoals of fish. On its back stood a graceful young man.

His thick, dark grey hair was spread out in the water like seaweed. He had a typical Miah countenance, but his figure was very tall and sturdy, with broad shoulders and a narrow waist, more like the Xiuyi.

His eyes were two different colors, one grey and one yellow, but they didn’t seem strange at all. The corners of his eyes and the tips

of his brows were both slightly down-turned, as if adding a trace of sorrow to his gentleness, but there was a natural slight smile about the corners of his lips. When he looked at someone, he seemed to be the reflection of the affectionate husband of a young girl's dreams.

Suddenly, the waking dragon shivered. Its huge head split open. A dark red lotus stalk slowly reached out of the top of its head, then grew a flower.

The unusual white lotus took no notice of the water pressure. In the depths of the sea, it burst into full bloom. Where the stamen ought to have been, a face grew, all covered in mouths!

One mouth said, "Tsk, you sham!"

Another mouth said, "Disgusting!"

Yet another mouth said, "It's obvious you didn't expect that there'd be a kid with a first-class spiritual sense in this backwater and accidentally got yourself seen. Only appear to special people? Shameless."

At last there were no more mouths. A provisional slit opened in the lotus flower and spoke in Southern Shu's official language, strangely accented: "You would even lie to a child. Lao Wang, you're very wicked."

"My surname isn't Wang. My family name is 'Wangge,'" the "sea god," completely unmoved, responded amiably.

It turned out that this odd-eyed young man was Southern Shu's preeminent evil cultivator, Wangge Luobao, who spent every day openly roaming through Southern Shu's Three Islands!

Wangge Luobao spoke the Shu language with an unusual cadence, as though he were singing. It was pleasing to the ear. “While admittedly a first-class spiritual sense is a rare gift, what connection can a child of villagers and fishermen ever have to the cultivation world? It’s purely imaginary. Isn’t the best thing to make the child happy? He’ll love this patch of sea for the rest of his life..”

The four mouths on the lotus flower all spoke at the same time: “Ew —”

Wangge Luobao glanced at the lotus flower with his melancholy odd-colored eyes. “If you don’t want to be happy yourself, not even other people’s hearts breaking can make you smile.”

The lotus flower said with a cold laugh, “Where is your heart broken? Get it out and let me sew it up, why don’t you? I really can’t stand the sappy way you Shu talk.”

Wangge Luobao seemed to lack the emotion of “anger.” Hearing this, he remained unmoved. Instead, he very understandingly said, “Zhuoming, everyone in the world has mistreated you, but you’ve escaped them now, clearly. Yet you continue to mistreat yourself... as if changing to another mode of living would be betraying the past, forgiving your enemies. Why do you suffer like that?”

The lotus flower—Zhuoming, who had once escaped from the Sanyue Mountains—coldly said, “Save that crap for dealing with those evil cultivators, all right? See if they’ll bite.”

Wangge Luobao changed the subject. He said, “I’ve leaked all the information that needed to be leaked. I don’t have any control over whether they come or not.”

“Xuanwu will definitely come,” Zhuoming said. “He’s been wanted as a criminal by the four great spiritual mountains all these years, dodging and hiding. He urgently needs a stable place to heal and

restore his boundary. You're an evil cultivator. It won't hurt his Way of the Heart to destroy evil. The Misty Willow will also definitely come. His speed of passing through boundaries is unprecedented, but that means he has no solid foundation. He hasn't had time to steadily save up resources. The number of spiritual stones an ascended spirit has to burn isn't something a mere established foundation can imagine. All the Kaiming Departments of Great Wan's nine provinces put together might not be able to support him. He must be desperately hard-up now, desperately looking for resources... What reason could he have not to come?"

As Zhuoming spoke, he merged his four mouths into one. His features returned to their original positions. "This person is extremely sly, always hiding something. He'll have anticipated that many of his enemies will be at this gathering in the South Sea. It's likely he won't rashly come with his true body. An ascended spirit of the ungovernable way can swap his true body with his accompanying plant for thousands of li around at will. The vegetation on Southern Shu's Three Islands is lush, and misty willow is a lowly wood that grows in any corner. It's everywhere here... He's certain to order a trusted subordinate to go on ahead and send a sliver of his consciousness to watch in secret from a nearby misty willow.

"This time, as long as he sends a single sliver of consciousness..." Zhuoming's newly collected features twitched uncontrollably. His eyes nearly went flying. "I won't give him another chance to escape."

Wangge Luobao sighed. "In fact, as I see it, all the preparations that individual made back then were for the purpose of protecting himself. If you hadn't attacked him first, no matter how many backup plans he had, he wouldn't have had a chance to use them. There was no need for things to reach this stage. Stubborn biases always have a reason. If you can't clearly work out what this Tai Sui

means to you, even if you capture his consciousness, you'll still only have a new source of unhappiness..."

Before he could finish, a lotus stalk struck at his forehead like a flash of lightning. Wangge Luobao's figure flashed, and he was somewhere else, leaving behind only a strand of long hair broken off by the lotus stalk.

"You're only a speculator in spiritual beast offal. Don't try to teach me how to go about my business," Zhuoming said coldly. "I aided you in becoming an ascended spirit, so you have to pay tribute to me for ten years. We each get what we need. Don't forget that my lotus seal is on your consciousness. If you speak out of turn again, I'll restrain you."

As he spoke, the man and the python burrowed into the furthest depths of the sea bed. The fine sand of the seabed churned and absorbed them.

"There's another person I must be careful of." Zhuoming's voice reverberated over the empty seabed. "The shadow of the Slumbering Dragon Sea, Yu Chang. The Misty Willow removed his spiritual image brand and has used Yu Chang's vital power many times. There is a deep connection between the two of them. They must be colluding."

In the north—

With Southern Shu's Three Islands as a boundary, looking out from the towering peaks of the Lingyun Mountains toward the ocean that touched the sky, to the south was the South Sea, while to the north was the Slumbering Dragon.

Only the "foot" that the Slumbering Dragon Sea extended toward the peninsula of Chu and Shu was temperate. Going north, meanwhile, it was a world of eternally unmelting ice and snow. The

glaciers on the sea were linked to the frozen soil of the northern plains. This was the truly a place “with no birds in flight, unmarked by the step of man.”⁸⁹

Currently, in the southern half of the continent, the plums were already yellow, and Southern Shu’s Three Islands had entered the rainy season. Even the wildflowers at the feet of the Kunlun Mountains had blossomed, and familiar wild geese had returned to Yanning.

The glacier in the North Slumbering Dragon Sea at last melted slightly. There was a crisp crack. A huge ice floe fell from the glacier, revealing only a tip above the water. Underwater, there were still a thousand zhang, plunging into the abyss like a long drill.

A black shadow spread upward from the lower part of the ice floe. In an instant, it had stained the ice pure black, as if it had been soaked in ink. When it had floated all the way to the surface of the water, the black shadow dispersed into the seawater all around.

As the seawater oscillated, the delicate-featured face of a Chu man appeared faintly within it.

“The South Sea...” the person in the shadow whispered. His voice reverberated through the ice, shaking another ice floe off the glacier.

Then the shadow on the surface of the water collected together, and a person emerged. The chief offering who had once been imprisoned in the shallows of Yu Family Bend was already an ascended spirit. The aura surrounding him was even more unfathomable. “Tai Sui, it’s about time you returned my *Discard the False and Keep the True* book.”

At the Chu-Shu border—

Past the sheltering mountains of Chu, the terrain gradually leveled out. A vast rainforest separated the nations of Chu and Shu. It was called the All-Devouring Marsh.

This place had few signs of humanity. The rainwater went where it would. Each pool of accumulated rainwater might be hiding fatal marshland beneath it, capable of swallowing an elephant; at the shared border between the two nations, the spiritual energy was disorderly. Spiritual energy vortexes would appear in midair out of nowhere. In the past, Sanyue had sent some inner sect masters along with Qilin Guardsmen to explore it. Over a dozen established foundation and open-eyed elites, and they had vanished without a trace, dead or alive; not one person had returned.

Therefore, it had become forbidden territory for both the mortal and immortal worlds.

In the silent dense forest, a patch of level ground caved in without warning. Boiling bubbles floated up. Suddenly, a human hand reached out of the marsh, untouched by mud. It was clear at a glance that this was a cultivator protected by spiritual energy.

The veins on this hand stood out. It formed a hand seal overhead, and the surrounding spiritual energy immediately formed a talisman in accordance with that hand seal. Visible to the naked eye, a number of ancient trees drooped slightly. When the talisman had just taken shape, the hand suddenly trembled fiercely, like a convulsion, and was pulled downward fiercely by an unknown force.

The completed talisman condensed the surrounding spiritual energy into substance. Clutching its master's hand, it rubbed the fingers raw, but in the end this was futile.

The hand sank into the marsh. A moment later, weak spiritual energy diffused. A final bubble emerged from the marsh, like a burp while digesting.

The peaceful marsh faded bit by bit and became pure white. It turned into Xuanwu, wearing his mask.

Xuanwu gently wiped the mouth drawn on his mask.

“It is everyone’s duty to punish evil cultivators who pilfer heaven’s order.”

He cast his gaze southward and whispered, “The South Sea..”

—

Author’s Note

I won’t reply in the comments. Concerning the part in the last chapter about steam in this novel:

Smelting and mining have always existed, and coal was always a raw material, but the technology of the human world was insufficient to support an Age of Steam (in the true Age of Steam, steam engines, smelting, mining, navigation, and so on all developed together, spiraling upward).

The reason that an Age of Steam incompatible with society’s development came ahead of time before is that it had Moon Plated Gold to support it. Moon Plated Gold burns spiritual stones and has a certain ability to conduct spiritual energy. Its various properties can change according to its application. It’s a “divine iron” developed based on magic that raised production capabilities. You could say that the mortal world’s industry and technology were weakly built upon magic, completely different from development in the real world.

But in the last chapter, the new edition of Moon Plated Gold pulled up the smelting and mining industries past a certain threshold,

finally stimulating true technological reforms belonging to mortals. Mortals began to break free of Moon Plated Gold (though of course they'll return to it later).

This structure in fact closely resembles the 17th century's natural theology. At first, England's Royal Society attempted to use science to strengthen religion, believing that nature had a holy order and that science expounding on natural law was the same as analyzing divine oracles. But later science matured and became independent, and instead dragged conservative religious authority down from its altar.

CHAPTER 147 - The Storm Begins (5)

It was the fifth month. The days began to shorten after the summer solstice. Pestilential miasma hid beneath the lush leaves.

The heroes who couldn't see the light of day wouldn't give up on exploring any avenue of survival. Each harboring their own designs, they hastened toward the South Sea.

A realistic big whale passed over the sea bed a thousand zhang deep. The inscriptions on its belly flashed faintly—this was an immortal tool for moving stealthily through deep seas.

This immortal tool was somewhat similar to the “big cuttlefish” White Amaranth had used back when he had been looting Great Wan's spiritual stone shipment convoy, but its movements were far smoother than that vulgar cuttlefish's. When it was far from the continent, the huge whale would occasionally emerge from the surface to let the people in its belly see some daylight. Sometimes it would attract pods of real whales.

It was said that in the past, the common people in the southern coastal area of ancient He had all worshipped whales, believing that after the huge whales died, they would sink to the sea bed, and their corpses would bless all living things; therefore, it was said that whales became gods when they passed away.

Anyway, Wei Chengxiang hadn't seen this happen, so she couldn't say whether it was true or not. At any rate, when the huge whale of Lancang had sunk, all it had supported were things like “the demon host in the East Sea” and “the greedy officials of Western Chu.”

With her hands behind her back, she passed through the long, narrow passageway in the ship's hold, inspecting the spiritual stone supplies of the arrays. Everyone she met coming her way stopped

respectfully to greet her, calling her Wei-laoban—in the Land of Turmoil, there was no one who didn't know the story of the established foundation cultivator White Amaranth being stabbed to death in one blow by a little girl who had just opened her spiritual eyes. Especially after the Exonerators had spent years hunting her, wave upon wave coming her way, and not only had they not killed her, she had run them ragged and depleted their main forces, lending an additional aura of mystery to her bloody reputation.

At the moment, she was on the ship of an ascended spirit master called the Queen Mother of the West, one of the Three Heroes of Turmoil.

The Three Heroes of Turmoil—these were the three who had nearly founded a country in the Land of Turmoil. Their titles were all as aggressive as their actions. To the west was the Queen Mother of the West, to the east was the Emperor of the East, and to the south was Lord Guang'an. At any rate, hearing these names made one want to shout out loud, “Long live Your Majesties!”

East and West were both local personages. They had previously been married.

The Queen Mother of the West had formerly belonged to Lancang, while the Emperor of the East had been a feral evil cultivator of Southern He. When Southern He was vanquished, the Emperor of the East had already been an established foundation, the gang leader of the local evil cultivators, while the Queen Mother of the West had been a girl who had entered the way of medicine making not long before.

With her sect scattered, her home destroyed, and her family dead, the former noble daughter had wed an evil cultivator peasant. It was hard to say how willing the Queen Mother of the West had been; from what came after, it unfortunately seemed that the answer was not very. She didn't care very much about the Emperor of the East

keeping other women elsewhere. Once the little pretty boy Lord Guang'an had shown up, between the two of them, they had turned the Emperor of the East into the Cuckold of the East.

While due to discord between their Ways of the Heart, the Emperor of the East's wife had by then been so in name only, he still couldn't stand this profound humiliation. He had immediately issued an execution order for these two people in the Land of Turmoil. His network in the Land of Turmoil was large and deep-rooted. The Queen Mother of the West and Lord Guang'an had had a rough several years of it. It was fortunate that Lord Guang'an was a battle-ready sword cultivator.

These three had spent over a century fighting, until White Amaranth, one of the Emperor of the East's right-hand men, had somehow overturned his boat in Wei Chengxiang's gutter. Taking advantage of the Exonerators turning out in full force to hunt down Wei Chengxiang, the Queen Mother of the West and Lord Guang'an had picked up the Exonerators' den, sweeping the accumulated resources of the Land of Turmoil's largest snow wine merchant into their pockets, becoming ascended spirits one after the other.

The weightiness of ascended spirits wasn't something that a "force" composed of rabble could handle. The Emperor of the East was one against two. He knew that there was nothing he could do to this adulterous couple. Yet, after all, he was one of the lords of the Land of Turmoil. The Queen Mother of the West and Lord Guang'an couldn't budge him, either. So the three of them had strangely shook hands and made up, peacefully coexisting on the same patch of the continent. They had even held their noses and formed an alliance.

Not long after that, the Queen Mother of the West had sent Wei Chengxiang a letter, asking whether she wanted to come be a "visiting courtier" — in other words, a hatchet girl and errand runner.

In exchange for working for her, the Queen Mother of the West supplied her with spiritual stones.

With the killing of White Amaranth to connect them, the Queen Mother of the West offered very lax terms. She didn't require her to pledge her allegiance, and she didn't stamp a spiritual image brand on her.

Wei Chengxiang had adopted a group of Turmoilers in the Land of Turmoil, including those Liang Chen and the Indignant Cicadas had left behind. She spent every day fretting about not having enough money. Hearing that this kind of assignment was on offer, she had agreed without a second thought. Anyway, there was Tai Sui. Even if they did give her a brand, she still wouldn't be afraid.

After that, Tai Sui must have planted an informer beside the Emperor of the East or something—that gentleman truly was so magical that Wei Chengxiang wouldn't be surprised by anything he got up to—no matter what evil schemes the Emperor of the East came up with, Tai Sui could always provide timely information. After performing several meritorious services, Wei Chengxiang had entirely become the Queen Mother of the West's trusted aide. On this journey to the South Sea, the Queen Mother of the West had taken her along.

Wei Chengxiang took her money and did her work; she had never let her bankroller down. She had arranged the arrays in the huge whale into shipshape order and made minor adjustments daily. They hadn't had a single problem the whole way. After finishing a round of inspection as usual, she went to the huge whale's head. Before she came close, her olfactory spiritual sense was touched—a warm, luxurious fragrance was filtering out from the prow of the ship. The smell seemed to be summoning her.

Wei Chengxiang's steps paused. Then she went down the steps and turned into the prow.

There stood a resplendently attired woman in the old garb of Southern He. The hems of her skirts dragged on the ground for three chi. The heavy, complex fabric and embroidery made it hard to count up how many layers she was wearing. But an ascended spirit in the high clouds had a sense of distance that made people not dare to look at her up close. This splendid attire, which was enough to bury a person, not only didn't seem overly solemn on her, it instead served to set off the appearance of an immortal queen.

In a shadow three paces away from her was a standing figure holding a sword, dressed all in black fighting attire, almost one with the shadow. A glance from him could make anyone's spirit sting—this was the sword cultivator Lord Guang'an. Guang'an was practically growing out of her shadow. To quote the Emperor of the East's bitter phrasing, "Not even a dog follows a person as closely as him."

"Madam, Lord Guang'an." Wei Chengxiang avoided Lord Guang'an's spearhead gaze and reported to her bankroller, "According to our itinerary, we ought to be there soon. I've checked one last time. There has been nothing unusual in the ship's course."

Hearing this, the Queen Mother of the West turned and gave her a courteous, old-fashioned salute. "Thank you, A-Xiang."

Each and every one of her movements was bonelessly soft, like a perfectly doled out noble lady. Wei Chengxiang immediately felt that even her breathing was coarse. She automatically lowered the sound of her breathing a little. "You're most welcome."

The Queen Mother of the West opened her hand. A richly colored waking dragon scale flew out of her palm and hung automatically at the prow of the ship.

This was Wangge Luobao's invitation.

The dragon scale moved and a faint light flashed. A few words in Southern He writing that looked as though they had been printed flickered. They said: “To be opened personally by the Queen Mother of the West” — Guang’an also had one.

The method of opening them personally was to put spiritual energy into them; it could only be spiritual energy belonging to the invitee. Then the invitation would pull the big ship along on its own. Wei Chengxiang had been keeping an eye on it the whole time. Not only could this invitation lead the way, it also seemed very familiar with the routes of the various nations' navies and spiritual stone convoys. It automatically avoided them and adjusted the speed of travel.

In other words, no matter where the invitee was, so long as they poured spiritual energy into the invitation, reasonably speaking, they could even punctually and precisely reach the legendary South Sea Hidden Realm while lying down.

Even more considerate, the Emperor of the East’s invitation had led him along a different path. They were clearly going the same way, but since setting out, they hadn’t encountered each other again. The inviter seemed to know of the discord between them and had made thorough provision.

“Under the oppression of the spiritual mountains, each one of us is short on manpower and resources. If we remain a tray of scattered sand, sooner or later, we will be eliminated one by one,” the Queen Mother of the West said slowly and softly. “I have heard that in this instance, all of our... ‘kindred spirits’ of the middle established foundation stage and above have received invitations. It is inevitable that there would be private grudges among some of them. In his letter, Wangge Luobao says that he will ensure no disputes arise. I do not know how he plans to do this.”

Just then, Lord Guang'an, who had thus far kept silent, suddenly raised his head and said, "We're here."

No sooner had he spoken than Wei Chengxiang also sensed something. The next moment, the invitation hanging at the prow of the ship began to turn rapidly. The huge whale let out a long sigh and floated toward the surface on its own.

The surrounding seawater was immediately pushed apart by the spiritual energy of the huge whale. Spiritual light blazed brightly. Next, the huge whale vanished into thin air.

On the whale, Wei Chengxiang's consciousness immediately enveloped all the arrays and inscriptions on the ship, in case there was a problem. Then came a subtle sense of space and time warping. Her extended consciousness temporarily lost focus. After a moment, there was a light before everyone's eyes. The huge whale had completely emerged onto the surface and stopped beside a small island.

The island was deserted. There was a tidy house prepared with all the usual daily utensils of every kind, and oppressive spiritual energy—there couldn't be spiritual stones on a reef island only a few mu large like this; evidently attendants had placed them in advance.

Lord Guang'an and the Queen Mother of the West immediately sent out their consciousnesses to inspect the surroundings, but they found all of a sudden that their consciousnesses were constrained within a radius of fifty li around the little island. Small writing appeared on the waking dragon invitation. It said: *My guests have come from all four corners of the seas. All of you have entered the hidden realm through different entrances and will not disturb each other. If you are uncomfortable, you may exit the hidden realm by crushing the invitation and leave freely.*

The Queen Mother of the West and Lord Guang'an exchanged a look: indeed, this Wangge Luobao really could keep people from meeting each other.

Almost at the same time, a shadow landed on another desert island. Yu Chang, his irises slightly reddened, walked out of the shadow, examined the surroundings, and frowned.

The Land of Turmoil's Emperor of the East, a mysterious sword cultivator from Northern Li, and various major and minor evil cultivators from Western Chu disembarked one after another on their islands.

There was only one little island, planted full of reincarnation wood, that remained silent.

In the depths of the South Sea, lotus stalks like the limbs of an octopus climbed wildly. A pair of odd-colored eyes opened.

Over and over, Zhuoming asked, "Well? Well?"

"Nearly all of them have arrived." Wangge Luobao frowned and discerned for a moment. "That individual... hasn't appeared yet. I can't even sense his invitation."

Meanwhile, Xi Ping, who was in the mouths and hearts of a crowd of evil cultivators, didn't feel like sneezing at all.

At the end of the fourth month, he had swaggered into Southern Shu's capital city, Zhaoye, with a team of horses and carriages and put up at what was known as Southern Shu's premier money squandering establishment: the Mirage Building.

He spent every day eating well and drinking heartily and still found time to settle two business deals.

On the whole continent, the further west you went, the more enthusiastic and less restrained the culture became. If you said that Jinping took toiling in silence to excess, always striving for “composure,” and Dongheng was already considerably more demonstrative, then once you reached Zhaoye, they were simply afraid that they couldn’t dazzle visitors’ eyes.

The Mirage Building was actually eight floors high, with gold powder murals on the four walls and the rooftop. It couldn’t support steam power, so all the lighting came from precious pearls.

The building formed a big ring with an open garden in the center. In the garden, many rare types of medicinal herbs grew in manmade green ore soil. If the guests opened their back windows and breathed in, they could expel the weariness of their journeys.

Colored glass viewing platforms of various lengths hung in midair above the garden. Propelled by complicated gears and bearings, they slowly revolved like the sun, moon, and stars. Every evening, a stage would rise above the garden, full of beauties. Guests would buy gold leaves to throw down. In the Mirage Building, music and singing were endless, and gold fell endlessly like rain.

As for how much it cost to stay there for a single day, Zhao Qindan, who had spent eight years working as an “instructor” in Tao County, didn’t ask to keep it from troubling her.

“Thank you, no need, I’m not hot...” She waved a hand to politely refuse a Miah girl who was running after her to fan her. Then, seeing that the young woman was about to step forward to lift her hems for her, she quickly said, “That’s... that’s not necessary, either!”

The young woman sheepishly drew back her hands. Zhao Qindan smiled at her and said in somewhat unpracticed Shu official language, “Go about your business, I do not need service.”

Having said so, as if fleeing, she opened a door and went into lodgings on the top floor.

The lodgings had just received a wave of guests. The guests had bid farewell, and seven or eight attendants were just clearing away the feast. These people were extremely nimble. They didn't make a sound. Seeing her walk in, an attendant immediately got out some silk and knelt to wipe the already very clean floor in front of her.

Zhao Qindan: "..."

The young mistress wasn't inexperienced in the ways of the world, but in all honesty, she thought that Southern Shu's customs were a little over the top.

She nodded in thanks and quickly went in, then heard a middle-aged man saying, "I'd been thinking, the railroad between Chu and Shu has gone through, so freight fees will be cheaper now, and we ought to lower our prices, too..."

Across from him sat a rather refined man who seemed to be in his forties or fifties. His bearing seemed to belong to an aged dandy. Interrupting, he said, "The railroad's gone through, so the stuff will be even more novel. Why should we lower our prices? When the spring tea comes out next year, we'll say it was just processed within the last three days in Tao County, and the spiritual energy hasn't dispersed yet. Oh... if you want it to sound nice, we'll say that every year when we sell five hundred jin, we'll double the price."

"Double... Tai... no, I mean, Cui-laoban, wouldn't that be drinking gold?"

This Chu merchant going by the name of "Cui Buqiong"⁹⁰ was the Luwu's Tai Sui—Xi Ping.

“What do you think they want to drink? They only use tea as a symbol because gold doesn’t taste good. Just make up a story that’ll justify the expense to them. The story only has to be good enough, not too sloppy. The buyers have a tacit understanding with us, they won’t ask serious questions.” Xi Ping carelessly picked up a cup of plain water and drank a mouthful. “Otherwise, you’d have to be sick in the head to pay ten liang of silver to drink leaf bathwater.”

Zhao Qindan remembered her family’s expenditures in the past and somehow felt like she was being mocked.

Seeing her come in, Tai Sui nodded to her. The middle-aged man with the look of a shopkeeper across from him quickly stood up. “Sir... Miss Zhao.”

This middle-aged man was also a Luwu who regularly worked in Tao County. He was acquainted with her, a “temporary staff member” of the Luwu.

While Zhao Qindan didn’t meddle with the Luwu’s internal assignments, she still generally knew that they had been divided into two groups over these last years. One group focused on carrying out assignments, and the other group earnestly did business. People in the two groups could swap identities any time.

But what she hadn’t expected was that Tai Sui, a master who ought to have left the hubbub of the mundane behind long ago, was also involved to manage affairs. To hear the Luwu talk, the scope of his management seemed to be pretty wide, too.

It was already shocking for an ascended spirit master who could easily go into seclusion for several decades to be so good at converting between the currencies of each nation. This unconventional senior not only knew the commodity prices in every nation like the back of his hand, when it came to doing business, he

kept perfect accounts—like an old shopkeeper who had steeped in an abacus for decades.

What could he possibly be cultivating... if not the way of money?

She sat down and hadn't yet had time to speak when someone cautiously knocked on the door. The Luwu responded, and a rather dignified Xiuyi steward came in, holding a flower freshly cut from a medicinal herb in his hand.

The steward wrapped the flower in silk and offered it to Zhao Qindan. Smiling brightly, he said in the Chu language, "This is the first 'phoenix flame' to open this morning. The bud grew the day you arrived, young mistress. I suppose it must have bloomed for you. I hope that a divine person like the young mistress will not take offense at the actions of servants. If you truly despise the Miah clansmen, we can have the supervisor reassign only Xiuyi to wait upon you."

Zhao Qindan was bewildered. "Huh?"

"No need," Xi Ping put in. "My niece enjoys quiet and doesn't like having people coming and going around her. Just leave her be."

The Xiuyi attendant quickly agreed, put down the flower, closed the door, and withdrew. The disappointment on his face was hard to disguise.

Xi Ping said, "There was always a clear distinction between the two clans here, but I recall... that it wasn't so tense before?"

"This has come up in recent years," the Luwu across from him said. "Especially after the toilet bulletins spread here. Before, there was a tacit understanding, but in recent years, everything has been announced in the bulletins. An article by Zhaoye's Senior Scholar Duyu Ju spread very far. It said that the cranial circumference of

Miah is on average half a cun shorter than that of Xiuyi, and a small head means a small brain. Their dispositions are impulsive, so careful work and anything that requires using one's brain is unsuited to them. There was also research saying that the Miah language is harmful to orderliness. Recently there was an anonymous article mentioning that the spiritual images of Miah were inferior to those of Xiuyi. Lingyun Mountain's Miah won't be able to keep still much longer."

Zhao Qindan: "..."

She hadn't researched brains and didn't know how to refute this, but according to this reasoning, the smartest person in all the Xuanyin Mountains would undoubtedly have to be the Latent Cultivation Temple's Luo-shixiong.

Only now did she at last realize that because she had refused to let the Miah girl fan her and carry her hems, these Xiuyi had thought she was dissatisfied and had wanted to seize the opportunity to elbow out the other clan... Even the attendants in an inn wanted to oust dissidents!

"You're looking at it the wrong way. The tips the attendants in the Mirage Building receive in a month come to eight or nine liang of silver per month. It's a cushy job. Many big machinery plants are recruiting workers and apprentices now, and they've made it clear that they don't want Miah. They're being elbowed out everywhere on the main peninsula."

Having heard about the matter of the toilet bulletins, Xi Ping frowned thoughtfully.

Zhao Qindan asked, "Why don't the Miah dispute it?"

The Luwu said, "Southern Shu's official language and its grammar developed out of the Xiuyi language. The Miah believe in nature. Not

many of them study or learn to read. Only the scholars among the Xiuyi would bother to write articles and research these things. If you go and buy a few toilet bulletins in Zhaoye, you'll know that it's practically all people from a few places debating back and forth. There are practically no Miah voices."

Xi Ping glanced around himself. Formless spiritual energy abruptly spread out, placing a talisman to prevent eavesdropping all around.

The Luwu and Zhao Qindan instantly went silent.

Because he was wearing a spiritual image mask, Tai Sui's actions and mannerisms resembled a mortal's exceedingly. The Luwu and Zhao Qindan, who had both spent a long time in Tao County with its prohibition on spiritual energy, were always forgetting that this individual was an ascended spirit.

In front of an open-eyed cultivator, an ascended spirit was like a living spiritual mountain. If he let off a bit of his aura, he could sweep right through the meridians of low level cultivators.

It was only for a moment. Then Xi Ping once again withdrew his aura and quietly said, "I suspect that it isn't necessarily Wangge Luobao himself assembling evil cultivators from all sides."

In fact, he had always wanted to have a look at all the heroes in the world who rose in contravention of the spiritual mountains, but it had only been wanting. He hadn't actually assembled them—he didn't have the power.

And leaving aside people like Yu Chang and Zhuoming, whom he'd made trouble for, the others each had their own forces and powers. Other people hadn't been "raised" up to being ascended spirits by a series of shed skin elders. Every one of those people who had struggled to live for centuries until they'd become ascended spirits was a remarkable personage.

So how could this Wangge Luobao be so self-confident?

If he didn't already have a tacit agreement with those great evil cultivators he had invited, then he was a blindly overconfident idiot —but judging from the reactions of the three individuals in the Land of Turmoil, it wasn't the former, and Wangge Luobao had previously been a nobody without any apparent powerful lineage, acting secretly at the feet of the spiritual mountains; he really didn't seem like a hothead who didn't know his own strength.

There was only one possibility—behind Wangge Luobao was the support of the Miah in the Lingyun Mountains.

This time, while on the surface it seemed to be great evil cultivators colluding with each other while individuals in Lingyun's inner sect violated the rules and divulged secrets, in reality it was likely that because of the internal strife between the Xiuyi and the Miah, the Miah wanted to use some means to assemble and use these great evil cultivators.

The toilet bulletins, the new version of Moon Plated Gold—these disturbing winds had evidently already blown all the way to the western continent. The steam monsters didn't suit the Miah traditions. The Miah would sooner or later be thrown off by the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon. The wise people in the immortal mountains' inner sect had evidently already noticed that if things went on like this, the Miah wouldn't have enough land to stick an axe into on their native soil.

Xi Ping took out a small colored glass bottle. Inside the bottle, the invitation made of a waking dragon scale was “imprisoned.” The scale gently bumped against the colored glass bottle, as if trying to lead him in a certain direction. When it bumped into the bottle, the inscriptions bounced it back.

You didn't even give me a map, and you expect me to go wherever you tell me to?

Xi Ping gently tapped the bottle. "We'll go straight to the Lingyun Mountains."

CHAPTER 148 - The Storm Begins (6)

Shu's Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon had gotten a late start and still used steam engines made of the old version of Moon Plated Gold, which by now wasn't to be found in either Chu or Wan.

Small, strong Miah laborers hefted shovels, shoveling coal into the boiler the whole way, themselves turning as black as charcoal, with only many pairs of eyes of all different colors showing. Occasionally they straightened up and looked around somewhat blankly.

The Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon's carriages were divided into four classes. The Mirage Building could simply arrange for you to get a private compartment.

The compartment took up an entire carriage, complete with tea room, study, and bedroom; there were both male and female attendants assigned to the compartment, who came at the press of a bell.

Behind that were the first class and second class carriages, boarded entirely by respectable Xiuyi. Only after the previous class of passengers had boarded did the next class of carriage allow people to board.

When it came to the third class carriages, the "dragon-leading managers" on the platform would bawl as though herding sheep, shooing the pushing and shoving passengers onto the train. Often the people crowded to the very back wouldn't have time to board before the train got moving, so they had no choice but to throw themselves at it like locusts descending on a rice field, clinging with difficulty to the outside of the carriage, then climbing inside amid scolding and cursing, assisting children and the elderly.

Up until she boarded the westbound Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon, a question was constantly echoing in Zhao Qindan's mind: Are the Lingyun Mountains your family business?

For an ascended spirit cultivator like Tai Sui, trespassing into another country for no reason might end up attracting the notice of the great divine tool of the mountains. Last time, when all the ascended spirits in Tao County had violated the taboo, it was only that Xuanwu hadn't wanted to make enemies of his neighbors and had decided it wasn't worth it to punish the majority. This time it was only him. Even if he ranked among the thirty-six peak masters, if he died here, Xuanyin Mountain still wouldn't be able to say anything about it.

These were another country's immortal mountains, a blessed place of great importance. The great mountain array was connected to tens of thousands of li of veins of the earth. A foreign cultivator illegally entering the country would want nothing but to stay as far away as possible. And he was going there, just like that?

Had they been in Chu, Zhao Qindan might have suspected that Tai Sui was up to no good and was once again planning to play the "marriage alliance" card and slip someone a bearded, middle-aged Luwu for a wife. But this was Southern Shu. The Shu were extremely cautious about marriage. They didn't have the Xiang family's fondness for marrying all over the place like a dog pissing. If someone's child had an illicit affair with an outsider, they would kill them if it meant guaranteeing that their bloodline would remain untainted.

She was so curious she was about to explode, but in the private compartment's small tea room, Senior Tai Sui seemed to be meditating, and Zhao Qindan wasn't in a position to rashly disturb him.

An ascended spirit cultivator, no matter how slovenly a spiritual image mask he was wearing, became solemn when he entered meditation.

He was like the Illuminating Dragon;⁹¹ when he closed his eyes, the surroundings changed according to his mood—the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon’s attendants, who came in periodically to inquire after their well-being, somehow didn’t come bother them again. To Zhao Qindan’s hearing, on the level of a near-established foundation cultivator, the jolting and rumbling in the compartment of the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon’s movement was actually completely inaudible. She felt that even her consciousness was being drawn in by the ascended spirit aura. Her heart, which seemed before to have sprouted hair, calmed within a few breaths. She suddenly felt a bit of enlightenment. When she came back to herself midway, the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon had already entered the next station—she had inadvertently begun to meditate.

Zhao Qindan suddenly understood—it was no wonder that the disciples from each class who went directly into the inner sect cultivated far faster than those in the outer sects, and those who had the fortune to be chosen by some peak master as a direct disciple were faster still. Resources and natural endowments were one aspect, but it turned out that being beside a senior meant you could be taken by them to visit new heights!

Tai Sui ordinarily didn’t appear often. The majority of the time, he was in long-distance contact with them. This was an opportunity that couldn’t be passed up. Looking around, the Luwu cultivators who had come with them had seized the opportunity to do their daily lessons. Zhao Qindan also quickly picked up a few spiritual stones and began to meditate.

However... Flying Jade Peak’s General Zhi might not have especially approved of the conclusion she had come to.

Zhaoting being restored had made up for the strength that had nearly been boiled out of him by the Bell of Tribulation. Little by little, Zhi Xiu could occasionally catch his breath. He was no longer restricted to buzzing.

Whenever he had free time, he would run over to Xi Ping to watch that brat practice swordsmanship; it seemed as if he wouldn't die content if he couldn't manage to teach his disciple a second sword move.

In order to get the Unbound Furnace for him, Xi Ping had gone pilfering under the nose of a full moon sage and nearly been turned into a lotus root. How could he let his shizun say as inauspicious a word as "die"?

So this great "filial" disciple had spent eight years learning many crooked teachings from the surviving Lancang manuscripts Qiu Sha had left behind, listening at the windows of the Three Heroes of Turmoil to a bellyful of grievances and romantic grudges, single-handedly leading Tao County to prosperity, developing the prototype of the toilet bulletins inspired by boundless vulgarity and spreading print culture throughout the whole continent... One could say he really hadn't been wasting his time, but he hadn't learned that second sword move.

The young mistress didn't know that right now, the unfathomable ascended spirit "senior" she beheld, steady as the landscape, was being beaten by Zhaoting.

"Focus." Zhi Xiu sighed feebly. "Xi Shiyong, what's got you distracted now?"

Xi Ping was very wronged. "I'm not distracted. It's not like you can see what I'm thinking, shifu. My consciousness has even turned into the shape of a sword!"

Zhi Xiu in fact couldn't see what he was thinking, but he could sense that there wasn't a trace of sword aura in his spirit.

An ascended spirit couldn't study the sword by practicing moves. He needed to become completely absorbed in the sword aura, repeatedly temper and refine himself... but Zhi Xiu teaching this rebellious disciple to "sink into the sword aura" was like teaching a feral cat to wear clothes—if you held down his head, he'd extend his claws; he wouldn't be shoved in dead or alive.

"While sunk in the sword aura, a person loses their powers of speech. And you're still bantering with me!"

Doubtfully, Xi Ping said, "Practicing swordsmanship makes you lose your powers of speech? The way of the sword is too bizarre. Wouldn't everyone in it eventually turn into a mute? Shifu, could it be that you spent so much time squatting on your snow-capped mountain with no one to talk to that you forgot how to talk... ow!"

Zhaoting had dealt him another blow.

"Unreliable" may have been an inherent natural trait. Xi Ping had probably reached his present age without knowing the feeling of "a clear mind with only one thing in it" or "forgetting heaven, earth, and self"—when this kid had opened his spiritual eyes, shattered to bits and been held together by Princess Duanrui, he had still been mentally cracking jokes to himself; while establishing a foundation, he had been simultaneously scheming against his san-ge and the heart demon; on becoming an ascended spirit, the circumstances had been even more amazing—while being struck by heavenly lightning, he had been consulting with Zhou Ying on how to take precautions against the Heartless Lotus.

"I was mistaken." Zhi Xiu sighed again. "How fortunate that you did not enter the way of the sword with me back then, or else perhaps

you could not even have established a foundation.”

These words softly touched the past. For a moment, Xi Ping’s mind wandered.

If he couldn’t establish a foundation, perhaps he never would have left the mountain. He would only have been a troublemaking little disciple living with his shifu, now and then breaking pieces off the snow-capped mountain, going down into the mortal world for the New Year and festivals to check in back home, bringing local specialties back and forth between the two ends.

With shizun watching over him, perhaps he would never have grown up. He would have hung around Flying Jade Peak for two centuries, and then, when his lifespan ran out, would tranquilly have gone away. When that happened, shifu would probably have been sad for a time, as if a pet cat or dog had died, but there was no such thing as an endless feast; having lived to this age, the peak master had long ago accepted this. Since they hadn’t let each other down in life, there was nothing to feel uneasy about after death. Perhaps, feeling lonely, shifu might have taken another step forward in the way of the sword and, working according to the prescribed order for some centuries, he could have become a shed skin all the same.

What connection would the bewildering changes of the world have had with Xi Ping?

How ignorant a life that would have been, and also how carefree.

Xi Ping laughed. “Put that way, it’s a real pity.”

A pity that by a series of coincidences he had seen the universe and taken the part of all living things; the eternal unbound flame had come into his hands.

Zhi Xiu only paused for a moment, then understood what he meant. He was briefly silent, then, deliberately light-hearted, he said, “Forget it, just practice on your own. If you really can’t do it... well, if you really can’t do it, then when I leave seclusion, I’ll store another couple of moves in your meridians so you can use them to give people a scare... Ah, Shiyong, you’re better off being a good-for-nothing piece of rotten wood. In the way of the sword, a dumb piece of wood still beats a flea.”

Xi Ping picked up posthaste: “That’s right, shifu. In the way of the Dignitary of Fate, a dumb piece of wood still beats a... *hss*, I didn’t say anything yet!”

When it was through beating him, Zhaoting quieted down. The sliver of consciousness Zhi Xiu had split off returned to Flying Jade Peak.

Biting wind and stabbing frost simultaneously pressed down on him. He was ready. A beam of sword energy that feared neither gods nor demons surged toward the sky, holding out under the latest of some thousands upon tens of thousands of blows.

The elders thought that he was comprehending the mind of the universe, but actually he had long ago comprehended.

The will of the Way of Heaven was infinitely clear. If he only compromised, Zhaoting would become a nail fixing the land in place. Jinping’s Dragon Vein, which Zhaoting had previously just managed to sustain, would from then on cease to waver.

His Way of the Heart complete, he would be among the wisest, unmoved by sentiment, connected to the intentions of the spiritual mountains. He would set aside everything that ought to be set aside.

He would no longer worry about the Land of Turmoil, and he would no longer be uneasy.

The Zhou clan, which had brought about the disaster in the East Sea, would ultimately decline; all “evil cultivators” would sooner or later be suppressed. When the time came, he would feel the instinct to kill when he heard the words “evil cultivator”; Zhaoting would flash. Even if he knew intellectually that not all evil cultivators were necessarily wicked beyond redemption... Floods were not wicked either, earthquakes did not scheme, plagues nibbling away at human bodies were only following their instincts; even if they were not evil, they must still be cured. This was the instinct of the spiritual mountains.

He would become a new “sage.”

An echo from the depths of the spiritual mountains passed over the cliff of the north slope: Is there anything wrong with that?

Was there anything wrong with that?

Wailing, a blade appeared out of nowhere. Once again Zhi Xiu hewed a gash in the will of the Way of Heaven.

But his little disciple would be disappointed.

Why was he always going to see Xi Shiyong?

In fact, Zhi Xiu had seen long ago that this kid’s thoughts were too noisy. He didn’t have what it took to study the sword. Naturally he wasn’t afraid of being humiliated, either—anyway, the brat had lost all face for him long ago.

It was only that... the legendary General Zhi was also an ordinary person; he could also be weak. Without this disciple whose way was ungovernable, perhaps he would have compromised by now. It was the pressure coming from his junior that forced him to stay where he was, forced him to think carefully before making any

decision: there was a child without a Way of the Heart using him as a standard; was he worthy?

This was the light at his back.

He hadn't died yet. He still had to show later generations how far the mortals of one age could go in a world that had "always been like this."

If even the hard and fast rule that evil cultivators couldn't become ascended spirits could be broken, then couldn't the impenetrable heavens split open a little further...?

A mighty sword cultivator couldn't possibly be outdone by a member of the famously weak way of toolmaking, could he?

A ponderous force pressed down on Zhaoting. The Sword that Mended the Heavens, though it was a sliver thinner, had passed through the tempering of the Unbound Furnace; it gave a long cry. Sword energy even keener than before swept out, knocking a crack in the snow-capped mountain.

The sword cultivator had exhausted his strength for now and went back into hibernation... and from the crack in the snow-capped mountain, a fragile shoot grew.

On the Principal Peak, Princess Duanrui opened her eyes, feeling the Bell of Tribulation quiver.

She cocked an ear and listened for a moment, then expressionlessly raised her head and sent out a beam of ice-cold spiritual energy, stilling the Bell of Tribulation before it could ring. After a moment, the trembling of the Bell of Tribulation quieted. As if nothing had happened, she drew back her hand and formed a hand seal for a Heavenly Question: *Zhou Ying is a direct descendant of my family. He may study with me, go on record as a disciple of Green Pool*

Peak. Green Pool Peak does not accept men, but he is always away from the sect. If he needs to cultivate in seclusion, it will suffice to order him to proceed to the Latent Cultivation Temple.

The Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon on the western continent gave a long wail. At the front of the train, it was raining, but at the back it was still bright and sunny. Like a dragon, the train passed through a small curtain of rain. Its head breathed out rolling smoke that poured into the rainforest to either side.

As soon as Xi Ping opened his eyes, the clanking of the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon running over cracks in the tracks immediately filled the whole compartment. The mundane world, kept out by the aura of an ascended spirit, returned.

Zhao Qindan's head cleared at once. The handful of spiritual stones in her palm had already turned to powder.

For a moment, she couldn't quite come back to herself. Then Xi Ping said, "We're almost there."

A ke later, they came to a town beneath the Lingyun Mountains, called Quancheng, quite small.

Because further up ahead were the Lingyun Mountains and trespassers were forbidden to enter, there was a Dragon Subduing Knights sentry post at the town's border. The boundary of the great mountain array was less than sixty li from Quancheng. Here, the might of the spiritual mountains could already be faintly sensed.

Quancheng was the terminus of the westbound Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon. Many traveling merchants and hired laborers disembarked at this stop, because there was a market here: on the fifth of every month, the Lingyun Mountains would bring out the skin, fur, and bones that the sect couldn't use and auction it off to the mortals. Many wholesalers waited there to pick up goods. Then

they would process them slightly and turn them into unconventional ornaments and clothes, more precious than any pearls or jade.

Only the major merchants with the best connections and financial resources were qualified to come to the spiritual beast fur auction house. Years ago the Luwu had paid a big price in order to enter this channel. Xi Ping had come in no big hurry. The other major buyers had arrived ahead of him. He was quite familiar with all these people. As soon as they arrived in Quancheng, they attended three social engagements in one night. Only then did Zhao Qindan learn that which spiritual beast's fur was recommended each season was settled among this crowd of merchants, who would agree to promote it together. They were in a tacit understanding to maintain a collaborative framework, and privately there were hidden undercurrents surging as they competed with one another.

The night of the fifth, when the auction concluded, Zhao Qindan saw a special person.

Unexpectedly, this was a Turmoiler.

The Turmoiler had deathly pale skin and only a few scant hairs on his head. He was the height of a half-grown child, with a back as bent as a shrimp. His fingers were crooked to the point of being deformed, like disproportionate claws. His face was overgrown with gullies, and when he smiled, he showed a mouthful of sharp teeth, as if he were about to suck blood and eat flesh at any moment.

Zhao Qindan had never seen a Turmoiler. When the door opened, she jumped in alarm and thought, What kind of monster is this? She nearly drew her sword.

But Tai Sui stood up. Coming forward to greet him, he said, "Queru is here."

The Turmoiler gave a proper bow and saluted. A sharp trill came from his throat. He spoke the Wan language clearly and slowly: “The conflagration burns on, the cry of the cicada is without end— greetings, Tai Sui. I trust you have been well since we parted.”

“Oh, go on, get in here,” Xi Ping said, laughing. “Hasn’t Wei Chengxiang taught you people anything worthwhile?”

Zhao Qindan’s eyes opened wide. She thought, This is one of A-Xiang’s... people? Is he a person?

“You shouldn’t say that, Tai Sui. What you see as a senseless slogan is spring thunder when heard by those in a lightless place. When everything is too much to bear, you need an incantation to give you a hand.” The Turmoiler unhurriedly strolled in, took off his bamboo hat, and casually saluted Zhao Qindan. “My surname is Li, given name Manlong, nickname Queru. Because I was born in the Land of Turmoil, my appearance is shocking. I’ve frightened the young lady. Pardon me.”

Zhao Qindan was even more astonished, because she had heard that, owing to having lost the protection of the spiritual mountains, the Turmoilers had turned into monsters who killed people and ate rotten flesh, living ignobly like farm animals or wild beasts. This was her first time learning that Turmoilers could talk... that they could have surnames, given names, and nicknames, and even speak the Wan language with erudition!

“Enough, you’re full of arguments.” Xi Ping poured him a cup of tea and said, “Why have you come yourself? Where’s Renjiao?”

The Turmoiler who called himself Li Manlong thanked him and accepted the tea, neither obsequious nor supercilious. Then he said, “Renjiao passed away at the beginning of the year.”

Xi Ping instantly froze.

“The cultivator stewards of the spiritual beast farm made an oversight and didn’t repair the arrays in a timely manner. Two lightning foxes escaped. Renjiao happened to be on duty that day. He had gone to feed the terrestrial beasts and didn’t have time to dodge. He was bitten,” Li Manlong said. “The bite was extremely toxic. There was no pain. Set your mind at ease, Tai Sui.”

Only then did Zhao Qindan realize that these Turmoilers came from the spiritual beast farm at the feet of the Lingyun Mountains.

In the Lingyun Mountains, people and beasts lived together. Apart from the spiritual beasts kept by beast-taming cultivators, which acknowledged them as masters, the other spiritual beasts were all on the farm to be bred, trained... or provide materials for the medicine and toolmaking ways. The spiritual beast farm had cultivator stewards, but how could lofty cultivators do dirty, tiring work like feeding animals and shoveling manure? Before, they had enlisted mortals to do it, primarily the Miah, who were skilled in rearing spiritual beasts.

But the spiritual beast farm belonged to the periphery of the Lingyun Spiritual Mountains. There was plentiful spiritual energy. As time went on, some people among these Miah workers, like the miners in the southern mines, would have their spiritual eyes opened.

The Xiuyi believed that the crafty Miah were doing this deliberately. They had picked several fights about it. Finally, it had been forbidden for mortals to enter Lingyun Mountain’s spiritual beast farm. They only brought in Turmoilers with relatively clear intellects from the Land of Turmoil. The Turmoilers had unusual constitutions. They couldn’t open their spiritual eyes. They were only a little smarter than dogs. All you had to do was feed them; there was no need to pay wages. And if these clumsy things died, that was no problem. There were plenty of them in the Land of Turmoil. All you

had to do was snatch up another batch and beat them until they behaved.

In his shrill voice, Li Manlong calmly said, “The human world is an abyss of misery. We struggle to survive only because we are unreconciled. Death means freedom. There is no need for you to be troubled, Tai Sui. Anyway, it isn’t necessarily without benefit to us that the spiritual beast farm’s oversight is so lax. Though Renjiao is gone, I am still not lonely. Many of the brothers in the spiritual beast farm are our people now. It is only that our tongues and throats are unusual, and it is difficult for us to learn to speak. I was worried about offending Tai Sui and didn’t bring them today.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Xi Ping said after a moment’s silence. “My teacher often says that the human speech I know is limited, too.”

Having said this, the person in the high clouds met the eyes of the Turmoiler, and they both laughed. Zhao Qindan’s mind heated. She broke out in gooseflesh.

Then she heard Tai Sui point to her and say, “You could call Miss Zhao a close friend of A-Xiang’s. She recently completed her Way of the Heart and spiritual bones and wants to find a place to establish a foundation. How about the spiritual beast farm?”

“My life is too unimportant,” Li Manlong said seriously. “I guarantee Miss Zhao’s safety on my honor.”

“All right, then I’ll entrust her to you. Your honor is worth more than any bullshit spiritual mountains.” Saying so, Xi Ping took out a brocade bag containing a handful of reincarnation wood seeds. “Take me into the Lingyun Mountains.”

CHAPTER 149 - The Storm Begins (7)

It was over eight hundred li from the Lingyun Mountain Range to Southern Shu's west coast. All of this was given over to the spiritual beast farm.

The spiritual beast farm backed against the spiritual mountains and was surrounded on the other three sides by the sea. Its size far exceeded Zhao Qindan's imagination.

The nominal stewards very rarely came here, only used their consciousnesses to give it a sweep at fixed intervals. Zhao Qindan used a spiritual image mask to turn herself into a Turmoiler and infiltrated the spiritual beast farm following Li Manlong.

"No need to worry, Miss Zhao. The cultivator lords can't tell us apart," Li Manlong said, "and no one will look closely at us."

In fact, Zhao Qindan herself didn't dare to take a casual glance at her reflection when she passed by bodies of water. Though she couldn't bear to comment, the reality was that the Turmoilers looked less human than a shaved monkey.

Large-scale aquatic spiritual beasts encircled the main island, dwelling in the surrounding seas, their songs mixing closely with the sound of the waves.

On land, to the south was rainforest beyond what the eye could take in, extending all the way to the feet of the Lingyun Mountains. In the center was a wide swath of mixed wetlands and inland lakes, and to the north were grasslands.

Howls and shrieks came in waves one after another. They were a little frightening. Hearing the whistling wind, Zhao Qindan raised her head and saw an enormous avian creature that blocked out the sky

as it passed. It was over ten zhang long. When the bird's body brushed against the tops of the ancient trees, it knocked down all the water droplets preserved on the branches and leaves. It was as if a small rain shower were falling.

“That is a west winder. It's only a youngster, not fully grown. It's a little mischievous,” Li Manlong said unhurriedly, hands behind his back. “The west winder is large, but its disposition is docile. Once it gets to know you, it is even willing to let you fly it. So it's raised free range... Ah, and here's this wretched bunch.”

No sooner had he spoken than they passed by a range of small hills. There were many openings in the hills, from which surged a particular musk. When they passed by, a Turmoiler's head emerged from each opening and spun around.

Zhao Qindan: “...”

Who were they trying to scare?

Li Manlong let out two shrieks. The heads heard and turned a full circle in unison, revealing their true appearances—they were a group of big-eyed monkeys, grinning as they laughed indistinctly.

“These monkeys are called bluffing monkeys. They can imitate the appearances of living creatures around them. Sometimes you see a spiritual beast or a person acting strange and then smell that musk—most likely it's them playing with you. But while these monkeys like scaring people, they also function as an early warning. The spiritual beasts from the free range area can't get into the sealed area. If we see the bluffing monkeys turn into some violent beast, we know to be careful, because most likely an array has broken somewhere and a dangerous spiritual beast has escaped.”

Soon after, they encountered a spiritual snake that traveled underground, a giant clam frog that belched out one dreamland

after another, a knowing fish that could grow legs and walk up on shore... Medicinal herbs and spiritual beasts that Zhao Qindan had only read about in books appeared along the way in numbers too great for the eye to take in. It made her forget her own frightening appearance for a time.

Suddenly, she heard an excited whistle from a Turmoiler not far off and looked in the direction of the whistle. She saw that there was a spiritual beast the size of a water buffalo not far away, with an enormous pair of horns curving like a full moon behind its head. Its breast was thrown out, its four limbs long and slender. It was unbelievably graceful. Its whole body was pitch-black. Standing in the forest, it was like a lithe silhouette. It wasn't afraid of people. It nodded toward them as if presenting its compliments, then slowly strolled away.

"It's so pretty. What is it?"

"A sable sheep," Li Manlong said softly, as if afraid of startling something. "One of the three auspicious omens of Southern Shu. They don't permit themselves to be kept, and they don't accept masters. They live free and unrestrained... We see them very rarely. You have brought us good luck, miss. Something good will happen soon. All wishes will be granted."

Zhao Qindan smiled politely and didn't take it to heart. Back when her group had entered the Latent Cultivation Temple, there had been blue luan and white deer to greet them. The steward seniors had also said they were "auspicious omens," but ultimately no one had had rapid success. Instead, just at the start of autumn, the Latent Cultivation Temple had blown up, and at the end of the year had come the fire in Jinping's southern outskirts that had nearly burned down Great Wan. And after that...

A shadow flitted over her heart, so she quickly pulled back her train of thought to keep it from sweeping away her interest in sightseeing.

After walking longer toward the depths of the forest, Zhao Qindan sensed very powerful arrays in the vicinity.

“Further in is the sealed area. This is the terrestrial beast area. All the spiritual beasts inside the ring are dangerous. Please don’t approach carelessly, miss. Those of us who look after them must go in to feed and clean at fixed times and follow fixed paths. When the arrays are intact, they can hide a person’s scent. Despite this, we still have to be extremely alert. When these beasts run mad, it is hard for even a half-immortal to withstand them. As for us, if we run into them... Heh, when it’s someone’s turn to enter the sealed area, they’ll bid farewell to their friends and family before leaving.”

Zhao Qindan’s heart tightened. She was just about to say that she could help deal with it, but she heard Li Manlong add softly, smiling, “It’s a glorious period of time. Any discord you have with anyone automatically disappears. You feel that the human world is vast. Even a breath of morning mist is delicious. It’s us old things who take up this fine assignment. We can let the young people store up experience and wait.”

For a time, Zhao Qindan couldn’t speak.

Li Manlong went on to caution her, “This place is already within the scope of the great mountain array. Miss Zhao isn’t one of Lingyun Mountain’s people. Remember Tai Sui’s instructions. You absolutely must not use spiritual energy carelessly. Also, don’t take out your reincarnation wood lightly. If you need to send him a message, you need only to tell me.”

Xi Ping hadn’t come with them.

Zhao Qindan could enter this spiritual beast farm, but he couldn’t. Because a half-immortal had no essence and couldn’t retain spiritual energy, as long as Zhao Qindan didn’t take it upon herself

to draw a talisman or use an immortal tool and kept wearing her spiritual image mask, she could appear like a mortal.

But an ascended spirit master was different.

Last time, Xi Ping had only been an established foundation. Adding in that Sanyue was full of all kinds of people, that had allowed him to sneak in. Now he was an ascended spirit, like a giant weighing hundreds upon thousands of jin. While the Replica could hide his aura and spiritual image, his “weight” was still on display. Unless Lingyun Mountain’s great mountain array split apart like Sanyue’s had back then, if he took a step inside, the spiritual energy he disturbed would immediately summon Lingyun Mountain’s divine tool.

“You can have a peaceful stay. If you take a liking to anything in the spiritual beast farm, go ahead and take it. No need to be polite,” Xi Ping had told her before leaving. “Then wait.”

“Wait for what?”

“Wait for the divine tool of the mountains to become restless and the Lingyun Immortal Mountains’ spiritual energy to leak out,” Xi Ping had said, smiling brightly. “When the whole crowd of evil cultivators has assembled, if the immortal mountains still don’t react at all... then they’re really good for nothing. Don’t worry, if that’s really the case, I’ll drop them a ‘hint’ when the time comes.”

This veteran shit-stirrer’s statement had rendered the young mistress speechless. She could only dryly say, “Well... th-thank you, senior?”

“Before that, you can continue to refine your Way of the Heart.” At this point, Tai Sui once again became serious. He changed in an instant, once again becoming the mysterious ascended spirit senior. “Your Way of the Heart originates from your own heart. You must

seek everything out on your own, not like those who copy their Ways of the Heart straight from their elders... I once had a friend who spent a whole sixty-year cycle refining his Way of the Heart before it turned a corner. If you wish to, you can also tell those Southern He people about it. They can only listen, not talk. They won't ask a lot of questions to disturb your resolve. It won't be comfortable for you to live there, but it will benefit you."

He hadn't been lying about the benefit. The spiritual energy here was more plentiful than in the Latent Cultivation Temple. Precious medicinal herbs that could hardly be bought for any money outside were spread over the ground like wild grasses. She could use them to restore her meridians whenever she wanted to. The only problem was that it was a little difficult to talk to the Turmoilers.

Apart from Li Manlong and a small number of people who could communicate simply, gesticulating and stuttering, the vast majority of the Turmoilers couldn't really talk. Among themselves, they used whistles of varying pitch to communicate. An outsider couldn't tell where to start interpreting it.

Chief Li was the uncrowned king of the whole spiritual beast farm. Every Turmoiler who saw him would stop to greet him, lower their heads and let him stroke their bald pates.

It was very difficult to distinguish gender and age among these Turmoilers. Their bodies were all huddled, their voices were all sharp, and they were covered up in colorless rags. Only looking very closely could you tell that the women had slightly more strands of hair and slightly finer bones under their thin skins.

"The women live here. I had them clean up a house for you ahead of time. We aren't very attentive hosts. Please don't take offense, miss."

“Of course not, thank you, Chief Li.” In fact, Zhao Qindan had prepared herself to live in a cowshed—and that was nothing; a half-immortal’s body could remain unstained, and she didn’t have an obsession with cleanliness. To establish a foundation, she would have to endure rebuilding her meridians. Was she afraid of living in a slightly bad place?

But the house surprised her.

Southern Shu’s climate was warm. There was no need to shut the doors and windows year round. The natural lighting in the house was very good. A mugwort leaf curtain to repel mosquitoes hung over the window, the ends of it made into exquisite little embroidered pouches. There wasn’t a speck of dust on the walls or floor. There was a hand-woven blanket of straw laying on the cogongrass bed. Someone had been very thoughtful—at the window was a bunch of small, light yellow flowers the same color as the straw.

The Turmoilers, knowing that she wasn’t one of them, worried that she would find them distasteful, kept away and peeped at her from afar, not daring to approach.

Li Manlong said something in the ancient Southern He language, pointing at the bunch of flowers. Probably it was praise. Only after he had said it several times did a slender Turmoiler run over somewhat mincingly and present her head for Chief Li to pat.

Her features clustered horrifyingly at the center of her face. A hole seemed to appear in that face... This was the frightening smile of the Turmoilers. She ran over hastily and gave Zhao Qindan an ancient Southern He salute that nowadays could only be seen in books. Not waiting for her to return the salute, she slipped away.

But for a moment, Zhao Qindan had realized with perfect clarity that this was a Southern He girl trapped in a monster’s body.

“Chief Li,” Zhao Qindan couldn’t resist saying, “I don’t mean to offend, but...you people aren’t at all like the rumors I heard before.”

“The rumors aren’t fake. We who have been abandoned by the spiritual mountains are unable to live decently. Many people do not live past twenty or thirty before dying young. Nearly half of us are born witless, and then there are those who aren’t originally witless... but later find they can’t make it if they aren’t witless, so they have to go with the flow. It’s Wei-laoban who gave us a way to survive, and Tai Sui who gathered us. As long as there is a path, we will walk it to the end no matter what,” Li Manlong said. “Or else who will there be to remember our old homeland?”

On the immortal islands in the South Sea, the Queen Mother of the West stilled a pipa. The lingering music of ancient He dissipated.

She let her mind wander for a while, seeming to be waiting for an echo to appear out of empty space, but there was none.

The Queen Mother of the West sighed. “You’re back. Well?”

Lord Guang’an appeared as if out of thin air and landed behind her. “With my cultivation level, I cannot break through it. The arrays around this island are comparable to a spiritual mountain’s great mountain array. The inscriptions at the bottom of the sea are unheard of... Forgive me.”

The Queen Mother of the West shook her head. “I heard a rumor that says that Southern Shu’s Three Islands and its main peninsula are in fact connected, but the connection was somehow covered by water. Underneath, a branch of the Lingyun Mountains’ spiritual veins actually extends to them... Could it be that the so-called South Sea Hidden Realm is that spiritual vein?”

Just then, an unusually soft and low masculine voice sounded:
“That is correct.”

“Who’s there!”

Lord Guang’an had already sent a beam of sword energy flying toward the sea, but it came up empty.

A human figure emerged above the sea. The sword energy cleaved a deep gouge in the seawater, but it couldn’t harm that image one bit. The image gave the two of them a Southern He salute and said in not very smooth but very genuine He language, “I am Wangge Luobao. This event was prepared in haste. I have not been an attentive host. Your Highness’s pipa song just now provoked a myriad of thoughts in me. I came without invitation. I did not deliberately overhear. Please forgive me, Your Highness.”

The Queen Mother of the West flatly said, “Merely a stray dog’s tune of a vanquished nation.”

“The Miah feel your pain,” Wangge Luobao said, sighing. “I suppose the two of you must have heard about my clansmen’s predicament in recent years. The threshold for my clansmen to enter the immortal sect has become higher and higher, and furthermore, apart from the ways of medicine and toolmaking, there is practically nowhere they can go. Not that there is anything wrong with the ways of medicine and toolmaking. It is only that they both require a concentrated consciousness and a keen spiritual sense. Not just anyone can make headway in them. Moreover, neither of these two ways excels in fighting. Over time, my clan has become increasingly oppressed in the spiritual mountains. The winds of Miah exclusion in the mortal world have also grown more and more fierce. My clan no longer has a place on the main peninsula.”

The Queen Mother of the West and Lord Guang’an exchanged a look. They hadn’t expected Wangge Luobao to be this frank.

The Queen Mother of the West asked, “Fellow cultivator, do you mean to say that you have the support of Lingyun Mountain’s Miah behind you?”

“That is correct. I myself began as a walker in the mortal world in the Dragon Subduing Knights. Because the Way of the Heart I found was not of the ways of medicine or toolmaking, the spiritual mountains would not permit me to establish a foundation,” Wangge Luobao said. “My clan leader shishu couldn’t win in a fight. He ordered me to fake my death and escape. Relying on the strength of my whole clan in my cultivation, I was able to succeed in becoming an ascended spirit as I am now.”

“You must be extraordinarily gifted, fellow cultivator.”

Wangge Luobao shook his head. “You flatter me. I was lucky. The Way of the Heart I inherited comes from Lingyun Mountain’s founder, Tianbo-zhenren.”

As Wangge Luobao spoke, his form turned into mist and swirled upward. His voice resounded above all the islands. When it fell into different people’s ears, they heard it as different languages: “For many years, the Way of the Heart of Tianbo-zhenren has been scattered among the islands of Southern Shu, protecting the nation and the people, not appearing in the world. He himself was of mixed Xiuyi and Miah blood. It was only owing to him that our two clans were united in the past and cleared away all evil, forming the Lingyun Spiritual Mountains. Before leaving behind the mundane dust, the ancestor left a secret message. If the two clans remained happy and harmonious, his Way of the Heart would never appear in the world. If one day the two clans split apart... the one who inherited his Way of the Heart could find the Lingyun Mountains’ hidden realm at the bottom of the sea to protect his clan.

“This ought to have been my fate, but opening the hidden realm requires the cultivation of a shed skin, and the Xiuyi are already impatient to wipe us all out. That is why I invited all of you fellow cultivators to aid me, in spite of my honor. The Miah are willing to share all the resources in the hidden realm with you. Wangge Luobao is prepared to swear a heart demon oath with you all!”

Just then, on the heartless lotuses in the depths of the sea, all the eyes opened simultaneously. Zhuoming abruptly emerged from the lotus stalks—someone had touched reincarnation wood; as expected, someone was in constant contact with Tai Sui!

“Caught you.”

At the same time, Xi Ping’s true body crushed a slip of paper and sent separate messages to the Luwu and Li Manlong. He sensed briefly. The reincarnation wood seeds had already been hidden in the spiritual beast feed and passed through the viscera of some spiritual beasts, falling in corners of the Lingyun Mountains.

Meanwhile, Zhao Qindan had already spent ten days in the spiritual beast farm.

At first, she would often be startled by roars coming out of nowhere, and she couldn’t communicate with the Turmoilers. After only a few days, while Li Manlong was teaching the Turmoilers to speak the ancient Southern He language, Zhao Qindan quietly walked over. Though she was wearing a Turmoiler spiritual image mask, her each and every movement was still very different. Everyone recognized her as different from them at once and cautiously shifted aside to make an empty space for her. They didn’t dare to approach out of a sense of inferiority.

As Chief Li taught a sentence, even his voice reading it out became quieter.

But Zhao Qindan openly repeated after him—Southern He had been vanquished and its language had long ago fallen out of use. Even as learned as Zhao Qindan was, she had only studied a bit of it for fun when she was little. She could only get a general sense by guesswork, and she was thick-tongued when she spoke it.

Li Manlong unflappably corrected her pronunciation. Zhao Qindan didn't seem to find this humiliating at all. Like a clumsy child, she loudly repeated it again. The Turmoilers found to their astonishment that this cultivator young mistress with her nimble tongue and throat also spoke haltingly, often forgetting the words and coming up short.

The second day, a few bold young people worked up their nerve and recited along with her.

The third day, the fourth day...

Bit by bit, the Turmoilers became accustomed to this voice that recited the loudest and made the most mistakes and forgot that she was different from them. When Chief Li suddenly asked a question and she didn't react fast enough, someone would sneakily poke her and gesticulate. Hearing her make a funny mistake, the features of the Turmoilers would sink inward and they would rock back and forth with laughter.

The empty space around the cultivator young mistress gradually disappeared.

She still couldn't really tell the whistles of all different pitches apart, so she tried to put her learning into practice, using the Southern He language she had just learned to speak to the Turmoilers. She would often use the wrong expressions, and everyone would laugh benevolently at her.

The night wind carrying spiritual energy touched her meridians. The Way of the Heart Zhao Qindan had always felt wasn't very firm because she hadn't inherited it suddenly became fixed amid the mournful-seeming laughter of the Turmoilers.

People were born different. Some people were born with a silver spoon in their mouth, and some people's swaddling clothes served as mourning garb for their deceased parents; some people were born full of wits or with the strength to lift a cauldron, and some people were naturally deformed, bedridden all their lives; all people were divided among male and female, strong and weak, clever and foolish, their natural endowments separated into many grades... but so what?

If you were frail and sickly, did that mean you should lie in bed and wait to die? If you were born lowly, did that mean you had to be lowly all your life? Should a woman marry and take on a slave's brand, be a playing chip with no freedom of her own, birth another's children?

She wanted every person in the world to be able to live for the sake of achieving their own goals, even if their whole life was spent exhausting their strength in a struggle to remain human.

Just then, a rumble like thunder suddenly came from underground.

The Turmoilers who had been laughing playfully suddenly became nervous. The countless spiritual beasts around them let out uneasy quiet howls. Spiritual beasts called moonlight birds rose collectively into the sky, arranging themselves into a triangle.

Zhao Qindan quickly stood up and formed a hand seal—she had read about moonlight birds in ancient texts. They were the wisest of birds and could predict a crisis.

“Keep calm, don’t panic.” Li Manlong efficiently directed the Turmoilers to inspect all the spiritual beast cages and arrays. “Miss Zhao, come with me.”

Zhao Qindan quickly followed. She saw Li Manlong return indoors, carefully inspect the surroundings, then open a hidden compartment behind the bed. Inside was a machine very familiar to Zhao Qindan...

It was the “new goose” machine⁹² that had just sprung up in Southern Wan in recent years.

Zhao Qindan didn’t especially grasp the principles. She only knew that this thing was neither an immortal tool nor a downgraded immortal tool. It was made entirely through mortal means, but it could encode writing and send it from one place to another.

A slip of paper came out of the machine. Li Manlong briefly checked it against a densely-written codebook and translated the encoded writing. It said: *The time has come.*

CHAPTER 150 - The Storm Begins (8)

Wait, how had the time come just like that?!

Another spell of ominous dull rumbling came from the ground. Zhao Qindan held herself up against the wall, thoughts surging through her mind continuously like waves: What has Tai Sui done? Why does it seem like he isn't sneaking into the Lingyun Mountains but walking in and tearing down their great mountain array? Have the Luwu gone mad? Or is Great Wan planning to start a war with Southern Shu?

The Luwu lying low and awaiting orders in Quancheng were also stunned. This wasn't what they had agreed upon.

In this respect, the Luwu had a wealth of experience. They immediately submitted a report describing everything in full detail to Mr. Bai.

Even Xi Ping was a little bewildered right now—because this quake wasn't his doing.

To be precise, he hadn't yet had time to do this wicked thing!

When Xi Ping had received A-Xiang's message and learned that Wangge Luobao had appeared and the evil cultivators had all assembled, he had gone on to send that "goose letter" to Li Queru.

The goose letter had to be decoded. He figured that it would take Chief Li some time to decipher it, giving him just enough time to activate some reincarnation wood seeds that had infiltrated the Lingyun Mountains in a leisurely fashion—Xi Ping had already sensed that there were quite a few reincarnation wood trees near Wei Chengxiang, but he hadn't touched them. Wangge Luobao had even buried a letter under a reincarnation wood tree to deliver it;

evidently he had knowledge of his accompanying plant at his fingertips. He clearly knew that Xi Ping could send his consciousness through the reincarnation wood and swap it with his true body, yet he hadn't torn down all the trees and had even sent him an invitation to lead the way; there was obviously something not right here.

Over the years, Xi Ping had immersed himself in crooked paths, learning quite a few things. He knew that the reason he had been able to run wild through reincarnation wood before was that the majority of people at the time hadn't been on their guard. If others had a mind to it, they wouldn't be incapable of tracking his true body or even injuring his consciousness.

Xi Ping had been planning to turn this tactic around and use the reincarnation wood to steer the notice of the immortal mountains toward the South Sea, let the two sides get acquainted, then sit back and watch the fun.

Instead, before the seeds could sprout from the natural fertilizer, the Lingyun Mountains' veins of the earth had suddenly begun to quake.

All the spiritual energy in the western continent began to surge in a strange pattern!

Xi Ping liked hanging out in the human world and eavesdropping and didn't enjoy questioning heaven and earth, but that didn't mean that he didn't understand veins of the earth after being an ascended spirit for eight years.

A huge force swept out from the Lingyun Spiritual Mountains. A thunderclap startled the birds for several thousand li around. Xi Ping attached his spiritual sense to his eyes and saw to his surprise that there was a patch of dense cloud above the Lingyun Mountains, with nine raging dragons seething madly among the clouds—this

was Lingyun's divine tool of the mountains, the Cauldron of Nine Dragons!

Xi Ping's spine went cold.

The divine tool of the mountains also alerted Zhaoting in his spirit. Zhi Xiu abruptly opened his eyes and woke up. Zhaoting's light instantly enveloped Xi Ping. "The Nine Dragons... I only took my eyes off you for a moment. Xi Shiyong, what have you done now?"

At the same time, Zhou Ying's voice came through the reincarnation wood, so gentle it made your scalp prickle: "Xiaobao, don't you think someone here needs a leash?"

Xi Ping didn't want to make shifu waste his strength. His consciousness wrapped around Zhaoting and blocked it off. "No, I've been falsely accused, it really wasn't me this time! I've made an unsuccessful attempt at most!"

Wei Chengxiang had just sent him the message. Wangge Luobao had just appeared and hadn't yet finished presenting the history of the Miah's persecution. This ought to have been when the great evil cultivators were at their most cautious. Moreover, in recent years, the divine tools of the four great spiritual mountains had been benumbed by a blood moon rising practically every other day. Even if some good-for-nothing in the South Sea had given themselves away and been sensed by the Cauldron of Nine Dragons, reasonably speaking, there still shouldn't be such a big commotion.

It was bizarre. What was it that had gotten in ahead of him to anger the divine tool of the mountains so much that it was going crazy?

On the South Sea, Wangge Luobao's not especially fervent presentation was interrupted by a boom.

Lord Guang'an's figure flashed. He landed beside the Queen Mother of the West.

Next, the ground of the little island began to quake. A large quantity of bubbles suddenly rose from the surrounding sea.

The inscriptions at the bottom of the sea that Lord Guang'an had been helpless against stuck to these bubbles and floated up, exploding one after another. Then, a distorted human face appeared among the bubbles, white-clothed and white-haired, with veins standing out on his neck and plunging under his white paper mask like snakes.

Wei Chengxiang and the other low level cultivators took only one look before their eyes began to hurt, yet that didn't keep her from recognizing that the face in the bubbles was Xuanwu's.

Xuanwu had been born during the age of the Great War of Gods and Demons. He was next in rank after Sanyue Mountain's sect leader. He had obtained the authentic inheritance of the Black Emperor in inscriptions, arrays, and talismans. His level of mastery was something the Shu couldn't even imagine. Had Lingyun's Tianbo been living, even that beast-taming ancestor might not have been able to use inscriptions to restrain Xuanwu!

The inscriptions that had isolated a crowd of ascended spirits instantly lost effect. All of them were exposed before each other. With the hearing of an ascended spirit, they could hear all the whispered discussions for several thousand li around on the sea with perfect clarity.

"That's Sanyue's Xuanwu!"

"Didn't Sanyue Mountain say his boundary had fallen?"

Now, even those who hadn't recognized Xuanwu knew who he was.

The next moment, an enormous wave rose on the sea. A huge, ghastly pale hand extended from the water, as high as a mountain, and made a grab for Wangge Luobao's image in the air.

Wangge Luobao vanished like mist.

The Queen Mother of the West waved her long sleeve. The big whale ship flew out of her palm and swallowed up all the people on their island. Lord Guang'an didn't board the ship. His pitch-black sword left its sheath. The blade of the sword was as simple and unadorned as he was himself, its cutting edge almost invisible. A sword slash parted the sea, slicing toward the big hand in the water.

The moment the big hand touched the sword energy, it turned back into seawater. To either side rose huge waves dozens of zhang high. They completely submerged the small island.

The big whale ship was tossed aside by the sea waves. Another ghastly pale hand reached out and grasped the ship the Queen Mother of the West and her people were on.

Lord Guang'an struck another blow backhanded. At the same time, the Queen Mother of the West activated all the arrays on the whale ship. Poisonous black miasma was released from the body of the whale, blooming into a big cluster of black camellias.

With the two of them working together, the whale ship broke free. When it hit the water, it let out a long cry.

Lord Guang'an tersely said, "A-Wan, go!"

Xuanwu's snow-white figure broke out of the sea. "It is the duty of all to punish practitioners of evil ways. Where do you think you're going?!"

No sooner had he spoken than the South Sea practically began to boil. Never mind the low level cultivators, even Lord Guang'an was nearly shaken out of the air by this speech.

The established foundation cultivators who hadn't had time to slip into protective immortal tools were knocked unconscious by that voice. Though Wei Chengxiang had already taken shelter in the belly of the huge whale, her vision still darkened. When she came back to her senses, she was already half-kneeling on the ground, the taste of blood in her mouth.

Instinctively, she reached a hand into her mustard seed to feel for the reincarnation wood amulet sealed inside it.

When her fingers touched the ice-cold amulet, Wei Chengxiang gave a start and came back to herself.

Before her departure, Tai Sui had instructed her that there might be a possessor of a paramount spiritual sense among the great evil cultivators, who hadn't yet shown himself. No matter what happened, she wasn't to use reincarnation wood while in the South Sea. She must not let that person see that she had a connection to Tai Sui and instead use mortal means to contact him.

She bit through her fingertip and put an elixir pill into her mouth, calming her seething internal energy. She quickly used the new goose machine she carried to send a message.

"Xuanwu?" Xi Ping decoded the ciphertext; the corners of his eyes twitched.

Above the Lingyun Mountains, the Nine Dragons had nearly coiled themselves into fried dough twists. Rainclouds scudded everywhere. Mad downpours fell intermittently.

Xuanwu couldn't be associating with "evil cultivators," or else he would have thoroughly lost his mind and become the next Zhao Yin.

He had been gravely injured by Xiang Rong, his essence damaged. For him, all "evil cultivators" were perfect restorative pills that could be eaten raw. None of the major or minor evil cultivators now in the South Sea, no matter what kinds of plots they were concealing, would have voluntarily ganged up with him.

So how had he found this South Sea Hidden Realm? Who had summoned him?

Xi Ping's thoughts moved quickly: the Miah had sent out Wangge Luobao and attracted evil cultivators from all over. Either they were low on manpower and resources themselves and really did want to unify some of the common world's strength to rebel against the Lingyun Mountains, or they wanted to cook these evil cultivators in a pot to make something out of them.

As Xi Ping saw it, the likelihood of the latter was greater—if he had been the Miah, if he really wanted to form an alliance, he would have privately bargained with them one by one to reach a deal. Because great evil cultivators weren't obedient sheep. These people had made it this far escaping death by the skin of their teeth. Each was craftier than the next. No one could command them all. Moreover, the resources of the mortal world were limited. It was hard to avoid clashes. It was likely that there would be grudges among them. Rashly assembling them was likely to make nothing but trouble, as too many chickens would lay no eggs.

Now it seemed...

"My vision was lacking," Xi Ping said, whether to himself or to Zhaoting. "An ascended spirit can't even fill a gap in your teeth. I'm afraid it isn't those ascended spirit shrimps they want to cook—they

wanted to use the ascended spirits to lure in Xuanwu, then use Xuanwu to lure in the Cauldron of Nine Dragons.”

It was as if Xuanwu were covered in white paint that leached away color. Starting from his feet, the ghastly paleness permeated the seawater, spreading in all directions.

Though he had been ousted from Sanyue as a traitor, he still scrupulously abided by his vow not to pilfer heaven’s order. Without the spiritual mountains to restore his damaged essence, all he could do was use the living as spiritual stones—the established foundation cultivators he had just knocked unconscious, who were now floating on the surface, were all swept by the white seawater, instantly turning into one desiccated corpse after another.

Lord Guang’an’s sword made an arc, the lashing sword stopping the water. At the same time, another beam of gleaming sword energy fell. With the wordless understanding between sword cultivators, it handled the other side. The two beams of sword light, one bright and one dark, formed a circle that blocked the ghastly whiteness spreading in all directions, encircling Xuanwu.

Lord Guang’an raised his head and saw a tall, broad man in grey clothes nearby. He had a square face and long brows that extended toward his temples. His hair was even curlier than Wangge Luobao’s, plaited into two long, thick braids that hung behind him. He held a soft sword like a spiritual snake—this was a feral ascended spirit from Northern Li, said to be the heir of the Blind Wolf King at the feet of the Beijue Mountains. He was called the Snow Wolf.

Lord Guang’an exchanged a look with the Snow Wolf. Each quickly nodded to the other.

The next moment, Xuanwu gave an angry shout and once again pulled out the inscriptions at the bottom of the sea. They surged

toward the circle drawn by the sword light.

There was a sizzle as of hot oil pouring into water. Spray splashed a hundred chi high when the inscriptions touched the sword energy. Every water droplet that spurted out contained sword energy. A shark in the water was thrown right out from the surface and flew into midair. Before it could fall, the big fish's body was sliced to ribbons by the remaining sword energy in the water droplets. A rain of blood spurted out.

The circle of sword energy broke.

Countless inscriptions once again lined up at a dazzling speed, reaping the large quantities of spiritual energy on the battlefield, turning into layer upon layer of armor around Xuanwu.

Then there was a whistle, and a halberd fell out of the sky, stabbing into the seawater like a divine pillar.

This halberd seemed to have the power to topple mountains and raise seas. The wild spiritual wind in the surroundings was instantly drawn in and began to revolve. Beam after beam of spiritual energy seemed to turn into an arrow, ramming into the inscriptions and making them scatter.

A hand wearing a jadeite thumb ring gripped the halberd—the newcomer's attire was extremely luxurious. He wore a crown of purple gold. His sideburns and mustache were trimmed to perfection, without a single stray hair. His coquettish air made it seem as though he had just gotten through wedding eighteen concubines.

Northern Li's Snow Wolf beheld that halberd. "The Emperor of the East."

“Oh, hey, Crown Prince Snow Wolf, how very nice to meet you. Your humble servant...” As the Emperor of the East spoke, he abruptly pressed the halberd down, stirring up a huge whirlpool in the South Sea, chaotically sweeping up all the inscriptions Xuanwu had activated. “... has come to give you a hand!”

“Impertinent!” Xuanwu’s white hair suddenly burst out of its tie. In the thrashing sea wind, he was like a Queen of the Night flower in full bloom.

A curved blade like a crescent moon appeared and swept out over the South Sea, chopping toward the Emperor of the East Halberd.

Before the Emperor of the East could finish bragging, on the hand holding his halberd, the skin between the thumb and forefinger tore. He was knocked dozens of zhang away by Xuanwu’s blow. The Emperor of the East desperately stuck the halberd into the water to maintain his balance, nearly cutting the seawater in two.

A sneer appeared on Xuanwu’s paper mask. “Four of you. Who else is there? Who else?”

No sooner had he spoken than he soared upward.

There were reflections of Xuanwu in the water, in the foam floating on the sea... in all reflective surfaces. All these reflected “Xuanwus” put on bizarre smiles. A convincing imitation of the crescent moon blade’s sword wind flew from all the reflections, chopping toward Xuanwu himself!

The interweaving blade light collected into a big net, tangling around Xuanwu, hanging in midair. But the wild blades didn’t slice one bit off of Xuanwu. The moment he was encircled by the blade wind, he once again turned into seawater, scattering with a splash.

Once the original had scattered, the reflections scattered along with him. The many “Xuanwus” reflected in the spray and water collectively disappeared. There was only one figure that was a bit slow to disperse.

In that mere moment of sluggishness, a hand in the water made a grab for the person in the reflection.

The person in the reflection gave a low shout. A pitch-black branding spike extended and was crushed by that huge hand. The person in the reflection somewhat desperately seized that instant to escape. He appeared in the water, revealing a delicate Chu countenance. There was a rim of red around his pitch-black irises—this was the chief offering of Yu Family Bend, the first person to break free of a spiritual image brand, Yu Chang.

The Queen Mother of the West freed herself from the belly of the whale. She put on a pair of gauze gloves that reflected light. She reached out to stir the seawater. Black camellias burst forth and spread surrounding her hands. Thread upon thread of poison came from them. The shoals of fish that hadn’t had time to flee went belly up in droves. Unexpectedly, the ghastly pale hand in the water was dyed by that black energy. Xuanwu quickly flung off the black mist surrounding him and leapt away.

At this point, five great ascended spirits of the present age, from Li, from Chu, and the Three Heroes from the Land of Turmoil, all surrounded Xuanwu.

Just then, Wei Chengxiang, hiding in the belly of the huge whale, with difficulty deciphered the new coded message from Tai Sui. Her pupils contracted slightly. It said: *The Cauldron of Nine Dragons has appeared. Get out!*

The features on Xuanwu’s paper mask were level. He looked around and softly said, “There are still three missing.”

Yu Chang put his reincarnation wood amulet in his sleeve and smiled blandly. “High Elder, why don’t you take a guess where they’re hiding?”

The corners of the mouth on Xuanwu’s paper mask turned up high. “The clever ones won’t show themselves, silly child... Didn’t you hear what that southern barbarian said? The South Sea Hidden Realm can only be opened by a shed skin. Do you really think that a few ascended spirits can stand in for a shed skin?”

“Ascended spirits are as ants before a shed skin sage. Unless there were thousands upon millions of us, we wouldn’t be able to bite one to death.” The Emperor of the East stroked his mustache. “But as far as I know, Elder Xuanwu, you were gravely injured by your sect leader, your essence damaged. I’m afraid you have fallen from the shed skin boundary. Even if you had been able to go into seclusion to treat your wounds in the Sanyue Mountains, I suppose a mere eight years wouldn’t have been sufficient for you to recover? And now I see that your appearance is wasted and travel-worn. You’ve spent these years homeless and forlorn.”

Xuanwu gave a “ha,” not bothering to respond to this sort of idiot.

A lowly breed like the Miah could only ever hide in the shadows playing sly tricks. They were naturally despicable, skilled in treachery and deceit. It wasn’t unreasonable for them to be oppressed and excluded. Wangge Luobao had vanished long ago. It was clear he had wanted to use these greedy ascended spirit evil cultivators to lure him in, attract the Cauldron of Nine Dragons, borrow strength to crack open the so-called South Sea Hidden Realm, and seize possession of the divine tool of the mountains on behalf of Lingyun’s old guard.

It was said that the Miah shed skin had been “in seclusion” for a long time, having his disciple act as clan leader in his place. He had

probably died long ago, such that the younger generations of the southern barbarians had bitten off more than they could chew— even if his boundary had fallen, he was still the mighty elder of Sanyue’s East Peak. He could dispose of a few ascended spirits in a flash. The essence of these five people happened to be just enough to restore his fallen boundary. He would see when the time came whose name the South Sea Hidden Realm would bear—

CHAPTER 151 - The Storm Begins (9)

Wei Chengxiang rapidly destroyed the note and poured a beam of spiritual energy into the arrays of the huge whale. “Your Highness! Xuanwu’s appearance has disturbed Lingyun Mountain’s Cauldron of Nine Dragons. We cannot remain here. Hurry!”

The Miah were plotting something, but Xuanwu was evidently confident in his ability to withstand them. If the rumor about his boundary having fallen wasn’t incorrect, then he must have had some other chance encounters over the years... No matter who was plotting against whom here, none of the people caught in the middle would come to a good end.

The Queen Mother of the West’s eye twitched, but matters were now out of her control. Several great ascended spirits had been swept into the huge waves in a blink by Xuanwu.

In a flash, she only had time to give a push, flinging the huge whale ship far away from the battlefield.

The whale ship only had a brief encounter with the huge waves, and the better part of the arrays on the ship were destroyed by the brutal spiritual energy. The feet of Wei Chengxiang and the others on the ship all left the ground as they flew up. All kinds of precious Southern He antiques were smashed into a pile of fragments.

Nearly everyone aboard this ship was a former citizen of Southern He who followed the Queen Mother of the West. Cries of alarm rose in wave after wave: “Her Highness!”

“Hurry, hurry and turn the ship around!”

“Wei-laoban, turn back! Turn back!”

“We can’t turn back. Sixty percent of the ship’s arrays have been destroyed. It’ll break apart if we take another hit. Without a ship, those waves so much as touch you, you’ll all die,” Wei Chengxiang said calmly, rapidly inspecting the huge whale ship’s condition. “Since she tossed you out, it means she wants you to escape with your lives. You...”

A red-eyed bodyguard interrupted her: “Abandoning one’s master is a dereliction of duty. Better to die for loyalty! There is no need for an outsider to get involved!”

Wei Chengxiang turned and fixed her eyes on him. “What, will ‘loyalty’ shed tears of gratitude for you?”

“You dare!”

“If your princess had been ‘morally upright’ and died for her country back then, all of you would be Turmoilers by now.” Wei Chengxiang had been responsible for looking after the whale ship’s arrays during the whole trip. Now she skillfully repaired a few key arrays and ordered the ship to return to its base.

The whale ship quickly steered toward the east of the South Sea. Wei Chengxiang locked in the arrays and didn’t continue to dispute with the others. She turned and vanished, coming to the prow of the ship.

A half-immortal’s consciousness didn’t dare to probe outward. She could only look out through the “whale’s eyes.” On the sea, she saw billowing waves rising to the sky. She couldn’t find the Queen Mother of the West’s figure anywhere.

Wei Chengxiang stuck her hand into the mustard seed she carried and closed her eyes briefly: before she came, Tai Sui had given her two things. As long as she didn’t go looking for death, she would certainly have no problem escaping.

Her country had never been vanquished. Along the course of Jinping's Grand Canal, her friends and family were no longer to be found on either bank. Let it be vanquished. If it was vanquished, that would be just as well. It was hard for Wei Chengxiang to understand the thirst these people of He felt to restore their nation. There was always a barrier between her and them.

But the Queen Mother of the West had always treated her well, despite knowing very well that there was another power behind her.

Wei Chengxiang knew her own worth. Apart from having some extra sources of information, the usefulness an open-eyed half-immortal could have for an ascended spirit master were very limited. She didn't even have the qualifications to be a maid. The reason that this couple kept her around to carry out tasks was only that she had coincidentally slaughtered White Amaranth, and there was some good karma between them.

Just now, when she had thrown the whale ship out of the battlefield, the Queen Mother of the West—Yang Wan—had done very well by her.

Loyalty, filial piety, justice, and virtue—these were things her grandfather had carved into her bones with his life. A person only had to be worthy of them.

After a moment, a little boat made of a rolled-up willow leaf left by the whale ship's secret back door, holding Wei Chengxiang. It was an ascended spirit grade immortal tool—the same one General Zhi had used to protect Xi Ping when the great demon of the East Sea had emerged. A crack had been smashed in the edge of the willow leaf by the Tai Sui Qin. Later, Master Lin had returned it to the furnace and repaired it. Now its grade was a level higher.

Yet it still couldn't escape its fate of carrying ants bound for danger.

Xi Ping received Wei Chengxiang's new coded message: *No sign of the Heartless Lotus. The ascended spirits are no match for Xuanwu.*

The Cauldron of Nine Dragons left the mountains. Lingyun's great mountain array was in turmoil, all the spiritual energy in the mountains like a swaying swing.

Xi Ping quietly seized this moment to activate a reincarnation wood seed.

The quickly sprouting seed was crammed into a corner of the Lingyun Mountains' dense rainforest. It broke through the earth, spiritual light lashing over its trunk, shaking off the "natural fertilizer" of the spiritual beasts. The next moment, it abruptly stood up and turned into human form, which, without disturbing a single leaf, disappeared amid the rainforest.

Though he knew intellectually that spiritual energy could make him cleaner than anything, emotionally, Xi Ping still couldn't get past this concern. "I'm dirty, I've lost my purity. Truly I'm enduring humiliation for the sake of this mission."

"Enough, don't be unreasonable." Zhou Ying's consciousness was hidden in a reincarnation wood amulet he had with him. As he used his paramount spiritual sense to quickly inspect the interstices of Lingyun's great mountain array, he casually said, "When you were little, on Plowing Day, you rolled around in the mud a farm cow had just defecated in, clutching its leg. The adults couldn't stop you. There were all kinds of things in that mud."

Xi Ping held himself up as one of the rare male beauties of the world, his charm unmatched. He absolutely couldn't acknowledge that he had done such a thing. "Impossible!"

“They couldn’t get your hair clean and had to shave it off,” said Zhou Ying. “You were balder than the Heartless Lotus. I still have a picture of your august countenance then. I’ll have Bai Ling print some copies and give them to you.”

Zhi Xiu: “...”

How fortunate that Xuanyin Mountain stipulated that disciples could only join when they were sixteen or over. The ancients had been wise.

“Wait,” Zhou Ying suddenly said, “the inscriptions here have been altered.”

The Lingyun Mountains had eight major peaks. Originally, they had been evenly split among the Xiuyi and Miah. In recent years, as the power of the Miah had waned, all the Miah cultivators had been crowded onto an out-of-the-way little peak, Miah cultivators of the medicine and toolmaking ways living in the same place. Spiritual beasts that could consume tree seeds were pretty much all small herbivorous spiritual beasts, usually used as materials for making tools and elixirs. The place Xi Ping had snuck into was precisely the domain of the Miah.

Miah disciples with varicolored hair and eyes were keeping watch at the foot of the mountain, taking strict precautions. There was nothing unusual along the outer perimeter of the peak, but the protective array laid out with inscriptions inside had subtly fallen out of step with the great mountain array. It saved Xi Ping from doing any tampering himself.

“A fly can’t sting a seamless egg.” Zhou Ying sighed. “As expected, the Miah already intend to rebel. Lucky you. Follow the interstices between the inscriptions to enter, I’ll tell you where to go. Remember to use your protective spiritual energy to keep your smell firmly under wraps. Lingyun’s cultivators generally have their

spiritual sense in their mouths and noses. Don't get upwind of them."

Xi Ping bristled. "I don't stink!"

"That's right," said Zhou Ying, "you smell lovely. You're a human-shaped piece of ambergris."

In the space of these few words, Xi Ping's figure had flashed. He followed the cracks in the inscriptions to enter. He soon found that Zhou Ying's instructions were superfluous, because the higher he went, the fewer people he saw. The three palaces of the Miah ascended spirits at the summit of the mountain were empty. There were only some traces of an array left behind in an empty space on the ground of the main palace.

"I used the upheaval of the great mountain array to sneak in, and they used the upheaval of the great mountain array to sneak out," Xi Ping whispered. "Isn't that a coincidence?"

Just then, a voice from the distant South Sea came to his ears.

When he and Yu Chang had signed a blood covenant back then, he had given that little boy toy from Chu a piece of reincarnation wood so he could contact him at any time.

Yu Chang had called for him before, and Xi Ping had ignored it. When Yu Chang spoke again this time, he sounded even more hard-pressed than the first time. "Tai Sui, whether you're the mantis or the oriole, allow me to warn you, if all of us die here today, you'll be the target of all the great spiritual mountains!"

In the South Sea right now were five great ascended spirit evil cultivators: there was a sword cultivator each from the north and south; there was the Emperor of the East Halberd with its claim of "I bring the storm"; there was a medicine cultivator who carried her

own poisonous miasma; and there was the offering who could travel through shadows and pass through any opening... Put together, while they weren't perfectly coordinated, at any rate they weren't holding each other back; but they could hardly put up a fight. They were simply held down and beaten by Xuanwu.

This was the greatest master of Sanyue, who would only be hard-pressed facing a full moon sage.

The vanished Wangge Luobao's true body appeared dozens of li away. The vicious force in the seawater had yet to disperse; it brushed over the protective spiritual energy surrounding him.

As soon as he showed himself, he was immediately caught by the shed skin consciousness, brimming with might. Xuanwu's frightening ghastly whiteness began to emerge on the surface of the sea.

Without any hesitation, Wangge Luobao formed a two-handed seal. Out of nowhere, densely-packed giant kelp appeared on the surface.

The white shadow immediately permeated the giant kelp. Cluster after cluster of the giant kelp sticking up dozens of zhang high withered and rotted. Just then, a big fish flew out of the water. It opened its mouth and snatched up Wangge Luobao.

All of this had taken only a moment. In a flash, there was almost nothing left of the huge kelp being swallowed by the white shadow. The big fish just managed to disappear in the seawater before the giant kelp fell.

Like an illusion.

Wangge Luobao knelt on one knee inside the fish's mouth. He had lost the ease of the "sea god."

He was covered in seawater and cold sweat indistinguishable from each other. His legs had even gone a little weak.

The big fish that had taken him in its mouth was called a “next life spiritual fish.” In Miah folklore, it was a kind of fish god that could carry people to the world that came after death. Only the dying who had fallen into the deep sea could see it—only the best cultivators among the Miah knew that the “fish god” of legend really did exist.

The scales of the next life spiritual fish were very thick. They couldn’t be pierced without the cultivation of an ascended spirit or above. The body of the fish could block out spiritual energy and consciousnesses, and cultivators couldn’t track it. Moreover, this was the only one left in the world. It was a secret treasure Ancestor Tianbo had left behind for the Miah... It was so ancient it was like a stone on the point of crumbling. There was a smell of decay in its mouth. Its lifespan had nearly come to an end.

Inside the mouth of the next life spiritual fish was space to hold four or five people. As soon as Wangge Luobao entered, a face protruded from the inside of the fish’s mouth.

The protruding face was fused with the surrounding flesh of the fish. At first glance, it seemed to be an ulcer in the big fish’s mouth. The features weren’t especially distinct. There was only a pair of unusually protuberant grey-blue eyes. The face urgently asked, “Wangge, what’s happening?”

“Clan leader shishu.” Wangge Luobao recognized him by the look of his eyes. He evened out his breathing with difficulty. “The Heartless Lotus and that most mysterious Tai Sui have yet to appear. Of the major guests I invited, only five have come, fewer than we anticipated. Xuanwu came too soon. The strength of his cultivation far exceeds my expectations. I even think that it doesn’t seem as though his boundary has fallen. I’m afraid those ascended spirits

won't be able to hold out until the Cauldron of Nine Dragons arrives.”

Just then, two other faces emerged in the fish's mouth, one with amber eyes, one with dark brown eyes.

The Miah clan had originally had a shed skin, a master of the way of toolmaking. He had taken a clear-cut stand against Moon Plated Gold at the outset and had specifically debated with Lancang Mountain because of this. Since the spiritual mountains had formed, this was the only time a clash between masters had come close to a “frivolous debate.” While it had ended at that, after returning, the Miah elder had sunk into a lengthy seclusion—the same sort of “seclusion” as Xuanyin's Dignitary of Code and Sanyue's Xiang Rong.

Since then, the circumstances of the Miah in Southern Shu had changed dramatically. At present, only three unremarkable ascended spirits remained among Lingyun Mountain's Miah cultivators—the blue-eyed clan leader belonged to the way of toolmaking, and the other two were medicine cultivators.

Among the inner sect established foundation disciples, the Miah represented less than one in ten, and the outer sect walkers in the mortal world, the Dragon Subduing Knights, only accepted Miah on the Three Islands.

And even in the Miah's homeland of Southern Shu's Three Islands, those who held power in the Dragon Subduing Knights were still Xiuyi who had been transferred there.

Now, the three Miah masters who had escaped from Lingyun Mountain in the confusion had become “ulcers” in the fish's mouth, all of them surrounding Wangge Luobao.

The amber-eyed medicine cultivator spoke: “The Cauldron of Nine Dragons has already left the mountains. The Xiuyi’s Li Dui is escorting the Cauldron of Nine Dragons. He can handle Xuanwu. Don’t panic. They only need to hold out for a short while.”

Opening the South Sea Hidden Realm would take enough spiritual energy to unseal its long-sealed entrance. Whether it was Xuanwu or Lingyun’s elder, a shed skin must die today. And the South Sea Hidden Realm had always been a part of the Lingyun Mountains. Once it was opened, the Cauldron of Nine Dragons would naturally submit. If they could only take hold of the Cauldron of Nine Dragons, the Miah would have their own spiritual mountains. Once the Lingyun Mountain Range on the main island lost its divine tool, it would be nothing more than an abandoned spiritual stone mine.

Wangge Luobao said, “I’m afraid that a short while won’t be...”

Before he could finish, the seawater once again rose into huge waves. Even the invisible next life spiritual fish was thrown out onto the surface. With a hum, there came an enormous quaking, nearly raising a tidal wave in the South Sea.

The Emperor of the East’s halberd and the swords of the Snow Wolf and Lord Guang’an collectively slipped from their hands!

The blue-eyed Miah clan leader spoke decisively: “Notify the Three Islands. Order all the clan’s cultivators to set off at once.”

For a moment, Wangge Luobao suspected that the clan leader was too far away for him to hear clearly. “Who... who should set off?”

Weren’t all the Miah cultivators on the Three Islands half-immortals in the Dragon Subduing Knights?

Could half-immortals approach an ascended spirit battlefield?

Never mind “reinforcements,” this couldn’t even be called “delivering food.” After all, half-immortals didn’t even have an essence. There was hardly any spiritual energy to be squeezed out of them. They couldn’t be used as spiritual stones.

The dark brown-eyed medicine cultivator sighed. “This action concerns the survival of our clan. We must not lose. Established foundation pills were sent out ahead of time. Among the clan members in the Dragon Subduing Knights on the Three Islands, there are sixty-four clan members in all whose spiritual bones are complete. The clan leader has ordered them all to enter the way of beast-taming... Sixty-four people, precisely the number of people there were when Shu’s ancestors activated the spiritual beast tide, driving out the demons and overthrowing the tyranny of the Shamanic Way...”

Wangge Luobao couldn’t resist interrupting: “Elder, where did we get so many beast-taming Ways of the Heart?”

“Naturally from the clan’s martyrs,” the blue-eyed clan leader said. “No need for you to worry about it. Just do what you need to do.”

Wangge Luobao immediately understood what he meant—the Miah had been squeezed out of the way of beast-taming for many years. Though there had been some beast-taming ascended spirits in the past, there weren’t nearly enough to go around for over sixty people—in other words, it was likely that the Ways of the Heart the clan leader had brought out all belonged to established foundation cultivators!

Established foundation cultivators themselves had little experience, and if they had gone no further than an established foundation before passing away, it was most likely that their Ways of the Heart were insufficiently steady. How could you let later generations inherit Ways of the Heart like that?

Wangge Luobao's eyes opened wide. "Shishu, do you take our clan members to be disposable goods?"

"If cultivators die, more can be fostered!" the clan leader interrupted him. "Did you know that Zhaoye has issued a 'Material Decree'?"

"What..."

"On the surface, it says that evil has proliferated in recent years and the black market has run wild. The prices of spiritual beast and medicinal herb treatments are irregular. Southern Shu wants to bring every spiritual beast farm within the nation's borders under the control of the immortal mountains, for the immortal mountains to sell under a unified system—including the Three Islands in the sea. Do you know what that means?" The Miah clan leader's glaring eyes nearly popped from the fish's mouth. "It means that in the future, the Miah will be like those Turmoilers. They will serve them as slaves to raise spiritual beasts, be bought and sold like animals, with no one to investigate even if they're beaten to death in the streets. We can't even protect our own homeland! The Xiuyi have gone too far. Our clan has come to a fatal pass, do you understand?"

As they spoke, Wangge Luobao's spiritual sense had already been touched. He whipped his head around in astonishment. Through the spiritual fish's eyes, he saw hundreds upon thousands of "flying arrow gulls" diving toward the South Sea. Enormous gold-armored zhengs leapt out of the water. Terrestrial spiritual beasts stood on the backs of avians and waking dragons. Oppressive spiritual energy extended to the horizon—the spiritual beasts on the Three Islands, driven by cultivators who had forcibly established foundations, had all come out, blotting out the sky and covering the earth. They really did block the waves on the South Sea.

They... as well all those that came before and after them, were swept by knife light. Flesh and blood flew, the cultivators and the spiritual beasts indistinguishable.

The Miah clan leader said sternly, “Think of how your father raised you! Think of how your clan educated you! Wangge...”

“Clan leader,” Wangge Luobao said very softly, “I know all of that. But where are you?”

The Miah clan leader hadn’t expected that he would dare to talk back. For a moment, he was stunned.

Then Wangge Luobao smacked the spiritual fish’s mouth. The three faces in the spiritual fish’s mouth suddenly disappeared. Then, under his orders, the big fish charged toward the battlefield.

A face appeared out of nowhere on the lotus flower earring hanging from his ear. “*Tsk-tsk*, the Miah clan. No wonder outsiders think you people are lowly. Even your own clan leader uses your clan members as cannon fodder.”

“Be quiet.” The earlier “helpless panic” had vanished from Wangge Luobao’s face. He gently tapped the lotus flower on his earring, then said in his sing-song voice, as though throwing a cute tantrum, “So you see, we need to change clan leaders.”

Zhuoming laughed loudly.

Amid his laughter, the next life spiritual fish’s mouth suddenly opened. Wangge Luobao appeared out of nowhere amid the chaos and gave a long whistle.

He was an ascended spirit beast-taming cultivator. He simply steamrolled the battlefield. The spiritual beasts directed by the Miah all instantly slipped their masters’ control, stopping in unison.

Wangge Luobao whistled again. The legendary fish god appeared on the surface. He flipped over and landed on the back of the next

life spiritual fish, projecting his voice outward: “Tell the clan leader and the elders that I do not agree—I do not agree to using the blood of my clan members to purchase this hidden realm!”

He extended his hand. A flute fell into his palm. Wangge Luobao played a few brief, sharp trills. There was a rumble from the bottom of the sea. He had summoned a flood dragon out of nowhere. The clouds massed overhead.

He had suppressed the spiritual beast tide single-handedly. The spiritual beasts turned their heads in droves, picked up their dumbfounded masters in their mouths, and retreated outside the ring of battle.

“And I also do not agree to turning the guests I invited into bait.” Wangge Luobao leapt into the battle and blocked one of Xuanwu’s blows coming toward the Queen Mother of the West. There was no time for him to clean the blood from his lapels.

Lord Guang’an caught the Queen Mother of the West and looked toward the Miah ascended spirit in midair.

“The Miah were born of this earth. We are not a lower class of person!”

CHAPTER 152 - The Storm Begins (10)

Zhuoming heard Wangge Luobao efficiently sell out the Miah clan leader, then glanced at the Miah's blood-stained faces and saw light flicker in their eyes like flints being struck. He thought, Tsk, southern barbarians.

This Miah rabble was holed up on islands in the sea, complacent and conservative, spending all their days like animals, eating or sleeping, giving birth to a pile of little ones who would follow the same pattern as the last generation. They had never understood anything in their lives apart from shoveling manure and putting animals out to pasture. They had no possessions but the mere basics, so all they could do was adhere rigidly to their bloodlines and traditions. The harder the oppression from the outside, the closer they huddled together, huddling until they died.

An animal would run wildly before the whip, and a fool would give up their life for the sake of a grand but meaningless slogan.

But Zhuoming didn't do anything to complicate the situation. He kept his mad spitting hoard of mouths under control and said with restraint into Wangge Luobao's ear: "There's not much time. Follow the plan."

Wangge Luobao's eyes flashed. He jumped and headed south.

On the wide open South Sea, enormous spiritual beasts fanned out like islands. The vast majority were animal spirit images, but any one of them might suddenly "come alive" and throw itself at Xuanwu.

The towering giant kelp that had come in response to a summons withered in swaths. The roars and screams of the spiritual beasts rippled far outward. Xuanwu cast aside the others and went in pursuit of Wangge Luobao.

The spiritual beast tide that had been controlled by the flute regained its freedom, but suddenly a Miah cultivator let out a heartbroken roar.

No one organized them. The Miah called to each other in the jabbered Miah language, the tides of people and beasts both letting the hot blood go to their heads. Whoever first started it, they once again raised a spiritual beast tide on their own and swarmed in pursuit of Wangge Luobao—just as Zhuoming had anticipated, humans wouldn't scatter in confusion like sheep. Established foundations crushed their mortal bodies and rebuilt themselves; this was a pass that there was no turning back from. Once you started out along a certain way, even with an imposed or a useless Way of the Heart, that was all you could do for the rest of your life.

The sixty-four Miah cultivators, after receiving the clan leader's order, had known that they were already "sacrifices," but no one had dared to voice an objection, because the clan was above all. The utmost grievance and resentfulness of "a sacrifice for righteousness" had been ignited by Wangge Luobao's words—since they were going to "die for the clan," did that mean they weren't Miah anymore? If they sacrificed one generation to take the hidden realm, then who would enjoy the benefit of it in the future? The clan leader and the elders had even left the Lingyun Mountains by stealth. Thinking closely about these underhanded tricks, were they really the traditions the Miah clan took pride in?

Though the Miah were all new established foundations, the spiritual beast tide that blotted out the sky was nothing to be ignored. Among the ascended spirits, no one dared to get in the way of its keen edge. For a time, there was nothing else they could do; they let themselves be swept up by the tide of people and beasts, leaping madly.

As for Wei Chengxiang, who had just arrived, there was no question. Before she could even puzzle out the situation on the scene, the willow leaf boat that could only hold one person was swallowed whole by an enormous gold-armored zheng—now she could even save the strength it took to navigate and control the immortal tool!

Zhuoming, hidden in the earring, said softly into Wangge Luobao's ear, "Nice trick, Lao Wang."

Wangge Luobao had no time to pay attention to him. Xuanwu was hot on his heels. Even though he was on favorable terrain, with innumerable spiritual beasts in the sea ready to heed his summons, he was still beset by perils as he ran.

"Those idiots in your clan don't know what they want themselves, but you know. You'll give them what they want, so those people will follow you like tamed horses." Perhaps Zhuoming couldn't hold his tongue because he had too many mouths. In the end, he did start chattering on annoyingly. "Worthy of a member of the way of beast-taming... Heh, guess what? Your clan leader and the elders are getting frantic."

When the upheaval on the sea had started, the Miah clan leader and the elders had already known that Wangge Luobao had escaped their control.

The Great Way has three thousand paths, all of them equal in standing—this held up in the other immortal mountains; only in the Lingyun Mountains had a bias arisen because of the people. Even the Miah themselves thought that the ways of medicine and toolmaking were inferior.

"The way of beast-taming..." The amber-eyed medicine cultivator sighed. When everyone involved was an ascended spirit, a member of the way of beast-taming couldn't willingly accept being manipulated by others.

“And of mixed blood,” the clan leader said with a bitter laugh. “How could you expect him not to be a thankless wretch?”

As he spoke, he opened his palm. A complicated inscription emerged in his hand—had Xi Yue seen it, he probably could have recognized that this inscription’s basic framework closely resembled the dragon-taming chain that had once hung around his neck for over half a year.

The dragon-taming chain was a Southern Shu specialty to begin with. It could tame beasts, so naturally it could also tame people.

After the founder’s Way of the Heart had chosen Wangge Luobao, the clan leader had personally stood guard and placed this on his consciousness the moment he established his foundation.

What a pity. If only Wangge Luobao had been obedient and behaved...

Without warning, a ring of golden light like a necklet lit up around Wangge Luobao’s neck as he rushed madly over the South Sea. Countless densely-packed inscriptions crawled out of it and spread over his whole face.

Wangge Luobao stopped still.

With Xuanwu’s breadth of knowledge, he realized at a glance what this was. “Even the Miah slaves can have internal strife.”

This opportunity couldn’t be lost. Xuanwu grabbed Wangge Luobao and raised him high. “Evil cultivator—”

Just then, Wangge Luobao raised his head. His odd-colored eyes fixed on Xuanwu’s white paper mask.

A lotus flower suddenly shot out from the center of his brow. In just a flash, it had consumed nearly all the inscriptions of the dragon-taming chain.

“I apologize,” said a voice infinitely familiar to Xuanwu, “his consciousness is already my domain.”

Before the expression on Xuanwu’s mask had time to change, innumerable giant kelp once again shot out from the sea. The moment they broke the surface, they were assimilated by a large cluster of dark red lotus stalks that twined around Xuanwu’s limbs.

“Zhuoming!” said Xuanwu furiously.

The latter half of the name went off key, because a beam of warm “moonlight” had suddenly come toward him, flowing along the lotus stalks wrapped around Xuanwu and striking Xuanwu’s back. Xuanwu only managed not to let out a scream by clenching his teeth. His upper body, rigidly facing upward, seemed about to snap off. The purple veins in his neck nearly burst out from his skin.

“This is a full moon scab that the Silver Moon left me. I’ve spent eight years refining it,” said the lotus stalks twined around him. “How does it feel, shizun? Oh... your disciple is unfilial. I’d forgotten that your essence was pierced by the Silver Moon...”

At the same time, Wangge Luobao sliced open his hand without hesitation and fiercely pressed it downward.

An enormous hand appeared on the sea, over ten li high. The palm pressed down onto the surface. Where drops of blood fell, a whirlpool arose, spinning at a speed hard to distinguish with the naked eye. In the blink of an eye, it had stirred up this whole area of the sea.

The sky darkened. The sun was eclipsed in the sky.

Northern Li's Snow Wolf, who had come in pursuit, raised his head and looked from a distance. With an ascended spirit's eyesight, he could see the coast to the north.

Could this be the legendary South Sea Hidden Realm?!

The whirlpool spun faster and faster. The five great ascended spirits and the Miah spiritual beast tide had been pursuing before, but now they felt that they were moving involuntarily. They had the impression that they were about to get sucked in by that whirlpool.

Xuanwu, who was closest to the whirlpool, bore the brunt. Along with the myriad lotus stalks on him, he was dragged right into the water by the whirlpool. After that, it was Wangge Luobao himself.

Inside the whirlpool, lotus seals constantly attempted to invade Xuanwu's senses—Xuanwu's face was covered with a white paper mask, leaving only his ears exposed. So the lotus stalks grew many mouths. Countless fragmentary remarks poured into Xuanwu's ears.

“Shizun, I could never understand it—when I followed you joyfully to the spiritual mountains, didn't let you down and wasn't unfilial, why would you hate me so much?”

“Later, I understood that you look upon me as though looking at yourself, and you hate me just as you hate yourself.”

“Even the name you bestowed on me is based on yourself.”⁹³

“Shizun, you struggle desperately to uphold the orthodoxy of the immortal mountains because you aren't orthodox.”

“Unorthodox people spend their whole lives feeling guilty, spend their whole lives wanting to make so-called 'orthodoxy' accept

them... Haha, you've fallen to the condition of a stray dog, yet you actually haven't lost your mind yet."

Along with these words, dizzying lotus seals burrowed into Xuanwu's ears like monsters. As soon as some phrase managed to move him, the heartless lotus's lotus seal would immediately wrap around his consciousness like an ulcer on the bone.

The lotus stalks holding Xuanwu were constantly disintegrating, but Wangge Luobao seemed to have summoned all the giant kelp in the South Sea. It grew ceaselessly, and was ceaselessly assimilated by the heartless lotus.

Xuanwu, whose old wound had flared up in the afterglow of the Silver Moon, was trapped in the whirlpool, wrestling with the two great ascended spirits.

"Giving succor to the enemy..." Xuanwu nearly bit through his own mouth to draw blood. "Zhuoming...you know what the outcome will be...once the hidden realm connected to the spiritual mountains falls into the hands of evil cultivators... You know that as soon as the evil cultivators obtain the means to rebel against the immortal... ugh..."

"I don't know." Zhuoming's head emerged from the lotus stalks and spoke a lotus flower.⁹⁴ "What does it have to do with me?"

The Miah cultivators going to their deaths saw Wangge Luobao also get sucked into the whirlpool before their eyes. They urged the spiritual beast tide to jump into the whirlpool in droves. The Emperor of the East was the first to come to his senses. He scooped up his vital weapon, which had flown away, and aimed it at Xuanwu's back. "Everyone, this is an opportunity not to be missed! The South Sea Hidden Realm needs sufficient spiritual energy. If we take Xuanwu down here, won't that be perfect?"

Wangge Luobao, hearing this through the water, decisively dipped a finger in his blood, which hadn't dried, and drew an inscription in midair, which he sent into the center of his brow—a true heart demon oath required an inscription. Low level cultivators couldn't make inscriptions and needed to ask a master to “bear witness.” The inscriptions recorded the oath forever, and the fate of one who violated the oath truly would be miserable. It was nothing like how Xi Ping had tricked Xu Rucheng into helping him back in Tao County—casually swearing an oath and calling it a “heart demon oath,” then turning around and not even cutting down all the trees.

“I, Wangge Luobao, am willing to swear a heart demon oath.” The spiritual beasts in the area spoke in human tongues along with him, simultaneously using the Chu, He, and Li languages to say, “If we succeed today, the Miah clan will be your allies forever and share the resources of the hidden realm.”

Currently, even without swearing a heart demon oath, Wangge Luobao had no reason to trick these ascended spirits.

It was clear now that the South Sea Hidden Realm was different from the man-made “hidden realms” of the big families. This was a true hidden set of spiritual mountains.

Wangge Luobao had clearly just betrayed the Miah in the sect. It was a wild fantasy to suppose he would be able to defend the spiritual mountains with his own strength and the strength of the crowd of Miah cultivators who had been forced to establish worthless foundations—it was no good counting on the divine tool of the mountains, either.

Forming an alliance with the “evil cultivators” who longed for resources and a place to shelter was now the Miah's best choice.

“The expert in pulling down the east wall to prop up the west wall,” Zhuoming said, laughing. “Lao Wang, you’re the first person I’ve ever known to get this far selling yourself. Genius!”

The heart demon oath disseminated over a hundred li away, knocking on the heart of each ascended spirit.

Yu Chang pursed his lips. If they had a range of spiritual mountains, he and these other stray dogs with no dependable resources would no longer need to flee here and there, no longer need to worry that they, like Qiu Sha, would easily be wiped away by the divine tool of some immortal mountains.

The sea wind fanned out the Queen Mother of the West’s messy hair. Perhaps in the future they could stand level with the extant great immortal mountains, harry the four nations who had divided up the Lancang Mountains back to their homes, return Southern He to its former glory. Steam engines were no longer dependent on spiritual stones; no longer would a nation be extinguished due to Moon Plated Gold appearing in the mortal world. Southern He was the homeland of craftsmen skilled in exquisite work...

For a time, the expressions of all the ascended spirits were very complicated. Each one was considering something, each one was looking at the others.

The Emperor of the East once again prepared to be the first to speak and decisively set the tone. Yu Chang already had a resolution in mind and had raised his back heel... and just then, Tai Sui’s response at last came through the reincarnation wood that seemed to have died.

Tai Sui said, “Save Xuanwu!”

Yu Chang: “...”

He nearly snapped his own ankle.

“...What?”

Far away in the Slumbering Dragon Sea, Yu Chang had heard of events in Western Chu. If he recalled correctly, this Tai Sui seemed to have nearly died at Xuanwu's hands several times over... He'd just said he wanted to save *what*? Were Yu Chang's ears acting up because he had exhausted his essence, or was there something wrong with Tai Sui?

At this moment, Xi Ping was in the Lingyun Mountains. His hands were shaking uncontrollably.

Earlier, Xi Ping had been investigating the array left behind by the escaped Miah clan leader, attempting to work out some clues from it, then follow after as the real oriole stalking behind the mantis. Though things were developing somewhat differently than he had anticipated and his hopes of seizing that hidden realm under the noses of all the various forces weren't large, it was still possible to look out for a chance to gain some advantage.

Who would object to some extra money?

But after Wangge Luobao had aroused the South Sea Hidden Realm and the solar eclipse had begun, the true Lingyun Mountains had let out a wail like a sigh.

This sound was very hard to describe. It wasn't the sound of ridges snapping and boulders sliding, like when Xiang Rong and Xuanwu had brought down mountains in their fight.

Back then, however miserable a state the Sanyue Mountains had been in, the impression they had given was that this was temporary. No one had been worried that the Sanyue Mountains collapsing would impact anything. Everyone had known that when the battle

was over, even if no shed skins or ascended spirits took action, the spiritual mountains would still gradually repair themselves.

It had been nowhere near as terrifying as the sigh of the Lingyun Mountains.

This wail stabbed directly into the bodies of all the people... of all the intelligent beings in the mountains. Flocks of birds landed, the free range spiritual beasts on the peaks all went to their knees, and Xi Ping's heart gave a jump as he was nearly submerged in unreasoning panic.

In eight years of being an ascended spirit, he had walked through the mortal world like a celestial being, nearly forgetting the feeling of panic. But now he once again became an ant swept away by a flood, as if flying through the sky and burrowing into the earth had been only a drunken dream.

The spiritual beasts in the mountains all threw back their heads in the same posture. The roars of the quadrupeds and the shrieks of the avians gradually rose, echoing the voice of the mountains.

Xi Ping's heart was being pressured by something from the outside world. The heartbeat he normally took no notice of and didn't feel struck beat by beat against his ribs. A thought touched his spiritual sense: the spiritual mountains were dying.

But how could mountains "die"?

What did it have to do with a passing visitor like him whether the Lingyun Mountains died?

Even if the whole western continent sank into the sea, it still couldn't drown an ascended spirit...

For a moment, Xi Ping's intellect lagged behind his spiritual sense. Bewildered, he was towed along by fear. His first reaction was to send Zhou Ying's consciousness away.

Amid the spiritual mountains, more and more spiritual beasts joined that endless wail, which resounded powerfully through all the valleys.

Xi Ping turned his head in astonishment, just in time to see the sun entirely disappear at the crests of the Lingyun Mountains. The richly colored auspicious clouds became as gloomy as black streamers.

The spiritual energy was sinking toward the ground. It was visible to the naked eye as the natural white spirits exposed on the ridges lost their luster. Immortal palaces built atop piles of spiritual stones began to move without wind. Like Xi Ping, all the cultivators stood with their feet nailed to the ground.

In that moment, Xi Ping's mind buzzed. Countless blurred images flashed before his eyes—and it wasn't just him. Every person in the Lingyun Mountains now who had found their way to the ascended spirit threshold or had a sufficiently strong spiritual sense saw it.

The spiritual mountains collapsing, the monsters of iron and steel belching out steam that hid the clouds and blotted out the sun, foul water bursting onto wide swaths of farmland, rainforests burning to deadwood amid the rain and then collapsing and lying flat, the dust they raised concealing the rotting corpses of spiritual beasts.

People—it was unclear whether they were cultivators or mortals—grappled at close quarters, as if they had been transformed into the demon host at the bottom of the Impassable Sea. Savage-faced Xiuyi shouldered the newest firearms from Western Chu; when they pulled the triggers, the Miah who faced them lay flat, like wheat seedlings lodging. There were people whose bodies were still standing while half their heads had been blown away; out of the

shadows surged a Miah with hatred on his face, who pressed something. Behind him, seven or eight cars of a Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon exploded into fragments with a bang. The small, slender Miah was knocked to the ground by the flaming wreckage, yet he still laughed up at the sky...

“Shiyong!”

Amid the wails, an ominous crack pricked Xi Ping’s ears at the same time as Zhi Xiu’s voice. He gave a start, as if that crack had been his own spine breaking.

“Shifu... what is that voice?”

“A vein of the earth breaking.” In his spirit, Zhi Xiu’s voice was also strained. “In all my life, I’ve also heard it only once.”

“Just now, I saw...” Xi Ping had never reached the boundary of “so immersed that he lost the power of speech” while practicing the sword, but now he experienced it vividly. He bit the tip of his tongue and used the taste of blood to come back to himself. “The Lingyun Mountains’ spiritual energy is flowing outward, isn’t it? Why would that happen? Even when Xuanwu and Xiang Rong smashed up the Sanyue Mountains, it didn’t...”

Zhi Xiu didn’t speak.

But Xi Ping stopped himself—an established foundation needed to be told the hidden rules of the universe, but an ascended spirit could perceive them for himself.

His spiritual sense, connected to the Lingyun Mountains on the point of collapse, had already told him the answer: the strife between Xuanwu and Xiang Rong had been internal; up to the present, while Xuanwu had been nominally declared a wanted criminal by the cultivation world, he had never truly betrayed his

sect's orthodoxy. But now, with the Miah revolting over a trifle like a clash between clans, no matter what small patch of duckweed this wind had arisen from, it had in the end by a series of coincidences led to an outcome no one had expected: the "evil cultivators" were about to seize the spiritual mountains.

The "order" of the western continent was about to collapse.

Since he had always considered himself an "evil cultivator," Xi Ping ought to have rejoiced that the spiritual mountains were about to collapse, ought to have stood back and watched with pleasure at their misfortune, but he couldn't smile.

Out of nowhere, he had an ominous feeling.

"Save Xuanwu. You signed the blood oath. Within ten years, you have to do three things for me. Ten years haven't passed yet." Xi Ping didn't have time to overthink it. He passed word to Yu Chang far away in the South Sea. "I'll return your *Discard the False and Keep the True* book!"

CHAPTER 153 - The Storm Begins (11)

The Emperor of the East said something that Yu Chang didn't listen to closely. He only wished he could strangle his past self for underestimating the enemy—the blood oath hadn't stipulated that the parties couldn't fall out and kill each other after the fact. He'd had a very good plan back then: first sign the blood oath to lower the other's guard, then, when he was done using him, kill him when he least expected it; anyway, there was no need to pay back a debt to a dead man.

Just that moment of naïveté, and the lousy stone he had picked up himself was still crushing his foot eight years later.

“Just because of that, you want me to face a crowd alone, henceforth be pursued to the ends of the earth by those who walk my path?” After listening to Tai Sui briefly tell him what the unusual circumstances in the Lingyun Mountains were, Yu Chang was simply about to go crazy. His speech was so rapid he forgot his poise. “Fellow cultivator, is there something wrong with you? What does it have to do with you and me whether the Lingyun Mountains die or not? Anyway, was this brought about by the rebellion of a clan? The conflict between the Miah and the Xiuyi is of long standing. As for evil cultivators... ha, why don't you start with Qiu Sha becoming an ascended spirit on the fifteenth of the eighth month? According to you, we'd all be better off committing suicide!”

Xi Ping interrupted him. “Enough nonsense. Anyway, if Xuanwu falls in the South Sea's damned hidden realm today, you'll be in breach of contract.”

Yu Chang: “...”

Screw your ancestors!

And meanwhile, the Emperor of the East, with the Emperor of the East Halberd over his shoulder, had charged toward Xuanwu. While the Snow Wolf and the others hadn't agreed, their interests were currently aligned, so naturally they also followed him one after another.

Yu Chang was a step behind. Then he jumped and blended into the shadows on the surface of the water.

He was one of those rare people who had entered the Way as a child. He had struggled with tears of blood in his eyes for every grain of spiritual stone that had merged with his essence. Resisting the spiritual image brand, he had climbed for over four hundred years, until finally he had climbed to the starting point of those wealthy young masters—the feet of the spiritual mountains.

No one on earth had better natural endowments than him. No one had a stronger will than him. No one's road was harder than his.

The mediocre rabble in the mundane dust were ignorant and cowardly. Stuck in the mud themselves, they could only turn their anger onto those weaker than they were; what use did they have, apart from eating and defecating?

Shouldn't the useless die?

Fuck you, Tai Sui!

The great ascended spirits reached Xuanwu in an instant. Sword, halberd, and poisonous mist were set loose simultaneously. Yu Chang turned his murderous gaze onto Xuanwu's back.

Just another step, and those spiritual mountains would be in their grasp!

When he openly violated the contract, the blood oath he had signed with his own hand eight years ago immediately retaliated. All the blood in Yu Chang's body seemed to boil, bubbling around his bones. Next, his spiritual eyes were sealed and his essence congealed. The blood oath locked all the meridians in his body, firmly clamping him in place... and then his Way of the Heart began to waver. Years and years of the past flitted before his eyes like illusions. Once again, he became that powerless child who had thrown himself onto a bonfire.

Blood nearly dripped from the red eyes that the spiritual image brand had left Yu Chang with.

Unexpectedly, Yu Chang jumped out of the shadows and knocked back the killing blows all the ascended spirits had struck. Then a sharp spike broke free of the surface and pricked at the lotus roots wrapped around Xuanwu.

“What are you doing?!”

“Yu!”

“Are you crazy?”

Yu Chang had never felt such hatred in his life.

Xi Ping was feeling no better than he was. Right now, he had no time to attend to anything else. He jumped and flew toward the place where the vein of the earth had snapped—Quancheng, which was nearest to the Lingyun Mountains.

The collapsing vein of the earth had torn a deep gully in the ground, which a person would die falling into. The spiritual energy hidden within it surged out as if going crazy. By unlucky coincidence, the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon that came once a day was pulling in at just this critical moment.

The crack in the earth split the rails in two. The unprepared Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon pitched headfirst into the deep gully. A number of Luwu who had been awaiting orders in Quancheng, not caring about exposing their identities, acted simultaneously, narrowly managing to stop the front of the train in midair.

Before they could find a place to put the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon down, a nearby slope was knocked down by the collapsing vein of the earth. A herd of boulders carrying violent rage smashed into the village at the edge of Quancheng.

The village clock tower collapsed like a pile of sandy soil. In less than the blink of an eye, stones and mud had buried the village.

The lead Luwu was almost stunned. But the next moment, the place that had been buried moved. Countless reincarnation wood trees grew wildly in an instant, narrowly managing to create a gap people could run for their lives through.

From the depths of the thicket, someone loudly shouted: “Go!”

The Shu, scared silly by the abrupt natural disaster, didn’t understand the Wan language he had blurted out; they were only startled back to their senses by the voice.

A timber mill at one corner of Quancheng collapsed. The bodies of a row of tree-felling machines ruptured. Machine oil splashed, setting fire to the reincarnation wood trees holding up the “sky.”

The burning pain of the trees, the bone-deep hatred coming through the blood oath—Xi Ping felt every bit of it.

Even that as Yu Chang hated the ignorant people of the world, what he had originally hated were the spiritual mountains.

The silent wellness talisman had been hanging inside his lapels. The disordered spiritual energy roiling at the place where the vein of the earth had ruptured snapped the string. Xi Ping flew by in midair and picked up a child trapped in the rubble, then threw the child toward the fleeing crowd. The unguarded wellness talisman rolled off of him, falling right into the burning thicket.

The little brocade bag holding the wellness talisman had been embroidered with extremely fine silk. It was only lapped briefly by the flames, yet when Xi Ping reached out to snatch it back, the delicate colored threads embroidered on it were already burned through.

Some people were running wildly, some were calling the names of their loved ones in heartrending cries, some were running unwillingly, dragged away by others, wailing as they ran...

Xi Ping's ears were full of sounds that seemed to come from a pit of suffering. He squeezed the burned brocade bag containing the wellness talisman in his hand—it was called “wellness,” yet it couldn't even protect itself; it also couldn't really safeguard this body that had crawled out from the bottom of the Impassable Sea... and had been crushed to thousands of pieces and turned to dust.

And the Lingyun Mountains were about to fall. The sky that had loomed over his head was also about to fall, amid tears of blood.

He had once been...

He had once been an idler picking fights beside the Lingyang River.

For a divine tool to leave the mountains, there had to be a shed skin overseeing it. Just now, Xi Ping had roughly seen the location of the South Sea Hidden Realm through the reincarnation wood amulet. With a shed skin's speed, the divine tool would nearly be there by now.

Looking at the response speed of the Lingyun Mountains, they were just as bewildered as an outsider like him. When the Cauldron of Nine Dragons, Lingyun's shed skin, Xuanwu, and the South Sea Hidden Realm all came together, what would happen?

What should he do now?

"Shifu," Xi Ping said blankly, "I... I don't understand."

Was it that past generations hadn't stood high enough?

Was it that later generations had the will but not the strength?

Hui Xiangjun, who had seen through the nature of the spiritual mountains and turned herself into flame, had been unable to shake the spiritual mountains; the Luwu who were hidden everywhere and all the many and varied toilet bulletins had only been able to disgust the important personages a little, and had still been unable to shake the spiritual mountains; the Riverward, the Law Breaker, the Late-Autumn Red, the great demon of the East Sea, Zhou Ying when he had nearly lost his mind, the laborers who had suffered in silence, the evil cultivators crying out indignantly against injustice... none of them had been able to shake the spiritual mountains.

But now, the spiritual mountains were about to collapse into some handfuls of dust... because of the internal strife among the Shu, who believed that "If you are not one of us, we cannot be united."

If the spiritual mountains "died" because of a lowly reason like this, then wouldn't their death be very unjust, very sorrowful?

Before Zhi Xiu could answer, Xi Ping's somewhat numb spiritual sense was suddenly touched.

In the South Sea, Zhuoming had in fact already sensed Yu Chang using the amulet to contact the Misty Willow, but he hadn't done anything. He had only quietly fixed on the reincarnation wood Yu Chang carried—even the lunatic hadn't thought that with the hidden realm yet unopened, and the “sacrificial offering” Xuanwu yet to be absorbed, these two irresponsible clods would defect at a time like this.

Had that Misty Willow gone off his rocker? What was he playing at?

Zhuoming had been caught off guard. The lotus stalks had relaxed for a moment.

Xuanwu had seized the opportunity to struggle fiercely, nearly pulling Zhuoming up “by the roots.”

A group of spiritual beasts suddenly leapt out of the water, throwing themselves toward Xuanwu and Zhuoming as if looking for death. They were immediately pulverized. Flesh and blood flew everywhere. The bloody reek was oppressive.

Among them, a gold-armored zheng that had been torn to pieces sank into the big whirlpool along with the corpses of several Miah cultivators. As it sank, its slashed abdomen was pushed open by the seawater. Its gory guts slowly flowed out—where no one noticed, in the stomach of the gold-armored zheng was a willow leaf boat with room for only one person.

With the bloody mist to shield him from others' gazes, Zhuoming took the opportunity to instantly abandon this small cluster of heartless lotuses and escape to the edge of the giant kelp.

He reached out and took hold of a reincarnation wood amulet—when they had passed by each other just now, he had taken it off Yu Chang.

Originally, Zhuoming had been planning to wait until they succeeded, and then, when all the evil cultivators relaxed, to take action against the Misty Willow. He hadn't expected him to ruin his plans.

He had to capture the Misty Willow's consciousness now.

The Misty Willow was everywhere. That brat's consciousness was like water—you couldn't grasp it all with one hand. Even if he went through the reincarnation wood to seal one place with a lotus seal, he could still shatter himself and escape.

Unless...

Zhuoming held down the reincarnation wood amulet with a bloody hand. His blood soaked into it. The lotus seal went out blended into his voice.

Up in the blue empyrean or down in the underworld, no matter what nook or cranny the "Misty Willow" had his consciousness hidden in, these words would touch him. If only his consciousness was touched, the lotus seal could catch him.

Zhuoming said, "Xi Ping, Xi Shiyong!"

Xi Ping, just caught in a dilemma, was unprepared to have his identity exposed.

Disciple of an immortal sect, great evil cultivator, Tai Sui, Luwu, Cui Yugan, Cui Buqiong... All the protective armor he had used over the years instantly turned to dust. For a moment, Xi Ping's heart and mind were shaken.

The lotus seal carried by that voice seized the whole of his consciousness.

Zhaoting could protect his body, but it couldn't protect his consciousness. Zhi Xiu cried out involuntarily, "Shiyong!"

The next moment, it was as if something had stifled the shard of Zhaoting. The consciousness Zhi Xiu had split off into it was forcibly thrown out.

A chill poured into the top of Xi Ping's skull. Something was covering his consciousness. The Heartless Lotus's indecipherable lotus seal was like mist entering water, dispersing at a touch.

The reincarnation wood amulet in Zhuoming's hand turned to ashes.

Before Xi Ping could recover from the moment of mortal peril, he sensed a particular reincarnation wood tree contacting him. Reincarnation wood was his accompanying plant, but very oddly, he couldn't sense the location of this tree.

Next, a mild voice spoke into his ear: "The reason you do not understand is that you are too young."

Even in death, Xi Ping wouldn't forget that voice. It was as if his whole body was frozen.

That person continued, "In the cultivation world, even your shifu is only an extremely talented half-grown child. He himself still has many uncertainties, so how can he dispel your doubts? His seclusion is just at a critical moment. He is hardly able to fend for himself. Do not impose upon him."

This was Xuanyin Mountain's Dignitary of Fate High Elder—Zhang Jue.

At the bottom of the Sea of Stars was a reincarnation wood tree that had been pruned neat and upright.

“With the spiritual mountains present, evil cannot rear its head, and the common people have a place to shelter... The spiritual mountains were born through the hearts of the people. How could they collapse through the hearts of the people?” Zhang Jue said evenly. “What destroys the spiritual mountains are only the demons in people’s hearts. So it was with Lancang, and so it is now with Lingyun. The Xiuyi are skilled in combat, the Miah are beautiful and delicate. Tianbo-zhenren combined the strength of the two clans, stamping out the demons, bringing peace to the western continent. With the two clans now at odds like this, the aspirations of the full moon founder have been rent apart by his unfilial descendants, allowing demons to slip in to fill the void. How can the spiritual mountains continue? How can the people at the feet of the mountains live on?”

Xi Ping’s lips moved. Bearing enormous pressure, he spat out four words: “I don’t believe it.”

Zhang Jue didn’t quibble with him. He only raised a hand and tapped the reincarnation wood.

Xi Ping felt his vision blur. The name token of a disciple of Xuanyin Mountain’s Flying Jade Peak fell into his hand—without a doubt, this was a prison more impregnable than the Heartless Lotus’s prison made of lotus stalks.

“You do not understand now. That does not matter. But since your cultivation has already reached the ascended spirit level, when you return to the Xuanyin Mountains in the future, you can enter the Sea of Stars with me once... You have mistakenly entered a wrong path and taken a very long detour. I have always watched you. Fortunately Jingzhai has led you quite well. In this catastrophe on the western continent, if the monsters are permitted to consolidate power, it will bring great affliction onto living creatures. The spiritual mountains form boundaries that I and those like me cannot cross.

Only you, arising from vegetation, are not restricted by national boundaries—child, you have the answer yourself, do you not?”

Just then, Lingyun Mountain’s inner sect cultivators at last came to their senses as well. Countless points of spiritual light lit up on the mountaintops. Each peak master used their own essence to hold up the collapsing spiritual mountains. The established foundations left the mountains in a panic, making futile attempts to repair the veins of the earth, which were damaged everywhere.

The spiritual beast farm was also full of chaos. Just as Tai Sui had said, the spiritual energy of the spiritual mountains was indeed leaking out.

Li Manlong said to Zhao Qindan, “Miss Zhao, this opportunity cannot be lost. You can establish...”

Before he could finish, Zhao Qindan suddenly pulled him aside—the alarmed cries of the Turmoilers went up; a number of spiritual beasts came charging out of nowhere and destroyed Chief Li’s little house.

The new goose machine was shoved out by these big spiritual beasts and crushed to pieces.

Next came a surprise attack of the heavy musk of the bluffing monkeys. Zhao Qindan raised her head and gave a jump of alarm, seeing countless ferocious spiritual beasts charging directly toward them, letting out strange cries—there were big birds whose long beaks were like hooks and spiritual snakes as fast as lightning. And on the fangs of the giant beasts rolling toward them like a mountain, there were traces of blood!

She didn’t need to ask to know that these were all spiritual beasts from the sealed area.

The Turmoilers let out shrieks. These frightening spiritual beasts immediately turned into a crowd of little shouting monkeys. Without so much as looking at the people who normally reared them, they ran forward without a look back.

“Chief Li,” Zhao Qindan said, abruptly turning her head to look at Li Manlong, “I remember you told me that..”

“The arrays of the sealed area have been damaged,” Li Manlong said. “Miss Zhao, to establish a foundation, you’ll have to change..”

“Establish what foundation?” Zhao Qindan drew her sword. “Gather your clansmen, follow me!”

Replies from the Turmoilers were everywhere in the spiritual beast farm. Zhao Qindan flew up on her sword. Gazing into the distance, she saw that an ominous miasma had risen in the midst of the spiritual beast farm. There was clearly no wind, yet the trees and grasses were moving. A snake the height of two people sprang out of the ground and precisely clamped its jaws onto a passing spiritual beast. In a flash, it had crushed that spiritual beast’s body in its coils and swallowed it.

That spiritual beast was a sable sheep.

The strikingly beautiful big horns dangled behind it, bulging the big snake’s chin. The “auspicious omen” was like the wellness talisman; both were bits of foam that couldn’t even protect themselves.

Zhao Qindan smelled blood on the wind.

Humans—never mind the Turmoilers, who were half the height of a human—absolutely couldn’t outrun spiritual beasts.

As Li Manlong directed his clansmen to run to high ground, he lit all the signal flares he had on hand and sent them up into the sky, trying to call the spiritual beast farm's cultivator stewards to come—but no one paid attention.

It was already disastrous if a single spiritual beast ran out into the human world. All the inner sect cultivators of the Lingyun Mountains were already hardly able to fend for themselves; who would care about the Turmoilers in the spiritual beast farm?

Zhao Qindan took out a piece of reincarnation wood. "Tai Sui!"

But something was hindering Tai Sui; he didn't respond right away. Out of the corner of her eye, Zhao Qindan glimpsed a flock of west winders flying up in a panic.

Zhao Qindan formed a talisman with her hand—the only talisman she had learned that was related to beast-taming, which could only control good-tempered ones—and sent it out.

CHAPTER 154 - The Storm Begins (12)

Two Turmoilers were tripped by a suddenly-appearing hidden river deer. They were about to be trampled by the spiritual beast with its head like a lion's or a tiger's when a beam of sword light swept over. Zhao Qindan descended on her sword and sent out a talisman across empty space, knocking the huge beast aside several chi.

Then she dragged down a west winder like a kite, its wings flapping. The Turmoilers on its back each reached out their hands, pulling their companions onto the bird's back before the mindlessly charging spiritual beast could reach them.

The west winder was big but timid. Normally, it fled faster than the wind when it heard any movement. It hadn't thought that it would now be forced by a talisman to serve as a mount; it must have accumulated eight lifetimes of bad luck. It raised its head skyward. With the bearing of a roc, it was so scared it squealed like a pig. Its wings, flapping in alarm, sent Zhao Qindan reeling. She narrowly dodged a fierce beast coming her way. She flew her sword into the air and had hardly stood firm when a group of spirit-eating birds with long beaks like knives dove from the mountains.

The spirit-eating birds' long beaks could peck spiritual stones to pieces. When they were startled, they instinctively attacked cultivators with spiritual energy in them. Once they swarmed, they were capable of stabbing a handful of established foundations to death. Zhao Qindan had spent eight years in Tao County. It was a long time since she had fought with anyone. She was slow to react at first.

A sharp wind swept over with a *whoosh*. She crouched automatically. Another screeching west winder flew up from behind her, its huge body bumping into the swarm of spirit-eating birds.

Li Manlong, riding on the bird's back, tossed something glittering to Zhao Qindan. As soon as it touched Zhao Qindan, it instantly unfolded into a suit of armor.

“A grade-crossing immortal tool,” Li Manlong called loudly. “When a low level cultivator or a mortal wears it, as long as they have spiritual stones, it can block one fatal attack of ascended spirit grade. Keep it to protect yourself, miss!”

“Chief Li, where does it come from?” said Zhao Qindan in shock.

“A relic from Southern He,” Li Manlong said. “When Wei-laoban mistakenly fell into Qiu Sha's hidden realm, she obtained many things from that individual. She gave all those that mortals can use to us.”

Zhao Qindan said, “Then why don't you use it yourselves?”

If they put it on, wouldn't they no longer need to keep their hearts in their mouths when entering the sealed area?

At the same time, many questions flashed through her mind: there were in fact some immortal tools that mortals could use, but they were nearly all open-eyed grade, and none of them were “activated” with spiritual energy; they were protective items you carried with you, like the heart-protecting lotus. But hearing that it could “block one fatal attack of ascended spirit grade,” it would have to use a large quantity of spiritual energy. How could mortals use it? Unless inside the immortal tool was a living ascended spirit who could be called upon at any time.

Also, she had heard a bit of the general rumors about late-autumn red and eternal spring brocade—would Qiu Sha have casually gifted Hui Xiangjun's things to someone? And if they hadn't been made by Hui Xiangjun, then why would Qiu Sha have had “many” relics of Southern He's Lancang?

“It can only be used once. We couldn’t bear to, and we are unworthy.” Li Manlong’s sharp voice was nearly sliced apart by the whipping wind. “It was left behind from our Great He!”

The desperate homesickness of the wanderer in these words punctured Zhao Qindan’s flash of doubt and made the rims of her eyes heat up.

Just then, the mournful cries of the Turmoilers sounded in the distance. These were some elderly Turmoilers who had volunteered to stay back to bring up the rear.

Zhao Qindan said, “What are they saying?”

“The beast tide has come,” Li Manlong said as he urged the west winder to fly toward his old companions. “Miss Zhao, take..”

But Zhao Qindan’s sword flew faster than the bird. She got ahead of it and dove.

When she passed by him, she peeled off the armor and tossed it into Li Manlong’s arms. “I can’t bear to, either!”

“Miss Zhao!” Li Manlong became frantic. “My people live in the Land of Turmoil. The old pave the way and bring up the rear for the young. Life and death are predestined. Do not..”

Zhao Qindan leapt off her sword without pause and tore off the spiritual image mask. Her figure instantly extended, turning back into the tall and graceful young mistress. She reached out across empty space, caught up a Turmoiler, and sent him up into the sky with a talisman, placing him onto a west winder’s back. Then she raised her sword and beheaded a spiritual beast she didn’t recognize and sent another Turmoiler flying.

But the frantic beast tide couldn't be held back by all the courage and energy of a mere half-immortal. They surged forward like a flash flood.

Seeing that the people on the ground were about to be drowned by that "tide," Li Manlong's eyes nearly burst from their sockets.

Just then, there came the thrum of a qin playing. Everything seemed to slow down.

A man's ghostly form went against the tide. He held a narrow qin. The qin played three notes fit to rend the rocks and shake the clouds. In a moment, he had arrived in front of Zhao Qindan and the Turmoilers.

"Tai Sui!"

"Senior Tai Sui, what's going..."

Xi Ping waved a hand, interrupting her. "I didn't expect this. Forgive me, Miss Zhao."

Zhao Qindan froze briefly. Out of nowhere, she felt that Tai Sui seemed to have grown "old."

She knew that he definitely wore a spiritual image mask. Wearing a middle-aged face, his gestures would occasionally give him away, revealing a trace of vigor that couldn't be concealed. But now she felt that he had turned grim. The sound of the qin, not forming a tune, seemed like a trapped beast at the end of the road.

Xi Ping didn't look at her. He only said, "Go."

Zhao Qindan knew how formidable he was. She quickly snatched up a few Turmoilers bringing up the rear and took them onto the west winders. The big birds carried them into the sky.

Xi Ping rapidly formed an array, simply and crudely using spiritual energy to build a temporary barrier, stopping the rampaging spiritual beasts by force. He didn't belong to the way of beast-taming. This thing wouldn't hold them for long. Fortunately, the sound of his qin had disturbed the Lingyun Spiritual Mountains. They would soon send people to clean up.

Xi Ping looked at the savage-faced spiritual beasts through the bloody wind, then turned and went in pursuit of Zhao Qindan and the others.

A beast tide or an ocean tide could be blocked with a cultivator's strength, but what about the flowing current of the world?

The west winders groaned and chirped breathlessly as they flew. Suddenly, their beaks were collectively held by an invisible force, only breathy sounds remaining in their throats. A gale swept toward them. The dozen big birds sped up under the force of that wind, going as fast as shooting stars.

With an ascended spirit's might spreading everywhere, the west winders didn't dare to let out a peep.

“Senior!”

“If the South Sea Hidden Realm is occupied by evil cultivators, the spiritual mountains of the western continent will collapse,” Xi Ping briefly explained to Zhao Qindan. “I'll drop you off in a safe place on my way. I'm going to the South Sea.”

Having heard this, Zhao Qindan didn't utter a word for a long moment, as if she couldn't digest this information right away.

After a long time, her thin voice came through the gale: “The sky presses down on us, making us powerless, and because we are

powerless, we cannot withstand the sky falling... Gods oppress us, and demons also oppress us. Ha, so what should we do? Senior, aren't there some people who should kill themselves as soon as they're born?"

Xi Ping wasn't her senior, so he kept silent.

Meanwhile, they had reached the edge of the spiritual beast farm, the coastal zone of the southernmost end of the Lingyun Mountain Range.

Xi Ping was following the direction of the spiritual wind toward the "tide." He had meant to find a safe place to set Zhao Qindan and the others down, but his gaze paused—at the edge of the spiritual beast farm was a blank zone of spiritual energy that stuck out.

That place looked wholly unremarkable, but there seemed to be an invisible boulder blocking the surging spiritual energy.

At the edge of the Lingyun Spiritual Mountains, there was an invisible... little hidden realm?

The shape of the hidden realm was regular. It was clear at a glance that it was manmade, and it was no common product—even with Xi Ping's ascended spirit consciousness, if that place hadn't been made obvious by the vast wash of spiritual energy, he would have overlooked it.

Just then, Zhao Qindan, whom he'd pushed and dragged the whole way, suddenly gave a cry. Something fell from her.

This was a small inscription character stored in a small glazed bottle. It had been submerged in the green ore dust in the bottle, but now it suddenly lit up. As if something were drawing it, it rushed toward the hidden realm.

The two cultivators' eyes met in a flash. They spoke almost simultaneously:

“The Zhao family hidden realm!”

“You still have the inscription key to the Zhao family hidden realm?”

Eight years ago, the Zhao family had scattered throughout the nations. Using this as a pretext, the Luwu had dispatched many more personnel abroad. But leaving aside their good neighbor Chu with its messy domestic affairs, things hadn't gone smoothly in either Northern Li or Southern Shu—Northern Li was too large and sparsely populated, as well as insular; the appearances and customs of the people of Li were also very different from those of Wan. Xi Ping had heard that they had only started making inroads in the last few years.

In Southern Shu, the situation had been exceedingly tragic. It was cut off by the sea and didn't share a border with Wan; a great deal of information couldn't be sent in time. Before Xi Ping had freed himself up to help them put together the merchants' group, eighty percent of the Luwu represented by code names on the cenotaphs in the Kaiming Department Memorial Forest had died here.

Over in Northern Li, the Zhao clan had evidently had the tacit consent of Kunlun Mountain in entering the country. Western Chu's Zhao clan, meanwhile, had used the Yu family to contact Sanyue's West Peak directly. All that remained were the Zhaos in Shu. It was said that a portion of the Ning'an branch was still here. They had the greatest inside information, yet they were unusually discreet. At first there had still been some indications, but later they seemed to have had no contact with Lingyun Mountain.

If not for the Luwu whose bones had been buried here, it would have seemed that these Zhaos had only found a place to retreat into seclusion. For eight years, the Luwu had learned through clues that

they were in the southwest coastal area of the western continent, but they had never been able to find them... In fact, in bringing Zhao Qindan here to help her establish a foundation, it couldn't be said that wanting to try his luck hadn't been part of Xi Ping's plans.

He hadn't expected that when he really did come up lucky, the Zhaos would turn out to be openly living at the feet of the Lingyun Mountains!

Xi Ping gave Li Manlong a quick look. Li Manlong immediately said, "This is a medicinal herb field specifically provided for the use of the inner sect. All it needs is for the spiritual stones in the arrays to be swapped out at fixed intervals. These herbs aren't sold, so there's no need for anyone to stay here to look after or harvest them. Only inner sect medicine cultivators come here to collect materials."

Lingyun Mountain's medicine cultivators...

No wonder that despite the huge sum of money they carried, this group of Zhaos hadn't sought shelter with Lingyun Mountain. No wonder the Miah had money to secretly foster their established foundation cultivators and an ascended spirit. No wonder the defecting inner sect Miah cultivators could act so stealthily. The conflict between the Xiuyi and the Miah intensifying so rapidly in recent years—it seemed that it wasn't only because of the toilet bulletins.

Xi Ping turned to Zhao Qindan. "Can you..."

Zhao Qindan didn't say a word in protest. She only gave a bitter laugh and flew down in pursuit of that fallen inscription.

The Yuzhou Zhao clan belonged to a different branch than Southern Shu's Zhao clan. Zhao Qindan's inscription key didn't match. It gently tapped on the entrance, then dropped. Zhao Qindan hesitated, then bit through her middle finger and drew a special

symbol in the air in front of the entrance with the blood from her fingertip. The blood slowly seeped in. After a moment, a small door, just large enough to let one person pass through, opened in an ancient tree next to them.

Xi Ping held up his hand to hold her back, first sweeping inside with his consciousness.

“It’s all right, senior, this is a side door,” Zhao Qindan said, automatically lowering her voice. “To prevent against mortals and half-immortal disciples losing their inscription keys and not being able to get home when there is danger, the clan’s hidden realms can be entered by verifying your bloodline. With my position in the family, I can only use the side door... but that means it won’t make so much of a stir.”

Fortunately, the Zhao family came from Xuanyin. No matter what, under Xuanyin’s rules and regulations, high level cultivators had to go to spiritual mountains. When the Zhaos had rebelled, the Zhao clan established foundations and better had all been sealed within the immortal mountains by the high elders. Those that had escaped had at most just established a foundation. Without any fortuitous encounters, eight years might just be enough for an early stage established foundation to stabilize their boundary.

So, with an ascended spirit’s consciousness, Xi Ping easily swept the whole secret realm without alerting anyone—underground was a huge spiritual stone storehouse, though half of it had been emptied. Some established foundations were warily keeping watch there. There were people from Wan, and there were Miah.

The early stage established foundation cultivators were completely unprepared. All of a sudden, their consciousnesses were shaken simultaneously. They fell all at once without making a sound.

Xi Ping slipped in like a ghost. As soon as he touched the lead cultivator's spirit, he performed a soul-searching.

Zhao Qindan, catching up to him, shuddered as she looked at his stern profile. She opened her mouth, but in the end said nothing, only turned her head away.

There were truly too many Luwu who had died at the hands of the Zhaos.

Like a skilled butcher cutting up an ox, Xi Ping rapidly turned the souls of a bunch of established foundations inside out, then simply burned the corpses to eliminate the evidence with a wave of his sleeve. A handful of papermen flew out of his sleeve. When they landed, they took on the appearances of those established foundations.

The papermen took no notice of them. As if nothing were the matter, they dispersed to patrol. Xi Ping sped toward the levels deeper underground. Tossing out a mustard seed to cover up his actions, he quickly carved the inscriptions he had seen while performing the soul-searchings onto the blank flagstone floor.

The inscriptions on the flagstones activated one after another, then split off into all directions. A passageway that had curled into the ground unfolded before his eyes. Dense spiritual energy with the salt smell of the sea mixed into it wafted toward him, indicating that the passage led to the South Sea.

This was how the Miah cultivators who had ganged up with the Zhao clan had gotten away.

“You all hide here for now, I'll have the Luwu come pick you up,” Xi Ping instructed Zhao Qindan, then walked in, sending the location of the Zhao family hidden realm to the Luwu in passing.

Only then did he suddenly realize something was off... With all kinds of beasts stampeding, his emotions had been in a state of upheaval. He hadn't had time to consider anything else—after he had pushed san-ge's consciousness away in a panic, why had Zhou Ying kept quiet and not asked after his wellbeing?

It was as if... he knew that when the spiritual mountains were on the point of collapse, an unexpected person would contact him.

In the Xuanyin Mountains, the Dignitary of Fate High Elder waved a hand. The reincarnation wood sapling disappeared as he transplanted it elsewhere.

Next, the Dignitary of Rule Lin Zongyi projected his image into the Sea of Stars.

“Destiny has always been lofty and inscrutable,” Zhang Jue said softly. “Dignitary of Rule, I suppose you know now why I wanted to protect him?”

Lin Zongyi's mouth was sealed. He didn't respond.

Zhang Jue closed his eyes and slowly said, “During the meteor shower fourteen years ago, upheaval in the spiritual mountains became a foregone conclusion. Now the great tribulation is beginning on the western continent. No one can escape it. The frequent appearance of evildoers everywhere is already unstoppable. No matter how much you and I wish to cling to past ‘boundaries,’ the boundaries will break from being too rigid. When that time comes, what will be the suffering of living creatures?”

Lin Zongyi cast down his eyes slightly. He seemed to be sighing.

“He has spent so many years in the outside world and has never pilfered heaven's order, nor has he done anything that could not be taken back. Rather than allow another evil cultivator to exist in the

world, it is better to take him back into the Xuanyin Mountains... Tell me, what kind of person does it take to nearly allow his spirit to fall to the enemy because someone called his true name?"

A person with an identity, a person with ties, a person with roots.

Zhang Jue sighed. "He will return."

Lin Zongyi removed his mouth seal and briefly said, "Then Zhou Ying ought to enter the way of clarity."

Zhang Jue was silent for a moment, then nodded. "Fair enough. Too sharp a spiritual sense can easily go astray in unexpected ways. Clarity may not be without benefit to him."

Lin Zongyi's image disappeared from the bottom of the Sea of Stars.

Zhang Jue sent his consciousness to Flying Jade Peak. Now that the master of Flying Jade Peak was a near-shed skin, even a high elder could no longer glimpse where he himself was located.

Zhi Xiu's fate as he grappled with the Way was chaotic and hard to discern. The Sea of Stars could not see its course.

"Jingzhai," came Zhang Jue's voice, "I have rescued that child for you. Set your mind at rest and cultivate. Do not become distracted again."

Flying Jade Peak was silent. The wild wind only swept the flying snow a little further.

Zhou Ying's consciousness had been pushed back to Prince Zhuang Manor in Jinping by Xi Ping, but there was no expression of surprise on his face.

He held the reincarnation wood amulet in his hand and stroked it for a moment, but he didn't contact Xi Ping again. He sealed the amulet into his mustard seed and went to the window of the south study.

Because of the eclipse, the nearby Azure Dragon Tower had lit its lanterns during the day. A walker in the mortal world wearing a stealth talisman came to reinforce it and strengthen its defenses.

The newcomer was Xi Yue.

Xi Yue knew that Zhou Ying could see through stealth talismans. When he landed on the Azure Dragon Tower, he saluted him from afar.

Zhou Ying nodded to him and watched the Xi family's half-puppet walk into the Azure Dragon Tower.

Bai Ling was just at his wit's end from all kinds of information coming in from Southern Shu's Luwu. Suddenly, he heard his lord say out of nowhere, "That kid can establish a foundation now."

Bai Ling reacted half a beat slow. "Oh. What?"

Of course a half-puppet could also establish a foundation, but there was a rather different method of establishing it than for humans. A half-puppet proficient in arrays could normally alter his own arrays, but when establishing a foundation, it required his master doing it himself, required the master's Way of the Heart to guard the half-puppet's spirit as he changed his meridians and cast his essence, as well as to determine what path the half-puppet would walk.

Aside from that person, Xi Yue certainly wouldn't permit another person to hold that knife, such that of the people in the Jinping headquarters of Heaven's Design Pavilion, he was one of the few among those most useful to Pang Jian whose cultivation was only at the open-eyed level.

Zhou Ying didn't continue. He suddenly ordered, "Tell the Luwu to obey our Viscount. The situation in Southern Shu has stabilized. Leave it alone, help me straighten out some relics."

Bai Ling couldn't make heads or tails of this. He didn't know what had gone wrong with his lord. It was a total mess over there—what did he mean the situation had stabilized?

"My lord, the Lingyun Mountains..."

Zhou Ying waved a hand impatiently and went to rifle through the south study himself.

He had soon turned up all kinds of junk in the usually spotless study. Even Bai Ling hadn't known there were so many things in the nooks and crannies: there was a spice pouch in a small casket, evidently a work of embroidery bestowed by a female elder; there was a book filled with a naughty child's scrawls and some little knickknacks whose origin Bai Ling had forgotten; there was also a Northern Li knife that the Marquis had brought back from a distant journey, letters, talismans clumsily drawn by a certain young half-immortal who had just begun to cultivate...

"Right," said Zhou Ying, "do you still remember where I put those drawings of mine?"

"What drawings?" said Bai Ling.

"Didn't I spend a few days studying drawing with Zhao Tanghua? I dashed off quite a few cats and dogs to fulfill the assignments."

Bai Ling went blank. "Weren't those all..."

"Oh, right." Before he could finish, Zhou Ying remembered. "I burned them before going to the Latent Cultivation Temple. Tsk..."

put these things away for me. Help me change.”

Bai Ling caught the brocade box he had tossed to him. “To do what? Go where?”

“I’m going to the Marquis Manor. Take what I’ve brought out and get rid..” At this point, Zhou Ying paused, then changed what he was going to say. “Put it all in one place and seal it.”

CHAPTER 155 - The Storm Begins (13)

Bai Ling sensed at once that something was wrong. Before he could ask, a Heavenly Question landed in the study.

“Faster than I anticipated. These old things... How can they expect to get hold of him with a couple sentences of their own? Such self-confidence,” Zhou Ying ridiculed. Then he instructed Bai Ling, “Open it, then. It’s from the Principal Peak.”

“Princess Duanrui?” The ominous premonition in Bai Ling’s heart became heavier and heavier. He picked up the Heavenly Question. “Is it still about you establishing...”

His voice caught. His gaze was nailed to that Heavenly Question, as if its neat handwriting concealed a dreadful calamity. From Bai Ling came the sound of paper rustling.

A hand reached out to take hold of his elbow.

“Careful. That’s a Heavenly Question from the Principal Peak. Though I suppose that having severed her emotions, Princess Duanrui isn’t particular about etiquette, how would it come off if you took one look and ripped it apart?”

Bai Ling abruptly raised his head: “It says...”

“Yes, they’re telling me to enter the way of clarity.” He clicked his tongue. The paperman stood there like an idiot, not coming to help him change, so he was forced to slowly put on his outer robe and adjust his sleeves himself. “They know I have spiritual bones and no Way of the Heart and concentrate solely on personal gain. If the spiritual mountains want to rush a malingerer like me into establishing a foundation, naturally they have to grant me a Way of the Heart.”

“So why is it the way of clarity? Even on Green Pool Peak there are few formal inner sect disciples who take the way of clarity and unfeeling, why do they want you to... My lord!”

Zhou Ying shushed him. “Don’t shout. The way of clarity severs the emotions, not the senses. I haven’t gone deaf—bring me the fresh fruit Zhou Huan sent yesterday, I’ll take them to the Marquis Manor.”

When he was young, Emperor Jiahe had worried every day that his throne would get away from him. In his dreams he saw himself bitten by vipers; the vipers were uniformly named “Zhou Ying.” Worldly affairs were hard to anticipate. He had at last become emperor, but not only could he not hold his head up high, he now had the Kaiming Department’s tight grip around his neck and was even more humbled. When he sent things to his brother’s manor, he didn’t even dare to say he was “bestowing a gift.” Lord Yao had become the emperor’s father-in-law, but the high position seemed to have shortened his lifespan. He had departed his mortal frame not long after. It was said that before he had foamed at the mouth and passed on, he had thrice cried out “ancestors above”; everyone said that this cry was auspicious. The venerable old fellow must have gone to be an official in the heavens.

“Before, of the three elders, one supported the Luwu for the sake of selfish motives, one opposed the Luwu for the sake of justice, and the last paid no attention at all. The supporting one was half unwilling, and the resisting one, ha, he didn’t manage to nip it in the bud. That is the only way the Kaiming and the Luwu were able to muddle through, put down roots, and sprout. Because these are all affairs of the human world—the immortal mountains are above it all, and all that transpires in the mortal world is merely trifling. If a king of beasts in his period of splendor has his tail stepped on by a panicked pika, will he take it seriously?” After changing his outer robe, Zhou Ying reached out and snatched the Heavenly Question from Bai Ling’s hand. He carelessly said, “When the king of beasts

is plagued by fears and always baring his teeth, that means he has grown old—the spiritual mountains have also grown old. That Xu what’s-his-name... the one who got into the Sanyue Mountains in women’s clothes, what did he say in his letter last month?”

Bai Ling’s mind was a tangled mess. He responded automatically: “Within three years, two Xiang clan ascended spirits have passed away. The density of the spiritual energy on Sanyue’s West Peak has decreased since last year. Every year it gets worse...”

“If the Xiang clan can no longer rule alone, then naturally Sanyue Mountain can no longer continue to hold itself supreme, either. The mountains in Western Chu stand thick as trees in a forest. When a group of tigers determines that Xiang Rong is no longer in the land of the living, it will be time for the Silver Moon to fall to earth. As for Shu... thanks to that brat, I just had a chance to personally experience the crying of the spiritual mountains—whether the evil cultivators in the South Sea succeed or not, from the day the Miah allowed the Ning’an Zhao clan into their home, the Lingyun Mountains were doomed to a bad end. A group of outsiders, with at most some low level cultivators who had just hastily established foundations among them, and in a mere eight years, they have shaken the roots of the spiritual mountains. If you were the high elders, wouldn’t you be wary? Wouldn’t the little houseflies of the Kaiming and Luwu become important? And it isn’t suitable for the mighty to take a hand in mundane affairs. If they want the Luwu not to be influenced by worldly desires, then isn’t the way of clarity a ready-made solution?”

Bai Ling was looking at him in disbelief. “Does that... mean that you were ready for this? Since when?”

Zhou Ying smiled without answering.

Back in the Latent Cultivation Temple, Princess Duanrui had revealed this intention—that ancestor who took nothing to heart had

stopped in her tracks and, almost indiscreetly, had asked, “How does all that you see appear to your eyes?”

He hadn’t responded.

Back then, he had been only a step short of losing his mind. He couldn’t find clarity... Now, he would at last be able to resolve his cares and accept the princess’s Way of the Heart.

“No need to worry. The way of clarity isn’t death, and I won’t cast aside the Kaiming and the Luwu,” Zhou Ying said as he walked out. “You can continue to work with me afterward, anyway, just like before. Perhaps I’ll treat you better.”

In front of the Marquis and his grandmother, Zhou Ying was a junior. In front of Xi Ping, he had to act as an older brother. Much of the time it was inappropriate for him to indulge his temper. Therefore, when he was unhappy, there was only Bai Ling for him to pick a fight with... and he was always unhappy, so he was always picking fights over nothing.

The way of clarity could sever attachments, and it could also sever resentments. He would probably be much easier to serve then.

For the sake of convenient communication, Bai Ling carried a reincarnation wood amulet with him. In his consternation he heard Xi Ping suddenly ask, “Bai-da-ge, are you with san-ge? Why isn’t he answering me?”

Bai Ling didn’t know what to say, and he didn’t have attention to spare for him. “My lord, if the Viscount finds out in the future...”

“He’s coming home soon.”

Bai Ling froze.

“Had the high elders not given him the disciple name token, I wouldn’t have received Princess Duanrui’s letter,” Zhou Ying said. “As for the future... we’ll see about it then.”

After he left, as before he had come, the joys and sorrows of others would have no impact on him.

Bai Ling babbled, “But since ancient times, the way of clarity has never produced a shed skin! This way...”

“Heavens, you do think far ahead.” Zhou Ying laughed aloud when he heard this. “I do not wish to be a shed skin.”

“Then... then what do you want?” said Bai Ling.

Once again, Zhou Ying didn’t respond. He only narrowed his eyes and looked up at the sky.

The eclipse had yet to pass. The lights of Jinping burned anxiously.

He had often been ill in his youth and unable to speak or laugh loudly. Therefore, he had always been sedate, every word and gesture ponderous.

But now, when he had been weathered by decades of dust, his step had suddenly become light.

Zhou Ying ducked down and got into a carriage—now, the west bank of the Lingyang River had also started switching over to using steam carriages.

There was no need to speak of the east bank. The houses and shopfronts had collectively retreated. The bluestone streets that a girl had once run across entering the city to buy osmanthus duck had long ago been swapped out for broad roads. A number of railway lines passed from the southern outskirts into the city along

the river, with “jingling cars” running back and forth over them. A single car could convey a few dozen people.

The ticket seller wearing a little red-brown cap stuck his head out the window and shook a big bronze bell to warn pedestrians to get out of the way. As he shook it, he looked toward the sky, muttering something, praying for someone to bless them and release the sun.

The sky in Jinping wasn't clear today, but it was still fairly calm.

But in the west, the Shu were fighting for their lives.

The turbulent spiritual wind blew through the Lingyun Mountain Range and rushed right toward the South Sea.

The western continent had already been in the rainy season, and now torrential rains poured down over it. The veins of the earth snapped, dams burst. Lingyun Mountain's inner sect disciples and the Dragon Subduing Knights flew around like headless flies.

In the air above the South Sea Hidden Realm, Xuanwu, having nearly become a “stepping stone to fortune,” had struggled free because of Yu Chang thrusting his oar in.

Wangge Luobao and Zhuoming had fallen short of success at the last moment.

How could Xuanwu allow them to flee? A shed skin's consciousness immediately enveloped the whole South Sea, trapping all the ascended spirits. The Miah cultivators desperately protected Wangge Luobao. As the spiritual beasts were constantly brought out under control of cultivators of the way of beast-taming, the sea became a slaughterhouse.

Yu Chang changing sides at the front line could make people hate him enough for it to reflect on eighteen generations of his ancestors.

Anyone who had the chance would deal him a blow.

But while he had saved Xuanwu, Xuanwu didn't take him for an "outsider." Treating everyone alike, he had entered him into the category of "evil cultivators whose lives must be taken" — Yu Chang's appraisal of himself was extremely accurate; indeed, there was no one on earth who had it harder than him.

The masters present joined in a chaotic struggle, and the established foundation cultivators and spiritual beasts mixed in died by the batch.

The essences of the dead cultivators surged onto the surface of the sea, raising bubbles everywhere, as if the water were boiling. That gold-armored zheng was worthy of being a fierce beast that could chew up a half-immortal; its intestines were as sturdy as if forged of iron. Before Wei Chengxiang, trapped in its stomach, could struggle free, she was pressed down and buried at the bottom of the sea by all kinds of dismembered bodies. For a time, she danced with the hearts, lungs, and bellies, feeling that she had simply become the base for a pig offal soup.

The churning spiritual energy over the ascended spirit battlefield collided with what was surging from the western continent. The linking land bridge beneath the South Sea's Three Islands nearly broke from the quaking. The Miah mortals on the islands fled for higher ground in a flurry.

Under cover of the rising sea level, Xi Ping put on the Replica and, continuing to contact Bai Ling, who didn't respond, he took on the appearance of a Zhao family established foundation and slipped through the hidden passage at the bottom of the sea.

This hidden passage went from the edge of the Lingyun Mountains to the South Sea. It was an unexpected colossus. Xi Ping swept it with his consciousness and felt that he had swept a bunch of

tangled skeins—the inside seemed to be stacks of mustard seed spaces, full of twists and turns going in all directions. If someone with slightly low cultivation had wandered in by mistake, they might have lost their mind with a single look.

He was all alone in front of this incomprehensible maze, struggling to calm his mind and understand what he was seeing, find a way through.

First Xi Ping tried walking in a little. When he found that something was wrong, he withdrew. But the “maze” was changing every moment without end. He went back and forth several times and soon got dragged in. The spiritual energy around him became even more disordered and bewildering.

He was full of wits to begin with. Trapped in any surroundings, he could calmly think up a crooked notion and, with an air of complacency, shamelessly saunter out. But now, this “Tai Sui” who was so steady and sedate in front of Zhao Qindan and the others, after a moment of silence, suddenly clenched his teeth, as if he had reached the end of his endurance, and began to tremble all over.

Just then, a soft sigh came to his ears. “If I were you, I’d go back.”

Zhou Ying, long fallen out of contact, had finally taken out the reincarnation wood.

Xi Ping took two deep breaths and laboriously and desperately put himself together. He didn’t want to expose his shameful weakness in front of his family. He forced out a reasonably calm “san-ge.”

“I just received a letter from the inner sect, informing me that the Dignitary of Fate High Elder had put in a personal appearance, so I didn’t dare to disturb him. Has he gone?”

“You knew.” Though Xi Ping did his best to keep his voice as relaxed as possible, it still came out in a somewhat altered tone. “You knew—what, san-ge, are you going to teach me how to endure humiliation for a higher purpose?”

“I couldn’t teach you that. My powers aren’t so vast.” Zhou Ying sighed. Prince Zhuang Manor was very close to the Marquis Manor. The car reached it in the blink of an eye. When the porter saw him coming, he hurried out to receive him as he sent someone to go in to report his arrival.

Zhou Ying didn’t hide the reincarnation wood. He squeezed the amulet in his hand and stepped into the Marquis Manor’s garden. With his consciousness, he said to Xi Ping, “Don’t you want to come home? They’ve just repaired the courtyard. The stone steps are much smoother. All the lotuses in the yard are blooming. The shade is just right.”

In the maze, Xi Ping’s tottering composure nearly disintegrated on the spot at his light words.

“Shiyong, I know that you can’t accept it, but these are the facts.”

“...What facts?”

“Those who wish to bring peace to the world cannot break through the canopy of heaven above them. You may have very fine ideas, and others may let the blood go to their heads when they hear them and be willing to follow you, but in the end, because you refrain from taking action against evil for fear of harming the innocent, you’ll find yourself in a dilemma, and those who believed your promises with joyful hearts will be disappointed.”

“You’re saying that I can’t do it,” Xi Ping said.

“You can’t,” Zhou Ying said, gently but coldly. “If you could, the demon host from the Impassable Sea would have shattered the Bell of Tribulation eight years ago.”

“Then you would have died by Zhaoting’s blade eight years ago.”

“If one can leave behind a name that will go down in infamy through history, what do life and death matter?” Zhou Ying said, laughing. “Only those rogues who climb up single-mindedly, letting everyone else die, not stinting on the misery of the living, can pierce the sky.”

“Stop trying to convince me,” Xi Ping said, “I won’t.. I don’t believe it, I can...”

He could certainly think of a way, find some way out between the immortals and the demons. He didn’t believe this high-sounding reasoning.

Zhou Ying unhurriedly interrupted him: “If I said that, right now, Xuanyin wanted my life, that I was on the verge of death, and wanted you to seize the South Sea Hidden Realm as a foundation at once, rebelling and letting the Lingyun Mountains collapse like a heap of broken tiles and a hundred million southern barbarians on the frontier die there unburied, would you go?”

You can swagger before the slaving demon host, be ungovernable before the mighty sages... but can you cackle amid the wailing of ants?

“San-ge!”

“I’m teasing you. I’m at your house.” Zhou Ying put the amulet on a small table, meeting the Marquis of Yongning’s astonished gaze. This time, he simply spoke to Xi Ping aloud. “With strange phenomena in the sky, Xi Yue has gone to stand duty at the Azure Dragon Tower. I was uneasy and came with Bai Ling to look in on

them. The Miah are skilled at constructing snares and illusions. Bring my consciousness over, I'll lead you out.

“The spiritual mountains have stood for thousands of years. With the weight of the old pressing down on them, new things can never rise. You are not the one to command a demon host. Stop being obstinate.” Zhou Ying drank a mouthful of the Marquis Manor’s freshly picked Yu Qian tea. Like sending Xi Ping to study when he was younger, he instructed, “Get through with your business and come home.”

In the South Sea, frenzied spiritual energy poured desperately into the hidden realm, but it was never enough.

Xuanwu and the great evil cultivators were red-eyed with murder. Just then, there was a long wail in the sky. All the great masters collectively froze for an instant.

Dense clouds gathered, and an extremely bright golden light trickled down, making one nearly think the eclipse had ended and the sky had lit up once more!

Next, the shadows of nine dragons cut apart the vast sky. Where the light was, a human figure floated above a big cauldron—this was Lingyun’s Xiuyi high elder of the way of the beast-taming, bringing the Cauldron of Nine Dragons with him.

“Practitioners of evil ways who desire to plunder the spiritual mountains and destroy the foundations of my nation—you must be punished with a thousand deaths.”

The nine dragons roared in chorus, the sound of their roars blanketing the South Sea.

“First cut down all evildoers, then capture the traitors. Do not permit a trace of spiritual energy to leak out and disturb the South Sea!”

Leaving aside Xuanwu, who was looking directly at the Cauldron of Nine Dragons, all the ascended spirits had sensed the might of that great divine tool of the mountains. At an order from Lingyun's High Elder, the nine dragons dove with a scream.

If you said that the Silver Moon made you shudder for no reason, that it had a bone-piercing gloom, then the Cauldron of Nine Dragons was stark, bloody terror.

When the huge dragons descended, all the ascended spirits who could topple mountains and overturn seas turned into rabbits in the sights of a hawk. When the muzzles of the dragons came down, there was practically nowhere for them to run. They were pressed in succession into the sea.

An azure dragon sucked away the better part of the whirlpool in the sea. The bodies and essences of the established foundation cultivators who had met tragic deaths all went into its belly, not a bit leaking out.

Xuanwu was tightly encircled by three huge dragons; he might have been dead or alive.

The dragons' scales lit the pitch-black surface of the sea. The silhouettes of the frantically fleeing ascended spirit evil cultivators were nearly fixed in that moment.

Just then, an unfamiliar sentence in the Miah language came from the bottom of the sea.

The three great Miah ascended spirits who had been cast aside by Wangge Luobao just before the battle had appeared out of nowhere at the bottom of the sea. The blue-eyed Miah clan leader had a ball of dark blue fire held up in his hand, burning at the bottom of the sea.

With every step he took, the Miah clan leader recited a line of a secret Miah incantation, and the fire grew a shade brighter, the images of the nine dragons inside the flames became a bit clearer.

The Miah clan leader's features had all split open and were bleeding, but the hand that supported the fireball didn't move a hair. The nine dragons, which were like the punishment of heaven, stagnated in their movements bit by bit as though they were puppets on strings. Finally, they could only remain where they were, struggling slightly.

One of the Miah medicine cultivators raised his head and spat out a few bubbles, sending his voice up to the sky: "Elder Li, haven't you forgotten that the Miah also have a share in the Cauldron of Nine Dragons? This is the Cauldron of Nine Dragons inscription that our old clan leader in 'seclusion' exchanged his life for. Today we will introduce you all to it..."

The Miah clan leader took a deep breath. The hand supporting the flames rotted to the bone. His eyes were bursting from their sockets. He was about to shout the final line of the incantation.

CHAPTER 156 - The Storm Begins (14)

The Miah clan leader's original plan had been, before the Cauldron of Nine Dragons arrived, to lead Xuanwu and a bunch of great evil cultivators to their deaths, pour them into the South Sea, and open the hidden realm. When the Miah had their own "spiritual mountains," he would use those "spiritual mountains" to take the Cauldron of Nine Dragons. If Xuanwu proved too strong, he would use the evil cultivators to hold him back, and when the Cauldron of Nine Dragons came, egg them on into a fight to the death, and then, when a shed skin died and his essence dispersed, find an opportunity to direct the spiritual energy to break open the entrance to the South Sea Hidden Realm.

All of that had been ruined by Wangge Luobao's selfishness.

In order to seize the South Sea Hidden Realm, Wangge Luobao had activated the entrance with his own blood and then botched it; he hadn't been able to take Xuanwu down at one fell swoop.

Now the Lingyun elder holding the Cauldron of Nine Dragons evidently knew their intent. Seeing that his great scheme was about to fail, the Miah clan leader was compelled to resort to his final trump card. But, after all, the clan leader was only an ascended spirit. When he struck to wrest the Cauldron of Nine Dragons away by force, he himself cracked like a flaky pastry left sitting for three years.

But despite this, the big cauldron in the sky still went out of control.

The Lingyun elder controlling the Cauldron of Nine Dragons was trapped above the big cauldron. While admittedly he was a shed skin of the beast-taming way, the Miah medicine cultivator who belonged to the generation below him had been right: the Miah also had a share in the Cauldron of Nine Dragons.

He was only one of two Xiuyi shed skins, while his opponents were the entire Miah clan—the combined will of everyone from the shed skin to the walkers in the mortal world, the dead and the living, the orthodox and the evil.

On the sea, the nine dragons hanging in the air were pushed and pulled by two forces, their bodies twisting as though about to tie themselves into fast knots.

The sound of their teeth chattering was extremely similar to that of the veins of the earth of the western continent snapping. After wrestling several times, they finally opened their bloody maws one after another and sprayed out the spiritual energy they had just swallowed. Wave after wave rushed at the South Sea Hidden Realm, which Wangge Luobao had dragged out to the surface.

The two Miah medicine cultivator elders, seeing the situation, were also prepared to sacrifice anything—to sacrifice the clan leader.

One to either side, the two of them each put a hand on the clan leader's shoulders and, with the resolve that they were willing to blow the clan leader up, poured essence into him, narrowly allowing his incantation, which was about to go off key, to continue.

If only they could seize the Cauldron of Nine Dragons, if only...

Everyone present, ascended spirits and shed skins alike, was about to be buried by the dragons' talons and turn into a spiritual wind that would open the South Sea Hidden Realm and pull down the Lingyun Mountains!

The western continent, which had been occupied by the brazen Xiuyi, ought to have collapsed long ago!

Just then, a series of qin notes like a tempest came unexpectedly from behind the three Miah, as if it had flown out of their shadows.

All the essence of the three great Miah ascended spirits had been swept into that ball of dark blue fire. None of them had the excess strength to watch their backs.

The sword energy in the qin music was as sharp as the north wind on a snow-capped mountain. One stroke cut off the Miah clan leader's hand. The dark blue flames fell along with the severed hand.

The three Miah ascended spirits were sent flying by the qin music. The Cauldron of Nine Dragons instantly escaped both sides' control.

Amid the chaos, Zhuoming's eyes nearly burst from their sockets. "Misty—Willow!"

But no one had attention to spare for fighting anymore—the situation was hopeless for the Miah; it was only a small matter of time before the Lingyun shed skin elder snatched back the Cauldron of Nine Dragons. Neither the lunatics nor the fools wanted to test the hardness of their skulls against the Cauldron of Nine Dragons.

The five great ascended spirit evil cultivators, Xuanwu... the whole crowd of calamity-bringing masters scattered like flies as the out-of-control Cauldron of Nine Dragons made waves.

The nine dragons had been bewildered by Southern Shu's two clans openly turning against each other. They reeled against each other. Even more spiritual energy was swept up by these nine worms and smashed against the South Sea Hidden Realm.

From the depths of the sea came one loud hollow thump after another. The seal on the hidden realm seemed about to tear open at any moment. The sound struck listeners with terror.

But terror was no use. At this stage, the only one who could pick up the pieces was the Xiuyi shed skin. It was Lingyun's business whether the Cauldron of Nine Dragons could be controlled before the divine tool of the mountains pounded open the hidden realm. Xi Ping had done all that he could. Once his attack had come off, he didn't even show himself. Letting people hear his music without seeing him, he leapt and withdrew into the Miah's hidden passage.

Beneath the divine tool of the Lingyun Mountains, no one dared to send their consciousness out at random, and the seething seawater, the human corpses and beasts' blood, had obscured everyone's lines of sight. Xi Ping, coming and going in a hurry, hadn't seen that Wei Chengxiang was less than ten zhang away from him.

Hearing was more use than sight now. Xi Ping hadn't seen Wei Chengxiang, but Wei Chengxiang had heard the sound of his qin.

It was Tai Sui!

She laboriously extended a hand from the improved willow leaf boat, attempting to use a talisman to knock aside the dismembered heap of corpses pressing down on her from above. Sadly, while a half-immortal flying this way and that in the mortal world seemed pretty impressive, in a place where the torrent of spiritual energy could wash away the spiritual mountains, she couldn't even raise a breeze.

The talisman only flashed for a moment before it was silently extinguished. Then the crimson dragon among the nine dragons, wrung into a fried dough twist, fell out of the sky and knocked the pile of corpses apart.

Wei Chengxiang and the little boat floated lightly up in the water, brushing against the crimson dragon's big head. For a moment, her breath stopped; she felt herself touch those ice cold scales.

Death kissed her gently on the forehead, then let her go.

The huge dragon sprayed a long breath, tossing Wei Chengxiang and the pile of corpses away. Filled with abject terror, like a small winged insect caught in a gale, she rolled and tumbled every which way for a long time, then collided with the passing protective spiritual wind of an ascended spirit.

Wei Chengxiang's nails clinging to the small boat had long ago been pried up. Holding back the urge to vomit, she focused her gaze. As if it was fated, she had bumped into the fleeing Three Heroes of Turmoil!

Tai Sui's whereabouts were unknown. She was just about to pass word to the Queen Mother of the West, but before she could open her mouth, she saw the Emperor of the East, following the Queen Mother of the West, get a glint in his eyes.

At this unguarded moment, the Emperor of the East Halberd swung toward the Queen Mother of the West's back!

Guang'an was a sword cultivator. A single attack might not take him down. But that bitch Yang Wan was only a medicine cultivator, unsuited for combat!

Over the years, the Emperor of the East had put on the appearance of civility, but inside he bitterly hated the Queen Mother of the West. When the Queen Mother of the West's loose hair swept before his eyes in the seawater, it instantly ignited the Emperor of the East's malice. This woman was his disgrace... so let her be buried in the South Sea with the corpses of these animals.

Wei Chengxiang's pupils contracted sharply. Without a second thought, she drew an item out of her clothes—this was a “hand cannon,” made almost after the model of Heaven's Design Pavilion's

General Commander Pang Jian's talisman gun. Its shell was of some unknown material that gleamed like quicksilver. Round after round of obscure, meticulous inscriptions wound around it.

The more urgent the situation, the steadier Wei Chengxiang's hand usually was. She raised the gun with the false hand Lin Chi had given her and pulled the trigger.

But what flew out of the hand cannon was no bullet. It was a beam of sword energy.

Her intent had been to disrupt the Emperor of the East Halberd and warn the Queen Mother of the West and Lord Guang'an to be careful, but she was herself nearly knocked out by the sword energy! The instant the sword energy flew out, the hand cannon shattered into pieces. A big handful of spiritual stone powder hit her in the face.

Even more bizarre, when this immortal tool had activated, it had simply drained spiritual energy from the surroundings without going through her. This was clearly the feel of a "downgraded immortal tool."

She had just used a "downgraded immortal tool" to shoot a beam of sword energy that was at least established foundation grade...

That utterly scornful sword energy cut directly at the Emperor of the East Halberd, sending the halberd flying—along with the Emperor of the East himself!

No, this was ascended spirit sword energy!

That hand cannon was, apart from the willow leaf boat, the other item Tai Sui had given her. He had only said that it had been made by Master Lin, an early experiment made in the course of developing some kind of "spirit-conducting gold." At its present

stage, it could only be used once, and it wasn't very stable. He'd told her to take care of it, and if she encountered a life-threatening situation in the South Sea, it could give her a chance to escape with her life.

Wei Chengxiang had thought that this was another protective immortal tool made by the kind and generous Master Lin...

The Queen Mother of the West and Lord Guang'an were both startled by this earth-shattering sword energy. The Emperor of the East, seeing the situation had turned against him, took the opportunity to run off miserably in the opposite direction. And just then, yet another violent spiritual wind stirred up by the nine dragons pressed down on them.

Wei Chengxiang was swept up by the spiritual wind. Her brains were all jumbled: if such a spiritual weapon existed... such a thing existed... then what was the point of cultivating? Or refining your bones? Or seeking a way?

Lord Guang'an pulled the Queen Mother of the West into his arms.

The Queen Mother of the West said, "Wait, what was..."

"That sword energy belongs to the mysterious master who just took down the Miah clan leader. Their cultivation is no weaker than yours or mine. No need to worry about it, we can thank them later. For now, let's go!"

The two of them vanished into thin air just in time. The sword energy that had nearly broken the Emperor of the East Halberd just now had yet to be exhausted. After the Emperor of the East got out of its way, it was snatched up by the spiritual wind and sent slicing toward the South Sea Hidden Realm. There was a loud rumble as the impact of the spiritual wind and the sword energy provoked a whirlpool above the seal on the South Sea Hidden Realm. In an

instant, Wei Chengxiang fell into the whirlpool and knew nothing more.

An ominous crack came from the South Sea Hidden Realm. Just then, several dragons' cries sounded in the sky. Their voices went from wild to weak. The Cauldron of Nine Dragons lit up once more. At the moment of ultimate peril, the Lingyun shed skin elder had at last snatched back the Cauldron of Nine Dragons.

Just before yet another vast spiritual wind could reach the surface of the sea, it was absorbed by the Cauldron of Nine Dragons. The nine dragons circled in the air above the South Sea, swallowing the erratic spiritual energy in big gulps.

After a long time, the whirlpool above the South Sea Hidden Realm finally dispersed. The hidden realm that Wangge Luobao had awakened with his blood gave a long groan and sank back into the bottom of the sea.

By this point, all the major and minor evil cultivators had run off, leaving not a hair behind. On the surface of the sea, only the remnants of the Miah remained. It was a total mess.

The Lingyun elder had previously had the appearance of a young man. Now half his hair had turned white. When he withdrew the Cauldron of Nine Dragons, he sent his consciousness toward the western continent and saw that the upheaval of the Lingyun Mountains had at last ceased. On the point of imminent disaster, the spiritual mountains had been preserved, and Southern Shu's veins of the earth had been preserved... but to the consciousness of a shed skin elder, it was clear to see that the spiritual mountains had been pared down considerably. Nearly half of their spiritual energy had been lost.

The blood in the South Sea dispersed. The sun once again hung in the sky, but it was already sinking into the west.

Mournful cries echoed in the Cauldron of Nine Dragons. Though the way of the beast-taming was not skilled in observing destiny, he still sensed something.

One of the two great shed skins that still remained to the Lingyun Mountains sighed and disappeared along with the Cauldron of Nine Dragons—he still had to go back to clean up the mess.

No one knew that when the last spiritual wind had come down, the ascended spirit grade sword energy caught up in it had unexpectedly opened a tiny rift in the South Sea Hidden Realm, and an obscure open-eyed half-immortal had vanished there.

When the Luwu received the order to eliminate the surviving members of the Zhao clan, they moved at once in orderly fashion. After eight years of silent endurance, many people took relics of comrades in arms who had been buried in Southern Shu from their mustard seeds and hung them on themselves.

The Luwu who regularly operated here in Shu didn't know Zhao Qindan. The one who had followed Xi Ping from Tao County was afraid that people would misunderstand in their rage—after all, she was also named Zhao—so he kept watch over her and the Turmoilers. He quietly said to Zhao Qindan, “Sir Xu, the Zhao family's spiritual stones are abundant, I think you could also use the spiritual stones here to establish a foundation. Anyway, these things ought to have been... I'll stand guard for you.”

Zhao Qindan was silent a while, then asked, “Where is Tai Sui?”

The middle-aged Luwu said, “I suppose Tai Sui might be busy with something. We can't contact him for the moment. Don't worry, he brought you here because he wanted to help you establish a foundation. Anyway, you could say that you've rendered a

meritorious service this time. He'll think of a way to settle the spiritual stone accounts for you."

Zhao Qindan gave him a forced smile. "Thank you, there is no more need."

Having said this, she went into a corner to meditate.

Only when her worries had been laid to rest as the veins of the earth had calmed had she found that her desire to pursue cultivation and establish a foundation had all trickled out along the way.

What was the point?

She could no longer return to the orthodoxy of the immortal mountains, and if she went down another road, she would only become like those Three Heroes of Turmoil or the Miah rebel... unless she went and replaced the Luwu Xu Rucheng in being the third-rate imperial grandson's wife.

The Luwu had the third-rate imperial grandson under control. It would be in name only. In a few decades, he would die of old age. If she could accept it, it would really be no big deal for her to go.

But she couldn't accept it.

She had lived with A-Xiang for a while in Tao County. Sometimes when they spoke of the past in the dead of night, they could in fact relate very much on the subject of some desperate straits they had been through. But Zhao Qindan thought that she and A-Xiang still weren't the same. A-Xiang had fled for her life, while she had fled an arranged marriage. Those fleeing for their lives struggled in the cracks, sometimes indifferent to whether they were male or female, young or old; but those fleeing arranged marriages had all been ruthlessly humiliated because they had been "born female." That humiliation grew at the foundation of her Way of the Heart,

supporting her, making her incapable of bending to suit herself to her situation.

“Senior Tai Sui, can you help this junior through the maze?”

There was silence in the reincarnation wood. Everyone had their own road. In the end, you could only find your own way through the maze.

And Xi Ping didn't hear her voice. He was hiding.

The dust had settled over the farce of the South Sea Hidden Realm, so he had sent Zhou Ying's consciousness back to Jinping, left some instructions for the Luwu, then placed a mind calming talisman on his own spirit, blocking all the voices in the reincarnation wood.

He hid his aura, then picked a place at random to come on shore, returning to Southern Shu's main peninsula on the western continent.

He took no notice of where he made landfall, and he didn't know where he was going. Muddled, he went into a small Southern Shu town whose name he didn't know.

This place was probably not very far from the Lingyun Mountains. The veins of the earth here had also been damaged. Half of the buildings in the small town had collapsed. The Dragon Subduing Knights had used immortal tools to temporarily stabilize the broken veins of the earth until the inner sect could dispatch people to repair them.

The common people had been chased off by government soldiers and were temporarily sheltering outside of town. With walkers in the mortal world from the Dragon Subduing Knights in control, it was orderly enough. It was getting late now. Big pots were set up along

the streets, and the soldiers began organizing people to boil water and prepare food.

Xi Ping had removed his spiritual image mask. His looks were Wan.

When he had taken down the Miah ascended spirits, his hands had been cut by the qin strings snapping. There was blood all over him, but he hadn't done anything about it. He looked like a vagabond down on his luck. A green-eyed Miah girl stared at him for a while, then carefully trotted over to stop him. She began to gesticulate.

Xi Ping lowered his eyes, looked at this little thing that wasn't even as tall as his waist, and said, "I understand."

So the little girl said in a childish voice, "My big sister is an apothecary. Wait a bit, uncle."

Having said so, she gravely backtracked, running on her short legs, her attitude like a walker in the mortal world undertaking an assignment of utmost urgency.

Xi Ping had nowhere to go to begin with, so he stood where he was indifferently, staring blankly at the place where the sky was still glowing after the sun had set.

The mind calming talisman was useless. Even if he couldn't hear them, the Dignitary of Fate, san-ge, Yu Chang with his bleeding-eyed rage, the white-haired Marquis... all of them still pestered him like ghosts, binding him tighter and tighter, like the legendary immortal binding cords. He couldn't catch his breath.

The people of Wan were a little taller than those of Shu. Standing where he was, he was a little like a crane among chickens. He was soon noticed.

"Young fellow, are you a tourist or a merchant?"

“From Wan? On his own? So tender-skinned, he must be a young master who’s been separated from his family... Where did that blood come from?”

When they found that he understood the Shu language, quite a few people came over to start conversations all at once. Seeing that his reactions were a little slow, as if he had been scared out of his wits by the disaster, a crowd of Xiuyi pulled him over to their group.

Someone handed him a bowl, someone called a person who looked like a barefooted doctor over to clean the blood off him, someone nearby started singing a Shu ditty, reassuring everyone that the disaster would soon be over.

He drank a mouthful of the strangely sweet vegetable porridge in the bowl. His mortal memories came crashing back into place. Xi Ping recalled that when he had gone with Cui Ji’s people when he was little to play in Shu’s capital Zhaoye and had been attracted by those hybrid fake spiritual beasts, he had accidentally been separated from his family. At the time, he hadn’t known a word of the Shu language, and he’d had no fear of strangers. He had a stupid smile for everyone he saw. He had also been picked up by the locals. They had stammered in poorly-worded Wan language, cheering him up, and they had sung for him.

The Shu were warm-hearted and hospitable. They sang when they were happy and when they were sad. As long as they weren’t dead, they would do all they could to be cheerful.

Yes. When he had traveled all over in his youth, Southern Shu had been his favorite place.

Xi Ping stared blankly at the bowl. His eyes regained focus.

Suddenly, he sensed something and raised his head. He saw the little girl who had run off to find medicine for him standing far away holding a small paper bag. Seeing him surrounded by a crowd of Xiuyi, an expression of frustration appeared on her face.

Then she looked at him and silently went away.

For some reason, that look cut Xi Ping, more painful than having his fingers sliced by the snapping qin strings. His spirit shook, breaking the frail mind calming talisman.

Xi Ping gripped the disciple name token he had put into his clothes.

Just then, Wei Chengxiang's voice came to his ears: "S-senior, can... can you hear me? Do you want to come over and have a look?"

CHAPTER 157 - The Storm Begins (Final)

Wei Chengxiang was woken by the sound of lips smacking.

She had plainly been swept up by spiritual energy and waves and forced down all the way to the bottom of the sea. But when she opened her eyes, she found herself on a grassy field beside a black sheep with horns bigger than its head, which was munching single-mindedly, as if no one were around.

Wei Chengxiang had been bored on the way to the meeting and had seen this animal while flipping through an illustrated handbook of spiritual beasts. This seemed to be one of the auspicious omens of Southern Shu's Three Islands, the sable sheep.

This ethereal auspicious omen didn't eat grass. It only nibbled on flowers. It nibbled all the way to Wei Chengxiang's feet, raised its head, and said to her: "*Baa—*"

Wei Chengxiang: "... "

Why did the "auspicious omen" sound the way soy sauce stewed mutton did when it was alive?

A half-immortal couldn't entirely eschew food, but the Queen Mother of the West and all her subordinates considered themselves to be people of a vanquished nation and viewed the desire for food as a sin. Those who couldn't eschew food all relied on inedia pills to survive. Wei Chengxiang had had to follow their custom after joining. Now, faced with a big, plump sheep, she involuntarily swallowed a mouthful of saliva—the truth was, she was a little gluttonous.

The sable sheep had a docile temperament. It didn't take issue with her. It good-humoredly moved her foot aside with its curved horns,

ate a little cluster of jasmine she had accidentally covered, then gave a floral-scented belch.

Wei Chengxiang heard the flutter of birds' wings. She narrowed her eyes and saw a red-faced, white-feathered scarlet ibis fly by, chasing a rainbow phoenix. A rosy glow spread over the sky like satin.

She found herself at the summit of a mountain.

It was hard to say how big this place was. At any rate, it exceeded the scope that a half-immortal's consciousness could cover. Wei Chengxiang looked far into the distance and saw that there were eight principal mountain peaks here. The mountains surrounded a valley. There was running water in the valley that passed through and then rushed off to somewhere unknown. The gentle mountain ridges were full of medicinal herbs whose names she couldn't come up with. At the feet of the mountains, meanwhile, was a cluster of ancient trees reaching up to the sky. It seemed to be a rainforest.

Looking in the other direction from the mountaintop, you could vaguely see where the sky met the water... which seemed to be a sea.

Was this sea connected to the South Sea?

Supposing it was, then if she had washed up here, shouldn't she have been on the shore? How had she ended up on the mountaintop?

Wei Chengxiang couldn't understand it. She only felt that the spiritual energy in the mountains was astonishingly dense, exceeding the southern mines that had once been part of the Lancang Spiritual Mountains.

“This seems like a set of spiritual mountains.” To guard against her intellect being clouded, she took a mind calming pill from her mustard seed, chewed it, and gave Xi Ping an incoherent account of what had happened. Then she came to what she thought was the only reasonable conclusion: “Could this be the legendary South Sea Hidden Realm?”

Xi Ping’s first reaction was that this was impossible.

If the South Sea Hidden Realm had opened, how could the Lingyun Mountains still exist?

Anyway, there had been so many ascended spirits and shed skins present, all with their eyes fixed on the South Sea Hidden Realm. It was impossible that none of them would have noticed—but presently he found that he could only hear Wei Chengxiang’s voice; he couldn’t sense her location, and he couldn’t send his consciousness there.

“How many principal peaks did you say there are just now?”

“Eight.” Wei Chengxiang cautiously floated up on her sword. Afraid that there would be some unknown dangers here, she didn’t dare to fly too high. She roughly described the form of the terrain and used the setting sun to determine orientation. She added, “It’s very close to the sea to the south.”

Eight big principal peaks, a rainforest at the feet of the mountains, the south end on the sea.. Along with the form of the watercourse in the valley, the more Xi Ping heard, the more he thought she was describing the Lingyun Immortal Mountains.

But when he looked up, he saw only devastation everywhere. There was no “rosy glow” in the sky like she had said—in many places, the fires had yet to be put out. The smoke and flames had formed a choking haze in the air.

Just then, he heard Wei Chengxiang give a cry of alarm.

“What now?”

Wei Chengxiang was always wandering through the Land of Turmoil and various black markets. She was cautious to a fault. Seeing numerous different species, her first reaction wasn't to become enraptured by the beauty but to think “How many kinds of spiritual beasts must there be here?” For a half-immortal, wild spiritual beasts were very dangerous. As Wei Chengxiang carefully observed the surroundings, she reached a hand into her mustard seed, ready to put on something protective.

As soon as her hand reached in, she froze: her completely undamaged mustard seed was half empty!

Wei Chengxiang had been responsible for looking after the arrays on the whale ship. She was the custodian of all the spiritual stones that drove the arrays. This meant that her pauper's mustard seed had for once contained some white spirits and blue jades.

“The white sprits and all the blue jades larger than a fist are gone!”

It wasn't only the white spirits. Many things were missing from the mustard seed.

Xi Ping sometimes helped Lin Chi, who couldn't do accounts, balance his books. He often managed to get hold of some protective immortal tools that low level cultivators could also use. He himself was tough; for him, being broken to bits counted as cultivation. So he casually handed the immortal tools out among his friends and family. Wei Chengxiang had some items that were of established foundation grade and above.

But now they were all gone, including the willow leaf boat that not even that huge dragon had been able to blow off her.

“It’s the elixirs, too. The established foundation pill is gone, along with its bottle. There are only a few open-eyed grade ones left..” Wei Chengxiang turned her mustard seed upside down. “Wait, are established foundation pills an established foundation grade item?”

Concerning what grade established foundation pills belonged to, there was a dispute in the cultivation world. Going by their users, a pill meant for open-eyed half-immortals to take ought to be called “open-eyed grade,” but the materials that needed to be refined for them, as well as the spiritual energy that went into them, were in fact of the established foundation grade—of course, no one apart from medicine cultivators cared about this dispute.

In other words, all things of established foundation grade and above, including “Xi Ping’s consciousness,” couldn’t enter that hidden realm.

Xi Ping, as though afraid she would be in danger, said a few words to Wei Chengxiang and hurried over—in fact, when she was fifteen or sixteen, Wei-laoban had set foot all on her own onto the path of no return to Demon Country. In all these years, she had experienced every kind of situation. There was no need for others to exert so much strength fretting about her. Xi Ping just wanted to run away.

A hundred thousand mountains were weighing down his heart. He urgently needed a seemingly legitimate reason to “rescue” him from the misery of the mortal world, even if it meant running around for the sake of some trifle.

When he rushed back to the South Sea, the spiritual energy and the smell of blood over the sea had both largely dispersed. Xi Ping made a few circles near the entrance to the South Sea Hidden Realm that Wangge Luobao had summoned, even ran the risk of

sending out his consciousness, but came up with nothing—Lingyun's high elder must have inspected everything after putting away the Cauldron of Nine Dragons. If there had been anything unusual, it wouldn't have taken Xi Ping to find it.

He frowned, then suddenly remembered that willow leaf immortal tool of Wei Chengxiang's.

It had been an ascended spirit grade item to begin with and had become even sturdier after Lin Chi had improved and reinforced it. No matter what happened, it would closely protect the person inside it. If the place A-Xiang had gone into had stripped her of everything established foundation grade and above, then that willow leaf boat... or its wreckage ought to have been the last thing to have fallen off her. It had likely been left behind at the entrance.

The willow leaf boat's grade was too high. While a low level cultivator could use it, it would only acknowledge an ascended spirit or above who spilled blood onto it as its master. This willow leaf boat's previous master had been Zhi Xiu, who had given it to Xi Ping after the latter had become an ascended spirit. The boat had a drop of his blood on it.

Xi Ping formed a seeking talisman in his palm and followed the talisman's lead into the sea. He went about a hundred li south before his spiritual sense was finally touched as he sensed that drop of his own blood.

There were no more signs of the battle here. Xi Ping hid his aura and withdrew into a ball of spiritual energy. He sank to the bottom of the sea and found that willow leaf boat.

The boat was stuck in a crack at the bottom of the sea. For several li around were all kinds of familiar immortal tools and elixirs... as well as high grade spiritual stones, which had attracted a large number of deep-sea fish to crowd around them.

Xi Ping waved a hand to collect all the items. He grabbed hold of the willow leaf boat and sent his consciousness down along the hull, but no matter what he couldn't keep probing—this was his first time finding that his consciousness was too “fat.” Even if he pared it down to a thread, he still couldn't get it in.

After he tried several times without success, Xi Ping could only shout in the direction the boat was pointed: “A-Xiang, can you hear me?!”

Inside the hidden realm, the sable sheep was startled by the faint voice coming from outside. It raised its head warily.

Wei Chengxiang quickly straightened up. “Senior, did you shout something just now?”

“I may have found the entrance. Follow the qin music.” Xi Ping tapped lightly on the boat's hull with his fingers, his fingers rapping out the soft sound of the Tai Sui Qin. The qin music had spiritual energy. It could condense into a thread and serve as a guide.

Wei Chengxiang said, “What qin music?”

Xi Ping's fingers stopped.

The two of them went back and forth a few times and quickly found that anything holding Xi Ping's spiritual energy—for example, the music of the Tai Sui Qin, and words sent or amplified by spiritual energy—would be blocked by the crack. Only when he didn't touch a sliver of his essence and simply used his throat to shout could his voice get through.

Xi Ping: “...”

All he could do was wrap himself up in the spiritual energy bubble, take a deep breath, and start shouting toward that crack.

The two cultivators used this primitive method to find each other, with eight out of every ten sentences being nonsense like “Can you still hear me?” and “This way!”, like two desperate mortal miners performing a search and rescue on the scene of a mine collapse.

Xi Ping hadn’t used his throat like this since he’d begun cultivating. He shouted so much his mouth went dry and his head rang. He had scared off all the fish within a few li.

But strangely, he also seemed to have spat out a considerable amount of the gloom caught in his chest.

Finally, he managed to lead Wei Chengxiang to the “entrance” — according to her, it was in a little lake on a mountaintop.

She called it a lake, but in fact it looked to be only one or two mu in area, more like a little pool.

The water was so clear you could see right to the bottom. The water at the deepest part at the heart of the lake only came up to Wei Chengxiang’s chest. The little fish and aquatic plants in the water undulated vibrantly.

A corner of the willow leaf boat was stuck at the heart of the lake. There was a long, narrow crack at the bottom of the lake holding it. Spiritual light flashed at the edges of the gap. There seemed to be three thousand miniature worlds in the crack. Neither human eyes nor consciousnesses could see through them.

Tai Sui’s voice came from the water. He sounded a little distant. “Try and see if you can get out. I’ll meet you at this end.”

Wei Chengxiang did as he said, first attempting to reach her hand out of the gap.

When her hand touched the crack, it was as if it had dissolved within it. Wei Chengxiang instinctively curled her fingers to feel the location of her hand, then felt a cold, slender hand with faint calluses on it take hers.

“I see you,” said Tai Sui. “I’ll pull you out. Tell me right away if anything’s wrong.”

Having said so, he yanked her out.

Wei Chengxiang had hardly ever eaten a solid meal in her life. She’d never put on any weight. She had never expected to experience the sensation of being “too fat” and getting stuck.

She felt as though she had been jammed into an ill-fitting piece of clothing, all her bones and flesh squashed a size smaller. For a moment, she seemed to be pressed flat and stretched out.

Just when she couldn’t take it any more and was about to cry out, she smelled the salt of the sea. Next, a spiritual energy bubble wrapped around her. Wei Chengxiang took a deep breath and felt her flattened body expand once again.

“Tai..”

Then she saw the newcomer clearly—this was a Wan man covered in blood, with an exceptionally ostentatious, one-in-a-million face that could capture the gaze. But there was unspeakable weariness on his brow. It was hard to say whether his mind had ended up behind this face by mistake, or whether the face had covered the wrong mind.

Panting, Wei Chengxiang said, “S-senior, you must have been in a hurry when you shaped your spiritual image mask. It’s a little unnatural.”

Only then did Xi Ping remember that he had forgotten to put on a spiritual image mask. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s a little strange,” Wei Chengxiang said casually. “It feels like it doesn’t especially suit you.”

A face for idly watching the scenery go by on Tai Sui... tsk.

A little caustically, she thought, He looks like a little pretty boy who just got through hooking up with all the married women in Dangu Lane, and then, after cuckolding the nobles one after another, got himself hunted all the way from Great Wan to the South Sea... And the little pretty boy looked a little familiar. Where had she seen him?

This thought only flashed by. Wei Chengxiang didn’t consider it closely: she had seen too many people; everyone with well-proportioned features looked somewhat alike.

But Tai Sui, on hearing her, froze for a long moment, then gave a bitter laugh. “If you don’t like it, then don’t look—stop observing me, have a look at what’s going on with that crack.”

The two of them soon found that mortal objects could easily pass through the crack, while open-eyed grade objects got a little stuck but could be shoved in.

But if you had an established foundation object and above, even just a tiny established foundation pill, you shouldn’t even think of getting it through.

Xi Ping tried widening the gap, but the gap didn’t move a hair.

Unlike Wangge Luobao, he didn't have a Way of the Heart inherited from Ancestor Tianbo. There was nothing an outsider like him could do about this hidden realm being sealed.

Xi Ping reckoned: even if he could snatch Wangge Luobao and bleed him, without the support of the Cauldron of Nine Dragons swallowing and spitting out spiritual energy from the ascended spirit and shed skin battlefield, his mere ascended spirit cultivation would be nowhere near sufficient to open a crack here—that whole crowd of evil cultivators had known that in order to open the South Sea Hidden Realm, you had to at least sacrifice a shed skin here.

“Wait.” Xi Ping considered, then split off a sliver of consciousness and flew back to Law Breaker's space inside Tao County. In a heap of junk, he found a downgraded immortal tool—this thing used as its basis a “camera” from the mortal world that flashed when pressed; after being modified with spiritual stones and a miniature array, it could take very clear pictures, and they developed immediately with no need to wait—only there was a very limited audience for downgraded immortal tools, and the pictures of people it produced were excessively lifelike; everyone thought that it was like getting your soul sucked out—very frightening. So this item had become unmarketable.

A downgraded immortal tool could be stuffed into the crack. In no time at all, Wei Chengxiang, having been pressed flat once again, brought out a stack of clear photographs.

Xi Ping only took one look, and his heart began to beat wildly.

The hidden realm in this crack was identical to the Lingyun Immortal Mountains, as if it was a reflection in a mirror.

Except that there were no signs of human activity, no struggle between the Xiuyi and Miah fouling the atmosphere, no bloody and forbidding divine tool of the mountains, no immortal palaces or

inscriptions and arrays denying entry... It had its own land, its own sun and moon, clear and calm; perhaps this was the original form of the spiritual mountains.

In the calamity the Lingyun Mountains had experienced, close to half of the mountains' spiritual energy had dispersed. Xi Ping now knew where that portion of spiritual energy had gone.

It hadn't dispersed into the universe. It had all been collected in a place where no one who possessed an "essence" and walked a fixed immortal way could enter.

The two of them looked at each other helplessly.

Perhaps because her neck had been squeezed so many times going back and forth, Wei Chengxiang's voice was suddenly a little dry. "Tai Sui, what... what does this mean?"

Before Xi Ping could answer, Zhao Qindan's voice suddenly came through the reincarnation wood.

Her voice was a little low, but her tone wasn't rushed.

"Senior," she said, "I asked you many questions just now, but you did not respond to a single one. I suppose you wanted me to make my own choices."

Zhao Qindan glanced at Li Manlong, consoling his clansmen one by one nearby, and clenched her teeth slightly. "Thank you for advising me, and for taking me to Shu to temper my Way of the Heart— however... I have decided not to establish a foundation."

There was still no answer from the reincarnation wood, but once she said these words, her expression became even more determined. She continued: "When I began to cultivate, I already knew that only with a Way of the Heart could one sustain one's spirit while

establishing a foundation, keep one's consciousness from dispersing; that only when one had refined one's Way of the Heart could one survive amid the divine lightning of the high heavens and allow one's spirit to ascend... Looked at that way, it would seem that a Way of the Heart is a footpath leading to heaven.

“But while I have a Way of the Heart, my Way of the Heart is incompatible with the immortal sects. I could use my Way of the Heart as a ‘Way of the Heart,’ take an established foundation pill. I could go on to fool others and myself, contort that Way of the Heart into the form of the ‘orthodox way,’ and perhaps by dumb luck I might even become a great master. But... senior, it may be that my cultivation is weak and my knowledge is shallow, but I think that this is not how a Way of the Heart is meant to be used.”

At last, Tai Sui answered her, very softly. His voice seemed hoarse. “If you don't establish a foundation, what will you do from now on?”

“Pursue my Way of the Heart,” Zhao Qindan said. “If my lifespan runs out in two hundred years, then I will die at the age of two hundred. If I encounter a disaster tomorrow, then I will die tomorrow. All my life, I will never enter the immortal sects, and I will not be an evil cultivator. Tai Sui, even if this is a wrong road, I still...”

All of a sudden, Tai Sui laughed aloud.

Zhao Qindan wasn't very well acquainted with him. For some reason, every time this Senior Tai Sui spoke to her, he was more brief and to the point than with others and deliberately kept his voice lowered, as if afraid that speaking would waste spiritual stones.

This was her first time hearing him laugh like this. She couldn't help but be astonished.

“You aren’t taking a wrong road. I’m the one on the wrong road,” Tai Sui said, laughing. “A pity there’s no turning back. All I can do is guard the entrance and take the rest of you part of the way. Come —”

CHAPTER 158 - Flower in the Mirror (1)

“My lord.” Bai Ling knocked gently on the door of the south study.

It could be said that Zhou Ying had lived at the Latent Cultivation Temple for several years without “catching” a trace of ethereality. Never mind flying a sword, he wasn’t even willing to take a few extra steps from one year to the next. When it came to things like drawing talismans and making arrays, if he could order someone else to do it, he wouldn’t do it himself. He had no truck with the “three improvements and three abstinences,” preserving intact the fussiness of a Jinping elite, not devoting any excess effort to cultivation. When it was time to sleep at night, he slept. He never relied on a half-immortal’s resilience to stay up all night meditating.

But since returning from the Marquis Manor, he had spent a long time in the south study, without sleep or rest, not permitting even Bai Ling to enter at will.

The shadow cast on the window swayed, as if he had been disturbed.

Bai Ling said, “The Viscount asks why you have put the reincarnation wood amulet away again.”

The rustling of paper and brush came from the study. Then Zhou Ying said, “Come in.”

Inside the room, the smell of ink had yet to disperse and the little weasel hair writing brush on the brush rest had yet to dry, but on the table, only a few sheets of blank paper remained. It was impossible to know now what he had written.

Zhou Ying lowered his sleeves and washed his hands. Without surprise, he said, “Has he accepted it so fast?”

As expected, presenting the Marquis had been more efficacious than anyone talking themselves blue in the face could be.

“Give it to me... *hss.*”

No sooner had his hand touched the reincarnation wood amulet than Zhou Ying’s consciousness was tempestuously swept away by Xi Ping.

“San-ge, come with me.”

“Impudent,” Zhou Ying perfunctorily chided him, tolerantly allowing himself to be dragged through the South Sea, arriving in Xi Ping’s hand.

For some reason, Xi Ping had gone to the bottom of the sea, and he hadn’t put on a spiritual image mask, only used the spiritual energy surrounding him to crudely put together an obfuscation, making the mist inside the bubble hide his face and the bloodstains on his clothes.

Before Zhou Ying could recover from the dizziness of having his consciousness moved, he heard Xi Ping call to someone, “Take this. There’s a precious person inside. Be careful.”

Zhou Ying said, “What the hell...”

... are you up to?

Before he could finish, his vision darkened. Zhou Ying felt as if he had been shoved into a crack. He was squeezed so firmly he couldn’t move. He nearly missed a breath. The next moment, the piece of reincarnation wood he was occupying was taken by a false hand produced by Lin Chi. With a splash, it left the water.

In an instant, he went from the bottom of the sea to the top of a mountain, burrowing into the reflection of the whole world. A view filled with verdure struck his paramount spiritual sense eyes all at once.

Zhou Ying's unfinished rebuke caught in his throat.

Wei Chengxiang didn't know who he was and treated him as she would Lin Chi. She politely said, "Senior, in accordance with Tai Sui's wishes, I am going to take you around. Let me know if you have any requests."

At the same time, Xi Ping's voice had become very distant, as if he were talking through something. He quickly explained the whole sequence of events.

"... There are at least two requirements for opening the hidden realm: first, you need Wangge Luobao, who inherited Tianbo-zhenren's Way of the Heart. He's the only one who can bring out the concealed hidden realm. Then you also need the essence of at least one shed skin to open the hidden realm's seal. The immortal mountains don't have the Way of the Heart Tianbo left behind, and the evil cultivators don't have a shed skin—Xuanwu doesn't count. These two sides just fought a battle to the death. They probably won't be in a hurry to hold their noses and get into cahoots."

As he spoke, a crowd of excited Turmoilers hopped and skipped over. In their hands were all kinds of simple weapons. They called in high and low whistles that only they themselves could understand. Each one of them was smiling as if their face had been punched in, a frightening sight if they had jumped out in the middle of the night.

The Turmoilers, behaving like wild monkeys, saw Wei Chengxiang from a distance and finally remembered their manners. Pushing and shoving each other into upright postures, they tidied their clothes and hair and saluted her.

Their bodies were deformed. Even the solemn gesture of cupping their fists and bowing looked like performing monkeys trying to win a reward. But no one ridiculed them here, so they also temporarily forgot that they were ridiculous. They were scrupulously courteous.

In the ancient Southern He language, Wei Chengxiang said, “There are many unknown spiritual beasts here. Everyone be careful and stay with Sir Zhao. Do your best not to get separated, and don’t go far from the sable sheep area.”

A Turmoiler spoke laboriously, stammering a response: “Thank you... Wei-laoban. This... is much better than the spir-spiritual beast farm.”

“They really like it here, I’ve never seen them so happy,” Wei Chengxiang said. “After Southern He was vanquished, the spiritual energy stayed in the southern mines like a corpse, the veins of the earth ran dry, and the people of He became generation after generation of ‘Turmoilers.’ I don’t know whether these spiritual mountains at the bottom of the sea can ‘heal’ them... but I think they probably can. Even if it doesn’t work for this generation, perhaps their descendants can revert in the future.”

Zhou Ying seemed not to have recovered yet. He was silent for a long time. Then he suddenly said to Wei Chengxiang, “Miss, could I trouble you to take me to a place with a clear view of the sea?”

So Wei Chengxiang took out a battered sword and rose into the air from the mountaintop, flying to a height where the sea at the end of the mountain range could be seen.

“This place is the same as the Lingyun Mountain Range that runs through the western continent. From north to south, it’s longer than Suling Province. My cultivation is low and my manpower limited. I

really haven't had time yet to explore so far, or else I would be able to take you out over the sea to have a look."

"This will do fine, my eyesight is decent." Zhou Ying stared at the distant horizon of the sea. "Do you see the horizon?"

Wei Chengxiang looked in the same direction as him and saw only vast water holding up the bright moon. Where sky and sea met was gorgeous moonlight, a sight to ease the mind.

So she responded loftily, "I see it. I don't know where the end of the sea in this hidden realm is. One day, we'll build a ship and set sail for a distant shore."

"As I thought," Zhou Ying said to himself, "she can't see it."

In his eyes, the horizon in this hidden realm wasn't much like the true horizon. There was a blur where sea and sky met, which extended outward, connecting to a place his vision could not reach—it was identical to the border of the Law Breaker's space in Tao County.

"So there exists... such a place."

"The spiritual mountains certainly don't want the hidden realm to appear. Wangge Luobao can hardly fend for himself right now. He may wish for the South Sea Hidden Realm, but it is out of his reach, and he probably won't appear rashly in the South Sea. The willow leaf boat holding the entrance open contains a drop of my blood. I can make the boat invisible, so apart from me, no outsiders will be able to find that entrance again. Supplies can be brought in and out via the Law Breaker—I'll have Zhao Qindan return to Tao County to communicate with outsiders. A-Xiang's true body will stay here for now, and her consciousness can enter the Law Breaker to receive supplies at any time," Xi Ping said. "They can build their own houses, explore, settle down... If they have the luck, perhaps they

can open their spiritual eyes, but at most they can be half-immortals. It takes a master of at least the established foundation level to make an established foundation pill, and neither the person nor the pill could enter.”

Since time immemorial, spiritual mountains had been forbidden ground for mortals. The immortals had used the spiritual mountains to hold the veins of the earth in the palms of their hands, to rule the land and the people.

So... what would spiritual mountains that belonged to mortals turn into?

“San-ge, you said, ‘With the weight of the old pressing down on them, new things can never rise.’ One must either submit or become a demon.” Xi Ping said with emphasis, “I still don’t believe that.”

A half-immortal was after all a half-immortal. Staring at that mysterious horizon too long was dizzying. Zhou Ying closed his eyes to rest. Somehow, amid the darkness that had cut off his line of sight, he remembered some very trivial events of the past.

Imperial Consort Xi had once again been unable to hold on to her flesh and blood, and he, along with the people around him, had been stained with the snow wine-scented pall of death. He had found an excuse to leave the palace and stay briefly at the Marquis Manor. He had come in search of clarity, but unfortunately, a child had been born at the Marquis Manor. Other children grew up drinking milk, but this one might have been sneaking sips of machine oil while still in his swaddling clothes. It was as if he had a spring in his spine. He never stopped.

The young Zhou Ying could hardly contain his jealousy of that weedlike vitality, and he was vexed. He said mildly and steadily to the nursemaid, who was at her wit’s end, “It’s no matter, leave him

here with me,” and then, once the servant had left, he unhurriedly dragged the gap-toothed child waiting to hear a story into the nightmare of the Impassable Sea along with him.

As expected, the naked malice of the demon host scared the child ashen. Halfway through listening, he burrowed right into his quilt. Zhou Ying’s nose was too sensitive. The stink of milk on the child made him want to throw up. He simply left the quilt to him and recoiled to the bedside himself. He thought, Let’s see you dare to come again.

But this gap-toothed lump hadn’t yet developed the ability to understand people’s expressions. He had no idea that he was being shunned. He only stopped for a moment, then once again wriggled over like a worm and grabbed Zhou Ying’s sleeve.

“Weely? I don’t b’lieve it much.” This lisping “hero” curled up in his arms, mumbling, “Don’t be scared, gege... We’ll hit them! Hit them!”

In the blink of an eye, all his teeth had grown in, and he was so grown-up.

“I used to think that talk of fate was utter nonsense.” Xi Ping’s voice came through the reincarnation wood from the outside world. “Now I believe in it a little... Not that I want to go to the Dignitary of Fate for a divination. It’s just that I think some things might arise at opportune moments. Otherwise, after the Great War of Gods and Demons, why would a crack like this that only mortals can pass through have been left behind?”

“You can’t enter it,” Zhou Ying said slowly.

“Hui Xiangjun couldn’t enter the Law Breaker, either, or hold the Riverward,” Xi Ping said indifferently. “San-ge, do you know what something Miss Zhao said made me think of?”

“Yes?”

“She said that all the people in the cultivation world now don’t pursue Ways of the Heart but use Ways of the Heart as a means to get ahead. They’ve put the cart before the horse.” Xi Ping gave a grim laugh. “Perhaps the young mistress grew up reading too many holy books. Whether she’s betraying them or holding fast to them, she’s still too high-minded. As I see it, it isn’t the cultivators using Ways of the Heart as stepping stones. It’s obviously those so-called ‘Ways of the Heart’ driving the cultivators upward, turning them into furnace slag... and the piles of furnace slag compete to see which can burn the most vigorously.”

Zhou Ying’s voice became even gentler. They couldn’t see each other, but for some reason, Xi Ping thought that he seemed to be smiling. “What makes you think that?”

“The shed skins all seem inhuman, the full moon sages get swallowed whole by the spiritual mountains, and then there’s my shifu.” Xi Ping paused, lowering his voice inadvertently. “My shifu lived alone on Flying Jade Peak, practicing the sword for four shichen without fail during the day, questioning heaven and earth and refining his Way of the Heart at night, not slacking off a single day in over two hundred years—a person like him, when he’s clearly at a critical moment in his seclusion, about to cross a boundary, still keeps splitting off his attention to come hang out with me... I don’t suppose it can be for the sake of carving designs into this piece of rotten wood.”

Zhou Ying sighed softly and made no judgment.

“We can’t yet contend in strength against heaven and earth. The South Sea Hidden Realm is like a gold mine in the hands of a baby. But I’m going to raise that baby—using this as a foundation, they can win themselves a means of survival that no one will be able to repress.”

The demonic god, toying with fate, had forced these evil undying bones onto him. The spiritual mountains had labeled him an evil cultivator without cause.

They had shattered the body he had been born with and banished his consciousness to the slime, where he had been awakened by the mournful cries of the voiceless, then called to turn back and see the shore.⁹⁵

The gods were liberal with their magnanimity. The demons would drag him into their own decay. How careless were heaven and earth in their treatment of people.

Outside the world, Xi Ping grit his teeth, biting off the indignation he had nearly blurted out in front of Zhou Ying. Forcing a smile, he said, “What do you think, san-ge, this is a good place, right? I know Xuanyin Mountain wants to foist a Way of the Heart onto you, compel you to establish a foundation. I know you must have a means of escape. Come on, let them go fuck themselves.”

Zhou Ying didn't answer.

“You don't need to have qualms about me, and you don't need to have qualms about the Marquis Manor. Since the Dignitary of Fate has returned the disciple name token to me, naturally I have to ‘accord with the venerable fellow's wishes’ and return to contend with all the gods and demons in heaven. I'll plug the holes the gods and demons leave in their endless squabble, and you come help me look after this place, all right?”

This time, I'll stay on the outside and look after all your troubles back home, shield you all from the piercing wind and biting frost.

For the rest of it... when you have the time, just take some pictures and send them out through the crack to cheer me up.

“San-ge.” Not hearing Zhou Ying’s response for a long time, Xi Ping became a little apprehensive. “Trust me this once...”

Zhou Ying interrupted him: “While this is a good place, you cannot be overhasty.”

Xi Ping held his breath in spite of himself.

“In the early stage, the fewer people know, the better. It’s best to use Turmoilers to open up land—the Turmoilers have nowhere else to go and won’t want to betray you. When the local force is sufficient to neutralize newcomers, you can slowly move forward. You have the immortal mountains and the evil cultivators to deal with at once. It’s like tightrope-walking over a cliff. Equilibrium must be maintained, internally and externally.”

“San-ge! You’ve agreed!”

“Don’t interrupt,” Zhou Ying said, slightly impatiently. “Remember that no place that has people in it can be paradise. No matter how hot your blood is, first establish rules, then divide up authority. With this hidden realm’s resources, it won’t be a problem to start supporting these people, but there is always a limit to resources. If you support people, you’ll also be supporting greed, gluttony, and stupidity. It isn’t enough for you to treat them as human, the people here must think of themselves as human. Education is just as important as being well fed. The simplest thing is to use something to give them ‘status.’

“When others come in the future, you can let them keep their original customs and writing systems, but this place needs to have its own systematic ‘official language.’ Each community needs to have its own channel for integration. There can be intermarriage and

alliances, and you can also have each group exchange stewards amongst themselves.

“Though the relationship is distant, the Kaiming and Luwu both have communication channels to the spiritual mountains, so none of them are trustworthy. You can continue to have dealings with the Luwu, but you cannot reveal the hidden realm to them. You can think of a way to train your own people to infiltrate the Luwu, but it can’t go the other way...”

Bai Ling was waiting apprehensively at Prince Zhuang Manor in Jinping. Xi Ping had contacted him very hastily, only saying, “I have a way to break san-ge free of Xuanyin Mountain.”

Zhou Ying’s true body was meditating in the south study, and his consciousness had been called away by the Viscount, not returning all night. In the blink of an eye, it was midmorning the next day.

Over and over, Bai Ling had picked up a piece of reincarnation wood, wanting to ask what the situation was, then forcing himself to hold back—concerning the Heavenly Question that had come from the Principal Peak, his lord had strictly prohibited him from exposing it by any means to any person. This cousin young master was truly too astute. He might even work out from a superfluous question that something was wrong... While Bai Ling wished he could tell him everything at once, he was also petrified lest he make a fool of himself by taking matters into his own hands.

The half-demon could only comfort himself: the Viscount said he had a way, so he must have a way. From the time he had been possessed by an evil cultivator while alone and cut off from help in the Latent Cultivation Temple, to the time he had robbed the Impassable Sea’s altar as a mere half-immortal... time after time, when had the situation not been “impossible”? And hadn’t it ultimately all passed with alarm but no harm done?

This time, he was also sure to...

The desk clock in the study spat out a thread of steam. It was precisely noon.

Zhou Ying's eyelashes trembled. His consciousness had returned.

Bai Ling's spine stiffened. He heard Xi Ping say from the reincarnation wood, "It's settled, no problem."

Zhou Ying opened his eyes and calmly said, "Write back to Princess Duanrui for me..."

On Bai Ling's solemn face which rarely wore a smile, seldom-seen happiness appeared—

"...tell her to give me a month to deal with some trifling affairs in the mortal world."

Bai Ling agreed and waited for his instructions for the following arrangements, for how to escape, but he waited for a long moment without hearing Zhou Ying continue.

"My lord?"

Zhou Ying waved a hand. "Once you've responded, go about your own business. Don't keep hovering around me. There's something off about the items confiscated from the Zhaos in Southern Shu. There ought to be far more than that. Tell them to check again."

Bai Ling, watching him, suddenly realized something. The happiness gradually curdled on his face. "My lord, the Viscount said..."

"He has his own direction to go in, though it isn't quite what I expected." Zhou Ying paused. From that selection card up to the

present, the road Xi Ping had walked had always run counter to his own wishful thinking.

“He understands everything he needs to understand, and he’s old enough now...”

Saying so, Zhou Ying took a small box from under the desk and stored it in his mustard seed. “This time I won’t go to the Heyin Building to see him off.”

San-ge was all-powerful. So Xi Ping trustingly sealed away the disciple name token, hiding all alone and “downhearted,” while in reality he was running back and forth between the South Sea and Tao County, hopelessly busy.

He had to get a set of open-eyed grade and downgraded immortal tools as well as firearms to give to the mortals in the hidden realm for self-defense; had to think of a way to make the willow leaf boat holding the crack open invisible and rack his brains to set layer after layer of protection around it; and he had to plan a passageway leading from Tao County to the South Sea Hidden Realm... So many trifles, and not one he could delegate to someone else. He himself often slipped up, but fortunately Tao County was Zhou Ying’s domain, and he could always point out the shortcomings.

The people in the hidden realm were also extremely busy. In one short month, they had met with two dangerous spiritual beast attacks, and there were only two half-immortals to protect them. They had to build their own village and sentry posts in the spiritual mountains, and while protecting their own home turf, they also had to work up their courage and constantly scout the surroundings.

During the day, the people inside and outside the hidden realm were all busy with their own affairs, unable to help each other; at night, apart from those standing the night watch at the sentry posts,

everyone would crowd around the shores of that tiny lake on the mountaintop to talk.

Xi Ping stood watch outside the hidden realm alone, wrapped in a bubble full of spiritual energy. He rarely interjected. The sound of the Tai Sui Qin couldn't enter, so he found an ordinary flute somewhere.

At first, apart from Li Manlong and Wei Chengxiang, everyone—including Zhao Qindan—was reserved, but later they little by little became accustomed to the melodious and distant sound of the flute and began to speak their own wishes under Chief Li's guidance... Each person had to speak. Each person had a wish.

They also discussed rules. Every time they reached a consensus, Chief Li would relate it and turn it into law, having the two half-immortal young women carve it into a huge stone beside the small mountaintop lake.

After a whole month and more, the first small mortal village at last took rudimentary shape inside the South Sea Hidden Realm.

Xi Ping had left several hidden reincarnation wood trees in the array formation at the hidden realm's entrance and arranged that everyone would assemble beside the lake on the fifteenth of every month at zi hour. "Everyone, I have another request. Can you help me build a little compound by the lake?"

All the Turmoilers were descendants of Southern He with its long history of skilled craftsmanship. So Li Manlong said, "What are you saying, Tai Sui? What kind of compound do you want?"

Descriptions were too lifeless, and Xi Ping couldn't draw, but fortunately there were cameras. So he sent photographs of the little compound where old Madam Xi had lived in the Marquis Manor through the crack into the hidden realm.

“Build it according to this,” Xi Ping said. “If you’re short on anything, just tell me. He’s very delicate. Thank you, thank you.”

Bai Ling was an established foundation half-demon; he certainly wouldn’t be able to enter. It was also unrealistic to think of moving Prince Zhuang Manor over in the early stages. Xi Ping had considered it and could only devote some care to it himself.

He sent Zhou Ying a letter and saw Zhao Qindan back to Tao County, the whole time recalling what had been in the room in Grandmother’s compound that san-ge had stayed in when he was little.

As he thought and remembered, he boarded Tao County’s Great Wan-bound Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon.

Once across the national boundary, Xi Ping took off his spiritual image mask. All the inscriptions on the border were disturbed by the presence of an ascended spirit. Faint light invisible to the naked eye spread outward, traveling along the veins of the earth to Jinping, and to Xuanyin Mountain.

Since leaving his country, in a flash, fourteen years had passed.

Snow-white steam surged up to the sky. Xi Ping blended into the crowd and walked into Great Wan’s border post to the accompaniment of rumbling. At once, he saw a stream of Heaven’s Design Pavilion’s blue-clothesers nervously charge into the little border inspection booth.

Xi Ping didn’t stop, only waved the inner sect disciple name token in front of the blue-clothesers and raised a finger to his lips to stop their terror-stricken cries of “shishu.” Then his figure flashed, and he floated away.

“I’ll have to buy the flower seeds in Jinping,” he was thinking. “Will Southern Shu’s climate suit them?”

Zhou Ying was already in the Latent Cultivation Temple. He crumpled the Heavenly Question in his hand that read “The Viscount has returned to the country.” He turned and bowed to the white figure that had at some point appeared behind him. “Your Highness Duanrui, I have kept you waiting.”

CHAPTER 159 - Flower in the Mirror (2)

Nowadays, the Latent Cultivation Temple was divided into two levels. The valley and the lower slopes were left to the provisional disciples who hadn't yet begun to cultivate. Half-immortals who came from the outer sects to advance their cultivation could fly swords, so all their activities took place in the heights. Near the area of the inner sect was a tall mountain with many cave dwellings carved into its face. In imitation of Sanyue, they were separated by small manmade hidden realms so as not to disturb each other.

Zhou Ying was residing at the mountain's summit. When the clouds were thin, he could turn to see the whole valley of the Latent Cultivation Temple, and in front of him, he could overlook all the thirty-six peaks... Only the Qiu courtyard, where he had stayed before, was shielded by the dense forest in the valley. He didn't know which family's scion in this class of disciples had been assigned to it.

Duanrui nodded. Time was eternally stagnant for her. She repeated the question she had asked before: "How does all that you see appear to your eyes?"

This time, Zhou Ying didn't fob her off. He responded frankly, "Your Highness's spiritual light is dim. Your form is occluded by dust. If you do not retire to seclusion to cultivate, you do not have long."

These words amounted to pointing to someone's nose and saying "There is darkness between your brows, your lifespan is nearing its end"; it could be described as the extreme of discourtesy.

But Duanrui was completely indifferent. She calmly said, "You can see my Way of the Heart?"

Zhou Ying, looking at her, said, “And also how the foot has been cut to fit the shoe.”

The corners of Duanrui’s mouth twitched, as if she were smiling. With a wave of her sleeve, she raised a cool breeze that landed in the valley and disturbed the bells of Chengjing Hall.

The glow of the setting sun gilded Chengjing’s Hall’s bamboo forest, submerging the paths many people had walked.

Xi Ping stared blankly at the Lingyang River for a long moment, avoiding several cars that honked at him. He was a little lost—the pleasure boat ferry crossing he had once run past barefoot had been torn down.

Cui Ji still occupied the most luxurious location on the west side of the Lingyang River. Its outer wall had already been revamped several times in pursuit of people’s rapidly changing interests. If not for the small brocade carp mark at the gate, Xi Ping would hardly have recognized it. Despite its best efforts, it still showed inevitable signs of decline. It was quiet and cheerless.

The steam carriages filling the street had no lanterns hanging from them; it was impossible to tell which families they belonged to. Among the faces flashing by ostentatiously, not a single one was familiar to him. There was no knowing how many crops of rich wastrels Jinping had been through.

Finally, he found his way back to Dangui Lane navigating by the Azure Dragon Towers.

The flagstone path had changed into a carriage road, and the appearance of Dangui Lane had also greatly altered. San-ge had said that the Marquis Manor had renovated its courtyard, but for some reason, the outer wall, along with the front and side gates,

hadn't been made over along with it. They looked so old that they stuck out.

Out of nowhere, timidity rose in Xi Ping's heart. He dithered at the gate for a long time, instinctively looking for people he knew; that was when he found that neither Zhou Ying nor Bai Ling had responded to his letter.

He was just thinking something was off when he heard the sound of a door. A man walked outside in the Marquis Manor, around thirty, with a big face, dressed in long robes and wearing a short beard; he had quite a dignified manner. This man was assigning work to a group of servants and pages. The porter was nodding and bowing, constantly repeating "Master Zhang," rather fawning on this person.

He had heard that the old butler Wu Letai had died last year. Xi Ping guessed that this might be the new butler.

It was natural for staff to be replaced, and Xi Ping had no objections to a new butler... but he still felt a little unhappy for no reason.

Perhaps sensing his gaze, the new butler inadvertently glanced in Xi Ping's direction. Only a glance, and at once it was as if he had been struck by lightning.

His small eyes instantly turned round. He stared dumbfounded at Xi Ping for a long time, then stammered out, "... Young master?"

Xi Ping felt that this man's features, pushed into a lump by flesh, were a little familiar, so he smiled at him and thought, Who's this now?

Before he could remember, the round-faced man, casting aside his dignity, took to his heels and scrambled toward him. He tripped over the threshold and nearly fell flat on his face. The porter and the servants quickly came forward to help him up, but the man shook

them off as if in a state of unbearable anxiety. Forgetting himself, he stumbled before Xi Ping and said tearfully, “Young master! Have you come back?”

He fell to his knees with a thud. “I’m Haozhong!”

Xi Ping nearly took half a step back—Haozhong had grown from his namesake bell into a whole set of bells. He had stubbed his toe against the marks left by time on this childhood companion.

Before he could recover, someone went to bring the news to the Marquis Manor. Xi Yue was the first to charge out through the crowd. Then it was the Marquis, and Madam Cui, who could no longer walk very nimbly...

The bottomless mundane world swallowed him up in one gulp.

In the spiritual mountains, Zhou Ying gathered back his consciousness and listened to Princess Duanrui’s voice, still as an ancient well.

“The way of clarity and unfeeling is an ancient inheritance—‘the wisest is unmoved by sentiment, and unmoved by sentiment sees the greatest good.’ Therefore, it has historically been viewed as the ancestor of the three thousand paths of the Great Way, as well as the basis of cultivation. But this way is unusually arduous. Since time immemorial, it has produced no shed skin. My shizun died in the middle ascended spirit stage. At the time, she was teaching scripture to all her disciples as usual. She was merely reading from the text, not saying a single phrase out of the ordinary. But halfway through, a smile suddenly appeared on her face. She closed her eyes and passed away—before me, she was the person to go farthest in the way of clarity.”

She paused briefly. “As for me, you must have seen that the end of my life is near.”

“Yes,” Zhou Ying responded.

Duanrui continued, “Once you enter this way, you will be untouched by emotion, your bonds to the world severed, all love and hate dispelled. Have you thought it through?”

Zhou Ying didn’t answer at once. He turned his head slightly eastward—that was the direction of Jinping.

To avoid disturbing the Azure Dragon Towers, Xi Ping had hidden his aura when entering Jinping, but the activity in Dangui Lane couldn’t be kept down.

Pang Jian landed on a streetlamp at the corner and looked at the brightly lit Marquis Manor from afar. He didn’t bother them rashly. After their parting in Demon Country, the tip of years of filth had been uncovered, then once again hastily covered up at the bottom of the Impassable Sea by the Bell of Tribulation. Zhou Ying had towered into view in the mortal world like the projection of a demon. General Zhi had Flying Jade Peak locked up to this day. And the life of the puny half-immortal who had been involved in it all had become an enigma, something no one in the immortal mountains could breathe a word about.

Walkers in the mortal world were unqualified to rise to heaven or sink into the earth, but he had scented the moisture of an approaching storm.

Pang Jian glanced toward Prince Zhuang Manor and saw that the half-demon paperman Bai Ling had appeared at some point and was also watching the Marquis Manor from afar.

Pang Jian’s lips moved. He sent a message: “I heard...”

Bai Ling raised a finger toward him expressionlessly: *Shh, not now, this is a rare happy reunion.*

Xi Ping was rejoicing that he had no Way of the Heart. In a daze, he understood somewhat why Xuanyin Mountain didn't especially encourage inner sect disciples to establish foundations and become set in a way before their relatives in the mortal world passed away. At a loss, he couldn't resist being weak enough to try anything that might help. He once again called a cry for help to Zhou Ying across the distance.

Zhou Ying didn't hear it. He averted his gaze and nodded to Princess Duanrui. "Yes."

"The tribulation of the Impassable Sea arose because of me and ended with you. I suppose there must be destiny in this." Watching him, Princess Duanrui's spiritual light suddenly dimmed considerably. For an instant, a trace of weariness appeared on her unaging, unchanging sculpture of a countenance.

She was eight hundred years old.

"In this matter, no predecessors have had the natural gifts you possess. The way of clarity has been waiting for you for a long time." She extended a hand to tap Zhou Ying's spirit. "Follow me."

There was a roar in Zhou Ying's ears. The pain of the demon host sucking his marrow in his youth, innumerable sleepless nights in the Guangyun Palace, a ridiculous ballad, the taste of blood, the taste of snow wine, the smell of putrefaction, his grandmother's warm smell of elderliness... Many sharp emotions that had been concealed over the years surged up. His spirit shook violently. For a moment, he couldn't catch his breath.

But he didn't dodge it. He inspected his past bit by bit, hearing the ancient echoes pour into his consciousness.

Anger, enmity, happiness, anticipation... One after another, they stagnated, freezing into ice sculptures that no longer clamored, arrayed in his spirit. Zhou Ying abruptly looked around and saw that a mirror seemed to have appeared in his spirit. The mirror showed him raving, crying, and laughing, in many different states. All of them were cut off by the surface of the mirror. All the things that touched his state of mind were inside the mirror. Then, they disappeared.

His past was clear. He had never been so calm in his life.

Having removed all interference, the suspicions that each person with the misfortune to be born with a paramount spiritual sense spent a lifetime strenuously pursuing settled clearly before his eyes.

Zhou Ying's eyes opened.

Not getting an answer from him three times, Xi Ping at last became alarmed. His restrained consciousness swept through the whole of Jinping without warning, immediately catching Pang Jian and Bai Ling.

Pang Jian gasped—this was an ascended spirit!

Bai Ling turned, ready to leave, but he was nailed in place by a beam of spiritual light.

In the immortal mountains, Princess Duanrui held up an established foundation pill, but she hung back, not giving it to Zhou Ying. "You have seen the way of clarity. What did you see?"

The false courtesy and ingrained cruelty on Zhou Ying's brow were gone. He shook his head toward her. "Your Highness, I cannot say."

First, Duanrui froze. Then she seemed to understand something. The center of her brow abruptly cracked. Wrinkles appeared all over

her face. Her hair turned white. The spiritual energy around her billowed the sleeves of her robes. Lightning flashed outside the window.

But it was only for an instant. Then she once again suppressed all unusual manifestations, offered the established foundation pill to Zhou Ying, and nodded gently. “As I thought.”

Meanwhile, Jinping’s seven Azure Dragon Towers seemed to have been scared out of their wits. Their bells shook wildly. Pang Jian said in horror, “Xi Shiyong, you...”

Before he could finish, a figure crossed the skies like a white rainbow, its arc flying toward the Xuanyin Mountains.

Torrential rain was falling in Jingzhou. The dense clouds were unexpectedly ripped apart by that figure. The people busy dredging the gutters looked up blankly.

The arrays of the Latent Cultivation Temple, one of the sect’s important locations, were torn apart barehanded. The young disciples attending evening class in the Qiankun Tower watched in alarm as Luo-shixiong fell on his rear amid the shaking.

Xi Ping disregarded Xuanyin’s brutal great mountain array and charged right in, narrowly stopping in his tracks before bumping into the protective screen Princess Duanrui had created.

Spiritual light glimmered at the summit of the mountain, a rosy glow like satin—an immortal was establishing a foundation.

Being born with spiritual bones was connected to bloodline. After generation upon generation of selection by the Zhou family, innate spiritual bones had nearly become a family speciality.

But not the paramount spiritual sense.

It seemed to have nothing to do with bloodline. It fell at random among the multitude. It could be an imperial kinsman, or it could be a member of the common people—of the latter, even fewer survived.

A first-class spiritual sense was a gift; a mortal who had it was sure to win when gambling, and with it, cultivation brought twice the results for half the work. But a paramount spiritual sense seemed to be a curse, each person who possessed it having a rougher lot in life than the next; therefore, each had their own insanity... as if there was an obscure power silencing those who would divulge the designs of heaven.

When it came down to it, every survivor who bore this curse wanted this world to answer for it.

This was what Wangge Luobao thought to himself as he watched Zhuoming from afar.

Zhuoming was using a small knife to carve a portrait onto his own body. His handiwork was poor. No one could tell whom he was carving.

When he was finished, he grew a mouth on the bloody portrait and began to hurl insults at himself.

This time the mouth was calling him a “rebellious disciple”; presumably the face he had carved was Xuanwu’s. He spoke nothing but obscenities.

Wangge Luobao looked on, feeling that, no matter what, this didn’t seem like a shed skin sage... It seemed like Zhuoming’s own hatred.

At first, Zhuoming listened to this abuse without responding. He shook all over amid torn skin and gaping flesh. As the portrait of

Xuanwu cursed him more and more heatedly, Zhuoming trembled like a fallen leaf in the autumn wind. At last, he gave a shout and brought down the knife to gouge out the portrait's eyes, as if taking the portrait carved into his own skin for the real Xuanwu. He smeared the portrait until it was a gory mess. Then he lay down in the seawater as if he had exhausted his strength, letting the blood spread.

They were currently on a nameless island in the South Sea.

The South Sea had many small islets like this. They vanished at high tide, then appeared all over when the tide receded.

After failing to open the South Sea Hidden Realm, Wangge Luobao had escaped with a small bunch of surviving Miah cultivators to one such little island... In the depths of the islet was a large stash of spiritual stones and immortal tools.

The Miah cultivators were nursing their wounds. Wangge Luobao slowly walked up beside Zhuoming. Anxiously, he bent down and gently asked, "Do you want an elixir, or do you want me to stay with you for a while? I think you seem very lonely."

Zhuoming lay on the surface of the water, eyes glaring up at the sky. He muttered, "... Save it. Scram."

Wangge Luobao didn't scam. Not at all disdaining him, he sat down and dangled his legs in the bloody seawater.

Zhuoming blinked. "You'd be better off thinking up how to rope in your stray dogs. Your Miah clan leader hid so many of the Zhao family's things. It's not like the Luwu can't count. By this point, they may already have joined forces with the Lingyun Immortal Mountains to put out an arrest warrant for you."

Wangge Luobao sighed. "Fate is against me."

“Why aren’t you out looking for your stupid clansmen?”

“There’s no rush.” Wangge Luobao glanced at the wretched Miah cultivators in the distance. His voice was as low as the sea wind. “The Miah clan elders colluded with outsiders, committed an open betrayal, kept evil cultivators in their pay, damaged the Lingyun Mountains’ veins of the earth, and left countless people destitute and homeless. As one of the evil cultivators in their pay, will I be able to convince the general public among my clan? They’ll also hate me.”

Zhuoming moved one of his eyeballs to the side of his face and looked at Wangge Luobao. “What do you mean?”

“The immortal mountains have suffered such a heavy loss. They won’t let it rest at that. If the Luwu come to see them over the matter of the Zhao family, the immortal mountains will have even more reason to launch an attack against the Miah. If I return when they’ve vented most of their wrath, my clansmen will naturally know who they need to follow to survive.”

Zhuoming gave a sharp laugh. “Ha, you truly are number one in wicked designs among the southern barbarians.”

Wangge Luobao was unmoved. He spread his hand. “As for the Luwu, they’re certain to come to the Lingyun Mountains, because among the items the clan elders hid, I found this.”

CHAPTER 160 - Flower in the Mirror (3)

This was an antiquity, a small, palm-sized bronze mirror, likely the vital weapon of some deceased cultivator. It had faint traces of a Way of the Heart on it. But it was evident that the former owner's cultivation hadn't been high, not exceeding the middle established foundation stage.

What was so interesting about a dead established foundation's scrap relic?

But Zhuoming, floating in the sea like a corpse, slowly sat up straight. His misplaced eyes even returned to their original positions.

A lotus stalk reached out of the seawater like a snake and snatched the bronze mirror. There was a flash of spiritual light, and the mirror reflected a vague map. The surrounding seawater also seemed to have been disturbed. Tiny eddies swirled up in it.

Wangge Luobao said, "We southern barbarians have limited knowledge. What does Sanyue's proper immortal say—is this... the legendary Territory Map of Great Wan?"

"Of course not, do you think an established foundation can shoulder the Territory Map of Great Wan? Not even Zhao Yin had that authority—anyway, the original was destroyed long ago by the Southern Sage." Zhuoming pressed himself up against the bronze mirror. After his fit just now, he was temporarily normal for a while. "It's said that Zhao Yin once fell into the Territory Map and assimilated a part of it into his Way of the Heart. This must have been passed down to his kinsmen through his Way of the Heart."

"Tsk. Other families' inheritances are pearl and jade ware at most, while their family has a Way of the Heart," Wangge Luobao said,

laughing. “Amazing, worthy of a great family of Xuanyin.”

“All those Zhaos made it as one of Xuanyin’s four great families purely thanks to their high birthrate. Each generation of them is worse than the one before. Never mind fumbling around for their own Way of the Heart, it’s rare for them to be accomplished enough to go out and find someone else’s. When those good-for-nothings establish foundations, each one of them has a vestige of their ancestor.”

As he spoke, a small lotus seal appeared on the surface of the bronze mirror. As the seal dispersed, the bronze mirror turned to slag, which was sucked up by a mouth on a lotus stalk.

Zhuoming smacked his lips. “Tsk, a chicken rib—is this the only one you found? Are there more?”

“There are many.”

Wangge Luobao blew a whistle. A number of Miah cultivators carried a big box over in response. Inside, it was piled full of all kinds of immortal tools. There was a rattle as it was put down. The box was overflowing. Quite a few immortal tools fell out.

Each of these items had once been the vital item that a cultivator committed their life to, that had been tied to their thoughts. After death, like their distinguished nameless owners, they were heaped together like junk, tossed around by the “evil cultivators” and “southern barbarians” they had regarded as lower classes of person.

“The legends about the Territory Map sound truly bizarre,” Wangge Luobao said. “The reflection of the spiritual veins... does that make it the reflection of the spiritual mountains? And that reflection wouldn’t be ‘tamed.’ It ran off as soon as it came into the world, and its every

tremor shook the roots of the spiritual mountains, as if that Red-Eyed Yu had latched onto the spiritual mountains' shadow.”

Zhuoming didn't so much as glance up. “What's so strange about that? People have shadows, so why can't spiritual mountains have shadows? The spiritual mountains are far filthier than you imagine—the work of the sages, the shelter of the people, bah! Everything high-sounding is contemptible, the grander the dirtier. Aren't your Shu's Lingyun Mountains and South Sea Hidden Realm more of the same ugliness?”

Wangge Luobao sensed that he was implying something. “Wait, are you saying that the 'Territory Map' the Southern Sage destroyed is probably like the South Sea Hidden Realm? It's also a hidden realm?”

“How would I know? It's some grubby history from thousands of years ago.” Zhuoming leaned against the immortal tools inside the box. “The history books wouldn't record anything disgraceful.”

Having said this, he started picking and choosing, selecting the Ways of the Heart in good condition and “eating” them as if he were munching on melon seeds, even providing commentary as he ate.

“The Zhaos really do have monotonous ways. Apart from a few medicine and toolmaking Ways of the Heart thrown in like props, they've pretty much all followed after Zhao Yin. Inheriting their ancestor's Ways of the Heart without a second thought—it's no wonder the tree fell and the monkeys scattered as soon as Zhao Yin died.”

“This one is different... Bah, this one died by losing their mind.”

“And this one, too... Hss, is there some flaw in their family's bloodline? They can only choose among a few Ways of the Heart, and if they choose a different one, they lose their minds?”

“I advise you not to taste the ones who didn’t follow the path of their clan.” Wangge Luobao leaned languorously against the box. “That sort, unless their family background is perfect, and they’re talented themselves, they’re certain to be pushed out to the fringes of their clan. What worthwhile resources can they have?”

As Zhuoming sucked up the Ways of the Heart in the relics, he freed up an eye for him. “Are you being reasonable again?”

Wangge Luobao said, smiling, “Since time immemorial, groups of people with a great deal of curiosity and a love for new things have been like scattered sand, prone to internal conflict. A big clan like the Zhaos, with thousands of years of history, its branches scattered through every part of the country but still maintaining its identity, must be extremely close-knit and isolationist, with the ones holding power in the clan already old hidebound walking corpses. Old walking corpses only like young walking corpses. Those who are daring enough to rebel must all carefully weigh their opponents.”

Zhuoming, sneering, said, “Wow, there speaks the experience of steering southern barbarians.”

“That’s right. That’s why my Miah clan won’t allow those steam-belching iron monsters and factories to establish a presence in the Three Islands, and, apart from weapons of self-defense, won’t permit those iron tools to destroy the rules of my clan’s ancestors.” Getting to his feet, Wangge Luobao said, “There is hidden intent behind Moon Plated Gold. The Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon upsets the environment. The Xiuyi kiss the asses of the Chu and the Wan, parroting their ideas, and the rich and powerful congratulate themselves on having friends in Great Wan’s Jinping. They forget their own origins... they simply ought to be killed. Listen to this.”

At this point, Wangge Luobao suddenly raised his voice. In the melancholy ancient Miah language, he began to sing a mourning

song.

It wasn't only the Xiuyi who loved to sing. Among the Miah, it was even more common for people to have good voices, and they rarely sang alone. They were particular about joining in when you heard singing. Even if a courting couple were singing a love song, if a passerby heard, they still had to help out with a few notes of backup.

When the Miah cultivators on the island heard his voice, no matter what they were doing, they all stopped.

Hoist my brother's bones, return the beautiful pearls...

As more and more voices joined in, the atmosphere changed little by little.

The originally lingering and sorrowful mourning song began to turn ferocious. When the Miah cultivators sang accented syllables, they pounded the ground heavily with their hands or feet.

Pearl, please do not weep.

Boom—boom—

Weave a pair of gloves, I will raise my brother's knife.

Boom—boom—

It was as if they had all formed a resonance with the song. Little by little, they all turned and faced north—the direction of the western continent.

Even a person who didn't understand a single word of the Miah language would have been able to guess the grief and hatred in the singing from these people's expressions.

Wangge Luobao, leading the song, had easily provoked the Miah cultivators' emotions. He looked down and seemed to inadvertently meet Zhuoming's eye. There wasn't a trace of a spark or any anger in those odd-colored eyes; rather, they held self-satisfied derision, as if he were showing off: You see, it's not that I'm deluding the people with lies; this is the will of the people.

Zhuoming pulled a long face and slowly digested the Way of the Heart of another immortal tool. He thought, I'd heard that the way of beast-taming often turns out assholes, and sure enough, this guy really is bad news.

Suddenly, Zhuoming stopped eating. He sank his consciousness into the thousand hearts and hundred ways of the lotus roots. He found that the "chicken ribs" he had been gobbling up for fun had gradually formed a recognizable picture.

This group of Zhaos came from Southern Wan's Guzhou and Ning'an, and Ning'an wasn't much more than a hundred li from Jinping.

The Territory Map he had put together seemed to be precisely the area of Ning'an and Jinping.

Zhuoming's eyes slowly opened wide. His head turned upside down. The corners of his mouth reached up to his temples.

The word was that... the most luxurious, most yearned-for city of Jinping, which could pull the tide of the whole continent effortlessly, had a Dragon Vein that wasn't very stable.

The den of the Kaiming and the Luwu was also there. For over a decade, because of the Kaiming Department, Great Wan's domestic "evil cultivators" had practically been eliminated. Heaven's Design Pavilion's dog Pang had fixed up the borders until they were like

impregnable fortresses. The other three nations had suffered at the Luwu's hands for a long time, yet they still didn't dare to imitate rich and arrogant Southern Wan in opening their doors to a large quantity of common cultivators.

If they knew there was a means of crossing the borders and going straight for Jinping...

Would the three great spiritual mountains think it was more important to punish the "evil" that hadn't been fully eliminated after all these years, or would they think it was a higher priority to drag down Southern Wan, which refused to play by the rules?

He thought Jinping also had one of the Misty Willow's roots.

"Lao Wang, Lao Wang, stop leading the chorus in mourning." Zhuoming stuck his head out of the sea. "After this event in the South Sea, no matter what prejudices the four great spiritual mountains have, I figure that they'll make an attempt to hold their noses and collaborate, work together to hunt down all us evil cultivators. Rather than wait for that, wouldn't it be better if we struck first?"

Xuanyin Mountain's Latent Cultivation Temple, above the clouds.

By the ninth day Xi Ping stood guard outside the protective screen the princess had left behind, the vertebrae and ribs that had been broken by the great mountain array had healed.

Duanrui's protective screen only blocked interference from the outside world. She hadn't put much strength into it, and it certainly wouldn't have been harder to break through than the great mountain array. With Xi Ping's current cultivation level, he in fact wouldn't have had a hard time breaking it if he'd wanted to.

But when Duanrui had left, she had only given Xi Ping a calm look, as if to say, “You’re just in time.” Without reinforcing that protective screen in any way, she had floated up, returning to the Principal Peak and her own business.

A Way of the Heart was a path of no return. Once a Way of the Heart was complete, it couldn’t be broken; if it broke, the person would be finished.

When an established foundation cultivator’s Way of the Heart was first completed, the boundary would be unstable; they would be at their weakest. Even if Xi Ping was dying to charge in and throw a tantrum like he had when he was little, ask ten thousand “why”s, all he could do now was stand guard and save the princess the trouble.

Xi Ping didn’t move a muscle, as if he had become a rock on the mountaintop. No one knew what he was thinking.

On the evening of the ninth day, the spiritual light and rosy glow on the mountaintop suddenly gathered into a thread pointing to the place where Zhou Ying was in seclusion. Then a faint sound reached Xi Ping on the wind. It was the protective screen Duanrui had left behind breaking. The person inside had left seclusion.

The superimposed light swept over Xi Ping’s eyes. His eyelashes trembled, as if he were waking from a dream.

Then the next moment, without waiting to see Zhou Ying, he turned tail and ran, as if he would run into a ghost if he lingered for a moment.

Only when he was once again intercepted head-on by the great mountain array did Xi Ping in his agitation remember to take the disciple name token out of his mustard seed. He tumbled into Xuanyin Mountain’s inner sect practically in a panic.

The sound of an ascended spirit battering down the “door” had made all the auspicious animals in the Latent Cultivation Temple bristle. Zhou Ying had naturally heard it, but he had been entirely unmoved, as if it had been only an impetuous bird flying past the window.

He opened a pair of entirely new eyes. He beheld the mountains and waters as though he were the universe. Clamorous noises and colors passed through his senses and no longer vexed him.

A stack of letters from the Kaiming Department and the Luwu awaiting his response had accumulated. Zhou Ying paid no attention to them. His eyes fell on the note Duanrui had left behind.

Princess Duanrui had written: *I am incapable of guiding you. You must explore this way yourself.*

Zhou Ying was entirely unsurprised. He shredded the note and took a brocade box from the mustard seed he carried.

Before entering the Latent Cultivation Temple, he had emptied the mustard seed of everything, including the reincarnation wood, giving all of it to Bai Ling for safekeeping. All he had brought with him was this one thing.

The lock on the box was called a “conscience-examining lock.” It was only a common open-eyed grade immortal tool—little different from a mundane “cypher lock” that could only be opened with the matching cypher; it only had a few extra embellishments.

When he touched the lock, a line of text appeared above the box: *The way of clarity’s Way of the Heart is utterly sincere. It does not practice self-deception. A thing either is, or it is not.*

Zhou Ying said, “Yes.”

The old writing above the box disappeared at his answer. The cypher that needed to be matched appeared: *In fact, the way of clarity and unfeeling is not among the so-called “three thousand paths of the Great Way of the spiritual mountains,” yes or no?*

Zhou Ying paused. Then he gently tapped out spiritual energy, erasing all the writing except for the “yes.”

The cypher sank into the immortal tool. There was a click. The conscience-examining lock was gone. The brocade box opened. Inside the box was a thick stack of notes, hundreds upon thousands, all of them with spiritual energy attached.

Zhou Ying didn't riffle through them. Now that his emotions had been sealed, it seemed that even his curiosity had vanished. But one of the notes was swept up by the preserved spiritual energy. As if it had come to life, it jumped out on its own and landed in his hand.

On it was his own handwriting: *Duanrui cannot lead you. You might as well try finding the heart demon seed and using it to refine your Way of the Heart.*

When Zhou Ying had read it, the slip of paper dissolved automatically. He waited patiently for a moment. No second slip of paper flew out of the box. So he calmly closed the little box and put it back into his mustard seed.

When he came to the window, Zhou Ying looked in the direction of Xuanyin's inner sect.

After establishing a foundation, his vexatious spiritual sense had become over a hundred times stronger than before. Had he entered a different way, it would have been difficult for him to maintain

spiritual clarity when he opened his eyes. He supposed that the Heartless Lotus had gone entirely insane then.

But the way of clarity and unfeeling was precisely capable of making all that passed through a person's senses ephemeral as mist, completely changing that excessively acute spiritual sense into a mere tool.

Zhou Ying "saw" at a glance the faint demonic energy spreading through Xuanyin's thirty-six peaks.

The heart demon in the Impassable Sea was dead. Only this seed that Zhou Kun had stolen remained. It had at first been hidden in the Impassable Sea. Then it had been unwittingly brought along by the three high elders, directly leading to the Dignitary of Rites Zhao Yin passing away.

A heart demon was a fairly powerful thing; whether ascended spirit or shed skin, if you picked up a trace of it, even if you wouldn't die, it would still peel off a layer of skin. But at the same time, it was also very "weak." Once a person became alert and noticed it, it was easy for its traces to be exposed. Xuanyin's masters inspected their Ways of the Heart every day; they weren't befuddled mortals. Yet eight years after Zhao Yin's death, they had yet to find that heart demon seed hidden among the Xuanyin Mountains... That didn't make sense.

Zhou Ying pondered objectively and without a trace of judgment: so the heart demon seed that had come up the mountains with the three elders in the first place must have taken root in a place that everyone thought was impossible.

Zhou Ying turned his gaze toward Xuanyin's Principal Peak. His special eyes allowed him to see the Bell of Tribulation concealed above the Principal Peak.

The great immortal tool of the mountains, said to punish all evil it met, was making no sound, but it was quivering every moment, like a fierce beast with drooping eyelids ready to open its mouth and snap its jaws.

Zhou Ying sent a Heavenly Question, asking Princess Duanrui whether he could come cultivate on the Principal Peak for a time.

Just then, another letter from Bai Ling flew in through the window. Zhou Ying waved a hand and pressed it down, tossing it unopened into a corner with the other letters.

He was no longer interested in the mundane trifles of the Kaiming and the Luwu. They only took care of things for the immortal mountains. Since the immortal mountains had given no instructions, he wasn't going to bother to read the letter. It would suffice for Bai Ling to deal with it himself.

On the Lingyang River, a puffing Jinping Day Cruise boat had just set out. The scattered shoals of fish reassembled, mouths opening and closing as they ate the algae at the bottom of the river.

Suddenly, a strange lotus stalk reached out from the sparse aquatic plants at the bottom of the river. Some fish with poor vision were lured over. Blood spread faintly outward.

But the Lingyang River was full of stains left by people and bubbles spat out by steamboats. That trace of blood quickly vanished.

CHAPTER 161 - Flower in the Mirror (4)

The lotus stalk went on to burrow into the waterway, trying to spread into the surroundings. When it had only infected a small portion of the aquatic plants around it, it touched something, and the bronze bells of the Azure Dragon Heart Tower rang in response. A beam of spiritual light flashed, burning away that lotus stalk.

Almost at once, a walker in the mortal world wearing a stealth talisman appeared beside the Lingyang River, reported his location, and sent a message to Heaven's Design Pavilion's head office: "Some filth just disturbed the Heart Tower, I don't know what, a little like a snake... It's been destroyed. But there seems to be a tear in the spiritual vein underwater. Please send someone from the head office to have a look."

"Strange," the walker in the mortal world muttered to his colleague on duty at the head office, carefully avoiding the workers and tourists jostling beside the river, "why have the Azure Dragon Towers been constantly ringing here and there lately, picking out small holes in the spiritual veins? It's as if someone's snooping on the city. Who's biting off more than they can chew thinking they can attack Jinping?"

"Could be plenty of people. The spiritual stones being two or three times cheaper than in other countries alone is enough to make those evil cultivators go red-eyed and run the risk," his colleague responded. "Last month, we collaborated with the Yuzhou Department and caught a bunch of Chu wearing spiritual image masks. Didn't they stop to think who invented the spiritual image masks? Don't worry, there isn't a more peaceful place in the world than Jinping."

While with people coming and going and machinery roaring, minute tears were unavoidable, it would be absolutely impossible for evil

cultivators and foreign spies to make much of these small holes—before, the Dragon Vein had had to wait for the inner sect to send someone to repair it during the year of the Grand Selection. Since the rule that “walkers in the mortal world cannot establish foundations” had disappeared, Great Wan’s Dragon Vein and all the spiritual veins everywhere could be repaired as soon as a flaw was discovered. Jinping’s Dragon Vein had broken, but it had been repaired by the Dignitary of Fate High Elder himself. Unless a shed skin master fell out of the sky, with the whole capital enveloped by the Azure Dragon Towers, not even a single suspicious fly could get in.

“I hope so. Do the Luwu have a grip on it? How come they’ve been acting like they’ve lost their souls ever since Prince Zhuang left...?” The walker in the mortal world lowered his voice to grumble, “I haven’t even been back ‘home’ for a month.” He exchanged greetings with the colleague who had come to inspect the spiritual vein and returned to the Heart Tower.

In the South Sea, a Territory Map rubbing one zhang square was spread out over the surface of the water. Zhuoming had just buried himself entirely in that map, spying on Jinping through the rubbing.

Out of nowhere, the lotus stalks he had left hanging out withered and burned. Wangge Luobao knew that he had once again run into the Azure Dragon Towers, so he gathered spiritual energy in the fingers of one hand, reached into the Territory Map rubbing, and scooped Zhuoming out.

During the Zhao clan’s rebellion, nearly all the elites who held authority over the Territory Map had met their ends inside the country. From those who had gone into exile abroad, it was hard to reassemble the glory of their ancestor. All the immortal tools that the Miah had turned up were established foundation grade. The Way of the Heart of a cultivator who had died as an established foundation

had fewer benefits than a chicken heart, so the Zhaos had used these things like ordinary immortal tools.

In order to put together this small map, Zhuoming had eaten raw the vital immortal tools of sixty-four deceased cultivators. The most distant owner had died over nine hundred years ago, and the most recent had established a foundation only when the Zhao clan had rebelled and left the country. Even for the Heartless Lotus, this was still a rather tall order. By the end, Zhuoming seemed to have started babbling in incoherent Wan language.

With profound melancholy, Wangge Luobao watched the lotus stalks tie themselves into knots underwater, feeling that this unhinged associate's brain had even more screws loose now; he might be about to fall apart. "Are you all right? Take your time, haste makes waste. Why are you always in such a rush?"

Zhuoming and all the mouths covering his body strove to outdo each other in delivering a lengthy harangue in a language that was a cross between Chu and Wan.

It was less comprehensible than an ensemble of frogs after the rain. Wangge Luobao, exasperated, pursed his lips and whistled. The sharp whistle usually used to herd gold-armored zheng pierced the Heartless Lotus's spirit. Zhuoming gave a start, his ears falling into the water from fright. Only after a long moment were they fished out by two dripping lotus stalks.

"Excuse me, Zhuoming-xiong," said Wangge Luobao, "could you use language that an ordinary fool like me can understand?"

"I heard a piece of information." Zhuoming's eyes were fixed dead ahead. He spoke with emphasis. "The Kaiming Department's Zhou Ying. He's entered the way of clarity."

The corner of Wangge Luobao's eye twitched slightly.

The mouths on the heartless lotuses opened, ready to wail along with him.

“Shut up!” Zhuoming berated himself. Lowering his voice, he said, “He still holds power over the Luwu, but the way of clarity is special. A person’s frame of mind will change drastically after entering it. He’s just established a foundation and must avoid trifling matters of the mortal world. A one-of-a-kind opportunity, not to be missed.”

As he neared the end of his words, his voice, like a kettle about to boil, became faster and faster, sharper and sharper. Eerily, he repeated “A one-of-a-kind opportunity, not to be missed” seven or eight times. The heartless lotuses underwater erupted.

Wangge Luobao, hearing the sound of boiling water, was ready. In a flash, he was elsewhere. With a wave of the hand, he created a protective screen for himself and his clansmen behind him, in time to block the tidal wave raised by the heartless lotuses.

The Miah were used to this—they all regarded Zhuoming as a spiritual beast their mighty new clan leader was domesticating.

Watching Zhuoming acting like a sea monster, some Miah cultivators ran over and asked, “Clan leader, did he eat something bad? Why is he having another fit?”

“He just heard that a monster like him got something that he’s failed over and over to get.” Wangge Luobao put a finger to his lips. “He’s crazy with jealousy. Everyone, be careful. Stay away from him.”

But people have different joys and sorrows.

Xi Ping fled in a panic. After escaping from the Latent Cultivation Temple, he headed straight for Flying Jade Peak—he truly had nowhere else to go.

His parents had grown old. He was afraid he wouldn't be able to control his expression and would upset them.

Bai Ling wouldn't be feeling any better than he was. It was better not to see him.

Of his old friends in Jinping, whether mortals or walkers in the mortal world, all of them had drifted away from him. He wasn't in the mood to reminisce about that distant past in the midst of their many speculations.

As for A-Xiang, the young mistress, and Li Queru... All of them called him "Tai Sui."

Flying Jade Peak was sealed. The mountain seal could block even the gaze of a shed skin high elder, but before Xi Ping, it was as if it didn't exist. By the time he came back to himself and remembered that there was such a thing as a "mountain seal," he had already landed wholly unhindered on the slope amid thickly falling snow.

There had been no sign of humans on Flying Jade Peak for over a decade. He put down the first set of footprints.

In that moment, Xi Ping's heart, blown numb by the stiff wind on the mountaintop in the Latent Cultivation Temple, sprang a leak. Nearly all his unreasoning sense of grievance spilled out.

He lowered his head and tightly clenched his teeth. First, he used his consciousness to block the shard of Zhaoting in his spirit off completely. Then, facing the ice and snow at his feet, he manipulated his already frozen features bit by bit, forcing a careless expression onto them.

"Shizun!" With the cold of the snow-capped mountain, Xi Ping fixed that "high-spirited" expression in place. Stepping on his sword, he

rode the biting cold northwest wind. “I’m back!”

The little mustard seed house teacher and disciple had lived in before was still in its original location, buried nearly to the roof in snow. The cottage and yard had vanished long ago, blown somewhere by the north wind.

Xi Ping followed Zhi Xiu’s aura, searching, using all his strength to pretend that his step and his voice were equally light. “With all the forces of evil running wild in the South Sea, the old bastards took a look and finally thought that compared to them, my crimes weren’t so bad as to merit being broken into eight hundred pieces. They gave me back my name token trying to enlist my services... Damn it, they have the final word in everything. While I can’t overpower them, it really makes me mad to see them, so I’ve come to hide out here with you and curse a little, or else I’m afraid I won’t be able to control myself and do something disgraceful on impulse... Hey, I...”

An astral wind coming out of nowhere swept toward him. At first Xi Ping thought it was shifu chiding him for his insolent remarks and only mischievously dodged a direct hit, accepting the blow like he was used to doing. Only when the wind was right in front of him did he realize with a start that something was wrong.

Xi Ping abruptly twisted in midair, the protective spiritual light around him flaring up. There was a crisp sound. The harsh sword energy carried by the wind unexpectedly pierced the hastily raised protective spiritual energy, its remnants breaking his hair crown.

Xi Ping’s hair, loosed from its binding, tumbled down to the backs of his knees, while he himself slanted for several zhang before finally steadying himself in midair—this was wrong; shifu never went all out chiding him.

With a flash, his figure merged with the wind. At the same time, Zhi Xiu’s voice echoed over Flying Jade Peak: “Shiyong, stay away...”

But an ascended spirit's movements were far faster than speech. In an instant, Xi Ping had followed his voice to the other side of the snow-capped mountain.

Before he could understand what was going on, a constriction that blotted out the sky hit him head on. All the hair on the back of Xi Ping's neck stood on end. There was no room for him to resist. Something flung him out of the air and down onto the ground. He fell into snow that went over his waist.

All his senses seemed to be blocked. For a time, Xi Ping couldn't catch his breath. He felt like a carrot that had been wedged into the earth by a shovel.

Just then, the almost mournful whistle of a sword tore through the sky. Xi Ping's whole body lightened. He finally opened his eyes—and was struck dumb.

With the sword platform where Zhi Xiu often spent time refining his sword aura as a focus, for a hundred li around, on the whole slope, all the protruding rocks had been pared flat. The ground was covered in crisscrossing sword cuts, the deepest of them too deep to see the bottom.

The sword aura was awe-inspiring. Had Xi Ping not already been an ascended spirit, just one glance at those cuts might have shattered his spirit.

This was no place for quietly cultivating in seclusion. This was an ancient battlefield, the site of an all-out close combat.

Xi Ping gasped... but before the breath could reach his chest, he was choked by the frosty northwest wind.

The nameless heavenly might that had just “planted” him in the ground descended once again. The blood vessels nearly exploded on his temples.

As for what this heavenly might was, Xi Ping was not yet qualified to “hear.”

It was only that he had never known that the nape of his neck was so soft. No matter what, he couldn’t raise his head. As a so-called “person in the high heavens,” at this moment, each and every one of his joints, every bit of his meridians was firmly pressed down. Never mind bursting out into resistance, he didn’t even have the latitude to take a deep breath and shout.

The sword light once again stabbed through the oppressive sky. The cold wind suddenly pouring in nearly wrung his neck. He coughed.

Zhi Xiu’s voice came amid the echoes of the sword’s whistle. He was a little out of breath, but despite this, his tone still maintained its old mildness. “Why are you still standing there like a fool? Go now, while you can. If you want to curse someone, go curse them yourself on the other side of the mountain... Don’t let me hear you cursing my shifu.”

Xi Ping didn’t move. He turned his face up to the sky. As if his strength were exhausted, he fell backward into the piled snow. “Shifu, where filial piety is concerned, you can be held up as a model disciple.”

“Rebellious disciple,” said Zhi Xiu, “go...”

Before he could finish the last word, a fresh round of heavenly might pressed down on Flying Jade Peak.

Xi Ping’s pupils contracted sharply. This time, lying on his back, he vividly sensed the blatant attitude of brooking no disobedience.

This heavenly might wasn't aimed at him. He only caught the edge of it. Yet Xi Ping could hardly keep himself from starting to tremble. Next, the unruly sword struck the boundless canopy of heaven. The scattering sword energy was tattered by the snow-capped mountain, then brushed past Xi Ping, but he not only didn't dodge, he couldn't even bring himself to blink.

He watched the sword light rise in defiance of the universe's chaos and be annihilated time after time, fearing neither the living nor the dead.

Past midnight, the heavenly might became increasingly violent. Zhi Xiu had no more attention to spare for him. Flurries of snow shot up high. Falling for half the night, they buried Xi Ping, who couldn't move a muscle.

The sound of stone fracturing pierced through the snow, earsplitting.

Xi Ping didn't know how many times he had been knocked unconscious by the shaking. When he awoke, the horrifying heavenly might had temporarily calmed, as if heaven itself had grown weary.

The dense clouds dispersed over deadly silent Flying Jade Peak, revealing stars and a moon that seemed within arm's reach.

Xi Ping's mind was a blank. It was a long time before he remembered where he was. Next, he gave a start of terror. He couldn't sense Zhi Xiu's aura anymore, neither on the snow-capped mountain nor in the shard of Zhaoting in his spirit!

"Shifu!" Xi Ping panicked. He laboriously "plucked" himself from the snow, then scrambled up, trying to fly his sword into the sky.

But no matter what grade it was, no sword would dare to pass through this horrifying sword array. Frantic, Xi Ping simply tossed aside the useless piece of metal and climbed up the mountain on foot. He passed through floating ice and was repeatedly sent flying by the remaining sword energy in the sword cut. By the time he came within a hundred meters of the sword platform, he could hardly move forward.

Xi Ping raised a hand to summon the Tai Sui Qin, planning to force his way through. Before he could strike, his gaze froze.

Friendly moonlight fell on the snow. Among the crisscrossing sword cuts, he had seen a small sapling.

The trunk of the small sapling was snow-white. What ought to have been an upright tree was crooked and bent—it had been broken innumerable times by the wind and snow, even pulled up by the roots. Its root system was spread very far. Only a small portion remained on the surface. There were no leaves or branches, but... it glowed in the moonlight. It was alive.

Xi Ping, holding the Tai Sui Qin, slowly knelt. He held his breath, gazing almost piously at that unthinkable sapling.

After a long while, he tried raising his frozen hands and using the gentlest of melodies to transfer spiritual energy. The music of the qin brushed the dusting of snow off the tree. After a long moment, a new shoot grew on the tree. It unfurled in the moonlight, like a fairytale.

The dim shard of Zhaoting in Xi Ping's spirit at last showed signs of life. An extremely weary voice said, "... Good child, finally there's something other than elopements in your head. As your teacher, I am deeply gratified."

Xi Ping wiped the snow and water off his face. Shards of ice clung to his brows and lashes. His eyes seemed to flash with a peculiar light.

“Shifu,” he said softly, as if afraid to disturb that shoot, “what kind of tree are you growing?”

“Newly born accompanying plants are all ones that did not previously exist in the world. It has no name,” Zhi Xiu said softly, conserving his strength. “What do you think of ‘snow shuffler’?”

Xi Ping: “...”

Zhi Xiu laughed somewhat laboriously. “A cheap name means it will be easy to care for.”

As he laughed, the sapling shook gently. A newly-grown tender leaf fell and flew into Xi Ping’s hand.

The leaf was very thin, diamond-shaped, somewhat resembling a birch leaf. It was too fragile. Xi Ping held it with his frozen fingers spread apart, not daring to touch it carelessly.

“Take it as a wellness talisman. The Dignitary of Fate High Elder has been waiting for you outside Flying Jade Peak for a long time. It is rude to make your elders wait,” Zhi Xiu said softly. “Don’t be afraid.”

“Who’s afraid of him?” Xi Ping scoffed. But his sneer was fleeting. He lowered his head and gazed at that new leaf. He felt desolate. The snow-capped mountain felt even colder to him. “It’s just that I... suddenly remembered what you said to me before I left the mountain back then...”

Shiyong, the Great Way leads to heaven. There are no family and friends on that road.

“What did I say? It’s been years. I’ve forgotten.”

Xi Ping was silent.

Then Zhi Xiu continued, laughing, “It’s not important. I’ve said lots of things. When haven’t you treated my words like the wind blowing past your ears, you fiend?”

Xi Ping was stunned for a long time. For some reason, the gloom that had been stifling him for several days suddenly eased.

Once again, he looked at that tender sapling. “Shifu, I think that... it shouldn’t be like this.”

“What a coincidence,” said Zhi Xiu. “I think so, too.”

So, bearing a thousand tribulations, they would go on fighting with their backs to the wall.

The new leaf burrowed into the Tai Sui Qin, leaving a tiny outline below the qin’s name. Zhi Xiu said, “Go on.”

“Yes, shifu. I have understood the lesson.”

Xi Ping took a final glance at the sword platform, then turned and flew off—after all these years, shizun had yet to impart knowledge successfully, but he had indeed always transmitted wisdom and resolved his doubts.

The rules of heaven said that evil cultivators could not be ascended spirits, yet Qiu Sha had painted the moon red.

The rules of heaven said that there would be no more accompanying plants after the Great War of Gods and Demons, yet that snow-white tree had sprouted in the spiritual mountains.

The rules of heaven said that a Way of the Heart was irreversible, that once you started, you could only walk that one path—did it really have to be that way? Did a person really have to be driven and enslaved by a “way”?

He went faster and faster. In his spirit, from the distant South Sea Hidden Realm, he heard Wei Chengxiang’s voice.

Two ke earlier, Wei Chengxiang had narrowly dodged a fireball belched out by a spiritual beast, then abruptly swooped down on her sword, lancing into the depths of the dense forest. The carnivorous spiritual beast behind her opened its mouth wide. Its fireball instantly raised dense smoke in the rainforest. The fierce beast’s line of sight was momentarily obstructed.

Just then, a big crowd of Turmoilers charged out in the dense forest. Each one held a hand cannon that had been turned into a downgraded immortal tool. Li Manlong gave an order, and the spiritual beast, which had just come in firing range of the hand cannons, was shot as full of holes as a sieve. It came crashing down—Wei Chengxiang rolled lithely on the ground, then bounced up. A talisman came flying to snap the big bird’s neck.

The fierce beast that had been burning the Turmoilers’ domain for the last half month had been killed by them pooling their forces. Wei Chengxiang gulped a deep breath. From midair, she saw those abandoned people hugging each other like a ritual.

Suddenly, one of the Turmoilers went weak at the knees and fell onto her companion. Wei Chengxiang was startled and quickly leapt down from the sky.

“What’s wrong with A-He?” She had spent a long time with the Turmoilers and could tell them all apart. She could easily come up with their names.

The Turmoiler named A-He was surrounded by concerned companions. Li Manlong trotted over to examine her.

After a moment, he slowly raised his head. There seemed to be tears in his exposed eyes.

Wei Chengxiang had never seen him with an expression like this. She was alarmed. “Don’t worry, Chief Li, I’ll contact Dandan, have her find medicine in Tao County...”

Li Manlong interrupted her softly. “Wei-laoban, she’s carrying... our new clansman in her womb.”

Wei Chengxiang’s eyes opened wide.

Everyone’s eyes fell on A-He’s skinny, flat lower abdomen. After a moment of utter silence, someone let out a scream with all their might toward the dense forest.

This cry called back their souls. They began to stamp their feet and howl. Some smiled stupidly, some wept bitterly—in two hundred years, this was the first child among them who would be born with the nourishment of the spiritual mountains. He or she would escape the curse of the Turmoilers, grow up to be an ordinary person... become what the people of He had been in the past.

The weather in Shu changed rapidly. A cloud floated over the sky. The Turmoilers hastily raised big plantain leaves, shielding the pregnant woman from the rain.

Wei Chengxiang raised her head toward the sudden rain and clasped the reincarnation wood hanging from her neck. It seemed as though tears were streaming down her face.

CHAPTER 162 - Flower in the Mirror (5)

Flying Jade Peak had been only one of thirty-six peaks to begin with, but because there was a sword cultivator becoming a shed skin here, it had turned into something of a forbidden territory. From a distance you could sense the harsh mountain seal, more forbidding than either the Sea of Stars or the Discipline Hall.

The Xuanyin Mountains' two great shed skins—Lin Zongyi and Zhang Jue—were both kept well outside.

Lin Zongyi, hands behind his back, faced the fish belly pale dawn at the farthest reaches of the sky. In a rare occurrence, he spoke voluntarily: “Zhi Jingzhai entered the Way due to turbulence in the spiritual mountains. His progress has been quick, previously unheard of. When he has become a shed skin, there will be another upheaval in the cultivation world.”

The blindfolded Zhang Jue responded expressionlessly, “I am the Dignitary of Fate.”

Basically everything Lin Zongyi said was an assertion. When he was through asserting, he wasn't especially concerned with how others reacted. When he was contradicted by the Dignitary of Fate, he didn't dispute it. He was just about to replace his mouth seal.

Suddenly, the two of them simultaneously sensed something. Lin Zongyi looked into the distance and saw a youthful figure covered in frost and snow stroll out of Flying Jade Peak.

His hair crown had gone missing. His hair hung loose down his back. His robe was covered in slashes from a sharp weapon. His gait was unusually lax. While he evidently knew there were people waiting for him, he still wouldn't hurry up.

When he reached the mountain pass, he looked down and saw that one of his thin boots had frozen and cracked—he had come in haste and was still dressed in summer attire—so he simply kicked off both shoes. He had no sword. He stepped barefoot onto a tree branch and flew before two of the world’s current shed skin sages. “Gentlemen, it has been a long time.”

Xuanyin Mountain’s sect rules and general principles—“improve your body, mind, and morals, abstain from luxury, lust, and sloth”—were the first words written on a provisional disciple’s selection card. Never mind encountering a high elder in the inner sect; even if you wore a blue robe in the outer sect, you still had to constantly examine yourself. Who would dare to act with such presumption and wantonness?

Lin Zongyi was the Dignitary of Rule. Restrictions and regulations were his purview. He frowned at once.

The newcomer—Xi Ping—noticed it right away. He met his eyes unflinchingly and gave him a rather provocative smile.

Lin Zongyi’s displeasure deepened.

Zhang Jue waved a hand and said, “Yuan Hui’s temperament was also like this. Their way...”

Xi Ping interrupted him languorously: “*Whose* way? I don’t acknowledge any rotten bones with no one to bury them.”

Lin Zongyi seemed to reach the end of his endurance. He broke his silence: “Xi Ping, impudence!”

Each of the Dignitary of Rule’s words was weighty. These words fell onto Xi Ping, pressing down so hard his face turned white. The branch at his feet cracked.

But he only wavered once, then managed to steady himself.

Xi Ping had been hunted by a full moon sage, and he had just been planted in the snow for a night by heavenly might. He was boiling with ferocity. He directly engaged the shed skin elder in a dispute. With a fake smile, he said, “If Elder Lin truly can’t stand the sight, why doesn’t he do as Elder Zhang does and cover his eyes?”

Lin Zongyi’s sleeves moved on their own. The branch at Xi Ping’s feet turned to dust. He fell out of the air into the ground.

His fall left a hole in the ground, but Xi Ping didn’t seem hard-pressed at all—as long as he wasn’t hard-pressed, it was the other guy who’d be humiliated—he took the opportunity to sprawl out on his back and even crossed one leg over the other. Laughing, he said, “High elders, take care. Last time, thanks to your tender care, I got beaten to a near-ascended spirit. This time, if you beat me into a shed skin, I’ll have to fight back.”

Lin Zongyi’s slanting brows practically stood upright. Zhang Jue swept his sleeve and separated the two of them. “Dignitary of Rule.”

Lin Zongyi’s sleeves billowed out. He stared fixedly at Xi Ping for a long moment, then, without a word, pulled his mouth seal back into place and left with a flick of his sleeves.

Xi Ping watched him leave with slightly malicious ridicule and remembered the rumor in the street about the Dignitary of Rule High Elder—they said that Lin Zongyi was the first among Xuanyin Mountain’s shed skins, with a will like iron and just as impartial, with the Yuntian Palace Discipline Hall in his charge. Because he stood so high, he viewed all living creatures as merely fulfilling their functions, taking no issue with anyone, as steady as a cultivator of the way of clarity.

It was said that this ancestor of the Lin clan was, of all those in the Xuanyin Mountains, the person closest to the “Great Way.”

And now, with a couple of sentences, he had sent this “Great Way” running off in a rage.

Xi Ping slowly got up and, with highly artificial “astonishment,” said to Zhang Jue, “Is the Dignitary of Rule Elder cultivating some kind of ‘great pufferfish art’? How is it that in the decade or so since I last saw him, the venerable old fellow’s temper has grown so much? I do hope he hasn’t encountered some stumbling block.”

How could Jingzhai have turned out a scoundrel like this?

Zhang Jue sighed to himself and said, mildly, “At the bottom of the Impassable Sea, he shattered your consciousness in a momentary slip. Meeting you again in the immortal mountains, it is as though he has come face to face with his own error of judgment. Indeed, this matter touches on his Way of the Heart. Some testiness is inevitable.”

“Oh, so that’s what it is.” Xi Ping rolled up his ragged sleeves, picked up a broken stone, and flew up on it. There was only enough room on the stone for one foot, so he stood on one leg like a rooster. He said, “Here I thought it was because Elder Lin failed to get rid of me back then, and now that he’s had to hold his nose and call me back, it’s put him in a bad mood.”

Zhang Jue had been a shed skin for nearly a thousand years. Whether orthodox or evil, all who met him were struck with fear, filled with respect. This was his first time dealing with someone so completely indifferent. For a time, even he couldn’t avoid feeling a headache.

This was his first time finding that it was rather inconvenient not having Zhao Yin around anymore—the Xuanyin Mountains were

missing their smooth talker.

“Let us go. Come down into the Sea of Stars with me.” Zhang Jue waved a hand at Xi Ping. Seeing that he had no lengthy remarks to deliver, he moderated his tone even further and said, “According to Xuanyin’s rules, after a disciple has become an ascended spirit, he may immediately complete his studies and take his place among the thirty-six peak masters. As you have now...”

Before he could finish, he was interrupted by Xi Ping’s rude laughter.

The Dignitary of Fate instantly shut his mouth.

“You flatter me, you flatter me, I am truly overwhelmed by the favor.” As Xi Ping laughed, he waved his hand over and over. “The thirty-six peak masters...”

Before, when he had been a minor disciple who admired the immortal mountains, they had “eliminated evil” without considering his guilt. Now that he was a renowned shit-stirrer who could even receive an invitation to a meeting of the South Sea’s demon host, they wanted him to take his place among the thirty-six peak masters.

“That really beats anything, haha, no wonder the Dignitary of Rule Elder is as mad as a gourd.”

The Dignitary of Fate: “...”

He ought to put a seal over his mouth like the Dignitary of Rule.

Xi Ping shook the foot that was dangling in midair. “Also, just when did I say that I belonged to the Xuanyin Sect? I’m only a fiend from Flying Jade Peak. It’s up to my shizun to decide whether I’ve completed my studies. There’s no need for your sect to stick its

nose in and meddle! ... Hey, Peak Master Wen! You're on your way out? How have you been?"

Rosy Cloud Peak was next to Flying Jade Peak. Rosy Cloud Peak's Peak Master Wen Fei had just been about to fly out on his sword when, to his surprise, he had seen that the Dignitary of Fate High Elder had left the Sea of Stars. He had hurriedly straightened his clothes and stood at attention. But before he could say hello, he was forced to overhear these heretical remarks.

Wen Fei was dumbfounded. He almost suspected there was something wrong with his ears. He thought, Where did this great monster come from? Damn it, he's so arrogant! Wait, how does he know me? What peak did he say just now?

Once the two of them had gone by, Wen Fei turned into a comet, "plummeting" straight toward Moon Plated Peak.

The summit of Moon Plated Peak was no longer the isolated place it had been before, always closed off and declining visitors. Since Master Lin had left seclusion to make tools, it was as if all of Moon Plated Peak had taken on new life. Now, it wasn't yet daylight, and carts were already racing back and forth over the rails on the slopes.

Moon Plated Peak's carts were driven by arrays. They carried sample products up from the toolmaking disciples at the bottom of the mountain to line up for Lin Chi's inspection. Once he had inspected, if he had any objections, he would write a note and have the cart send the item back.

Wen Fei arrived outside the arrays at the summit of Moon Plated Peak like a streak of smoke. He waved his folding fan wildly, waving several dozen *Master Lins* toward Moon Plated Peak's array in a single breath. Finally, Lin Chi showed himself.

Master Lin had changed to a light grey robe. He waved a hand to open a hole in the array that had intercepted the uninvited guest. “Wen-shixiong, wh...”

Wen Fei landed in front of him, words quickly popping up on his fan: *Was there a complication when you repaired Zhaoting for Zhi Jingzhai? Otherwise, with him always in seclusion and the mountain sealed, where would Flying Jade Peak have picked up such a great monster? Truly evil, I’m telling you, he challenged the Dignitary of Fate High Elder to his face, utterly fearless...*

Lin Chi couldn’t read so quickly. His eyes blurred from hopping around. “Wait, slow down... What complication?”

Wen Fei said, *A great monster with his clothes all in disarray has shown up on Flying Jade Peak! He shook his foot in front of the Dignitary of Fate High Elder!*

Lin Chi went blank for a moment, touched something in his sleeve, then, unperturbed, led his guest inside. “Oh, he’s back—Wen-shixiong, don’t you remember, that’s the direct disciple General Zhi took in.”

Wen Fei chased after him. *Which direct disciple?*

“What do you mean, which?” said Lin Chi. “Doesn’t General Zhi only have one direct disciple? The one who let off those fireworks that brought down the north slope.”

As Flying Jade Peak’s busybody good neighbor, of course Wen Fei had seen Xi Ping, but that had been fourteen years ago. Wen Fei only remembered that that boy was good-looking, sweet-talking, quite a lot of fun... It wasn’t that Peak Master Wen had a bad memory for faces. Put anyone in his place, they wouldn’t have been able to connect the charming boy from back then with the mysterious master who had just flown by on a rock.

The writing on Wen Fei's fan turned into wild, barely legible cursive: *What do you mean "he's back"? Didn't Zhi Jingzhai's little disciple go into seclusion with him when the mountain was sealed? Anyway, that was an ascended spirit! Listen to me, is there such a thing as an ascended spirit under fifty? Tell me the truth, Master Lin, is Jingzhai dying? Did he use some evil art to transfer his whole lifetime's worth of cultivation to his disciple on his deathbed?!*

Lin Chi: "..."

Xuanyin Mountain did not advocate the use of external objects in cultivation; the higher one's cultivation, the fewer opportunities there were to use elixirs; such that some medicine making masters did very little work themselves and spent all their time immersed in bizarre stories from the mortal world.

"Don't joke. A person isn't a sack. Cultivation isn't something that can be transferred," Lin Chi said. "It's a long story..."

Lin Chi had known Xi Ping for many years. Even though he hadn't gone out of his way to ask, from casual conversation, he had still picked up most of Xi Ping's story. So, covering up Hui Xiangjun's part as much as he could, he gave Wen Fei a rough explanation of the whole history. Then he picked up Wen Fei's dropped fan and handed it back to him. "The immortal mountains have acknowledged him, but the way he walks isn't orthodox, after all. Speaking of it openly would unavoidably cause dispute. You're on friendly terms with General Zhi, so let this matter stay with you. Don't tell others."

Wen Fei waved his fan slowly. For a long time, no more words popped up.

Finally, a line of writing haltingly passed over his fan: *You're saying that the one who started all of this...that half-evil cultivator who*

provoked Jingzhai into leaving the mountain, the one who possessed a child...

Lin Chi said, “Was the former nominal general commander of Heaven’s Design Pavilion, named Liang Chen. What a pity, he was once...”

Wen Fei waved a hand to interrupt him: *That’s not the important part —you said just now, there was a dragon in his shadow?*

Lin Chi said, “He didn’t obtain the complete Way of the Heart of the ungovernable way. He attempted to use Jinping’s Dragon Vein to rebuild his body. Therefore, there was a dragon in his shadow. After all, you and I don’t understand crooked techniques like this.”

Wen Fei frowned, shaking his head. *No...the imagery is highly inauspicious. You were in seclusion at the time and don’t know — did you ever hear why a shed skin elder accepted a mortal as his disciple? Zhaoting began as mundane iron — did you ever hear how it became the Sword that Mended the Heavens?*

Lin Chi froze.

Wen Fei said in a rush of writing on his fan: *When Lancang invaded Jinping, I was still an established foundation disciple, part of the main workforce. Many mortals in the Jinping area were impacted by the battle. Either there were changes to their bodies, or their spiritual eyes were forced open. There was a need for a large quantity of open-eyed grade restorative pills. When the Dignitary of Fate High Elder went to repair the spiritual veins, he took me along — that was when I met Zhi Jingzhai. Guarding the borders and suppressing bandits are both drudge work. Naturally the Zhi family didn’t amount to a distinguished line. They had no association whatsoever with Xuanyin’s great families. But Elder Zhang took one look at him and asked whether he wanted to become his direct disciple. After being refused on the grounds of “My father and elder brother have aged,*

the nation is not yet secure,” he said he would leave the position open for him. When he was through with matters in the mortal world, he could enter the sect directly.

Lin Chi thought, What’s so unusual about that?

Master Lin thought everyone was impressive, and as for Zhi Xiu, an ascended spirit after a century and a shed skin at two hundred, able to subdue a disciple like Xi Shiyong, Lin Chi looked up to him as a god. The strange thing would be for a god to be left out in the dust of the mortal world.

Then he saw a line of writing flash across Wen Fei’s fan: For those in the medicine making way like me, it is necessary to be able to see where the focus of a person’s infection lies. Even if we encounter a person whose cultivation is slightly higher than our own, as long as the difference isn’t as big as a major boundary, we’ll still be able to pick something up from looking at them. But back then, I couldn’t see Jingzhai clearly... He was already not entirely human then.

At the bottom of the Sea of Stars, while Xi Ping understood nothing of the star sand swirling all around, his ascended spirit’s spiritual sense kept prodding him.

There was fog of varying density everywhere. While passing through a patch of thick fog, Xi Ping, as though sensing something, couldn’t help himself from extending his consciousness to peer outward, faintly glimpsing the lines drawn by the star sand... The map that flashed there for a moment was familiar.

But when he tried to distinguish it, his consciousness was bounced back by the fog. The center of his brow stung. His spirit wavered.

“Do not look at random.” A strip of gauze fell, covering his eyes, and the Dignitary of Fate High Elder’s voice spoke. “The places where

the fog appears thick and impenetrable to you have karmic connections to your fate. You must not pry into them.”

Xi Ping ignored him. Enduring the pain in his head, he continued considering what he had just glimpsed. Suddenly, in a flash, he remembered: it seemed to be Jinping.

So he asked, “My family is in Jinping, so that means it has a karmic connection to me?”

The Dignitary of Fate was silent for a moment. “Your shifu is also in Jinping.”

Xi Ping was bewildered. He thought, Shizun didn’t go down the mountain once in a hundred and eighty years. Does it count that he ordered a bowl of wontons in a shop in Jinping?

“When Jinping’s Dragon Vein broke, Zhaoting, as mundane iron, held off Lancang’s army. Before I could repair it, the Dragon Vein chose your shifu, entrusting itself to him,” the Dignitary of Fate said slowly. “Or you could think of it as your shifu being the living Dragon Vein. Back then, the Sea of Stars passed judgment, saying that when he had become a shed skin sage, there would be no more need to repair the Dragon Vein. All would be at peace, impregnable to evil. Even if the four nations’ spiritual mountains all collapsed, there would still be nothing that could shake Great Wan... Shiyong, before that happens, we must undergo a period of upheaval.”

Chu’s Sanyue Mountains—

Elder Xiang Ning withdrew his consciousness from a routine inspection of the great mountain array. Brow tightly furrowed, he opened his eyes—the spiritual mountains’ spiritual energy had once again grown scarcer.

After Sect Leader Xiang Rong had “returned” to the spiritual mountains, all of Sanyue’s spiritual energy had at first been unprecedentedly dense, replete. But over the last eight years, with Chu’s political situation unstable and the Xiang family losing power, the spiritual energy had unavoidably scattered outward... until now, when the density of Sanyue’s West Peak was about the same as in Great Wan’s Xuanyin Mountains.

As a shed skin elder, Xiang Ning was well aware that the human world and the immortal mountains reflected each other.

The spiritual mountains determined the nation’s boundaries and terrain, and the mortal world’s order in turn maintained the stability of the spiritual mountains. When an event like one of Southern Shu’s clans defecting occurred, the immortal mountains might even collapse.

In other words, if they couldn’t stabilize the situation with all haste, Sanyue might end up as the next Lingyun.

The Luwu... it was all the Luwu.

Those toilet bulletins that could get in anywhere—starting at the top from the spiritual mountains and going down all the way to the black market, there was no place where they didn’t have their spies. And what made Xiang Ning most uneasy was that the Luwu likely already knew that the sect leader was dead, and they might leak it at any time.

If the hyenas all around knew that the Xiang family’s mainstay was gone...

Just thinking about it, Xiang Ning’s scalp went numb.

Suddenly, his spiritual sense was touched. Xiang Ning waved his sleeve, sending out a beam of spiritual energy. “Who’s there?!”

An invisible spiritual beast had at some point snuck into the Sanyue Mountains. When Xiang Ning took it down, it fell to the ground, twitched twice, then died. It spat out a lotus seed.

The lotus seed rolled on the ground. From it emerged a face to give you nightmares.

Xiang Ning abruptly stood up. “You?”

“Xiang-shishu,” the face on the lotus seed said, slowly adjusting its features, “how about we strike a deal?”

CHAPTER 163 - Flower in the Mirror (6)

A Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon ran from Jinping's Maze Station to Ning'an. It stopped midway at a town called Zheluo.

Since ancient times, the area of Jinping and Ning'an had been prized land, the roads smooth, the natural disasters few, and it hadn't been divided up by big factories like Suling. You could pick up any job and make a living. Naturally Zheluo Town didn't amount to being impoverished, but there was truly nothing special about it.

This wasn't a major transportation thoroughfare, and neither was it a center of trade. It had no famed scenic spots and no prominent families. It was like countless other towns near Jinping, the better part of its adults in the prime of life sucked away by the flourishing capital, making it ordinarily seem somewhat lonely. The Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon stopping here for half a ke actually brought some liveliness to the town.

Short-haul Cloud Soaring Flood Dragons didn't need to restock; no one knew why this train route had a stop here.

Disembarking at Zheluo Town and going approximately ten li south, you would pass a big patch of paddy fields and lotus ponds, then come to a wild lake. The locals called it Crane Crossing Lake. No intellectuals came to write poetry or carve tablets, so it didn't amount to much of a scenic spot.

Fishermen's songs floated among small boats for fishing boats and lotus seed gathering boats as they went home by starlight. There was only one boat with a black sail going against the current of homebound singing, heading toward the heart of the lake. The "person" rowing the boat wore a big bamboo hat, the face under it invisible. The force of each stroke of the paddle was extremely uniform. A wind blew over the surface of the water and raised the

person's hems, revealing interlocking gears under the short jacket... It turned out that this was a puppet of the "straw child" model.

The small boat went all the way to the heart of the lake. There was a small island there, connected to nothing, with wetland and dense forest on it. The birds stopped over here in their migratory flights.

Zhou Xi followed Pang Jian, who was dressed in civilian clothes, off the boat. He held a wooden box. He carefully wrapped his feet in spiritual energy. After taking several turns in the dizzying forest, his field of vision widened onto a beautiful vista.

Zhou Xi's eyes opened wide. He saw "Jinghua Village"⁹⁶ carved onto a stone tablet at the entrance to a village; spiritual light shimmered over the writing.

He took only one glance, and inexplicable comfort welled up in his heart. For a moment, all his cares disappeared. He forgot himself and the world. It was as if he had come to his final resting place. He was intoxicated.

Without looking back, Pang Jian extended a hand and snapped his fingers in front of his face.

Zhou Xi gave a start and came back to his senses. He quickly averted his gaze. "What... what's on that?"

"Nothing at all." Pang Jian sighed. "Only the feelings left behind by the person who established the tablet. It's just that that person is now a 'person in the high heavens,' so while it's only a bit of writing, if those with a wavering will look at it, they will be somewhat influenced."

Zhou Xi heard his implication. His face flushed red.

Pang Jian glanced at him out of the corner of his eye and involuntarily sighed to himself—going by mortal reckoning of age, His Fourth Highness, who was over thirty, had passed the age of maturity. By now he ought to have had a family, built a career, taken on the attitude of a patriarch. But never mind that cultivation had preserved his body in its adolescent form, he had spent all these years in Heaven’s Design Pavilion’s head office on the strength of his family background, playing the role of an attendant who had no need to experience trials, so his intellect had also permanently halted in the wet-behind-the-ears youngster phase. He hadn’t grown up at all after over a decade.. He would have been better off being transferred to a lower level to go get some experience.

Pang Jian said, “Were you in the same class as the Yongning Marquis Manor’s Xi Shiyong?”

“Yes,” Zhou Xi answered, forcing himself to focus, “but then Xi-shixiong went into the inner sect, and I never saw him again. I was young and frivolous then, I didn’t know he was suffering at the hands of an evil cultivator, so I brought about some misunderstandings. Afterward I didn’t have the chance to contact him again... though I hear he came down from the mountain recently. I’ll have to pay a visit if I get the chance.”

You’re better off not visiting, Pang Jian thought. If you visit and find out that you have to call your former classmate “shishu,” I’m afraid you’ll hang yourself out of shame.

He’d only caught a fleeting glance at the Yongning Marquis Manor that day, but Pang Jian knew that his perception had been right. That had been an ascended spirit—and certainly not one of those weak ascended spirits.

Bai Ling was a half-demon, his constitution different from the average person’s. He could cultivate as soon as he was born, and could control inscriptions before he had established a foundation.

After establishing a foundation, it went without saying—during the Zhao family’s mutiny, Pang Jian had had a chance to get acquainted with his eccentric methods. That half-demon was entirely up to going a couple of rounds with an ascended spirit master, but on that day, held down by the consciousness sweeping out from the Marquis Manor, he’d had no room to resist.

But while that consciousness had been potent, it had also been unusually judicious—steady, precise, but not relentless. Unlike those “immortals from the mountain” who could make the Lingyang River rise by taking a couple of steps, he was reserved and concentrated; he had injured no one, and he virtually hadn’t impacted the surroundings.

You could rely on your cultivation level to hack through a mountain, but to carve patterns into tofu with a sword...you had to have been thoroughly tempered in the mortal world.

All these years, while Xi Shiyong had nominally been in seclusion on Flying Jade Peak, what had he actually experienced?

Then there was also Zhou Ying suddenly tossing aside the Kaiming and the Luwu and entering the way of clarity. One came when the other left, as if they were swapping places; was there some connection here?

For some reason, there was a tightness at the center of Pang Jian’s brow, as if his spiritual sense were revealing something... His mood was a little unsteady; he didn’t notice Zhou Xi’s expression behind him.

Pang Jian’s careless question had brought forth many concerns weighing on the young walker in the mortal world’s mind.

Zhou Xi had been born into the imperial family. He had known since he was little that he had the resources of the Zhou and Lin families

behind him, his starting point higher than others' ending points. Therefore, on entering the Latent Cultivation Temple, he had as a matter of course considered himself to be the "chief"... but it had all turned out to be a joke.

He wouldn't compare himself to Xi Shiyong, who had disturbed two great peak masters, brought out the Bell of Tribulation, and brought down half the Latent Cultivation Temple—that was beyond the scope of human capability.

But among the remaining "normal" disciples, he had still been unable to stand out. His ninth younger sister, whom he'd never made direct eye contact with in his life, had smoothly opened her spiritual eyes before the first snow had fallen; she had obtained the qualifications to enter the inner sect's Green Pool Peak in advance.

Zhou Xi would never forget how he had felt when he heard the news in the dining hall early that morning.

Then, before he could digest it, that very day, another one of the female disciples had drawn spiritual energy and opened her spiritual eyes... That had been a nobody from a side branch of the Zhao family. It was said that she had entered the Way even more calmly. It was clear she had been prepared and it was only that, out of respect for Green Pool Peak, she hadn't wanted to steal the thunder of the Zhou family's direct descendant and had tactfully allowed the ninth princess to get a step ahead of her.

At the time, Zhou Xi hadn't even gotten the feel for opening his spiritual eyes. After that, his whole period of cultivating at the Latent Cultivation Temple had become a muddle. In desperation, he had made a mediocre showing; the inner sect no longer had anything to do with him. He had even just barely scraped through Heaven's Design Pavilion's entrance exam. Then, the first day he had put on the blue robes, he had found that the "senior" taking them around to

get to know the trivialities and procedures was the mute half-puppet who had dressed Xi Ping and done his hair.

Even that chronic invalid third older brother who, in his eyes, could only “squabble over mundane power,” had turned around and become the master of the Kaiming Department and simply changed the structure of Great Wan’s... even the whole continent’s cultivation world; he had constantly been spoken of with fear by General Commander Pang for years.

Bewildered by political changes, confused and helpless when it came to cultivation, Zhou Xi had at last discovered that being the “treasured hope of both the Zhou and Lin families” had been only his self-aggrandizing notion. The big clans looked upon their descendants as trash. They had only allowed him to grow up on account of his bloodline; they hadn’t given him any extra attention.

Over a decade later, Zhou Xi had yet to find his place.

Zhou Xi’s footsteps seemed to be trapped in the mud, growing more and more sluggish. He accidentally lost track of Pang Jian.

“Woolgathering?” Pang Jian had turned back to find him. Forcing down his impatience, he said, “There is a labyrinth here left by a powerful senior. It’s easy to get lost. Follow me.”

Zhou Xi quickly restrained his emotions and quickened his steps to catch up.

Where the two of them passed, in a lotus pond in the wetlands, some wild lotus flowers suddenly began to move on their own.

The small island where Jinghua Village was located, if drawn on a map, might at most take up a few mu, but inside, it had been expanded with mustard seeds into a spacious village that could hold over ten thousand people, on the same general principle as the

living quarters in the rear courtyard of Heaven's Design Pavilion's head office in Jinping—only it was more “real” than that stage setting, so lifelike that it was impossible to see anything unnatural about it... or at least, Zhou Xi couldn't see anything unnatural about it.

This was the fake village where Heaven's Design Pavilion's walkers in the mortal world hid their names and played house with mortals.

It was late now, but there were still lights burning on the stage in the village. People were making music.

They were all neighbors. No one amused themselves at another's expense. Anyone who wished to perform could go on stage. Some slightly older women were just enjoying themselves singing old Lingyang River tunes from over a decade ago. Children were riding fashionable bicycles back and forth beneath the stage. An old woman went by driving a horse-drawn cart, now a rarity in the outside world, hauling a cartful of freshly husked rice. When she passed by the stage, she hummed a couple of phrases. As she receded into the distance, so did the melody.

Here, chickens, dogs, cows, and sheep all ran free. The only machinery was for lighting. Everyone wore the reserved style of clothes from previous years, unlike in Jinping now, where there were chemical dyes everywhere, so bright that they stabbed the eyes.

Apart from the children, nearly all those permanently residing in Jinghua Village were married women. Therefore, the surroundings were incredibly clean.

With Heaven's Design Pavilion for backing, they had no need to worry about their livelihoods; they could do whatever they liked. When their husbands weren't on leave, they could happily and harmoniously idle away the time with their sisters. It was a true paradise.

But when the people in “paradise” saw Pang Jian, they were all somewhat nervous. When Pang Jian and Zhou Xi entered, the singing and laughter on stage came to a halt. Countless gazes fell on the two of them. Zhou Xi had never in his life been stared at by so many women. His movements nearly became unnaturally stiff.

The old woman driving the cart pulled it to a stop and waved a hand toward the others. She stepped forward somewhat cautiously to give a salute. Forcing a smile, she said, “You’re here, Lord Pang, and you’ve brought a handsome young fellow with you today, quite unfamiliar. Where is that tight-lipped little Young Master Xi who usually comes with you?”

Both Pang Jian’s tone and his bearing were very subdued. “Xi Yue’s older brother has come home. He has things to do at the manor right now, so he’s taken leave.”

“Good, that’s a happy event.” The old woman nodded repeatedly. “His brother is safe, his mother and father are both living, that’s the good life... What brings you here today?”

Zhou Xi acutely noticed that as soon as this question was spoken, many women looked concerned.

Pang Jian, keeping to himself, said, “I came to deliver my colleague Wang Run’s things...”

No sooner had he spoken than there was a loud noise. One of the women playing accompaniment on stage abruptly got to her feet, accidentally knocking over her qin stand.

She was slightly older, with an oval face and willow leaf brows, still very beautiful, like a delicate flower in full bloom that had met with a sudden rainstorm. First she was frozen for a long moment. Then, as if refusing something, she began to shake her head desperately. The

woman playing the pipa next to her quickly put her instrument aside and came forward to embrace her. The women who had just been singing came back to their senses and huddled around, tightly encircling the woman with the oval face, as if that could keep Pang Jian and Zhou Xi out.

Pang Jian had come to return “last effects” — it wasn’t that this woman’s walker in the mortal world husband had unfortunately died in the line of duty; quite the reverse, he had taken a step forward, received the favor of the inner sect, established a foundation.

After establishing a foundation, your Way of the Heart settled. No matter what the way, associating long-term with a mortal would harm your cultivation... and the mortal couldn’t take it, either. A half-immortal could still have children, but at the established foundation level, if they stayed with a mortal, the mother and child dying together would be getting off easy.

So, as far as the wives and children in Jinghua Village were concerned, a person who established a foundation was “dead.” During the brief life of a mortal, these established foundation cultivators would never set foot in Jinghua Village again.

Afraid of their emotional state being unstable, they often didn’t come in person to say goodbye, so Pang Jian was the “crow delivering bad tidings.”

Pang Jian had originally taken a step toward the stage. Seeing the situation, he tactfully retreated, indicating that Zhou Xi should give the wooden box to the old woman driving the cart. “I won’t go over and make myself offensive. Please pass this on, Auntie Song.”

After some more empty words along the lines of “Contact Heaven’s Design Pavilion at once if anything happens,” Pang Jiang also felt uncomfortable, so he didn’t delay any longer. He called Zhou Xi over and prepared to leave.

Just then, all of a sudden, the encircled woman said sharply, “Wait, Lord Pang!”

Pang Jian paused slightly.

With a sob in her voice, the woman asked, “Did he have anything to say to me... to the two children?”

Pang Jian didn’t respond. He turned and bowed deeply, almost to the ground, startling Zhou Xi so badly that he jumped a step sideways—he’d never seen General Commander Pang humble himself like this, not even in front of inner sect peak masters.

The woman cried, “A mortal’s life only lasts a few brief decades, exalted. Don’t you people have the patience to wait just a few decades?”

Zhou Xi opened his mouth—walkers in the mortal world who could establish foundations were all exceptional talents among their peers. It was no easy matter to refine your spiritual bones in the mortal world. Each one of them was around a century old. If you established a foundation too old, it would impede your cultivation in the future. Even if the walkers in the mortal world could live several more decades without their appearances changing, it would greatly alter their status and future prospects.

With a look, Pang Jian stopped him from justifying. Humbly, he said, “Sister-in-law, I apologize on his behalf.”

His apology was worthless. The woman began to wail, making all the others’ eyes redden. There was faint resentment in their gazes.

Amidst Zhou Xi’s discomfort, Pang Jian faced all that resentment directly, backing up as the two of them left Jinghua Village together.

Zhou Xi couldn't resist saying, "General Commander..."

Pang Jian waved a hand. "Walkers in the mortal world marrying mortals is a violation of sect rules to begin with. As the general commander of Heaven's Design Pavilion, I did not fulfill my duty and turned a blind eye to it. Now there is no way to resolve the situation. I bear the blame for it. Kneeling or kowtowing to them isn't much. In the future, I won't permit anyone else to bring families to Jinghua Village."

Zhou Xi assented and couldn't resist looking back again. Behind them, the words "Jinghua Village" slowly blended into the labyrinth and became invisible. The sound of crying seemed to linger in his ears. Zhou Xi's vision blurred; it was as if a small lotus flower seal had flashed in front of his eyes. He thought that he was too tired, rubbed his eyes, and didn't think anything of it. He followed Pang Jian.

Meanwhile, Wen Fei, gossiping with Lin Chi on Moon Plated Peak, froze.

Wen Fei's eyes were excessively vivacious. It was hard to say whether they were peach blossom eyes or fox eyes. There was usually no sense of propriety about them. Now though, his expression growing grave out of nowhere made a person nervous to see it.

"What's wrong?" said Lin Chi.

Wen Fei removed the sentence he had gotten halfway through from his fan. The fan shut and opened. The wild writing on it had turned into a scene from the mortal world—what it showed was precisely Jinghua Village at the heart of Crane Crossing Lake.

It was the dead of night, the shadows of cranes flickering, the lotuses in the wetlands undulating in time to the ripples. There was

no sign of anything unusual.

Lin Chi saw that he didn't mean to hide it, so he craned his neck to take a look. "This is..."

Wen Fei wrote carelessly: *The place where Heaven's Design Pavilion settles their wives and children. I sealed the entrance to the village... Strange, I thought something had entered just now. I'm a little uneasy.*

Before Lin Chi could work out why Heaven's Design Pavilion would have "wives and children," Wen Fei's consciousness reached out following the Jinghua Village stone tablet he had left behind. The stone tablet at the village entrance glowed with fluorescent light, wrapping the whole small village in mist.

Wen Fei's consciousness scanned the whole village. He didn't find anything out of the ordinary, but he did get an earful of grievances and weeping. As soon as he heard, he knew what had happened. He couldn't bear to watch. He sighed, then hurriedly averted his gaze.

Just after his gaze had left, in a small brook in the village, the center of a lotus flower in full bloom tumbled down.

A child's ball accidentally rolled into the brook. He hopped and skipped down to get it, just in time to see that lotus without a stamen turn and grow a tiny human head where the stamen had been.

The child gazed at that head in astonishment. The person at the heart of the flower smiled and raised a finger toward him. "Shh—"

In the boy's clear eyes, two small lotus seals appeared. With a *plop*, the ball he had just picked up rolled once again into the mire.

“Papa...”

“Papa's knife's in need of honing...”

The child crooned a line in oddly-accented Wan language, climbed out of the brook, and ran into a pile of children who had gone to sleep for the night.

After a moment, like an infection spreading, one child after another began to recite with him.

“Papa's knife's in need of honing, Mama's got the water boiling. Fat white baby's lost his smock, lying laughing on the block. My bones are soft and tender too, my flesh is sweet and good to chew, toss some red peppers in the stew—heehee... heehee...”

At the bottom of the Sea of Stars, the star sand scattered everywhere began to roil.

Xi Ping, blindfolded, frowned. He cocked an ear and said, “What's wrong?”

The Dignitary of Fate's blindfold fell. He saw the scattered star sand begin to gather in one place, forming a whirlwind that came whistling toward the two of them. The Dignitary of Fate and Xi Ping moved aside to make way, one to either side. The whirlwind cut off a lock of Xi Ping's hair.

In Jinping, Zhou Xi said goodbye to Pang Jian as though nothing were the matter, then went to stand his shift at an Azure Dragon Tower. When he turned away, a peculiar smile appeared on his face.

CHAPTER 164 - Flower in the Mirror (7)

A karma beast that had been curled up in the wall napping instantly bristled. Pang Jian said, "Wait."

Zhou Xi turned his head. His twisted features returned to normal. "Hm?"

The karma beast quickly raced from the wall to the floor and warily sniffed at his heels.

Zhou Xi was bewildered. He lifted the hems of his robes to let the sacred beast smell him. "What's wrong, General Commander? Have I picked up a stink?"

Pang Jian scanned Zhou Xi with his consciousness and aimed an evil-expelling, pestilence-avoiding talisman at him, but... nothing happened.

The karma beast didn't sniff anything out, either. It tossed its head in confusion and began to chase its own tail.

"It's nothing." Pang Jian wearily pinched the center of his bow. "I'm a little dizzy. You don't need to stand your shift, you're also tired after today. Find a colleague to swap shifts with."

Zhou Xi was very perplexed. He thought, What's tiring about going on a short trip to Zheluo?

But the general commander had said he was tired, so he couldn't very well boorishly insist on saying "I'm fine, actually," so he agreed and, obeying orders, left.

Before, whenever Pang Jian had gone to Jinghua Village, he had taken Xi Yue. Xi Yue spoke little, but he could always understand the

sighs of others. Unfortunately, Xi Yue had taken leave today, and it wouldn't have been appropriate for Pang Jian to go alone, so he had snatched up Zhou Xi before going. As expected... he would have been better off not taking him. The prince probably couldn't imagine that lowly mortal women could have their own joys and sorrows.

Perhaps because he had taken a different person, Pang Jian kept feeling that something was off. Feeling awkward himself, looking at Zhou Xi also made him feel awkward, and that had made him a little paranoid—when the karma beast had bristled just now, he had thought that a shadow had flitted over Zhou Xi.

Pang Jian focused. If someone really had brought to bear methods undetectable to him, that person would have to be an ascended spirit or better. With the current tightness of Jinping's defenses, the Azure Dragon Towers would have started up a "concert" by now; it wouldn't be so quiet.

Taking a glance at the already calm karma beast, he shook his head to shake off his inexplicable thoughts.

"Tsk." Zhuoming briefly pulled his consciousness out of the Territory Map rubbing. "The Xuanyin Mountains really are the mountains of tortoises. They all live in their iron shells."

"Really," Wangge Luobao echoed, maintaining the posture of meditation. "No wonder they're the originators of this bad precedent of sending spies to foreign nations. You can only seal yourself up like a drum if you know everyone else's leaks inside and out. Shu's Zhaoye City couldn't catch up to them after three centuries of trying."

One of Zhuoming's eyes rolled up to the top of his bald head. "Ditch your little ploys, don't think I don't know you're making fun of how I

talk. If you're in such a hurry to give me your mouth, just come out and say it."

"My Chu is poor, and you're the only proper Chu person around me. It's unavoidable that I would inadvertently imitate you. Of course I'll stop if you're unhappy about it," Wangge Luobao said indifferently, smiling. "Zhuoming-xiong, that soul-sucking lotus seal of yours makes too much of a fuss. You can only borrow a person's senses temporarily. Just now when you tried to seep into that little half-immortal's consciousness, you immediately alerted Jinping's sacred beast. If you really tried to seize his consciousness, I'm afraid the Azure Dragon Towers wouldn't agree to it. What is to be done?"

"I got to use their eyes to find the entrance to the legendary Jinghua Village thanks to that wife-deserting, child-abandoning blue-clotheser, didn't I? That Jinghua Village was built out of nothing by a master using a layered mirror array. A place like that, which tramples all over their 'three improvements and three abstinences,' naturally has to come up with a way to avoid the surveillance of the spiritual mountains. It's a blindspot in the sightline of the Xuanyin Mountains' spiritual veins, perfectly suited for planting lotuses."

As Zhuoming spoke, he extended a hand. His arm grew seven or eight chi long. He broke off a length of lotus stalk from under his own ass and shook it out into the water. From the sticky crack, the images of some young children floated out, disappearing as soon as they came to light—these were the children from Jinghua Village.

When the Heartless Lotus swallowed a person's consciousness, whether they were an established foundation or an ascended spirit, if they had slipped up and let their consciousness be seized by the Heartless Lotus, they would all turn into empty shells, dead as doornails, controlled for a while by lotus stalks before they rotted.

There were thousands upon millions of evil cultivators in the world, but tied together in a bushel, they couldn't outdo one single

Heartless Lotus for evil. This Zhuoming's behavior was excessively deranged. In a rare occurrence, Wangge Luobao frowned. He closed his eyes and didn't watch.

"A child's intellect isn't fully developed, you can't keep them if you absorb them, and there are limits to what their bodies can do. Why would you do something so atrocious and detrimental to yourself..."

Before he could finish, the lotus stalk that had been gamboling around him suddenly sprang toward him like a viper and gave Wangge Luobao a firm slap in the face.

"Are you lecturing me?" said Zhuoming.

A few nearby Miah cultivators happened to catch sight of their clan leader being insulted. They gave angry cries and raised their weapons, ready to charge over and start hacking at lotus stalks.

Zhuoming didn't give a damn whether anyone understood him or not. In the Chu language, he said provocatively, "Come at me. I've put my stamp on your new clan leader. He sold himself into slavery to me long ago. We'll see who he'll be able to protect when I kill you all!"

Wangge Luobao raised a hand, stopping his clansmen from a distance.

He seemed to go deliberately still for a moment. Then his thin eyelids covered his odd-colored eyes. Like a person made of dough who had no temper, with the red mark from the lotus stalk's slap on his face, he spoke an ancient Miah proverb: "*The tamer of beasts lives cheek by jowl with talons and fangs.* It's no matter."

The Miah cultivators continued to glare wrathfully at Zhuoming.

Though Wangge Luobao's tone was light, there was no question about his ascended spirit might. "*Do not meddle where others tame beasts. Go.*"

The Miah were powerless. They made some local rude gestures toward Zhuoming and then were driven off by their new clan leader, muttering oaths.

"You misunderstood me, Zhuoming-xiong. I meant nothing by it. I was only worried about you," Wangge Luobao at last said earnestly. "Since there is an array left behind by a master in Jinghua Village, if you cause too much commotion, it's sure to alert that person. Anyway, even if you can have your own way in Jinghua Village, what's the use? The moment those walking corpses get walked out of the village by the lotus stalks, how will it be any different from you yourself walking around in Southern Wan's main streets? It will also alert Xuanyin. Moreover, while Jinghua Village can avoid Xuanyin's surveillance, you've already taken the lives of mortals. Even if the spiritual veins don't spot it, the Xuanyin Mountains still have the Sea of Stars. Aren't you alerting the enemy..."

Seeing that he was neither alarmed nor angry, Zhuoming felt very bored, so he said, sneering, "Bah, you beast-taming vipers. You'd let a person spit on your face and wait for it to dry. There must be nothing but ice flowing in your veins—who said I wanted to make a bunch of walking corpses leave? I'm not a corpse-puppeteer. Do you think it takes tricks to control mortals, idiot?"

Having said this, like a child eager to show off his talents, he snatched up Wangge Luobao's consciousness, which he had put a lotus stamp on, and plunged into the Territory Map rubbing.

However much one felt another's pain, other people were still other people. The people in Jinghua Village had in the end scattered, and the abandoned woman desolately went home alone.

Her little daughter was still in her swaddling clothes, her son only five years old. She had to endure the remainder of her days.

As soon as the woman came in, she found to her surprise that the lights were on at home. Her little boy hadn't obediently gone to bed, nor had he snuck out to play. Under the dim gas lamp, he was oh-so-quietly sitting beside the soundly sleeping infant, now and then lightly rocking the cradle.

The woman turned around hurriedly and wiped her face. She squeezed out a smile and softly called the boy's nickname: "Fuhu, why haven't you gone to bed yet? Careful not to wake your little sister."

The boy jumped off the bed without a sound and ran over to hug the woman's legs. He turned his face up to look at her. Those big black eyes were like two wells in which corpses had been sunk.

The woman didn't notice anything unusual about the boy. Her nose stung, and she nearly wept. She drew the child into her arms, seeking a trace of consolation from that small body.

A blurred lotus seal flashed on the side of the boy's neck. In that body that had been taken over by an evil cultivator, the original owner's immature consciousness had vanished. The dead spirit contained only two malign evil cultivators.

Zhuoming made a scornful pronouncement: "The enmity of mortals is like oil. It goes up in flames at a single spark. Watch the show. Today I'll slit a hole in the Dragon Vein without anyone the wiser."

He made the boy slowly turn his head and whisper poisonously into her ear, "Mom, when is Papa coming home? I miss him."

The woman's body stiffened. Her arms tightened around him.

The boy's lips turned up at both sides. "Mom, they say I look like Dad."

Wangge Luobao looked on, thinking with admiration, What skill. Even his breathing is hateful.

But contrary to his expectations, the tempest Zhuoming was anticipating didn't develop.

The haggard woman, as if about to collapse, took several deep breaths, then unexpectedly controlled her trembling body. She picked the child up gently. "Your Dad, he's gone very far away to fight demons. We can't let those evil cultivators get in and disturb our Fuhu's sleep."

Wangge Luobao raised his eyebrows in some surprise.

A clean scent came from the woman as she exhaled. With her weak, useless hands, she patted the boy's back. "Our Papa is a big hero. Fuhu has to eat up, sleep well, and in the future..."

Zhuoming's expression turned cold. He interrupted the woman: "He left you."

The woman's already bloodless face paled further. "Fuhu... what are you saying? Has someone been saying things to you?"

Zhuoming outperformed himself in the Wan language. His pronunciation was extremely crisp, nearly surpassing the average level of a Wan child. "He's gone to find his future and tossed you aside."

Come on, vent your powerless anger on your son, you useless good-for-nothing. Your man's gone, so who are you playing the loving mother for?

“You’re an undignified piece of old clothing, and me and that sniveling brat are two wads of used toilet paper...”

The woman’s lips were trembling. Her expression nearly fell several times, but she narrowly managed to hold out. Finally, she only looked into the boy’s wrathful eyes and gently said, “Child, it’s not like that.”

Wangge Luobao sniggered.

His quiet laughter lit an indescribable anger in Zhuoming. “You’re lying...”

“It’s not like that.” The woman gently stroked his hair. The same clean scent came from her sleeve. Maybe the scent she used was a specialty product of Southern Wan. In all the centuries he had lived, Zhuoming had never smelled anything like it.

“You don’t understand grown-up business yet, but whether Papa comes back or not, you and Baozhu are still my treasures.” As she spoke, she smiled, accidentally squeezing traces of tears from the corners of her eyes. “What bad person taught you to talk like that? Little ingrate, Papa loved you so much when he was here, but you don’t trust him, you’d rather believe what bad people say. What’s the sense in that? Your Dad has just left it all to your Mom to love you. Just wait and see, Mom is much stronger than him...”

Wangge Luobao laughed aloud. “Zhuoming-xiong, you really are lucky. How did you pick out such a good mother at random?”

Zhuoming was simply beside himself with rage.

The boy’s small body erupted into inhuman strength. He broke free of the adult’s arms. A lotus seal emerged on his forehead. He opened his mouth and spat out fog.

“Hey,” said Wangge Luobao, dying to make trouble, “you said you weren’t going to use any tricks. Why are you using illusions on a mortal...?”

Zhuoming flung out a hand and sent him away. He began to torment the mortal’s untempered mind with all-consuming illusions.

“No more nonsense, listen to me, we’ll leave here quietly, go give those blue-clothed dogs and Jinping bighats something to look at. Mom, be good—”

The Heartless Lotus’s tricks could make an established foundation long for death, but when half the night had passed, this mortal, whom he could have poked dead with one finger, still wouldn’t do as he wished. With her life and her dignity, she kept her rage and resentment contained, unwilling to reveal a sliver of it in front of her child.

At last, amid Zhuoming’s howl of “Why won’t you listen?”, the mortal’s mind completely collapsed.

But while the light of her spirit had been extinguished and saliva was leaking uncontrollably from the corners of her mouth, she didn’t stop whispering the nicknames of her two children.

“Fuhu... don’t be scared... Baozhu... don’t cry... don’t cry...”

The lotus stalks controlling the boy broke through the body’s forehead. Zhuoming had nearly lost his mind from anger.

Her consciousness was dead. He had failed!

The mighty Heartless Lotus had wasted half the night, unable to delude a mortal!

Zhuoming had never thought that his first attempt would fail so miserably, nor that the “gutter” he overturned his boat in would be so small.

He grabbed the hair of the boy he was possessing and desperately pulled down. The infant in the cradle, after being forced to share a room with demons, was crying so hard she was nearly blue in the face.

Why did a woman like this exist?

Why did these gap-toothed brats with no redeeming qualities deserve to be protected like this?

Why... why...

“To hell with it!”

Wangge Luobao’s voice entered his consciousness from far away. “There’s no more time, Zhuoming-xiong. Give it up, leave at once. The people you’ve killed tonight will alert the Sea of Stars. Those two walkers in the mortal world have your lotus seals on them. They can’t sense it themselves, but a master will understand at a glance. It’ll be a matter of moments for them to find Jinghua Village then. I think we ought to take it a little at a time. Well, it’s too bad. We’ve spent so long plotting, but we’ve still alerted the enemy in advance.”

This Miah degenerate really knew how to start a fire. Zhuoming had already been on the edge of losing control and flying into a rage. The provocative words turned him into a Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon, all the apertures of his face insufficient to spurt out the steam!

In the room, the infant’s crying came to an abrupt halt. A clump of reckless “fog” exploded from the small house. An ascended spirit

grade illusion instantly covered the whole of Jinghua Village, reached into every person's dreams.

Now completely unreasoning, heedless of the consequences, Zhuoming clean forgot all previous plans like "infiltrate in secret, no one the wiser."

The spiritual energy bursting out in the village instantly disturbed the village's array. In the Xuanyin Mountains, Wen Fei, who had already averted his gaze, instantly woke with a start from meditation. Who was that!

And meanwhile, in Jinping City, Pang Jian kept feeling a little dizzy. On returning to his residence at the general office, he sat quietly to examine himself and settle his mind. He felt faintly that he had picked something up on his eyes, ears, nose, and tongue, but it was vague, hard to see clearly with his level of cultivation...

Suddenly, a Heavenly Question from the inner sect flew in. Disturbed, Pang Jian's mind wavered.

The faint traces that had only been lightly stuck to his senses came to "life," seizing the opportunity to start burrowing into his consciousness. Seven or eight karma beasts scrambled over to surround him. The bronze bells on the eaves clamored.

Crap!

By the time Pang Jian realized something was wrong, it was already too late.

The faint traces turned into lotus seals, firmly biting down on his consciousness. His spirit ached sharply. Just then, someone kicked open the layer upon layer of arrays on this critical location of Heaven's Design Pavilion, charged right in, and landed in front of

Pang Jian. Two ice-cold fingers touched the center of Pang Jian's brow.

There was a buzz in Pang Jian's head. A blizzard seemed to blow through his spirit, chilling him to the marrow. The sinister lotus seals were shattered to bits.

He heard someone curse under his breath in a familiar voice: "That relentless bald donkey *again?*"

Pang Jian abruptly opened his eyes. A face not one whit different from fourteen years ago struck them. But while he opened his mouth, he didn't dare to recognize him at first.

The newcomer was Xi Ping, who had returned through the night from the Xuanyin Mountains. There was no time to exchange pleasantries. He rudely yanked over the Heavenly Question and tore it open. "That medicine-making mute? What's his connection to Jinghua Village...? So is that where you were just now?"

Trespassing into Heaven's Design Pavilion, starting right off with an impertinent remark, hair down and not wearing shoes..."medicine-making mute"...

Pang Jian was poleaxed by the aura of evil cultivator coming off him. For a time, he didn't know whether the bronze bells outside were ringing because of the lotus seals or to "welcome" this personage.

"Yes, what about Jinghua Village..."

Before Pang Jian could finish his sentence, messages from his colleagues suddenly surged in like an explosion.

"General Commander, has something happened in Jinghua Village? Why did my wife just leave without authorization?"

“My wife, too, I can’t sense the protective talisman I placed on her...”

“Wait, I sense her now, why would she suddenly be in Jinping!”

Day was just about to break in Jinping. A woman from Jinghua Village, riding a talisman, landed in a Jinping street. There just happened to be an unobtrusive break in the spiritual vein there.

She looked vacantly around her for a moment. In her blank, staring eyes, bitter rancor appeared bit by bit. She picked something out of her hand and flung it fiercely at the vein of the earth—it was a lotus seed.

Jinping’s defenses were instantly activated. Dazzling light fell from an Azure Dragon Tower. Just then, a sapphire-blue figure flashed by as if flying, protecting the woman, using his back to block the light coming from the Azure Dragon Tower. The mortal and half-immortal were simultaneously obliterated amid the dazzling light.

The lotus seed the woman had dropped seized that opportunity to fall into the spiritual vein, put down roots and sprout, spreading outward.

At the same time, the same thing was happening in several places throughout Jinping. The Dragon Vein began to tremble, warping the tracks where public trams ran. Underground, the sewage drains ruptured. A foul stink floated up—

There was a *twang* as the sound of a qin reverberated in the air above Jinping.

A figure landed on the Azure Dragon Horn Tower in Dangui Lane. Wrapped in the music of the qin was sword energy received from

Zhaoting. It instantly settled the uneasy Dragon Vein and took aim right at the mutinous lotuses.

The clamoring bells on the eaves abruptly stopped.

Pang Jian was startled. He hadn't yet had time to give Xi Ping the Dragon Vein map, yet the latter seemed to know it like the back of his hand...

Was this Xi Shiyong? For a moment, he was dazed, unable to match his memories to the person he saw.

Never mind the Dragon Vein underground, Xi Ping might not even have been able to find his way around if he'd been standing in Jinping's main thoroughfare. But the instant the Dragon Vein had started to heave, the shard of Zhaoting in his spirit had immediately responded. Instantly, the whole shape of the Dragon Vein and the broken areas were projected within his spirit.

The Tai Sui Qin didn't stop, but a heavy shadow flitted over Xi Ping's heart. While he didn't completely buy what the Dignitary of Fate had said, it was evident that his shifu's vital sword did indeed have a profound connection to the Dragon Vein.

There were ten thousand questions in his mind that he couldn't untangle, and there was no longer a person at the other end of the reincarnation wood who had listened to the talk of all the demons and could dispel his doubts.

Now Xi Ping had only his intuition as an ascended spirit, and he had a very bad feeling about this... How could the fate of a whole nation depend on a single person? Wouldn't he be crushed by that weight?

But there was no time now for all of that.

The seven Azure Dragon Towers were brightly lit. Heaven's Design Pavilion and the Kaiming Department had been fully deployed.

Wangge Luobao watched Zhuoming in front of him, his consciousness sunk into the Territory Map as cut after cut from a sharp weapon appeared on him. He couldn't resist a laugh.

Though he was only too eager for the lunatic Heartless Lotus to get chopped to pieces by his old acquaintance, he still resolved to put the big picture first—

Wangge Luobao grabbed a lotus seed next to him and said to the person at the other end of that lotus seed, "Elder Xiang, if you hesitate any longer, you'll lose your chance."

If the four great spiritual mountains didn't fall out now, the road to heaven that he and the other ascended spirit evil cultivators had torn open for themselves would be under threat once more.

CHAPTER 165 - Flower in the Mirror (8)

On Sanyue's West Peak, an incense seal used to promote concentration flickered constantly in the faint breeze. In the bowl of writing brush water on the desk in front of High Elder Xiang Ning floated a lotus without a stamen.

On the snow-white petals, the Territory Map rubbing of the Jinping and Ning'an area appeared intermittently, fused with the veins inside the petals, constantly urging him to choose.

Eight years ago, Sect Leader Xiang Rong, the closest person in the world to a full moon position, had "disappeared." The Sanyue Mountains' backbone had collapsed without warning, and Southern Wan had seized the opportunity to rise. The new version of Moon Plated Gold had come into the world, Jinping's political reforms had shown their first results, the Kaiming and Luwu had become firmly entrenched... A whole succession of acts that had shaken the world. Jinping seemed to have become a Resurrection Vortex on dry land, rampantly sucking in the vigor of the whole continent.

Large sums of money flowed steadily to converge upon the coast of the East Sea. The prices of spiritual stones were twenty to thirty percent lower than in the surrounding countries. With the support of plentiful spiritual stone supplies, the Kaiming and Luwu became all the more powerful. The Kaiming Department took part in manufacturing, the Luwu scurried through every nation's black market, turning around and instead making money for Southern Wan.

And despite this, for Chu, which had previously mocked the institutions of the Kaiming and the Luwu, it was already too late to follow that example: after the Kaiming Department had been established, large numbers of "common cultivators" had fled to Chu. The status of these people was too complicated. No one knew

how many of them were spies or had been bought off, making the already muddy waters of Western Chu even more confused. Trying to incorporate these people's strength wouldn't have worked even when Sanyue had been flourishing, never mind now.

Anyway, after their spiritual stones had drained away, they couldn't afford to support those people anymore.

With Moon Plated Gold behind it, Southern Wan's technology had gone a step ahead of the other nations'. Wan's merchants had nearly monopolized transportation and mining. Leaving aside Northern Li, which had halfway locked its gates and clung obstinately to its old ways, industry in Chu and Shu had been firmly suppressed; with this cruel oppression, domestic conflicts immediately became magnified. In Sanyue, the wolves had their eyes on the Xiang family, and in Southern Shu, there was now the unrest between the Xiuyi and the Miah—

“Elder Xiang,” said that voice with a slightly foreign lilt once again, “half of the Lingyun Mountains' spiritual energy has scattered, but spiritual energy can't disappear into nowhere. Where do you think it has gone? If your Sanyue Mountains' spiritual energy keeps being depleted like this, how many more centuries do you have left?”

“Evil cultivator,” Xiang Ning interrupted him, “stop trying to be clever. Don't think I don't know what you people are planning.”

“You have misunderstood us. Once the four great spiritual mountains join forces, it will only be a matter of time before there is no more place for us to shelter—both the so-called ‘common cultivators’ and my Miah clan,” Wangge Luobao said candidly. “This is plain to see, I don't believe Elder Xiang wouldn't have observed this much. What I want is for rifts to form among the four nations, and I hope that you will be on my side.”

Sneering, Xiang Ning said, “You really are daring.”

Wangge Luobao answered calmly, “Of course, you can use the so-called ‘Great Way’ as your bottom line, stand firm by an immortal’s position of ‘defeating evil and upholding orthodoxy’; it would only mean giving up the Xiang clan and the Sanyue Mountains. When the time comes, we will serve as an example for Sanyue to learn from. The only difference is that we will be knocked down at once, while Sanyue will be slowly drained dry by Xuanyin. Elder Xiang, the biggest mistake Sanyue has made over the years is relying excessively on Sect Leader Xiang Rong.”

Xiang Ning’s expression became grave. Wangge Luobao had poked him in his sore spot.

Since the sect leader had left, Xiang Ning hadn’t even dared to take the Silver Moon down from the mountains to track down the rebel Xuanwu... because he had no idea whether he would be able to control the Silver Moon when he left the immortal mountains. If, when the time came, instead of vanquishing evil he ended up offering himself up as a feast, he really would become a laughingstock.

“The Xuanyin Mountains currently have two shed skins and two near-shed skins. Zhuoming belongs to those people who have had their ‘mouths sealed by heaven,’ you ought to trust his guesses—as soon as that Sword of the South becomes a sage, none of you will have another chance to shake Southern Wan. When that happens, Western Chu, as a near neighbor... Haha, elder, this is Sanyue’s final chance. Since you do not dare, then you can sit there peacefully, like a crab letting the hot water rise over it. During the Wan-He War, all of you stuck in your oars to muddy the waters. Times have moved on and you no longer remember, but Southern Wan remembers it all. That is all I have to say—”

“Wait,” said Xiang Ning.

He was a direct descendant of the Xiang family to begin with. Below the sect leader, he was the hidden clan leader of the Xiang clan. But with the sect leader in seclusion, all the cultivators in the mountains... even the Xiangs, while deferential to him on the surface, had all taken orders from that bastard Xuanwu.

Now that the power of the Xiang clan was waning, there were even some in the clan who had begun to make faint noises—even Wenqing had furtively sounded him out—about whether there was any leeway for Xuanwu to return to the immortal mountains. It was clear to see how illusory the Great Way was. It was never the first bottom line in the human heart; it was only a much-mended tattered flag.

On the island in the South Sea, it was raining. There was no trace of the Miah cultivators or their large quantity of possessions. Wangge Luobao alone remained beside Zhuoming.

Wangge Luobao ducked a beam of undiminished sword energy that flew from Zhuoming. He smiled slowly.

Through the Territory Map rubbing, Zhuoming had stuck a part of himself into Jinping City and was elbowing his way around; naturally he had also exposed himself to the qin music.

They both had accompanying plants and both knew that the other was a tough customer, so Xi Ping showed Zhuoming no mercy. When he ran into him, he struck to kill. With new grievances added to old resentments going to his head all at once, like a miracle, he used that second sword move he hadn't managed to learn in eight years, stabbing right through Zhuoming, whose true body was far away in the South Sea.

Zhaoting resonated with Jinping's Dragon Vein, multiplying the sword energy over a hundred times, striking back directly at the Territory Map rubbing and hitting the South Sea. The Southern Shu

Luwu immediately followed that lead to find the location of the island and report it once they found it.

Bai Ling simultaneously passed the information on to Xi Ping.

“In other words, the large quantity of possessions we didn’t find while searching the Zhao family hidden realm likely fell into Wangge Luobao’s hands, and that slops-eating pig of a Heartless Lotus put together a portion of a Territory Map rubbing?”

“Viscount,” said Bai Ling gravely, “this person is capable of causing no end of trouble.”

The Horn Tower was in Dangui Lane. Xi Ping could see the Marquis Manor out of the corner of his eye.

Xi Yue was protecting the whole area of Dangui Lane. When he felt the gaze fall from the sky, Xi Yue turned his head to meet his eyes. This child, who now wore the blue robe, was standing on top of a wall, in precisely the spot where Xi Ping had stood witnessing a beautiful soul from the Blissful Village demand Young Master Dong’s life and make him break out in song in the middle of the night.

Xi Yue squeezed the reincarnation wood he had just taken up, sending his voice through it: “Ge, when this is over, I’m going to go with you. I want to establish a foundation!”

Xi Ping ignored him, thinking, The world’s full of collapsing establishments, you’re not establishing shit.

That lunatic Heartless Lotus had been beaten until it hurt; his mind had finally cleared a little. He seemed ready to shrink back and turn around. Xi Ping sent his consciousness underground and grabbed hold of a lotus stalk that hadn’t had time to flee. “Don’t go, Brother Lovesickness, I haven’t yet repaid the favor of your ardent call in Southern Shu last time. Haven’t you been friends in spirit with my

cousin His Highness Prince Zhuang for a long time? Too bad he isn't here, he's gone to establish a foundation and cultivate in the inner sect..”

As Xi Ping said this, he accidentally cut his tongue with the tips of his teeth. His mouth instantly filled with the taste of blood. He softly sucked in a breath. There was cruel laughter in the words he hissed out: “It's just that he's chosen the way of clarity, which is unmoved by sentiment. He's very quiet and comfortable now. I'm afraid he won't be able to find much common ground with you in the future. But I can fulfill the duties of a host, take you to pay your respects at his manor, see if you can pick up some good fortune.”

Zhuoming's reason, brought back by the stab of the sword, was once again sent flying by these words. Hearing the words “way of clarity,” he gave a howl and turned into a mad dog.

Bearing the pain of being hacked to pieces, the Heartless Lotus's lotus stalks seeped out from the gutters, the sewers... every hidden and filthy place in Jinping City. The great masses of stinking white flowers were covered in mouths, roaring in unison: “Misty—Willow!”

Pang Jian fired a whole clip of fireproofing talismans in one shot, suppressing several places throughout the city where sparks had broken out due to the fighting, to keep a fire from starting among the residences. Overhearing the incomprehensible confrontation between those two individuals, he suspected that he was too parochial—why were pseudonyms so popular among all the evil cultivators these days? And they all chose such fanciful names!

The heartless lotuses struggled to the death, growing wildly. On the tower, the Tai Sui Qin played three soul-shaking notes, each note louder than the one before, as if the Bell of Tribulation had descended. An ascended spirit consciousness covered the whole area of Jinping and Ning'an. Xi Ping brushed the air with one hand, picking up a plain book.

This was the *Discard the False and Keep the True* book that he hadn't returned to the blame-bearing Yu Chang!

The pages of the book moved on their own. Countless lotuses identical to Zhuoming's lotus seal flew out.

It was as if a blizzard had started in Jinping, and each snowflake was in the form of a lotus flower.

Out of nowhere, the cultivators in the city felt bone-deep dread. Pang Jian's pupils contracted sharply. He waved a hand and raised a big umbrella. The half-immortals without established foundations had no time to respond; they stiffened in place.

But those snowflake-like lotus seals seemed to be intelligent. Not a single one so much as landed on an unrelated plant. They all stuck to the heartless lotuses that were seeping in everywhere.

When the *Discard the False and Keep the True* book copied the attack of a cultivator of the same grade, it certainly couldn't match up to the original. But with the resonance between the seven Azure Dragon Towers and the Dragon Vein, as well as Zhuoming for some reason being a little deranged, he actually fell for his own trick!

In his long life, the Heartless Lotus had captured innumerable consciousnesses, strong ones, weak ones, interesting ones, boring ones... This was his first time getting a taste of the lotus seal for himself. He was like a flower about to be torn from the stem, each vein in its petals rupturing.

"You really think...!"

All of Jinping reverberated with Zhuoming's scalp-numbing scream. The snakes and rats in the gutters fled helter-skelter.

Xi Ping's control over every lotus seal was precise down to the finest grain. The veins on the hand holding the *Discard the False and Keep the True* book stood out; though he was an ascended spirit, his essence was still nearly drained dry.

He abruptly drew in the lotus seals. "Let's see how you like it."

In the instant Zhuoming was nearly "pulled up by the roots," Wangge Luobao shouted, "Catch!"

Xiang Ning, far away on Sanyue's West Peak, split off a portion of his consciousness to sink into the Territory Map rubbing on the lotus in front of him, instantly shattering all the lotus seals stuck to the heartless lotuses.

Wange Luobao grabbed Zhuoming and jumped into the sea. The next life spiritual fish took them both into its mouth. The fish's form disappeared in a flash.

Xuanwu, who had been attracted by the sword energy, and the Lingyun cultivators, lured over by the Luwu, reached that barren island practically at the same time. The two sides looked at each other in dismay. The Lingyun cultivators sent to catch the Miah traitors were three ascended spirits leading seven or eight skilled established foundations. They had thought that this force would be more than adequate to capture Wangge Luobao and Zhuoming, but unexpectedly they had run into this personage. They were at a loss. They immediately moved to send a report to the inner sect.

Xuanwu's reaction was swift. With a two-handed seal, he wove a spiritual energy cage, trapping all of them inside.

Blood dyed the seawater around the barren island. The invisible next life spiritual fish sank through the water, silently following the current into the distance, letting hatred float upward.

With the passing of ascended spirit masters, lightning flashed and thunder rumbled over the South Sea. A hurricane welled up. The storm even reached the South Sea Hidden Realm far underwater. The bustling Turmoilers raised their heads, hearing the grief-stricken weeping of waking dragons pass through the valley.

At the other end, Xiang Ning, with the strength of a shed skin, having stuck his oar in, passed through the Territory Map rubbing like a flash of lightning, pouring into Jinping City through the crack held open by the Heartless Lotus.

The better part of Xi Ping's essence had just been drained by the *Discard the False and Keep the True* book. The unexpected backlash broke his ribs. His punctured lungs choked him with a mouthful of blood. The music of the Tai Sui Qin instantly went astray.

Everyone was stupefied.

Since the spiritual mountains had formed, apart from the ancient demonic god who had fled into a dead end thousands of years ago and Sanyue's Xuanwu, who had recently revolted, a shed skin openly appearing in another country's territory was an earth-shattering, unprecedented event. Even when Southern He had invaded the north, the mad Lancang Sect Leader still hadn't personally come down to the mortal world!

It wasn't that Lancang was particular about the "ethics of war." It was that once a cultivator reached the shed skin boundary, they became a part of the spiritual mountains. If one spiritual mountain went and crashed into another spiritual mountain, no one knew what frightening thing would happen.

Xiang Ning was one of the small number of shed skins who had been born after the Great War of Gods and Demons. He had experienced nothing; he was ignorant and undaunted. And now,

unexpectedly, there were no more tigers in the Sanyue Mountains, only him, and he'd let his brain get fished up and cooked into soup —there was no one left to mind him!

The moment Xiang Ning struck, he did in fact already feel faint unease, but once the arrow was on the string, there was no turning back.

Once he had seeped into the Territory Map rubbing, he had no more room for regrets. In these circumstances, fear will cause people to work even harder to deceive themselves and others.

Xiang Ning could never forget how, many years ago, the Sect Leader had inadvertently passed judgment on him. He had said, "A-Ning, in conduct and in cultivation, you can always handle everything, but you err slightly in being indecisive. Faced with a major event, you find it hard to come to a resolution. You ought to be more like your Xuanwu-shixiong." These words had placed him beneath Xuanwu, not letting him see the light of day for centuries.

Xiang Ning decisively suppressed all his misgivings: The Sect Leader was wrong. Shixiong was out of touch with reality. He never really knew people. What does that ingrate Xuanwu amount to? I'm Sanyue Mountain's real hope for the future—

A loud crack came from the earth of Jinping. Before Xi Ping's handful of blood could leak out from between his fingers, he was frozen in place. He had the impression that his spine had broken. Indescribable panic instantly swallowed him. In his spirit, Zhaoting trembled fiercely.

Pang Jian, ashen pale, raised his head. The Dragon Vein that the Dignitary of Fate High Elder had repaired had been snapped by the strength of another shed skin!

Then Xi Ping was standing on emptiness. The Azure Dragon Horn Tower fell to pieces. Xi Yue shouted something and flew toward him.

Then it was Neck, Room, Heart... The seven Azure Dragon Towers collapsed one after another.

But the strange thing was that the rupture of Jinping's Dragon Vein was completely different from what had happened in Quancheng at the feet of the Lingyun Mountains.

Perhaps because the terrain was level, Jinping didn't experience anything like the impact of the ground splitting and the mountains cracking in Lingyun's Quancheng. Aside from the Azure Dragon Towers, not even the ramshackle buildings on the east bank of the Lingyang River collapsed. There was near total silence.

A silence that chilled you to the bone.

Xi Ping landed gracelessly on the ground. He had no time to say anything to Xi Yue. A thought flashed through his mind like lightning, touching his spiritual sense: something was about to be released.

It was now light in Jinping, the sky quite clear. There was no wind and no clouds. But out of nowhere, an enormous shadow emerged on the ground, "crawling" out from the place where the Dragon Vein had broken, moving slowly, intent on permeating the whole capital.

Xi Ping's consciousness, enveloping Jinping, glanced at that shadow, and his scalp went numb: it was the shadow of a dragon.

This shadow couldn't be more familiar to him. It had swallowed Jiangli in the Blissful Village and hurled him into the cultivation world with its tail; in the Latent Cultivation Temple it had attached itself to his shadow, and after coveting his body unsuccessfully, it had left him with half a set of hidden bones that had damned him forever.

It had appeared at the feet of a person who called himself “Tai Sui” — Liang Chen.

What did this mean?

Xi Ping didn’t know where to start.

But he shuddered. Just like Zhi Xiu facing the ancient demon host in the Resurrection Vortex and the Impassable Sea, he caught a glimpse of the threads of fate.

CHAPTER 166 - Flower in the Mirror (9)

There were a number of provinces between Jinping and the Xuanyin Mountains, not like Dongheng, which was right at Sanyue's feet.

And while the Sea of Stars had given him a warning, it hadn't concretely shown what was going on. There had only been a vague direction—evil cultivators were meddling, and those evil cultivators came from the South Sea.

That whirlwind had dispersed at once after brushing shoulders with Xi Ping. Its approach had been menacing, but the followup had caused little commotion; it had seemed to be only the unsuccessful attempt of some “acquaintance” in the South Sea. Xi Ping had only been uneasy and left the mountains by night to go have a look because the walkers in the mortal world were early stage established foundations at most, and he didn't know whether the Kaiming and the Luwu had had time to get accustomed to losing their head.

No one had expected that there could be such an addlebrained shed skin.

And the whole thing seemed to be a repeat performance.

The last time a similar dragon shadow had appeared, it had also been the Sea of Stars giving misleading directions that had led to Zhi Xiu, alone and under myriad restrictions in the mortal world, hastily warding off Liang Chen and the half skeleton of hidden bones. The current strictness of Jinping's defenses was incomparable with what it had been in the past, the skilled walkers in the mortal world had all established foundations, and the bogus “near-shed skin” had also risen to suit the occasion, changing into a true shed skin.

Xi Ping's message sounded in Pang Jian's ear: "A Heavenly Question! Quick!"

Fortunately Xuanyin Mountain could prohibit the use of spiritual energy throughout the country. If matters really reached the point of no return, even if the elders couldn't get here in time, they could still...

Just then, in a flash, another frightening thought arose. In Jinping's late summer, Xi Ping's hands turned cold faster than the blood he had coughed up.

He thought: Wait, why is it only Xuanyin that can prohibit the use of spiritual energy?

When his cultivation had been weak, he hadn't thought there was anything unusual about this. After all, shed skin masters could blow him sky-high with a single breath. Xi Ping hadn't even seriously considered what methods they might have at their disposal. But now that he had climbed higher and higher up the ranks of cultivation, now that even ascended spirits had become peers that he could measure himself against and shed skins were no longer unreachable, he had realized that shed skins weren't omnipotent.

At any rate, Xiang Ning certainly couldn't prohibit the use of spiritual energy throughout Western Chu, or else the Xiang family wouldn't have ended up in its current desperate plight.

Also, when the Lingyun Mountains had all been wailing and countless surrounding cities and counties had been shattering to pieces, their shed skins had still been busy hunting evildoers and putting down rebels. It had only been ordinary inner sect cultivators who had been sent to repair the veins of the earth.

Why had it been the Dignitary of Fate High Elder, who sat at home like a fine lady in a compound, who had come in person to repair

Jinping's Dragon Vein?

Just because Jinping was the capital, more privileged than other places?

But in just the space of a thought, the better part of that dragon shadow had already "crawled" out, as if it were alive. Where the Dragon Vein had broken, Xi Ping caught Xiang Ning's aura.

Wait... who?

For a moment, Xi Ping thought he had misidentified him. Even if the person who had barged into Jinping City today had been Xuanwu, gone entirely out of his mind, Xi Ping might still not have been so shocked.

He had only had one brief encounter with the shed skin of Sanyue's West Peak. He only remembered that that gentleman's heels had been well greased indeed. When Xiang Rong and Xuanwu had just started their kerfuffle, he had slipped away even faster than Xu Rucheng's third-rate husband.

How could it be him?

In the eight years since he had last seen him, had this old fart eaten a leopard's guts, or had he finally been driven mad by the toilet bulletins?

Right now, Xi Ping was the only ascended spirit in Jinping City. There was no time for overthinking. He braced himself and sank his consciousness into the split Dragon Vein, trying to block the dragon shadow spreading in all directions.

He was just in time to hear Xiang Ning laughing. "The Territory Map! Hahaha! It really is the Territory Map!"

In the mouth of the next life spiritual fish in the South Sea, Zhuoming had become a bloody gourd. He lay face-up inside a heap of lotus stalks, his face ashen, not making a sound.

Wangge Luobao surveyed him for a moment, then couldn't resist expectantly raising a hand to his nose to check his breathing... To his disappointment, he felt fleeting puffs of laughter.

Wangge Luobao calmly drew back his hand. "It seems you've won your bet. The Territory Map really is sealed within Southern Wan's veins of the earth."

"All that nonsense about 'the reflection of the veins of the earth in the water,' haha... *cough-cough-cough*." Zhuoming laughed breathlessly as he coughed. "The spiritual mountains are the heart, and the veins of the earth that extend from them are only blood vessels. What's so important about the reflection of a bunch of blood vessels? That hypocrite Southern Sage didn't dare to acknowledge it—the Territory Map is the shadow of the spiritual mountains!"

"So back then the sage didn't destroy it, but sealed it within the true veins of the earth of the spiritual mountains. It was originally a seamless solution. But then Lancang made trouble, the cultivation world shook, and Lancang's sword slit open the Southern Sage's seal." Wangge Luobao sighed softly. "No wonder the Dragon Vein was so unsound even after the Dignitary of Fate High Elder himself repaired it. It was the Territory Map beneath the seal constantly trying to escape."

"It's fallen into Xiang Ning's hands. As soon as it breaks free of the veins of the earth, Xuanyin Mountain is done for. As for Xiang Ning, he'll be hunted by Xuanyin to the ends of the earth. Sanyue won't necessarily be able to provide for themselves..." As Zhuoming spoke, he turned over and sat up laboriously. He extended his hand and stuck it into a mustard seed holding spiritual stones. Enough

spiritual energy to fill a sea poured into each and every one of his lotus stalks. All the sword cuts on him healed rapidly.

“What do you want?”

“The Misty Willow,” Zhuoming said softly. “This time I’ll make sure he can never reincarnate.”

Xi Ping could be said to have learned his lesson. The most useless shed skin was still a shed skin; a new ascended spirit like him, whose boundary still wasn’t very stable, had no chance of withstanding him.

Even worse, the seven Azure Dragon Towers and the Dragon Vein beneath them had all been on his side just now; they had not only succeeded in guiding him in learning the sword move his own shifu hadn’t been able to explain clearly, they had also helped him get a better hold over the *Discard the False and Keep the True* book and use Zhuoming’s own trick against him.

But whatever had just been released from beneath the Dragon Vein evidently hated its “cage,” and it hated him into the bargain!

Xi Ping only had time to push Xi Yue away. His consciousness was under a double pressure, and he had hardly any leeway to resist. His protective spiritual energy exploded—fortunately his essence had just been drained by Zhuoming until there was nothing left.

Xi Yue only had a half-immortal’s cultivation and couldn’t get near him. Suddenly remembering something, Xi Yue turned and ran, his figure nearly turning into a sapphire blue lightning bolt.

Under the weight of the chaotic spiritual energy, Xi Yue dashed toward the split in the Dragon Vein and tossed out a brocade bag.

The little brocade bag was shredded in midair by the sharp wind. Countless reincarnation wood seeds scattered. The moment they fell, they were urged to sprout by the master of the reincarnation wood.

Xi Ping's tightly constrained consciousness immediately had room to turn around, burrowing into countless reincarnation wood trees. Linking to the vestiges of the Dragon Vein, those saplings wove a frail net, trapping the constantly struggling dragon shadow within it.

Good child! No wonder Pang Jian takes you everywhere!

The dragon shadow seemed to have been enraged. Its beard flared out wrathfully. Xiang Ning was nibbling away at the Dragon Vein. "Puny junior, you overestimate your strength!"

All of Xi Ping's meridians twitched painfully. He had gone to the Xuanyin Mountains in a hurry; he'd hardly brought any spiritual stones.

"Half-immortals retreat!" Pang Jian tossed Xi Ping a bag of spiritual stones across the distance. "Catch!"

Lao Pang really hadn't stinted. There were dozens of liang of blue jade among the spiritual stones he had thrown, as well as a number of white spirits. He must have dug deep into his coffers for this.

Unfortunately, for an ascended spirit, this bit of spiritual energy was like trying to put out a fire with a cup of water. Xi Ping knocked the bag aside. "That's not even a mouthful for me, look after yourselves, go repair the Dragon Vein!"

"Here," said Bai Ling.

He had brought out the spiritual stone stores of Prince Zhuang Manor and the Kaiming Department. The mustard seed holding

several thousand jin of spiritual stones didn't even reach Xi Ping before they were all drained to powder.

"I know it's not enough," Bai Ling said grimly. "A portion of the spiritual stones from the southern mines has yet to be delivered. It'll be here soon. I've also ordered the spiritual stone stores of the Ning'an and Suling Kaiming Departments to be transferred. Hold out a little longer, Viscount."

Pang Jian's scalp went numb when he heard this. He could hardly keep count. "Xi Shiyong, what kind of glutton *are* you?"

"The kind you ought to be calling shishu..." said Xi Ping.

Xi Ping absorbed the spiritual energy dispersed around him in one gulp. The Tai Sui Qin played fast as a driving rain, carrying sword energy like lightning, smashing into Xiang Ning's consciousness.

At the same time, all the established foundations in Heaven's Design Pavilion followed Pang Jian's lead in tightly encircling the broken Dragon Vein and quickly forming an array. They were always patching up the veins of the earth here and there; they were practiced hands.

The dragon shadow's shrieks echoed in Jinping's underground as it was pushed back down by the assembled walkers in the mortal world. The huge dragon claws scrabbled at the earth.

Just then came Zhuoming's spiteful voice: "A mighty shed skin, defeated by a snot-nosed brat who's been an ascended spirit for less than a decade commanding a bunch of established foundation ants. Tsk-tsk-tsk, Elder Xiang Ning, you little runt... If you had any fight in you, those cultivators from other families wouldn't get so mad when they saw the Xiang family keeping the Sanyue Mountains all to themselves."

Xiang Ning gave an angry roar.

Zhuoming said, laughing, “Since you did just help me escape, I’ll give you a hand, too.”

Right now, Xi Ping was using the reincarnation wood to keep the dragon shadow trapped while hacking at Xiang Ning. Even with the support of the Dragon Vein, there really was too much for him to do. He couldn’t free up a hand to keep a lid on Zhuoming.

Zhuoming extended a hand and grasped the Territory Map rubbing he had put together from the relics of innumerable Zhaos. “Allow me to demonstrate how the true power of the Territory Map ought to be used.”

As if it had been whipped, the dragon shadow that had crawled out of the broken Dragon Vein went crazy. The arrays the walkers in the mortal world were using to repair the veins of the earth were instantly destroyed. The better part of Xi Ping’s reincarnation wood trees were pulled up by the roots. At the same time, Zhuoming’s lotus seals struck back like a reprisal, pulling apart the dozens of portions of his consciousness he had split off.

Xi Ping’s vision went dark.

Never mind mortals, even half-immortals could hardly move now.

The place where the Dragon Vein had snapped just happened to be on the densely populated east bank of the Lingyang River. The lines of tall buildings were about to cave in. A child’s heartrending cries went up. He was hanging in midair, hands losing their hold on a slanting railing, about to fall into the dragon shadow’s mouth.

From the dust crawled a woman covered in dust herself, perhaps the child’s mother. She was bleeding, her skinny arms like grass that had sprouted from a crack in a stone. In the midst of this irresistible

catastrophe, she managed to struggle forward and reach out, firmly grasping the child's sleeve. There was a long rip as the sleeve tore. The woman screamed desperately.

Four or five hands reached out simultaneously. The people who normally squabbled as they shared these cramped living quarters all scrambled to catch the child. There were old people and young people... just as if they themselves weren't on the brink of dropping.

But the building would fall in the end. It only held out for a moment before there was a teeth-aching snap. The rescuers fell along with those who were struggling.

In a flash, several Kaiming half-immortals charged in against orders, using weak talismans and spiritual energy to weave a big "mesh bag," knocking aside the building and the mortals who were about to fall into the dragon shadow.

It was already all that a half-immortal could do to charge into a place like this. The mesh bag tore apart, and the figures of several half-immortals flashed. Before they could make a sound, they fell into the dragon shadow's mouth.

Like spiritual stones drained dry, they turned to dust in the blink of an eye, and the dust was thrown up into midair.

Just then, at the docks, the spiritual stones conscripted at the last moment from the southern mines arrived. Xi Ping once again managed to raise the few reincarnation wood trees still remaining to him.

"Is Xuanyin Mountain's Heavenly Question," he said, gritting his teeth so hard they nearly snapped, "slower than a flying goose letter?!"

What were those two high elders doing? Why hadn't they prohibited spiritual energy yet?!

Zhuoming laughed aloud. "Poor wretch, why are you still baffled? Don't you understand yet? The reason that the Territory Map rubbing the Zhaos inherited from their ancestor could move the land wasn't that someone of Zhao Yin's ilk could shake the roots of the spiritual mountains' veins of the earth—what they moved was the Territory Map itself, sealed within the veins of the earth. Your Xuanyin Mountain high elders prohibiting spiritual energy was only a by-product caused by spiritual energy not flowing through the veins of the earth when its seal was used to stifle the Territory Map. The Dragon Vein has broken, the Territory Map has been released, and they're all out of cards to play!"

What the hell was this Territory Map? Why hadn't the Southern Sage destroyed it, leaving a hidden danger like this lurking for future generations?

"Shiyong!" Just then, Zhang Jue's voice came through the reincarnation wood—yes, Xi Ping had always treated them as outsiders and hadn't recalled that the Dignitary of Fate High Elder had a reincarnation wood tree; he didn't need to go through Pang Jian to contact him.

"Dignitary of Fate El... Elder." At the end of his endurance, Xi Ping turned to impertinence. "If you... were telling f-fortunes in the mortal world, you'd get your stall knocked over twice a day..."

The Dignitary of Fate was thousands of years old; naturally he wouldn't bicker with him. "The Dignitary of Rule and the Dignitary of Rites are on their way. If the Territory Map falls into Xiang Ning's hands, the thirty-six peaks will fall and shake the foundations of this nation. You..."

Xi Ping didn't hear the rest of it. As soon as he split his attention, Zhuoming's lotus seals reached the consciousness within his true body. His ears rang.

But in the midst of the fierce pain, his mind was still working.

The Dignitary of Rule and the Dignitary of Rites were on their way... Why wasn't Zhang Jue coming himself?

Had the Dignitary of Fate messed up a divination and gotten his leg broken by a dissatisfied customer? What was he busy with? Why wasn't he coming in person to clean up the Dragon Vein he himself had failed to repair properly?

Suddenly, Xi Ping remembered Zhang Jue saying in the Sea of Stars that when his shizun became a shed skin sage, the Dragon Vein would no longer need to be repaired, and Great Wan would be eternally secure.

So this was what he had meant—when the Dragon Vein had broken then, it, along with a part of the Territory Map that had leaked out, had ended up in Zhi Xiu. Once General Zhi became a sage, it would mean that the Territory Map belonged to the spiritual mountains.

But... what kind of sage?

Xi Ping hadn't yet had time to change his clothes after they were sliced to rags by the struggling sword aura on Flying Jade Peak. His heart sank: obviously not the kind of sage that planted an accompanying plant in the earth.

Meanwhile, Zhang Jue had landed outside of Flying Jade Peak.

"Jingzhai," the Dignitary of Fate High Elder sent his voice into Flying Jade Peak from afar, "I shouldn't rush you, but events have been sudden..."

In Xi Ping's spirit, a new crack appeared in Zhaoting.

“No...” With difficulty, Xi Ping split off a sliver of consciousness and futilely wound it around that crack. “Shifu, no...”

Zhi Xiu was silent—perhaps he couldn't speak under the pressure of a fresh round of heavenly might. Neither Xi Ping, far away in Jinping, nor Zhang Jue, kept out by the mountain seal, had any way of knowing.

But Xi Ping could sense from the shard of Zhaoting that he was wavering.

A person could resist his own fate, resist the enlistment of the spiritual mountains, but... could he pay no heed to Jinping City on the point of collapse?

The crack in the shard of Zhaoting grew.

“Shifu, you were only a mortal then, and you defended Jinping from the Lancang Sword for a day and a night. I can do it, too... Shifu!”

San-ge had said that shed skins were fettered by divine will. That, like the Dignitary of Fate and the rest, they became part of the spiritual mountains. The person who came out of seclusion in a hundred years might not necessarily be the person he knew.

He had talked big then, said, “That's his business.”

Now he was babbling, pleading desperately: “Shifu, I can defend Jinping, don't listen to them, don't go there...”

San-ge had entered the way of clarity. If shifu also had his hands bound and went into the spiritual mountains, became a lofty sage,

then next time he fled the Latent Cultivation Temple in a panic, where would he go?

“Shifu, I’m begging you...”

On Xuanyin Mountain’s Principal Peak, everyone was buzzing with anxiety. There was endless gossip and surmise. Terms like “Jinping,” “Dragon Vein,” and “war” constantly floated through Zhou Ying’s ears.

But he ignored them.

His consciousness had already made countless patient circles around the Bell of Tribulation.

Xuanyin Mountain’s divine tool hung invisible in the air above the Principal Peak. Zhou Ying could “see” the path of its every tremor, and the direction that its spiritual energy surged in.

There were thousands upon millions of inscriptions on the Bell of Tribulation, so vast that a single look could drive a person mad.

Fortunately, the way of clarity was immovable as a mountain. He couldn’t go mad.

With the Way of the Heart standing guard, Zhou Ying was utterly patient. As if untangling a knotted skein, he probed inward layer by layer.

Just as Princess Duanrui, in her capacity as Dignitary of Rites Elder, urgently left the Principal Peak to hurry toward Jinping, he found the gap.

Zhou Ying’s consciousness, so mild it was as if it didn’t exist, instantly poured in, grasping the faint aura in the depths of the Bell of Tribulation—the heart demon seed.

As expected, the heart demon seed was inside the Bell of Tribulation!

As soon as the heart demon seed, which had appeared to be on its last gasp, touched him, it immediately cast off its pretense of weakness and violently lashed out against Zhou Ying—at the moment of capturing a heart demon seed, a person was often at their most lax and self-satisfied.

But Zhou Ying didn't resist. He casually opened his spirit and let the heart demon seed dive in, burrowing into his spirit and taking root.

The moment the heart demon seed landed, every nook and cranny of his memories was brought out.

But Zhou Ying only looked on like an observer, watching the past calmly, his mind unmoved.

The moment he had entered the way of clarity, it had frozen and rinsed away his emotions.

On his spirit, the place where the heart demon seed had taken root petrified little by little. A crust like colored glass grew on the heart demon seed's root system and slowly swallowed the whole seed.

CHAPTER 167 - Flower in the Mirror (10)

It was said that each demon seed contained nine thousand facets, nine thousand smiling faces, reflecting the circles within which humans had confined themselves since time immemorial.

Only without self could one see the truth.

In fact, the way of clarity wasn't the "way of demon-subduing." It was mainly that Zhou Ying's current situation was special—his Way of the Heart was external, and it had been inherited directly from the current pinnacle of the way of clarity, a master half a step from a shed skin.

This was different from the Ways of the Heart those like Zhao Qindan totteringly fumbled toward on their own and made from scratch. The disparity between his cultivation level and Duanrui's was too great. Within herself, her Way of the Heart could hardly cope, but it could envelop Zhou Ying in his entirety like a mountain. He couldn't digest it right away. And precisely because he couldn't digest it, he had temporarily entered an unusual state of "void," the restriction becoming a powerful protection—there would be nothing to worry about now even if a master came to fight a duel of Ways of the Heart with him. He would only need to relax and let the Way of the Heart carry him through it.

Precisely because of this, the heart demon seed, which could only attack the mind and was otherwise toothless, could do nothing to him.

Moreover, Zhou Ying had grown up alongside the demon host in the Impassable Sea. He was well acquainted with the nature of the heart demon seed. He was simply the heart demon seed's natural predator.

He only quietly waited off to the side while the last heart demon seed in the world exhausted all its efforts and finally stopped struggling.

Like amber, it congealed.

The surface of the heart demon seed wasn't smooth. It was made up of countless small facets. Zhou Ying didn't actually count to see whether there were nine thousand. He only watched the rich play of color over them—it was actually rather pleasing to the eye.

He pierced the tamed heart demon seed with his consciousness. When he opened his eyes, in the depths of his pupils flashed a pair of “multifaceted gemstones.”

The cursed descendant of the demon subduers had obtained a pair of demon's eyes, as if predestined.

Through the demon eyes, just like when Zhou Ying had first established his foundation, the world seemed once again to turn completely on its head. The last layer of “gauze” covering his eyes had also vanished.

First he raised his head to look at the Bell of Tribulation in the sky above the Principal Peak.

The Bell of Tribulation didn't come out to frighten people for no reason. Only the eyes of those who had found the edge of the shed skin boundary or those with a paramount spiritual sense could see it.

An established foundation with a paramount spiritual sense could see the Bell of Tribulation at a glance from the Latent Cultivation Temple. At the Principal Peak, he could clearly see every inscription on it, as well as its spiritual energy.

And right now, Zhou Ying could see that there was “color” to the spiritual energy surrounding the Bell of Tribulation. The vast majority of the spiritual energy blended with the surroundings, constantly gathering and dispersing in its flow. But the lower part of the great divine tool of the mountains was linked to a special thread of spiritual energy, which was grey as the smoke belched out by the factories in the southern outskirts. It was clearly spiritual energy scattering outward, yet it didn’t move a hair in the strong wind of the mountaintop. It maintained a fixed form—like a big hand supporting the Bell of Tribulation.

No... wait.

Zhou Ying’s demon eyes went deeper. He found that at the join between the “smoke” and the Bell of Tribulation, the Bell of Tribulation’s edges were blurred.

Rather than saying that the grey spiritual energy was supporting the Bell of Tribulation, it would be better to say that the Bell of Tribulation had itself “grown out” of the spiritual energy; it was a physical embodiment of that grey spiritual energy.

Staring at the Bell of Tribulation for a moment, Zhou Ying at once saw through Xuanyin’s thirty-six peaks.

He saw the established foundations bustling all over the mountains, all with more or less essence within them, and the grey spiritual energy of the spiritual mountains curled up within their essences like an infant’s umbilical cord; the Zhou clan’s ascended spirit peak masters were currently gathered to talk about something, and unknowingly they were allowing that grey spiritual energy to pass through their meridians.

Then he looked at the only shed skin who was still within the spiritual mountains at present—Zhang Jue.

Through the demon eyes, a person's emotions were crystal clear: the Dignitary of Fate High Elder was outside of Flying Jade Peak right now, feeling hesitant and distressed, with faint unspeakable remorse mixed in... but none of that was important—what the demon eyes saw was that Zhang Jue was a “half-person.”

Only half of his body was flesh and blood, with all kinds of subtle emotions churning within it as with the ascended spirits; the other half, however, was completely grey. At a glance, it looked like it was made of clay brick.

The high elder was in the air on a sword. It was easy to see that the “clay” half of his body was connected at the foot to the grey spiritual energy extending from the spiritual mountains. Like the Bell of Tribulation, he seemed to be a person who had “grown out” of the spiritual mountains.

While the ascended spirits were also full of smoke, it was only interwoven with them; they still had plenty of emotions, desires and weaknesses.

Zhang Jue, however, was different. His grey half was completely separate from his other half... and it wasn't “dead”; in the grey spiritual energy, the demon eyes saw panic.

This was the panic of the Bell of Tribulation, the panic of the spiritual mountains as a whole.

The demon eyes paused briefly on Zhang Jue, then continued to probe onward. They penetrated Flying Jade Peak's mountain seal and beheld... a magnificent sight.

On Flying Jade Peak, the “smoke” of the spiritual mountains covered everything. When panic became concentrated enough, it would turn to rage. The “smoke” so dense it had nearly condensed

into clay bricks was desperately throwing itself at the sword platform on the slope.

The person on the sword platform was evidently half a step from a shed skin, yet there wasn't a sliver of grey spiritual energy within him. The wondrous sword cuts that covered the ground kept resisting the corrosion of that "smoke." Beside him was a sapling that looked something like a birch tree.

The connection between that tree and the person was just like the one between the Bell of Tribulation and the Xuanyin Mountains.

Without any judgment, Zhou Ying thought, "There's a rebel against the spiritual mountains here..."

But the resistance on the sword platform was growing weaker and weaker, and the sapling was withering at a speed visible to the naked eye.

"... though it seems he won't hold out much longer."

Just then, Zhou Ying's spiritual sense was touched. The box of notes in his mustard seed opened on its own and spat out a slip of paper.

He reached out to remove the note. On it was written: *Sanyue's Heartless Lotus is an ascended spirit, and he was trapped in the Silver Moon for centuries. He has seen more secrets than all the world's shed skins put together. He must already have guessed the location of Great Wan's Territory Map. Now, while that lunatic is attacking, take a look at the veins of the earth—what is this "Territory Map" that the sage wouldn't breathe a word about?*

Concerning what the Territory Map actually was, why did it seem that all the shed skin sages of Xuanyin weren't as well informed as Zhuoming, who had been locked in a cage for centuries?

Zhuoming was using the Territory Map rubbing to push his way through, and Xi Ping, at an impasse, wanted to “blindfold” Zhaoting with his consciousness, not let shifu see what was happening in Jinping now.

But that was only futile self-deception. The crack in the shard of Zhaoting in his spirit deepened.

Xi Ping had the feeling that if that shard of Zhaoting disappeared, he would no longer have a shifu.

Crushed between the oppressive immortal mountains and the shameless evil cultivators, he couldn't catch his breath. There was a gloomy lump of stagnant blood in his chest. For a moment, he even came to the edge of losing his mind. He wished the universe would collapse; he wished he could kill everyone.

Just then, his consciousness, beaten and scattered all over the place by Zhuoming's lotus seals, slipped into an unexpected place — as Jinping City wavered, the poor of the east city were fighting for their lives, while the wealthy of the west city had retreated into their inscriptions if they had them, had shut up their houses if they had arrays; whether it was any use or not, they all ordered their guards to surround their houses tightly.

Only the Yongning Marquis Manor hadn't been shut up.

The front gate was open. The Marquis at his age couldn't stand up for long, so the servants had brought a chair for him to sit in. Madam Cui ordered a bowl of hot soup to be sent to him. In the midst of the turmoil, he said, “Thank Madam for this gift.” He held the bowl of soup in both hands. At his feet was the miniature reincarnation wood tree that before had been growing in Prince Zhuang Manor.

The dim lantern at the gate swept over the “Peace Under Heaven” gate pins and fell on the reincarnation wood, quickly brushing over Xi Ping’s eyes, steadying his scattered mind.

Next, a familiar bracing smell came flying toward him head-on. Xi Ping’s consciousness, fallen into the reincarnation wood, returned to his body. He blocked automatically, but the thing turned into a thread of clear energy and seeped into his sense organs—it was a mind clearing pill.

The scent of the elixir diffused everywhere, as if it had no need to perform a diagnosis and could sniff out where the injured were, then dissolve the correct medicine into the wind.

At the same time, a fierce wind flew straight toward the white lotuses in the gutters; a segment of heartless lotus stalks that couldn’t dodge in time corroded and turned black.

The taste of this mind clearing pill was all too familiar. Xi Ping looked up and saw that the first person to arrive from Xuanyin’s inner sect turned out to be neither the Dignitary of Rule nor the Dignitary of Rites—it was Wen Fei.

This medicine cultivator could fight, far exceeding Xi Ping’s expectations. He instantly alleviated the one-against-two pressure Xi Ping was struggling under. His fan shook, sending a handful of talismans flying toward Xiang Ning.

People normally classed the medicine and toolmaking ways together—as a representative of those too weak to undertake a burden, Wen Fei himself was in fact always grouping himself with Lin Chi. But Xi Ping found to his astonishment that it was possible Master Lin was the only one of Xuanyin’s thirty-six peak masters who really couldn’t look after himself.

When Peak Master Wen, who normally seemed somewhat unreliable, got down to it, he let out a string of killing blows, more direct than Xi Ping, who had rolled out of a heap of evil cultivators. Why did his posture as he tossed out talismans without batting an eye resemble Pang Jian...?

A line of writing on the fan quickly swung at Xi Ping's chest: *Your humble servant was the General Commander of Heaven's Design Pavilion...some number of office holders back.*

Xi Ping: "..."

Pardon his lack of manners, it was Lao Pang imitating him.

"Zhi Jingzhai," Wen Fei suddenly shouted to Zhi Xiu through Xi Ping. It turned out that he wasn't mute. It was only that, perhaps because he hadn't spoken in a long time, he bit off each word individually. "Don't—listen—to—them."

Wen Fei landed beside Xi Ping, glanced at him, still couldn't stand the sight, and gave a sigh of lamentation. He brought his fan up in front of Xi Ping's eyes. On it was written: *The Heartless Lotus is poison. I can't defeat him. You go ahead.*

These words flashed and vanished. Had Lin Chi been reading them, he probably wouldn't even have had time to understand them. Then Wen Fei took out something like a giant seal and pressed it toward the constantly quaking ground of Jinping City. To Xi Ping, he said, "Follow me!"

Zhi Xiu wasn't a person who liked a lot of bustle, but from Duanrui, Su Zhun, and other such people, to Zhao Qindan, whom he had casually added to the list of provisional disciples, his appraisal of people was quite good. Rosy Cloud Peak just happened to have the most interaction with Flying Jade Peak of all the thirty-six peaks.

Xi Ping had no time to think carefully. He could only temporarily trust in his shizun's ability to choose his friends. His consciousness followed Wen Fei into that black seal.

He felt his consciousness enter the earth. As a Jinpinger born and bred, he had never been so close to Jinping. His consciousness seemed to have melded with the earth of Jinping. It struck violently against the Heartless Lotus.

Enemies walk a narrow path—the lotus seals copied by the *Discard the False and Keep the True* book crashed into the real lotus seals. Xi Ping and Zhuoming simultaneously felt stabbing pain in their consciousnesses; each retreated.

While the faux lotuses couldn't defeat the real lotuses, Xi Ping's consciousness had the hidden bones attached to it; cultivation for him was being constantly broken and remade; he was much more resistant to attacks than the "delicate flower" Zhuoming. He didn't care at all about a little wound like this. After a pause, he immediately continued the pursuit.

As he chased, he asked, "Wen-shishu, what is this?"

"The Territory Map rubbing of the Jinping area." Wen Fei used his consciousness to communicate directly, sounding much more normal. His speech was even rather fast. "No, sword god's disciple, don't call me 'shishu.' It makes me feel old."

Zhuoming had stuck together his Territory Map rubbing by swallowing the relics of countless Zhaos, but the one Wen Fei had was evidently complete. It had clearly come from the hands of a Zhao inner sect master.

Where had it come from?

“Wen” was no distinguished noble surname, and he’d said himself that he came from Heaven’s Design Pavilion. Why would he have something belonging to the Zhao family stashed away?

Xi Ping suddenly realized that it was because Wen Fei had set out as soon as he sensed something going wrong in Jinghua Village that he had been able to arrive faster than the two elders.

In other words... when he had left, he hadn’t told the immortal mountains; he hadn’t even followed the rules and gotten a token to leave.

On Xuanyin’s Principal Peak, Zhou Ying crushed the note. Following his own instructions, he gazed into the depths of the spiritual mountains with the demon eyes.

The veins of the earth—also called the spiritual veins—extended from the spiritual mountains, covering all of Great Wan like blood vessels. The offshoot that reached into the capital city of Jinping was the so-called Dragon Vein.

Now a hideous tear had opened in the Dragon Vein. A bit of blackness had seeped out of the “wound,” causing the thing that had lain perfectly dovetailed within the veins of the earth to fall slightly out of alignment, revealing its true face.

It was an enormous shadow, its main body crouching beneath the Xuanyin Mountains, the “branches” extending from it identical to the veins of the earth flowing out of the immortal mountains.

In the immortal mountains, there was a statue of the Southern Sage. It was solemn and stately; it seemed to be alive.

And in the same spot within shadow, there was an inverted statue of the Southern Sage.

Zhou Ying paused: he had heard that the great demon in the depths of the Impassable Sea had a face identical to the Southern Sage's.

Just then, spiritual light flashed from the demon eyes. Zhou Ying, the new master of the heart demon seed, having subdued it, seemed to sense something. Following the spiritual light, his consciousness sank into the demon seed.

After a moment, he had a sudden realization.

The countless facets of the heart demon seed reflected Xuanyin's thirty-six peaks; the history hidden within the heart demon seed ran backward before Zhou Ying's eyes and played out once more.

He saw the instant the Southern Sage reached a full moon position — countless spiritual stones gathered around the sage's Way of the Heart and assembled into Xuanyin's thirty-six peaks.

The demon eyes saw that the moment the sage stepped over the full moon boundary, the Way of the Heart that had been fed by endless cultivation and spiritual stones broke free of the Southern Sage and turned around to pollute his body.

The sage became the vessel of the Way of the Heart, and he didn't know it himself.

And just then, he received word from an old friend who, while they didn't follow the same path, was still on fairly good terms with him. This friend invited him to go to the East Sea's Impassable Sea to vanquish demons.

This person's name was Yuan Hui. His way was called "ungovernable." His temperament was a little unsociable, but he wasn't a bad person. When all the forces of evil had been running amok, he had even helped the Southern Sage look after his young disciples.

The Impassable Sea was a nest of demons. It ought to have been cleared out long ago. So the Southern Sage brought along a demon subduer and went to accept the invitation.

In the Impassable Abyss, the demon eyes reflected the truth about becoming a god: Yuan Hui had no Way of the Heart; when he discovered that he was being controlled by his hidden bones, this shed skin master who had always been ungovernable personally cleaved the hidden bones, killing himself at the bottom of the Impassable Sea.

And the Southern Sage saw his own true face reflected. His heart demon was immediately born. At the same time, the spiritual mountains quaked, and the “Territory Map” came into being.

But Southern Wan’s borders had just been established; the common people had been given a place to shelter. He could no longer afford to pay the price of the spiritual mountains collapsing. All he could do was join hands with the demon subduer to seal the secrets of the Impassable Sea and the spiritual mountains beneath the Resurrection Vortex forever.

The Territory Map wasn’t the supposed “reflection of the spiritual veins in bodies of water”; it had been born from the sage’s heart demon.

It existed alongside the spiritual mountains. The sage had been well aware of it, but he could never get rid of it.

When Zhou Ying had entered the way of clarity, Duanrui had asked him what his special eyes had seen. He hadn’t answered then, because had he said it, Princess Duanrui’s Way of the Heart would have crumbled on the spot like Zhao Yin’s.

What he had seen was: the way of clarity and unfeeling was a scam. There was no such thing as all-embracing, all-comprehending pure intellect.

If a person had a heart, whether it belonged to a way, to a demon, or a mortal, they could never forget emotion and become a god.

And the way of clarity and unfeeling was seen as the origin of the three thousand paths of the Great Way. Reasonably speaking, every road to becoming a sage ought to arrive by different paths at the same destination that the way of clarity led to. Supposing the way of clarity had no endpoint, then none of the three thousand paths of the Great Way could have an endpoint.

When the full moon sages had “broken free of the mundane dust and ascended,” where had they ascended to?

Clarity’s Way of the Heart wiped away the fog before the eyes of the paramount spiritual sense: they hadn’t gone anywhere; the Southern Sage was still in the mundane world.

His corpse was called the thirty-six peaks of Xuanyin.

CHAPTER 168 - Flower in the Mirror (11)

So that was it.

Within the Way of the Heart of a near-shed skin, Zhou Ying was like a small insect all alone inside a spacious mansion. Because he was so negligibly small, even the sky falling couldn't have much impact on him.

But despite this, the moment the heart demon seed reflected the spiritual mountains, he actually felt the Way of the Heart waver.

Fortunately, this Way of the Heart wasn't his.

He hadn't taken a close look at any of the questions contained within the Way of the Heart, never mind experiencing and inheriting them. Zhou Ying had absolutely no interest in this way. At the same time, having disconnected his emotions, he didn't care that his cultivation path would end before reaching its destination, and he didn't care about heartbreak or death. In a peculiar fashion, this meant he accorded with the way; he remained calm.

Since the formation of the spiritual mountains, Zhou Ying was the only person to reach this point.

The common people looked to the immortal mountains for guidance, ignorant of the reality. And once you truly set foot on this path, however many unanswered questions there were in your heart, you could still never face this truth.

Even Princess Duanrui, at the end of the way of clarity, having long ago received hints from her cultivation level and her spiritual sense, was still attempting to find an "exit," as if it was only that her boundary wasn't high enough, that she hadn't quite made it

“through.” Once she made it through, she would be able to find the answer she wanted.

Standing here meant the collapse of your Way of the Heart, meant facing your own hundreds upon thousands of years of utterly meaningless bitter struggle and search.

Only a person on the verge of death would look this way.

The Heartless Lotus could only count as halfway capable of understanding him. Perhaps he had also been here. But he was burdened with a hundred and eighty bickering Ways of the Heart. They wouldn't permit him to preserve his reason for so long before the tombs of the sages.

Inside and outside the immortal mountains, in the whole vast sea of people, Zhou Ying was the only one to come in solitude to pay homage at the place where the gazes of generations of the dying had converged.

Fortunately, he was currently incapable of feeling loneliness.

Just then, the box of papers in Zhou Ying's mustard seed moved for the third time. He received the third... “guiding last testament” from the past.

In Jinping City—

Events were happening too quickly. Xi Ping had no time to work out what the “Territory Map” was; he only relied on his instincts, which told him that this big four-legged worm that had been sealed by the veins of the earth crawling out meant nothing good.

But a person couldn't fight a “shadow,” and with Xi Ping's experience and cultivation, he didn't know how to force this thing back. Next to him there were also the old weasel Xiang tearing right

at the Dragon Vein and the damned bald donkey constantly provoking the black dragon.

Fortunately, Wen Fei had brought along another “Territory Map rubbing.”

When he poured his consciousness into it, Xi Ping could at last touch the black dragon—the Territory Map itself—directly.

From the black dragon’s body, he heard the loud rushing of rivers and the echoes of human voices underground; he heard a heavy heartbeat coming from within the earth, like a pump, scattering the spiritual energy that gave life to all things, growing more and more urgent.

Even Xi Ping’s own heart was influenced by that pulse. He quickly dismissed preoccupations and placed a mind calming spell over his ears.

“Wen-shi... Peak Master Wen, how do we use this thing?”

Wen Fei answered with his consciousness: “I’ll lure away that crazy shed skin, you think of a way to control the Heartless Lotus and use the rubbing to lure the Territory Map... that dragon back into the veins of the earth, and then we’ll seize the opportunity to repair the hole in the Dragon Vein!”

In answer, Xi Ping picked up a string of faux lotuses and knocked Zhuoming flying. Zhuoming, wounded, broke away from the Territory Map rubbing.

Xi Ping quickly covered the rubbing with his consciousness: *Go back!*

But the black dragon shadow underground tilted its head toward him: it seemed to be “alive.” After hundreds upon thousands of

years sealed underground, its dreams were all of escape. The scraps of Territory Map rubbings from the Zhaos could only touch it, awaken it; they couldn't command it.

The rubbing was obviously no dragon-taming chain.

How was he supposed to convince it to return to the veins of the earth? Use well-meant admonitions, persuade the dragon with virtue?

Seeing the withered heartless lotuses once again ready themselves to climb up along the gutters, Xi Ping decisively pulled over the Tai Sui Qin. Music holding sword aura pierced through the Territory Map rubbing, firmly hitting the black dragon on the head.

The black dragon went sideways. It seemed to have been knocked silly.

“Wh-wh-what are you doing?” Wen Fei was perturbed. He nearly let a talisman Xiang Ning had parried snag him. He had no attention to spare to use his consciousness to pass a message. He yelled out, stuttering, “Are-are you... beating up the Territory Map?”

He's punched it right in the head!

“Is that not allowed?” said Xi Ping.

Then, not waiting for Wen Fei to hold him back, he bashed the black dragon over the head with one beam of sword energy after another.

Wen Fei's tongue didn't seem to be very nimble. “You'll... you'll anger it...”

“Did it look particularly calm to you before?” said Xi Ping.

“At this point, I only know two sword moves,” Xi Ping cried out toward the shard of Zhaoting frozen in his spirit. Two beams of sword energy slapped the black dragon’s face, one left and one right. On the ground, the dragon shadow’s long beard flew wildly. “Look at me! Don’t you feel humiliated, shifu?!”

Zhi Xiu: “...”

Since its birth, no one had pulled a sack over the Territory Map’s head and boxed its ears. The whole dragon was being hammered into the damaged Dragon Vein by the Tai Sui Qin like a nail.

Wen Fei: “...”

That works?

You couldn’t judge by appearances. Shaking his foot in front of the Dignitary of Fate High Elder was nothing; he thought that this hero might think nothing of running naked through Xuanyin’s thirty-six peaks! Where the hell had Zhi Jingzhai picked him up?

The black dragon returned to its senses. It was beside itself with rage. The dragon shadow’s beard bristled like a porcupine.

Seeing this, Xiang Ning pushed Wen Fei aside and took the opportunity to slam against Jinping’s already torn Dragon Vein.

Xi Ping howled: “Elders, Duanrui-shishu!”

Xiang Ning and Wen Fei both paused in the midst of their struggle: What? Where?

Xi Ping quietly scattered an immortal tool like a dandelion—this was the same one that, during the revolt of the nine great Zhao ascended spirits, Lin Chi had used at his urging to counterfeit the Bell of Tribulation to scare the rebel faction.

There came the droning of a bell, crossing all of Jinping City, colliding with the big bells at the Southern Sage Temple in the mountains to the south, striking an echo.

At the same time, Xi Ping used the *Discard the False and Keep the True* book to create a handful of lotus seals that he tossed at Xiang Ning's consciousness. The two attacks overlapped. Xiang Ning's consciousness shook; he was almost overwhelmed with terror.

Xiang Ning didn't belong to Xuanyin. Unlike Xi Ping, he couldn't immediately work out that Wen Fei hadn't taken a token when leaving the mountains, so there had to be something fishy going on. From his perspective, Wen Fei arriving with the Territory Map rubbing represented the arrival of Xuanyin's inner sect. With the Dragon Vein unstable, it was only natural for Xuanyin's three elders to come in person.

Xiang Ning was perfectly well aware that he had only been able to become a shed skin because there was no one else in the Xiang clan, and the sect leader, not wanting there to be no one who could curb Xuanwu, had piled up all the West Peak's resources, personally stood guard, and shoved him up to being a shed skin himself. He was definitely no match for Xuanyin's old geezers, who had lived through the Great War of Gods and Demons... He might not even be able to beat the near-shed skin rising star.

The game was as good as lost. Xiang Ning came to a decision—he had to run.

When Xuanyin came for him after the fact, he would simply deny everything.

Anyway, the Lingyun Mountains had half-collapsed. The decline of Shu was already a foregone conclusion. Next to the spiritual energy bandits at Xuanyin, those southern barbarians would have no other

choice; they would have to side with Chu. Northern Li had always disliked the south with its billowing smoke. They certainly wouldn't step in to help Southern Wan... Xuanyin stood above the crowd on the continent, but they were also beset on all sides; he wasn't afraid of them coming after him!

In a flash, Xiang Ning had his whole line of retreat perfectly planned out. He skillfully activated his marvelous powers of skedaddling and abruptly retreated, serving up Zhuoming in front of the two great ascended spirits.

Wen Fei was well aware of the fact that Xuanyin's elders couldn't get here fast enough—and even if they did, they wouldn't bring the Bell of Tribulation. Jinping wasn't Tao County; no one could bear the responsibility if there really was a three-year drought.

Anyway, the Bell of Tribulation had to remain in the inner sect to keep watch over Flying Jade Peak.

Gracious, what were public morals coming to? Here was a young sprout terrorizing an elderly man nearly a thousand years old in broad daylight!

Wen Fei rapidly pulled together his attention, which had been dispersed by the ascended spirit grade scare machine. He scattered a handful of poison, killing all the heartless lotus stalks reaching out of the nooks and crannies and wiping out all the rats and mosquitoes under Jinping into the bargain. For the next three years at least, there was no need for Jinping to worry about an epidemic.

Meanwhile, the highly efficient Kaiming Department had transferred a large quantity of spiritual stones from nearby.

Bai Ling felt that something was faintly off. He roughly calculated the volume of freight and found to his surprise that the spiritual

stones that had been delivered to Jinping far surpassed his impression of the Kaiming Department's reserves.

Yes, he suddenly remembered, his lord had previously always been storing up the spiritual stones the Luwu collected on the black market.

His lord seemed to have... expected that such a thing would happen. Had he seen something in the South Sea Hidden Realm?

Strangely, a bit of Bai Ling's barely suppressed anxiety lifted. These spiritual stones pouring steadily into Jinping seemed to be his lord coming in person... the one from before.

As soon as he thought this, Bai Ling suddenly once again found his bearings. He turned around and joined the group of Heaven's Design Pavilion's established foundations.

After Wen Fei finished sprinkling "weedkiller," he created an inscription in midair, drawing a large quantity of spiritual energy to stab at the black dragon's head.

The black dragon, unreconciled, struggled. The veins on the back of Wen Fei's hand holding his fan stood out. Countless spiritual stones turned to powder and brushed past him. The medicine cultivator's hands were as steady as the most precise machine in the southern outskirts. A series of inscriptions without a stroke out of place crashed out like a thunderstorm and were picked up by Xi Ping's utterly merciless sword energy, joining forces to shove the black dragon back into the Dragon Vein.

Wen Fei landed and staggered. "Quick!"

Pang Jian gave the order, and Heaven's Design Pavilion's established foundations quickly began to repair the damaged Dragon Vein.

Just as this crisis seemed about to stabilize, there was a sudden change.

Xiang Ning, fleeing the battlefield in pants-wetting terror, froze. In silence, some vast will that even a shed skin was powerless to resist engulfed him without warning, instantly suppressing his consciousness.

At this time, there was a sudden peal of thunder in the Sanyue Mountains. The spiritual energy began to stir, flowing spontaneously toward the West Peak, forming a sinister whirlpool in midair.

All of Sanyue's great ascended spirits were disturbed. One after another, they rushed over to the West Peak, but they found that none of them could get near the elder's residence.

They exchanged looks of bewilderment. Before they could come up with anything, they saw a sudden burst of glaring light pierce through the dark clouds.

Someone cried out, "Look, the Silver Moon!"

The Silver Moon had originally been on Sanyue's East Peak. After Xuanwu had fled, Xiang Ning, in order to pretend that the sect leader was still there and bolster morale, had placed the Silver Moon on the Central Peak. Now, the invisible "moon" had suddenly appeared in midair and was heading toward the West Peak along with the surging spiritual energy. It landed on the summit of the West Peak.

The Silver Moon's cold light burned brightly, pelting down like rain on the summit of the West Peak, turning most of the top half of the peak into a ghastly white silhouette. Then, following the moonlight, a large quantity of spiritual energy poured into the West Peak elder's residence!

The ascended spirits scattered like rats, terrified of being splashed by the Silver Moon. There remained only Xu Rucheng, concealed at the foot of the West Peak. This Luwu was a hothead who would even dare to spectate at a shed skin battlefield. Rather than fleeing for his life, his first reaction was always to get a better look and send out the information.

Xi Ping and Bai Ling received his message at the same time.

Bai Ling frowned: “What does that mean?”

The Silver Moon thought Xiang Ning had disgraced himself, so it had decided to cook him like an evil cultivator?

But after a moment’s blankness, Xi Ping’s pupils contracted sharply. “Peak Master Wen, out of the way—”

Before he could finish, Wen Fei’s spiritual sense was also touched.

This former general commander of Heaven’s Design Pavilion reacted extremely fast. First he waved his sleeve to sweep all the established foundations away. Then he flung his fan up high and opened up a temporary protective mustard seed, shielding himself and all the walkers in the mortal world behind it.

The sleeves that had floated up in his haste had yet to settle when from the nearly sealed crack in the Dragon Vein began to ooze a quiet light...like moonlight—it was shining through Xiang Ning’s consciousness.

However unworthy a shed skin, he still belonged to the spiritual mountains. A shed skin’s greed was never purely his own foolishness.

The wailing of the Lingyun Mountains had not only shaken the western continent; it seemed that it had also awoken the terror of the other spiritual mountains.

Terrified Sanyue, desperate to maintain its position as “sole authority,” had pointed a sword at Xuanyin.

Just like Lancang over two centuries ago.

The fatal moonlight, using the consciousness of the perhaps already dead Xiang Ning as a medium, seeped out of the crack in the Dragon Vein, passing through the whole area of Jinping and Ning’an.

It was as if a peculiar string of lanterns had been lit underground.

The Silver Moon’s instinct to destroy evil still remained. As soon as it latched onto its old acquaintance Zhuoming, it immediately wiped out all of his hidden lotus stalks.

The other cultivators, who had “status” and were under the protection of the Xuanyin Mountains, didn’t turn to ash beneath the Silver Moon’s light, but they still couldn’t budge.

Wen Fei’s fan fell to pieces. The inscriptions on the Lingyang River’s west bank melted in the moonlight coming out of the ground; there was no more distinction between Jinping City’s wealthy and poor.

Like fracturing porcelain, the level ground silently cracked.

Jinping’s Dragon Vein, which before had only broken in one place, was now completely shredded by the malignant moonlight. The black dragon shadow underground was free of its fetters.

The dragon’s head swallowed Jinping City. The dragon spread throughout Southern Wan broke free of the veins of the earth. The

Territory Map's seal was broken!

The black dragon that had been imprisoned for thousands of years turned its head and roared toward the Xuanyin Mountains, opening its mouth wide. The spiritual energy of the human world and the immortal mountains surged into its mouth.

It was striking back against the spiritual mountains!

Just like Zhao Yin in the past, the consciousnesses of all the cultivators closest to that black dragon were sucked into the Territory Map.

The half-immortals on the outer rings protecting the mortals as they fled all went blank—with one exception.

Zhou Xi, who just happened to be maintaining order in Dangui Lane, paused. In the chaos, lotus seals appeared in his eyes. The consciousness of this person who had once been the favorite of heaven was swallowed up like a stone sinking into the sea.

There were no ripples.

“Zhou Xi”'s eyes simultaneously made several circles in different directions, then fixed on the Yongning Marquis Manor—the only place in all of Dangui Lane with a light burning at the gate.

In the sudden upheaval, no one noticed one of their colleagues going missing.

“Zhou Xi” seemed to have been half-paralyzed. Limping, he went inward along the path of Dangui Lane. He began to croon a strange ditty indistinctly: “Papa's knife's in need of honing, Mama's got the water boiling...”

From several zhang away, the butler Haozhong, desperately counseling the Marquis to go inside, saw the “blue-clotheser” dragging one leg behind him as he walked. He froze, then stood up and said, “Exalted?”

“Zhou Xi” stared at the potted reincarnation wood tree the Marquis was holding. The twitching corners of his mouth formed a smile.

Haozhong stepped forward. “Can I...”

A lotus stalk erupted from “Zhou Xi”’s mouth, aimed right at the center of Haozhong’s brow.

CHAPTER 169 - Flower in the Mirror (12)

A mortal couldn't see this swift-as-lightning "immortal skill" clearly. Before Haozhong had time to blink, just as the lotus stalk was about to break through his skull, a talisman came out of nowhere and lit the killer lotus stalk on fire. Haozhong was pulled away by the collar. When he looked again at "Zhou Xi," his mouth had been slit open by lotus stalks, stretching until it took up half his face. His chin had dropped right off. His front teeth were gone. The Marquis Manor's new butler plopped to the ground in fright.

Xi Yue, knife extended, shielded the Marquis Manor. The Marquis waved a hand to dismiss the servants. He stood up.

"Zhou Xi" — the walking corpse controlled by Zhuoming — tossed his head with force. He'd had a direct collision with Xi Ping via his consciousness, and his brain had been buzzing from the bump with the iron-plated head of that expert in being torn to pieces. Then all the lotus stalks in the city had been burned by the Silver Moon. Now, his vision was swimming.

Dragging Zhou Xi's body, Zhuoming, as if drunk, squinted at the Yongning Marquis Manor in front of him. The Marquis Manor was no opulent dwelling. The people of Wan were naturally mincing; even if they were going to show off, they couldn't be ostentatious about it, or else they would be "descending to vulgarity." So to Zhuoming's eyes, this courtyard gate was a little plain, far inferior to his "home"... After all, his father's surname was Xiang.

But his home hadn't had this kind of lantern.

In his youth, there had been no Moon Plated Gold yet. The lanterns had to be lit, and the wicks would leap about; they weren't this steady. There were a great many rules at home. The lanterns were lit and extinguished at set times. That bit of dim light was a sight

seldom seen all day. His father's official wife seemed to be worried that he would scare the sun; she had put him in a lightless wing. He couldn't move, so he only lay there, bored out of his mind, watching the one ray of daylight that leaked into the courtyard, looking forward to the lanterns being lit.

When he woke, the lanterns were unlit. The next time he woke, the lanterns were still unlit.

“Zhou Xi”'s eye reflected the milky white lantern over the gate. He straightened out his bearing until he was practically urbane. He replaced his dropped chin and saluted the Marquis of Yongning. “Hello, Marquis, I happened to make the acquaintance of the Misty... of Shiyong. You could say we survived mortal peril together. I've long heard that Jinping City is the pearl of Southern Wan, the finest place in the world. I've always wanted very much to come and see his home.”

Xi Yue, treasuring words like gold, said, “My older brother isn't here.”

“Yeah, I know.” “Zhou Xi”'s right eye didn't move a bit, but his left eye swiveled to look at the half-puppet. With a laugh, he said, “He's been sucked into the Territory Map. Back then, when Xuanyin's Elder Zhao Yin was sucked into the Territory Map, the Southern Sage was there to stand guard in person, and he was still trapped inside for a full forty-nine days and only escaped using the divine lightning from the high heavens when he became an ascended spirit. Now that the Territory Map wants to steal the spiritual mountains' light, even the Xuanyin Mountains will collapse. I'm afraid no one will have time to spare to look after anyone else. Why don't you all come with me and settle down in a 'nice place,' then wait for him to come back so you can reunite.”

Before he was finished speaking, Zhuoming, controlling Zhou Xi's body, came forward like a ghost.

Xi Yue met him with a talisman. “Stop!”

Zhou Xi’s body was only a half-immortal one. Xi Yue’s talisman broke the not-fully-cleansed bones. His form instantly became warped...like Zhuoming in his youth.

Innumerable lotus stalks reached out from among the fractured bones, holding up the beaten human body. Though Xi Yue wasn’t friendly with Zhou Xi, they were after all colleagues. Seeing him silently become a puppet in the hands of an evil cultivator, to be molded at will, he still felt horror. Zhuoming didn’t spare this puppet body at all. The lotus stalks tore open the wounds and used the no longer flowing human blood as seal ink. A bloody lotus seal came right toward Xi Yue.

Just then, a bolt of lightning fell out of the sky and nailed the expanding light of the Silver Moon. Enormous inscriptions pressed down on Jinping City like a mountain, stabilizing the crushed veins of the earth. At the same time, blazing spiritual light flashed. A whip pierced the air and wrapped around the black dragon’s neck. The Dignitary of Rule and Dignitary of Rites elders had at last arrived!

Lin Zongyi’s mouth seal was blown down by the wild wind. “Xiang Ning, is Chu declaring war?!”

When this taciturn mouth opened, two sets of spiritual mountains on the continent reverberated simultaneously.

Xi Yue’s brows moved. Instantly, the joy of “We’ve been saved” appeared on his face. But then there came a boom. The black dragon shadow rose from the ground and gave a fierce shake, dragging down Princess Duanrui, who had her whip wound around its neck.

The place where Duanrui landed was the very same Guangyun Palace where she had spent her whole youth. Jinluan Main Hall, carved all over with second-class inscriptions, folded like paper; the nine dragon pillars carved of stone crumbled. Guangyun Palace caught fire. Everyone was running for their lives. No one had attention to spare for putting out the fire. The south-facing heated room bore the brunt. The Welcoming Spring painting by the “Carefree Old Man” that Emperor Taiming had once hung there vanished as soon as it was licked by a tongue of flame.

All relics of the mortal world were lighter than floating dust.

Duanrui was after all only a near-shed skin. She was now being entirely dragged along by the Territory Map, which even a full moon sage was powerless against, while Lin Zongyi was in a deadlock with the Silver Moon that was seeping through the Territory Map rubbing. It just so happened that no one had attention to spare for tiny Danguai Lane.

Zhuoming laughed aloud. The lotus stalks exploded from Zhou Xi’s body. While the Silver Moon was too busy to attend to him, this audacious lunatic freed himself of the hindrance of his half-immortal puppet’s skin, his true body simply swapping places with his accompanying plant!

Inside the next life spiritual fish in the depths of the sea, Wangge Luobao sat by and watched as Zhuoming disappeared before his eyes. He said nothing, and he wasn’t surprised.

He only holed up alone inside the fish’s mouth, tapping his right palm with his left hand. In an unusually soft and tender voice, he began to croon an ancient Miah tune—a song of eternal parting used during funeral processions.

Sadly, Zhuoming couldn’t hear it.

Jinping's burst Dragon Vein could no longer prevent the incursion of the ascended spirit evil cultivator. The moment Zhuoming's true body arrived in Dangui Lane, apart from the reincarnation wood, from every place in the Marquis Manor where there was water, as if a plague of snakes had descended, lotus stalks that would swallow anyone they saw erupted.

Xi Yue was pushed a hundred meters away and knocked over someone's courtyard wall when he crashed into it. He was very popular with the Kaiming Department. Though events had happened so quickly that there had been no time to call for help, a large number of Kaiming Cultivators had rushed over upon hearing a stir.

The half-immortals valiantly charged into the Marquis Manor's courtyard, shielding the mortals.

Zhuoming couldn't restrain his laughter. Without so much as looking at these half-immortal ants attempting to shake a tree, he knocked them aside like dust and landed into front of the Marquis of Yongning—the Marquis instinctively shielded the potted reincarnation wood tree in his arms, even though the big flowerpot was too heavy for him and weighed him down so much that he couldn't stand up straight.

Zhuoming's staring eyes flashed, stabbed by this sight. He tilted his head stiffly. The lotus stalks quickly wrapped around the Marquis's lapels, dragging the old Marquis so that he staggered half a step; a lotus seal stamped the center of the Marquis's brow.

Just then, from the Marquis's brow and from the Marquis Manor's courtyard, several beams of utterly cold sword light flew out, carrying the frostiness of the north, and pierced the lotus seal.

Zhuoming was caught off guard. The blow nearly sliced off half his head.

The way of the sword was a direct and daring way, but the sword wind that had shot out from the Marquis Manor was out of the ordinary; its chill seemed capable of permeating a person's spirit.

The sword wind wrapped around Zhuoming's already injured consciousness like winding silk. All the malice in the depths of his heart was uprooted, revealing the "seed" buried deep beneath the malice. His paramount spiritual sense-bearing senses were swallowed by lengthy illusions. The Marquis of Yongning before him turned into Xuanwu, into his stranger of a father, into his puppet-like mother, into the frightened, shirking servants...

The heartless lotus stalks extending in all directions flew wildly. Two Kaiming Cultivators, guarding the Marquis with their lives, got him out of the way. The potted reincarnation wood tree fell out of his arms. It landed on the ground and was snatched by the deranged Zhuoming.

Spiritual light flashed beneath that small tree. A transport array hidden beforehand was activated.

But the weak spiritual light of this half-immortal grade array couldn't attract the lunatic's notice. Out of control, the Heartless Lotus swallowed everything he saw. He swallowed the item that came through the transport array directly into his spirit.

The next moment, Zhuoming stiffened abruptly. The lotus stalks that were wreaking havoc stopped moving. They gave a twitch as if dying, bringing down the Marquis Manor's porter's lodge.

On Xuanyin's Principal Peak, Zhou Ying was holding the third note. On it was written: *The Yongning Marquis Manor must not be lost. Get rid of the Heartless Lotus. The Blind Wolf King's Perplexing Sword Attack is with the Marquis. You can assist with the heart demon seed.*

In front of Zhou Ying was a very simple transport array. Through it, he transported a prism-like demon seed.

While the note said “must not be lost,” it wouldn’t matter if it was lost. Zhou Ying couldn’t feel worry, and because he wasn’t concerned, he was steady. He chose his time precisely.

The flowerpot of that reincarnation wood tree was a downgraded immortal tool for communication. Across the vast distance, it allowed him to meet the world’s other paramount spiritual sense.

But Zhuoming could no longer see him.

Zhuoming clutched his own throat tightly, staring in front of him as though his eyes were about to burst from their sockets, but his gaze was unfocused. The heart demon seed flashing through his pupils had completely blocked his line of sight.

Zhou Ying could practically hear the rejoicing of the heart demon seed. There was no place on earth more suitable for a heart demon to sprout than on the Heartless Lotus. The moment Zhuoming swallowed it, the demon seed couldn’t hold back from taking root and sprouting in every segment of lotus root. In the blink of an eye, it had formed a big net.

Every consciousness Zhuoming had swallowed was reflected by the facets of the heart demon seed. Innumerable interwoven loves and hates fractured his mind.

The Kaiming Cultivators surrounding the Marquis watched dumbfounded as this horrifying great evil cultivator’s flailing lotus stalks withered. His flesh shrank bit by bit as though being dessicated. A shell like crystal formed around him. On countless small facets flashed countless faces belonging to Zhuoming.

From instinct, Zhuoming was struggling fiercely. As the heart demon nibbled away at him, he was constantly forgetting his own story. He thought vaguely that he had said something; then he heard in the depths of his lotus heart a person saying blandly to him, “Right-side up. Why don’t you put those down?”

Zhuoming was stunned. Through the prism, he saw his own face—the wan face of his youth, when he couldn’t yet rearrange his features like a monster.

In his heart, he dimly knew who the person answering was, and he knew what fate it would lead him to if he followed this person, but just like three hundred years ago, his tears still fell uncontrollably.

That person said to him, “Come with me.”

The Kaiming Cultivators saw this evil cultivator suddenly stop moving and, as if letting his hands be tied, allow himself to be locked inside a “stone shell,” like a winged insect in amber. The “stone shell” wrapped around him was constantly shrinking. At last it shrank to the size of a broad bean. Because of the refraction of light through the prisms, the transparent stone appeared to be a particular shade of grey.

One unusually erudite half-immortal mumbled, “This... seems to be what’s written of in books... a ‘star stone’ from the bottom of the Sea of Stars.”

No sooner had he spoken than the Heartless Lotus’s unruly lotus stalks fell with a crash.

Zhuoming had captured the consciousnesses of countless people, trapping them in the lotus stalks, forever unable to reincarnate.

His own consciousness was trapped in the heart demon seed, forever unable to reincarnate.

Zhou Ying's face appeared above the flowerpot. Then he said to the half-immortal who had spoken, "This isn't a star stone—put it in the transport array and send it over for me."

Then he nodded to the Marquis and gently said, "Thank you, uncle."

The corner of the Marquis's eye twitched violently, as if he had been slapped. After a long moment, he finally waved a hand to dismiss the servants coming to support him and softly said, "Your Highness."

Zhou Ying took back the heart demon seed. In the midst of Jinping City, wavering on the point of collapse, he smoothly wished good health to the Marquis. When he was finished, he was about to cut off the communication and crush the note.

Then he saw a line of his own slightly hesitant writing on the back of the note. It said: *Wait a bit.*

CHAPTER 170 - Flower in the Mirror (13)

He had written the note himself, and the way of clarity wasn't the way of memory loss. Zhou Ying could easily "remember" what he had meant: if the Heartless Lotus could infiltrate Jinping City and swagger into Danguai Lane to make mischief, Jinping would have to be in the midst of chaos, and Xi Shiyong would be trapped.

His "past self" had wanted him to stay here and keep the Marquis company for a while.

Zhou Ying felt there was no need for this. In this battle, he had done all that an established foundation like him could do.

And as for the Marquis of Yongning—while it cost the Marquis an effort to stand for too long, he was still giving directions with perfect ease. The Kaiming Cultivators were unlike Heaven's Design Pavilion. They had practically all begun cultivating within the last fifteen years or so; they were young and inexperienced. Seeing Zhou Ying stand by saying nothing, they all matter-of-factly obeyed the old fellow. The Marquis was urging the petrified Haozhong to go inside and check on Madam Cui... perhaps he meant for her to look after him. Then he called Xi Yue over. Seeing that Xi Yue wasn't seriously injured, the Marquis bowed to the nearby Zhou Xi and said to Xi Yue, "Please invite His Fourth Highness inside to rest, don't leave him out in the middle of the street to... Take care."

He had made perfect arrangements for the living and the dead. Zhou Ying didn't see that the Marquis needed anyone's company.

But he had nothing else to do, anyway. He wasn't in a hurry. When the Kaiming Cultivators came to their senses, they trotted over to cautiously pay their respects. Whenever anyone came to greet him, Zhou Ying nodded to them.

He toyed absently with the heart demon seed and in the end remained above the flowerpot, joining the Marquis in watching the indistinct daylight hanging unsettled in the sky above Jinping.

At present, the shed skin grade battle of the spiritual mountains and the Territory Map was no longer something that an ant of established foundation level or below could see. Lin Zongyi had long ago opened a temporary mustard seed. Looking from Dangui Lane, the sky was a muddle; even the wind had stopped. The Azure Dragon Tower that had seemed to be eternally standing tall at one end of Dangui Lane was gone; this changed the whole look of Dangui Lane. Half the sky had emptied. Who knew where the crescent moon would hang when next it rose?

Supported by a servant, the Marquis of Yongning sat in a new rattan chair that had been brought over; he couldn't bear to look at Zhou Ying. His slightly emaciated and dry hand lightly stroked the reincarnation wood sapling—not long ago, while delivering the potted tree to the Marquis Manor, Zhou Ying had said that Shiyong returning was a sign; it meant that the strength of the spiritual mountains was waning, the orthodox sects were stretched too thin. They could no longer control the rampant growth of evil cultivators. There would certainly be great turmoil in the future. He had asked the Marquis to prepare.

That was when Bai Ling and Xi Yue had used a Perplexing Sword Attack to place a sword array in the Marquis Manor. The Perplexing Sword was the vital sword of Northern Li's rebel, the Blind Wolf King. Its sword energy could shake a person's Way of the Heart. It had been extraordinarily effective against that evil cultivator just now who had called himself Shiyong's friend... Presumably the trap in the Marquis Manor had been tailor-made for him.

His Highness had also said that with events at this stage, the time for him to establish a foundation and enter a way had come. He

couldn't tell Xiaobao, or else he might refuse to behave and come home, go make more trouble instead.

As for what way he would enter, there was no need for him to say; the Marquis understood.

“When I was young, I wanted to go north, but I never managed to set out,” the Marquis said softly, his breath a little short. “In order to protect you, your mother decided to stay. In fact, she had been pampered and spoiled all her life. Her temperament was weak. Back then she was only a girl who had never gone through any trials. I knew her. If I had really set my mind to it, it wouldn't have been impossible to take her away by force... But I had an old mother and a frail wife. With Ziyi as my excuse, I compromised in the end. My generation has been cowardly. We've left it all for your generation to bear.”

If the child bearing a double curse hadn't been born, there would have been no consciousness to pry up a corner of the Impassable Sea to escape. Liang Chen wouldn't have wandered in there by mistake, wouldn't have come to a fork in the road and been enticed by the Territory Map. Reincarnation wood wouldn't have had the chance to see the light of day again... All the events that had followed, none of them would have happened.

As for Zhou Ying and Xi Ping, one might have died in the womb, and the other would probably have become a shepherd at the feet of the Beijue Mountains. They wouldn't have been forced into “ways” that they had to walk alone and unaided, wouldn't have been sentenced to serve out prison terms in the mortal world while innocent.

When the Marquis's hand fell on the flowerpot, it began to tremble. “Your Highness, A-Ying... If your grandmother knew, in the future, when we meet in the underworld... she would blame me for it.”

Unruffled, Zhou Ying soothed him: “Cicadas have their ends, humans have their lifespans, and spiritual mountains also grow old. The cause was buried thousands of years ago, and now the effect has come. No matter what, this chaos in the world was an inescapable doom. It was nothing you could alter with a single thought. Do not take it to heart, uncle.”

While they spoke, Xi Yue and some Kaiming Department half-immortals had used talismans to clean up Zhou Xi’s body, carefully sewing up the damaged places. Then Xi Yue took off his own sapphire blue outer robe and covered him with it. He was carried into the Marquis Manor’s courtyard.

During the passing of the deceased, the living all kept silent.

From politeness, Zhou Ying watched the final journey of this brother who had a different mother from him, toying with the heart demon seed that held a murderer—time and space inside the heart demon seed were both illusory, different from the outside world. In this space of time, Zhuoming had once again followed Xuanwu into the Sanyue Mountains, had once again been let down and betrayed.

In that prism like a kaleidoscope, he once again launched his scheme for revenge.

While taking revenge, he could be completely focused. When he was avenged, his pleasure was practically such that he could have died without regrets. But soon, he fell back from his ecstasy and sank into unending despair, so that he once again became frantic, once again came to a dead end... was once again called away by a sentence from Xuanwu in the illusion, repeating his whole life.

Zhou Ying suddenly noticed something. His fingertips tapped the heart demon seed. A thread of smoke flew out from Zhuoming’s consciousness.

Zhou Ying clutched that thread of thin smoke and sniffed out a noxious smell only to be found in spiritual beast feeding grounds. When that smoke came upon a person, it would try to burrow into their sense organs. Zhou Ying felt his own heartbeat suddenly change as it was seized by that thin smoke, as if being dragged into mud. At the same time, his breathing became slightly unsteady. He observed briefly and felt that this was a physical reaction akin to “sadness.”

So Zhou Ying concentrated and locked onto that smoke, using clarity’s Way of the Heart to knock it apart. His heartbeat returned to normal, and he understood the purpose of this smoke—this must be a method peculiar to the way of beast-taming that could magnify a living creature’s emotions without being noticed.

Wangge Luobao.

This Miah rebel who would sell himself in all directions had betrayed the Lingyun Mountains and obtained the sage’s Way of the Heart, and then, as soon as he was strong enough, he had colluded with Zhuoming to betray the Miah clan leader. After usurping the clan leader’s position, he was naturally unwilling to be controlled and manipulated by the lotus seal, so he had turned upon the Heartless Lotus. He truly was a remarkable individual.

Zhou Ying raised his eyebrows. He watched as Zhuoming inside the heart demon seed escaped Wangge Luobao’s interference, but he only froze where he was and raised his head to cast a glance outward.

Who knew what those eyes of his that also possessed a paramount spiritual sense saw? Zhuoming had no “great awakening.” Instead, he kept calling for “shizun,” willingly going further into the depths of the heart demon seed.

In his whole life, only two paths were “true”: the first was whole-hearted adoration as he racked his brains and exerted all his efforts for a nod from his shifu; the later was whole-hearted hatred as he schemed incessantly for centuries to get revenge on Xuanwu. He had single-handedly destroyed Sanyue’s thousand-year glory and reached the pinnacle of life.

All that a person wanted in life was but one wild fantasy after another. Attaining it, you were left empty-handed and had to go on choosing new illusory goals, like flowers in a mirror, the moon in water, eternally racing on without pause to the next difficult journey.

What difference was there between racing in the real world and racing in the heart demon seed’s illusion?

Clarity’s Way of the Heart reflected this mockery in Zhuoming’s glance perfectly. Zhou Ying, immovable as a mountain, savored it briefly, then put away the heart demon seed.

From Xuanyin’s inner sect, all the ascended spirit peak masters and the middle and late stage established foundations had set out. While the two high elders firmly held down the thrashing Territory Map, the inner sect masters hurried to various spots to steady the mountain ranges and waterways.

The sage who could suppress the Territory Map was not longer present. All of Xuanyin was fighting the Territory Map with their lives.

Xi Ping, who had been sucked into the body of the “black dragon,” felt that he had been swallowed by the universe. When he opened his eyes, all he saw was darkness all around.

Even a half-immortal could see easily in the dark. It had been many years since Xi Ping had found himself in pure blackness like this. He was dazed, almost feeling that he had “disappeared.” He automatically clenched his fist. Just as he was about to form a

talisman, he heard someone cry out: “D-don’t use spir... spiritual energy! Do you have a tin... tin... tin...”

Peak Master Wen’s actions were swift as the wind, but his speech was truly too aggravating.

Fortunately, Xi Ping caught on quickly. Before Wen Fei had finished stammering “tin,” there was a pop as Xi Ping lit a tinderbox—burning pure kerosene, with a mortal-made shell; there wasn’t even any Moon Plated Gold.

The bean-sized light shone into the distance. Xi Ping saw at once the cultivators lying higgledy-piggledy nearby. He gave a start and quickly bent to feel a walker in the mortal world’s neck.

“They... they’ve been... knocked out by—by the Territory Map.” Wen Fei approached, following the light. “I-it’s... fine.”

Xi Ping raised the flame. By firelight, he observed the surroundings and found that he must still be in Jinping City. The surrounding scenery was no different than it had been when he had fallen in. The collapsed buildings east of the Lingyang River were identical. It was only that the whole scene had a deathly air. Apart from the cultivators who had been sucked in, there were no living creatures, and the spiritual energy was extremely stagnant. His nose was flooded with the earthy smell of an ancient grave.

“We’ve been sucked in like Zhao Yin was back then?” Xi Ping asked. “How big is this place? How did Zhao get out?”

“As... as... as big as Great Wan, that... that’s how big it is,” Wen Fei said very laboriously. “Zhao... Zhao... Zhao... had help from the South-southern Sage and a h-heavenly calamity to...”

Xi Ping: “...”

It was said that the Xuanyin Mountains had four pitiers: General Zhi didn't take disciples because of his "puzzlement," the princess didn't wear colorful clothes because of her "way," Master Lin didn't make tools because he was preoccupied... so Peak Master Wen didn't speak because he stuttered?

Why was he unlike the rest?

Wen Fei's fox eyes glared. "W-what-what're you—looking at!"

Xi Ping considered, then sincerely presented a lousy idea: "Wen-shishu, you say we can't use spiritual energy here, and you've lost your fan. It's hard for you to talk, and it makes me feel bad to hear it. Why don't you sing instead? I've heard that when... some people sing they stop stuttering. Shan Po Yang or Zhe Gui Ling?⁹⁷ You don't have to rhyme or match syllables. I can provide whistled accompaniment."

Angrily, Wen Fei said, "Y... you're teasing me! I'm... I'm telling your shifu!"

In this respect, Xi Ping was so covered in lice that another one wouldn't itch—Lin Chi had gone to lodge appeals at Flying Jade Peak's door countless times. Xi Ping thought, It's been over a decade. Do you think shifu doesn't know what I'm like by now?

"Fine, tell him when we get out. You brought the Territory Map rubbing, what do we do now?" Xi Ping waved a hand. He frisked himself and came up with a piece of reincarnation wood. "Don't sing if you don't want to. If you trust me, spill your blood on this. It'll be faster to use your consciousness to 'talk' directly."

At any rate, the monk could run away, but the temple couldn't run with him; if the disciple got him in trouble, at worst he could always go to Flying Jade Peak to demand repayment from General Zhi.

Wen Fei didn't so much as think about it before pressing a drop of his blood to the reincarnation wood.

"The spiritual energy in the Territory Map is different from the outside world's. Once it worms its way into your essence, you'll be here forever." As long as Wen Fei wasn't speaking aloud, his speech would be as quick as the words that flashed over his fan. As he spoke, by Xi Ping's light, he fed a mind-clearing pill to each of the unconscious established foundation cultivators.

As Xi Ping provided lighting for him, he transmitted the urgent information in his speech to the newly awoken and completely lost established foundations. Then he asked Wen Fei, "If we can't use spiritual energy, how are we going to get out? Walk? Where's the exit?"

Wen Fei's expression was a little grave. He shook his head and said, "We may not be able to get out in the near future. Back then, the Southern Sage suppressed the Territory Map with his own consciousness, forcing open a way out for Zhao Yin. Zhao Yin followed the lightning of his ascended spirit tribulation to get out... Unless another full moon sage emerges among us to tear open a passage... we'll have to wait for someone to take care of the Territory Map again."

Xi Ping stopped in his tracks.

All of them put together would probably still be as far from a full moon sage as heaven was from earth. And as for someone who could take care of the Territory Map again...

Just then, the ground began to shake. There was a roaring in Xi Ping's ears. Mournful screams burst into the black stillness of the Territory Map. Xi Ping instinctively sent his consciousness toward the sound.

In the Ning'an area near Jinping, as the buildings and the ground collapsed, mortals were being swallowed by the Territory Map—the cracks in the veins of the earth had reached Ning'an, and Lin Zongyi and Duanrui were trapped in Jinping, unable to attend to so distant a place!

CHAPTER 171 - Flower in the Mirror (14)

“Don’t move!” said Wen Fei.

But it was too late.

There was a certain danger in sending your consciousness out where your senses couldn’t reach. You would be in for it if you were caught by a malicious master. Half-immortals and established foundations would often have misgivings. But for an ascended spirit, all the mortal world’s continents and seas were theirs to stroll through at will. There weren’t so many “malicious masters” out there.

Except in a situation like the South Sea’s chaotic battle, where he had known very well that Xuanwu and Lingyun’s Cauldron of Nine Dragons were nearby, Xi Ping never had any misgivings. In eight years, he had gotten used to running rampant through the human world. This instance could serve as a lesson to him.

In the dark, his extended consciousness was like a frail kite. It enraged the Territory Map. A savage gale that seemed to come from the wild past came out of nowhere to attack him. Xi Ping was caught off guard. The out-flung thread of his consciousness was pulverized.

His vision darkened; even his gaze lost focus. He folded like an empty shell.

Next to him, Pang Jian had just woken up after taking the elixir. He was still confused. His reactions were a little slower than normal. He only caught Xi Ping by the hair.

Wen Fei’s scalp tightened. He looked away, simply unable to stand the sight.

Fortunately, before he was sucked into the Territory Map, Xi Ping had gone a round against the Heartless Lotus; his consciousness had been so badly shredded by that baldy that it had gone numb. He recovered in time, before General Commander Pang's talons could pluck him a bald spot. His consciousness, spread throughout the surrounding reincarnation wood trees, speedily returned to hold up his body. He narrowly managed to plant his heels in the ground. Inclining in the direction of Pang Jian's tug, he turned a half circle like an awl and fell to one knee with a thump.

Wen Fei, afraid that others would be as rash as him, impatiently opened his mouth to give a warning: "D-don't l-let out your consciousness here!"

Xi Ping's temples felt as though someone had crashed a pair of bronze cymbals on them. The veins on his forehead stood out. He felt that his brains had turned spindle-shaped. The blow from the Territory Map was comparable to the Heartless Lotus shredding his consciousness.

But for the moment, he had no attention to spare for anything else—in order to handle Zhuoming, his consciousness had been hidden all over the place. There was still a portion in the reincarnation wood trees in the outside world; and just now, he had discovered that he could still contact those portions of his consciousness. It was only that something divided the worlds inside and outside the Territory Map. The responses lagged heavily, and his consciousness couldn't enter and leave freely; he also couldn't swap his body with the reincarnation wood trees outside.

But it was still enough.

Ning'an Province's outlying counties had reincarnation wood. Enduring a splitting headache, Xi Ping sent his thread of consciousness on the outside through countless reincarnation wood

trees and ended up at the place where Ning'an's vein of the earth had cracked.

Ning'an was too close to Jinping. The local Heaven's Design Pavilion branch was basically Jinping's rearguard. If anything happened, they would immediately be transferred to the capital. Ning'an had currently become a blind spot.

There was a waterway running through the little town. The residences were all clustered along the banks. Under the riverbed, a black shadow was seeping out of the vein of the earth, which was cracking bit by bit, greedily spreading through the river within the town. The land of both banks was like melting wax, softening and being absorbed by the black dragon shadow.

Like a miser seeing a bank note fall into the fire and finding no tools to hand, Xi Ping's first reaction was to reach out his hand to scoop.

Outside the Territory Map, the reincarnation wood trees growing along the riverbanks all fell toward the crack. Perhaps because he was inside the Territory Map himself, just like when he had obtained the Territory Map rubbing, Xi Ping could use the reincarnation wood trees on the outside to touch the Territory Map.

The reincarnation wood trees' suddenly growing branches rapidly sketched a stream of talismans and stopped the constantly falling people and things.

At the same time, while his essence had yet to be emptied, Xi Ping made the reincarnation wood trees in the corresponding place inside the Territory Map grow wildly, connecting to the ones outside that had lain down and been caught in the hole in the vein of the earth. The reincarnation wood trees inside and outside of the Territory Map swiftly interwove, weaving a big, tangled and complicated net with an array plaited into it—he had picked it up

while the walkers in the mortal world were repairing the Dragon Vein.

The Territory Map, which had pulverized his consciousness earlier, erupted into fury. The force of collapsing mountains and overturning seas crashed against the thicket. Xi Ping felt that his brains were about to spurt out of his ears. His consciousness shouted to the dumbstruck mortals, “Move it!”

Gritting his teeth, he forced the tree branches down, blocking the hole. Whether the array had been drawn correctly or not, he had no energy left to fix it. He could only plaster it inside and out several times over, making a hideous “patch” over the vein of the earth.

Xi Ping’s eyes hurt as though they had been stabbed. Blood dyed the hair at his temples. Bai Ling held him up.

The hole in Ning’an’s vein of the earth was only a small crack, covering less than one li, but Xi Ping’s essence, which had emptied out nearly half the Kaiming Department’s reserves of spiritual stones, was once again in a critical state—with an ascended spirit’s essence, it was possible to guard one’s spiritual eyes while using spiritual energy and keep the contaminated spiritual energy inside the Territory Map from entering one’s body. But once the essence was used up...

Bai Ling quickly pulled out a handful of spiritual stones, but the moment the spiritual stones left his mustard seed, they turned to dust—the spiritual energy in a spiritual stone would disperse throughout the surroundings. This Territory Map was a bottomless whirlpool, greedily swallowing spiritual energy from the outside world.

“Spiritual stones are n-n-no good.” Wen Fei quickly took a handful of objects, each the size of a walnut and with a glossy surface, from

his mustard seed. It wasn't clear whether they were metal or stone. He stuffed them into Xi Ping's hand. "Take for yourself!"

Xi Ping's senses had nearly gone out of commission from the Territory Map's attack. He didn't take a close look at what the things were. He only felt that each "walnut" contained about as much spiritual energy as an established foundation's essence. He instinctively probed them with his consciousness and drained the "clean" spiritual energy inside.

Though for an ascended spirit, this bit of spiritual energy was like putting out a fire with a cup of water, at least it let him catch his breath and protect his spiritual eyes.

The drained "walnuts" fell to the ground, becoming an inauspicious slate grey. Next to him, Pang Jian was stunned. "Are those... silk dragon hearts?"

The silk dragon heart was the most valuable material that went into the established foundation pill. Probably the only person on earth who could fish up a handful at a time was the master of Rosy Cloud Peak. This thing could repeatedly absorb the surrounding spiritual energy and store it long term. It was like a portable cultivator's essence.

Many years ago, Pang Jian had gone south to the Land of Turmoil with a young man who understood nothing. The two of them had been as bad as each other, their minds filling with evil designs at the sight of riches. They had plotted to go to the spiritual beast pasture in Southern Shu's encampment to poach a silk dragon.

That young master who had grown up in the lap of luxury had said he didn't want the heart; he only wanted a bit of the silk dragon's horn... because a silk dragon horn could treat dim sight disease. He had been viciously ridiculed by Pang Jian.

Later, during the events of the East Sea, he and his things had disappeared together amid the vast waters. That segment of rather hard-won silk dragon horn had fallen into the Resurrection Vortex as well; no one had wanted it anymore.

Now, this was all like something from a past life.

Pang Jian automatically stepped forward to pick up the silk dragon hearts and was blocked by a wave of Wen Fei's sleeve.

“Don't.” Very determined to save face, Wen Fei kept his voice very slow, doing his best to only say each syllable once. “When the silk dragon... heart is empty, it... sucks in nearby spiritual energy, it's... *hss*... already... contaminated.”

Having said this, with a grave look, he turned to Xi Ping, “Xi Shiyong, can't... can't you be more like your shi... shifu? D-do you think y-you're the Southern Sage?”

“I'm not,” Xi Ping mumbled almost inaudibly. “Thank you... I'm not —and neither are Lin Zongyi or Her Highness Princess Duanrui.”

All the walkers in the mortal world, hearing him actually refer to the Dignitary of Rule High Elder by name, collectively drew in a breath.

“Stop hissing, if calling his name could summon him, I'd sit here yelling 'Lin Zongyi' ten thousand times, yell it until he wanted to change his name.” Xi Ping tilted his head to wipe the blood from his ears and heretically said, “Let me give you all some news that may or may not be good. The Dignitary of Rule and the Dignitary of Rites have both reached Jinping.”

When he had been repairing the vein of the earth, though he knew perfectly well that he shouldn't waste his strength, he had still been unable to restrain himself from looking toward Jinping—his

consciousness had lingered for a moment in the flowerpot at the Marquis Manor.

A number of houses and courtyard walls in Dangui Lane had collapsed; everything was in disarray. A group of half-immortals, along with Xi Yue, were collecting someone's corpse. But the Marquis was still sitting safe and sound at the gate. Xi Ping felt his father's warm palm on the reincarnation wood tree and halfway relaxed; he meant to leave, but he heard that his dad seemed to be... talking to san-ge.

From the point of view of the reincarnation wood, he couldn't see Zhou Ying. In the confusion, Xi Ping's mind was shaken. He instinctively followed the Marquis's gaze toward the sky. But that look didn't find Zhou Ying. Instead, through the chaos before those mortal eyes, he had seen Lin Zongyi and Duanrui in desperate straits.

The elders had come in time. Didn't that mean Jinping was secure and someone would take care of the Territory Map?

Before the others could feel pleased, they saw that the expression on Xi Ping's pale face wasn't right.

"Viscount, what's wrong?" said Bai Ling.

Xi Ping, leaning on Bai Ling, straightened up with difficulty. "I think that good-for-nothing Lin Zongyi..."

Pang Jian was shocked. "Xi Shiyong!"

Wen Fei seemed to have gotten stuck: "B-b-be c-c-care..."

"... doesn't seem to be a match for the Territory Map," Xi Ping finished.

Everyone instantly went silent.

It was well known that the Dignitary of Fate High Elder controlled the Sea of Stars, the Dignitary of Rites took care of the daily tasks of the thirty-six peaks, and the Dignitary of Rule, apart from being taciturn, had once been the Southern Sage's head disciple—and was now the foremost among Xuanyin's shed skins.

In the current age, apart from Sanyue's Xiang Rong and Kunlun's Sect Leader, who was supreme in the way of the sword, there were few people to rival him.

If even Lin Zongyi couldn't take care of the Territory Map...

Xi Ping looked up at Wen Fei. "Wen-shishu, Princess Duanrui isn't a shed skin yet. If we can't rely on Lin Zongyi, what else can we do?"

Wen Fei automatically glanced toward the center of Xi Ping's brow, then quickly averted his gaze. With a bitter smile, he said, "The Territory Map's seal is broken. Any rub-rubbing is... useless. What—what else can we do?"

Xi Ping immediately understood what he had left unsaid—if Lin Zongyi couldn't do it, then Xuanyin's only hope for taking care of the Territory Map had to fall on Zhi Xiu.

The moment the Silver Moon had swept through Jinping City and the Territory Map's seal had broken, the heavenly might oppressing Zhi Xiu had abruptly lightened.

Xuanyin's thirty-six peaks were shaking. The wrathful "heavenly might" had begun to focus all its strength outward, seeming to weaken moment by moment. Not long after, it had had no more attention to spare for him. It disappeared entirely.

Zhi Xiu went to his knees, leaning on Zhaoting. The cold sweat on his back had frozen long ago. He was like an ice sculpture. Ringing echoed in his ears. For a time, he could hear nothing.

Echoing repeatedly was Xi Ping's cry coming across the vast distance: "I'm begging you."

The Dignitary of Fate High Elder was outside Flying Jade Peak. Zhi Xiu's consciousness was being pushed and pulled repeatedly. He was exhausted.

The heavenly might that had wished to force him to bend his head had dispersed, but Zhi Xiu knew that this was no good omen. It was likely that the spiritual mountains were too busy to deal with him.

In a rare occurrence, Zhi Xiu took out a pill—sword cultivators didn't like to borrow external force. Though all the medicine Wen Fei had made for him was of the gentle strengthening and healing type and didn't even count as "external force," he had always thought that injury and illness were a part of cultivating the way of the sword.

But now he no longer cared about "cultivating." Rosy Cloud Peak's elixirs were the best on earth. As soon as the pill slid down his throat, Zhi Xiu's mind cleared. His meridians, which had nearly tied themselves into knots, immediately smoothed out. He caught his breath and split off a sliver of his consciousness to go to the shard of Zhaoting.

But he couldn't make contact—he could clearly feel that the shard of Zhaoting was still there, but something seemed to be obstructing his consciousness.

Zhi Xiu's pupils contracted slightly: what had happened?

Then he heard the Dignitary of Fate Elder's voice come to him on the wind and snow. "Jingzhai, the Territory Map's seal has broken,

the Dignitary of Rule cannot handle it. He just sent word. I can no longer stay here with you.”

The Territory Map’s seal was broken...

A cloud flitted by, driven by a wild wind. The shadow of the lofty mountain moved rapidly, covering the Dignitary of Fate High Elder entirely.

“But I fear that there is no help for it. Only the consciousness of a full moon sage could suppress it.” Zhang Jue sighed softly and closed his eyes. When he spoke, it was unclear whose voice came from him: “In Jinping City, nearly all the established foundation disciples have been sucked into the Territory Map... I do not know how long we can hold fast. If the Territory Map escapes, the thirty-six peaks will collapse. I am afraid... that I ought to bid you farewell.”

Having said this, Zhang Jue’s figure flashed, and he flitted toward Jinping... practically somewhat flurried.

Zhi Xiu’s gaze fell on the struggling birch sapling. In this brief span of time, the little sapling that had been repeatedly broken had once again put forth new shoots, just like grass after a brush fire. Beneath the flourishing life force that had been repeatedly honed, a spiritual light closely connected to yet also repelled by the Xuanyin Mountains glimmered on the branches and leaves, unwilling to submit.

Zhi Xiu touched a leaf with his consciousness. The spiritual light on the leaf echoed his consciousness. He sighed.

Zhaoting’s light flashed as it finally sliced toward that small sapling.

Just then, a wooden amulet passed through the mountain seal, meeting no resistance, just in time to shield the sapling from Zhaoting’s blow. The amulet, sliced in half, gave a miserable wail,

nearly shaking the accumulated snow off the sword platform. “Lin—Chi! Did I dig up your fucking ancestral graves?!”

Zhi Xiu: “...”

There was only one person apart from the master of Flying Jade Peak who could be allowed in by the mountain seal.

“What kind of way is that to talk, fiend?” Zhi Xiu raised a hand to summon the reincarnation wood Zhaoting had sliced apart into his palm. His scarred hands were still shaking. “Where are you?”

“Inside that big worm’s... that damn Territory Map’s belly. There’s not much of my consciousness left outside, if you break it I won’t be able to contact you. Take it easy, shifu.”

As he’d thought—Zhi Xiu’s hand tightened.

But then he heard this unruly disciple, as if he were stupid and had no idea what kind of deathtrap he’d wound up in, give three rather light-hearted laughs. “You know, it brought this on itself, daring to swallow me. This little master’s going to make sure all its guts run today.”

“Who are you calling yourself a master in front of? I’ve really spoiled you. Your manners get worse and worse,” Zhi Xiu interrupted him in exasperation. “Shiyong, listen to me...”

“La-la-la, I’m not listening. Heh, why don’t you work on that big worm instead, tell it to have a nice long chat with the Latent Cultivation Temple, the north slope, the Sanyue Mountains, and the Lingyun Mountains.”

“... Impertinent,” said Zhi Xiu.

“Shifu,” Xi Ping said, suddenly becoming serious, “do you know about how, years ago, my old dad wanted to rebel and run away to Northern Li on account of my aunt and unborn san-ge?”

The Zhou family’s demon-raising plot had come to nothing. For Zhi Xiu, belonging to the lineage of the Dignitary of Fate, the schemes of the mortals connected to it were apparent at a glance. All he’d had to do was take one look at the Sea of Stars.

“Yes.”

“My dad regrets up to this day that he didn’t persist back then. He’s always thought that even if san-ge died in the womb, he would still have been better off than he has been living this life. If he’d succeeded back then, everything would be different now,” Xi Ping said. “I used to think that the old fellow was right, but lately I’ve had some different thoughts about it..”

Far underground, Xi Ping, sealed into the Territory Map, as he talked to Zhi Xiu, was using his drop of consciousness on the outside to send all the people he knew in circles.

First he needed spiritual energy. It was the same for Xi Ping and Wen Fei—an ascended spirit’s essence couldn’t be restored with a few silk dragon hearts. If there was another small crack in the veins of the earth anywhere and they had no spiritual energy to restore themselves with, never mind the established foundations, even the two of them would be drained dry.

If a spiritual stone was taken out here, its spiritual energy would immediately be snatched away by the Territory Map. The only thing they could use was the silk dragon heart, like a cultivator’s “portable essence.”

Xi Ping had quickly contacted Lin Chi through the reincarnation wood. When he had asked him to deliver the reincarnation wood

amulet to Flying Jade Peak, he had also taken the opportunity to loot next-door Rosy Cloud Peak, turning up all the silk dragon hearts stuffed full of spiritual energy that the master of Rosy Cloud Peak had stored up. Lin Chi's consciousness, carrying a large quantity of silk dragon hearts, was brought into the Law Breaker's space by Xi Ping—Xi Ping had tried it out; the Law Breaker could actually penetrate the Territory Map.

When the first silk dragon heart lit up the Territory Map, a crowd of veteran walkers in the mortal world nearly burst into tears of joy.

In Tao County, in the Land of Turmoil, in the South Sea Hidden Realm... even in the Sanyue Mountains, everyone who held a reincarnation wood amulet heard Tai Sui's voice.

"Everyone," said Tai Sui, "this time, I need you to give me a hand."

Xi Ping raised the tinderbox in his hand, sending the manmade flame far out into the Territory Map. He said to Zhi Xiu, "... If my san-ge hadn't happened to pry open the Impassable Sea, the Zhou family's demon-raising plot might have succeeded by now, and Great Wan would have been destroyed fourteen years ago. I don't suppose that demon would have paid any attention to national boundaries or ethnicities, and he wouldn't have needed any papers to cross a border. The world would have collapsed into its state before the Great War of Gods and Demons.

"Isn't the current situation much better than a life and death struggle like that?"

"Shifu, don't you think that the hidden bones coming to me was actually because heaven couldn't stand to see all life extinguished and was leaving a gleam of hope for survival?" Xi Ping said softly. "What do stars know of destiny? They can't even explain *Detailed Account of Meridians*."

CHAPTER 172 - Flower in the Mirror (15)

The Silver Moon had used Xiang Ning's body to shatter Jinping's Dragon Vein. When Zhuoming disappeared, that patched-together Territory Map was also annihilated in the spiritual wind, and the Silver Moon withdrew from Great Wan.

On Sanyue's West Peak, Xiang Ning sat in his room without moving a muscle. He was like a human-shaped glass lantern, glowing all over, lighting up the whole room, a peculiar smile fixed on his face. Then, as if operated by clockwork, both the Silver Moon above the West Peak and Xiang Ning simultaneously turned in a half circle to face Great Wan.

Northern Li, Southern Shu, even the Queen Mother of the West and the others who had already returned to the Land of Turmoil, all of them sensed the upheaval in Jinping.

Outsiders couldn't work out at first what had happened. They could only tell that the Xuanyin Mountains were on the point of collapse—it was even more heart-stopping than the crying of the Lingyun Mountains.

First Lingyun, then Xuanyin. The impregnable spiritual mountains seemed to have turned into paper houses overnight, ready to topple at any moment.

In the Lingyun Mountains, the still fearful sect leader, elder, and all the Xiuyi masters were gathered near the fretful Cauldron of Nine Dragons, their hearts brought into their throats by the ominous noises coming from across the sea.

And just then, news reached Lingyun's summit that the inner sect masters who had been ordered to capture the Miah rebels had all passed away.

Apart from the sect leader and the shed skin elder, whose emotions didn't appear on their faces, all the Xiuyi erupted. Public sentiment was aroused.

Amid the pandemonium, Lingyun's sect leader at last gave a quiet sigh. "The Miah acting clan leader and two elders betrayed the nation. Without someone to sponsor them, all Miah on the main island must return to the Three Islands to face inspection. The Three Islands will be overseen by the main island's Dragon Subduing Knights. From this day forth, all Miah cultivators in both the inner and outer sects will be strictly investigated. But do your best not to disturb..."

The voice of the Lingyun Mountains struck word by word against the mortal world, sending clouds of dust flying.

The sect leader's conclusion of "Do your best not to disturb the mortal common people" was drowned out by rage and didn't reach anyone's ears. There was only the sorrowful wailing of the Cauldron of Nine Dragons.

In the mouth of the next life spiritual fish in the depths of the sea, Wangge Luobao felt the lotus seal on his consciousness quietly vanish. Like a sigh, he breathed in the stench of freedom. His song didn't stop.

This scheming "savior" had waited long enough; the disaster he wanted had arrived.

In Western Chu, after all the previously broken lines of transportation between Chu and Shu had been reconnected, today the Chu-Wan border was tightly locked down. All the boats on the Xia River received emergency orders to return to port. The Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon was canceled without warning.

Across the river, thick clouds covered the sky in Southern Wan's Yuzhou, and there was smoke everywhere. It was said that major and minor earthquakes were coming nonstop. And everyone knew that these were no ordinary earthquakes, because there were absolutely no tremors in Chu.

Rows of cannon were set up along Western Chu's border. The Xia Waterborne Troops all stood by awaiting orders. The riverbank was covered with standing Qilin Guardsmen. In mountainous Chu, a rare gale blew in. Raising your head, you could see the major and minor "offerings" of local thugs everywhere. Though it was nearly late morning, there was still a moon fixed in Western Chu's sky.

Taking advantage of the chaos, after eight years, the red-eyed Yu Chang passed through the Slumbering Dragon Sea and returned to Western Chu. He was toying with a new reincarnation wood amulet.

Between Wan and Chu... one was sure to come to a bad end today.

Only Tao County couldn't be reached by the wild wind. The earthquakes couldn't shake this place. It was as calm as a lone boat carrying a divine blessing in the midst of a stormy sea.

Men shouted, working together to chop down reincarnation wood trees. Aproned women moved deftly, gathering a large quantity of seeds in one place.

Tao-er-nainai was standing with some old neighbors by the street, watching the young people work. Waving a fan, she said, "Back when the government soldiers came and also wanted to cut down the trees, in order to save these misty willows, our people nearly started a fight with the Xia River Waterborne Troops... Who would have thought that one day we'd be bustling about cutting them down ourselves?"

“The misty willow can still grow as long as you don’t dig up the roots. Haven’t many of the ones that got cut down back then grown back?” a person next to her responded. “This time it’s Tai Sui himself telling us to do it... In a flash, it’s been a decade, and we’ve heard him speak once again.”

“Tai Sui doesn’t speak, but when you’re asleep at night, you can always hear qin music in your dreams. Any irritations that happened during the day vanish. Since spiritual energy was prohibited, these last eight years, I haven’t had any nightmares.”

“I haven’t heard it recently. I’ve heard people say there’s trouble everywhere outside.”

“That’s right, the southern border has been locked for months, and now in the east..”

“Let it go to hell. We follow Tai Sui.” Tao-er-nainai’s voice rose, the power of her lungs no less than in previous years. “This is Tao County. Even a god who shows up here has to walk on the ground. If a monster or demon stirring trouble outside dares to barge in, we’ll get together and beat him up like we did before. We’re not scared of anything!”

A large quantity of reincarnation wood trees were transported to the center of the Xia River Waterborne Troops’ garrison to await the Luwu there to send them batch by batch through the Law Breaker space to the various Kaiming Department branches.

Zhao Qindan had just secured a large quantity of silk dragon hearts off the black market. She stopped to catch her breath and looked east—toward her old home.

When Tai Sui had asked her to move silk dragon hearts from the black market, he had naturally told her the current situation with the Territory Map, regardless of whether she needed to know. Now,

outside of the Kaiming and the Luwu, she was one of the few people who knew what had actually happened in Southern Wan.

A half-immortal forced into foreign exile who was living under an assumed identity in a strange land—when the mountains were collapsing and the earth was cracking, apart from obeying orders and rushing around, what could she do?

Zhao Qindan stared blankly toward the sky-blotting dense clouds to the east for a moment. Suddenly, she strode back to the little school where she taught female students to read and write, picked up a brush, and started drafting a letter.

Those who had debated with her, those who had sympathized with her, those who had called her a hen crowing at daybreak...

The silk dragon hearts from the black market and from Rosy Cloud Peak were sent into the Territory Map, bringing spiritual energy.

In recent years, because Xuanyin had expanded the threshold for outer sect disciples to establish a foundation, the demand for established foundation pills had greatly increased, making the price of silk dragon hearts rise sharply—and this had been a valuable material that the evil cultivators of the Land of Turmoil would crack their heads open to snatch. Rosy Cloud Peak had been forced to reduce the remainder of its expenses, tightening its belt while wrangling with the Principal Peak for resources.

For the sake of these silk dragon hearts, Wen Fei's medicine-making disciples had each cultivated themselves into accountants. It could be said that at present all of Rosy Cloud Peak's fortune was concentrated in these silk dragon hearts.

Wen Fei silently swallowed a begrudging mouthful of stale blood, forced an "it's nothing" expression onto his face, and managed to

say nothing. Clearly you had to be a man of iron to have served as the general commander of Heaven's Design Pavilion.

The above-mentioned man of iron went behind the others' backs and, through the reincarnation wood, settled the account with Xi Ping at length: "Listen, sword god's disci... ancestor, even if you can bring together all the silk dragon hearts on the black market, empty out all the silk dragons in Southern Shu and let them die without progeny, bring all the spiritual energy from Rosy Cloud Peak here, will that be enough? No amount of spiritual energy can turn you into a shed skin. You're only 'eight years old,' you only know two sword moves. Wake up, you can't pluck an unripe sprout like this— anyway, the real shed skin is no use, either. Didn't you see that for yourself?"

Xi Ping gave him a wary glance and quickly retorted with his consciousness, "Who says I only know two sword moves? For a medicine cultivator, Peak Master Wen, you have quite the 'understanding' of the way of the sword."

Had they not been surrounded by people and eyes, Wen Fei would have put his face in his hands. "You smacked the Territory Map dozens of awe-inspiring times, and your posture throughout 'changed superficially without departing from the central idea.' A boiler-tender like me has no understanding of the way of the sword, but that doesn't mean I can't count!"

Xi Ping: "..."

At the same time, Zhi Xiu's voice came through the reincarnation wood. "Shiyong, you don't understand the Territory Map. Do not put on airs."

"I know, I just got pulverized by it," Xi Ping said. "Before the Territory Map escaped, only the Territory Map rubbing could touch that worm. But for some reason, Xuanyin Mountain only has the rubbing

for Jinping and the surroundings. The reincarnation wood trees on the outside originally couldn't touch the black dragon shadow, but because I'm inside it, they could just now. I know I can't compete against the Territory Map, but I can act as a 'rubbing' to connect the inside and outside."

"Be a rubbing for whom? Your shifu?" Wen Fei immediately said through the reincarnation wood. Because only the two of them could hear him like this, Wen Fei didn't need to worry about splashing cold water on anyone. He was rather free of scruples. "Allow me to explain. Your shifu's connection to the Territory Map isn't what you think. He isn't the 'master' of the Territory Map. He was only the person who got trapped at the rupture in the Dragon Vein... Let me put it like this, he's connected to the Territory Map at one end and to the Dragon Vein seal at the other. If he submitted to the spiritual mountains and became a sage, the spiritual mountains could naturally use him as a medium to suppress the Territory Map. But if he becomes an unconventional shed skin, Xuanyin won't acknowledge him. The Territory Map might have some friendly feeling toward him, but if you want to make a new shed skin whose boundary is unsteady do the work of three high elders, wouldn't that be pushing him beyond his strength?"

"I've been meaning to ask," said Xi Ping, "Peak Master Wen, your surname isn't Zhao, and you've had no dealings with the Zhao family. Why do you know the inside story about the Territory Map so well?"

"That's not important." Wen Fei waved a hand. "Anyway, I'm afraid this Territory Map that's always ready to make trouble won't wait for Zhi Jingzhai to become a shed skin. You don't have..."

Even without his fan. Wen Fei's crow's mouth was just as powerful.

Before he could finish saying "you don't have time," another ominous snap sounded inside the Territory Map. Wen Fei said, "Oh

no!”

This time, a vein of the earth had snapped in Yuzhou.

Fortunately, reincarnation wood was plentiful in Yuzhou. As soon as the vein of the earth began to split, before it could swallow up the surroundings, Xi Ping’s consciousness had instantly moved there. Wen Fei was afraid he wouldn’t be able to handle it on his own. “Take me!”

Xi Ping didn’t stand on ceremony. The next moment, Wen Fei’s vision swirled as Xi Ping swept his consciousness to the corresponding area in Yuzhou inside the Territory Map. Rapidly growing reincarnation wood trees clustered thickly to block the hole in the Territory Map, connecting to the reincarnation wood on the outside.

Wen Fei felt the pressure of the Territory Map that no one but a true full moon god could subdue pour into the top of his skull. As one of the medicine cultivators famous for the firmness of their consciousnesses, he felt extremely despairing—this was only a crack, and it had brought two great ascended spirits to this pass. Who could take care of the whole Territory Map?!

“Help me hold out a while!” said Xi Ping.

“You... you don’t ask for much...” said Wen Fei.

Fortunately, Xi Ping had learned from experience. His speed in repairing the vein of the earth was much more practiced than before.

But despite this, the two of them still used up quite a bit of the silk dragon hearts that Lin Chi had just sent in.

“You said it yourself, how could I make a shed skin whose boundary is unsteady do the work of three elders?” Xi Ping took a breath. “It’s not like the three elders are dead.”

Connecting inside and out, the reincarnation wood trees that had repaired the crack in the vein of the earth were clustered as if they were planted within the earth and towered to the sky. Looking from a distance, they were like the legendary pillar holding up the sky.

“I just asked some friends to help me prepare a large quantity of reincarnation wood seeds. There’s the Kaiming Department to provide support on the surface. I want to use this spiritual energy to drive ‘pegs’ into the Territory Map at all the veins of the earth throughout Great Wan.”

Before Xi Ping could finish, throughout Great Wan, the veins of the earth tore again and again, and some places had no reincarnation wood nearby!

“Stop bragging,” said Wen Fei. “There’s the Kaiming Department to provide support on the surface, but who’s going to plant the seeds underground?”

Before he could finish, he saw Pang Jian, who had also worked out Xi Ping’s predicament, take the initiative, flying up on his sword. “Give me the seeds. Split up to maneuver!”

Wen Fei’s consciousness immediately returned to his body. He shouted toward Pang Jian, “G—g-g-get down! An est-established foundation’s bit—bit of essence can’t match an a-ascended spirit’s, don’t use spiritual—spiritual energy, even a silk dragon heart can’t b-block the Territory Map’s encroach—encroach...”

“Peak Master Wen, you are a senior.” Wen Fei’s speech truly couldn’t keep up with Pang Jian’s progress. Before he could finish shouting this sentence, Pang Jian had already vanished. Only his

voice came their way. “Have you forgotten that to leave one’s bones in the ground is all a walker in the mortal world of Heaven’s Design Pavilion asks for in this life?”

CHAPTER 173 - Flower in the Mirror (16)

“Lao Pang!” A segment of reincarnation wood reached out of nowhere and caught Pang Jian roughly. “Wait, I’ll have the Luwu think of a way to send steam cars in...”

“Who can drive one of your metal shells that goes slower than a horse? If you tried going cross-province in that thing, you’d be seeing in the New Year on the road!” Pang Jian scolded, “Xi Shiyong, you’re shredding my pants!”

“Well, who told you to...” While Xi Ping narrowly held him back, he had already transported over via the nearest reincarnation wood. Then he barreled out of the tree and turned into a gust of wind, taking the shortest possible route to a hole without reincarnation wood nearby. “...pull my hair! Why are you talking like a pedantic old geezer who’s swallowed ancient wisdom without digesting it?”

At the urging of his spiritual energy, the reincarnation wood seeds, like their master, grew too fast for their own good.

Xi Ping was up to his ears in work, hastily running between the various cracks. Before his ears, struck painfully by the enraged Territory Map, could recover their hearing, the consciousness he had left on the surface glimpsed the Dignitary of Fate Elder arriving in Jinping City.

The Territory Map was struggling even more fiercely. Evidently the Dignitary of Fate’s arrival hadn’t brought about a turn for the better. The three elders were still going in circles around Jinping, desperately holding down the Dragon Vein while they tried to go through the Territory Map rubbing that Wen Fei had stamped on the ground to wrestle the black dragon shadow back underground.

It seemed that apart from Wen Fei's Territory Map rubbing of the area around Jinping, Xuanyin Mountain really had nothing else!

Even worse, the spiritual energy dispersed in the fighting was constantly being absorbed by that black dragon shadow. The more powerful the suppression, the more spiritual energy dispersed. The essence of a shed skin elder was comparable to one of Xuanyin's peaks. The Territory Map grew "fat" feeding on them. In this brief span of time, the black dragon shadow's girth had doubled. In one ferocious attempt to escape, it actually split apart the Grand Canal!

The banks of the canal had thrived since ancient times. It connected north to south. The speed of the canal rupturing was too fast for Xi Ping to repair by planting trees on his own!

Watching the breaks spread, Pang Jian shook off and snapped the tree branches that had turned his robes to rags. "If I hadn't started cultivating young, I'd have grandchildren older than you by now. If I'm not an old geezer, then what am I?! You're going to get yourself killed showing off. Can you look after so many mortals..."

Before he could finish, he was interrupted by a long whistle. The familiar whistle spread through the spacious and silent Territory Map; unexpectedly, there was something sorrowful about it.

Pang Jian froze. This was Heaven's Design Pavilion's whistle to summon the sacred beast.

Before the whistle was finished, a beast's roar answered. A palm-sized karma beast appeared out of nowhere and rushed toward the whistling Wen Fei.

Inside the Territory Map, the karma beast, which could only travel over things like walls and paper, had turned into a "living creature" that could be seen and touched, like the time Pang Jian had taken Xi Ping through the walls.

The little karma beast landed on the ground and gave a roar, then grew countless times, becoming a huge beast as tall as an elephant. Its roar was earthshaking. It lowered its head to gaze at the dumbfounded walkers in the mortal world. Its eyes were so big they were a little frightening, but in them was warmth and friendliness.

The big karma beast bent its big head and rubbed it against Wen Fei's hand. The next moment, it split into many avatars. One of them dashed away, just in time to catch Pang Jian, who had fallen from the reincarnation wood tree.

Wen Fei said, "Whose—whose elder are you playing at, disobedient little b-brat.."

The karma beasts moved much faster inside the Territory Map than on the outside. In a flash, they had leapt over a hundred li, far surpassing even the speed of masters riding swords on the surface. Only Xi Ping, who could swap places with distant trees any time, could keep up.

The karma beast avatars, carrying a group of walkers in the mortal world, planted reincarnation wood along the banks of the canal in the blink of an eye.

At the same time, the locally garrisoned Kaiming Cultivators also arrived one after another under orders. Along the banks of the canal, the reincarnation wood trees inside and out twisted into a patch like a scar, twining tightly around the veins of the earth. Countless silk dragon hearts broke in the process.

Xi Ping caught his breath and immediately pulled a portion of everyone's consciousnesses into the reincarnation wood so that the walkers in the mortal world dashing in all directions astride karma beasts could communicate easily. "Talk here!"

“Wait!” Pang Jian, who had been carried over a hundred li in an instant by a karma beast, was scattering seeds with perfect accuracy, but he was still bewildered. “What the hell is going on?”

The karma beast, looking at the reincarnation wood trees that spread as far as the eye could see, seemed somewhat displeased. It thought that these “evil cultivator’s trees” stank unbearably. It puffed out a breath, but, bowing to the dictates of the situation, didn’t use its claws and talons.

On seeing the exhausted Xi Ping stagger out of a tree, the karma beast only bared its tusks, charged over with earthshaking force, stamped him into the fragrant mud beneath the tree, and rolled him around—new grievances and old resentments were avenged.

Xi Ping: “...”

In the pitch dark, Pang Jian didn’t see this clearly. He only felt acute jolting beneath him. He blurted out his pet name for the karma beasts: “Careful, what did you step on to get tripped on like this? Peak Master Wen, why would Karmie be here? How did you know?”

Xi Ping dug himself out of the earth with difficulty, inwardly cursing in the languages of five nations at once. “Karmie... *Hss*, Lao Pang, have you gone around the bend from being an old bachelor? How sappy!”

Pang Jian was very perplexed by his attack. “What business is it of yours? I wasn’t talking about you.”

The karma beast, immensely proud of itself, rushed into the distance, letting out a sound halfway between a cat’s meow and a tiger’s roar.

Only now did Wen Fei, half a beat slow, say, “I didn’t know... I was just... just trying.”

His expression looked unusually bad. He didn't stutter when he spoke with his consciousness, but now he was for once a little incoherent. "Isn't the Territory Map also a dragon's shadow? So I had a sudden thought..."

Pang Jian and Xi Ping were both extremely clever. In the confusion just now, they hadn't thought about it, but now, seeing his expression, they also realized something was wrong.

The karma beast was a special kind of beast spirit. Tradition had it that it had once been the Southern Sage's treasured pet. After it had changed into a beast spirit, the Southern Sage had left it to the walkers in the mortal world, and it had become Heaven's Design Pavilion's exclusive sacred beast. It hated evil like a mortal foe. For thousands of years, it had accompanied batch after batch of blue-clothesers through life and death, walking between light and shadow, coming when called.

It could travel over all flat surfaces with human markings, but it didn't like to run over the ground—unless there were arrays or inscriptions on it.

But wasn't the Territory Map the ground's shadow?

So it wasn't that the karma beasts didn't like running over the ground. It was that when they passed through the earth, they were inside the Territory Map. Before, with the seal in the way, people had been unable to see it.

The sacred beast was like a magical ancient totem. The blue-clothesers had grown accustomed to having the company of the karma beasts. No one had considered where they went when they weren't working.

Supposing...

Supposing the karma beasts had always been inside the Territory Map, then didn't that show that this hateful Territory Map, which was wholeheartedly determined to break free of its seal and strike back against the spiritual mountains... had some inexplicable relationship to the Southern Sage?

Why had the Southern Sage kept the Territory Map such a closely guarded secret?

Xi Ping had witnessed Xiang Rong becoming a full moon sage, and he had heard the crying of the Lingyun Mountains. From the bottom of his heart, he held absolutely no veneration toward the spiritual mountains. He was the first to recover. He thought, So just as expected, if you dig down into the spiritual mountains' old roots, there'll be smelly fertilizer.

But right now, in order to avoid lowering morale, as though nothing were the matter, he still talked Wen Fei skillfully out of his predicament: "It was the Southern Sage who sealed the Territory Map, what's so strange about him leaving a fat watchdog to guard a locked gate? I've always wondered why back when Liang Chen used inscriptions to seize the Dragon Vein, that gap-toothed big-eyed lamp managed to bite through his burial robes..."

As if it could hear their conversation inside the reincarnation wood, the karma beast gave an angry roar.

But then a round-faced walker in the mortal world bluntly put in, "In that case, when the sage sealed the Territory Map, why didn't he just leave behind a rubbing instead of being all hush-hush and saying the Territory Map had been destroyed, putting us and the elders in this wretched situation?"

Xi Ping, who had just managed to turn the subject away: "..."

“He did leave one. The former Dignitary of Rites Elder Zhao Yin was a living Territory Map rubbing. If he were still alive, as a shed skin, he ought to have been able to control the Territory Map.” Suddenly, Wen Fei was no longer flippant. “Unfortunately, the Territory Map is too great. Each of the disciples who inherited Zhao Yin’s Way of the Heart only had a small portion of the rubbing branded onto them, and each successive generation was worse than the one before. The one I placed on Jinping came from the former master of Resonant Stone Peak, Zhao Long. He was Zhao Yin’s direct disciple. Because the portion of the rubbing he inherited was of the capital, he was highly valued.”

The former... master of Resonant Stone Peak?

But all the walkers in the mortal world—as well as Bai Ling—sighed when they heard this name. Xi Ping froze, finding that it seemed that apart from him, everyone present knew who was being spoken of.

Wen Fei, presuming that Zhi Xiu wouldn’t have told his disciple about this rotten business, explained briefly: “In Xuanyin’s dispute between the Li and Zhao families, the Dignitary of Code Elder Li Fengshan went into strict seclusion for a thousand years, and the great ascended spirit Li Yuelan had her spiritual bones removed. The charge was murdering a fellow sect member—oh, you could also say killing her own husband. That ‘husband’ was Zhao Long.”

Xi Ping was shocked. “The internal strife was that bad? An ascended spirit even passed away?”

“No, the master of Resonant Stone Peak’s passing must have been two hundred years ago, not long after Southern He’s invasion of the north. It was only that the true culprit was unknown at the time.” Pang Jian finally remembered that Xuanyin’s internal strife had taken place nearly forty years ago. Xi Ping hadn’t been born yet. So he put in a word. “This came out during the internal strife... Oh, Zhao Long was poisoned.”

Xi Ping was fairly well-acquainted with this trope, but it was his first time hearing of a version of it playing out in the Xuanyin Mountains. “Wait, without anyone knowing? The Sea of Stars didn’t know either?”

“Haven’t you been down in the Sea of Stars? It only gives a general direction for everything. It can’t spit out a note with the killer’s name written on it. Back then... for certain reasons, they wrongly accused another person and only reversed that verdict thirty-some years ago.” Wen Fei didn’t seem to want to say any more. “All right, none of that’s important. The Heartless Lotus must have put together his Territory Map rubbing after swallowing the Ways of the Heart of a crowd of Zhao family juniors. Others don’t have his skills or appetite. If you wanted to get a complete Territory Map rubbing, you’d need to use a forbidden art to strip it right off Zhao Yin or his chief direct disciples—more or less like peeling off a person’s skin and ripping out their tendons. Never mind that you couldn’t manage it—Xuanyin is an orthodox sect. It wouldn’t do that kind of thing. The Jinping piece really is the only part of the Territory Map rubbing on hand. It’s no wonder the elders are at wit’s end.”

Xi Ping heard his implication. “So the Territory Map rubbing you pressed onto Jinping was peeled off an ascended spirit?”

“Yes. The killer wanted it but didn’t get it,” Wen Fei was vague. “Later, by a series of coincidences, it fell into my hands.”

Xi Ping felt that his brief words hid countless secrets—“the killer wanted it”; after Jinping’s Dragon Vein had been damaged, Li Yuelan had deliberately gone after the Jinping Territory Map rubbing, not stinting to murder her own husband. What had she wanted? And taking a step back, fights among cultivators had in fact been common in ancient times. It was only in recent years that the spiritual mountains had stabilized the social order and everyone had begun to abide honorably by the laws for the sake of the big

picture. Reasonably speaking, Li Yuelan's crime of murder wouldn't have merited having her spiritual bones removed—the last person who'd had the “fortune” to suffer this punishment had been Hui Xiangjun, who had nearly shaken the foundations of the immortal mountains.

And was leaving aside that this case had also drawn in one of Xuanyin's four elders. You could count the extant shed skins on your fingers. As long as they didn't publicly defect like Xuanwu, anything an elder did was “in compliance with the Will of Heaven.”

Also, among Xuanyin's thirty-six peaks, Wen Fei was the only proper medicine cultivator at the ascended spirit level. So in a case involving “poisoning,” who would have been tasked as the lead investigator? And thirty-some years ago, who was it who had reversed the verdict and brought an end to the struggle between the Li and Zhao families?

Through the reincarnation wood, Xi Ping took a glance at Wen Fei. He saw this medicine cultivator who never looked decent with his eyes slightly cast down. In the dark, he wasn't smiling, exposing the icy-cold underpinnings of his flesh and bones.

Yes—on learning last night that something had happened in Jinghua Village, seeing Zhuoming destroying Xuanyin's veins of the earth, Peak Master Wen's first reaction had been to take the Territory Map rubbing and leave the mountains without authorization... It seemed that Wen Fei hadn't been “seized with anxiety” and forgotten to notify the elders. The history of his Territory Map rubbing must be something he couldn't account for.

“In the end, this is my fault,” Wen Fei said, understanding the meaning of Xi Ping's silence. “I had thought that Zhao Long's complete rubbing would be enough to handle an evil cultivator like the Heartless Lotus. I came rashly without reporting to the elders. I hadn't expected that the Sanyue Mountains would really dare to

openly invade the imperial capital. If there is no way to repair the situation brought about by the Territory Map's seal breaking today, I ought to be the one to pay for it with my life. I shouldn't have gotten all of you involved... as well as Jingzhai..."

Zhi Xiu, who had been silent until now, suddenly spoke. "Had the Silver Moon not smashed apart the Territory Map's seal, even if you had voluntarily turned in the rubbing, the elders still wouldn't necessarily have done anything with it. Rather..."

Zhi Xiu always made allowances in his speech. For him, saying this much could already be described as harsh—rather, they would have locked up Wen Fei along with that rubbing of unknown origin.

A few cracks in the veins of the earth were nothing to worry about. As long as the Territory Map didn't break, matters wouldn't reach the point of no return. Great Wan had been peaceful too long, such that the country had forgotten that there were eyes watching them covetously over the borders; "disloyalty" could even grow within their own spiritual mountains. A small upheaval would have been just right to force Flying Jade Peak, where "grass" was growing, to get back on track and return to the orthodox Way, stop being "willful."

Zhi Xiu raised his head to watch the rapidly changing sky over the spiritual mountains: it took a hundred million ants to shake the spiritual mountains; in tiny Jinping... there weren't a hundred million people, after all.

Just then, there was a sudden boom among the thirty-six peaks that even passed through the mountain seal to disturb Flying Jade Peak.

Zhi Xiu froze. At the same time, everyone inside the Territory Map felt their consciousnesses nearly squeezed to nothing. The overlapping conversations inside the reincarnation wood were cut off.

Another sliver of Xi Ping's consciousness shattered. He grit his teeth, maintaining a thread of clarity to keep from losing his connection with the Law Breaker and being unable to get silk dragon hearts in time. Then he heard Lin Chi say, "Resonant Stone... Resonant Stone Peak has collapsed!"

After a peak master died, their disciples would be dispersed among the remaining peaks to wait for the next ascended spirit to take over. Resonant Stone Peak had been the Zhao family's asset. After the Zhao clan's revolt eight years ago, Xuanyin had emptied out nine major peaks at once. There weren't so many ascended spirits in the inner sect. The peaks couldn't be managed, so they had all been sealed.

Now, the corner of the spiritual mountains that had been under the control of the Territory Map rubbing's master seemed to have melted. As the vein of the earth collapsed, the thirty-six peaks became thirty-five peaks!

Reincarnation wood couldn't be permitted to grow in the vicinity of the Xuanyin Mountains. This place was one of Xi Ping's blindspots.

The Territory Map, which had just been caught in coordinated attacks from inside and outside and had seemed nearly spent, had simply broken the mountain seal while no one was paying attention. This thing had to be a scourge left behind by the Southern Sage. How could it even extend inside the spiritual mountains?!

The Territory Map, taking the "pillars" that Xi Ping and the others had woven with reincarnation wood for foreign objects, was trying to squeeze them out. All their consciousnesses added together could hardly withstand it. The Kaiming Cultivators on the surface, seeing the situation, sank their consciousnesses into the reincarnation wood without hesitation, protecting the pegs they had just managed to drive into the Territory Map.

But these were only a few half-immortals who had opened their spiritual eyes less than twenty years ago. The bulk of the forces were still overseeing the evacuation of the nearby common people and couldn't make it in time.

“Lin... get the inner sect...”

There was no need for Xi Ping to speak; Lin Chi and Zhi Xiu simultaneously sent Heavenly Questions that flew throughout the country—all the ascended spirits and the experts among the established foundations of Xuanyin's inner sect had already spread throughout the provinces. The Heavenly Questions clearly pointed out the locations of the arrays created from reincarnation wood. The inner sect's masters each arrived in the blink of an eye.

On seeing the scalp-numbing clusters of reincarnation wood, Xuanyin's inner sect masters froze. Hearing the Kaiming Cultivators say that they needed to spill their blood and send their consciousnesses into the wood, they immediately became hesitant.

Blood, consciousness, spiritual image... There were all taboo objects in the immortal sects. The inner sect wasn't the inexperienced Kaiming Department; who among them hadn't heard of the ancient demonic gods and accompanying plants?

An ascended spirit said, “The implications of this action are profound. We must ask the elders for instructions...”

How could the elders be in the mood to pay attention to them right now?

All of Resonant Stone Peak's spiritual energy surged into the Territory Map. Even the flow of air and water in Southern Wan's part of the continent went wild, rivers turning back on themselves—

In Jinping City, the Dignitary of Fate said “oh no” to himself and tore off his blindfold. “Careful!”

He and Princess Duanrui were holding down the black dragon shadow together, while Lin Zongyi had sunk practically all of his consciousness into Jinping’s shattered Dragon Vein. One series of inscriptions after another passed over his face. He was temporarily filling in for the Dragon Vein himself.

The black dragon shadow suddenly began to swell. It gave a sudden shake, and Zhang Jue and Duanrui were simultaneously thrown off.

At this, the factories in the southern outskirts caught fire. Guangyun Palace had already turned to ruins. Lin Zongyi’s efforts fell short at the last moment; the inscriptions covering him abruptly disappeared. A mouthful of blood stained his mouth seal.

The black dragon shadow took aim at the foremost of the Xuanyin shed skins, abruptly raised its head, and was just about to fight free of the hateful reincarnation wood nails holding it and swallow Lin Zongyi.

Teeth-aching cracks came from the reincarnation wood array formation that seemed impregnable as a fortress. Inside the Territory Map, no one could contact each other anymore.

Just then, Xi Ping sensed something.

Those densely-packed, interwoven reincarnation wood trees inside and out seemed to have become a passageway. In an instant, millions of consciousnesses poured in like the tide, narrowly bearing up under the pressure.

These consciousnesses were extremely weak, nearly all without spiritual light, a large portion of them even formless—formless

consciousnesses usually belonged to people who were feeble-minded... or even completely witless.

Wen Fei and the others had never seen this many consciousnesses belonging to mortals. Surrounded by them, they hardly dared to breathe too deeply: the tiniest injury to a mortal's consciousness would kill them.

But these countless consciousnesses, slender and frail as ox hair, arranged into a closely-packed formation, actually managed to sustain the pressure that even an ascended spirit peak master couldn't endure.

In the Land of Turmoil, in the South Sea Hidden Realm, the Turmoilers who considered themselves Indignant Cicadas had their hands on all forms and kinds of reincarnation wood, concentrating breathlessly. Many of them had been born mentally handicapped and didn't even understand what they were doing; they were only willing to brave any danger for Tai Sui.

The Territory Map was yanked back, and Duanrui narrowly managed to pull Lin Zongyi away with her whip. The black dragon shadow clung to the earth of Jinping with all four feet.

CHAPTER 174 - Flower in the Mirror (Final)

“A-Xiang!” Xi Ping was the only one not in the least bit shaken. His scalp went numb. He immediately passed a message to Wei Chengxiang, far away in the South Sea. “Who’s leading this? Have they gone crazy?”

Inside the Territory Map, even the consciousness of a master could easily be mauled. It was only that cultivators tempered their minds daily and their consciousnesses could move freely; if they really couldn’t stand it, they could always withdraw back into their bodies in time to catch a breath. Mortals, however, were nowhere near so nimble.

Mortals hadn’t opened their spiritual eyes. Their spirits were in chaos, and their consciousnesses couldn’t leave their bodies voluntarily, unless they “consigned” themselves using a special medium like reincarnation wood. Once they were consigned, they couldn’t voluntarily withdraw. These consciousnesses with no control over themselves were like snails that had lost their shells. Even a slightly keen spiritual wind could destroy them utterly.

Xi Ping was furious. “Control them! I can’t even look after myself! How could I protect so many people?”

Wei Chengxiang, hearing his indistinct irascible voice, for some reason suddenly remembered the scene of her first contact with this person. He’d been angry enough to swear when she called him “Tai Sui” and, stamping his feet, had drawn a clear line between himself and his “believer.”

Never mind that he spent all his time putting up the steady and competent front of “Tai Sui” — thinking back on it, he really had been unreliable back then. Even ignoring his bellyful of lousy ideas, he

hadn't known a single proper thing. Relying solely on good luck, he had only been able to trick a child in her teens.

“Uncle,” Wei Chengxiang said, using this former form of address half-mockingly, “in the human world, the Turmoilers aren't even good enough to make up the numbers. When they die by the road, it's no different from rats dying. What do you care? If they're any use, make do and use them.”

Xi Ping thought something was wrong with his ears. “What the hell are you saying? What's wrong with...”

Wei Chengxiang sank her consciousness into the reincarnation wood. She was closer than anyone in the world to the master of the reincarnation wood—after all, she had once pawned her “life while living and corpse after death” to this tiny amulet... though they had later been returned.

Inside the reincarnation wood, her consciousness led the Turmoilers, like an expert guide who could distinguish directions with a look at the sky.

“Unless you view them as people.” While she could still speak, Wei Chengxiang used the last of her strength to interrupt him. “How could a person control another person? Can anyone control you? I don't think so. So how am I supposed to control them?”

After Liang Chen had learned the truth about the Impassable Sea, he had been unable to get past it. In the Land of Turmoil, which had no one to govern it, he had established a small village to take in Turmoilers. Pang Jian had discovered it, but he had been unable to bring himself to disturb those people; he had let them be. Later, they had fallen into the hands of the Indignant Cicadas' fake holy woman Wei Chengxiang.

The holy woman was fake; “Wei-laoban” was real.

She was unaccomplished as a cultivator. She had spent her time fleeing left and right, looking for food to scrounge while thinking up ways to get money and materials to use to support these abandoned people. She had turned the small village into a town with the flame of civilization in the Land of Turmoil.

Still later, Tai Sui had personally gone to the Land of Turmoil, bringing with him the powerful network of connections and resources of the Luwu at his back, turning her small town into countless sparks scattered across the wilderness of the Land of Turmoil. Many people like Li Manlong were scattered everywhere. They were once again picking up the old customs of Southern He, educating and bringing enlightenment to He's descendants... Now, in the depths of the sea, they even had their own home and were moving there group by group.

Xi Ping was doing all he could to withstand the Territory Map's attacks. He couldn't prevent the constant stream of mortal consciousnesses coming in. "What does trouble in Southern Wan have to do with them? Doesn't Li Queru teach history? Hasn't he told them why Southern He was destroyed, how they ended up like this?"

Wei Chengxiang could no longer speak. She thought, It wasn't because of you, anyway.

At this point, Xi Ping had already "sewn up" dozens of cracks in the veins of the earth with reincarnation wood, spreading practically across all nine provinces, but the patches were very evenly distributed.

He only needed to take advantage of the elders holding down the Territory Map, follow the veins of the earth, and drive in another dozen or so "nails" of reincarnation wood at some critical junctures in the veins of the earth according to what he had already done.

Then he would be able to hammer out a complete Territory Map rubbing with reincarnation wood.

With that rubbing, the people on the surface would be able to touch the Territory Map itself. The three elders would no longer be closely restricted to the area of Jinping, and the masters outside would no longer have to risk their lives holding down all the veins of the earth.

They only needed to use a drop of blood, and they would be able to lead their consciousnesses into the reincarnation wood, alleviate both the symptoms and the root of the problem, beat the troublemaking Territory Map right back into the earth.

Xuanyin had three high elders, a passel of ascended spirit masters, and countless hardworking established foundations on the thirty-six peaks... Everyone said that Xuanyin's established foundations were stronger than Sanyue's ascended spirits surnamed Xiang. Was it possible that if they pooled the strength of the whole sect, they wouldn't be able to suppress one Territory Map?

But that turned out to have been wishful thinking on his part.

After rushing around, asking people abroad to send seeds and chop down trees, nearly draining dry all the silk dragon hearts on Rosy Cloud Peak and the black market—having done all he was capable of doing—the only thing he hadn't thought of... was that the masters on the outside wouldn't do it.

The immortal mountains were orthodoxy. They wouldn't entrust their consciousnesses to a conceited "evil tree."

He ought to have been disheartened, but instead a crowd of fools who didn't even look human had come ready to die for him indiscriminately.

This was simply the most absurd thing in the world. Xi Ping didn't know whether he ought to laugh or cry, and he didn't know for whose sake he was pouring out his utmost effort.

He would have loved to give it all up on the spot, do his best to send these Turmoilers away and be done with it. Let the mountains fall, let the country die. At worst he'd spend the rest of his life underground with the Territory Map, treat it as being imprisoned in another Impassable Sea.

But Jinping still had the Marquis Manor. The spiritual mountains were still holding his shizun. San-ge was still going farther and farther along a path of no return... He was bound by many cares like a spiderweb, making life intolerable but death impossible.

The Tai Sui Qin was moved by his heart. Unplucked, it played the Soul Calling Melody on its own.

Just then, a leaf floated out from the qin, breaking off its music.

“Shiyong.” Zhi Xiu's voice spoke into his ear. “If today the spiritual mountains topple because of the Territory Map, the condemnation of the ages will fall on me and the Xuanyin Mountains, not on you.”

“Shifu...”

“Do your best,” Zhi Xiu said, his voice as steady as the backbone of a snow-capped mountain, “and leave the rest to me... and fate. Of the thirty-six peaks, at least Flying Jade Peak is still here.”

As he finished speaking, a beam of clearest sword energy flew out from the snow-capped mountain and tore Flying Jade Peak's mountain seal—the inner and outer layer both.

Thunderclouds curdled above the snow-capped mountain.

But these thunderclouds were overhasty. One of the thirty-six peaks had just collapsed. The Territory Map at the spiritual mountains' feet had bitten their "tail." They couldn't even look after themselves; they had no strength left to suppress the traitorous sword cultivator on the snow-capped mountain.

Flying Jade Peak, which had always been sealed because of its master's laziness, shook off the frost and snow, revealing its true appearance. All the auspicious omens on the mountain felt something and scattered in a panic. Several of the surrounding mountain peaks began to shake as well. The Bell of Tribulation gave a loud *dong*, but when it struck the decade and more's accumulation of sword cuts covering the slope, it revealed that its strength was only a cloak over weakness.

When Sanyue's Xiang Rong had become a full moon sage, the tumult had been large enough to nearly flatten the whole Sanyue Mountain Range. But the shed skin on Flying Jade Peak was almost silent.

The snow melted. The new snow-white trees grew instantly into a forest, spreading outward from the sword platform, stabilizing the tottering north slope, trapping the spiritual energy that was leaking out.

The fleeing figures of the frightened auspicious animals calmed bit by bit, and the wild wind also came to a sudden halt. The sharply rising "snow shuffler" precisely caught a blue luan nest that had been blown down by the wind.

There was only a single beam of sword energy pointing toward the firmament, its keenness undisguised.

"Move."

That sword energy met the thunder and lightning. It pierced through the thunderclouds as easily as crushing dry weeds. Where Zhaoting's light passed, the thunderclouds were torn to shreds by this sword that had begun life as mundane iron.

What clouds of tribulation are qualified to pass judgment upon me?

The spiritual mountains had blotted out of the sky and rewritten the heavenly commandments. This was the first cicada to crawl out onto the surface.

The snow shuffler leaf on the Tai Sui Qin disappeared, carrying away a reincarnation wood seed, and was instantly taken by its master to the place in the Territory Map corresponding to the Xuanyin Mountains.

At the same time, Lin Chi appeared riding a sword and tossed a handful of reincarnation wood seeds toward collapsing Resonant Stone Peak.

The reincarnation wood narrowly managed to nail down the black dragon's tail in the spiritual mountains.

But a collapse among the spiritual mountains was beyond Xi Ping's ability to repair. As soon as the reincarnation wood grew, the Territory Map tried to uproot it.

Following the branches of the reincarnation wood connecting the inside and outside of the Territory Map, the southern continent's sole shed skin sword cultivator sent his consciousness to split open the Territory Map.

The snow shufflers swiftly followed where the sword energy passed, filling the trench left by Resonant Stone Peak's collapse. The trunks of these trees were upright as spears, like ranks of soldiers utterly loyal to their duty. The leaf inside the Territory Map, on its master's

urging, turned into a beam of sword energy. Zhaoting's light lit up the pitch black Territory Map.

Wen Fei caught his breath and let out a long sigh as though in relief — Zhi Jingzhai had chosen his path in the end.

Everyone's consciousnesses were connected by reincarnation wood. Pang Jian intellectually understood what had happened, but he was instantly struck dumb: General Zhi a shed skin... An accompanying plant... Not the kind of accompanying plant that came of wandering by mistake onto the wrong road, by a series of coincidences inheriting some demonic god's way; this was the first one in history to break through the earth on its own among the spiritual mountains.

But... wasn't it said that only one who betrayed the three thousand paths of the Great Way would cause an accompanying plant to be born?

Betrayed...

“Shiyong, don't get distracted!”

The snow shuffler had blocked the opening through which the Territory Map was absorbing the spiritual mountains' spiritual energy. The shed skin's consciousness all at once undertook the majority of the Territory Map's pressure. The few remaining silk dragon hearts seeped into the root system of the reincarnation wood. Following the veins of the earth, throughout Great Wan's nine provinces, countless reincarnation wood trees grew inside and outside of the Territory Map.

Then Xi Ping grit his teeth and turned back to Jinping—at the most intense point of Jinping's battlefield, there were still a scant few reincarnation wood trees left over from the seeds Xi Yue had tossed out.

Shielded by the sword energy, under the weight of the shed skin battle, he forced the reincarnation wood to grow. A layer of sword light plated the trunks of the reincarnation wood trees, bouncing back the spiritual wind around them.

Xi Ping had nearly fallen unconscious. In his spirit, only the light of the shard of Zhaoting was illuminating a bit of awareness for him. The reincarnation wood's branches moved bit by bit, forming a thread linking inside and outside, making a tiny knot over the original hole in the Dragon Vein.

In an instant, Xi Ping's consciousness covered the whole of Great Wan. He could feel it as a complete Territory Map rubbing, crystal clear, landed on his spirit!

The spiritual mountains, the veins of the earth, the mountains and rivers were all visible at a glance.

Xuanyin's elders were all masters; they were extremely acute. The moment the new Territory Map rubbing formed, Duanrui, Zhang Jue, and Lin Zongyi all felt it.

Duanrui relaxed slightly: at last there was a turn for the better.

But in the eyes of Zhang Jue and Lin Zongyi, murder flashed.

The same thought arose in the minds of both great shed skins: The Territory Map always wants to strike back at the spiritual mountains. Zhao Yin is dead, and the only complete rubbing that can touch the Territory Map has now fallen into the hands of an outsider.

Xuanyin had only just managed to control this wild and ungovernable successor to a demonic god...

Zhou Ying watched the battle from the west bank of the Lingyang River—Guangyun Palace had been trampled, and Dangui Lane had been unable to remain intact; half the street had collapsed as well. Even the Marquis Manor’s main gate was gone. Xi Yue and a group of Kaiming Cultivators had escorted the mortals in Dangui Lane to Cui Ji’s compound.

The demon eyes pierced through the obfuscation. Zhou Ying saw Zhang Jue and Lin Zongyi become more than halfway “grey,” hardly looking human anymore.

He picked his time precisely, calmly sending a message to Duanrui: “Your Highness, look out.”

Then a fierce struggle flashed over Zhang Jue’s face. His expression momentarily looked unexpectedly savage. Then it was once again forced to flatten out by the “grey energy.” He aimed a blow at the frail reincarnation wood knot.

Princess Duanrui’s whip dropped Lin Zongyi and swept over.

She held up Zhang Jue himself for a moment, but the force of his blow had already flown out. At the same time, Lin Zongyi’s figure flashed over. His eyes, as ice-cold as the Yuntian Palace Discipline Hall, were fixed on the reincarnation wood on the ground.

Duanrui, one person half a step short of the boundary, couldn’t stop two shed skins no matter what—

Xi Ping had in fact not anticipated that under these circumstances, Zhang Jue would drop the Territory Map and strike at him. But for some reason, when he considered it, he thought that this was the way it ought to be. He actually laughed.

The shard of Zhaoting in his spirit fractured into countless points of light, enveloping his whole body, pulling his consciousness from the

reincarnation wood, ready to meet the Dignitary of Fate's attack.

Zhou Ying lightly tossed the heart demon seed in his palm as though it were a die and caught it on the back of his hand. He thought, The true shed skin who has torn open a thread of heaven is matched against the spiritual mountains' two puppets. Who will be superior?

But in a flash, Lin Zongyi, staring fixedly at the reincarnation wood, contrary to everyone's expectations, pierced through the "grey energy" tightly binding him and blocked the force of Zhang Jue's blow.

The reincarnation wood trees' leaves shook gently in the remnants of the blow. Lin Zongyi didn't pause. Taking advantage of his momentary freedom, he cut open his finger and spilled a drop of blood onto the reincarnation wood. Through Xi Ping, the new rubbing, his consciousness sank into the Territory Map.

Maybe sometimes, until the final juncture, people themselves do not know what choice they will make.

Even Xi Ping was stunned.

Xuanyin's most cold-blooded and unfeeling Dignitary of Rule Elder had chosen to stand with the reincarnation wood, doing what no other inner sect master had dared to do. His consciousness reached into the Territory Map and caught the black dragon around the neck. The pressure on Zhi Xiu instantly decreased by half.

At the same time, Lin Zongyi's voice was sent throughout Great Wan by the reincarnation wood. He ordered: "Seal the Territory Map!"

The irresolute inner sect elites followed suit one after another. Inside the Territory Map, tears of joy brimmed in eyes of the walkers in the

mortal world who were sprawled on the backs of the karma beasts —the Xuanyin Mountains, which had been in constant internal strife ever since the time of the Southern Sage, could for once join forces and act with one mind.

Zhou Ying alone finally frowned—this deviated from what he... what the “him” from before entering the way of clarity had anticipated.

Reaching out for the small box he carried with him, Zhou Ying put the lid on the box of notes.

“This is bad,” he said inwardly to the box. “Lin Zongyi has created a new problem.”

“Uncle,” Zhou Ying said, “take my aunt into a room protected by arrays. Don’t watch.”

At the same time, he sent a message to Duanrui: *Lin Zongyi’s consciousness must not enter the Territory Map!*

Duanrui, just about to follow, froze: *Why?*

At precisely that moment, there was a sudden change. Inside the Territory Map, an ominous tolling sounded... It was very similar to the sound of the Bell of Tribulation. Only Lin Zongyi could hear it.

The ancient shed skin froze in place.

The cultivation of the ascended spirits wasn’t strong enough, not qualifying them to touch the true origins of the Territory Map, and Zhi Xiu had removed the stamp of the spiritual mountains from himself when his accompanying plant had been born. There was only Lin Zongyi—the person closest to the Southern Sage—who, the instant he touched the heart of the Territory Map, without warning, saw clearly the truth that the Southern Sage had once understood through the demon host.

Slowly, Lin Zongyi's consciousness turned its gaze onto the surface. He saw his own puppet-like body, as well as the grey spiritual energy inside him.

At the final juncture, the humanity he had narrowly won through a momentary slip had pushed him toward a dead end.

Xi Ping, connected to his consciousness, quaked with terror as he heard a crack—the Dignitary of Rule's Way of the Heart had shattered.

The Territory Map, which they had forced into an impasse, was ready to burst into applause. Boundless darkness swept over, ready to swallow the shed skin who had come especially to offer himself up.

Lin Zongyi came to his senses and used the last of his strength to break free of the Territory Map. The grey energy that had covered him like armor dispersed, revealing the person beneath. Two trails of blood flowed from the corners of his eyes. "Zhou Xueru!"

With the passing of a shed skin, Jinping... nearly half the country would collapse.

Duanrui didn't stop to think. She caught Lin Zongyi with her whip and dashed toward the East Sea like a meteor.

The Dignitary of Rule's crushed Way of the Heart had raised a spiritual wind. Lin Zongyi no longer had the strength to cover up what he had touched inside the Territory Map. It threw itself at Princess Duanrui along with the overflowing spiritual energy.

Duanrui, who had spent eight hundred years bitterly seeking a way out, saw the end of the way of clarity—a dead end where all came to nothing.

But after a pause, she quickly averted her gaze. She only very firmly turned her head to take a glance at her native land.

In Great Wan, late summer was blending into early autumn. There was a riot of color.

She saw countless people... mortals, workers, farmers... following the lead of people holding up toilet bulletins and flying goose letters, surging toward the reincarnation wood trees beside the veins of the earth. When a person loudly read something out, one after another, the people cut open their fingers and grabbed hold of the reincarnation wood growing through the cracks.

Men and women, young and old, all in great numbers.

The perennially frozen corners of Duanrui's—of Zhou Xueru's—lips moved. She smiled. Then, with the crumbling Lin Zongyi, she jumped into the Resurrection Vortex.

There lay the place where her ancestors had been buried.

To the end of her days, she never cast off her plain clothes.

CHAPTER 175 - Tomb of the Sage (1)

“...you either live in cramped quarters or wander the marketplaces. You draw heavenly light to plate mundane iron, pay tribute to sages past with your toilsome study. On your shoulders rests the weight of parents whose temples are weathered with frost and snow, of children whose flesh and bones are as frail as matchsticks. Born into this world, you rise early and retire late—how could you dare to snatch a moment’s leisure?”

“When the wind rises, your lives are pricked like paper. Fragrant clouds stoke the consuming flames, luxurious mansions hasten the profusion of desolate graves. Cries of distress meet with no response, only attract the inquiries of monsters and ghosts...”

The black dragon shadow was like a flood dragon meeting floodwaters head on. Its claws scrabbled wildly with nothing to cling to. Now, the time had come for it to behold heaven and earth.

The dragon shadow that had fallen over the earth was forced down. Inside the pitch black and silent Territory Map, there was a cacophony of voices.

They came from Great Wan’s nine provinces, in a mixture of accents, sticking heavily to the reincarnation wood, reciting over and over in Xi Ping’s ears the article distributed by Zhao Qindan under her pen name “Scholar Xu.” There were some who were literate and could memorize it, but the majority of people didn’t really understand. They listened to others explain it—the same way they usually chased after the scholars to hear gossip and anecdotes from the toilet bulletins, laboriously asking after their own stories, remembering only a phrase here and there.

It had been a rare year of favorable weather. The harvest was nearly here. Yet now the waters were about to breach the dykes. When the

factories caught fire and people hastened to the rescue, they couldn't predict that the houses behind them, which they had spent three years saving up to repair so they didn't let in the rain, would half collapse. They would miss seeing their old mothers paralyzed in bed one last time, their wives would be missing, perhaps dead...

Was it true that this time they could shoulder the catastrophe just by sinking into the earth?

In a mortal's life, could there also be a moment when they would not have to submit to the will of heaven?

"The spiritual mountains are distant—not a speck of dust will reach to stain them. The Great Way is boundless—the people do not have a speck of land to call their own."

Even the "Territory Map rubbing" itself—Xi Ping's consciousness—was submerged in the wave of voices. In that moment, Zhao Qindan's voice was bigger than him.

Through the Law Breaker, Lin Chi transported a newborn birch sapling to Jinping's Kaiming Department.

His mouth was too slow. He didn't have time to explain clearly. The one who received the sapling happened to be a Luwu who had returned to Jinping to report. He was holding the ice-coated sapling in both hands, completely at a loss, when he collided head on with a Kaiming Department colleague dashing back to get medicine to treat injuries.

The sapling fell to the ground and put down roots in the Kaiming Department's yard. The perfectly straight trunk rose steeply. In the blink of an eye, it was several zhang high.

General Zhi, who had defended Jinping City over two hundred years ago, walked out of the snow-white tree, saluted the two

dumbfounded half-immortals, and was at once outside the courtyard walls.

He didn't fly, only walked along the Dragon Vein holding Zhaoting. His steps weren't long, and he didn't seem to be moving quickly, but somehow, each person only just had a chance to glimpse him; after that glimpse, that figure would disappear without a trace.

With Lin Zongyi gone, there was no one left who could fix the Dragon Vein by force. The earth of Jinping had cracked in the shape of a dragon. As if sensing the arrival of an old friend, the half-crumbled old city let out a wail.

Where Zhi Xiu walked, the cracked earth closed. Exhausted Kaiming Cultivators were held up by a spiritual wind; their vision would blur, and then an open-eyed grade healing pill would appear before their eyes.

“Who is that...?”

“It's General Zhi,” a walker in the mortal world of Heaven's Design Pavilion said softly. “Over a decade ago, he presided over the Grand Selection from Heaven's Design Pavilion. I saw him.”

Back then, General Zhi had also come on foot like this. He was even wearing the same light grey robe.

The Kaiming Cultivator holding the pill between his fingers was still perplexed. “I've heard that General Zhi went into seclusion when he was half a step from a shed skin, so by now he would be... Why would a master like that have so many open-eyed grade elixirs?”

No one answered. Everyone looked toward the ground in astonishment. Many tiny inscriptions were climbing automatically out of the cracks, spreading in all directions. The Dragon Vein, which had been shattered by the Silver Moon and the Territory Map,

repaired itself bit by bit—in the blink of an eye, Zhi Xiu had already arrived in front of the Dignitary of Fate Elder.

Zhaoting left its sheath with a clank. Zhang Jue, who had yet to recover from Lin Zongyi's passing, unconsciously backed away half a step, then saw Zhi Xiu abruptly thrust Zhaoting into the earth.

Branches and leaves seemed to flash on the sword. Next, the inscriptions that were everywhere repairing the veins of the earth gradually converged on the sword and sank through it into the earth.

At this point, the black dragon shadow had no more room to resist, held underground by the consciousnesses of millions. The piece of his consciousness that Zhi Xiu had kept underground connected with his true body.

Inside the Territory Map, the walkers in the mortal world rushing around all of Great Wan astride karma beasts saw brightness before their eyes. Soft white light flew along the veins of the earth, pointing in the direction of Jinping. The karma beast seemed to understand without needing orders. As if gamboling, it used all its avatars to skip and bounce after the light, carrying the blue-clothesers.

Pang Jian felt that he was speeding along a string of lanterns. The warm white light coiled beside him. Staring at it wouldn't dazzle your eyes, but the karma beast was moving too fast; he couldn't quite see clearly. Inside that white light, countless human faces flashed before his eyes, holding down the black dragon like an impenetrable bastion.

His eyes that could dispel barriers saw faintly behind the crowd. Perhaps it was his mistake, but Pang Jian thought that the edges of the Territory Map were blurry where the white light shone.

The karma beasts, like lightning bolts, brought the walkers in the mortal world back to Jinping one after another, stopping beneath

the reincarnation wood tree in Jinping that had made a knot over the hole in the Dragon Vein. The karma beast's avatars reluctantly set down the blue-clothesers on their backs and returned to the main body.

Surrounding the reincarnation wood tree that was holding up heaven and earth was a circle of inscriptions containing sword aura. Passing through them, you could return to the human world.

As the general commander, Pang Jian, despite arriving early, didn't immediately go up. He kept watch beside the circle of inscriptions, waiting until all his subordinates and colleagues had gone, and only then turned to look at the Territory Map, which was "ablaze with lights."

The karma beast, as if throwing a cute tantrum, took the hem of his clothing in its mouth and gently butted him with its big head, sending Pang Jian reeling.

"All right, all right," said Pang Jian, petting it. "Things will be unstable for a while. When it calms down, come to the mural, I'll brush your fur."

Hearing this, the karma beast let out a whine, then at last unwillingly released his clothing and watched him go. Pang Jian suddenly felt a little unhappy. He thought that that body as big as an elephant standing alone in the wide and empty Territory Map seemed extremely lonely.

It was said that the karma beast "moved through writing and art," but in fact, this was only the usual fussiness of the Wan people. It wasn't so finicky. When the blue-clothesers got busy and summoned the karma beast, they would all scribble a line on a wall in charcoal, no more sophisticated than wild moss. Rather than saying "writing and art," it would be more accurate to say that what the karma beast wanted were human markings.

Pang Jian suddenly thought: the Territory Map rubbing was a “bridge” that let people on the ground touch the Territory Map itself, and “human markings” seemed to be a “rubbing” for the karma beast, letting the sacred beast that watched over the darkness alone come out and see a glimmer of daylight.

When the Southern Sage had sealed the Territory Map and placed the karma beast inside it, what had he been thinking?

“Don’t delay.” Just then, Wen Fei, who had hurried back, landed beside him. “We cannot remain here long.”

No sooner had he spoken than he gave Pang Jian a shove. The two of them plunged into the inscriptions together. Soon after, Xi Ping walked out of the trunk of the reincarnation wood tree.

As a sacred beast, the karma beast had always been reliable and mighty. The only time in its life it had ever been humiliated had been because of this brat. It boiled with rage as soon as it saw him.

The sacred beast of the ancient sage was bold and fearless. It wasn’t at all afraid of a mere ascended spirit. Now that all the others had gone, it crouched and tensed to spring, planning to have a good fight with this scoundrel junior. But when it pounced, it suddenly caught a whiff of something from Xi Ping. The karma beast came to a sudden halt. Its bared teeth retreated. After a while, it reluctantly puffed out a breath and, with its back to Xi Ping, insultingly mimed digging a hole and burying shit in it. Then it ran off.

Xi Ping dispersed the talisman he had prepared for “beating the dog.” The sword light surrounding him pulled back and withdrew into his spirit, turning back into a slightly damaged shard of a broken sword.

Xi Ping sighed. “Shifu, even if I’m not very good with a sword, I still know what I ought to know... I won’t have much of a problem unless I go up against a shed skin on my own. There’s really no need for you to...”

Keep looking after me.

Zhi Xiu interrupted, shushing him. Out of nowhere, he said, “I know... but the snow-capped mountain is too cold.”

Xi Ping was stunned.

Zhi Xiu said, “Send them off and hurry back.”

By this time, the Territory Map was completely still. Xi Ping sank his consciousness into the reincarnation wood. The cultivators’ consciousnesses had already left on their own, so, as if leading the current, he sent the mortals out of the reincarnation wood one by one. Amid the human tide, Xi Ping skillfully passed through the joys and sorrows of countless people. He had meant to thank them but on second thought decided it would be superfluous, so he didn’t speak, only silently plucked the Tai Sui Qin—he played a country tune to celebrate the harvest.

He had traveled in his youth and by chance had heard a cart driver in Guzhou singing it once.

Inside the Territory Map, a response came at once from the area around Guzhou.

“That’s wrong...”

“It’s off-key...”

There were hundreds upon thousands of voices speaking simultaneously in the response. Then many people, in order to

correct him, all began singing different tunes. Xi Ping didn't know what the original ought to have been like. The Tai Sui Qin ran hither and thither after them for a snatch of phrases at a time, getting increasingly off-key.

Some people became frantic, some people laughed.

Then those voices little by little became distant as he gently carried them back to the human world.

Now, Xi Ping at last saw the whole Territory Map clearly, but at a single glance, he froze—the people had all gone, but the soft light hadn't disappeared. Some strange alteration had taken place to the seal in the veins of the earth. The edges of the Territory Map seemed to be dissolving in that light. The Territory Map and the veins of the earth seemed to be slowly blending!

Xi Ping was startled. What did this mean?

The veins of the earth were the “meridians” of the spiritual mountains. That menacing black dragon shadow seemed to have wanted to drain the spiritual mountains dry just now. They had barely managed to subdue it. If it became one with the veins of the earth... wouldn't that be sticking a drinking straw into the spiritual mountains for it?

Xi Ping quickly sent his consciousness out and made separate observations on the surface and inside the Territory Map. The surging spiritual energy had by now returned to its usual state, slowly spreading all over through the veins of the earth and the spiritual wind. It wasn't being sucked up by the black dragon like he had been worried it would be. The black dragon shadow seemed to be “dead.”

“Shiyong, come out first,” Zhi Xiu said. “I'll explain it to you soon.”

Right, shifu was still waiting to seal the Dragon Vein. Xi Ping couldn't linger. Bearing heavy doubts, he turned and entered the passageway Zhi Xiu had opened with inscriptions.

A stench hit him right in the face. The pestilential Heartless Lotus had ruptured all the sewers in Jinping City. Had Wen Fei not been there, there might well have been a plague.

When Xi Ping's true body broke free, a final thread of sword light from the Sword that Mended the Heavens "flowed" into the damaged Dragon Vein. Devastated Jinping fell silent.

Only then did Zhi Xiu return the sword to its sheath. From over a zhang away, he respectfully called to Zhang Jue: "Shifu."

For some reason, the wrinkles on Zhang Jue's face deepened a great deal. After a long time, he said quietly, "According to Xuanyin's rules, an ascended spirit has left his teacher."

Zhi Xiu didn't turn a hair. "Dignitary of Fate High Elder."

There was a violent tremor at the corners of Zhang Jue's eyes.

This was the place where the three high elders had just fought against the Territory Map. Never mind walkers in the mortal world, even ascended spirits didn't dare to approach. So apart from the two shed skins, there were only the people who had just climbed out of the Territory Map.

Wen Fei, who had been leaning against the reincarnation wood tree like a dead dog, resting, now straightened up indolently. With his back to Zhi Xiu, he shifted a step closer to him.

Peak Master Wen's feet seemed capable of performing a consecration. With a single step, the atmosphere went off. Next, Xi Ping's true body appeared in the reincarnation wood tree. With one

leg crossed over the other, he leaned back against the treetop, closely watching Zhang Jue with a slightly derisive smile.

The division among these four masters was evident.

There was no question about Bai Ling. As soon as Xi Ping appeared, he floated over like a kite, hanging himself from a branch beside the master of the reincarnation wood. Only the walkers in the mortal world were helpless and bewildered. Their gazes turned in unison toward Pang Jian.

Pang Jian: "..."

Without a word, he simply toppled onto the ruins, using his power of passing through walls to sink into the earth.

"Since the Southern Sage reached the full moon boundary and Xuanyin formed, up to the present, over a thousand years have passed," Zhang Jue said slowly. "Over a thousand years of peace and prosperity, Jingzhai... Do you know what you are doing?"

Zhi Xiu calmly responded, "When Jinping's Dragon Vein broke, by a series of coincidences, the Dragon Vein and the Territory Map sealed within it passed through me, and since then, I have had the fortune to be closely bound with both of them. I was granted shi... the Dignitary of Fate Elder's introduction into cultivation. If I had committed myself to the spiritual mountains, it would have allowed the spiritual mountains to subdue the Territory Map through me, destroy the danger that had lurked for a thousand years. I have disappointed the spiritual mountains."

"Why have you betrayed your sect?" Grey energy invisible to others flashed in Zhang Jue's eyes. "Don't you know that because you have entered an evil way, the Territory Map has fallen entirely into the hands of an evil cultivator? If he..."

“Elder.” Xi Ping didn’t give a damn whether he had any place in this conversation. He impudently opened his mouth to interrupt the Dignitary of Fate. “When you had a use for me, you would have allowed me to take position among the thirty-six peak masters. Now I’m an ‘evil cultivator’ again?”

“Shiyong, you mustn’t be rude,” Zhi Xiu scolded him mildly. Then he said to Zhang Jue, “The Territory Map will not mutiny under his control...”

Zhang Jue abruptly interrupted him. “Can you guarantee that? You’ve placed all of Great Wan into the hands of a person with selfish desires. Zhi Jingzhai, you...”

“No, I ought to have said, the Territory Map will not mutiny again,” Zhi Xiu said softly. “Because I have become a shed skin, the Territory Map and the Dragon Vein have already become one. In some decades, no longer than a single generation, the two of them will be able to resolve their misunderstanding. Isn’t this also a way for the Territory Map to be committed to the spiritual mountains?”

Zhang Jue’s expression was aghast. Even Pang Jian couldn’t resist sticking half his head out of the ground—by now, he had understood everything. Supposing Zhi Xiu had become an orthodox shed skin, cast off his selfish desires and surrendered to the spiritual mountains, the Territory Map would have become an auxiliary of the spiritual mountains, been controlled by the spiritual mountains. But the shed skin Zhi Xiu had planted an accompanying plant in the spiritual mountains, unwilling to be tamed. The Territory Map and the spiritual mountains were naturally equal now... When they blended together like this, which would come out on top?

“Zhi Jingzhai,” Zhang Jue said, his voice so tense it shook, “do you want to destroy the Xuanyin Mountains, destroy Great Wan’s millennia-old foundation?”

Xi Ping and Wen Fei froze simultaneously. Their eyes looked toward Zhi Xiu.

Zhi Xiu laughed. “The spiritual mountains will cast off the form of the thirty-six peaks and by this means slowly disperse through the veins of the earth, henceforth be with the mountains and rivers of the land. Does that amount to destruction?”

Zhang Jue said, “Do not forget that beyond our borders...”

Zhi Xiu raised a hand to interrupt him. “The Xuanyin Mountains and I both still have some decades left, don’t we? I will make suitable arrangements. Please return to the Sea of Stars, Dignitary of Fate Elder.”

CHAPTER 176 - Tomb of the Sage (2)

Inside Great Wan, Zhi Xiu and Zhang Jue were the only two shed skins remaining, and the Xuanyin Spiritual Mountains were now entwined with the Territory Map, “faithful unto death.”

Since an accompanying plant had grown on Flying Jade Peak, the spiritual mountains had been powerless to inhibit this traitorous sword cultivator. If even the spiritual mountains were powerless, then what could the Dignitary Fate do, under siege in the Sea of Stars?

The dust had settled in Jinping.

Seeing the “conclusion,” Zhou Ying bid farewell to the Marquis of Yongning, then added, “I will be leaving the mountains shortly. In all trifles relating to repairs of the Marquis Manor, if you have any difficulty, uncle, by all means have Bai Ling attend to it.”

The Marquis of Yongning seemed to want to say something, but before he could speak, Zhou Ying had cut off the communication.

The peak masters of Xuanyin had yet to return. Only a crowd of inner sect disciples remained. They were watching the collapsed Resonant Stone Peak anxiously; there was no one to step forward and take responsibility.

The dim Bell of Tribulation seemed to have rusted. When the wind blew through it, its chafing made an almost hoarse rustle.

Zhou Ying took out the box full of notes and took a rough look through it; that told him that more than half of the notes inside were now useless.

The current outcome had deviated from what the pre-clarity “him” had anticipated. The previous Zhou Ying had thought: all the evil cultivators had collectively appeared in public and nearly dragged the Lingyun Mountains down into a ditch; though they had failed at the last moment, this had evidently already aroused the dread of the cultivation world. If the spiritual mountains united, the great evil cultivators would stand no chance. All they could do was think of a way to split up the four nations. Northern Li was a sealed drum, Southern Shu was on edge, Western Chu was jumping at shadows. If, under those circumstances, the news that “Zhou Ying has entered the way of clarity and gone into seclusion, with no attention to spare for the Luwu” got out, Southern Wan was certain to become a lantern flame attracting insects.

The Zhao family’s scraps of the Territory Map were certain to end up in Zhuoming’s hands; Southern Shu’s Miah rebel would help him “think of a way.” After all, what Wangge Luobao primarily cultivated was the way of “destroying the bridge after crossing the river,” with a side of governing beasts. After using Zhuoming to shake off the Miah clan leader, he certainly wouldn’t permit the lotus seal to remain on his consciousness for long.

Zhuoming was certain to come to Jinping, though he lacked some strength in cultivation. The greatest likelihood was that he would drag Sanyue’s Xiang Ning underwater.

And some person in Xuanyin would have to bring out that hidden portion of the true Territory Map.

The rubbing that had been stripped from the former master of Resonant Stone Peak would be far better than what Zhuoming had glued and patched together. With it, there wasn’t much chance that Xi Ping would be unable to defeat Zhuoming—even in his right mind, the Heartless Lotus wasn’t as clever as Xi Ping.

With Zhao Yin dead, the Xuanyin Mountains would be unable to bring out another complete Territory Map rubbing. If Xi Ping could seize this opportunity to obtain a Territory Map rubbing, he would no longer be a wandering ghost being offered amnesty by an enemy. He would have a bargaining chip he could use to keep Xuanyin in check.

The rest of the path was his to walk. The previous “Zhou Ying” could set his mind at ease.

There were three risks involved in this.

One was the Heartless Lotus. The disciple of Sanyue’s former elder had been deranged to begin with, and swallowing a large quantity of Ways of the Heart within a short span of time in order to stick together a Territory Map rubbing was sure to further damage his mind. Adding in the poisonous beast-taming cultivator beside him to further agitate him, there was no saying how muddled he would get. One couldn’t evaluate him on the basis of common reason—it wasn’t impossible that he might forget what he was doing halfway through the battle, let envy and hatred go to his head, and turn his attack on mortals. So before entering the way of clarity, Zhou Ying had spoken to the Marquis about preparing the Perplexing Sword Array at the Marquis Manor. If he added a heart demon seed into the mix when the time came, it would make a perfect treatment for the Heartless Lotus, resolving the problem permanently.

As Zhou Ying saw it, the Heartless Lotus couldn’t make too big of a stir. The second risk was harder to deal with: Xuanyin’s elders.

The Xuanyin elders wanted to use Xi Ping. If there was trouble in Jinping, they would first send him back there to see whether he would be easy to prompt. But as soon as they realized that he would seize the opportunity to obtain the Territory Map rubbing, Zhou Ying’s malicious conjecture was that the elders would likely choose to first put out the “fire in the backyard.” If it really came to

that, Xi Ping still wouldn't be caught between two enemies; Zhi Xiu and Duanrui would be certain to step in—when Zhao Yin had passed and the Zhao clan had revolted, the elders had only been concerned about the Impassable Sea; one could in fact say that it had been the other two who had cooperated to stabilize the Xuanyin Mountains.

Though they were both not quite shed skins, and one was still in seclusion, their combat skills were superb. Moreover, at a time like this, a near-shed skin wouldn't violate their own will for the sake of safeguarding the orthodoxy of the spiritual mountains, giving them an edge over the real shed skins.

It was certainly unrealistic to hope that they could defeat those two millennia-old codgers, but they would have no problem giving Xi Ping enough room to maneuver.

The greatest risk, however, was that Zhi Xiu would become a shed skin just before the battle.

It was hard to assess what Zhi Xiu's standpoint would be after becoming an "inhuman" shed skin. And leaving aside that a shed skin sword cultivator was more frightening than a natural disaster, if it came to a fight, Xi Ping certainly wouldn't be able to attack him. This situation might turn out hopeless.

But the pre-clarity Zhou Ying had cautiously reckoned that the likelihood of this taking place wasn't great. Though this General Zhi was excessively high-minded, often making him feel that he was pretentious and hypocritical, between Xi Ping and Xuanyin, Zhi Xiu's standpoint had always been apparent. Except as a last resort, Zhou Ying couldn't imagine what reason he could have to choose that moment to become a shed skin, and Xi Shiyong, who was always babbling about "shizun this, shizun that," probably wasn't about to let him be in a position to need a "last resort."

If such a thing really did happen, then it would be like the Zhou family's last-moment failure in the Impassable Sea—fated.

But Xi Ping was very well-acquainted with the Heartless Lotus. With Zhuoming present, his consciousness was certain to be hidden all over. With his hidden bones, he wouldn't be so easy to kill. It would be a chance for him to make a complete rupture with the spiritual mountains. When he had recovered from his injuries and regrouped his forces, some decades would have passed; his ties to the mortal world would have severed. It would be just as well if he went on to be a great demon bringing prosperity to his supporters and destruction to his opponents—it would beat being ground away to nothing in a narrow crevice by the Xuanyin Mountains.

Sadly, no one's plans were perfect. His “past self” had provided for three risks, but there were three others he hadn't counted on.

The first was the Silver Moon appearing in Jinping.

Before obtaining the way of clarity's Way of the Heart and the demon eyes, while Zhou Ying had had his vague guesses, he hadn't understood the essential nature of the spiritual mountains. Fortunately, this lapse had had no impact. When the Silver Moon invaded, the high elders had acted at once. Xi Ping had been forced into the Territory Map, and Zhuoming had been caught in the net. The Silver Moon had in fact aided them in keeping Lin Zongyi and Zhang Jue in check.

The second thing he hadn't counted on was Zhi Xiu. After all, without the demon eyes, not even a paramount spiritual sense could see through the mountain seal of Flying Jade Peak's Peak Master. Who would have thought there would be someone growing an accompanying plant in the Xuanyin Mountains?

But, in fact, neither of these two counted as oversights. They came from Zhou Ying's limited field of vision before he had entered the

way of clarity. Therefore, upon discovering them, he hadn't been surprised. But the last thing he hadn't counted on had been entirely beyond his expectations—Lin Zongyi.

At the critical moment, Lin Zongyi had betrayed the spiritual mountains. He had died, and his Way of the Heart had been destroyed; he had even nearly fomented a catastrophe. Fortunately he had been able to hold out. He had escaped in time and in the end hadn't flattened half of Great Wan's nine provinces.

But despite this, his consciousness entering the Territory Map had led to two consequences unforeseen by Zhou Ying: the first was Princess Duanrui, for the sake of protecting Jinping, being infected by the Dignitary of Rule's shattered Way of the Heart and dying for her country; the second was that new shed skin comprehending something from all this and using the particular relationship between himself and Territory Map to single-handedly push Xuanyin's fate in a direction no one had expected.

Before entering the way of clarity, Zhou Ying had only wanted to use this tactic to extricate Xi Ping from Xuanyin's control. At best, he would be able to openly and legitimately stand up to the Xuanyin Mountains as an equal. At worst, his delusions of "world peace" would be thoroughly shattered, pushing him onto the "evil path" of carnage—whichever direction it went in, there would still be a lengthy struggle.

But instead the shed skin masters had slipped off the game board one after another. Through a series of unexpected events, they had squeezed time into a ball, bringing about the "death" of Xuanyin.

The demon eyes could see the Territory Map in the process of fusing with the veins of the earth. The "way" and the "shadow" that the full moon god had left behind would no longer be separate. Within a century, Xuanyin's thirty-six peaks would disperse throughout the veins of the earth. At that point, ascended spirits and

shed skins alike would become rootless trees. When the spiritual mountains died of old age, could cultivators live long?

The common people were in fact going on steadily now, but in a hundred years, when they had lost the protection of the immortal sect and were living on precious ground, they would certainly become fish on the chopping block. General Zhi wouldn't let that happen. In choosing this destination for Xuanyin, he had also made a public declaration that in the coming decades, his sword would be pointed at the whole cultivation world.

In terms of both timing and structure, everything had thoroughly overturned the plans left by the previous Zhou Ying.

Fortunately, he could no longer feel thwarted.

Zhou Ying destroyed the notes that were no longer useful. The box became much emptier all at once. He didn't understand why his past self had behaved so superfluously, writing down so many pointless trifles while "blindfolded" — as long as all the goals were laid out clearly, he would attend to them point by point himself; the way of clarity wasn't the way of imbecility, anyway.

Then he picked up the next note and saw that on it was written:
Once Shiyong has obtained the Territory Map rubbing, when you see him, smile at him. There will be no more need to worry about him. It's time to bury the Great Way.

The first half could already be classed in the invalidated pile. Observing impassively, Zhou Ying had a sudden realization. All this longwinded repetition with no regard for importance came from a tangled skein of profound anxieties. It turned out that deep down, behind what appeared to be a cautious, gradual plan, jumbled and disorderly emotions were buried.

Without his deliberate study, a bit of the Way of the Heart Princess Duanrui had given him had silently been digested.

Zhou Ying destroyed the note after reading it. When he stood up, he made the robes he was wearing fade to white—he had inherited Princess Duanrui’s way. While he was only a disciple of record from an outer sect, he still maintained a disciple’s etiquette.

Before burying the Great Way, according to the rules, he ought first to pay his last respects to Princess Duanrui.

The disciple standing watch on the Principal Peak was apprehensively waiting for news. Suddenly, he heard the sound of a door. Turning his head, he saw the master of the Kaiming Department, who was “cultivating in seclusion,” come out. He quickly stepped forward to greet him. “Zhou-shixiong... what are you doing?”

Zhou Ying raised his head. Wherever his gaze passed, one white streamer after another tumbled down from the main hall’s eaves.

Then, to the panicked disciple on duty, he said, “Shixiong, please find someone to notify the Zhou and Lin peak masters that Princess Duanrui and Elder Lin have passed away.”

As if disturbed by his airy sentence, the immortal cranes on the Principal Peak gave a long cry and flew through the white streamers into the air. The mourning cries lingered.

Zhou Xueru, Master of Green Pool Peak—since Zhao Yin’s death, Xuanyin Mountain’s acting Dignitary of Rites.

She was the eighth daughter of Emperor Shizu, after many years of silence the first possessor of innate spiritual bones to be born to the Zhou clan since the passing of their progenitor. She had been pampered in childhood. At eighteen she had entered the Latent

Cultivation Temple and had the title of “Princess Duanrui” conferred upon her. In the same year, she had entered the inner sect.

By the time her nephew Gaozong inherited the throne, she had already entered Green Pool Peak’s way of clarity. Gaozong had conferred the title of Princess of the First Rank upon her and from then on had led his whole clan onto a forking road.

Guangyun Palace and the Latent Cultivation Temple both had records concerning Princess Duanrui. Zhou Ying had leafed through them at idle moments.

It was said that she had been very sensitive toward color when she was young and had especially liked things like painting and calligraphy. She was a skilled painter and had once dreamed of entering a way connected to this—the Zhao family had a way devoted to painting and calligraphy. But later, everyone had thought that while her hand was deft enough, her aesthetics and taste were lacking; she wasn’t cut out for this way.

Strange to say, as Great Wan’s imperial family, the Zhous often turned out vulgar princesses fond of gaudy colors; Zhou Xueru had been like this, and Zhou Qing, who had been buried amid a sea of flowers many years later, had also been like this.

It was said that because of her talents, she hadn’t felt any of the restrictions social convention placed on women. Both her horsemanship and her martial arts had been good; she wielded a mean whip. After painting and calligraphy didn’t work out, she wanted to enter the way through martial arts, but when she learned how the sword cultivators of Northern Li lived, she was scared into giving it up. At the time, Hui Xiangjun’s fame had spread in Southern He. All kinds of rumors had flown to the Latent Cultivation Temple. Hearing them gave the teenage girl a deep longing, so she also dreamed of entering the way of toolmaking.. She had all kinds of notions, without any settled idea.

While innate spiritual bones meant that you would be half a step from an established foundation as soon as you opened your spiritual eyes, the inner sect had seen that her temperament was unfixed and slow to mature, so they had instructed her to cultivate for a decade, let her intellect finish growing before she entered a way.

With this delay had come a drastic change in the situation.

Ten years later, Hui Xiangjun had passed away, Lin Chi had been locked up, and the cultivation world was keeping it all a closely-guarded secret.

And the girl who had been full of dreams, even bewildered by her options, had slowly grown up; then she had learned that she had never actually had a choice.

When her innate spiritual bones had entered the mountains, blue luan and white deer had welcomed her at the gate of the Latent Cultivation Temple. Now, the lively girl had turned into an ice sculpture of an old ancestor and been buried in the East Sea. All the auspicious animals in the mountains cried for her.

Her vital weapon had been a whip. It had lashed evildoers, and it had stopped traitors. It feared neither the gods nor demons of the universe. Purple lightning like dark rime followed its passage.

The whip was called “Remorseless.”

In Jinping City, Zhang Jue, having reached a dead end, from unknown motives left behind a final word for Zhi Xiu.

He said, “You will be censured by the whole cultivation world, Jingzhai—I leave you to look after yourself.”

Having said this, he put on his blindfold and returned to the powerless immortal mountains, leaving behind only a crowd of stunned ascended spirits and established foundations.

Xi Ping broke a branch of the reincarnation wood tree, lost his balance, and fell out of the tree, nearly stomping on Pang Jian in the ground.

Neither of them noticed it. Xi Ping said, “Shifu..”

Zhi Xiu’s consciousness could now reach all the way to the Xuanyin Mountains, “escort” the Dignitary of Fate Elder the whole way like his shadow, but with utmost courtesy, he still watched Zhang Jue’s figure depart. Then he finally turned and said to all the people gathered around, “In taking this decision into my own hands, I have ruined the immortal path of the spiritual mountains. I apologize to all of you. Today’s affairs concern the fate of the nation. To avoid the information leaking out and attracting the covetous eyes of malefactors, I ask you to keep them strictly secret.”

As he finished speaking, each person felt the might of a shed skin. There was no frightening sense of oppression, but they all understood at once that they would be unable to reveal what they had heard today, as though this were a natural law.

Pang Jian moved Xi Ping’s foot away and came out of the ground. “Shishu, does this mean that in some decades, Xuanyin won’t exist?”

Zhi Xiu nodded patiently. “That is correct.”

Pang Jian’s mind roared. He opened his mouth, searched his guts and belly for ages, and finally came up with, “So... so what about you? And all the seniors in the inner sect?”

Before Zhi Xiu could answer, next to them, Wen Fei suddenly laughed aloud. Whether because he was stuttering or because he intended to, he said “good” several times over.

Zhi Xiu raised a hand. Many points of light flew out of the ground and restored Wen Fei’s fan, which had been destroyed over the veins of the earth, as good as new. Before the loquacious medicine cultivator had even taken it, writing was already popping up impetuously on the fan.

Zhi Jingzhai, after all these years, I admire you.

Wen Fei took his fan and pointed to Pang Jian. *Walkers in the mortal world, come with me to Jinghua Village.*

Seeing the words “walkers in the mortal world,” Pang Jian’s lost and uncertain gaze suddenly focused.

Then he earnestly saluted Zhi Xiu. His eyes swept over his colleagues and subordinates. “Walkers in the mortal world are only concerned with events in the mortal world.”

Having said this, Pang Jian waved a hand, commanding the crowd of confused blue-clothesers to follow him, and went after Wen Fei. Before leaving, he didn’t forget to lodge a complaint. Pointing to the disheveled Xi Ping, he said, “Zhi-shishu, we’re powerless against a great evil cultivator. Control him!”

CHAPTER 177 - Tomb of the Sage (3)

When Pang Jian poked him in the spine and called him out, Xi Ping at last came back to his senses. He turned his head to glance at deserted Jinping, then suddenly looked down and laughed.

Supposing that all the spiritual mountains blended into the veins of the earth, then would there still be spiritual stones? Would the human world become what it had been before the Great War of Gods and Demons?

That would be the dream of evil* cultivators and demons come true. Shizun couldn't accept that.

So... probably the only way it could go was that all the "old ones" bound each by their own "way" would by some means slowly withdraw from the scene, either die or, like the full moon sages, ascend to heaven after laying down a new order, turn into gods that existed only in legend, not in the human world.

Not only did Xi Ping not feel afraid, out of nowhere, he was glad.

Why should he care what happened to him decades from now? Weren't people not meant to live more than a hundred years, anyway? After all the twists and turns, his teachers and friends would all be there... There was only san-ge who had undertaken a distant journey, but that was all right. Supposing that all paths led to the same end, they would still be reunited one day.

The blank road ahead had suddenly gained an endpoint. He seemed to have been pressed back into the mundane dust by the imminence of time; unconsciously, he stamped on the ground.

Zhi Xiu beheld his wretched disciple's august mien and also thought it offensive to the eyes. Therefore, he sighed, extended a hand, and

drew back the sword energy remaining in Xi Ping's ragged clothes. The cuts closed up automatically. Then, a pair of shoes and a wooden hairpin fell beside Xi Ping.

“At least put on some shoes.” Having a rebellious disciple aged a person. Zhi Xiu hesitated, then pronounced an assessment that seemed to belong to an old man. “Disgraceful.”

The young master taken in by Flying Jade Peak had left the mountain, and that parting had nearly become final. Over a decade of springs and autumns had raced by, and the whole time, the shard of Zhaoting had shone upon Xi Ping on his lonely wrong road.

And this mutual dependency that spanned mountains and seas might at any moment have become one that spanned the worlds of the living and the dead.

Xi Ping had always been broad-minded, impervious to apprehension. Since before all his teeth had grown in, he hadn't worried when he got lost in a busy street. The thoughts “my family has abandoned me” or “I hope nothing's happened to my family” hadn't even entered his mind... until he'd had a shifu who really could disappear at any time.

He was flighty and frivolous, with too many distracting thoughts, so all his efforts in studying the sword had come to little avail. In fact, the blame was all on shifu, or else how could he have learned that move as soon as the broken Dragon Vein had forced him to it? More than half of his distracting thoughts were “Is shifu still there?” Shifu instructed him to sink into the sword, forget self and the world, but he was always afraid that some piece of instruction would be the last thing shifu ever said. Worried that he wouldn't hear it clearly, his consciousness was always clinging to the words, going nowhere, not daring to abandon the person in favor of the sword.

Since Zhi Xiu had picked him up in the Blissful Village, it seemed that half a lifetime had passed. At last he was seeing him in person again.

Xi Ping thought that had he still been a teenager, he would have thrown himself at shifu and wailed while clutching his leg.

But he wasn't a teenager anymore, so he only looked down at that pair of shoes, hiding his expression, and said disdainfully, "Shizun, do these shoes come from the time of Renzong or something? Are they wearable?"

"Give them back if you won't wear them." Zhi Xiu saw a pair of boots appear on his feet as soon as he moved them. "Why didn't you put those on if you had them?"

"Just deliberately embarrassing people," Xi Ping said very candidly while putting Zhi Xiu's pair of "antiques" away in his mustard seed. "This is Ning'an embroidery, right? There are textile mills all over Ning'an, the embroiderers have all changed profession. Ning'an embroidery is a dying art. Old things from the Renzong and Xiaozong eras are favorites with Southern Shu's upstarts. If we try them out in the Zhaoye antiques markets, they'll sell for thirty liang of gold at least. Hey, shifu, why don't you gather up all the junk you couldn't stand to throw away back then, I'll move it for you next time, family discount thirty percent off... hey... ow!"

He seemed to have taken "thirty percent off" Zhi Xiu's parting sorrow, too; he instantly recalled this little bastard's unsavory track record. "Do you have anything decent to say for yourself? Moon Plated Peak's Lin-shixiong is such a quiet person. He doesn't readily interact with people. But because of you, these past few years, he's sent over three hundred Heavenly Questions to Flying Jade Peak."

Xi Ping froze at a distance of two zhang away. “Oh... three... three hundred letters? Complaining about me?”

The corner of Zhi Xiu’s eye twitched. “What, do you think it was because he wanted to have some light intellectual chitchat with me?”

Xi Ping only knew that that punching bag Lin Chi would file a complaint when he was at the end of his tether. He hadn’t thought that in addition to his toolmaking, Master Lin could also “relentlessly live by pen” like this—even Zhao Qindan, who was always wielding her pen and hurling abuse, would feel ashamed of her own inferiority if she heard about this!

So his first reaction was, “Do you still have the manuscripts? Can you pick through them and see if there’s any we can publish? I’ll have someone assemble them and bind them to be sold.”

No sooner had he spoken than he was already prepared to dodge the small branch that came whizzing toward him. In a flash, he had covered nearly half of Jinping City. “I’ll go help repair Jinping... Shifu, repairing the city will take spiritual stones, too, and the Kaiming Department is so poor it rattles. Without all the money I’ve been sneaking around extorting all over the place, where would we be getting the spiritual stones now? Ask Bai Ling!”

Bai Ling: “...”

He was a half-demon. Beside an upright shed skin cultivator, he was having some trouble catching his breath. Therefore, he had been pretending to be a piece of paper, not expecting that their cousin young master would sell him out without warning.

Perhaps he had been the Viscount’s shield in a previous life. Every time a certain person was getting beaten—regardless of who was doing the beating—he would always get dragged in.

Bai Ling was helpless. All he could do was brace himself and salute. “General Zhi.”

Zhi Xiu had just become a shed skin. His sword aura was still overflowing somewhat. He deliberately toned it down a little, put Zhaoting away in his mustard seed, and politely said, “Thank you for your efforts. Does the Kaiming Department have enough spiritual stones?”

“It’s all right. Many people in the Kaiming Department come from poverty. Everyone is very frugal,” Bai Ling said. “It’s only that there are many people and a great deal of things to attend to, and the immortal mountains allocate limited funds to outer sects. Sometimes we have trouble making ends meet when we encounter something like a natural disaster. Fortunately the Luwu have business abroad. With an ascended spirit like the Viscount to convoy them from the shadows, it goes fairly smoothly. They can transfer spiritual stones when the Kaiming Department falls short.”

So Zhi Xiu said, “I suppose that the Kaiming Department has no established foundations as yet?”

“That is correct. Apart from myself and my lord, the Kaiming Cultivators have all been cultivating for a very short time, and none of them have yet had time to rinse their spiritual bones... and they don’t have the resources to establish foundations.”

Zhi Xiu nodded. His consciousness watched Xi Ping call up a crowd of Kaiming Cultivators. Xi Ping always made himself at home, not taking himself for a stranger with anyone. He assigned work to the Kaiming Cultivators the same way he usually ordered the Luwu around.

The Kaiming Cultivators’ skill level with talismans was generally not high—they had all taken crash courses and had no systematic

knowledge. Anyway, practicing talismans wasted spiritual stones. They wouldn't usually learn "useless" talismans and arrays.

But when these people got down to repairing the ruins, they were very skillful, as if they had practiced it hundreds of times. They were more adept at coordinating amongst themselves than even Heaven's Design Pavilion. It was clear to see who had been safeguarding Great Wan in recent years when it encountered droughts, floods, and earthquakes.

Of the spiritual stone reserves Bai Ling had urgently transferred over, a small amount still remained. Not a wisp of spiritual energy was wasted. All of it dissolved into Jinping City.

The fractured riverbed and roads were joined with countless talismans. Damaged brick and tile returned to their original locations, the cracks in them "glued" shut by spiritual energy until they looked even stronger than before. The ruptured sewers underground, the broken tracks aboveground, were all restored to their former condition bit by bit. Even the somewhat muddy and smelly waters of the Lingyang River became considerably clearer. The glazed tiles of Guangyun Palace shone as if consecrated...

Except that the things that had burned to ashes couldn't be restored. Except that the dead couldn't be brought back to life.

Zhi Xiu said, "Many silk dragon hearts were spent inside the Territory Map. I'm afraid that established foundation pills will be in short supply in the near future. Xuanyin Mountain won't be expanding the established foundation quota for now. But the funds allocated to the Kaiming Department can be doubled in the future, supplied so all the branches can recruit new open-eyed cultivators. If it isn't enough, we can discuss it again."

He was a new shed skin who had suppressed the Xuanyin Mountains with an accompanying plant. When he spoke these light

words, an echo instantly came from underground. The mountains and rivers agreed. The spiritual mountains were forced to obey.

Bai Ling knew perfectly well that he meant no harm, but he still couldn't keep his spine from tensing amid this echo.

Zhi Xiu was also slightly shaken. He had an unprecedented sense that a single thought from him could affect all of Great Wan—the Dignitary of Rule sealing his mouth, the Dignitary of Fate blindfolding his eyes, both were in fact in order to shackle themselves, ensure that they would be cautious in word and deed... No matter how you looked at it, while listlessness had come to Xuanyin after a thousand years, the fact that it hadn't ended up like Sanyue and Lingyun was entirely down to the seals these two seniors had willingly taken on.

And the way of the sword was to begin with the most imperious and isolated way in the world. He needed a seal...

“In legend, the Kaiming and the Luwu are two divine guardian beasts. They protect the world of the gods, are mighty yet benevolent, have sharp claws and fangs but do not injure the meek. They are good names.” Zhi Xiu was talking to Bai Ling, but it also seemed that he was talking to himself. “Please convey to His Highness Prince Zhuang that I hope the Kaiming and the Luwu will stay true to their original intentions. If one is motivated by resources, one becomes the claws and fangs of spiritual stones. It unavoidably chills the heart.”

Having said this, he nodded to Bai Ling and instantly landed beside Xi Ping.

“Take this,” Zhi Xiu said, sounding casual. “Put it away for me and keep it safe. Don't auction it off.”

Xi Ping was just quickly familiarizing himself with Jinping's layout. Hearing this, he turned his head. "Wow, shifu, have you finally brought yourself to open the mountain..."

Before he could finish, a beam of light shining like a white rainbow fell on him. This thing seemed to weigh over a thousand jin. With Xi Ping's ascended spirit cultivation level, he was still pulled down from midair and stumbled when he landed.

Xi Ping: "..."

Astonished, he got a clear look at what Zhi Xiu had given him: Zhaoting!

Zhi Xiu—the same stingy shizun who had just wanted a pair of old shoes back—as nonchalant as if he had just tossed his disciple a piece of candy, pulled the map of Jinping out of his hands. "How much more is there? Let me see... Apart from the canal and Guangyun Palace, I don't recognize any of it... Tell the Kaiming Department brothers to go repair people's homes, I'll take care of these two places. Let's get it done as fast as we can, let the frightened common people in the city go home—you also ought to go look in at home."

Xi Ping, clasping Zhaoting two-handed, hadn't come to his senses yet. He blurted out, "Will you come visit my house, shifu?"

Zhi Xiu gave him a strange look, as if he had said something completely superfluous. "Naturally I must go pay my respects to your honored parents."

Xi Ping: "..."

He had a bad feeling.

Zhi Xiu said, “Or else how will I deal with those three hundred plus letters of complaint?”

A female cultivator from the Kaiming Department who had come to draw upon the spiritual stone stores heard these words and couldn't resist turning her head away to smile. Zhi Xiu had old-fashioned manners. Seeing a strange woman, he swallowed the rest of what he had been about to say and temporarily let Xi Ping off the hook. He gave him a “behave” expression and went toward the canal.

Unlike the members of Heaven's Design Pavilion, who had nearly all come in through Xuanyin's Grand Selection, the Kaiming Cultivators had started out in the common revolt during the final year of Taiming. Among those who had been driven by anger at oppression to enter evil ways, there had been no small number of women. Later, they had also been pulled into the Kaiming Department. So the Kaiming Department had always accepted many female cultivators; they were no longer only limited to princesses.

Fair enough. The brave entered the Kaiming.

At any rate, there would be no more Jinghua Village.

Centuries later, Jinghua Village at last saw the arrival of the one who had carved its tablet.

The mustard seeds and arrays holding the small village open were still there. Wen Fei gently tapped on the stone tablet at the entrance to the village with his folding fan, and the prohibition on the entrance silently dispersed. Though the blue-clothesers all knew what had happened in Jinghua Village, when they saw the devastation with their own eyes, they still turned their heads away automatically.

There was only one blue-clotheser with a newly established foundation who, as though he had lost his soul, staggered inside.

“Wang-shixiong...” A colleague wanted to go after him, but he was held back by Pang Jian.

“Let him be alone,” said Pang Jian.

No sooner had he spoken than they heard suppressed wailing nearby.

“He’d just returned from the Latent Cultivation Temple,” Pang Jian said softly. “He dithered for days, but in the end he didn’t dare to come... Earlier, he asked me to deliver his ‘last effects’ to his wife.”

The cowardly man had been enticed by the prospect of a road to heaven and had in the end abandoned the mundane dust. He hadn’t even dared to come in person to break it off with his wife and children. There had still been fantasies in his heart... He had imagined that in the future he might sneak a look at them, look after them from the shadows—after all, a mortal lifespan wasn’t long.

But instead... instead...

The long night had ended, and amid the first rays of dawn in Jinping, they had heard the sage say that the spiritual mountains’ days were numbered; they wouldn’t even outlast a mortal lifespan.

Then what had all of this been for?

Wen Fei narrowed his eyes, looked at all the strange yet familiar sights of Jinghua Village, then stepped in. Where he passed, the corpses of women and children were appropriately laid out. He didn’t look closely at these people. He only took out a piece of “white paper” from his mustard seed, scattering it as he walked. The scraps of paper, like snowflakes, landed on the bodies and automatically turned into light blankets like silk that wrapped the bodies.

Everywhere he cleaned up the bodies, he reached out to remove the mustard seed folded there.

Bit by bit, he dismantled Jinghua Village. The original appearance of these few mu of wetland at the heart of the lake was revealed, as bleak and desolate as a shattered immortal dream.

A walker in the mortal world quietly said, “General Commander, does this mean that... there won’t be a Jinghua Village from now on?”

Pang Jian raised his head to look at Wen Fei’s back and remembered what was said in Heaven’s Design Pavilion concerning this person.

In its entire history, the most special of Heaven Design Pavilion’s general commanders had been Wen Fenghan—other people got into the immortal sect based on either birth or luck; he had gotten in based on his face.

Among the men Pang Jian had had dealings with over the years, on the score of appearance, it seemed that the only one who could compete against him was the Yongning Marquis Manor’s Xi Shiyong... but that brat Xi Ping had been spoiled rotten all his life and knew only too well that he was good-looking, so he wanted to show off as soon as he met a person. If no one paid attention to him and he was left to his own devices, he would gaze infatuated into a mirror, so there wasn’t much sense of looking at something forbidden—looking closely at him could easily inspire the desire to beat him up.

Peak Master Wen had much better deportment than that guy.

In his time, Great Wan’s Dragon Vein had been in perfect condition, and Xuanyin Mountain had yet to institute the “Grand Selection

Year.” How long passed between selecting disciples depended on heaven—when one of the four great families produced a scion with excellent endowments, members of that clan within the inner sect would lead the way in starting a Grand Selection.

That year, the unexpected Grand Selection had happened to coincide with the imperial examination. Wen Fei had had nothing to do with the cultivation world to begin with. He had come to the capital to take the exam—he wrote good verse and had a name for being a romantic. He was a literary man. The emperor himself had conferred on him the title of Tanhua, the third-place examinee. While he had been out parading before the crowd, he had run into the immortal envoy coming to the capital.

The immortal envoy that year had been a medicine cultivator disciple from Li Yuelan’s peak. Her nature was shy. Because she hadn’t wanted to disturb the mortals, she had hung a stealth talisman on herself and gone against the flow of the crowd toward Heaven’s Design Pavilion.

Wen Fei had a first-class spiritual sense. A first-class spiritual sense was already extremely rare, and his spiritual sense was naturally concentrated in his olfactory sense.

The overwhelming majority of people had their spiritual sense concentrated in their eyes, and roughly another thirty percent had their spiritual sense concentrated in their ears—it was whatever their most acute sense before opening their spiritual eyes was.

Even Southern Shu’s beast-taming cultivators, who were celebrated for their sense of smell, mostly cultivated it deliberately after entering the Way. People whose spiritual sense was naturally concentrated in their nose were rare—clearly this person had been born less than honorable.

When they brushed shoulders, this uncommon nose caught the scent of medicine on the lady immortal of the way of medicine making through the stealth talisman. The stealth talisman instantly dissipated. Wen Fei's eyes met those of the young immortal lady; gazing on her, he smiled.

Immediately upon entering the mortal world, the immortal lady slipped and fell to sexual charms. So that year, the name of the Tanhua first appeared on the Grand Selection roster, the reason given being his "uncommon spiritual sense."

By an odd coincidence, the Tanhua didn't enter the Hanlin Academy; instead, he joined Heaven's Design Pavilion.

CHAPTER 178 - Tomb of the Sage (4)

Wen Fei had no backing. After entering Heaven's Design Pavilion, he was first assigned to the remote Hongyin branch, and in the following decades spent time in places like Suling and Guzhou. He passed through all the most unrestful places, doing the most unrestful work, accumulating a thick stack of meritorious achievements. In addition, he was smooth and slick, unusually good at mingling. Reasonably speaking, he ought to have climbed the ranks long ago, but the trouble was that tumultuous romances were written into his destiny. He left behind a trail of messy love affairs wherever he went. Heaven's Design Pavilion's headquarters in Jinping repeatedly wanted to promote him, but over and over he would cause some different slight problem.

He himself didn't care. When he had money, he'd go tinker with bizarre bagatelles. The black market was full of his informers. The two centuries of an open-eyed immortal's lifespan seemed to exist just to give him time to play around in the mortal world... until the third year of the Wen Emperor, when an unusually troublesome evil cultivator killed nine of Heaven's Design Pavilion's people in Hongyin and entered the annals due to his ruthlessness.

The nine people who had died in the line of duty were all Wen Fei's former comrades. He had already been transferred to Guzhou then. When the news reached the South Sea coast, Wen Fei, who got along with everyone, for the first time turned on his superiors. Disobeying orders, he went north.

Both Li and Wan sent inner sect established foundations who, working together, were unable to contain that evil cultivator. Wen Fei, using a poison he had turned up who knew where and an array of his own making, managed to detain the evil cultivator who was a major boundary above him for half a night, holding out until the arrival of an ascended spirit sword cultivator from Northern Li.

The Xuanyin Mountains and Northern Li's Kunlun had lost one inner sect established foundation each, and of the half-immortals who had come along, practically all of them had been annihilated, with the exception of Wen Fei. Wen Fei himself had been poisoned; no one in the outer sects could cure him. The general commander at the time sent a Heavenly Question to the immortal mountains, asking the inner sect to save him.

Of Xuanyin and Kunlun, one concentrated on mental cultivation, while the other concentrated on physical training. In the early years, neither sect had had anyone cultivate the way of medicine making. Put together, the two sects couldn't come up with a single medicine making master. So the inner sect could only send an established foundation of the way of medicine making to do whatever she could toward saving him.

By coincidence, that medicine cultivating shijie was the immortal envoy who had drawn Wen Fei into the Latent Cultivation Temple.

When the medicine cultivator reached the Latent Cultivation Temple and took a look, she was stunned. She had no idea what the hell he had managed to get up to. All she could do was keep him alive while thinking up a way to wake him up and ask him for the details.

Wen Fei had been gathering bizarre objects purely for his own amusement; he also couldn't clearly say what he had done. So the patient and the healer could only spend every day racking their brains as if investigating a case, guessing and fumbling. In several breathtaking instances, he nearly died, only to be pulled back from the brink. He spent three years bedridden in the Latent Cultivation Temple, bringing the early established foundation shijie to the middle established foundation stage... It was lucky that a cultivator couldn't go bald.

The Latent Cultivation Temple was the boundary between inner and outer sect, a place of quiet cultivation. Under the noses of a crowd of stewards, naturally nothing untoward could happen.

Everyone only knew that when he was cured of the poison and returned to the outer sect after three years, Wen Fei's whole personality seemed to have changed. He no longer fooled around all over the place—it turned out that he also knew how to behave decently.

Because of his great service in punishing evil, Wen Fei was transferred to Jinping after he left the mountains. Within a decade, he succeeded to the post of general commander. At the time, his spiritual bones were already complete, but he hadn't deliberately gone in search of a Way of the Heart. He seemed to have no intention of entering the inner sect.

He bought a bit of land in Zheluo Town near Jinping. Following the model of the place where the walkers in the mortal world lived, he used mustard seeds to transform that land into a small villa. He called it the Village of Apricot Blossoms. Not confining himself to apricot blossoms, he planted all kinds of flowers, and saved up his own spiritual stones to create a small patch of spiritual ground that he weeded in his free time. During festivals, he would receive his colleagues there for drinking and fishing. It was an excellent place to be happy and carefree, forget yourself in drunkenness.

He didn't buy things at random anymore. When he had money to spare, he spent it on his little hidden realm. After over a decade of meticulous care, the spiritual field grew a rare spiritual flower that was hard to come by even on Southern Shu's Three Islands—the orchid of immortality.

The orchid of immortality was already rare, but all those circulating on the market were lilac, while this one was snow-white.

This was of paramount quality. When the flower bloomed to its ripest, you could distill three drops of flower dew from it—this was the main ingredient in the spirit-protecting pill.

Tradition had it that the spirit-protecting pill could protect the spirit of a dying person, keep it from being extinguished for at least half a shichen, so you could keep the deceased emotionally stable enough to recite the whole *Detailed Account of Meridians* before closing their eyes... Of course, the average person wasn't so wicked as to make such difficulties for a person on their deathbed. The greatest use of the spirit-protecting pill was that, during the great heavenly tribulation of a cultivator becoming an ascended spirit, it could cover the spirit with a fragile layer of protection, raising the chances of success by one tenth.

That one tenth wasn't to be underestimated. This was the single extant medicine in the world that would aid in passing the ascended spirit boundary.

Only the purest and truest Way of the Heart of the way of medicine making, devoted heart and soul, could grow a pure white orchid.

It was only then that everyone learned that General Commander Wen already had a Way of the Heart.

Since the formation of the Xuanyin Mountains, this was the first Way of the Heart for medicine making that anyone in Southern Wan had found for themselves.

The walkers in the mortal world furtively spoke through their own communication devices. One person said, "So after Wen-shishu entered the inner sect, he left the Village of Apricot Blossoms to Heaven's Design Pavilion? What about the spiritual field?"

Pang Jian said, "The terrain has changed over time. When he built the small hidden realm here, it wasn't surrounded by water yet..."

The spiritual field sank into the lake long ago, and with no one to attend to it all these years, the spiritual energy has long since drained away as well. Give it up.”

Another blue-clotheser said, “Actually, I’ve been wanting to ask, who changed the name to Jinghua Village? It doesn’t sound auspicious at all. What were they thinking?”

The blue-clotheser who had spoken before put in a word: “I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but... I’m just curious, Wen-shishu... um... did he also talk like that back then? Even if he was born with that problem, wouldn’t it have healed by the time he became an ascended spirit?”

“No, I believe it was an accident with elixirs,” Pang Jian said. “When he had been poisoned with some strange poison and was being treated in the Latent Cultivation Temple, that medicine making shijie tried many medicines on him, and one of them had negative side-effects. First he was completely mute for three months, and afterward, he could speak, but not very smoothly.”

The blue-clotheser who had asked the question said in astonishment, “What kind of elixir was so powerful that the master of Rosy Cloud Peak couldn’t cure it?”

“He could,” Pang Jian said after a brief silence. “I heard from Chief Su that after returning to the inner sect, that shijie couldn’t get over it. She went into seclusion for over a year to produce a cure. Before her enthusiasm could wear off, she sent it over. But when he received it, he didn’t take it. He said he was used to it already, and he felt that it was better this way. It would cure him of his philandering. If he avoided love affairs, he could concentrate on cultivation.”

For a half-immortal who had yet to establish a foundation to breed a snow-white orchid of immortality, he must in fact have been entirely

free of distractions.

“So what happened to that orchid of immortality?”

Pang Jian said, “I don’t know about that..”

“A medicinal herb wouldn’t be any use to anyone who wasn’t a medicine cultivator. You can’t stir-fry and eat it,” another blue-clotheser put in. “Did he give it as a gift to that inner sect shijie?”

“Is that shijie also surnamed Li?”

They had been calling her “shijie” all along because it was well known that Wen Fei was the only ascended spirit medicine cultivator among Xuanyin’s thirty-six peaks. Since the female immortal in the story was also a medicine cultivator, then she had to still be an established foundation.

Pang Jian received his eyebrows. “How would I know? What’s your guys’ problem? Why would you need to know about a female cultivator from the inner sect? How is her surname any of your business?!”

“She wasn’t surnamed Li.”

Just then, an unfamiliar consciousness interjected, putting down a line of writing.

All the blue-clothesers, Pang Jian included, felt their spines stiffen. As one, they put the communication devices they held behind their backs.

They’d been careless. An ascended spirit peak master was capable of casually spying on their conversation at this distance.

Pang Jian gave a dry cough. “Wen-shishu.”

Wen Fei seemed indifferent. With his back to them, he gazed at the blue-clotheser whose wife and children had been in Jinghua Village, listening to his wails.

Words popped up automatically on the immortal tool. They said: “There was no future for a medicine cultivator in the Xuanyin Mountains. A direct descendant of the Li clan wouldn’t have taken that way. She was only a girl from a slightly distant offshoot branch of the Li clan. At the time, two new ascended spirits had come out of the Zhao family within ten years, and they had taken the lead twice in a row in holding the Grand Selection. They were very much at the center of events. The other big families naturally couldn’t let them get complacent. While bending over backward to get their own people onto the provisional name list, they tried to dig up dirt about the Zhao family members on the list. Her background was too ordinary. In all these years, the Xuanyin Mountains haven’t had a female cultivator of lower birth than her. The families were too busy scuffling to take notice, so she made it in among the mess. As the only daughter of a minor family, her ideas were too pure, and she wasn’t very sensible. When she got to the Latent Cultivation Temple, she didn’t know that she was supposed to make way for the princesses and children of nobles and ended up becoming the first person to open her spiritual eyes that year. Li Yuelan saw that she was talented and could be counted as part of her family, so she accepted her into her own Gold Osmanthus Peak.”

Wen Fei had finished dismantling Jinghua Village. Finally, he glanced at the stone tablet. “Oh. I was the one who changed the name to Jinghua Village.”

Then, under his gaze, the stone tablet silently turned into a heap of powder, many former affections coming to an end.

“I ought to have dismantled this place when I left. I’ve known all along that there were people fooling around with mortal women, but

I didn't attend to it. It ought not to have happened. The many lives that ended here before their time today can all be put down to a disaster of my making. When Jinping has been cleaned up, if anyone who has had a family member die here cannot be at peace, just come to Rosy Cloud Peak to take it up with me."

All the blue-clothesers hurried to say, "We wouldn't dare."

"This cannot happen again in the future." With this, Wen Fei waved a hand and was about to fly away on his sword.

Suddenly, a blue-clotheser quietly asked, "Since the orchid of immortality is so valuable, did Wen-shishu plant more afterward?"

Wen Fei's expression was very bland. "I didn't have the time. The orchid of immortality is only rare. It has no use. The spirit-protecting pill cannot save a person's life. It can only prolong the pain of parting. If you take a spirit-protecting pill, even if you get past the ascended spirit boundary, you'll still be weaker than other cultivators of your grade, and you'll never be able to take another..."

He paused, remembered that discussing "taking another step along the Great Way" was now meaningless, and therefore erased the following words. He added, "The orchid of immortality is also called 'the flower in the mirror' in Southern Shu. It isn't a good thing. Let it go. If you run into it on the black market, remember to look after your purse. Don't be a sucker."

Before the words had all appeared on the communication device, a light breeze swept by. Wen Fei rose with the wind and was gone in a flash.

The Kaiming Cultivators along the line had already repaired the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon tracks. An empty train just happened to be trying to go through. Wen Fei's figure vanished amid its snow-white steam.

“A white orchid of immortality?” Xi Ping rolled up his drooping sleeves. “In all these years hanging out on the black markets in the north and south, even I haven’t come across one. No wonder that stutt..”

Zhi Xiu raised his wine cup and shot him a glance.

“Stu... stupendous medicine making master is the number one medicine cultivator of the thirty-six peaks,” Xi Ping said, quickly changing what he had been about to say and turning the subject away. “Then why didn’t he plant any more afterward? If it were me, I’d have planted a whole mountainful, sold ‘em to that crowd of good-for-nothings in Sanyue at a hundred thousand white spirits a flower.”

This Tai Sui, whose name had shocked all four nations, currently had his pant legs and long sleeves rolled up and was digging in the rear courtyard of the Marquis Manor. Xi Yue was silently standing by holding a lantern for him.

The Marquis of Yongning had never expected that after all these years, the only son he’d thought was gone would return, and that a “teacher” would come to the house to complain about him! For a moment, the Marquis had been unsure of the date. If not for this “teacher”’s unique identity, he practically would have felt that time had turned backward... as if his nuisance of a son were still six years old and, after a month of being a study companion, had angered the imperial instructor into a migraine.

Among all the Marquis of Yongning’s jumbled feelings, he had wanted to crawl into a hole from shame. He must have said “I have educated my child badly” and “I am ashamed” a hundred times in one day. He couldn’t beat him anymore. Therefore, he had given him the punishment of cleaning up the garden.

Xi Yue and the Kaiming Cultivators could repair the courtyard walls and the rockery, but they couldn't bring the plants that had burnt to ash back to life. Xi Ping didn't need to sleep at night, so it would have been a waste of labor force not to use him. Zhi Xiu was supervising, not letting him use talismans.

“The spirit-protecting pill is forbidden within the Xuanyin Mountains,” Zhi Xiu said. “It is said that when the former master of Resonant Stone Peak was murdered, in order to peel the Territory Map rubbing off his consciousness, the killer used a spirit-protecting pill to keep his spirit from collapsing for as long as half a shichen.”

Xi Ping froze. He suddenly recalled Wen Fei saying inside the Territory Map that when Zhao Long had died, someone had been wrongly accused of being the murderer.

“That medicine cultivator was surnamed Shen. She was a disciple of Golden Osmanthus Peak's Peak Master Li,” Zhi Xiu said. “The Li and Zhao families never got on well. When Peak Master Zhao and Peak Master Li found each other congenial in their younger years, someone thought that this was a good opportunity for a reconciliation and facilitated their marriage. But then, as both of them went further and further in cultivation, following separate Ways of the Heart, it didn't work out in the end. They became ascended spirits one after another and grew more and more distant. Husband and wife lived separately on their respective peaks year round. Apart from a marriage contract filed with the Principal Peak, their marriage was basically in name only.”

Xi Ping had heard many stories of lovebirds broken up. There were ones of malicious in-laws playing dirty tricks, ones of relationships forbidden because the couple were of different clans, ones of nobles stealing common women away from their beloveds... This was his first time learning that a “Way of the Heart” could also act in this role. For a time, he was speechless.

“But though they had each gone their separate ways, a couple is still treated as one entity. There were many occasions where they had to appear together. When it came to discussing private matters, Peak Master Li usually sent a disciple in her place. This errand was extremely awkward. Naturally the disciples didn’t want to go. This Medicine Cultivator Shen didn’t belong to the Li family’s main branch and unavoidably suffered some wrongs. She often made trips between Resonant Stone Peak and Golden Osmanthus Peak, and because of this, some rumors got started.” Zhi Xiu paused. Choosing his words carefully, he said, “The master of Resonant Stone Peak...uh, I never met him myself, but the word was that his character was somewhat ‘unruly,’ and in the early years quite a few fellow sect members denounced him.”

Xi Ping took the hint at once. “Oh, I see, a lecherous old pervert.”

Zhi Xiu gave him a “mind your tongue” look, but he didn’t correct him. “He was a direct descendant of the Dignitary of Rites Zhao Yin. With Zhao Yin there, as long as there wasn’t a major scandal, others couldn’t very well say anything...until there was an unusual shift in the Sea of Stars. It pointed to Resonant Stone Peak and said there was a ‘romantic crisis.’”

“I’ve got goosebumps. Call that a romantic crisis?” Xi Ping muttered. “Hey, wait, shifu, wasn’t he getting his skull peeled open at the time?”

“The spirit-protecting pill can keep a spirit from collapsing. As long as the spirit didn’t collapse, Xuanyin’s disciple name token wouldn’t be destroyed, so the Sea of Stars didn’t say that he had already died of poisoning.” Zhi Xiu sighed. He also felt that speaking of these things was a little vulgar. “The Dignitary of Fate Elder notified the Principal Peak, and that was when everyone learned that this Medicine Cultivator Shen had gone to Resonant Stone Peak and had yet to return. Golden Osmanthus Peak had already asked for

her twice. Yuntian Palace's Dignitary of Rule was furious and wanted to search Resonant Stone Peak at once, the Zhao family instinctively shielded their peak master... They bickered for half a shichen, until Zhao Long's disciple name token was destroyed."

"In my opinion," Xi Ping said earnestly, "he had it coming."

Zhi Xiu flicked a seed at him.

Xi Ping casually caught the seed and looked for a good place to plant it. "So what happened to the lady medicine cultivator surnamed Shen?"

Zhi Xiu softly said, "When the elders broke through the prohibition on Resonant Stone Peak and charged in, they saw her next to the body with her clothes all... Then she took one look at her shifu, Peak Master Li, and, without a word, killed herself. They found flower dew of the orchid of immortality among her last effects, a small bottle. Of the three drops, two were gone."

Xi Ping immediately froze. "Was it Wen-shishu who gave it to her?"

Zhi Xiu gently took a sip of the Marquis Manor's sweet wine and didn't answer. He only said, "At the time, it was thought that perhaps her cultivation level had been insufficient while making the spirit-protecting pill and she had made a mistake. It was within reason to think she had wasted some of the materials... But later, there was something that always seemed strange to me."

Xi Ping came back to himself and caught up quickly. "You mean Liang Chen."

"After a Way of the Heart shatters, a person dies, body and soul extinguished. Not even a shed skin can escape... Even the Dignitary of Rule Elder could only just keep himself together for a brief moment to ask Duanrui-shijie to take him away. Why was Liang

Chen able to hold out until he obtained the half-skeleton of hidden bones after his Way of the Heart shattered at the bottom of the Impassable Sea?” Zhi Xiu stroked the wine cup and glanced south. “Did the heart-protecting pill that killed Zhao Long really take two drops of flower dew?”

Outside the courtyard walls, the road had been repaired. The sounds of cars passing through Dangu Lane came to the rear courtyard. A flying goose machine was set up on a stone table with people far abroad sending illegible scrawls at all times which, once deciphered, were summaries of toilet bulletins from all over.

His old hometown of Jinping was already very strange to Zhi Xiu. The earth monkey digging in the ground in the courtyard was his only point of reference.

Zhi Xiu skimmed the sensational toilet bulletin summaries. There were ones from Western Chu that went “Dongheng on lockdown, Northern Xia mutinies,” “His Majesty’s whereabouts unknown, it is feared he will be deposed,” and so on and so forth; ones from Southern Shu that went “Miah being hunted through the streets,” “Miah clan leader said to have committed treason,” with fragments mixed in like “troops gathering at Northern Li’s borders.”

In the north, the defensive walls stood high. On the southern continent, all was chaos. Only the Land of Turmoil wasn’t subject to these varying opinions.

Zhi Xiu sighed. “It’s been over two hundred years. I ought to go to the former location of Southern He.”

CHAPTER 179 - Tomb of the Sage (5)

Xi Ping was unsurprised.

Zhi Xiu had never been able to let go of the Land of Turmoil. Sometimes Xi Ping even suspected that shifu spending all these years trudging through the ice and snow with his sword was largely for the sake of that place.

In the twenty-eighth year of Taiming, when Liang Chen had coveted the Dragon Vein, the shadow he had produced seemed to have been a shrunken version of the Territory Map. This person had spent a lifetime diligently mining in the Land of Turmoil, wrongly devoting all of his ardor to the Zhou clan, such that his Way of the Heart had shattered as soon as he laid eyes on the truth in the Impassable Sea. With the levels he would have been able to reach, it wasn't very likely he would have known about the Territory Map.

That the true Territory Map was sealed in the veins of the earth was known only to the Dignitary of Fate and the Dignitary of Rule, who had been the Southern Sage's disciples... as well as Zhi Xiu, who had touched heavenly might while becoming a shed skin.

Even the Zhao family members who bore the Territory Map rubbing didn't know, or else they wouldn't have struck blindly during their revolt eight years ago. Great Wan's imperial family was also evidently ignorant, or else there would have been no need to spend all these years offering their own family members as sacrifices to the sea. Wouldn't it have been much more straightforward to simply blow up the veins of the earth and let everything go to hell?

So... who had pointed Liang Chen in the direction of the Dragon Vein? Who had aided him in surviving the shattering of his Way of the Heart?

Xi Ping said, “So can we trust Peak Master Wen? How did he solve the case?”

“At the time, the Li and Zhao families had an open break over the quota for the Grand Selection. There were still three years to go before the Latent Cultivation Temple opened its mountain gate for the next class, and the two families had raised a furor in court with their fighting. The late emperor could not bear the disturbance and dispatched a letter to the Xuanyin Mountains. The Zhou clan suggested a contest among the established foundation disciples of the thirty-six peaks, with the winner to be the next immortal envoy,” Zhi Xiu said. “The arenas were on the unclaimed peaks, arranged by all the peak masters together. During the match on Resonant Stone Peak, a disciple made a sneak attack contrary to the rules, resulting in a person falling off the cliff at the rear of the mountain and breaking through some array. Those of us on the scene scrambled to the rescue and were incautious in our haste. The spiritual energy we stirred up disturbed Zhao Long’s spiritual bones, which had been laid to rest there—after two hundred years, those spiritual bones were completely black. The poison in the corpse had permeated the bones. Medicine Cultivator Shen, who had been taken for the killer at the time, had only been a near-ascended spirit. While as a medicine cultivator, it wouldn’t have been hard for her to cross over a boundary to fatally poison Zhao Long, for the poison to permeate the spiritual bones would have taken the cultivation of an ascended spirit or above. The Zhao clan was furious and requested a thorough autopsy. Therefore, Wen Fei was brought forward.”

Shizun spoke like a court historian.

“I get it,” Xi Ping said with a sigh. “The Li and Zhao families lost their heads fighting, the Zhou family got in between to stir shit up at both ends, and Peak Master Wen saw his chance to fish in muddy waters.”

“Why does everything sound so bad coming out of your mouth?” Zhi Xiu shot him a glare. “Fenghan became absorbed in meticulous study of strange new elixirs after becoming an ascended spirit. He reported at least two or three types per year, with rarer and rarer ingredients. Many times, he nearly died out there, and in the end, none of the medicines he made had much practical use. Bit by bit, everyone came to know that he was weird, and no one cared about the ‘fruits’ of Rosy Cloud Peak. But that year, it just happened that one of the new medicines Rosy Cloud Peak submitted was called ‘heed the grave.’ When the medicinal powder soaked into a body, it could discover whose essence the spiritual energy surging around the deceased at the time of death belonged to—the remaining spiritual energy in Zhao Long’s body pointed directly to Li Yuelan, but there was also a very faint thread that pointed to the Dignitary of Code Li Fengshan.”

Playing dumb, plotting and scheming, dealing a fatal stroke.

Extremely craven, yet also extremely straightforward.

No wonder that, upon learning the cultivation world was coming to an end, he had only laughed.

“Since the war between Wan and He ended, the Dignitary of Code had always been in seclusion on and off. When this happened, he was forced to appear. Everyone was surprised when they saw him. He was skin and bones, half his hair white. It was clear his Way of the Heart had been damaged and he was showing signs of failing... It was my first time seeing that a shed skin could show signs of declining with age.” Zhi Xiu sighed. “A person can fool everyone in the world, but in the end, he cannot lie to the universe or himself.”

“Forget about it, shifu,” his rebellious disciple said, putting forward his viewpoint. “When they’re doing rotten things, if it isn’t ‘to right wrongs on behalf of heaven,’ then it’s ‘for the greater good.’ They’re always confident in having justice on their side. I haven’t seen any of

them suffer an attack of conscience. As I see it, it was that Li Fengshan had betrayed the Xuanyin Mountains and suffered some kind of mysterious backlash.”

Though Zhi Xiu didn't assent, he only acted as if he hadn't heard it, silently drinking his wine. It was clear that in his heart he rather agreed with this.

Xi Ping said, “So how did the Territory Map rubbing end up in Peak Master Wen's hands?”

Zhi Xiu shook his head. “If he hadn't voluntarily produced it now, no one would have known that Zhao Long's Territory Map rubbing was in his hands. He has his priorities straight. Since he was willing to expose himself now, it was because he was putting the country first and did not plan on concealment. If this had been a matter of consequence, he would have come out and said it. If he didn't say anything, it was because it was a personal matter. It will do no good to try getting to the bottom of it.”

As Xi Ping scattered seeds according to a sketch, he considered: that they still had time to maneuver and arrange was built upon the premise that Xuanyin's situation was a secret.

It wasn't important whether the people who knew about this matter at present sincerely supported Zhi Xiu or not. When the order to keep silent had come from a shed skin sword cultivator, they couldn't say anything even if they wanted to. A few walkers in the mortal world couldn't make any big waves.

But if there really was some mysterious individual involved, the situation became dangerous.

Once word leaked out, they would be attacked on all sides.

In Xuanyin's inner sect alone, there were close to thirty ascended spirits if you counted the ones confined to seclusion, and there were tens of thousands of established foundations. When these people learned that their path to immortality would be severed, nothing they got up to would be surprising.

Even if Zhaoting on its own could suppress the thirty-six peaks, what about the other three nations? What about Kunlun's legendary Wanshuang Sword?

And then there was that crowd of evil cultivators who had made names for themselves in various places...

"Alas, peril all around." Xi Ping sat down crosslegged and tapped the ground with his fingers. Extremely fine spiritual energy poured into the new mud. The seeds of flowers and trees immediately broke ground and sprouted.

In the blink of an eye, the bleak garden became covered in greenery. In another blink, a mass of flowers spread out like brocade.

The big tree from the snow-capped mountain was so upright that it stood out in the little garden, but as its leaves and branches unfurled to shade the flowering shrubs, it no longer seemed lonely. Xi Yue, holding the lantern and not watching his step, was lifted into the air by a reincarnation wood tree that had been planted underfoot at some point. He was raised as high as the streetlight outside the courtyard wall.

The lantern light shone on the snow-white tree trunk, making it look like moonlight, lighting up the person under the tree who was like an unconventional flower fairy.

Then the "flower fairy" stretched and, looking pleased with himself, crooned, "The repulsive rat crossing the street, out parading is sure

to be beat. Though the bonfires are lit, it cares not one whit, and runs the old cat off its feet, heh-heh...”

Zhi Xiu nearly choked on his wine. “*You’re* the rat crossing the street, scoundrel!”

Xi Yue: “...”

Was there any of that bad medicine Peak Master Wen had taken left? These two needed a dose right now.

When Xi Ping was halfway through stretching, Xu Rucheng’s voice suddenly sounded in the reincarnation wood.

“I don’t know what’s going on,” Xu Rucheng said quietly, keeping his eye on an immortal tool for monitoring spiritual energy. “The spiritual energy on the West Peak suddenly became denser. I don’t know about the Central and East Peaks yet, I can’t easily go out...”

Before he could finish, a bright light swept past the window. Xu Rucheng’s heart tightened. He instinctively held his breath and shut his mouth. Only after a long moment did he dare to look out the window. “The Silver Moon has moved away from the West Peak. It seems to be going east.”

The Silver Moon seemed to have given up on something. When the grim moonlight was gone, the West Peak was deathly still.

Some ascended spirits circling outside the West Peak exchanged glances. Xiang Wenqing, who was in the lead, got his nerve up and landed at the door of Elder Xiang Ning’s residence. He said loudly, “Disciple Xiang Wenqing requests to see his shizun.”

There was no answer.

“Disciple Xiang...”

A thin spiritual wind suddenly blew past, interrupting him. Xiang Wenqing's gaze followed the wind. His pupils contracted slightly: the inscriptions outside of Elder Xiang Ning's residence were manifesting one after another, the spiritual energy in them dissipating piecemeal.

An ascended spirit not surnamed Xiang suddenly went around Xiang Wenqing and charged right in, coming face-to-face with Xiang Ning, who was facing south. The ascended spirit felt his heart stutter. He broke out in a cold sweat, regretting his rashness. "Forgive me, Xiang-shishu, I..."

The ascended spirit was just searching his belly and guts for an excuse when he saw Xiang Ning, like a dandelion in a strong wind, disintegrate before his eyes. The ascended spirits following closely after him were dumbfounded—the passing of a shed skin ought to have been an earth-shattering event, but Xiang Ning went to pieces without a sound. There seemed to be a ray of moonlight inside him. It guided the shed skin's essence as it blended into the mountain at his feet, not a drop of it leaking out... He had been swallowed whole by the Sanyue Mountains!

The Silver Moon had already returned to the Central Peak. It wavered there briefly. Then it was as if the divine tool of the mountains was being pushed and pulled by two forces. The huge moon itself remained at the Central Peak, but the moonlight streamed toward the East Peak.

On the face of Xuanwu, exiled in Southern Shu, the white paper mask was suddenly lit by moonlight. The drawn-on features, as if cracking open, took on a frightening smile. Xuanwu slowly turned his head to look east—though there was interference, the Sanyue Mountains were summoning him back.

At the same time, like an explosion in Xi Ping's ears, news came from Chu.

“Sanyue's inner sect has been sealed. No one goes in or out.”

“Sanyue's inner sect is reinforcing the great mountain array.”

“The Silver Moon seems to have been blunted!!”

In Tao County, the Luwu keeping an eye out in all directions were also on the alert. “Quite a few cultivation masters have entered the county, including some familiar ones. They seem to be the ‘offerings’ of distinguished families.”

Zhao Qindan put down the pocket thousand-li eyeglass made of brass in her hand and said categorically, “Yu Family Bend's former chief offering Yu Chang is included. His disguise isn't very good. He's recognizable at a glance.”

This evil cultivator was very bold.

Xi Ping narrowed his eyes, then heard a voice in the reincarnation wood overpower the babble of the others.

Through the reincarnation wood, Yu Chang said, “I don't know whether your news is faster or my news is faster. There's been a letter from Dongheng, inferring that Xiang Ning may already be dead. The Silver Moon has at last abandoned the good-for-nothing who's let the Xiang family lose its grip on the country. Can you guess who it's going to call back?”

Xi Ping didn't respond.

So Yu Chang continued his solo performance toward the reincarnation wood. “Xiang Ning didn't have the strength to keep the Central Peak under control. Over the years, Sanyue has turned

into a joke for the toilet bulletins. But once Xuanwu returns, there is sure to be a frantic expulsion of dissidents. Not one of the powers that have taken advantage of the favorable conditions in recent years to spring up all over the place will escape, including your Tao County. Tai Sui, do you want to consider working with me?”

“It’s like this, shifu. Let’s prepare for several eventualities.” Xi Ping was finished stretching. “If Xuanyin’s situation does get out, we need to send our malicious neighbors back home to sweep the snow at their own gates and stay out of our business. If it’s a false alarm, then that’s just perfect.”

“What’s just perfect?” said Zhi Xiu.

Xi Ping raised his head. “I know you’ve always wanted to put an end to the southern mines, shifu.”

When Southern He was vanquished, its veins of the earth had been broken, keeping its spiritual energy from transmitting throughout the whole country, fixing all of it within the Lancang Mountains. Lancang had turned into the mines that supported Moon Plated Gold; the smoke and dust amid the steam, the demon host in the Impassable Sea—all they burned, all they consumed, were the ashes of the Turmoilers.

Zhi Xiu froze. Suddenly, he remembered when this spendthrift rebellious disciple had used two spiritual stones to send back a double handful of fireworks suspected of delivering dire insult to his shizun, putting on a big show for the thirty-six peaks to see; it seemed that that had been precisely when he had just reached the southern mines.

The vast majority of the time, Xi Ping was an extraordinary scoundrel, yet when he occasionally revealed a trace of thoughtfulness, he always seemed to know what the people around him were thinking.

“If it’s a false alarm, we’ll seize the opportunity to level that grave disease,” Xi Ping said. “When it comes to the Land of Turmoil, Northern Li is separated from it by the whole southern continent, and Southern Shu by the South Sea—it’s beyond their reach. I’ll take the Luwu to stir up trouble in Western Chu—chalk it up as returning our good neighbor’s hospitality.”

Zhi Xiu was silent for a moment. “There is another matter I ought to instruct you about.”

Xi Ping lowered his eyes slightly. “My san... His Highness Prince Zhuang?”

Zhi Xiu had seen with his own eyes how, as a half-immortal, Zhou Ying had gone down into the Impassable Sea and yanked out the Zhao family’s colossal spine, and that had been him being lenient. In a few short years, he had used the Luwu to sow discord among all the great spiritual mountains, splitting them apart. Now, just by taking a step back, he had drawn out the Territory Map that Xuanyin had kept buried for a thousand years. When one thought about it, his traces were to be found in all the major changes of the last decade and a half.

This prince’s cultivation clearly wasn’t high, but he seemed to be the incarnation of the demon host.

Only the Kaiming and the Luwu, though they had been established with ulterior motives, were full of Xi Ping’s traces... but now Zhou Ying had entered the way of clarity, washing away all external objects. Naturally, Xi Ping was also an “external object.” It was hard to say where the Kaiming and the Luwu would stand in the future.

If either the Dignitary of Rule or the Dignitary of Fate had ever paid attention to the “ant” Zhou Ying, they probably would have gotten rid of him ages ago. It was only Zhi Xiu, who would take the trouble

to mention him behind his back in such a tactful manner, who wasn't capable of "preventative measures" like that.

"When a person enters a way and spends hundreds upon thousands of years believing in a Way of the Heart, it is easy to mistakenly think that their own way is 'orthodoxy.'" Zhi Xiu sighed. "Since the way of clarity is the origin of the three thousand paths of the Great Way, all these years, Xuanyin's elders have believed as a matter of course that it would bind a person to be a tool on their side. They didn't necessarily have a true understanding of the way of clarity."

"They just wouldn't acknowledge that they had selfish desires," Xi Ping said with a false smile, "so they thought a way 'without selfish desire' would have to look just like themselves. Before all my teeth had grown in, I also used to think that everyone on earth who didn't look like me was ugly."

Zhi Xiu said, "... Did I not tell you not to let me hear you talking like that?"

Xi Ping stood up and patted the mud off himself. He said, "There's no need to worry about His Highness Prince Zhuang. He... he sometimes goes a little too far, but essentially it isn't for the sake of being a scourge upon anything. At most I suppose it's to be a scourge upon Bai Ling."

"Then in your opinion," Zhi Xiu said seriously, "what is he doing it for?"

Xi Ping considered, then softly said, "Perhaps it's because he's looking for an answer."

Zhi Xiu raised his eyebrows.

“We commonplace people, if we occasionally get stuck in some hopeless situation, there may be many things we can’t get over, but there will always be other things to block our sight. We’ll look at others, then look back at ourselves, run around for a while, and maybe by then we’ll have forgotten about it. But it doesn’t work like that for them... I’m also talking about the Heartless Lotus Zhuoming. They have to constantly consider, is it that others are blind, or that they’re insane? So they always want to get to the bottom of things. He doesn’t belong to the inner sect, anyway. It doesn’t take long to establish a foundation. In a few days, he ought to be leaving the mountains. Don’t worry, shifu, I’ll contact him.”

Xi Ping was familiar with Zhou Ying’s conduct and methods. Naturally it was for the best to have him take care of it. But Zhi Xiu didn’t need to look to the stars to know why his disciple had “fled” to Flying Jade Peak that day. Therefore, he hesitated. “You...”

“I’m better.” Xi Ping waved a hand, as if all he needed was a patch of shade so he could catch his breath and start frisking around happily again. “It’s just the way of clarity. That’s no big problem... Look at Duanrui-shishu—she never got angry. With that smile-hiding-a-knife rotten temper of his, if he really manages to cultivate Princess Duanrui’s self-restraint, I might miss out on a few beatings from the discipline rod in the future.”

Having said this, he washed his hands, ran over to warm wine for his shifu, and changed the subject just as quickly as he had fled the Latent Cultivation Temple. “Shifu, have you tried out a steam carriage yet? I see there’s one parked in the Marquis Manor’s rear courtyard. Why don’t we drive it out and give it a spin now, while there’s no one on the roads? If we run into a wall, at worst we’ll have to pay compensation...”

Zhi Xiu was like Pang Jian, politely declining to have anything to do with these racing “iron bulls,” so he drove his annoying disciple away.

Xi Ping went inside, humming his off-tune “runs the old cat off its feet,” until he reached a deserted place.

He was alone now. There was no more need to pretend.

He stared emptily at Jinping’s night sky, for once perfectly clear. He had the disciple name token. A member of the inner sect could send a Heavenly Question. The Heavenly Question was a direct connection to the Xuanyin Immortal Mountains that avoided all prying.

Spiritual energy collected at his fingertips, then dispersed again, several times over. The spiritual energy inside the room overflowed; plants and small living creatures all instinctively chased spiritual energy, so it wasn’t long before a multiflora rose seed that had ended up outside the window had sprouted and climbed over the whole wall in the blink of an eye. Outside the glass window, a crowd of little birds gathered to scrounge spiritual energy.

They were all babbling at once. It was too noisy. Xi Ping had been on edge to begin with, so he pushed open the window, sending the birds flapping up to the top of the courtyard wall.

“Freeloading food and water, *and* talking so much crap,” he complained irritably. But suddenly, under the rose bush, he saw a little black cat so skinny that it looked like a chicken. It opened its mouth and meowed at Xi Ping. Its voice was thin and sharp, almost inaudible to mortals.

Xi Ping instantly remembered the cat he had picked up when he was eight years old.

In that litter of cats, there had only been one pure black one. The adult cat didn’t seem fond of it, so it had bedded down alone, away from the group. Occasionally it would open its eyes to look at the

other gamboling and frisking kittens, but soon it would avert its gaze disinterestedly and lick its own fur. Somehow, it had reminded him a little of san-ge.

Later it hadn't been like him anymore. That black cat had gotten so fat its head and neck became one. He had heard that in the end it had died of old age in the Latent Cultivation Temple, having lived to the age of twenty, a half-immortal among cats.

Xi Yue sensed the spiritual energy leaking out of his room and felt a little uneasy. As soon as he walked into the courtyard, he saw a spiritual wind lifting a filthy feral cat.

"You're just in time, Yue-bao'er, look what I've picked up," Xi Ping's high-spirited voice said from inside. "Heh, it bites! Same bad habit as you when you were little."

It was night. A Heavenly Question came straight to Xuanyin's Principal Peak, nimbly passing through a pile of mourning streamers.

Objects resemble their owners. This Heavenly Question boldly barged into the mourning hall and nearly landed in the incense ash.

Mist suddenly appeared above the incense burner. A hand reached out of nowhere from among the mist and grabbed the letter.

Other people's Heavenly Questions were a single page. Relying on the abundance of an ascended spirit's essence, Xi Ping had written a whole volume. The proper business was crammed in among trivial matters; there were even doodles here and there.

Zhou Ying didn't waste time with rubbish like "I picked up another cat." With a beam of spiritual energy, lines tumbled from the voluminous Heavenly Question like a flower's petals falling, leaving only a few urgent sentences on the page.

“Xiang Ning is dead, Xuanwu has returned, the Silver Moon has come to the end of the road and gone mad. Yu Chang wishes to start an armed rebellion and has asked me to think of a way to remove the spiritual image brands of offerings from various places in the country. Western Chu is in chaos. Lend me some of what’s buried under Tao County.”

Zhou Ying casually responded with “okay,” then stood up to meet Wen Fei, who happened to have just returned to the mountains.

CHAPTER 180 - Tomb of the Sage (6)

The people of Xuanyin's inner sect, apart from the elders, couldn't enter and leave the immortal mountains at will; they had to go to the Principal Peak to request and then return a token. Though Wen Fei had run off without authorization, on the way back, owing to his unstable emotions and unsteady state of mind, he unconsciously came to the Principal Peak. When he saw the sky filled with white streamers, he stared blankly for a long moment, then at last remembered that two of Xuanyin's three elders were gone; everything had changed.

Wen Fei glanced in the direction of Resonant Stone Peak. The whole mountain was gone, as if there was a tooth missing among the uninterrupted stretch of the Xuanyin Immortal Mountains. Even the wind had become much stronger than before.

Who could have thought that the untouchably lofty immortal mountains could collapse?

A disciple was passing by and quickly came forward to offer a greeting on seeing him. Wen Fei nodded and averted his gaze. He strode toward the main hall and waved his fan toward the disciple at the door: *I've come to pay my respects to the two elders and, while I'm here, receive my punishment for leaving the mountains without authorization.*

A crowd of established foundations looked at each other in dismay — the elders had nearly all died off; which junior would dare to take it upon themselves to punish him?

“Uh... you must be joking, Wen-shishu, we...”

“Peak Master Wen.” Zhou Ying appeared at the door, gave the salute appropriate for a junior, and rescued the disciples on duty on

the Principal Peak from their embarrassment. “Please come this way.”

The incense altar of the Xuanyin Mountains’ main hall was located beneath the divine image of the Southern Sage. It was normally invisible. Only when a master of ascended spirit level or above passed away would the incense altar automatically appear with the name token of the deceased resting on it.

The altar hung in midair, like a projection from the underworld. The name tokens of the two high elders were arranged at the very front; their spiritual light had dimmed. Behind these two name tokens that provided a focus for those commemorating the dead, there was a vague mist. With an ascended spirit’s vision, it was possible to see that the mist was “planted” full of dim name tokens, like a crowd of ghosts silently peering into the human world; it was unspeakably gloomy.

In a momentary daze, Wen Fei had the impression that the dead were behind that mist, still with the immortal mountains.

He shuddered involuntarily—this truly was being eternally unable to reincarnate.

Zhou Ying led Wen Fei up to the incense altar, offered incense, and stepped aside. “The sect rules are on the stone tablet in front of the main hall’s door, to the right. Once you have finished offering incense, Peak Master Wen, you need only consult the sect rules yourself and act as you see fit.”

Wen Fei examined him briefly: the Kaiming Department’s Prince Zhuang?

The Kaiming Department’s swift reaction, the spiritual stones prepared ahead of time, the mysterious Luwu communication network that could pass through the Xuanyin Mountains, the

Territory Map, and the mortal world... Though Wen Fei turned deaf ears onto everything “outside the mountains,” though there were many people he didn’t know and many things he only half understood, he could still sense that this “little established foundation” was dangerous.

Wen Fei screened the lower half of his face with his fan, using the fan to represent his mouth: *In your opinion, what ought to be my punishment?*

Zhou Ying answered candidly: “I don’t know. I haven’t finished reading the sect rules.”

Wen Fei: “...”

He suddenly thought that, considering appearances alone, this individual was a little like Zhi Jingzhai’s evil disciple!

Wen Fei tried sounding him out: *Nicely done, Your Highness Prince Zhuang. Everything calculated to the smallest detail. How did you know that the Territory Map rubbing from Zhao Long’s head was in my hands?*

“I guessed.” Zhou Ying had no intention of evading. “There was nothing from the Li clan for two hundred years. It was evident that the Territory Map rubbing stripped from Zhao Long back then hadn’t fallen into their hands. Senior Shen was an innocent scapegoat. In those circumstances, there was no latitude for her to pull any tricks. It wasn’t very likely that the Territory Map rubbing had fallen into her hands, either. Furthermore, this case was odd: medicine cultivators have resilient consciousnesses; their wills are steady and tough. With her near-ascended spirit cultivation level, some humiliation wouldn’t have led to her killing herself. Zhao Long’s wrongdoing had come first, and the Dignitary of Rule Elder didn’t belong to the Zhao family. He would have handled the case justly. Why would she have been in a hurry to die?”

Wen Fei's hand tightened. A crack appeared on the fan. His eyes flashed, and the fan was repaired by spiritual energy.

“All I could think of was that she had done it in order to conceal something only a medicine cultivator would know—in other words, the issue was likely with that pill. At the same, Senior Shen was Xuanyin's leading medicine cultivator, just preparing to become an ascended spirit. She had in fact made a spirit-protecting pill... but a single orchid of immortality produces three drops of dew, and two of the three were missing. The vanished drop of orchid of immortality dew may have been lost in a failed refining, and it may have been turned into another spirit-protecting pill. Supposing there really were two pills, both made by her, then there would seem to have been nothing to hide. After all, everyone knew about her. So was it possible that one of the pills—for example, the one that had been used on Zhao Long—just happened not to have been made by her? And just happened to have something to do with the mysterious whereabouts of the Territory Map rubbing?”

On Wen Fei's fan, a number of words appeared, as regular as though inscribed on a memorial tablet: *If she did not make it, who did?*

“Indeed. The spirit-protecting pill not only uses materials that are hard to come by, it is even harder to refine. At the time, Peak Master Wen, you had just recently entered the sect. You were a nobody, so no one thought of you. Looking back on it after two hundred years, I'd have to be blind not to understand.” Zhou Ying waved a hand. “These are my wild guesses. Forgive any inaccuracies, Peak Master Wen.”

Wen Fei stared at him, his expression changing several times, but he saw no probing on Zhou Ying's face, and no curiosity. It was as if he were only asking him about the different weather on the thirty-five peaks.

Watched by this gaze that contained practically no humanity, unexpectedly, Wen Fei's tense shoulders gradually relaxed. After a moment, he gave a laugh and thought, The Xuanyin Mountains's death really will deserve their deaths at the hands of you fiends.

He turned and offered incense to the two elders almost solemnly. Suddenly, with nearly every word dragged out very long, he clumsily said, "I heard rumors before that said when Green Pool Peak's disciples found themselves bewildered or doubting, they would all go tell their peak master about it. When outsiders heard that, they didn't believe it. Who would dare to babble in front of a person like Duanrui-shijie? Now it seems that it may have been true. Anyway, no matter what you way of clarity cultivators hear, you can treat it all as ephemeral."⁹⁸

As he spoke one word at a time, Zhou Ying waited expressionlessly beside him, neither fretting on his account nor finding him ridiculous.

Wen Fei didn't look at him. When he was finished offering incense, he concentrated all his spiritual sense in his eyes and strove to look into the mist behind the incense altar, trying to find the name he had pronounced many times in his heart, but in the end, he couldn't see anything clearly. Instead, he felt colder.

He had chosen the way of medicine making and come to the inner sect. He had seen the dozens of heavenly rules at the gate of the Principal Peak, unexpectedly even stricter than those for the outer sects. Learning that she was soon to become an ascended spirit, he had been even more reluctant to rashly disturb her. He had only used a Heavenly Question to furtively send her the orchid of immortality flower dew—two drops of it; the third drop he had used to make a pill himself. He didn't dare to call it a "gift," afraid of showing off before an expert and afraid of giving offense, so he had

only said, “This is my first time making it. Please instruct me, senior.”

Only the medicine and toolmaking ways would use the spirit-protecting pill. The people in these ways often neglected physical training and found it hard to pass through heavenly tribulations... and their success didn’t depend on their combat skills; they didn’t care very much about whether they would be strong or weak after becoming ascended spirits.

But Wen Fei had still wanted to give her the best, so he had thought long and hard and come up with a lousy idea: in the ancient texts of the medicine making way, it said that the ascended spirit tribulation was a test. Only if it pierced the spirit and touched the consciousness could it grant the cultivator the comprehension of the ascended spirit boundary. With the spirit-protecting pill putting in its oar, the heavenly tribulation would feel that it hadn’t struck to its satisfaction, so what it gave would be lesser.

So he’d had a fantastic idea. Taking inspiration from the idea of the spiritual image doll, he had used the secret art of an evil way obtained from the black market to include a sliver of his own consciousness in that spirit-protecting pill. This way, when the heavenly tribulation fell, it would first strike the spirit-protecting pill—in other words, him—and only reach the real spirit after shattering the pill. The lightning she would endure would be decreased, and the heavenly tribulation would have attacked to its heart’s content—wasn’t that the best of both worlds?

Of course, it was possible that the recipient didn’t think much of him and wouldn’t use his pill. That was all right. At any rate, he had sent both the flower dew and his intentions. If she disdained him, she could just as well make one for herself. He would know how she felt and wouldn’t bother her in the future.

But mortals possessed of emotions and desires very often only say that they are taking the philosophical approach. When the consciousness in the spirit-protecting pill was touched, Wen Fei was in Jinping, running around everywhere under pressure. As soon as he felt the touch, he knew that the pill had been taken by a stranger.

Though he bragged about being ready to take whatever came, he still couldn't restrain a bitter laugh.

Looking at the desolation of Jinping City, the former general commander of Heaven's Design Pavilion who had abandoned walking in the mortal world had felt all his guts ache. What had he been doing, going all the way to the inner sect for the sake of a relationship? In the end, his affections had turned out to be unrequited. It was utterly lamentable and utterly despicable.

But once he had made his intentions known, there had always been the possibility that he would be shot through the heart. Wen Fei grit his teeth and readied himself for a heavenly tribulation to strike his outreaching consciousness. He waited for a long time, but there was no heavenly tribulation.

He felt that something was wrong and couldn't resist probing the spirit of the person who had swallowed the pill. That was when he found to his astonishment that this person's consciousness was already dead, and it was only the spirit-protecting pill keeping the spirit together. The person's cultivation was quite high, too!

Someone was speaking nearby.

First a woman said with a soft sigh, "Bailu is one of my most talented disciples, on her way to leaving my tutelage and taking her place as a peak master..."

Another voice, imposing, interrupted her: “The Xuanyin Mountains have only thirty-six peaks, and at present thirty-three of them have masters. Haven’t you noticed that there have been fewer and fewer ascended spirits over the years?”

“Yes, the disciples are all worthless...”

“It isn’t that the disciples are worthless,” that imposing voice said. “Xuanyin’s thirty-six peaks were left behind by the sage. The Xuanyin Mountains can hold thirty-six ascended spirits at most. Once there are too many ascended spirits, no matter how talented the established foundation disciples may be, their boundaries will be kept down if they cultivate in the inner sect. Shen Bailu isn’t a direct descendant of the Li family, her talents aren’t precisely outstanding, and she’d have had to rely on the aid of a pill to become an ascended spirit. There’s nothing to regret.”

“Shen Bailu” was her name. Wen Fei, scared witless, thought, What does that mean? They aren’t going to let her become an ascended spirit because she was using the spirit-protecting pill?

He had already realized that the woman speaking was Li Yuelan, master of Golden Osmanthus Peak. Li Yuelan’s position in the Li family’s generational ranking was very high. Who dared to speak so commandingly to her? Could it actually be...

Wen Fei’s heart came up to his throat. He listened with all his might. But his consciousness was trapped in the spirit-protecting pill and couldn’t move at will.

Then he heard the imposing voice say, “Do not waste any more time.”

Wen Fei’s first reaction was that he should send a Heavenly Question to the Dignitary of Fate Elder. Before he could stand up, he

felt a sharp pain in the part of his consciousness attached to the spirit-protecting pill.

The spirit of the dead person who had taken the pill was quaking. Something was being peeled off by force. With Wen Fei's cultivation level at the time, he couldn't see what it was clearly. The others spent a long time peeling, and he seemed to be cleaved in two for a long time. By an odd coincidence, just at the moment that the thing was removed, the spirit-protecting pill wore off. The dead person's spirit collapsed, and Wen Fei's external consciousness recovered its freedom of movement... and ran head-on into that dead person's thing. A map was imprinted whole and entire onto Wen Fei's consciousness.

Faintly, he heard one of the killers cry out in alarm, "Why has the Territory Map rubbing disappeared?"

He had no time to see what place this was a map of. The moment his consciousness was free, he finally caught sight of the indistinct scene around him. He was overwhelmed with grief—

"Li Yuelan and Li Fengshan knocked Senior Shen unconscious and used her spirit-protecting pill to kill Zhao Long so they could strip off the Territory Map. As a master medicine maker, Senior Shen must have already seen what special processing you had applied to the pill you had given her. When she woke up, she realized that the Territory Map rubbing must have ended up with you through a series of coincidences. But the elders had already barged in then, along with others. She knew that she would be unable to explain herself, and in order to protect you, the only thing she could do before the colossus of the Li clan was to die." Zhou Ying nodded. "That makes sense. Thank you for resolving my doubts, Peak Master Wen."

Wen Fei ignored his heartless answer. He was silent a while, then said, "Way of clarity cultivator, instruct me—why are so many name

tokens preserved behind that mist? Is it... that their spirits continue after death?"

Zhou Ying answered, "After becoming an ascended spirit, if one's consciousness is resilient enough, one may be able to seize another body after one's physical body dies. But a person's death is like a flame being extinguished. Ghosts are only the vain fantasies of the living who are greedy for life and fear death."

"Then... then what are they?"

Zhou Ying looked in the direction of his gaze. "They are ways."

"What?" Wen Fei gave him a look of incomprehension. This youngster's age wasn't great—why was his tone like that of the old cultivators in the Latent Cultivation Temple who taught the basics of cultivation, saying things no one could understand and then demonstrating them with useless scripture?

The candle flames in the mourning hall dimmed for a moment for some reason. Wen Fei just happened to see a strange light shining from Zhou Ying's eyes. Instead of being spherical, his eyeballs had become multifaceted. It was only a flash. Before he could get a clear look, that light had vanished.

Zhou Ying opened his mouth, but for some reason, he didn't say whatever words had come to his lips, swallowing them back.

Wen Fei frowned. This was even stranger—cultivators of the way of clarity either said whatever they had to say or else said nothing. How could he "wish to speak but hold back"?

"Peak Master Wen, a person may be guided by others to open their spiritual eyes, can deliberately exercise themselves, or they may find themselves in a place where spiritual energy is thick, and it will happen naturally through happy accident." Zhou Ying's voice

suddenly became much softer. As if afraid of losing his voice, he was keeping it low in his throat. Fortunately, sound carried well in the mourning hall. “But there is only one way to establish a foundation, and that is to take an established foundation pill.”

Wen Fei waved his fan and wrote in dense small regular script: *Establishing a foundation is the formal entrance into cultivation. Having an essence in one’s body is by nature colossally different from being an open-eyed cultivator. If one wants to preserve an “essence” within one’s body, then one must refine a material for elixirs like the silk dragon heart, which is capable of storing spiritual energy. In fact, reasonably speaking, even if there were no silk dragon hearts, there would be something similar. It is only that we of the medicine making way have yet to find any more ideal material. We shall see whether the geniuses of the toolmaking way can create a “spirit-storing gold” in the future.*

“You must be joking, Peak Master Wen,” Zhou Ying said with no show of surprise. “If one used metal as part of one’s body, wouldn’t one become an earworm half-puppet?”

Wen Fei became even more curious: this cultivator of the way of clarity not only had the ability to “wish to speak but hold back,” he could also say “words that mean more than what they say”; how could he have so many tricks?

So he asked, “What does that mean?”

“Nothing, only idle chat.” After this, Zhou Ying did not speak to him again.

Wen Fei left the main hall with his mind full of misgivings. When he passed by the stone tablet carved full of sect rules, his steps paused slightly. The Xuanyin Mountains’ regulations and taboos numbered in the several dozens to over a hundred, and all they regulated were the cowering little disciples.

Wen Fei thought, Well, you can go fuck yourself.

Thereupon he stepped onto his fan and flew toward Rosy Cloud Peak like a meteor. But the ghastly disciple name tokens behind the incense altar and Zhou Ying's "Wouldn't one become an earworm half-puppet?" remained stuck like a fish bone in his throat. Wen Fei returned to his own mountain, avoided the salutes of the disciples coming to welcome him, and wrote: *The silk dragon heart stores have bottomed out. I'm afraid we will not be able to restock in the near future. Find me all the ancient texts concerning the established foundation pill. I'm going into seclusion to research whether there is any possible substitute.*

In the mourning hall on the Principal Peak, Zhou Ying coughed up a mouthful of blood.

Before he could finish speaking the word "ways" earlier, a force like a heavenly tribulation had flown from the incense altar and penetrated his body, piercing his lungs. Zhou Ying, slowly repairing the wound with spiritual energy, cocked an ear toward the incense altar.

He heard countless clamoring voices behind the mist of the incense altar. They were all human voices, but none spoke in human tongues.

Fortunately, the way of clarity could feel no terror, or else the sounds in the mourning hall could have scared a person sick.

In other words, there had in fact been two spirit-protecting pills back then.

Wen Fei's cultivation had after all still been shallow. Shen Bailu had seen what he had done and been unable to bring herself to let him undertake the tribulation in her stead, so she had made another

spirit-protecting pill, only carrying his gift with her, not expecting that it would become another person's tool to commit murder and shift the blame.

Wen Fei's pill had been taken by Zhao Long. So what had happened to the one Shen Bailu, who hadn't had time to become an ascended spirit, had made herself?

It was said that the Sea of Stars had pointed to a "romantic crisis" at the time. If it had only been Li Yuelan, "romantic crisis" might have been justifiable, but Wen Fei had heard with his own ears that the Dignitary of Code had been present and might have been called the mastermind.

Elder Li had at any rate been over a thousand years old; "romantic" would have been rather a stretch.

The star stones in the Sea of Stars looked very similar to the heart demon seed...

The Xuanyin Mountains were the corpse of the full moon god. All cultivators from antiquity to the present were the puppets of their Ways of the Heart. After death, their essences returned to the spiritual mountains and the universe, and their Ways of the Heart, like these name tokens, also merged with the immortal mountains.

Compared to a full moon sage, even shed skins were ants. An ant naturally could not shake the immortal mountains. So what about countless ants over hundreds upon thousands of years?

Xi Shiyong said that the Silver Moon had "gone mad." The body of the tool was on the Central Peak, while the "moonlight" had run off to the East Peak. That was nothing to wonder at—after all, the Sanyue Mountains were the only immortal mountains with two "full moons."

Flowers born from the same stem, twins, the Heartless Lotus... This truly was the fate of the Sanyue Mountains.

When the flimsy Heavenly Question reached the Yongning Marquis Manor, Xi Ping only glanced at it and put it away without opening it. He only said to Xi Yue, "Meat's no good, it's too little, it can't eat it. Go get some sheep's milk and dilute it a little... Xi Yue, you're really in a hurry to waste a fortune!"

Xi Yue had taken out a small jade stamp stone and pulverized it, then used plain water to feed it to the kitten that couldn't chew and tear solid food yet. He looked at Xi Ping. "The Heavenly Question..."

"Oh, it's nothing. No need to read it. I asked His Highness Prince Zhuang for something, is he going to be stingy and not let me have it? I was the one who made the money to buy it, anyway."

Just then, both their spiritual senses were touched. Xi Ping glanced toward the garden.

Xi Yue said, "The Peak Master has left."

"Yeah." Xi Ping paused, then said, "He has things to do."

Even if he hadn't had anything to do, he wouldn't have stayed long. Never mind the Yongning Marquis Manor, Dangui Lane... even Jinping City itself had no room for a shed skin sword cultivator. Zhi Xiu was uncomfortable, and others were even more uncomfortable — Xi Ping had never known the servants at the Yongning Marquis Manor to be so well-behaved.

It was now the still of night, and also the stillness of the whole house not daring to breathe too loud. Tonight, probably no one had dared to sleep. The indolent Marquis Manor, which not even the arrival of the selection card back then had been able to wake, would be rising early tomorrow morning.

Xi Yue suddenly grabbed him. "I want to establish a foundation."

"What's a little brat like you need to establish a foundation for?" Xi Ping gently tapped on his head, then pulled his sleeves back down. "So you can also make the whole family get up early to attend on you? The path to the immortal mountains is a path of no return..."

Xi Yue stubbornly interrupted him: "I want to come with you. I want to establish a foundation."

"Fine, I'll go talk to Lao Pang about it first thing tomorrow," Xi Ping said. "There are open-eyed disciples in the inner sect, too, you don't need to establish a foundation to come with me."

"It's not the same!"

"How is it not the same?" Xi Ping said. "What, all your colleagues have established foundations, and you're jealous? Why the rush? All those geezers in Heaven's Design Pavilion are older than Dad..."

Xi Yue was inarticulate, he couldn't explain it clearly. For his every sentence, Xi Ping could use ten sentences to shut him up. After a long moment of frustration, the half-puppet could still only squeeze out, "It's not the same."

It wasn't because he wanted to raise his cultivation level or be more powerful. It was because he dimly sensed that as long as he hadn't established a foundation, there would be an ice-cold barrier separating him from Xi Ping.

That person was on the other side of that barrier, digging up the earth and planting flowers, now ordering him to do this or do that, now wanting to go out driving a steam car and fool around running into walls, filling the Marquis Manor with his bustle... but still extremely lonely.

“[...”

Xi Yue was just about to say something when another Heavenly Question flew in.

Xi Ping froze. He hadn't expected san-ge to send another letter.

When he tore open the second Heavenly Question, he caught a faint scent of blood. The letter said: “Beware the spiritual sense.”

Beware... what?

The middle of the night was the time many cultivators were hard at work, especially after such an eventual day when they were all uneasy and urgently needed to calm down. In Xuanyin's inner and outer sects, the cultivators who had no official duties to attend to all began to meditate without prior consultation, but the sounds in their ears didn't grow quiet at once as usual.

The Ways of the Heart inherited from their forebears were in constant agitation. As if they had something to say, they gently touched the cultivators' spiritual senses.

CHAPTER 181 - Tomb of the Sage (7)

People were born with a spiritual sense. A paramount spiritual sense was in fact also an “abnormal spiritual sense” — it wasn’t completely human.

Ordinary people’s spiritual senses were separated into first, second, and third class.

Of these, the first-class spiritual sense came near to the level of the average person after they had opened their spiritual eyes. It was very rare and was among the natural endowments valued by the cultivation world. The third-class spiritual sense, meanwhile, belonged to those whose intellect wasn’t entirely sound. Apart from these, over ninety percent of people were second-class, with minor variations. Slightly more sensitive people had an easier time winning at dice and could often avoid a catastrophe through a flash of inspiration, but under ordinary circumstances they also easily became agitated by slight disturbances in their surroundings, and might be prone to illness. The slightly slower ones, for example the type that would carry out a prank right under their own father’s nose and still brag about it, were more robust; they only had a tendency to throw themselves at the discipline rod.

A mortal’s spiritual sense wasn’t separate from their physical senses; only after their spiritual eyes opened could the spiritual sense stand alone and be free to control. Up to a point, cultivators could attach their spiritual sense to one of their physical senses, making it more acute. And when danger was near, some major event that concerned them took place, or there was a master in the area, the spiritual sense would be touched.

“Beware the spiritual sense” read like “beware the eyes” or “beware the nose.” If you didn’t know better, you would have thought this

letter had been meant for Zhuoming and had been sent to the wrong person.

Xi Ping concentrated for a moment, but now that shifu was gone, there was no person or object in the vicinity that could touch his spiritual sense. His constantly stressed spiritual sense had gone dormant in the still night, for once resting.

For the first time in his life, he couldn't understand san-ge's letter.

Xi Ping suddenly felt an unreasoning distress. An unprecedented sense of distance passed through the four words on the paper and hit him in the face like a slap.

The kitten was frightened by the aura coming off him; it shrieked. Xi Yue saw that there was something wrong with his expression. "Ge!"

Xi Ping was quickly pulled back by their voices. He clenched his teeth tightly, forcing down his turbulent emotions, making himself return to the state of "there are no big problems."

"It's all right, let me think," Xi Ping said softly. He deliberately deepened and lengthened his breaths. Across empty space, he picked up the little cat and held it in one hand.

Controlling the extremely faint spiritual energy at his fingertips, as if he were using Zhaoting to carve designs into tofu, he cleaned the dust and dirt from the cat bit by bit. As his fingers stroked the kitten's soft fur, he commanded himself again and again: Calm down... calm down...

San-ge had entered the way of clarity, not the way of "I'm not telling you." He had no reason to be deliberately vague.

The Heavenly Question looked spotless, but there was a smell of blood clinging to it. The handwriting that had been written with

spiritual energy was obviously unsteady in a few places. It was clear that the writer had been injured. Princess Duanrui had just died, and the way of clarity stood aloof from the world; on the Xuanyin Mountains' Principal Peak, who would dare to harm the successor to her Way of the Heart? Even if there were external foes in the immortal mountains, it wouldn't be up to an established foundation to step in.

So the greatest likelihood was that he had encountered some backlash... San-ge probably couldn't say what it was.

If it wasn't some great matter of vital importance, san-ge wouldn't have sent an extra Heavenly Question. But if it was a great matter of vital importance, then why was Xi Ping's own spiritual sense so quiet?

Xi Ping considered briefly, then sent a message through the reincarnation wood: "Is all at peace tonight?"

Practically none of the cultivators were sleeping. Zhao Qindan, Wei Chengxiang, and the Luwu abroad were the first to respond; they reported whatever they happened to be busy with.

"The Sanyue Mountains aren't at peace, two groups of cultivators have started gearing up for a fight."

"I wouldn't say it's at peace. There are more and more evil cultivators in Tao County. Even that Bu Zhichou has come."

"What do you mean 'at peace,' senior? Everyone is on edge in Zhaoye. The government troops are going home to home searching for Miah. They won't even let the old people and children slip by."

"It's all right, don't you worry. Everyone's consciousnesses returned intact, no one was injured. Our village and the traps to ward off spiritual beasts are basically finished, I was just talking it over with

Chief Li, we might have another batch of people come over at the end of the year...”

Xi Ping listened with one ear, feeling that there was nothing out of the ordinary. What remained were the comparatively strong consciousnesses. Bai Ling and Zhi Xiu simultaneously asked him “What’s wrong?”, while Wen Fei and others like him were surprised that the reincarnation wood could be used as a communication device and asked him in the spirit of intellectual inquiry, between reincarnation wood and a Heavenly Question, which was more resistant to prying.

Xi Ping quickly realized that only one person who was normally quick to respond hadn’t answered: Lin Chi.

“Look after the house, Yue-bao’er,” Xi Ping said to Xi Yue, then turned and disappeared in the courtyard.

Lin Chi had been helping him transport trees. A few reincarnation wood seeds had fallen on the summit of Moon Plated Peak.

One of the reincarnation wood seeds that had dropped into a thicket easily found a place to put down roots and sprout. Before the sapling could finish growing, Xi Ping came out of the tree, crouching.

In a rare occurrence, the summit of Moon Plated Peak was enveloped by an extremely oppressive aura. The spiritual wind had stagnated, hardly moving. With a flash, Xi Ping headed straight toward the peak master’s residence.

He was feeling more and more uneasy: Lin Chi’s routine was more regular than an old man’s. If there was no “great work” that he needed to keep an eye on, at this time, he would usually be meditating to do his daily lessons. With such a major event having just happened in the Xuanyin Mountains, there was no way he could

focus enough to create tools. Reasonably speaking, he also wouldn't put away the reincarnation wood. What had happened?

Lin Chi was in fact doing his daily lessons. A cultivator ought to have been at his calmest while meditating, but for some reason his brow was deeply furrowed.

Xi Ping sent over a spiritual wind. "Peak Master..."

Before the spiritual wind reached him, Lin Chi abruptly opened his eyes. There was actually some ferocity on his delicate features, aimed at Xi Ping.

Xi Ping's fingers curled instinctively to take hold of an invisible qin string. But Lin Chi quickly got a good look at him and pinched the center of his brow hard, pinching away the bitter enmity.

Before Xi Ping could speak, Lin Chi, for once in his life, got ahead of him and said, "The Xuanyin Mountains and the Territory Map are blending together, and in less than a hundred years, the thirty-six... the other thirty-five peaks will completely dissolve into the veins of the earth like Resonant Stone Peak—is that true?"

After a pause, Xi Ping broke out in gooseflesh—though Lin Chi was a friend, the battle in Jinping had just been fought. Apart from Wen Fei and the others who had been present, Zhi Xiu had yet to tell anyone else.

"How do you know?"

Even a person like Lin Chi, who was virtually without desire, couldn't resist being dumbfounded. He blankly mumbled, "It's actually... it's actually..."

He had lived over eight hundred years, one lonely and weary day after another, and suddenly he was learning that this immortal path

would soon be severed. Lin Chi felt as if he had put a foot wrong going downstairs. He didn't know how to react.

Xi Ping said urgently, "This has profound implications. Peak Master Lin, who was it that told you?"

Lin Chi came back to his senses and grabbed hold of Xi Ping. "Leave now. I'm afraid they also know that you're here."

These words were even more bone-chilling. Xi Ping said, "Wait, are you telling me a ghost story? Who knows I'm here? Why should I..."

"While I was meditating just now, my spiritual sense was touched by a 'heavenly edict.' It was the heavenly edict that told me."

As Lin Chi spoke, he tossed the Unbound Furnace and a pile of stuff on the summit of Moon Plated Peak into a mustard seed. It was said that when a cultivator was absorbed to the utmost point in their Way of the Heart, able to forget self and forget the world, they would sometimes have a subtle sensation, as if they were glimpsing the designs of the heavens. Once they attained this "heavenly edict" that could only be come upon by chance, not sought, they would make great progress.

Xi Ping didn't get a clear look at what he was sweeping into the mustard seed. He hadn't come around yet. "What kind of heavens are so talkative? Overcast ones?"

In a rare occurrence, Lin Chi bristled. "Don't be flippant! When you came to Moon Plated Peak just now, it was as if something had pricked my spiritual sense. My head was full of 'The pilferer of the immortal mountains' heavenly order is here.' How could a heavenly edict like this come only to a toolmaker like me? I'm afraid all thirty-six peaks must know by now! Even General Zhi might not be able to handle it if he returned. Take the things and go!"

When he had just spoken, a message came to Moon Plated Peak with a whizz. Lin Chi's heart skipped. Before he could read it, all kinds of messages were coming thick and fast. There were spoken messages and Heavenly Questions. In hardly any time, all the great peak masters had Moon Plated Peak surrounded.

Thoughts flew through Xi Ping's mind: what the hell was this "heavenly edict"?

If someone was sending the peak masters a message, why hadn't Wen Fei received it? Because he was an accomplice?

But so was Lin Chi an accomplice! Lin Chi had run back and forth between the Xuanyin Mountains and the Law Breaker on his own, emptying out Rosy Cloud Peak and planting trees on Resonant Stone Peak, hopelessly busy... Wouldn't the heavenly edict have to have been blind to miss an ascended spirit of his stature?

Also, why was there someone who could disguise themselves as a heavenly edict and prod directly at the peak masters' spiritual senses?

Never mind the likes of the Dignitary of Fate, even the full moon Xiang Rong couldn't have done it!

"The immortal path has been severed" was a sentence to drive every mighty cultivator mad; it was no different from having your spiritual bones removed with a blunt knife.

Each of Xuanyin's ascended spirit peak masters competed with the next in outward propriety, but now they had involuntarily lost hold over decorum. Without waiting for Lin Chi's response, they joined forces and barged onto the summit of Moon Plated Peak—after Lin Chi had rekindled his furnace, because he needed to be able to send materials in and out and communicate with the Principal Peak at all times, he had dispersed the mountain seal on Moon Plated

Peak's summit. After all, most of the people in the inner sect weren't as rude as Xi Ping. Normally, if you "left the door open," people still wouldn't come in uninvited.

Who could have expected something like this to happen?

Lin Chi stuffed the mustard seed into his hands. "Go!"

Xi Ping quickly absorbed the mustard seed into his palm. He didn't delay for a moment—among ascended spirits, he was in the early stage of the early stage; an "eight-year-old" was a baby, and he wasn't a fiendish sword cultivator. How could he withstand being ganged up on by a crowd of veteran ascended spirits?

But just as he was preparing to swap places with a reincarnation wood tree outside the immortal mountains, he suddenly found his consciousness confined.

Next, the Dignitary of Fate's blindfolded figure flashed, appearing above the Sea of Stars.

This was bad. Shifu must have already left Great Wan by now.

Once Zhi Xiu went beyond the national boundaries, Xuanyin's great mountain array would take instructions only from the Dignitary of Fate. The whole area of the Xuanyin Mountains seemed to have become like the bottom of the Impassable Sea had once been, completely cutting off contact between inside and outside. Xi Ping couldn't leave by swapping places!

At the same time, this meant that he couldn't contact shifu, and shifu likely couldn't return to the Xuanyin Mountains via his accompanying plant, either.

Rosy Cloud Peak wasn't very far from Moon Plated Peak. Wen Fei arrived quickly. "What is this? What has happened?"

No one paid attention to him. All the great peak masters came to stand at the summit of Moon Plated Peak at once. It had never been so full of people.

Xi Ping and Lin Chi were surrounded.

Xi Ping only now realized that he had only been calm on the surface before. In reality, he hadn't been calm. Otherwise, he wouldn't have rushed straight to the Xuanyin Mountains just because he had taken back his disciple name token.

“Zisheng, move aside,” a peak master surnamed Lin said to Lin Chi in a relatively mild manner, but his eyes didn't leave Xi Ping.

“Dignitary of Fate Elder, just now, obeying the heavenly edict, I probed the immortal mountain's veins of the earth and saw that the immortal mountains are indeed inseparably mingled with that Territory Map—so was everything the heavenly edict said true? Will the immortal mountains... truly come to an end under our auspices?”

The Dignitary of Fate glanced expressionlessly at Xi Ping and responded, “I have received no heavenly edict. As to the rest, I cannot say.”

A silencing spell only made a person unable to reveal information voluntarily. If someone else developed a suspicion and asked, the silencing spell couldn't control what hints the person it had been placed on gave. When the Dignitary of Fate said “I cannot say,” what more did the peak masters need?

“Fine—a fine two-hundred-year-old shed skin. He has always been mild and refined, keeping his head down, and now he's turned around and placed a silencing spell on his own shifu—how far he has gone to give insult to his teacher and his sect!” another peak master said. “Here I was wondering how he could produce an

accompanying plant when he became a shed skin—his must be an evil way that heaven and earth cannot abide! Is his shed skin boundary very firm? Does he really think that now that the Dignitary of Rule Elder and Princess Duanrui are dead, he can hoodwink everyone in the Xuanyin Mountains?”

“Indeed,” Xi Ping answered, “it’s too disgraceful. In my opinion, Peak Master I-don’t-know-your-name, you ought to immediately write him a Heavenly Question calling him back and have it out with him.”

Lin Chi was about to kneel down before him. Xi Shiyong, have a heart, don’t stoke the flames!

“You...”

Xi Ping quietly waved a hand at Lin Chi, changing tack quickly. The next moment, he smiled very charmingly and saluted the peak master who was seething with rage. “Do not be angry, senior. You criticized my shifu just now. It made me unhappy to hear, so I spoke out of turn. Please forgive me. Yesterday, Jinping was invaded by evil cultivators and enemies from Chu, who shattered the Southern Sage’s seal. The situation was urgent, you know that as well as I do. We all did whatever we could. No one had attention to spare for the consequences. My shifu knows that we have incurred a catastrophe and is already considering a means of remedy. Do you not see that he is still out working on it now and has not yet returned to the mountains?”

It was just that the method of “remedy” might not be very well suited to the immortals’ wishes.

The thirty-six peaks hadn’t turned out such a glib talker in centuries. The restlessness and rage about to blow the tops of the peak masters’ skulls off was suspended and held down; it fell slightly.

Anyway, Old Man Zhang Jue couldn't very well say anything. Even if his bladder burst from holding it in, all he could do was listen.

Xi Ping assumed a grave expression and said with deadly seriousness, "As soon as I heard Lin-shishu mention the heavenly edict, I hurried back to learn the details. Before he could explain, all of you showed up. That will save me going to pay each of you a visit. We can all pool our wisdom and efforts, quickly discuss what to do—what did the heavenly edict say? Were there any other indications?"

In order to keep him here, Xuanyin's great mountain array had sealed the mountains. Xi Ping couldn't contact the outside world, so others were sure to be unable to make contact either. After all, other people didn't have accompanying plants.

This wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Him being trapped in the Xuanyin Mountains was much better than this deadly information secretly spreading in all directions.

Xi Ping calmed down: maybe this was just what san-ge had meant. The most pressing issue was for him to work out as soon as possible just what was going on with this heavenly edict.

He hoped that san-ge had escaped after sending him that letter.

But even in this, events ran contrary to his wishes.

When Xuanyin's great array rose, its hum disturbed the Bell of Tribulation. The Bell of Tribulation moved on its own, causing the strange incense altar on the Principal Peak to sway gently.

Seeing Zhang Jue "hanging" above Moon Plated Peak, Zhou Ying silently disappeared—his immortal path had always been unlike that of ordinary people. The Heartless Lotus had at least had the lotus seal; Zhou Ying had had no vital weapon as a consummate open-

eyed cultivator, and he still didn't have one after establishing a foundation.

Perhaps he himself was the "weapon."

Before establishing a foundation, Zhou Ying could deceive a cultivator a major boundary above him when he turned into mist. After establishing a foundation, with the way of clarity inhibiting his emotions, he had become even more unfathomable. When he dissolved into mist, even he sometimes couldn't find himself.

His mist blended with the mountain mists. While Zhang Jue was being kept in check by Xi Ping, Zhou Ying silently snuck into the Sea of Stars.

No one below an ascended spirit could enter the Sea of Stars, because low-level cultivators would be ensnared by chaotic fate and lose their way.

Once inside, Zhou Ying, who had turned to mist, was blown back to his original form by the wind. Stars hinting at his destiny automatically drew near him, tempting him to look at them.

Zhou Ying turned a blind eye, avoiding these obstructions with complete unconcern, going straight to the very core of the Sea of Stars.

CHAPTER 182 - Tomb of the Sage (8)

In the deepest recesses of the Sea of Stars was the Dignity of Fate Elder Zhang Jue's place of quiet cultivation. It was an empty space containing nothing but a faded prayer mat. There wasn't even a place where one could occasionally recline.

It was said that the Dignitary of Fate Elder had sat here day and night for a thousand years, refining his Way of the Heart by resisting the desire to open his eyes.

Fate could not be grasped. If you couldn't take the temptation and glimpsed your own fate and that of those closest to you, the originally fixed trajectory would take a turn in an unknown direction. At best, matters would go contrary to your wishes. At worst, you would become obsessed and perish, body and way both.

The person sitting here on this lonely old prayer mat could only look at two kinds of things: things that had already happened, which the Sea of Stars could aid in interpreting, and things that would influence the general course of events in the world, for which the Sea of Stars would create a fog to give warnings to all living things, which the Dignitary of Fate could convey on its behalf.

Zhang Jue did not cultivate the way of clarity. Relying purely on his personal self-restraint, he really had kept himself blindfolded here for a thousand years, not taking a step over the line.

One didn't know whether to admire him or pity him.

The slightly glowing "dust particles" floating in the air were the "stars" in the Sea of Stars. They would float for the length of a lifetime before falling to the ground. When these particles stuck together and congealed, they formed a star stone.

The Xuanyin Mountains had formed over a thousand years ago. Surrounding that prayer mat, the star stones were spread all over the ground.

These star stones that seemed dirty because they had so many facets did indeed closely resemble the demon seed, though they were of a different material. Because they were made of fine sand stuck together, the star stones were slightly more spongy, and the facets on them weren't as regular as the demon seed's. Moreover, the star stones covering the ground were all different sizes: there were those as big as a human head and those as small as a bean.

The saying that "mirrors reflect the heart" had existed since antiquity, and prisms took the shape of countless "small mirrors." In the cultivation world, things with this structure were usually all connected to the "heart." Many "mirrors" meant that they could reflect many points of view, easily echo what was in the depths of the human heart. It wasn't strange that they should obstruct the senses and trap the consciousness like the heart demon seed.

But the metaphor in this made one fearful: after the luminous stars "died," they gathered together to become stones like the demon seed.

Just then, there was a loud noise from outside; they must have started fighting on Moon Plated Peak. Zhou Ying ignored it. He put a pill to suppress pain and focus the mind in his mouth. His eyes changed shape, becoming demon eyes.

The excuse Xi Ping had come up with at the last moment after hearing the contents of the heavenly edict from Lin Chi wasn't exactly seamless, but Zhi Xiu's prohibition was keeping Zhang Jue from speaking to refute him, and there seemed to be no problem with what he had said at first listen. But no sooner had he spoken than a peak master surnamed Li tossed a talisman right at him without a word.

“What a glib tongue! The heavenly edict distinctly said that you people had used us to take possession of the Territory Map and steal the immortal power of the spiritual mountains.”

The Xuanyin Mountains didn't necessarily adhere to reason, but they certainly adhered to politeness. Since the downfall of the Li family's backer, the family had drifted along as though they were invisible. Xi Ping hadn't expected there to be such a fractious peak master among them.

The talisman turned into a rain of swords above Xi Ping's head, dense enough to turn him into mincemeat. Lin Chi quickly stepped forward. A line of light flashed on the ground. As if it had turned into a screw, the summit of Moon Plated Peak twisted downward a zhang. Twelve rabbit heads leapt out of the ground, drawing spiritual energy directly from Moon Plated Peak to shoot upward, shooting up twelve astral winds.

This gust seemed to scatter even the stars in the sky. The rain of swords in midair was also swept away.

“Stop,” said Lin Chi, “why would the heavenly edict...”

But his words were shouted too slowly. The other Lis had already charged forward. Two sword thrusts from the Tai Sui Qin flew out. Xi Ping hadn't gone easy; his meridians were even aching faintly. After forcing his opponents into a brief retreat, he immediately wanted to find a reincarnation wood tree in the Xuanyin Mountains to swap places with, but as soon as he moved, he froze—there was no more reincarnation wood in the Xuanyin Mountains.

The ones Lin Chi had planted on Resonant Stone Peak, the reincarnation wood trees and seeds that had accidentally been left behind in thickets and bushes during the process of transport... At some point, all of them had been wiped out.

Xi Ping abruptly looked up. Around countless heads, he looked at Zhang Jue, standing in midair.

At Zhang Jue's feet, there were only two small stones. From a distance, he looked like a puppet hanging there.

During this brief pause, an iron chain came hurtling toward Xi Ping's head. Yet another peak master was seizing the opportunity to attack. In a moment of desperation, Lin Chi summoned forth his own vital toolmaking furnace. The furnace crossed the sky to block that iron chain.

A toolmaking furnace was for making tools, not for fighting. Lin Chi was thoroughly shaken. He took several steps back. But he was entirely unharmed. There was only a crack—a “Fly Ten Thousand Li Like the Roc” green jade pendant he was wearing had split apart.

This had been bestowed on him by the Dignitary of Rule when he was young.

At the time, he had been immersed in intensive study of the spirit-conducting gold, abandoning food and sleep, making tremendous strides along the way of toolmaking, accidentally becoming outstanding among his peers.

Xuanyin's Lin clan didn't have as many people as the other big families, but they were all very close. Every year, they had a “family feast” for the Mid-Autumn Festival. Anyone who wasn't in seclusion came. That year, for some reason, the Dignitary of Rule also made an unexpected appearance. The atmosphere of the whole family suddenly became like the Yuntian Palace Discipline Hall. Everyone greeted each other with looks. Some ascended spirit seniors kept the elder company, not daring to breathe too loudly.

Fortunately, Lin Zongyi only stayed briefly. As if performing routine business, he pointed out a few juniors to ask about their cultivation, naturally including the “outstanding” Lin Chi. Lin Chi even got nervous speaking to his own shizun. When he saw the Dignitary of Rule, it was like a mouse seeing a cat. He nearly fainted. He had no idea what answers he gave... though they had definitely been stupid. When the Dignitary of Rule Elder, who was like an ice sculpture, had heard him out, his eyes actually curved slightly. In a rare occurrence, he spoke, saying to Lin Chi’s shifu, “I remember him.”

Then he beckoned him over and gave him that jade pendant, pronouncing a weighty utterance: “Your future is boundless.”

He couldn’t not wear an item that the old ancestor had bestowed on him. Though the jade pendant carried the harsh and awesome aura of the Yuntian Palace, over time, he had still gotten used to it. In the centuries he had spent confined and confining himself, it had even been the only living energy beside him.

Sometimes, Lin Chi would wonder whether that utterance of “Your future is boundless” had been one of the Dignitary of Rule Elder’s rare mistakes. Would the elder be disappointed when he recalled it? But probably he wouldn’t—what expectations could a sage have had of him?

Instinctively, Lin Chi reached out to grab for it, but the familiar aura flew out from between his fingers and vanished.

Xi Ping’s eyes became cold. The sound of the Tai Sui Qin was nearly sharp enough to pierce a person’s skull. Sword energy swept out. Then he pulled out the *Discard the False and Keep the True* book and tossed lotus seals copied from the Heartless Lotus everywhere.

His cultivation was limited, and the lotus seals were copies. He couldn’t simply capture the consciousnesses of great ascended

spirits whose boundaries were higher than his, but he could still stab their consciousnesses hard enough to hurt.

At the same time, the Lin family member who had told Lin Chi to get out of the way struck, beside himself with rage, aiming directly at the person who had launched the sneak attack with the iron chain. His voice brimmed with spiritual energy: "What a disgrace!"

Lin Chi came back to himself. All the rabbit heads on Moon Plated Peak quickly shifted to form an array, encircling Xi Ping and Lin Chi. They puffed out a patch of dense steam. The situation became deadlocked.

One of the Li family members forcibly stabilized his wavering spirit and coldly said, "What powerful evil cultivator tactics. You all saw that. With the tightness of Jinping's defenses, how could it be invaded by external enemies? Why did evildoers mount a surprise attack as soon as he returned?"

The members of the Zhou clan, who had thus far been standing by and watching, exchanged veiled looks amongst themselves. One peak master surnamed Zhou put in a word hesitantly. "Do not get excited, shixiong. You are only speaking in anger. The Territory Map will soon blend with the veins of the earth, and the spiritual mountains' immortal power will then disperse throughout the country. There do not necessarily appear to be selfish motives here..."

"If you're pilfering millet, everyone looks like a thief." Xi Ping gave a "ha." Amid his bitter sarcasm, he didn't forget to sow discord. "It was Li Fengshan who wanted to steal the Territory Map and kill a fellow sect member, not me. Take a good look, why don't you? None of you are *my* unworthy descendants."

The rabbit heads were forced to puff away yet another killing blow for him.

As expected, when the unknown Zhou peak master heard these words, he said without batting an eyelash, “But hasn’t Flying Jade Peak thought that, without the Xuanyin Mountains, the border inscriptions and arrays will all fail? When that happens, won’t a patch of fertile land like Great Wan become a fish on the chopping block for others?”

Though these words were critical, there was still the intention of turning Flying Jade Peak into one of their own.

“Accompanying plants are possessions of the ancient demonic gods. Zhi Jingzhai has betrayed the spiritual mountains. The spiritual mountains were born on account of the full moon sage, and they are closely bound to the existing shed skins. As for why they were so powerless in the face of the Territory Map, there must be a connection to Flying Jade Peak’s traitor. The heavenly edict commanded that, if there was truly no other way, we must first think of a way to sever the whole country’s veins of the earth, execute the evildoers, and allow the immortal mountains to regain their strength.”

As soon as this last sentence was spoken, disapproval appeared on the faces of a number of peak masters. Even Zhang Jue frowned.

“The heavenly edict I heard wasn’t so extreme. If the veins of the earth are severed, wouldn’t the common people...”

“Shixiong, you didn’t listen to the heavenly edict in its entirety. If the veins of the earth are temporarily severed, some of the elderly and frail in the current generation will indeed be harmed, but in this way, we will keep future generations safe. Otherwise, if we preserve this generation, it might be Great Wan’s last!”

“Shixiong, that’s your interpretation.”

Xi Ping forced down his seething internal energy and met Wen Fei's eyes from a distance.

Seeing that he had the situation under control, Wen Fei hadn't stepped in. He had blended in with the crowd of peak masters, pretending to be on their side. Whenever anyone spoke, he would nod enigmatically.

Now, Wen Fei silently squeezed the reincarnation wood in his sleeve. "Why are these people all singing in different keys?"

All the peak masters seemed to be saying the same thing, but there were subtle differences in the details and their attitudes.

Xi Ping said, "Peak Master Wen, you didn't receive this so-called 'heavenly edict'?"

Do you perhaps never do your daily lessons, hardworking senior that you are?

Wen Fei somehow understood his implication and waved his fan rapidly. He thought, You're the sword god's disciple, and you only know two moves. You're always running around copying others' powers like an evil cultivator. How can you have the face to scold others?

"No," said Lin Chi, also putting in a word through his reincarnation wood amulet, "having your spiritual sense 'pricked' is very painful. You would feel it even if you weren't meditating."

So Xi Ping silently asked Lin Chi, "Did the 'heavenly edict' issue some kind of riddle that can be interpreted any way you like?"

"Not at all," said Lin Chi hesitantly. "In my opinion, it only told the facts. The Lis seem to have been bewitched."

No... it wasn't that the Lis had been bewitched. Xi Ping's eyes flashed faintly. A guess appeared in his mind: if it was only a matter of different interpretations, they wouldn't have been so certain from the get-go. It was likely that the "heavenly edicts" they had seen had had different contents.

Why?

Didn't everyone have the same heavens above their heads?

Xi Ping had traveled extensively through black markets everywhere. He was unusually sensitive toward subtle currents among people. Now, as soon as he swept the scene, from a few words spoken by the Xuanyin peak masters among whom internal strife was conventional, he was able to faintly distinguish the camps—those with the same surname or belonging to the same faction weren't necessarily together, and those with different surnames certainly weren't together. Wen Fei, the "spy" mixed in among them, immediately became like a louse on a bald man's head, exceedingly obvious.

But, after all, Wen Fei was an old fox who had been general commander of Heaven's Design Pavilion. Keeping his composure perfectly, he subtly shifted over a few steps, calmly moving to the fringes of the scene. "This grouping today is different from before..."

A thought struck Xi Ping; he had faintly touched something. "How is it different?"

Wen Fei said, "The big families are more fragmented than usual."

The Zhaos were confined, their circumstances unknown. The Lis were all fairly worked up. But the Lin and Zhou clans, which stuck together most of the time, had ceased to cooperate. Apart from family interests, what else would separate Xuanyin's peak masters...?

In a flash, the two of them simultaneously worked it out and spoke almost in unison in the reincarnation wood.

Xi Ping said, “Are they grouped according to Ways of the Heart?”

Wen Fei said, “Ways of the Heart of common origin!”

By “Ways of the Heart of common origin,” what was meant was that —regardless of whom the Ways of the Heart had been inherited from, whether they had been passed on from a living shifu or refined from a dead person’s vital weapon—they could be traced back up to the same ancestor. In distinguished families, apart from the direct disciples accepted by the family’s masters, the clan would accumulate high-quality Ways of the Heart belonging to deceased masters to provide an alternative for talented inner sect disciples whose temperaments were truly unsuited. Therefore, not all the cultivators of a single family line had Ways of the Heart of common origin.

Why was Wen Fei the only one who hadn’t received the “heavenly edict”?

Because as a direct descendant of the Lin family, Lin Chi’s Way of the Heart had been inherited from his shifu, while Wen Fei, a feral walker in the mortal world, had fumbled around and found his own.

The difference between them was one dead shifu!

Zhang Jue had also said earlier that he hadn’t heard any “heavenly edict.” That was because, as the Southern Sage’s direct disciple, the Dignitary of Fate Elder had also fumbled around for his own Way of the Heart in ancient days.

So this so-called “heavenly edict” was the cultivators’ Ways of the Heart prodding their spiritual senses!

Xi Ping felt that since he had come to the Xuanyin Mountains today, his goosebumps hadn't subsided—what the hell were these Ways of the Heart that all these immortals had on their spirits, tied to their very lives?

Meanwhile, Zhou Ying, not seeing anything with the demon eyes, frowned as he pondered briefly. He got out the heart demon seed and tossed it right into the pile of star stones.

There was a “silent” bang in the depths of the Sea of Stars.

“Silent” meant that others didn't hear it; the “bang” struck Zhou Ying's ears directly. If he hadn't first taken a pill, he probably would have been knocked unconscious.

When the heart demon seed fell into the pile of star stones, it was as if it had blown a hole. On all the star stones larger than the size of a fist, countless human faces flashed. The larger the stone, the more faces there were.

The faces on the same stone, regardless of whether they were male or female, whether their countenances were youthful or showed signs of age, no matter how vast the difference in the outlines of their features, were all extremely similar... as if the same ghost had put on different skins. In unison, they were pouring their “ways” into Zhou Ying's ears.

The larger the star stone, the louder the voices.

This was like simultaneously “debating” with thousands upon thousands of people. Had it not been a cultivator of the way of clarity standing there, the debate would have reduced his Way of the Heart to smithereens.

But not for nothing was the “way of clarity” the legendary origin of the three thousand paths of the Great Way. Zhou Ying stood his ground, treating it like the croaking of frogs.

As these star stones squabbled, they hurriedly rolled away on their own, avoiding the heart demon seed. The thick layer of stones was broken up by the demon seed, revealing the smooth, mirror-like surface of the ground below; it was dozens of li in area.

The demon eyes fell onto that “mirror” and saw an enormous human figure appear on it, as crystal-clear as a living person. His eyes opened, and his gaze shot at Zhou Ying like lightning. Tears of blood immediately fell from Zhou Ying’s eyes.

This turned out to be an unimaginably large star stone, growing in the Xuanyin Mountains like a tumor.

Zhou Ying didn’t avert his gaze. He kept his eyes fixed on the human figure in the “mirror.” He recognized this as the Dignitary of Code Li Fengshan.

As one of the Xuanyin Mountains’ four elders, his picture sometimes appeared in the ancient texts. Because he had betrayed the spiritual mountains, he had been sealed by the other three elders working together into “seclusion to death.” When the demon eyes had swept over all the Xuanyin Mountains, they had even been able to see Zhi Xiu, but they hadn’t seen Li Fengshan. It was said that he had already shown signs of nearing the end of his lifespan over forty years ago. Reckoning it, he must just have given out in recent years.

When their Way of the Heart shattered, a person would die immediately. But if a person died for a different reason, the Way of the Heart would remain.

For Xuanyin’s orthodox cultivators, the essence they took from the immortal mountains would return to the immortal mountains after

their deaths, and the Ways of the Heart they left behind would be absorbed by star stones. Ways of the Heart of common origin would converge, stick together, and grow.

Since the spiritual mountains had formed, few shed skins had died naturally of old age. The Dignitary of Rule and the Dignitary of Rites had both died from their Ways of the Heart shattering. In their lineages, the Ways of the Heart of common origin had all been left behind by disciples after they died, with ascended spirit cultivation at most.

Only the Dignitary of Code Li Fengshan had been embedded in the Xuanyin Mountains as a shed skin.

The Xuanyin Mountains' Sea of Stars, which observed fate—did it really only observe?

Or had it been controlling the puppets' Ways of the Heart to strengthen the waves all along?

Now that the Xuanyin Mountains had been ruined, the Ways of the Heart could at last hold themselves back no longer. They had lost patience with imperceptible influence and openly deployed the “heavenly edict.”

Zhou Ying wiped the bloodstains from the corners of his eyes. “A misstep.”

Meanwhile, Xi Ping's heart skipped: if it was the Ways of the Heart sending the “heavenly edict,” then it wouldn't only have been the inner sect peak masters who had heard it—the Ways of the Heart of outer sect established foundations practically all came from the inner sect!

Crap.

CHAPTER 183 - Tomb of the Sage (9)

Heaven's Design Pavilion had ten branches in nine provinces. Each branch had established foundations. If it really was as Xi Ping guessed, the fact that the Xuanyin Mountains were soon to bite the dust would have spread throughout Great Wan's nine provinces by now.

He was trapped in the Xuanyin Mountains, and his shifu had gone to the Land of Turmoil!

If Xi Ping had at first been afraid that Zhou Ying would get dragged into this and hoped that he had already escaped from the Xuanyin Mountains, now he simply wanted to burn incense and pray to the heavens to let san-ge have left in time so he could get word out.

But just then, out of the corner of his eye, Xi Ping glimpsed the Dignitary of Fate suddenly turn his head toward the Sea of Stars. Leaving the endlessly arguing peaks masters and the "great evil cultivator" behind on Moon Plated Peak, he turned tail and ran.

In the Sea of Stars, Zhou Ying knew that he had made too much noise pushing aside the star stones. He had been discovered.

He didn't panic; he was only surprised that a person who had grown up listening to the voices of demons in the Impassable Sea could still be so ignorant. Since entering the way of clarity, every little new discovery had overturned everything he knew; every step had to be reconsidered.

The master of the Sea of Stars was about to return. Zhou Ying stood where he was, unmoving, upending all his previous suppositions, rapidly drawing conclusions about the current circumstances.

Then he took a nearly forgotten piece of reincarnation wood from his mustard seed and contacted Xi Ping: “Hold off Zhang Jue for me.”

When his voice struck Xi Ping’s ears without warning, Xi Ping nearly fell into a stupor. Only then did he realize what Zhou Ying had said: this “master” whose cultivation wasn’t very high, after getting a preview of some of the designs of heaven, had not only not left this dangerous place, he had instead dashed straight toward the forbidden territory of the Sea of Stars!

Xi Ping had gone numb, and he suspected that his own true identity was the father of the heavens—apart from an unfilial son, what in the world could contradict all his wishes like this?

Before, san-ge had been all “Don’t you dare” and “You need a leash” at every turn, can’t do this and can’t do that either, as if he were a troublesome walking disaster. Yet after entering the way of clarity, the first words he said to him were, “Hold off Zhang Jue for me.”

Xi Ping didn’t know whether he ought to cry or laugh... It turned out that san-ge’s appraisal of his abilities was so high.

And Zhang Jue had already reached the Sea of Stars, as if he had appeared there out of thin air.

Zhou Ying immediately wiped away all his thoughts and changed into mist, becoming one with the “fates” swirling all around.

Zhang Jue knew without thinking that it was him. Apart from Zhou Ying, the Xuanyin Mountains hadn’t produced anyone else with such a bizarre power. But Zhou Ying had entered the way of clarity; why would he suddenly trespass into the Sea of Stars? What had gone wrong with Duanrui’s Way of the Heart?

Reasonably speaking, however mysterious the power of an early stage established foundation, it still wouldn't be able to deceive the eyes and ears of a shed skin. Zhang Jue only needed to extend his consciousness and pick through those "stars" to turn up that Zhou brat at once.

But that would mean breaking the rules, violating his oath.

Zhou Ying was above him, watching him, neither anxious nor self-satisfied, his clarity unstained. He seemed to be interrogating him: *Today it seems that "there is a reason for everything." If you break the rule and open your eyes, you will be able to examine everything in detail. Everything will have its reason. A "rule" is like a line drawn in the sand. Once you step over it, it becomes meaningless. High elder, a thousand years of cultivation—what will you do?*

The two of them reached a temporary deadlock.

This brief pause was already plenty of time for Xi Ping on Moon Plated Peak to come up with a countermeasure.

"Peak Master Wen, help me out," he said to Wen Fei through the reincarnation wood. "Say something aloud for me!"

After Wen Fei had heard out his request, he was strangely silent for a moment. "How many graves did Zhi Jingzhai have to dig up behind our backs to end up with you?"

Then all the ascended spirits saw Wen Fei, who had seemed nonexistent, suddenly flash his fan and fan large writing into the air as though setting off fireworks: *Stop arguing. A matter of such importance must naturally be settled by the Sea of Stars. Don't you see that the elder has gone? Hurry up and follow!*

Having said this, "setting an example," he flew toward the Sea of Stars.

The peaks masters who had all been talking at once in a huddle finally noticed that the Dignitary of Fate Elder, who had been hanging in midair, was gone. Xi Ping took the opportunity to add a bewildering tactic and went after Wen Fei.

Even an ascended spirit peak master could not go into the Sea of Stars without being summoned, and Wen Fei's wave of the fan had made all of them think they had missed the Dignitary of Fate's summons. Seeing that even the evil cultivator Xi Ping had run off, what more was there to hesitate over? Therefore, they went in pursuit like a swarm of bees.

The Dignitary of Fate rarely called people down into the Sea of Stars. If he absolutely had to call them, he would make preparations ahead of time. First he would lay down an array to stabilize the Sea of Stars, to keep the disciples from getting tangled up in "destiny" connected to them.

But everything was happening too quickly now. He didn't have time for any preparations.

While the Dignitary of Fate Elder was facing the difficult interrogation Zhou Ying had put before him, the two co-conspirators Xi Ping and Wen Fei, yanking and prodding, herded the masters of the thirty-six peaks into the Sea of Stars like mindless oxen.

The ascended spirits made much bigger "ripples" descending into the Sea of Stars than Zhou Ying. Each ascended spirit was a "colossus." They had lived for centuries or even a millennium, had countless disciples under them whether direct or of record, and could be tied back to the fortunes of their families. These big families held either resources or some form of power. With a single cough, one of them could change the fates of countless ordinary people—it could be said that these people were the fate of the whole nation of Great Wan.

By the time the peak masters came to their senses, it was already too late. As soon as they touched the edges of the Sea of Stars, all the countless ties linked to them came to surround them, “swallowing” these completely unguarded people. When a person falls into a tangled skein, the more they struggle, the deeper they’ll be ensnared. These stars brought with them a windstorm; they collided with each other frantically. Even if you didn’t struggle, you would still be pulled in. The whole Sea of Stars turned as chaotic as a pot of porridge, with star stones rolling everywhere.

Someone thought that this still wasn’t enough. The music of the Tai Sui Qin soon sounded, playing a confounding tune learned from some evil cultivator. Hearing the music, the peak masters and the Sea of Stars, already turned upside down, nearly went to pieces.

Zhang Jue had no more attention to spare for Zhou Ying. He hurried off to settle the turbulent Sea of Stars.

At the same time, Xi Ping landed.

Before jumping down, Wen Fei had furtively given him a dose of “return to unity powder.” If this wasn’t the by-product of some failed elixir, then it had been made by this malicious stutterer with the intention of harming people. After taking it, all your senses would be firmly sealed, turning you into a block of stone. Never mind the stars filling the sky, if someone came up and stabbed you to death, you’d have no idea how you had died.

“That’s not true,” Wen Fei corrected him, speaking through the reincarnation wood directly to his consciousness. “When you’re about to die, your spiritual sense will let you know.”

Xi Ping said, “... That’s nice of it.”

Lin Chi put in a word: “Have you left your vital qin outside? What will you do now?”

“I don’t have my vital qin on me. That qin was a copy. It’ll lure Old Man Zhang away,” Xi Ping said. “San-ge, look and see how far the three of us are from dying. Are there any missing arms or legs?”

Wen Fei said, “Who are you talking to?”

No sooner had he spoken than he heard Zhou Ying’s voice in the reincarnation wood: “Zhang Jue alone will not be able to suppress the storm raised by all the peak masters. He’s too busy to attend to anything else. You three are already at the bottom of the Sea of Stars. You’re relatively safe at present.”

Wen Fei: “...”

These two evil brats really were related!

“Your Highness Prince Zhuang,” said Lin Chi, “what are you doing at the bottom of the Sea of Stars?”

Zhou Ying answered unhurriedly amid the windstorm: “Investigating the origin of the ‘heavenly edict’ you received.”

“What is it?”

“You must have guessed most of it,” said Zhou Ying.

Lin Chi paled. Wen Fei and Xi Ping simultaneously opened their mouths, then simultaneously closed them—to begin with, they had been able to say the terms “Ways of the Heart” and “Ways of the Heart of common origin” as they liked; but now that they had a definite answer, it was as if something had placed a silencing talisman on them. They couldn’t say a word.

Lin Chi was anxious. He thought, Fortunately I have the Unbound Furnace to keep me aware.

Wen Fei thought, So inheriting a Way of the Heart comes with this kind of danger.

Xi Ping took a glance inward at his own spirit. What the hell was a Way of the Heart?

Zhou Ying looked on, not speaking—he couldn't say anything, and even if he could, no one would have believed him.

These three were already uncommonly clear-headed. They could transcend the prison holding the vast majority of people on earth. Yet this close to the truth, they were still limited by their hearts and only saw the danger others were in.

“My cultivation is low,” Zhou Ying said. “Please lend me a hand. Do not let the ‘ghosts’ here haunt the human world.”

Wen Fei immediately asked, “So what do we do about the information that has already reached Heaven’s Design Pavilion?”

“I figure Lao Pang also can’t hear the ‘heavenly edict,’ but there were many others with him at the time.” Xi Ping spoke in a very optimistic tone to keep up morale. “These people know the inside story. When they hear the ‘heavenly edict,’ they’ll probably realize that something’s not right. Telling Lao Pang will amount to the same thing as telling my shifu. I’ve thought about it carefully, and I don’t think it should be a big problem. He’s much more reliable than we are. Don’t worry.”

The walkers in the mortal world who had buried Jinghua Village had by now returned to Jinping.

The Kaiming Department could repair the residences of mortals, but they couldn't repair the Azure Dragon Towers. The former locations of the seven towers were empty.

The Azure Dragon Towers had existed for the purpose of stabilizing the Dragon Vein. They would no longer be needed. All Pang Jian could do was cancel the routine night shift and send his disoriented subordinates back to the head office to rest. At night, a number of established foundations woke with a start from meditation one after another; those who hadn't been meditating also felt their spiritual senses quake. Each person's first reaction was to charge out to find General Commander Pang. As soon as they went out, they bumped into their colleagues, then ran into Pang Jian, who had just returned from Guangyun Palace.

Pang Jian had escorted the remains of the fourth prince Zhou Xi back to the palace. Over a decade ago, he had personally taken this young man to the Latent Cultivation Temple; now he had personally sent him off.

In the enormous Guangyun Palace, his insane father was dead and gone, and his anxious older brother was so frightened he had no attention to spare to lament. He had only gone through the motions of mourning, then pulled Pang Jian aside and repeatedly asked him to confirm Guangyun Palace's safety. Only his white-haired old mother was so overwhelmed with grief for him that she wished she were dead. How would she wear away her twilight years?

He had been a prince born to the imperial consort of the Lin clan in Great Wan's Jinping. Among his contemporaries, no one had managed a better reincarnation than Zhou Xi; he might have been called the favorite of the heavens. Yet even he had noiselessly died young on the boundless immortal path like this... What would become of all other living creatures?

Several established foundations all wanted to speak at once, but when their gazes met in midair, they all fell silent without prearrangement. Each with a different expression, they waited for someone else to speak.

“Why are you all hanging around outside in the middle of the night? Can’t calm down to meditate?” Pang Jian said without so much as looking up. “Daily lessons are also rest. When you encounter a major event, it’s much easier than closing your eyes and forcing yourself to sleep. You could say it’s the greatest benefit of cultivation. Be content with your lot, everyone.”

Someone tentatively said, “General commander... are there any instructions?”

Pang Jian thought that he meant instructions from the palace and the court. He thought, Instructions my ass, they’re practically hugging my leg and begging for milk over there. Zhou Ying must be the one who’s adopted.

He didn’t respond, only waved a hand somewhat wearily and returned to the general commander’s residence.

Behind Pang Jian, the blue-clotheser established foundations exchanged veiled looks. Their initial panic had calmed, and they had sensed something uncommon: this generation of walkers in the mortal world had virtually all grown up listening to stories of General Zhi, but... the heavenly edict had given a warning directly to the cultivators’ spiritual senses, branding Zhi Xiu as a traitor to the cultivation world.

This was the heavens above them.

Someone spoke first: “It seems that everyone above the established foundation boundary has received it.”

“But General Zhi...”

“Didn’t you understand General Commander Pang? Stay dumb and say nothing. Anyway, we are under pressure from a shed skin. It isn’t surprising that we can’t tell our fellow cultivators the truth.”

Some walkers in the mortal world exchanged some ambiguous sentences. Suddenly, someone sighed quietly. “We’ve worked hard to cultivate for so many years, given up so much...”

The blue-clothesers followed this person’s gaze to look at Wang Run—the walker in the mortal world who had just laid his wife and children to rest in Jinghua Village.

“Who would willingly accept that the immortal path has been severed?”

Just then, some established foundations who hadn’t been down in the Territory Map came rushing outside, heading toward Jinping City.

“Are they... acting without approval?”

“On the surface, General Commander Pang has always been a staunch supporter of Flying Jade Peak...”

Meanwhile, Xi Yue, who had received orders to watch the house, was exchanging a blank look with the little kitten—he already had the array needed for a half-puppet to establish a foundation prepared. He only needed Xi Ping to guide him. He could accomplish the rest himself.

But that person was like this every time. From the Latent Cultivation Temple to the Resurrection Vortex, he would always toss him aside at the critical moment. All his years of pursuit and questing seemed

to have been meaningless. He would always be like the kitten, only fit to be a little toy whose company could relieve boredom.

He had become a cultivator because of Xi Ping. It was ironic that after all these years, only in the Kaiming Department and Heaven's Design Pavilion did he have the feeling of being useful.

Just then, Xi Yue received a summons from a colleague, notifying him to go out on patrol.

Patrols and standing duty at the towers were Heaven's Design Pavilion's routine business. The losses among the cultivators had yet to be counted, but they must have been grievous. It was only to be expected that they would be shorthanded. Xi Yue restrained his emotions and didn't overthink it; he quickly put away his reincarnation wood, changed into his blue robe, and went to report to the general office.

As soon as he left Dangu Lane, he saw a number of colleagues coming toward him. Xi Yue went over, entirely unguarded. "How are we splitting the areas?"

"You're going to the Lingyang... let me take a look." One of his colleagues seemed not to remember clearly. He took out a roll of paper and went through it.

Xi Yue reached out a hand to take it. "Give it to me... ugh!"

Under cover of the roll of paper, his colleague had attacked him without warning.

A spirit-severing awl stabbed directly into the array core just below Xi Yue's navel—this was the critical point of his arrays, known only to those closest to him; every half-puppet's was different. Had they not faced mortal danger together, a person certainly wouldn't know this vital secret.

Xi Yue's pupils contracted. His half-puppet body couldn't move.

At the same time, another person formed a search talisman and aimed it at Xi Yue.

Xi Yue's mustard seed, the reincarnation wood amulet, and the seeds in his pocket all fell out. The established foundation blue-clothesers burned the amulet and the seeds to ashes, simultaneously sealing Xi Yue's mouth.

A blue-clotheser met his appalled gaze and unconsciously looked away. He softly said, "Forgive me. The heavenly edict has been issued, we cannot disobey. Xi-xiong..."

"Don't waste words. Someone might be listening. This kind of thing cannot get out." Another blue-clotheser stepped forward and, seeming very friendly, hooked an arm around Xi Yue's shoulders and half-pushed, half-pulled him away. He whispered to Xi Yue, "You're only a half-immortal, and you're only an adopted son. This doesn't have anything to do with. Even if the immortal mountains hold you accountable after the fact, we'll do our best to protect you."

A half-puppet's body was abnormal. Xi Yue's field of vision was far wider than an ordinary person's. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw some blue-clothesers heading toward the Yongning Marquis Manor. His eyes nearly burst from their sockets.

For "important locations" like Dangui Lane and Guangyun Palace, though the majority of the repair work had been done by the Kaiming Department, there had been walkers in the mortal world taking part.

Heaven's Design Pavilion knew that the Marquis Manor hadn't yet had time to put down a new array.

Xi Yue struggled against the talisman, forcing breath out of his throat: “Aren’t you... scared of... General Zhi... and...”

“We are scared. We’ve heard that people with accompanying plants can use them to instantly cross vast distances. We would all be dead at the least touch. The waters of the Yongning Marquis Manor are very deep. It could even block the great evil cultivator who invaded the city. We all saw that array and that sword aura.”

“Then how can...you...dare...”

The gaze of the blue-clothed walker in the mortal world was extremely upright and honorable. He looked straight into Xi Yue’s eyes. “When the Territory Map fell, we did not receive the heavenly edict immediately. It is clear to see how powerful a shed skin evil cultivator is—he can even hoodwink heaven and earth. Since the heavenly edict could now be issued, it shows that now is the best opportunity. A rapid response is our vocation—little friend, don’t you remember? We walk in the mortal world, uphold the will of heaven above, protect the common people below, do not cravenly cling to life, do not fear death.”

Xi Yue remembered that the reason he had stayed in Heaven’s Design Pavilion with Pang Jian at the very beginning was because of the drive that had been passed down through Heaven’s Design Pavilion for a thousand years.

“This is our way. Even if we should be killed by those of the evil way, even if our enemy is the person we looked up to in our youth...” That blue-clotheser said. “Heaven helps Great Wan. Do not worry, we will not carelessly harm mortal lives.”

There were people who had spent a century protecting this city day in and day, risking their lives, upholding the morality they believed in.

Xi Yue felt that it was extremely absurd.

CHAPTER 184 - Tomb of the Sage (10)

A rattling suddenly came from the half-puppet's body, like the gears of a marionette's joints stuck in the wrong position. Xi Yue began to "twist." A talisman raised sparks on his colleague.

That established foundation blue-clothesser gave a groan of pain as he was pushed several zhang away. A corner of his protective armor even broke. The mustard seed he had confiscated from Xi Yue also flew back into its owner's hand. The blue-clothesser raised his head in mingled surprise and fright. He saw that Xi Yue had yanked the spirit-severing awl from his body. There was a small silver knife clamped in his hand, still dripping blood.

"You're crazy!"

The spirit-severing awl only temporarily cut off the array that moved spiritual energy through a half-puppet's body. It had been stuck into the "puppet" part of his body. Apart from being unable to move, Xi Yue wouldn't be harmed in any other way, and it didn't hurt. It would only have to be removed afterward for him to recover.

But just now, he had used a downgraded immortal tool that had come out of nowhere to slit open his own core array. The clothes around his torso were shredded by the spiritual energy gushing out. Thread after thread of racing, out-of-control spiritual light flickered over Xi Yue's face. The delicate features that had been repaired after he had opened his spiritual eyes began to twist.

A half-puppet's ability to move relied entirely on their core array. This was his second heart. Now that it had been blown up like this with spiritual energy, there would be no way to repair it. When the remaining spiritual energy in his body had been consumed, he would...

“I said we wouldn’t harm mortal lives, what are you doing?!”

Xi Yue was accustomed to being mute. When it came to the crux, he would forget to speak. He responded mentally: *He told me to watch the house.*

He summoned back his mustard seed and took out a piece of reincarnation wood hidden inside it.

The established foundation blue-clotheser was horrified. He threw himself forward to snatch it. The amulet was thrown far away.

Xi Yue had only had time to send word and hadn’t yet heard a response. His black irises, larger than normal, became clouded by a layer of deathliness, but his eyes were still fixed unwaveringly on that amulet, his blood-covered hand laboriously reaching out.

The blue-clotheser smashed the amulet with a flick of the fingers, but when he turned his head, his eyes were red.

“Xi Yue! Xi Yue!”

Fruitlessly, the blue-clotheser turned up a handful of white spirits and tried shoving them into Xi Yue’s mouth and wound. “Eat these... hurry up... then you can get up and repair yourself, I... if it’s no good I’ll take you to the general commander...”

Xi Yue ignored him. Whether spasming or struggling, he slipped from his one-time colleague’s arms.

“Xi Yue! Have you been bewildered by evil, lost your mind?”

In this city, on this path, sorrow and hatred fed each other. Every person, on beholding another person holding fast, would think that they had lost their mind.

And Xi Ping was still trapped at the bottom of the Sea of Stars.

Zhou Ying saw the misty stars gather around to collide with him and frowned slightly. Xi Ping had taken the return to unity powder. He wouldn't have felt it even if he had been knocked flat on his back. But his heart skipped out of nowhere. Immediately, he quietly asked Zhou Ying, "What's wrong?"

Before Zhou Ying could answer, Lin Chi suddenly frowned and brandished the Unbound Furnace.

The special "seventh sense" of the way of toolmaking connected a person's consciousness to a toolmaking furnace in order to reflect themselves. Lin Chi kindled the Unbound Furnace, and his expression finally eased.

"Master Lin?" said Xi Ping.

"S-sorry." Lin Chi panted for breath. "The urge to kill just surged up in my mind out of nowhere..."

Both Xi Ping and Wen Fei were astonished—Master Lin, a well-behaved person who had locked himself up on a mountain for eight centuries, who would use a suppression talisman in the direst of circumstances, could actually feel such a thing as an "urge to kill."

"Although..." said Wen Fei, "I would like to ask if I might, Linshixiong, how were you planning on killing us?"

"Don't joke," Lin Chi said feebly. "It was a feeling like the most important thing I had in the world was about to be destroyed. The impulse was almost impossible to restrain..."

Fortunately, at the moment of imminent peril, he had remembered that his "most important thing in the world" was already gone.

“Damn it,” said Xi Ping.

The walking corpse Ways of the Heart at the bottom of the Sea of Stars didn't care whether they were bringing chaos to Great Wan for the sake of their own survival. One after another, they were sending “heavenly edicts” to juniors bearing Ways of the Heart of common origin. Now that they knew they had been exposed, what would happen?

If even Lin Chi could be affected...

In Jinping, the established foundation blue-clotheser who had already picked up Xi Yue and resolved to go find Pang Jian stopped in his tracks.

In all the branches of Heaven's Design Pavilion, a thought appeared in the minds of all the elite established foundations, as if they had been possessed: *If you sever the veins of the earth, won't the Xuanyin Mountains' immortal energy be kept from dispersing? Just like Southern He before. The southern mines have yet to be hollowed out after two hundred years. The spiritual energy there is as dense as in the Lancang Mountains of the past.*

At the same time, the ascended spirit peak masters entangled in stars in the Sea of Stars stopped struggling simultaneously. As if they had all suddenly made breakthroughs in the way of clarity and no longer cared about anything, their consciousnesses turned with full concentration onto Xi Ping and the others hiding at the bottom of the Sea of Stars.

In that moment, each peak master's mind was crammed full of one thought: *These scoundrels want to destroy my foundations.*

Even the Latent Cultivation Temple was in chaos.

Su Zhun and all the stewards were only outer sect half-immortals. None of them had received any edict, whether heavenly or earthly. They only watched in confusion as the established foundations went from restless and uneasy to increasingly obsessed.

“The mountains are sealed—the mountains are sealed—the Xuanyin Mountains have been sealed, everyone please remain calm—” A crowd of straw children walked everywhere with amplifying talismans stuck to them, spreading a steward’s voice all over, but no one listened to him.

“Elder Su, the Talent Cultivation Temple is the boundary between mortal and immortal. Isn’t there any way to contact the outside world?”

“The Xuanyin Mountains have been sealed, and the Latent Cultivation Temple is also within the scope of the great mountain array,” Su Zhun said falteringly. “Don’t you think I’m frantic? Don’t you think I want to contact the outside world...?”

“This is urgent, Elder Su, a matter of life and death. We must leave the mountains at once, return to Heaven’s Design Pavilion, and think of a way to sever all the veins of the earth!”

Su Zhun’s expression was unwavering, but inwardly he gasped, exchanging a look of surprise and bewilderment with his subordinate half-immortal steward Yang Anli. He thought, Have you all gone crazy?

There were still young disciples who hadn’t yet opened their spiritual eyes in the temple. Su Zhun shot Yang Anli a veiled look. Yang Anli took his meaning at once and loudly said, “Mortals sometimes mistakenly wander into the Latent Cultivation Temple at the boundary of the great mountain array. Perhaps there is an exit. Let me take you there to look!”

When he said “come with me,” a crowd of Heaven’s Design Pavilion established foundations who had come to advance their cultivation hurried to follow. He led them far away from the residences of the mortal disciples.

Su Zhun breathed out heavily, then turned straight back to Chengjing Hall. But as soon as he opened the door, he saw that an “uninvited guest” had appeared in Chengjing Hall—Luo Qingshi, holding a teacup with both hands, sat in a chair with his feet dangling.

A pair of narrow, upturned eyes looked at Su Zhun through the enshrouding steam.

Su Zhun’s heart gave a jump. Yes—the Latent Cultivation Temple also had a resident established foundation!

Then came the flash of a talisman. Luo Qingshi had already placed talismans against eavesdropping on all sides. In a drawling voice, he said, “Elder Su, how dishonest.”

Su Zhun forced a smile. “What are you talking about? Luo-shixiong...”

“The Latent Cultivation Temple falls within the purview of the great mountain array, but we aren’t unable to contact the outside world when the Xuanyin Mountains are sealed—these quacking ducks from the outer sects weren’t here before. The only ones who came were mortal idiots who hadn’t opened their spiritual eyes. Though the temple has a formal order forbidding the disciples from contacting the outside world during the cultivation period, out of fear that these kids who haven’t yet cut their ties to the mortal world, not making it in time to attend a family wedding or funeral, would take it too hard and hang themselves, we leave them a passageway. As a last resort, we can break the rules and allow a mortal to return to the human world by that way.” Luo Qingshi’s

voice was kept very low. “There’s no way? That’s only enough to fool outsiders.”

Su Zhun’s expression didn’t change, but his heart sank. “Ah, I overlooked that in my haste..”

“Don’t be hasty, take a break,” Luo Qingshi interrupted him and extended a hand. “Give me the inscription key to the secret passageway.”

The star stones concealed at the bottom of the Sea of Stars were faced with imminent danger, so they resisted with all they had.

Wen Fei and Lin Chi simultaneously struck in the direction Zhou Ying indicated, but an invisible hard shell seemed to have coated the outsides of these star stones. Leaving Lin Chi aside for the moment, even Wen Fei’s full strength attack bounced off.

At the same time, the largest star stone, like a leech, began burrowing into the ground. The small star stones plastered themselves tightly to it. The star stones that had originally somewhat repelled each other were sticking together.

Zhang Jue sensed that something was wrong. The Dignitary of Fate Elder seemed to be being pulled by three forces at once: he himself understood that these ascended spirit peak masters who had accidentally gotten trapped in the Sea of Stars couldn’t all have fought free so easily, and there had to be some strangeness to this; at the same time, dimly, the part of him that belonged to the spiritual mountains was also split in two; there seemed to be a weak voice in the depths of the mountains that persisted in saying that the spiritual mountains held the common people above all, even if that meant withering away themselves. But there was a more intense emotion shaking his mind like the tolling of a bell, ordering him to quell rebellion and punish evildoers.

In that moment, a fierce impulse surged up in his heart. He wanted to tear off his blindfold and look into the depths of the Sea of Stars and the spiritual mountains.

During the Dignitary of Fate's brief pause, the peak masters had already escaped the shackles of the Sea of Stars and were heading toward Xi Ping and the others.

Xi Ping used the *Discard the False and Keep the True* book to copy the rain of swords one of the Li peak masters had used earlier and tossed it out blindly—having taken the return to unity powder had now become a disadvantage.

Lin Chi quickly followed suit, tossing out an immortal tool like an oilpaper umbrella. That umbrella flew up into the air and grew in size a hundredfold. Its ribs turned out to be made of the newest spirit-conducting gold. They automatically absorbed the spiritual mountains' spiritual energy to turn into a protective screen, instantly shielding all of them.

Lin Chi said, "Your Highness, what can we do?"

Wen Fei was dumbfounded. "My goodness, what kind of thing sure to throw everything under the heavens into an uproar has Moon Plated Peak made now?!"

Xi Ping decisively turned over his palm. The Eternal Flame flew into the Unbound Furnace like a shooting star.

The Unbound Furnace had refined Xiuluo and Zhaoting; it had cooked Sanyue's shed skin sect leader—Xiuluo had been incomplete, keeping Xiang Zhao from inheriting the Way of the Heart in the divine sword; Zhaoting had fallen a step behind, unable to keep up with the too long stride of its master's Way of the Heart; Sanyue's sect leader had had a wild notion and wanted to refine his own Way of the Heart into the form of the Black Emperor's... In

sum, during Hui Xiangjun's life and after her death, her Unbound Furnace seemed always to have had some unspeakable connection to Ways of the Heart. Maybe it would be able to refine these rotten impervious stones.

"If we let them get away, never mind us, they'll kill all of Great Wan. Dig them up and burn them!"

Lin Chi had yet to develop other varieties of spirit-conducting gold. Currently, it could only conduct spiritual energy; it wasn't indestructible. The peak masters' powers, fit to topple mountains and raise seas, were smashing against the umbrella's canopy. The umbrella's ribs were about to warp, and the canopy was also hanging on by a thread.

Guided by Zhou Ying's eyes and ears, the three great ascended spirits pooled their strength to pry up the largest star stone.

Wen Fei couldn't feel anything else, but he felt that his essence had nearly been drained dry. "How can it be... so heavy!"

"An ascended spirit's spiritual bones weigh several hundred jin, so how heavy would a shed skin's Way of the Heart be?" Lin Chi had after all been cultivating the longest. He might not be able to fight, but his essence was more abundant than the other two's. "As heavy as a mountain?"

"Why is the spiritual energy in the Sea of Stars so sparse?" said Xi Ping. "I can't catch my breath."

"The spirit-conducting gold has split off the flow of spiritual energy." Zhou Ying was directing the three ascended spirits in their manual labor and acting as eyes and ears from the sidelines, participating only by speaking. No matter how dangerous the situation became, it didn't affect him. As he spoke, he was methodically drawing an

array around the three ascended spirits who couldn't see. "Wait a moment."

Wen Fei had known countless people, but he had never met an established foundation with such an "original approach." Hearing that "wait a moment," he instantly had an ominous premonition. "What are you doing now? Don't..."

Before he could finish, Zhang Jue landed.

In the end, the Dignitary of Fate hadn't torn the blindfold off his face. He had chosen to obey the will of the spiritual mountains.

As soon as a shed skin arrived, the big umbrella full of holes couldn't hold out any longer. It broke instantly. Zhou Ying chose his time precisely. He set down the final stroke of the array.

This was an unusual spirit-gathering array. Within the array was embedded an inscription that had never been seen in the land of the living—it came from the demon host's altar in the Impassable Sea.

The whole Xuanyin Mountain Range formed a resonance with the inscription in that array. The spiritual energy formed a tornado, bursting into the Sea of Stars as easily as crushing dry weeds.

This blow was truly too fierce. All the ascended spirits and Zhang Jue were knocked aside.

Xi Ping and the other two couldn't see anything, but they could feel the coursing spiritual energy trying to flip the tops of their skulls. It smashed right into their meridians.

If any one of them had taken a spirit-protecting pill and had had meridians that were just slightly more fragile, they would have been smashed to death by that blow!

Wen Fei howled. “Zhou whoever-you-are, you asshole, don’t you know that two of us are famously weak medicine and toolmaking cultivators, and the other is an ascended spirit baby who hasn’t even wiped the drool off his face?!”

Zhou Ying was very calm: Lin Chi was an eight-century-old great ascended spirit whose cultivation was much higher than it appeared; Wen Fei had spent a hundred years in Heaven’s Design Pavilion, and later, for the sake of revenge, had gone into countless dangerous hidden realms, surviving on a knife’s edge; Xi Ping went without saying—he had the undying bones. When he had become an ascended spirit, a heavenly tribulation doing its level best to kill him hadn’t managed it. This was nothing.

Xi Ping had the sensation that every bit of his meridians had broken, but torment to his flesh and bones could alleviate his emotions.

Anger briefly overwhelmed the pain of separation. “Zhou Ying, just you wait!”

“Sure,” said Zhou Ying. “The fire.”

This time, for the Sea of Stars, it was no longer its flesh being gouged; it was an amputation. Each and every star seemed to be screaming in pain. That huge star stone had been “dug” right out.

At Xi Ping’s thought, the Unbound Furnace, which was only the height of a person, suddenly seemed to take on the vastness of the universe. It drew that enormous star stone right in.

The countless little star stones of varying size followed soon after.

Xi Ping, who had put reincarnation wood into the Unbound Furnace ahead of time, and Lin Chi, who was a toolmaking cultivator, simultaneously stuck their consciousnesses in.

As soon as the star stones entered, Xi Ping and Lin Chi were simultaneously shocked: the human faces that Zhou Ying had forced out with the heart demon seed, which could only be perceived by a paramount spiritual sense looking through the demon eyes, now emerged with perfect clarity in the fire.

Without so much as thinking about it, Xi Ping's first reaction was to push Lin Chi's consciousness out while he was off his guard—he had remembered Lin Zongyi, whose Way of the Heart had been shattered in the Territory Map.

The Ways of the Heart of all the deceased masters of the Xuanyin Mountains seemed to be here, which naturally included Lin Chi's shifu. Xi Ping had a peculiar intuition that if he let Lin Chi come face to face with his shifu, the master of Moon Plated Peak would be no more!

As soon as these Ways of the Heart fell into the true fire of the Unbound Furnace, they were like wax that had fallen into an ironworks. It was even hard to catch a glimpse of any of the faces... Then he saw that at the edges of the Eternal Flame that was dissolving the star stones, there was a blurry light, extending boundlessly, seeming to connect to some place.

This seemed to be something he wasn't supposed to see. Xi Ping only took one glance, and his consciousness stung as though it had been pricked like a pincushion.

All of a sudden, his point of view became very peculiar—it was as if he were standing in front of a reincarnation wood tree, and the reincarnation wood tree had a sliver of his consciousness in it, through which he was looking out at himself.

As if looking into a mirror, he saw “himself” right in front of him.

Amid the Eternal Flame, that countenance that couldn't have been more familiar became slightly translucent. Beneath the flesh, the skeleton was faintly visible.

Because of Zhou Ying's rude drawing of spiritual energy just now, Xi Ping's whole body hurt like hell, and the anger on his face had yet to vanish...but his faintly visible bones were smiling.

How could bones... smile?

CHAPTER 185 - Tomb of the Sage (11)

Xi Ping's eyes were momentarily dazzled by the firelight. When he looked again, the skeleton's jaws had returned to a normal arc. Through the flesh, they were peacefully looking back at Xi Ping himself. They seemed to be saying, *This is how your bones look. Don't be paranoid.*

But Xi Ping was chilled to the marrow. He hadn't jumped into the Unbound Furnace himself. It was only his consciousness that had gone in.

A consciousness was formless. Only in certain places, like the Unbound Furnace and the inside of the Law Breaker, would it give itself a concrete form for ease of communication—it was like a projection.

Since it was a projection, why would it have a complete skeleton?

With a thought, Xi Ping dispersed the human form projected by his consciousness. The human figure vanished, but the skeleton lagged half a step behind, laid bare. Then it caught up and tried to run off as well.

All of Xi Ping's hair stood on end like flagpoles. "Stop!"

The raging Eternal Flame inside the Unbound Furnace surrounded that skeleton, just like when it had swallowed the star stones. At the same time, Xi Ping understood how Lin Chi had felt earlier—reasonably, he wanted to burn the skeleton, but his spiritual sense was shouting its lungs out in defiance and warning, telling him to run away, as if lightning heavier than that of the ascended spirit heavenly tribulation was about to fall upon his head.

Xi Ping braced himself and ignored it. He thought, *Trying to pick up their tricks to fool your own dad...*

Before this thought could flit through his mind, the pain of being burned by raging fire engulfed his whole body. Xi Ping's vision went black. The Eternal Flame inside the furnace nearly went out from having no one to maintain it.

Zhou Ying's calm voice came to his ears: "First burn the star stones. There will be plenty of time later for self-immolation."

Self-immolation...

Hearing his choice of words, Xi Ping's heart jumped. Then he stood there watching as that skeleton patted sparks off itself in an attitude that couldn't have been more familiar. The skeleton's teeth chattered slightly. He heard his own voice say, "Well, who did you think I was? Of course I'm you..."

I'm you...I'm you...

When the skeleton was through "talking," it smiled again, then disappeared before his eyes. Xi Ping's consciousness's field of vision returned to normal. Had the scorching pain not still been there, everything that had happened just now would have seemed like an illusion.

The Eternal Flame once again surged toward the star stones. The faces in the star stones convulsed with fear. They hurled abuse toward him.

Xi Ping turned a deaf ear to it. His numb consciousness stood by observing, but his heart was full of a Zhuoming-like instinct to pluck out his hair, carve out his flesh, pick out his bones.

When he had first joined Flying Jade Peak, Shizun had asked him what he liked, and Xi Ping had responded that he liked eating, drinking, and making merry. He didn't especially want to be immortal. In his heart, he still wanted to go home.

But now he realized with a start that it seemed he hadn't craved the feeling of home again. He hadn't gotten drunk. Since his true body had left the Impassable Sea, he hadn't slept, either.

Before, when he had followed Cui Ji's merchant caravan this way and that, it had been so he could play around wherever they went. Now he went all over to "play" so he could set up spies and plant agents. When he made a friend, he first had to consider the person's position and decide what identity to use; he still liked "beauty," but any natural lovely notions he might have had when he encountered a beautiful person had long been obliterated. It was as if he dimly knew that he was no longer connected to worldly desires.

Over the last decade and a half, he had changed completely. He no longer seemed human.

And the most frightening thing was that, in front of others, he would still pretend that he was flesh and blood—to cheer up Shifu and Xi Yue, he had deliberately checked the Marquis Manor for new things, "ransacking" the rear courtyard had turned up a steam carriage he had no actual interest in and raced to bring it up and harp on it.

This wasn't Xi Ping's first time entering the Unbound Furnace. Here, through Zhuoming's eyes, he had seen cultivators becoming less and less human the higher their cultivation became; and through Hui Xiangjun's eyes, he had seen the absurdity and might of Ways of the Heart. He had cursed the spiritual mountains for their indifference, mocked the sages for their ignorance, had laughed at himself for the wrong road he had taken. He seemed to understand all the reasoning perfectly.

But just like everyone was always saying “the heart is a servant to circumstance,” “longing is like an ulcer on the bone,” it was all only a slightly sentimental metaphor.

Even just now, when he had discovered the “ghosts” at the bottom of the Sea of Stars, he had still celebrated that he had no Way of the Heart.

Now, he had at last seen himself: a ghost tied to the hidden bones, fooling himself and others, suffering under the mistaken belief that he still belonged to the land of the living.

“San-ge, let me ask you something. Tell me the truth.” Xi Ping struggled to keep his voice calm. Softly, he said, “Have you heard of Yuan Hui? Do you know how he died?”

“I’ve heard of him. I know.” Zhou Ying’s voice came through the buy-one-get-one reincarnation wood. In the midst of the storm, the established foundation who had turned into mist had been blown who knew where, but his voice was still very steady. “There is no need to ask me. I can’t say, and you can’t listen. But since you have asked, it means you have already understood.”

Xi Ping had in fact understood.

Those who complied with the guidance of elders and inherited a Way of the Heart would follow the path of their predecessors. Under the guidance of the star stones hidden in the shadows, they would cultivate assiduously, accumulate spiritual energy and nourish their Way of the Heart, and ultimately become a part of some star stone at the bottom of the Sea of Stars.

Those with their own obsessions, their own Ways of the Heart, would go through all manner of events and tribulations, be pruned by the spiritual mountains at every step, and finally have an

“enlightenment” that would change them into a form the spiritual mountains could accept, transform them into a new star stone to sink into the Sea of Stars, coming by a different path to the same end as the first type of person.

For over a thousand years, this was how the spiritual mountains had operated.

It turned out that the spiritual mountains that had determined the form of the landscape, the national boundaries, and the climate were the remains left behind by the full moon sages. The scope covered by the spiritual mountains was the universe that a full moon sage could construct with their Way of the Heart. All the “heavenly commandments” that seemed incontrovertible were manmade.

Later generations had been born into the manmade world and had racked their brains to question “heaven and earth,” climbing up the framework built by the sages; whether “orthodox” or “evil,” they were all in perfect order.

Only the possessors of paramount spiritual senses, who seemed insane, could sporadically sense the human world beyond the bounds.

They weren’t insane. It was everyone else who was blind.

“San-ge,” Xi Ping said softly amid the raging fire, “have you seen the real sun and moon, the real stars? Do they not follow the paths of human fate, not turn red or green because some mountain fell or some person died? Lightning is just a fart let out by the clouds before rain, not doing its interminable best to strike some poor fool... I’ve always thought it was strange. When you pass through the clouds on a sword, they’re only water vapor blown around by the wind. How could they move so fast when it comes to striking people?”

“I’ve been standing too low. I haven’t seen them clearly,” Zhou Ying said. “Perhaps.”

“Don’t be in a rush. If you saw everything clearly, Princess Duanrui’s Way of the Heart would explode.” Xi Ping mumbled incoherently, “I can’t tell others, and even if I said it, at most they’d just sigh and say ‘How right you are,’ think that my analogy made sense. It’s said that stone tape ghosts don’t think they’re dead—unless like me... like Lin Zongyi, they see their own ‘way,’ and that spells their doom... I shouldn’t have called Lin Zongyi a good-for-nothing.”

Zhou Ying said, “The soul vanishes when a person dies. Nothing survives. Ghosts are only comforting nonsense made up by the ignorant masses who fear death.”

“Not entirely,” Xi Ping said, coming back to himself. “Haven’t ignorant cultivators who fear death cultivated themselves into ghosts?”

Just like the sages could never use their Ways of the Heart to build a true world restored to its original condition, the future generations operating within the framework and order of the spiritual mountains could never assemble a complete world of the sages. Each generation was worse than the one before—the sages had distorted the Will of Heaven and were then in turn distorted by future generations. Now, the Ways of the Heart accumulated at the feet of the spiritual mountains had polluted the origins of the spiritual mountains. The power of the spiritual mountains had waned, letting rebels like him break ground and sprout.

And they, thinking they had seen through the banality of the old order, were in fact only walking the old path of the five sages. When one day one of them “succeeded” and their Way of the Heart became consummate and fell to earth, washing “heaven and earth” clean once more, becoming the new spiritual mountains, then they would understand the truth about those who had gone before.

The only difference was that some were controlled by others' voices, and some were consumed by their own creations.

The one who had taken fifty steps in the wrong direction shouldn't laugh at the one who had taken a hundred steps.

"Guess what, san-ge." Xi Ping laughed aloud. Suddenly, the unilateral barrier between him and Zhou Ying also unilaterally disappeared. No matter how Zhou Ying reacted, he could once again comfortably talk nonsense just like before. "I brought a set of burial robes with me back when I left Flying Jade Peak. Aren't I smart? Too bad I never got to wear them. I lost them back in your old home. You can make it up to me when you have time."

He had once again scored the winning prize. Others were controlled by a Way of the Heart and would only learn of it on the point of death.

He was controlled by an eccentric set of lousy bones and could never "succeed"; he was also in no danger of a shattered Way of the Heart. He could become aware in advance.

But why must living creatures be controlled by these hearts?

Where had the first Way of the Heart in the world come from? What kind of evil thing had it been?

Using every bit of his strength, Luo Qingshi had managed to get into the Latent Cultivation Temple's secret passage leading to the outside world.

He had initiated a dozen classes of disciples. His basic skills were strong. As the Latent Cultivation Temple's sole established foundation steward, he was normally also responsible for all of the Latent Cultivation Temple's inscription defenses. He could be

described as proficient in talismans, arrays, and inscriptions. But now, as though he had been half-paralyzed, he was staggering as he walked. He had the inscription key in his hands, but he couldn't get it to match up. Over and over, he nearly touched the secret passage's defense net.

As if his Way of the Heart knew that he was going to betray it and was trying by every means possible to obstruct him.

“We were in the same class, Su-shixiong. Do you still remember... what I used to look like?”

That year, the “promising young person” among the four great families belonged to the Zhao family. Perhaps the Zhao family had never been very good at rearing its children. As soon as that Zhao clan direct descendant entered the sect, he was enticed into violating the sect rules through the machinations of other families. A month after opening its gates, the Latent Cultivation Temple had expelled four provisional disciples. The situation could be described as unprecedented. Among the remaining disciples from the big families, there hadn't been a single presentable one, not even if you went easy on them, so two sons of civil officials who had been chosen to make up the numbers had gotten ahead, one named Su Zhun and one named Luo Qingshi. They were the twin stars of that class of provisional disciples.

Su Zhun had a kind and gentle disposition and was thorough in all matters. Luo Qingshi was haughty and boastful, above it all. The two of them had been at odds since entering the sect and opened their spiritual eyes practically on the same day.

The thirty-six peak masters had probably thought it would be too humiliating and had all said openly that they would be accepting no inner sect disciples that year. The only opportunity to enter the inner sect was to take the established foundation steward in charge of the Latent Cultivation Temple at the time as your shifu—first you would

go into the inner sect for some years, and after establishing a foundation, you would have to come to the Later Cultivation Temple and take over the role.

Luo Qingshi needed to fill that spot, because at the time, Wen Fei had not yet become an ascended spirit, and Rosy Cloud Peak, which would regularly supply elixirs to the outside world in the future, was still uninhabited. Outside the Xuanyin Mountains, even for members of the four great families, elixirs could only be obtained by getting a favor from someone going to the inner sect. Luo Qingshi didn't have the connections, and his mother was seriously ill. The medicines of the mortal world were no use. He could only come into contact with Xuanyin's scarce medicine cultivators by entering the inner sect himself.

When Su Zhun had learned of this, he had gone to report to Heaven's Design Pavilion without demur, giving up that "road to heaven" in favor of his classmate.

As he had wished, Luo Qingshi entered the inner sect and easily obtained medicine from the medicine cultivator shijie, prolonging his mother's lifespan for twenty years. He had thought his virtuous achievements complete, not expecting that his nightmare had just begun. The reason his shifu had accepted him was that he was already showing signs of decline. He had only a few years left to live comfortably, and he was in a hurry to find a successor.

Only then did Luo Qingshi learn that in order to take over the Latent Cultivation Temple, he had to inherit his shifu's Way of the Heart, which was dedicated to giving instruction and dispelling doubts.

But Luo Qingshi's temperament was reclusive and disagreeable. Everyone was an idiot to him. He was extremely impatient when it came to dealing with people. He was incompatible with his shifu's Way of the Heart. Had he been the scion of a noble family, his elders would naturally have brought a spare Way of the Heart from storage

that would accord with him, but Luo Qingshi wasn't. He had been accepted into the inner sect for the purpose of filling this position. He had no choice.

When Princess Duanrui had entered the way of clarity, though she had also been forced into it, at any rate she had received a Way of the Heart of utmost attainments, left by an ancient master. Luo Qingshi's shifu himself, however, had merely stopped at the middle established foundation stage. Even in the outer sects, his was a useless Way of the Heart that no one would have wanted.

Perhaps for some, it had been the "foot being cut to fit the shoe," but for him, it had been unwillingly hacking off all his limbs and being shoved into a jar.

Receiving this Way of the Heart had been exceedingly difficult for Luo Qingshi. Over and over, he had nearly died of it. Only after close to fifty years of struggle had he finally managed to survive amid terrifying alarms. A Way of the Heart could leave marks on the body, and he was the only person in the Xuanyin Mountains with a "foundation-establishing wound" — a full-grown man, he had taken on the ridiculous appearance of a child.

A mortal couldn't wait fifty years for him. In the end, he had been unable to see his mother one last time.

His only consolation was that the old lady had lived past seventy and died naturally in old age. She had endured no hardships. He heard that when Southern He had invaded Jinping, she had just happened to be in the Southern Sage Temple burning incense for her son far away in the immortal mountains. When she encountered Southern He cavalry outside the city, the Southern Sage hadn't answered; it was the young general left behind to protect Jinping who had saved her life.

Where no one knew about it, Luo Qingshi noted down that debt.

“You have to look after yourself, Su-shixiong. If you’re found out, you must not resist for my sake. Be adaptable, avoid those established foundations.” The former classmate who had been his hostile opponent—and who now looked like a twelve-year-old child—said to the white-haired, withered old man, “If you die, there will be no one left to remember my original appearance.”

Luo Qingshi forced his way into the secret passage. He had meant to fly his sword, but his internal energy was in chaos; he couldn’t fly steadily. He grit his teeth and from his mustard seed took a two-wheeled “steam donkey”—a downgraded immortal tool he had confiscated from a wildly audacious wealthy disciple some years ago. He stuck a white spirit into the donkey’s mouth. Before he could sit properly, the “donkey” howled and spurted out a mass of steam, taking to its heels and charging forward.

All toolmaking cultivators were insane!

Only by stretching his feet nearly to the point of cramping his tendons could Luo Qingshi just reach the pedals. Calling out “whoa” did no good. Unable to get the hang of it, he ran into the wall several times. Finally, “leaping onto roofs and vaulting over walls,” he charged out into the human world.

Naturally, as a traitor sneaking out of the Xuanyin Mountains, he was noticed by the stones at the bottom of the Sea of Stars. The established foundation cultivators in the Latent Cultivation Temple and Heaven’s Design Pavilion’s established foundations left to watch over Jingzhou were simultaneously “notified” by their Ways of the Heart.

Luo Qingshi had been prepared. As soon as he charged out, he was about to send his already drafted Heavenly Question, not expecting that it was already too late. Before it could take shape, the Heavenly Question was dispersed by a talisman.

At the same time, the established foundations from the Latent Cultivation Temple also caught up, surrounding the stupid downgraded donkey that had already burned through the spiritual stone.

“Luo-shixiong,” the leading established foundation blue-clotheser said, “I truly never thought that even the Latent Cultivation Temple would betray the spiritual mountains.”

“Su Mingyi, you’d better not have been stubborn about this, old man,” Luo Qingshi thought.

He closed his eyes. Then, glaring with those eyes that regularly appeared in every disciple’s nightmares, he laughed coldly. “Good-for-nothings. I taught every last one of you. Do you really think you’ve made something of yourselves?”

“Enough chatter, get him!”

Luo Qingshi hated his Way of the Heart, and he had never sincerely liked the provisional disciples who had been consigned to his care. He and class after class had mutually tormented each other in the Qiankun Tower. All of them were children of important people; many of them hadn’t experienced as much humiliation in their whole lives as they had in one year at the hands of this dwarf. Now they finally had a chance to wreak their vengeance.

New grievances upon old resentments, a righteous cause and a private score—the situation was tenuous; the two sides immediately came to blows.

Luo Qingshi’s internal energy was in such disorder he thought his Way of the Heart was about to shatter. Though he was simultaneously besieged by eight Heaven’s Design Pavilion established foundations, he wasn’t overcome at once. It was clear

that he hadn't been entirely wrong in constantly saying "good-for-nothings" for over a century.

Luo Qingshi waved his sleeve. A dazzling talisman sent three established foundations of the same level as him flying at once. But the next moment, he found that his essence had been emptied out.

This place was still at the feet of the Xuanyin Mountains. The spiritual energy was abundant. A cultivator in fact didn't need spiritual stones to replenish their essence. But all his meridians had sealed themselves automatically; external spiritual energy couldn't enter!

"A Way of the Heart... a fine Way of the Heart." Luo Qingshi suddenly laughed. "Interesting."

All of a sudden, he recklessly tore through the circle of blue-clothesers and used the very last of his strength to send six Heavenly Questions in a row. A blue-clotheser stabbed a sword through his shoulder, which wasn't even as thick as the width of a palm, nailing him to the ground.

"Luo Qingshi, you are unworthy of being a teacher—"

Luo Qingshi's vision swam again and again. At these words, an even more bitterly sarcastic sneer appeared on his face. "I never even..."

Before the words could leave his mouth, the six Heavenly Questions were all intercepted. The point of a sword had appeared before him.

But just then, Luo Qingshi's disorderly internal energy suddenly calmed. His sealed meridians unexpectedly reopened. In a flash, with no time to consider, Luo Qingshi hastily sent out a talisman to knock the sword aside—the Ways of the Heart controlling the

established foundations had been lapped up by the Unbound Furnace!

Almost at the same time, the eight Heaven's Design Pavilion blue-clothesers seemed to fall into a daze. Luo Qingshi seized the opportunity to snap off the sword stuck into his shoulder. With a blood-stained hand, he sent off a seventh Heavenly Question.

The spiritual energy that was once again flowing through his body swept up the Heavenly Question with excessive force. The established foundation nearest to him didn't have time to react!

The Heavenly Question instantly passed over vast distances and landed in the wilderness of the Land of Turmoil.

The next moment, Zhi Xiu appeared right in the back garden of the Marquis Manor.

CHAPTER 186 - Tomb of the Sage (12)

When a shed skin appeared, there was practically no need for him to do anything. Where his consciousness swept, the established foundation cultivators were instantly rendered immobile. Inside and outside the Yongning Marquis Manor, all the established foundations who had been incited and then plunged into confusion by the destruction of the undead Ways of the Heart were held where they were by Zhi Xiu.

In a flash, he landed in Dangui Lane.

The established foundation blue-clotheser who had just put down Xi Yue went weak at the knees and knelt with a thump.

Zhi Xiu didn't attend to him. He flew forward to sever the random bursts of spiritual energy coming from Xi Yue. Seeing that the half-puppet could no longer speak, he reached out a hand to summon a snow-white tree branch and smeared Xi Yue's blood on it. "Your core array has been destroyed. I don't understand earworm half-puppet techniques. Tell me what to do."

Just then, a piece of paper carried by a wild wind hurried toward them—the great battle of the masters had ended, but the Kaiming Department's "great battle" had just begun. The Kaiming Cultivators everywhere had to set about repairing the fields, factories, and houses that had been damaged by the Territory Map's troublemaking, and they had to restore the river embankment and provide disaster relief. Bai Ling had originally thought that with Xi Ping to oversee Jinping, he could leave it to him and go coordinate elsewhere. But before the night was out, when he had just reached Suling, he'd heard that there had been yet another incident.

When Bai Ling landed, he took only one glance at Xi Yue, then sucked in a breath and turned to go. "I'll go get in contact with the

Luwu and have them grab the worm master Bu Zhichou in Tao County.”

Seeing them, Xi Yue seemed to know that the Marquis Manor was safe and sound. He smiled. The blood on the tree bark quickly twisted into a word: “Ge...”

Zhi Xiu froze. All of a sudden, he thought that encountering Xi Ping may not have been good for Xi Yue. Xi Ping had spent the first half of his life in perfect contentment, whereas the half-puppet practically hadn't had a chance to be human. It could sometimes be very hard for the two of them to understand each other... unlike the half-demon and half-human who had escaped the Impassable Sea together and could rely on each other absolutely.

A drop of warmth was enough for Xi Yue to spend half a lifetime digesting, making him overexert himself to repay it.

For this child, the Yongning Marquis Manor was a bowl of potent elixir fed to a person too sickly to handle it... he might end up giving his life in exchange.

“I'll take you to see him,” Zhi Xiu said gently. His consciousness had already swept toward the Xuanyin Mountains. The thirty-five peaks that had been sealed by Zhang Jue sensed something; they were trembling.

He sent out three beams of sword energy that connected to the snow shuffler growing in the rear garden, securing the four corners of the Yongning Marquis Manor. He nodded to the dumbfounded Pang Jian, who had rushed over. “I'll leave this to you and Bai Ling.”

Having said this, he picked up Xi Yue and vanished into thin air.

Right now, at the bottom of the Xuanyin Mountains' Sea of Stars, the blaze of the Unbound Furnace had reached its pinnacle. At last,

it swallowed that final star stone, which was as big as a mountain.

Xi Ping controlled the Unbound Furnace alone, no longer speaking to Zhou Ying, all his focus given over to that tumor-like star stone.

When the Eternal Flame burned away a bit of that stone, he learned some information from it.

During Xuanyin's internal strife, the Dignitary of Code Li Fengshan had shown signs of decline. His consciousness had been sealed by the Xuanyin Mountains' three other elders, and he had made it through another decade or so before dying.

To make a mean comparison, these high elders were like the wheels of a steam carriage. Emperor Taiming and his son had punctured Zhao Yin with a big awl; the explosion had been heard all over. For Li Fengshan, however, it was more like the air had slowly been let out of him by numerous slender needles; he had deflated soundlessly.

After death, his body had "ascended," turning into spiritual energy; probably only sages of the elders' level could have felt it. Then his shed skin Way of the Heart had slowly sunk into the Sea of Stars.

The Li clan was the most well-established of Southern Wan's big families; Li Fengshan had been senior even to Zhao Yin. Before they had frittered it all away, their clan's prosperity had been in no way inferior to that of the Zhao clan. The shed skin's Way of the Heart had dropped like a whale falling into the depths. The Ways of the Heart of common origin had immediately gathered to cling to it. Thus had the first Way of the Heart that could disrupt the will of the spiritual mountains been produced amid the Xuanyin Mountain Range.

Xi Ping carefully delved into that star stone and saw that this "malignant tumor" had even disturbed the distribution of spiritual

energy throughout the country—on the inner sect peaks under the Li clan’s jurisdiction and in places where clan members congregated in the mortal world, the spiritual energy concentrations were nearly ten percent higher than elsewhere.

Their power in court had collapsed utterly, but they had used the exceptional advantages of their ancestral inheritance to build factories wildly and rake in money. While admittedly the civil unrest during the twenty-ninth year of Taiming had been caused by Zhou Ying’s meddling, traces of activity by Li family members also appeared.

And Li Fengshan dying and ascending had happened precisely in the year that Zhou Ying had escaped and Liang Chen had fallen to the demons.

No wonder. While the Sea of Stars couldn’t light the Impassable Abyss, when the half-skeleton of hidden bones had emerged and hidden in Jinping, the Sea of Stars still ought to have given warning. Reasonably speaking, it shouldn’t have waited until eight years had passed and Liang Chen was plotting to seize Jinping’s Dragon Vein to react.

At this point, the power that could hoodwink a spiritual image brand, give Liang Chen the spirit-protecting pill, and lure him down into the Impassable Sea seemed on the point of being revealed—

Just then, the surge of spiritual energy Zhou Ying had drawn came to an end.

The fire in the Unbound Furnace had burned the Xuanyin Mountains clean. Half of the interference in Zhang Jue’s mind instantly disappeared. In surprise and bewilderment, he realized what Xi Ping and the others had been burning.

But the ascended spirit peak masters were unlike the established foundations, who had first been driven crazy and out of control by the “heavenly edict,” then been at a loss when the “heavenly edict” had suddenly been removed. When one’s cultivation reached the ascended spirit level, the Way of the Heart became impregnably firm. Rather than saying their minds had been influenced by the “heavenly edict,” it would be more accurate to say that the “heavenly edict” had only revealed the truth. They had already “joined ways” with the stones underground.

Now the dead stones underground had been burned, but the “living stones” remained.

The three ascended spirit “stone blocks” who had lost their senses suddenly heard Zhou Ying speak through the reincarnation wood: “Gentlemen, who still has protective immortal tools?”

“What’s a protective immortal tool?” said Wen Fei.

“I was in a rush and didn’t bring enough. I packed some for Shiyong.”

“I can’t right now, they’re in the mustard seed, feel around and use whatever you like!” Xi Ping needed to concentrate. “What’s wrong?”

“The spiritual wind has disappeared, and the ascended spirit peak masters are coming toward you,” Zhou Ying said indifferently. “I can’t reach you. My cultivation is too low, and that wind just now blew me too far away.”

Xi Ping: “...”

What a great brother! How had Bai Ling managed not to murder his superior after all these years? That half-demon da-ge must be the one really cultivating the way of clarity.

Meanwhile, Zhi Xiu had already passed through the snow shufflers on Flying Jade Peak.

The Xuanyin Mountains' seal was like paper. As soon as he arrived, it immediately fragmented along with the flying snow filling the air.

Zhi Xiu first flew up to the sealed immortal palace at the summit of Flying Jade Peak. A spirit ice pearl flew out at his summons and turned into a big sphere larger than a person when it landed. Zhi Xiu placed Xi Yue inside it to keep his spirit from being extinguished. Then there was no time to say anything. He turned and flew toward the Sea of Stars.

The Sea of Stars was one chaotic battle. Apart from the Lin family members, who still had some recollection that they should protect Lin Chi, the other peak masters, without hesitation, were hurling all kinds of talismans toward the three ascended spirits who had lost their senses.

Wen Fei wasn't a tidy person. He normally stuffed elixirs into his mustard seed at random. Anyway, with his cultivation level and sense of smell, there was no way he could get the wrong one. Now that he couldn't see or smell and was pretty much grabbing blind, this unreliable medicine cultivator absolutely couldn't remember what was what.

With Xi Ping, it was even more of the same. He had no idea what was in the mustard seed Lin Chi had given him, and there was no time to discuss it now. He had no alternative; he pulled back his focus from where it was sunk into the Eternal Flame and rummaged through the mustard seed.

The two of them didn't talk it over; they struck simultaneously, one scattering medicine at random, the other tossing things at random.

Zhou Ying opened his mouth but didn't have time to say anything. So he swallowed his words, appraised the situation, and felt that no matter what, his mouth couldn't be faster than these two's hands. Therefore, he simply stopped giving pointers and quickly withdrew from the Sea of Stars.

A large portion of the things Lin Chi had given Xi Ping were experiments with spirit-conducting gold, all deadly weapons—ascended spirit grade. Immortal tools made of spirit-conducting gold automatically absorbed spiritual energy. They only had to be switched on; there was no need for a cultivator to activate them with spiritual energy. Xi Ping could neither see nor feel. How could he know what kind of metal any of these things were made of? So he recklessly activated all of them with spiritual energy. “Go fuck yourselves, you stupid leashed dogs!”

An ascended spirit's force striking ascended spirit grade spirit-conducting gold weapons was simply overkill. Before they could confront the enemy, he himself had blown up nearly half the immortal tools. Adding in the other peak masters either actively attacking or passively defending... the spiritual energy boiling in the valley of the Sea of Stars was comparable to the essences of a thousand ascended spirit masters being ignited all at once!

Even Zhang Jue's blindfold fell. “Stop!”

Amid the fierce quaking of the valley of the Sea of Stars, there was a sudden *whizz*. Among the pile of immortal tools Xi Ping had tossed out, there turned out to have been a bundle of fireworks reinforced with spirit-conducting gold. Lin Chi had been inspired to make this when he remembered the great fireworks on Flying Jade Peak that had once brought down the north slope with two spiritual stones.

He had only been making it for fun and had accidentally put it in the mustard seed... Cultivators' lifespans were too long; the shortest

span of time they ever contemplated was a decade. Lin Chi had casually made enough for ten years.

There was a bang. Perhaps even the Bell of Tribulation went deaf. All of Great Wan could see the enormous fireworks rising into the sky, carrying Wen Fei's medicinal powders that may have been for anything at all.

It was like the folk tale about the imperial court of the thirty-three heavens descending to the mortal world. The newly risen sun in the east faded amid the bright colors as if its fires had been put out. After the colors passed, there came a big cluster of silver flowers, as if all the eternal spring brocade that had been in the world many years ago had burst into bloom at once.

Wen Fei's medicinal powders floated throughout the mountains. The flowers and grasses that had been revolving systematically through the seasons forgot the date and grew wildly. Vegetation crept everywhere, like monsters. A gigantic colorful mushroom broke through the roof of the lofty main hall of the Principal Peak. The white mourning streamers tangled with its mycelia.

This brightly-colored mushroom grew all the way up to the mouth of the divine image of the Southern Sage before half of it was charred by a bolt of lightning that could take this no longer; it let off an unusual fragrance of cooking. Each of the disciples who accidentally breathed it into their lungs took on a dazed expression, plunged into some unknown illusion.

The auspicious animals didn't know to hold their breaths and breathed in a different kind of medicinal powder. Whether blue luan or white deer, immortal crane or spirit fox, all of them opened their mouths and barked like dogs.

In over a thousand years, there had never been such an uproar on the Xuanyin Mountains' solemn and silent Principal Peak.

Amid these huge explosions like illusions, there were also now and then mixed in some ascended spirits who had been thrown up into the sky by the spiritual wind. The flustered ascended spirit peak masters tried using talismans and immortal tools to stabilize themselves, but all the powers they used required spiritual energy and stimulated the spirit-conducting gold in the fireworks a degree further. The fireworks climbed step by step up the sky, so dazzling they startled the whole of the southern continent, like celebrations for a hundred new years all squeezed together!

In the midst of this auspicious and jubilant atmosphere, the Sea of Stars was lifted in its entirety into the sky.

Innumerable stars representing “fate” were set loose at once, like an immense prank.

Luo Qingshi lay face up on the ground. The fireworks lit up his bloody, pitiful form. A smile of pleasure appeared on his cynical doll’s face.

Cracks came from the cliffs on both sides of the Sea of Stars. The ancient spiritual mountains couldn’t sustain this kind of stimulation. The cliffs were about to collapse. At the moment of peril, ice-cold sword energy appeared out of nowhere, freezing the mist permeating the valley. Then upright birch trees quickly put down roots and sprouted from the cracked stone of the mountains, forcibly mending the cracks. In the blink of an eye, they had woven a big net, holding up the tottering cliffs.

The layer of protective spiritual energy around Zhi Xiu was too strong. The glittering medicinal powder couldn’t get near him. When he saw these dregs of nameless poisons, the corners of his eyes twitched. He clenched his teeth and shouted toward the valley: “Xi Shiyong!”

A mist flew his way. Zhou Ying practically “rolled” out of the mist. He stumbled a long way in midair before finding his footing, but because he wasn’t at all embarrassed, this didn’t seem awkward.

Once he had his sword firmly under his feet, he saluted Zhi Xiu. “General Zhi, please descend to speak. He’s gone deaf.”

Zhi Xiu: “...”

The sword cultivator’s consciousness instantly enveloped the mess of the Sea of Stars. He pushed all the ascended spirits who had been sent flying back to the ground. The wildly leaping spirit-conducting gold was swept aside by a single blow. Next, he borrowed a blizzard from Flying Jade Peak and washed away Wen Fei’s bizarre medicinal powders.

The ice and snow met heat and melted. All the vapor rose and formed clouds. A moment later, a strong rain fell, scouring the mess of the Sea of Stars.

The inscriptions and arrays inside and outside the Sea of Stars were so tattered there was nothing left of them. The “stars” were washed into gullies by the rain. The star stones that had accumulated over thousands of years had been committed to the fires of the Eternal Flame. Only that faded little prayer mat in the depths of the valley had unexpectedly survived amid this storm.

Zhang Jue at last opened his eyes. He didn’t come to his senses until Zhi Xiu landed beside him.

The corners of Zhang Jue’s mouth twitched. Before Zhi Xiu could speak, he floated down into the valley, picked up the little prayer mat, patted the dust off it, then turned and headed off without a word to the Hall of Reflection on Errors beneath the Principal Peak —this was the place where Li Fengshan had once been locked up.

The Sea of Stars was empty, the paths of the stars in the sky had gone astray; the general trend of events was like a flood that had burst the banks.

But for some reason, the Dignitary of Fate's step was somewhat lighter than before.

Only embers remained in the Unbound Furnace. The ascended spirit peak masters lay higgledy-piggledy throughout the valley, making a certain established foundation escaping entirely unscathed seem even stranger. Zhi Xiu raised his hand to remove the authority of the mutinous peak masters and placed immortal-binding talismans on them, imprisoning them in Yuntian Palace.

Finally, he turned up Xi Ping at the bottom of the valley.

No matter what, Zhi Xiu couldn't work out what the hell Wen Fei had fed him. All he could do was send a beam of sword energy directly into his essence, like he had rinsed the Sea of Stars, forcing the remaining return to unity powder clean out of his body.

The senses that had been suppressed by the return to unity powder repaid him twice over. Xi Ping's arms and legs began to cramp. He curled into a ball.

Zhi Xiu grabbed his wrist to check his pulse and was just searching all over himself for pain relieving and healing pills that would work on an ascended spirit when he heard that Xi Ping was actually laughing intermittently. His laughter seemed a little off. Zhi Xiu frowned, then saw the veins in Xi Ping's neck and forehead stand out.

Xi Ping forced his convulsing meridians apart and rolled over onto his back to let the downpour fall onto his face.

"Shifu..." he said faintly, "I've risen from the dead."

Zhi Xiu was silent for a moment, then let go of his wrist. “Come with me.”

A moment later, Xi Ping, as though exhausted, was leaning against the spirit ice pearl holding Xi Yue. His body heat couldn't warm the pearl; instead, the pearl froze the rainwater soaking him.

Tao County's Luwu had received the order and had already carried the worm master Bu Zhichou back in a sack, pressing the worm master's blood onto reincarnation wood by force. Xi Ping had no time to thank them. He caught Bu Zhichou's consciousness.

“This... this is Xuan-xuanyin?!”

Xi Ping could sense this dishonest worm master's consciousnesses revolving wildly, eagerly trying to have a look around, so he aggressively shoved him back. “No nonsense. Take a look at him and I'll let you live.”

“Hey, hey.” Bu Zhichou clicked his tongue feelingly. “I've been saying the arrangements in Tao County are far-reaching, and wouldn't you know it, Tai Sui isn't some unknown evil... *hss!* Spare me, senior... Th-there-there-there's nothing to look at here, he stabbed through his own core array, who's going to be all right after gouging out his own heart? If he didn't have a half-immortal's cultivation, he'd already... Ow, senior, I wasn't finished, there's a way, there's a way. Just keep his spirit from dispersing and have him establish a foundation. It'll just take some spiritual stones... but you're orthodox immortals of the spiritual mountains, you must have plenty of spiritual stones...”

As Bu Zhichou spoke, he snuck a look through the reincarnation wood to examine the true countenance of the Tai Sui in front of him, but he saw that when he was finished speaking, this mysterious

ascended spirit with his dazzling features suddenly looked distraught.

“No way,” Bu Zhichou thought. “He can’t bear to spend the trifling sum of spiritual stones for establishing a foundation? Seems this half-puppet is useless.”

The next moment, the worm master’s vision dimmed. He knew nothing more.

Xi Ping pressed a hand against the spirit ice pearl and closed his eyes. The cold of the spirit ice pearl turned his fingertips bright red.

Xi Yue laboriously raised his hand, as though trying to reach him, but also as if trying to get him to take his hand off the ice.

“Shifu.” Xi Ping couldn’t bear to look at him. He abruptly turned away. “Your disciple has a presumptuous request. Please take Xi Yue as your disciple, whether direct or of record... pass on your way so he can establish a foundation.”

Xi Yue’s hand fell.

CHAPTER 187 - Tomb of the Sage (13)

Zhi Xiu didn't speak aloud, only said privately to Xi Ping through the shard of Zhaoting in his spirit, "A half-puppet establishing a foundation is different from a teacher conveying a way to a disciple. The earworm half-puppet technique is used to rear tools and slaves. While those worm masters want half-puppets to be useful, they are also afraid that they will break free of their control if their cultivation is too high, so a half-puppet is unable to cultivate independently. When remaking his arrays while establishing a foundation, there must be someone there to temporarily stabilize his spirit. I know that you have no Way of the Heart, but with your cultivation level, a sliver of consciousness will be more than enough for him to use."

After a pause, Zhi Xiu continued: "My way is ordinary and unremarkable. It is merely unfashionable because the southern continent values literary achievements over martial ones. There are plenty of sword cultivators in the north. It isn't that I'm jealous of it. It's only that I think you ought to ask Xi Yue what he wants."

"It would indeed cost me no effort," Xi Ping said softly. "But what would happen to him after he established a foundation?"

A human establishing a foundation rebuilt their meridians. A half-puppet would virtually have to rebuild their whole body. During this period, the half-puppet's spirit would rely entirely on their master, involuntarily accept the master's "way" and wishes without question to become a handier tool—what would Xi Yue get from him?

Xi Ping had come face-to-face with the hidden bones in the Unbound Furnace. After he had left it, as if the bones had "dropped the act," they were no longer deliberately hiding themselves. Right now, as he spoke to Zhi Xiu, he could clearly sense the existence of the hidden bones.

They were on his consciousness, taking strength from him, keeping him from dying, constantly nibbling away at his scant remaining warmth.

And all of this, Xi Ping was unable to tell anyone. Even if he found a way to say it, others would never truly understand—apart from those of the “way of death,” which had no Way of the Heart, the day others truly understood would be the day their Ways of the Heart shattered.

The only person left that he could communicate with was Zhou Ying. Fortunately, san-ge could no longer suffer.

He had hoped that Xi Yue could live on like Zhao Qindan, without establishing a foundation. Before learning the secret of Ways of the Heart, he had already made his plans. When the arrays to protect against spiritual beasts had been fully constructed in the South Sea Hidden Realm and the environment became a little safer, he would send Xi Yue there with their parents, keeping the evil cultivators from always aiming at his weak spot in Jinping.

But fortune made fools of people. Just as he had been looking at himself in the Unbound Furnace, Xi Yue had been pushed onto this wrong road... so he would at least find him the most dependable guide. No matter how dark the road ahead, shifu would lead him.

One waking ghost in the world was enough. Why should he drag someone else down? Only the bald Heartless Lotus did that kind of thing.

“My way does not stem from my own heart,” Xi Ping said aloud, letting Xi Yue behind him hear. “I’ve heard that the person who founded it was extremely reclusive and spent all his life wandering, alone, with no burial when he finally died... Elder Lin was right. This way is inauspicious. Even I don’t acknowledge it—how could I pass it on to another?”

Zhi Xiu froze. He had actually forgotten about this detail—when others obtained a Way of the Heart, it would fix their disposition. No matter how bad a fit it had been before, as long as they survived establishing a foundation, they would have accepted and acknowledged it. Only the ungovernable way, which seemed to want to be “ungovernable” up to the hilt, was different, deliberately choosing a person who refused it, imparting nothing but the hidden bones, creating a freak who had reached the ascended spirit stage and was still unwilling to accept the way he cultivated.

“Yue-bao’er, this wouldn’t be giving you a cold or a cough, it would be a fatal...”

Out of nowhere, Zhi Xiu’s heart jumped. He couldn’t resist interrupting him. “Xi Shiyong, how old are you? Mind your mouth!”

Xi Ping lowered his eyes. For once, he didn’t put his usual armor of frivolity on display.

Calmly menacing, he spoke practically, each word distinct: “If my ‘Way of the Heart’ were in front of me, I would shred it to bits without giving it a chance to cry for help.”

As he spoke, he looked far into the sky. Zhou Ying’s figure was faintly visible in the mist—Zhi Xiu had withdrawn the authority of a whole bunch of peak masters, so nearly all of the Xuanyin Mountains’ peaks were wide open. Floating in the air, Zhou Ying could see the whole Xuanyin Mountain Range at a glance, watch the truth emerge as the dust settled. When he met Xi Ping’s eyes, he nodded, then indifferently looked away.

Xi Ping smiled at him, then turned and half-knelt. Through the ice pearl, he patted Xi Yue on the head. “I can give you anything else, but not that. Achieve enlightenment through the sword heart, and in the future you’ll have sharper teeth to bite me with.

“Where do I start altering the core array for a half-puppet to establish a foundation? Give me a plan.” Xi Ping poked Bu Zhichou awake in the reincarnation wood. He felt an ice-cold idea as the hidden bones gently brushed his consciousness: *Extract the information through a soul-searching.*

This was a very mystical sensation. When a human brain was active, thousands upon thousands of odds and ends flashed through it every moment. Apart from a very small portion that would pass through conscious evaluation to be accepted or rejected, the vast majority of the noise only flew by, overlooked before you had a chance to notice it. But now, Xi Ping could see clearly which small ripples in the flood of his thoughts had emerged from the hidden bones.

Xi Ping briefly scrutinized that thought, decided to keep it in reserve, then said to Bu Zhichou, “Will you do it of your own accord, or should I soul-search you?”

Bu Zhichou: “...”

This immortal had a very striking appearance. How come he sounded so much like an evil cultivator?

The worm master cautiously asked, “Immortal, do you know how to alter a half-puppet’s arrays...? This isn’t something I can just talk you through. If you are unfamiliar with the procedures for...”

“Me, unfamiliar with the procedures for creating puppets?” Xi Ping interrupted him. “Do you know how I rooted out your den in Yu Family Bend at the start, when the two of us had never met before?”

Bu Zhichou was petrified. “I have not yet requested guidance on this subject.”

“Worm masters uphold the principle of ‘only do good, do not look out for future prospects.’ They only take ‘living ghosts’ and do not harm intact humans. So all you have to do is get others to help you turn ‘intact humans’ into ‘living ghosts’ and pretend you don’t know, and you think that means you haven’t violated the rules of your profession. There are evil cultivators who specialize in selling living ghosts. They deliberately choose places with many newborns to pilfer heaven’s order, not for the sake of their own cultivation, but to create deformed children to sell to you people..”

Bu Zhichou immediately felt the gaze of the shed skin god next to them sweep toward him, cold as ice. Through the reincarnation wood, he still felt chilled to the marrow, as if he had been stabbed. He hurried to give a flat denial: “Th-th-that never happened!”

Xi Ping said, “Once, in exchange for a piece of information from you, a person gave you a group of living ghosts in excellent condition. You were beside yourself with delight and went into seclusion for one month, three days, and four shichen, made twelve half-puppets of exceptional quality in a row, saved up the whole set, and named them after the twelve animals of the zodiac. This was in Yu Family Bend. Do you want me to give you the particulars of all twelve of those people? The first was a little girl around three years old, extremely short, but very loud when she cried. You didn’t like the noise, so you first cut out her tongue and chose ‘Mute Rat’ for her puppet name. When you made her into a puppet, the proportion of earworm wood to Moon Plated Gold you used was one to six. You welded in eight hundred purple lightning rat spiritual beast tendons so the half-puppet would be flexible..”

Bu Zhichou had had no idea that when he had gone into seclusion on his own turf to create half-puppets, there had been a pair of eyes beside him, always watching. In spite of himself, he felt bone-deep dread. He wondered to himself what kind of hobby would cause a mighty ascended spirit immortal to hide in the dark spying on a

minor worm master at work—an orthodox immortal who thought spying on this kind of thing was worthwhile had to be crazy.

“Immortal, Exalted, your powers are truly vast, your eyes and ears embrace the universe. It is I who have been blind.”

“Mr. Bu Zhichou, I spent several years watching you create half-puppets. Even an idiot would have picked up the procedures for making puppets, such as they are.”

And he hadn't just watched. When his scattered consciousness had been trapped in Wild Fox Country, it had often been dragged away by the little “living ghosts” in next door Yu Family Bend, and he had been on the receiving end of the procedures for making puppets along with them countless times; he remembered it even more clearly than the swordsmanship taught by his shifu, who couldn't stand to beat him. Even an ordinary worm master might not have been as well-versed in the techniques as him.

While Xi Ping was unearthing what had taken place in Wild Fox Country, the hidden bones were “icing” his hot anger: *There are too many vile people who deserve death in this world. The weak attracting disaster when they are not free to act is heaven's law. It is meaningless to wallow in the loves and hates of these nobodies. Why take them out to chew over? When you can look with disdain upon all under heaven, all under heaven naturally becomes well-ordered and equitable.*

Xi Ping couldn't help wanting to laugh. He discovered that the reason he had been able to focus entirely on seizing all kinds of opportunities for study over the years was perhaps not because his will was firm, but through the aid of this stabilizing force in his consciousness. He himself was a rich kid who loved leisure and hated work and had such a short temper that he would even hold a grudge over being scratched by a cat.

“I curse when I’m in pain and complain when I’m angry,” he thought, withstanding the calm of the hidden bones. “I’ll even go publicize it in the toilet bulletins so the whole world knows about it.”

Why should it be heaven’s law that the weak attract disaster?

Because everyone is busy standing up under the weight of the Great Way to heaven and has no time to attend to other things?

Zhi Xiu immediately noticed something and looked at Xi Ping—this was the first time Xi Ping had ever uncovered a sliver of the years he had been missing, which seemed to be under a dense fog, once again revealing willful and capricious flesh and blood.

Xi Ping reached out a hand to cover Xi Yue’s eyes. “I can’t give you a Way of the Heart, but I can rebuild your array. I’m not abandoning you, don’t worry. I know.”

Xi Yue thought, What do you know...?

But a half-immortal half-puppet had no latitude to struggle when faced with an ascended spirit. Xi Ping took him out of the ice pearl and easily sealed all his meridians. “Shiful!”

Zhi Xiu sighed silently. His sword aura landed on the spirit between Xi Yue’s brows like gentle snow.

“No, I don’t want..”

Xi Yue began to struggle. Out of nowhere, he found the strength to clutch at Xi Ping’s sleeve. If Xi Ping had been like other people, cultivating an orthodox “Great Way” that could be traced, and had abandoned him because he thought his natural endowments were poor, he could have let it go. The peak master and Commander Pang were both reliable people. It was all the same if he walked another path; all roads would ultimately reach the same end.

But perhaps because at the very start of this path through the cultivation world, the two of them had been joined by a dragon-taming chain, while Xi Yue had never understood what way Xi Ping cultivated, he had always had a powerful intuition—Xi Ping would part ways with everyone. If he missed his chance today, no one would ever have another chance to stay with him to the very end.

Today, he had to catch up even if he died.

The half-puppet body with its destroyed core array actually gathered a weak spiritual wind. Xi Yue frenziedly resisted the sword aura trying to sweep into his consciousness. All his features were tearing—

Zhi Xiu couldn't resist saying, "Shiyong, you can't force..."

Xi Ping formed a hand seal that no orthodox immortal would ever have seen and placed a talisman on Xi Yue's brow.

Bu Zhichou couldn't resist sucking in a breath. "Eliminate the past!"

This was an evil art particular to worm masters, used specifically to handle half-puppets who changed hands and masters. Without impacting a half-puppet's memories, it could erase all the attachments and sentiments contained in those memories that were connected to the original owner.

How could he know even this?!

Xi Yue felt every single trifle that had had happened since he had met Xi Ping well up in his heart: the unexpected encounter in the Blissful Village, the confused fear; the mutual dependance in the Latent Cultivation Temple and the first time he had had a name; the brief happy days on Flying Jade Peak, traveling together to Demon

Country... the reunion after their long separation, his wild joy when he had heard that person's voice again.

All those things were still there, but the emotions that accompanied the memories were being erased.

Xi Yue stared into Xi Ping's eyes. The hand clutching his sleeve began to tremble. It became weaker and weaker, looser and looser...

Finally, the half-puppet's consciousness was swept up by the sword heart of a shed skin.

Zhi Xiu hadn't handed everything over like Duanrui. This sword cultivator's sword heart was one he had refined for himself bit by bit out of nothing, so he could restrain himself and give Xi Yue a few insights from his early years, let him slowly digest them. All the same, this was still a Way of the Heart that came from a shed skin. Xi Yue was immediately submerged in that vast sword aura, sinking in and falling unconscious to the outside world.

Dimly, he could still feel that the hands wielding the knife were skillful and steady, even knowing what places to avoid, not letting him suffer. The rudiments of a new core array quickly took shape.

Xi Ping had cut off the last little tail trailing after him.

Meanwhile, the four nations of the southern continent at last came back to their senses after the Xuanyin Mountains' earthshaking fireworks display—

CHAPTER 188 - Tomb of the Sage (Final)

Southern Wan's Kaiming Department had been busy to the point of swooning, but apart from the capital city of Jinping, the vast majority of areas had yet to be restored. Medical halls and clinics were all crammed with people who had been injured in the earthquakes. Fortunately the weather on the southern continent had yet to turn cold; it was still feasible to throw together a little shack outside and make do for a night.

The Kaiming Departments rushing around everywhere had no established foundation cultivators. All their information lagged a step behind. They finished watching the fireworks display along with their countrymen, who had been the first to come help. They looked at each other helplessly.

In the city outskirts in Suling, a worker clearing the road with a big hoist truck stuck his head out and asked, "Exalted, it isn't the New Year, what are the immortal mountains celebrating with those fireworks?"

"Um... well..." The Kaiming Cultivator he had asked was himself hardly erudite. After a long moment, he finally squeezed out, "An escape from calamity will be followed by prosperity?"

Bai Ling had been in Suling during the small hours of the morning, and the Kaiming Cultivator who had spoken had followed him around to convey his orders. This casual bit of nonsense was mistakenly taken for something that Bai Ling, who had left suddenly, had said, and so it passed quickly from mouth to mouth.

"An escape from calamity will be followed by prosperity" spread throughout the country via the flying goose... until the Kaiming Department received official correspondence from the Heaven's Design Pavilion head office in the capital, requesting their

assistance in arresting the Heaven's Design Pavilion established foundation masters who had "absconded without leave."

Across the river, Western Chu had also been disturbed by the fireworks. The Silver Moon flickered, its silver light dragged out into a comet's tail by the two mountain peaks. The divine image of the Black Emperor on the Principal Peak seemed to suddenly split apart — this was the result of the silent struggle between the two full moon Ways of the Heart beneath the mountains.

The Xuanyin Mountains were ruled by four big families, and each family had a number of chains of Ways of the Heart of common origin within it, none of them willing to piss in the same pot. Even when they turned into stone, each group still stuck together, ignoring the rest.

Sanyue was different. Sanyue's "mainstream" was the way that their founder, the Black Emperor, had passed down. Up to and including former sect leader Xiang Rong, eighty percent of the Xiang family belonged to that group, while those from other families each had their own way, forming no trends.

It was just that in Xiang Rong's era, "passing down a way" had had a rather different meaning from what it had come to mean for later generations. It was Zhao Yin of the Xuanyin Mountains who had started the practice of picking up a predecessor's Way of the Heart whole without thinking about it. Before that, a permissive teacher like the Southern Sage would allow his disciples to fumble around for themselves, only giving occasional hints, while a strict tyrant like the Black Emperor would inculcate his disciples with his own way, leading his direct disciples to have Ways of the Heart that formed a continuous line from his; but, because each individual's disposition and comprehension was different, however continuous the line, there would still be slight deviations. That was why, when Xiang Rong had wanted to become a full moon sage, he had needed to use the Unbound Furnace to "correct" his Way of the Heart.

But while the Unbound Furnace without its furnace flame could alter the form, it couldn't get rid of a person's selfish desires: when Xiang Rong had been a full moon sage, while he had been as dignified as the Black Emperor's reincarnation, there had still been a knot in his heart that could never be smoothed out because of the disobedient Xuanwu.

Xuanwu was his brother, a "duplicate" inextricably linked to him, a stain and a disgrace that he couldn't erase.

Xiang Rong had been hard at work running the Sanyue Mountains for over a thousand years. It didn't matter to him whose hands it fell into, even if it was the utterly useless Xiang Ning—the only person it couldn't be was Xuanwu.

Two full moon Ways of the Heart, which had been precisely identical to begin with, now found themselves at odds over a man who couldn't show his face. Now, as if they had been stimulated by the activity in the Xuanyin Mountains, all the Xiang family members with Ways of the Heart of common origin were being pushed and pulled by two ideas: one side was saying that Xuanwu was an evil cultivator who could not be tolerated by heaven's law; the other side was saying that the Sanyue Mountains were rudderless, and the foundation of the spiritual mountains was of greater importance.

An ascended spirit might just about manage to steady their mind, but an established foundation—particularly those cultivators who had established foundations by relying on elixirs and their wives—couldn't very well stand up to questioning to begin with. Each and every one was torn this way and that in bizarre ways; the middle and lower levels of the West Peak turned into a disaster area.

At the manor of the "third-rate imperial grandson" where Xu Rucheng and his colleagues were concealed, several mutually contradictory orders arrived early in the morning: now they wanted

them to seal the doors and windows and let no one in or out, now they said they wanted them to temporarily withdraw from the Sanyue Mountains and get in touch with family in the mortal world as soon as possible to prepare for war. They didn't know whether they were supposed to move or not.

The Silver Moon was like a pendulum that needed its spring tightened, wavering between the East and Central Peaks.

Xu Rucheng was in the courtyard, watching with his head raised. He heard a young maid come running in a panic to report that the imperial grandson had fainted yet again and to ask her ladyship what to do.

“Her ladyship,” without so much as batting an eyelash, perfunctorily said, “Oh, then give him some medicine.”

Because of the Luwu's secret machinations, after eight years, the third-rate imperial grandson was still a mortal. He had gone from a youthful chronic invalid sprout to a middle-aged chronic invalid... barrel, and he had picked up a “wife-fearing disease”—it wasn't that he was afraid of being under his wife's thumb; it was that as soon as he saw his wife, he would act like he had seen a ghost; his calf muscles would start twitching from three zhang away. Saying a few words could make him pass out on the spot. At first it was only his own wife he had feared; later the scope had increased—his scalp would go numb whenever he saw a woman.

But there was nothing to be done. Over the years, Yu Family Bend had declined, Prince Qing Manor had lost power, and the third-rate imperial grandson had been increasingly excluded in the inner sect, relying entirely on the support of his wife. Having developed such a shameful problem, he didn't dare to make it public. In recent years, his health had been constantly deteriorating; soon he would kick the bucket. Xu Rucheng and his colleagues had initially been discussing

whether they would be able to find another equally suitable identity for infiltrating the Sanyue Mountains once they became “widows.”

Though under the circumstances, it looked like their anxiety had been superfluous; the Sanyue Mountains might not outlive the third-rate imperial grandson.

While Sanyue’s spiritual energy had been draining away year by year, for the impoverished Kaiming Cultivators, it was still notably plentiful. Apart from Xu Rucheng, who no longer had a family to worry about, the other Luwu would periodically be relieved of duty so they could rest and visit family. When they came back, all of them said that being in the Sanyue Mountains for one year, you advanced faster than through ten years of diligent cultivation in the human world. Even a punching bag like the third-rate grandson could live in luxury, immune to winter cold and summer heat. This assignment, which had once been absurd and dangerous, had turned into a “cushy job” that all their colleagues envied.

Xu Rucheng suddenly thought, So this is what it means to be “noble.”

But the nobles who usually passed judgment on the world were all as jumpy as startled cats and dogs; how were they superior to commoners?

All of a sudden, all the birds in Sanyue’s valleys rose in alarm. The inscriptions at the boundaries of the great mountain array lit up like the tide coming in. Everyone’s spiritual senses pushed them to turn their heads to look east—at this critical moment, Xuanwu had returned to the Sanyue Mountains.

The great mountain array also seemed to be subject to a tug of war between two forces. As if it had a faulty connection, it was flickering on and off. The Silver Moon swept truculently toward Xuanwu. The fatal moonlight broke off midway, only snapping Xuanwu’s hairband.

His head of white hair and his white clothes fluttered in the fierce wind. There seemed to be blood staining his hems and his paper mask.

Xuanwu spoke. His voice reverberated throughout the Sanyue Mountains. “All you rebels! You have sealed Dongheng City and locked the emperor’s quarters under the guise of protecting him. This is treason. You wish to depose the emperor and enthrone another. This is a conspiracy against the state!”

Xu Rucheng’s ears rang from his speech. He quickly shot his colleagues a look. The information was immediately transmitted to all the Luwu in Tao County. At the same time, the North Xia Waterborne Troops who nominally had jurisdiction over Tao County also received orders, saying that their former superior the Marquis of Qulong was conspiring against the state and ordering them to temporarily place themselves under the charge of the Qilin Guard outside of Tao County, remain where they were, and obey orders.

Zhao Qindan was doing two things at once. With a cartridge clip between her teeth, she was examining a hand cannon while glancing over complicated accounts, calculating how much goods and materials they would need once Tao County came under siege.

Just then, there was a noise from the gate of her small, secluded house. The newcomer very elegantly knocked three times, neither soft nor loud.

Zhao Qindan froze—all the Luwu contacted her through the reincarnation wood and very rarely came to knock at her door. The female students from the neighborhood were very familiar with her, sometimes even coming in without asking; when they knocked, it didn’t sound like this.

She had been born with a first-class spiritual sense and was unusually sensitive. She grasped the hand cannon. When she

opened the gate, she saw the red-eyed Yu Chang standing there.

Though she knew perfectly well that in Tao County, where the use of spiritual energy was prohibited, there was no difference between an ascended spirit and a mortal, her spine still tensed inadvertently.

In Southern Shu—

Lin Chi's fireworks had nearly been pushed up to the moon and stars by the ascended spirit peak masters. Across the South Sea, there were even some places in Southern Shu where they were visible.

For some reason, as if these fireworks were sentient, they could provoke different emotions in different people: they had made the people of Wan stupidly happy and made Western Chu restless, and they ignited the long-suppressed grief and indignation of the ancient clan of Southern Shu.

The Miah owner of a butcher's shop had been huddled deferentially in a corner, allowing the Xiuyi government officer to close down the little shop his whole family's survival relied on. When the fireworks suddenly snatched away the dawn light, the hired thugs and the beasts of burden alike were stunned. One of the Xiuyi officers had gotten a stiff neck from sleeping the night before; he watched with his neck twisted for a long moment. When he came back to his senses, he nearly pulled a muscle in his shoulder. Lowering his head, he saw the shop owner's little Miah cur imitating his crooked-necked stance.

This Miah child was just at the age to start growing permanent teeth. He didn't understand anything. When he was discovered, he stuck out his tongue, wanting to cutely show his gap-toothed smile like he usually did with adults. He was immediately picked up by the Xiuyi officer, who out of nowhere was enraged, and flung heavily against the wall.

The grey-eyed boy didn't even have time to scream. His head twisted, and he stopped moving. His aproned father still held a boning knife.

The butcher shop's owner stood there blankly for a long time. Then he gave a sudden roar and threw himself at that Xiuyi officer.

Once the first drop of blood had fallen in the conflict between the two clans, it couldn't be taken back.

The Miah on Southern Shu's peninsula lacked manpower and resources. Ultimately, their sparks of resistance couldn't connect to form a fire and set the fields ablaze. Instead, they only enraged the Xiuyi.

Starting from a small town eighty li from the imperial capital of Zhaoye, an indiscriminate hunt aimed at the Miah began.

Like the fireworks exploding in the distance, the unprecedented massacre quickly engulfed the whole of the Southern Shu peninsula, then spread to the Three Islands.

The Miah cultivators, unable to find Wangge Luobao, were scattered throughout the South Sea like headless flies. They contacted their families by a variety of means. Learning of the grievous news, they immediately rushed back from all points.

The Miah cultivators killed the first group of officers sent to the Three Islands by the court. The bloody conflict among the mortals was formally escalated to the immortal sect. The Xiuyi peace faction and the Miah officials, which had been striving all along to maintain the bond between the two clans, were powerless to turn back the tide of events.

Heartrending beast-controlling whistles reverberated throughout the South Sea. The two clans' Dragon Subduing Knights thoroughly fell out. The smell of blood billowed in the spiritual energy in the sky over the strait. And the originator of all of this—Wangge Luobao—was in the mouth of the next life spiritual fish, whistling a tune and quietly watching.

He was of mixed Xiuyi and Miah blood and seemed to have picked up the best blessings of both clans, both tall and beautiful. Now, watching half of his people slaughtering the other half, Wangge Luobao, unmoved, leaned his head against his hand, still waiting for the opportune moment to appear—when the fight between the cultivators on both sides became incandescent, Lingyun's inner sect sent even stronger individuals, and the Miah were at their most despairing, that would be the moment for the “savior” to appear.

Otherwise, a person of mixed blood couldn't make the old farts on the Miah's Three Islands hold their tongues.

In the hidden realm deep at the bottom of the South Sea, the spiritual beasts seemed to have sensed something. They faced north and let out sad cries.

In the hidden realm, the arrays to protect against incursion by spiritual beasts and lookout posts were basically complete. Today had been too unusual. Wei Chengxiang couldn't rest, so she was personally standing guard at a sentry post, uneasily turning over the Silver Tray Lottery's dice with her fingertips. Zhao Qindan, toilet bulletins from all over, the Land of Turmoil... All kinds of information flew at her like snowflakes.

Suddenly, a piece of news from the Land of Turmoil made Wei Chengxiang's gaze pause. She quickly snatched up her reincarnation wood to contact Tai Sui. There was no answer from Xi Ping at the moment, so she turned to Zhao Qindan.

“Dandan, I have a piece of news here, coming from the Land of Turmoil, source unknown...”

Zhao Qindan had no attention to spare to answer. She heard Yu Chang say, “Xuanwu has just returned. As soon as he landed, he went into battle with the ascended spirits of the Central Peak who belong to other families. The Xiang clan has currently split into two parties, one standing with Xuanwu, the other advocating the position that Xuanwu is an evil cultivator, and that expelling evil should be put before internal affairs. Right now, the three groups are locked in battle. The beacons have been lit. All the heads of household are summoning their offerings. The offerings are burdened with spiritual image brands, they can’t delay long. Will Tai Sui agree or not? I would like a definite answer.”

Zhao Qindan thought, How would I know? Therefore, as she fobbed him off and passed on responsibility, she furtively responded to Wei Chengxiang through the reincarnation wood: “The Land of Turmoil? What is it?”

Wei Chengxiang and Yu Chang’s voices came simultaneously to her ears—

Wei Chengxiang said, “They’re saying the Xuanyin Mountains are dying. General Zhi has hushed it up and is planning to cut the other spiritual mountains down with them.”

Yu Chang, smiling brightly, said, “Also, we just received word: the Xuanyin Mountains have been taken over by traitors. Within a century at most, their spiritual energy will disperse throughout the veins of the earth. When that time comes, the Xuanyin Mountains will no longer exist.”

His scarlet eyes were fixed on Zhao Qindan’s shocked gaze. “I wonder whether Tai Sui knows of this.”

Xi Ping was turning a deaf ear to the chatter of the Luwu everywhere. Completely focused, he finished Xi Yue's new core. Then the array knife shattered, and the spiritual energy of Flying Jade Peak, carrying frost and snow, all surged toward Xi Yue.

In this vast spiritual wind, an ascended spirit could still remain motionless as a mountain. Xi Ping reached out to "clutch" the wind. A talisman flashed in his palm, immediately pinching the ferocious spiritual wind down to a trickle. The gale was warmed to nearly human body temperature as it passed through his palm and flowed sluggishly into Xi Yue's injured meridians. When cold and heat met, mist rose around the two of them.

A full incense stick of time later, the foundation was established; sword energy formed in Xi Yue and tore through the mist with a whistle, surging toward the horizon.

Xi Ping reached out a hand to block it. When he moved, the water droplets hanging from his long brows and eyelashes fell. He clicked his tongue and took out a mustard seed that became a small house when it touched the ground, then put Xi Yue into it. "Watch where you're shooting that. That's all I'm capable of. The core array is complete. For the rest, he can go into seclusion to improve it when he wakes up."

Zhi Xiu looked at him, frowning, and spoke with rare severity: "Don't you deserve a beating?"

"Heh, that little whelp is still far from being able to beat me." Xi Ping casually wiped his face, cocked an ear to listen briefly, then, rejoicing at others' misfortunes, said, "Don't mention that. Guess what, shifu? The good doesn't get past the gate, but the bad goes a thousand li—we may not have decades to a century anymore. Prepare to go to war."

When Zhi Xiu had received Luo Qingshi's message, he had known that this matter couldn't be covered up. Therefore, he had already abandoned his illusions. "Someone has committed treason so soon? Who? Do you have any idea?"

"I saw some things when I was stewing Li Fengshan in the Unbound Furnace. I was interrupted by those blundering fools, but I can hazard a guess..." Xi Ping stood up and patted the snow off himself, then shouted into the sky: "San-ge, come down to the mortal world! My shizun requests the pleasure of your company!"

Zhi Xiu: "..."

Zhou Ying glanced toward the snow-capped mountain, then heard that jerk running his mouth again: "Yet another emperor in revolt! What's the matter with your family traditions? It's a disgrace! Just go ahead and switch to your mother's surname already!"

CHAPTER 189 - A Life of Regret (1)

Though the immortal sect had been turned upside down, the effects had yet to reach the mortal of Great Wan.

Apart from some burned plants, Guangyun Palace was already as good as new, but Emperor Jiahe, Zhou Huan, kept feeling that the bed beneath him was shaking. After Pang Jian had left, he had woken with a start twice, pursued by one confused dream after another. Now it was the cold eyes of his father, struck dead by heavenly lightning, and now it was his fourth younger brother Zhou Xi's bloodless face.

In this confusion, Zhou Xi's face changed into his own. He felt that he was like a corpse, lying all alone in a coffin. His imperial robes were embroidered with black dragons, identical to the dragon shadow that had nearly swallowed Jinping whole.

When the fireworks from the Xuanyin Mountains suddenly rose into the sky, Zhou Huan, on waking with a start, cried out "Father!" and sat up, cold sweat soaking his inner robe. When he was finished watching the "show," he found himself huddled at the foot of the bed like a nervous bird.

There came the sound of urgent footsteps. Zhou Huan came back to his senses, and nameless anger rose in his heart. He threw his jade pillow at the eunuch who came in at a trot. "It is forbidden to run in Zihuan Palace, haven't you learned the rules?!"

A corner of the jade pillow broke off when it hit the ground. The eunuch fell to his knees in the doorway with a thud. "Y-your Majesty, come look, quickly!"

The court assembly was canceled that day. Accompanied by the rising sun, Zhou Huan's wide sleeves raised a wind as he walked.

He seemed to want to run headlong, but the fastest part of his body was from the neck up. He gave off the powerlessness and obsolescence of something that had been left behind by the passage of time.

Emperor Jiahe had ascended the throne fourteen years ago. Among mortals, he was in fact no longer young. Had he been one of the herb gatherers of Western Chu, he might have reincarnated twice if he'd been in a hurry. But for a noble who had never missed a dose of low-grade elixirs, the early forties were the good days, when one had grown to full maturity and could begin to make waves. He had rather rushed ahead into elderliness.

Zhou Huan's belly was substantial, but his cheeks were so sunken in they looked emaciated. He had once had the serene eyes peculiar to the Zhou family—turned neither up nor down, the inner and outer corners of the eyes practically on a level, of moderate size. But now it seemed they could no longer hold themselves up; his eyeballs protruded more and more, making his eyes larger and larger, and the outer corners had begun to droop. The countenance that had been kindly in his youth had become pathetic. His eyelids, so thin they were translucent, couldn't shield his panicked gaze.

He burst almost disheveled into Changming Palace—the residence of the Empress Dowager.

There was deathly silence in Changming Palace. Eunuchs knelt everywhere. Sweat flowed at the temples of the imperial physicians bustling in and out. Empress Yao, who had arrived a step ahead of him, didn't even dare to raise her head.

The phoenix head that automatically watered the plants in the courtyard activated just then. Under the horrified gazes of the young palace maids, the gears unscrewed the stopper and sprayed water all over the emperor as he charged in.

Ice-cold droplets fell on Zhou Huan's face. He ignored them. Eyes fixed straight ahead, he rushed through slender rainbows into the empress dowager's sleeping quarters. He saw an emaciated hand hanging down beneath a heavy screen, with inauspicious purple-black on the nails.

Zhou Huan shook. For a moment, he nearly lost consciousness. Many people stepped forward to hold him up all at once and call out nonsense like "May His Majesty's health be preserved." Empress Yao only cried.

Zhou Huan flung off the eunuchs, gathered all his scant courage, and haltingly walked in. He saw Empress Dowager Zhang with her eyes wide open, her chest heaving violently, like a combustion cylinder about to explode.

His legs went weak, and he went to his knees beside the bed.

Fourteen years ago, when Zhou Huan had fearfully ascended the throne, he had legitimately welcomed back his mother, who had spent the better part of her life in the cold palace.

Everyone said he was kind and benevolent, that he had ushered in a prosperous period of goodness and peace, sweeping away the chronic diseases of prior regimes. Only Zhou Huan himself was perfectly well aware that it was his renowned tyrant of a father who had swept away the chronic diseases. The new policies had been left to him ready-made by his predecessor, who had been unable to realize them. Since succeeding to the throne, from the major issues of disaster relief and road repairs to the minor ones of the imperial household's expenses, he had never made a single decision of his own.

"Mother, Mother..." This "orphan" of over forty helplessly clutched at her sleeve. "Mother... what have you done? I don't understand,

what's wrong...?"

Empress Dowager Zhang had suffered a "sudden acute illness" early in the morning—no one dared to say she had been poisoned, having consumed a poisonous gas made by a master. It was very valuable. It couldn't be detected by the spiritual sense of a cultivator below an ascended spirit. If a mortal breathed in a single drop, all remedies would be useless. The imperial physicians were all bustling for nothing.

No one could have access to such a thing without having once belonged to a big family.

"Out... everyone out..."

Empress Yao made out what she was muttering and quickly stood to dismiss all the attendants. On tip-toe, she returned to kneel at Zhou Huan's feet. Through sobs, she whispered, "Mother... Mother ordered me to send a letter to Ziming in the southern mines, I... I sent it according to her orders, and when I looked back, she had..."

The empress's younger brother by a concubine, Yao Qi, had spent a whole year tormenting and being tormented by Luo Qingshi in the Latent Cultivation Temple, each leaving the other with unending trauma—one's Way of the Heart had nearly exploded from anger, and the other to this day felt ill whenever he saw a boy of similar stature to Luo Qingshi. Yao Qi had opened his spiritual eyes in the final days before the Latent Cultivation Temple was about to shut its gates. After leaving the mountains, he had gone to do odd jobs in the southern mines.

In recent years, Zhou Huan's relationship with Empress Yao had been very distant. Looking at that woman, who had all the backbone of a lump of dough, he felt like he was looking into a mirror, despising her more the more he saw her. The empress was out of favor, and she made no waves. She spent all her time in

Changming Palace joining Empress Dowager Zhang in her vegetarian meals, rarely having contact with outsiders. Hearing that she had sent a letter to the southern mines, an ominous premonition rose out of nowhere in Zhou Huan's heart. "What did the letter say? Show me!"

Empress Yao, trembling, presented the downgraded immortal tool she had used to contact Yao Qi. Zhou Huan snatched it away and read it rapidly. He went numb all over.

A shed skin had rebelled against the spiritual mountains... the end of the Xuanyin Mountains was near... less than a hundred years... immediately make an inventory of reserves in the southern mines...

The big clock in Changming Palace reached the hour just then and made a lengthy tolling, striking the ears like a death knell. Zhou Huan abruptly came back to his senses. His face ashen pale, he said with a forced smile, "This... this... Mother, this can't... How could you just send this kind of..."

Then he quickly leapt up and slapped Empress Yao, knocking her to the ground. "Stupid bitch! Whether it's true or not, how could you send vitally important information like this through a mass-produced downgraded immortal tool?! It's no different from printing it in a toilet bulletin and announcing it to the whole world! Are you trying to kill us?!"

Empress Yao's sharp cry made the people waiting outside think the empress dowager had passed. With a rustling, they all knelt.

Glance sweeping over the empress dowager's derisive eyes and purple lips, Zhou Huan suddenly realized something: this was wrong. Empress Yao might not understand, but his mother belonged to a noble family. How could she not know about the taboos of downgraded immortal tools? And why had she taken poison?

All these years, his mother had been in contact with the silent Li clan. They had occasionally had instructions for him, but they had never told him the whole story.

“Have you... done this on purpose?”

Empress Dowager Zhang could no longer speak. Zhou Huan crawled to her bedside, tears and snot falling, and shook her hand forcefully. “Mother, have you gone mad? What the hell were you thinking? What am I supposed to do? What will I...”

Holding up her spasming eyelids, Empress Dowager Zhang laboriously focused on Zhou Huan’s blurred form. She simply couldn’t tell the sounds of these two wailing “Mother” apart; they were truly a perfect match.

“How strange,” she thought, “this is actually mine and Zhou Kun’s son. What went wrong?”

The roots of the Zhang family weren’t as deep as those of the four big clans, but its descendants had worked hard; many able officials had come out of it, and they had intermarried with Xuanyin’s Li clan for hundreds of years, tying them inextricably together. Before, practically every generation had had a direct descendant receive a selection card. There were thirteen members of the Zhang family in the inner sect, the one with the highest cultivation among them already a near-ascended spirit, merely a step away from becoming a peak master. Once they stepped over that pass, the Zhang family could say it had “immortal roots.”

And in Heaven’s Design Pavilion and the southern mines, the family’s members were innumerable. During each New Year celebration, the family would open up a small hall where blue-clothed “divinities” would descend from the sky.

Empress Dowager Zhang's disposition had been impetuous and unyielding in her youth. She was never willing to be left behind. She studied literary and martial arts and spent all her free time in company with spiritual stones, striving to develop her spiritual sense, never taking part in the dull poetry gatherings and flower festivals of Jinping's noble young ladies. She had left her mediocre older brother in the dust, dreaming that one day she too could wear the blue clothes.

But in that class, though the Zhang family spared no effort in the struggle, in the end they obtained only one spot in the quota for selection cards. It would truly have been a waste to give it to a daughter without any special talents; better to use her for a marriage alliance with another family, to widen the pathway for future generations.

When people were trampled by irresistible powers, they often had two types of reactions: either they would raise their weak mantis arms in indignation and resist, even if it meant dying under the trundling wheels; or they would climb into the carriage trampling them, grit their teeth and carve themselves into a totem to leave behind, then pledge their life to safeguarding that totem—to getting justice for all they had been forced to accept and all they had suffered.

The strong-minded Empress Dowager Zhang belonged to the latter type.

When the Grand Selection Year passed, she had a fit of crying, waved goodbye to her high-spirited youth, and entered into an engagement with Zhou Kun, who had just sent off his last loved one.

At the time, Emperor Taiming had not yet become a scheming old lunatic. His family had buried the older brother he had depended on, the immortal mountains had snatched away the sister who had been

his companion since childhood, his mother was in the ground, his father was on the memorial altar. He was alone, angry, and confused. As if grasping at a life-saving straw, he mistakenly set all his hopes on his first wife.

And the two of them *had* gone through a period of extremely sincere feelings. When passion was at its headiest, they had even thought they could be a pair forever.

Sadly, they hadn't chanced upon good times.

At the time, with Rosy Cloud Peak unexpectedly gaining a master, Xuanyin's thirty-six inner sect peaks were nearly all taken. All the sect's families were as tightly wound as could be. Each Grand Selection class was a silent fight at close quarters; it had also influenced the state of affairs at court. The Li and Zhang contingent were aggressive, the Zhao and Lin clans wouldn't budge, and Zhou Kun was naturally iron-willed and resolute. The internal strife in the inner sect and in the mortal world grew fiercer and fiercer. Empress Dowager Zhang was caught in the middle, wavering between her husband and her family. The hostility between emperor and empress grew stronger and stronger.

By the time Zhou Kun deliberately provoked a disaster, bringing the conflict between the Li and Zhao clans to the forefront in the mortal world, husband and wife were hardly on speaking terms. The harem was full of blooming flowers; the "happy news" of one pregnancy after another was announced. She reached the end of her endurance. All kinds of tactics had been unsuccessful. She nearly set aside her pride and went to him to ask for a reconciliation.

But fate makes fools of people. Just then, the "sky" above the Li family's heads in the inner sect fell.

The power of the once flourishing Li clan fell like a mountain. For all its future generations, those related by marriage, and close friends

—countless people who had formerly been “superior”—the path to immortality was forever severed.

Empress Dowager Zhang’s family was tied up in it. At the final juncture, she chose to be the Zhang family’s daughter, not Great Wan’s empress. She illicitly leaked information to her clan, having no idea that Zhou Kun was prepared. He personally shot down the messenger she had sent to her family at the gates of Guangyun Palace. Her family members were either put to death or sent into distant exile with no hope of return.

The power of the Li and Zhang bloodline in court had been practically pulled up by the roots. After this, the empress spent half her life in company with the oil lamps of the cold palace.

She was a person like a phoenix, who had longed to question heaven and earth. She had come together with Zhou Kun because of family and nation, and she had come to this dead end because of family and nation. She had never paid any attention to the irrelevant trifles in the harem. Zhou Kun had always thought that apart from Lady Lin, she hadn’t even had a clear look at any of the consorts or concubines. She didn’t have such small-minded thoughts.

No one knew that her first time seeing Lady Xi, she had been scorched into a panic by Xi Ziyi’s beauty. Learning that Lady Xi was related to Cui Ji, she had immediately awarded her favorite pearls and hairpins from when she had been a girl to her servants.

Out of jealousy, Empress Dowager Zhang had even committed the single pointless “folly” of her life—she had placed a “bewitchment” she had coincidentally obtained in her youth onto a palace maid named Xiao Song, whom that country girl Lady Xi had brought into the palace.

The bewitchment was normally useless, and Empress Dowager Zhang felt it was beneath her to use this little trick to harm others.

Even if a master had come along, they wouldn't have noticed anything wrong with that palace maid. Only on the night of the full moon could she activate it. On every full moon night, holding the corresponding "dreaming pearl," she could see some of the daily trifles happening in Yuying Palace through the maid's dreams.

She had only... wanted to see whether he really would be enchanted by that beauty.

After placing the bewitchment, she instantly regretted it, feeling that it was conduct unworthy of her position. That was just when her family was toppled. She had no time to attend to children or relationships. In a flash, she had forgotten about that act of petty jealousy.

When she once again recalled it, everything had changed.

Living in the cold palace alone, in what mood did she sneak into Xiao Song's dreams? Hard to say. Perhaps she only wanted to compound her suffering. When one has nothing, suffering is also pleasure... But unexpectedly, from that insignificant vase Lady Xi, she discovered something tremendous.

It turned out that into every generation of the Zhou family was born an unknown possessor of natural spiritual bones, and this generation's natural spiritual bones had somehow chosen to reincarnate in Lady Xi's womb.

The palace maid Xiao Song was the most handy of Lady Xi's servants. In the years immediately after the third prince was born, she was the one who always looked after him. Through her, a pair of surprised and horrified eyes saw Zhou Ying, and glimpsed from that sinful boy a corner of the Zhou family's eight centuries of secrets.

As the Crown Prince Zhou Huan grew up, she at last used this incompetent son to contact the Li and Zhang families. There were

still a few people around the edges of the southern mines who were relatives of the former Zhang family. As she cautiously observed Zhou Ying, she sent the information out, investigating along with her family the circumstances behind the Zhou family using the spiritual bones of their children as sacrifices. They pieced together an appalling truth... Then, in that year, all those with Ways of the Heart of common origin that could be traced back to the Dignitary of Code Li Fengshan received a “heavenly edict.”

Everyone was excited to the point of tears, thinking that heaven had at last opened its eyes and was prepared to set things to rights.

In that moment, Empress Dowager Zhang believed that she was carrying the weight of a sacred duty and heaven’s will on her shoulders.

Zhou Ying was fifteen years old then. He brought up wanting to leave the palace early to establish his own household. Empress Dowager Zhang didn’t know what he was up to. That fiend seemed to have reincarnated with the memories of some demon. He had always been strange. Looking at him too long was chilling. If he were allowed to leave Guangyun Palace, it would be hard to spy on him in the future.

So they determined to act that year. After long observation, they chose Liang Chen—a miserable wretch whose Way of the Heart had preceded his spiritual bones, who believed with all his heart that he was acting for the good of the nation and the people.

The heavenly edict said that the Southern Sage had sealed the Territory Map in the veins of the earth, which even Zhao Yin didn’t know. Only a person who inherited an ancient demonic god’s accompanying plant could reach into the Territory Map and become a living Territory Map rubbing, aid them in obtaining control over the Territory Map and take back the Xuanyin Mountains.

Those people had severed their path to immortality. Unless they struck at the roots, they would never be able to free themselves.

But the earthquake in the Resurrection Vortex alerted the Zhou family. Princess Anyang, Zhou Qing, took charge; the remaining agents planted in the southern mines were cleaned up. Something went wrong with that good-for-nothing Liang Chen; he didn't manage to digest the ancient demonic god's inheritance in eight years, and he was nearly killed by the hidden bones. In his haste, he revealed himself ahead of schedule, and everything immediately slid in an incalculable direction: the Impassable Sea scheme failed, Zhou Kun died, and then came the fall of the Zhao family...

Immortals and mortals alike seemed to have been caught in an accelerating vortex.

It turned out that while the stars could be deceived, destiny wasn't up to humans.

Now, it was all over.

Just then, two black-clothed people appeared out of nowhere like steam in the Empress Dowager's sleeping quarters and picked up the limp Zhou Huan. "Your Majesty, the Empress Dowager has ordered us to conduct you safely away from the palace."

"No, I... Mother..."

Empress Dowager Zhang's gaze was becoming dimmer and dimmer. She struggled to smile at her newly arrived family members. Idiot, the heavenly edict was forced to speak and then suddenly fell silent. It must be that Zhi Xiu has already received word. The game is as good as lost. The Territory Map and the dragon shadow reappeared under his nose; what happened in the past can no longer be hidden. If you let them find their footing, you won't survive.

“Mother! Moth...”

First it was sight, then hearing. She could no longer hear Zhou Huan’s raucous voice, either. In a daze, Empress Dowager Zhang seemed to return to her girlhood, when her engagement had just been fixed. Zhou Kun, who had still been Crown Prince then, had snuck out of the palace to see her. When he was discovered by the master being kept by the Zhang family, he didn’t hide; he openly offered up a letter. But when he bent his head, his ears were red.

The letter started out written as formally as a memorial to the throne, but further on, he called her “Yunying,” and further still, there were fallen flowers from Jinping’s four seasons folded into the letter paper... Where had they all gone?

Oh, yes.

Her hand dropped.

Forty years ago, they had turned to ashes in the cold palace’s furnace.

CHAPTER 190 - A Life of Regret (2)

“Diehard supporters of the Li family, with the opportunity to come into contact with palace secrets, who may have unearthed the connection between Liang Chen and the Zhou family. Considering all that, they must actually belong to the Li family,” Xi Ping said.

There had in fact been a good number of concubines and consorts who had fallen due to their connection of the Li family, but they were all dead without issue—there were those who hadn’t had any children to begin with, and those whose children had been scared into early deaths by their mothers’ fates.

There was only Empress Dowager Zhang, who had spent the better part of her life in the cold palace, yet had strangely maintained her position. As soon as her son had inherited the throne, she had once again risen to prominence.

“Actually, now that I mention it, I’ve always wondered—why did the late emperor not kill her, out of all of them?”

Amid the wintry winds and fresh snow of Flying Jade Peak, Zhi Xiu had once again erected the little house that could easily be crushed by the weight of snow and set it beside the place where Xi Yue was resting.

The outer shell had been casually thrown together, and the inside was a mustard seed. Inside the mustard seed, there was neither time nor season. After all these years, there had been absolutely no change to the complete set of furnishings. The teapot even seemed to still be warm.

Xi Ping familiarly poked the dying fire a couple times, rooted around in the wooden cabinet next to the fire, and, as he’d expected, turned up a handful of elderly fourteen-year-old chestnuts. They

were pretty fresh, so he buried the chestnuts in the sparking embers, then sat down on the ground to recite the lines of a brigand and traitor on stage.

“We’ve got the Xuanyin Mountains in our clutches, anyway, and there’s the Territory Map. If Lao Pang really can’t keep his subordinates in Heaven’s Design Pavilion under control, we can always prohibit spiritual energy throughout the country. So, if it were me, and I wanted to get the news out as quickly and directly as possible, I’d definitely contact the southern mines in the Land of Turmoil— who’ve they got in the southern mines from that group?”

Zhou Ying didn’t take issue with his manners. He stepped over his outstretched legs and answered, “Yao Ziming.”

Hearing this, Xi Ping frowned. “The empress’s little brother? Where’s their father, Lord Yao? Why isn’t he looking after them?”

“Lord Yao died three or four years ago.”

No wonder.

When he was young, Xi Ping had heard all kinds of fantastic anecdotes about the grand scribe Lord Yao and had thought that there was something a little wrong with that long-faced old gentleman’s head, always thinking people were out to get him. Now, at his current age, he was finally learning that Lord Yao hadn’t been paranoid; there was method to what elders did—had the Zhang family not lost power, with Empress Yao’s background, she wouldn’t have been able to marry Zhou Huan even in her dreams. Climbing to that “high branch” had in fact not been a stroke of good fortune for the Yao family. Had it been His Third Highness who had succeeded to the throne, with the Crown Prince deposed and unable to achieve his ambitions, that would have been one thing; failing that, these nominal in-laws were in reality a disgrace to the Zhang family. How could a person not quake with terror?

Not only would the old nobility not take them seriously, they were probably harboring hidden malice in their hearts.

And the Yao family sister and brother were actually still mixing with them. Truly, with their father gone, there was no one sensible left to mind them.

Xi Ping considered, then extended his hand to put together a Heavenly Question. A beam of spiritual energy formed into the two wild cursive words “run now” and sent them south... Whether he listened to it or not would depend on Yao Qi’s fortune.

Zhi Xiu’s consciousness swept through the Xuanyin Mountain Range. He confirmed that the Latent Cultivation Temple’s Su Zhun, Luo Qingshi, and other stewards had not been fatally injured; forced the established foundations affected by the “heavenly edict” into meditation, making them calm down; made arrangements for the disciples who hadn’t established foundations yet; repaired the main hall on the Principal Peak; then inquired about the status of the damage to Moon Plated Peak.

Only when he was finished with these trifles did he go inside. Right away, he saw his rebellious disciple’s undignified sprawl on the ground, and the corner of his eye twitched faintly—Zhi Xiu was normally quite casual himself, but however you looked at it, there was still an outsider and guest present. Passing by Xi Ping, he calmly gave him a kick. “Serve tea.”

Xi Ping didn’t budge. “Shifu, our tea leaves are from the previous reign. They’ve nearly developed intelligence. It would be cruel to drink them.”

Zhi Xiu: “...”

You sure can talk.

“There’s plenty of Flying Jade Peak’s ‘magic frozen dew’ to go around. Anyone who’s thirsty can just go out and scoop up a ladleful. Why should I serve tea? It’s a needless formality invented by fools to keep from being embarrassed when they have nothing to say to each other after the pleasantries have been exchanged, a way to give both the host and the guest a chance to work out what to talk about next. Who actually cares about drinking tea?” Idly, Xi Ping said, “Your Highness Prince Zhuang, can a cultivator of the way of clarity feel embarrassed?”

Call him “san-ge,” Zhou Ying would nod calmly; call him “Your Highness Prince Zhuang,” there also seemed to be no particular reaction from him.

Zhou Ying glanced at Xi Ping, ignored the faint provocation in his words, and, turning to Zhi Xiu, said, “What are your instructions, General Zhi?”

“I wouldn’t presume to instruct you,” Zhi Xiu said politely. “It is only that I cultivate the way of the sword and am unlearned in many areas. I inspected Jinping earlier and saw that the Empress Dowager has committed suicide. Guangyun Palace is in disarray, and someone has used some secret means that have made me unable to determine His Majesty’s location.”

“Let the palace be in disarray. There is no need for you to be concerned about the people’s welfare, General Zhi.” Zhou Ying knew what he was worried about. “The influence of the noble families has crumbled in recent years. The six ministries have been restructured, the Ministry of Works divided up into ever smaller components. Public roadways, mining affairs, the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragons, the canals, industry and commerce all have their own systems. They have no need to request instructions from Jinping in every detail. As long as there is a sufficient supply of spiritual stones, the various Kaiming Departments will look after

internal affairs. They are up to dealing with matters for some time. If there are individual large matters that are hard to resolve, Xuanyin Mountain can simply go around Guangyun Palace and transmit orders to the Kaiming Department and Heaven's Design Pavilion. Rest assured, there won't be many such issues."

Xi Ping interjected: "Though it makes no difference whether he's there or not... are we really going to let him run off like this?"

Zhou Ying nodded. "He is only a mortal, and no matter what, his surname is still Zhou. With the Empress Dowager dead, at most the Li family remnants will let him live. They won't make much of him. Even heaven will leave a gleam of hope for survival. Indiscriminate killing is inauspicious."

"Your Highness," said Xi Ping, "would you care to have a go at translating that into human speech?"

Zhi Xiu felt that his manner was becoming more and more disgraceful. "Shiyong."

Xi Ping made a thoroughly insincere gesture of sewing his mouth shut.

Zhou Ying extended a hand, which turned into mist that dispersed invisibly and intangibly in the air. Before anyone could take a close look, with a wave of his long sleeve, the hand was once again restored whole and unharmed to its original position. "This is the power that comes with my spiritual bones. Any part of my body can turn into mist and disappear. I hardly used it before, so few people will be on guard against it. I had an audience with the emperor before going to the spiritual mountains and left one of my hairs on His Majesty's person. Given Zhou Huan's character, the mastermind behind all of this must be Empress Dowager Zhang. If we capture him, it would hardly be suitable to punish him. It would be better to

be lenient, use him to scope out the movements of the Li family remnants.”

Zhou Ying was perhaps the only weirdo cultivator in the world who would ride in a car to go the two steps between Prince Zhuang Manor and the Yongning Marquis Manor. Even Xi Ping often forgot that he could fly a sword and had his own power. Curiously, he said, “A hair? Where did you put it? Won’t it fall off? Won’t they take it off him?”

“I don’t suppose so,” Zhou Ying said rather cautiously after considering it. “It would be normal for them to change his clothes while on the run, but it isn’t very likely that they would shave his head—I planted that hair in His Majesty’s own scalp.”

Xi Ping: “...”

Zhi Xiu: “...”

Neither the shed skin who understood only the sword nor his disciple who understood everything but the sword had ever heard the likes of this. They were both rendered speechless.

Xi Ping said, “No wonder Zhuoming was always longing for you, san-ge. If you hadn’t entered the way of clarity, perhaps you could have founded your own ‘way of saving the bald.’”

“Xi Shiyong!” said Zhi Xiu.

Xi Ping put on a proper smile. “It’s not like cultivators of the way of clarity get angry. San-ge isn’t about to sink to my level, right?”

He wanted to see where the limits of “feeling neither joy nor anger” lay.

Zhi Xiu sighed and pretended not to notice the delicate hostility between the two brothers. He only asked, “Have you known all along, Your Highness?”

“I guessed some of it,” Zhou Ying said. “The Li clan has been Great Wan’s foremost family since ancient times, a many-legged insect whose legs would outlive the death of the body. What’s more, the Xuanyin Mountains being a place that insists on keeping face, they kept the majority of their peak masters. They didn’t kill them all off. I knew that the family had always been waiting for an opportunity to stage their comeback, but I didn’t know that they had been acting under the direction of the ‘heavenly edicts’ of the Ways of the Heart of common origin since Li Fengshan’s death—had the Unbound Furnace not burned the star stones at the bottom of the Sea of Stars, I’m afraid I wouldn’t even be able to speak the words ‘Ways of the Heart of common origin’ now.”

With Zhi Xiu’s cultivation level, he could see the demon eyes hidden in his eyes. “But there are still many things you cannot say.”

“Yes, those that have yet to be tracked back to the source,” Zhou Ying said with a nod, not seeming at all in a rush. “Until the law has been broken, the seal cannot be removed.”

Zhi Xiu scrutinized him briefly, then suddenly said, “Your Highness, a cultivator’s vital power will ordinarily mature as their spiritual bones mature, be inseparable from the cultivator’s background and experiences. But once they accept another’s Way of the Heart upon establishing a foundation—especially a Way of the Heart that differs rather significantly from their own personality—the vital power they had during the open-eyed stage will fade as their cultivation progresses, and their vital weapon will also change to match their predecessor’s.”

Xi Ping, who was taking chestnuts out of the fire, froze. A chestnut covered in sparks burned a hole in the cuff of his sleeve.

Zhi Xiu said, “But from what you say, your vital power has not only not faded, it has instead become stronger than before you established a foundation.”

Zhou Ying nodded. “That is correct.”

Zhi Xiu said gravely, “Your Highness’s method of cultivating the way of clarity is very special.”

“I am acting according to my inclinations, letting nature take its course,” said Zhou Ying.

Zhi Xiu was silent for a moment, then said with a bitter smile, “In the present chaos, only a cultivator of the way of clarity can follow his inclinations. Since the information has already leaked, sooner or later it will spread throughout the four nations. What will come will come. Disorder is everywhere on the southern continent. Everyone has their own difficulties. We can let that go. What I am most concerned about now is Northern Li. Luckily, Northern Li has been unwilling to mix with the southern continent for many years. Even if the news reaches them, they will most likely only look on at first. They won’t necessarily react quickly.”

Splitting the continent in two along the Slumbering Dragon Sea and the Hong River, the area of the northern and southern halves of the continent was in fact about equal, but the southern continent was shared by four nations, while the northern continent had only the nation of Northern Li.

The southern half of Northern Li was mainly composed of plains and grasslands. There were mountains to the northwest, separating it from the boundless unpeopled snowfields. The Tianze River came from the snow-capped mountains; its lower reaches split into two big tributaries—the Hong and Xia Rivers. Northern Li was spacious and sparsely populated. The hard and barren earth was farmed with

horses' hooves. The herdsmen at the feet of the Beijue Mountains still lived without a fixed residence according to ancient traditions.

The northerners only maintained a basic trade with the south, exchanging furs and crude farming products for cheap provisions and worthless manufactured goods. Kunlun's ninefold sword was unmatched under heaven. The inner sect and the outer sect, the latter called the Night Revenants, were made up of ninety percent sword cultivators. Even the evil cultivators were all specialty domestic products—common cultivators from outside didn't dare to enter at will without first getting in contact with someone to receive them. Moreover, sword cultivators' reliance on medicines and tools was low to begin with. The resources the spiritual mountains themselves produced were sufficient. They wouldn't go all the way to Southern Shu to buy them. Spiritual stones from the north rarely flowed outward.

In the centuries since Moon Plated Gold had come down to the mortal world, every nation had been turned on its head amidst the foul smoke: Southern Wan's workers had openly rebelled, the Kaiming Department had squeezed its way into the immortal sect, and now they had even misplaced their emperor; in Western Chu, stifled by the might of the Xiang family, all kinds of local despots had their own "offerings," and, as soon as the Xiang family weakened, they had immediately shown their teeth and talons and prepared to pounce; even Southern Shu had accepted transnational Cloud Soaring Flood Dragons and toilet bulletins, thinking that everything of Wan manufacture was high quality, gradually growing more open-minded... even if the direction their minds opened in was a little oblique.

Only Northern Li had been unmoved from beginning to end. The common people lived lives of unchanging poverty at the feet of the Kunlun Mountains, not daring to think of what they had and did not have.

“Shifu, you’re thinking of allying with Northern Li, keeping them from meddling in the southern continent’s affairs.” Xi Ping left off his temper and frowned. “They’re very xenophobic there. I went there with some people a few times and couldn’t find a place to put down roots.”

Generally speaking, in a spacious and sparsely populated place, people occasionally coming across living creatures from other places would be very interested, so the people of Northern Li were famed for their forthright hospitality toward guests.

But “guests” were still “guests.” The Li people generally had broad foreheads and faces, and large builds; they could be told apart from southerners at a glance. Their language was also different. The Chu, Shu, and Wan languages all borrowed vocabulary from each other. Between Chu and Wan, there was even no need for translation; you could communicate by guesswork. But the Li language was a completely different matter. Without devoting several years of study to it, you wouldn’t be able to understand that cackling.

Zhou Ying, however, interjected, “I actually have a connection. I’ve always been in contact, not with Kunlun, but with the Beijue Mountains’ Blind Wolf King.”

“The Perplexing Sword?” said Zhi Xiu.

Zhou Ying said, “The Blind Wolf King only left the Kunlun Mountains because his sword aura was incompatible. Though he is counted as an evil cultivator, his relationship to Kunlun’s orthodoxy is nowhere near the mutual intolerance of orthodox and evil in other nations. His position has practically always been semi-public. If you trust me, General Zhi, I can take a trip, stay in contact through the reincarnation wood.”

Xi Ping froze. “Huh? Me?”

Zhou Ying said, "There is a past friendship between the Blind Wolf King and the Marquis of Yongning. A branch of the Luwu use the Marquis as an intermediary. You wouldn't have understood it when you were younger, and the Marquis wouldn't have had time to bring it up with you. Since you can go back now, why do you not dare to stay a while at the Marquis Manor?"

Xi Ping's expression changed several times. Finally, with a smile that was asking for a beating, he said, "Well, isn't it the same as you not daring to go through the Marquis Manor's gates for five years back then?"

As before, Zhou Ying wasn't angered. He only nodded to him, seeming to imply "since you understand, I won't say any more." He looked away and said to Zhi Xiu, "The Kunlun Mountains are known as the most ancient spiritual mountains on earth, and Kunlun's sword cultivators have always considered themselves to be the descendants of the founder of the cultivation world. In fact, I would like to see what there is in the most ancient place. General Zhi, it will not be hard for me to persuade Northern Li to look on with folded arms; sword cultivators rarely regard other ways as worthwhile, and for the most part scorn to take part in this sort of fight—but there is one thing. During this period, you must not touch the southern mines in the Land of Turmoil."

Zhi Xiu frowned.

"Spiritual stones are the lifeblood of spiritual mountains. The southern mines are shared among the four nations. Northern Li has no border with the Land of Turmoil. They have always been sensitive about the southern mines," Zhou Ying said. "I know you are preoccupied with the Land of Turmoil, but over two centuries have already passed. A little while longer won't matter. Once you touch the southern mines, Kunlun's Wanshuang will come south. You are not the world's only shed skin sword cultivator."

Zhi Xiu seemed to be squeezing something in his sleeve. After a long time, he sighed softly and said, “Thank you for the warning. I understand the priorities.”

The two of them had a brief deliberation. Without Xi Ping’s troublesome interruptions, it was very efficient—after all, the two of them weren’t well acquainted, and they didn’t especially like each other. There was nothing for them to chat about.

Zhou Ying then stood and bid farewell. At the door, as though he had sensed something, his consciousness probed the mustard seed he carried and saw that after a long silence, the box of notes that he had destroyed over half of had suddenly “come back to life” and spat out a new note for him. On it was written: *If Xi Shiyong is impertinent, beat him.*

Zhou Ying paused and assessed the situation briefly in light of this note: calling his older brother’s full name at the bottom of the Sea of Stars, mocking him for being unable to feel embarrassed and not speaking in words humans could understand, as well as planning out a “way of saving the bald” for him...

So he came to a conclusion: Xi Shiyong had been extremely rude.

Xi Ping, who was seeing him out, saw him come to a halt and thought he had recalled something, so he leaned sloppily against the doorframe. “What other instructions does Your Highness have? I can convey them.”

Zhou Ying glanced at him: his posture was very vulgar.

Therefore, he pointed at him.

Xi Ping said, “Me? What about...”

Before he could finish, a talisman hit him straight in the chest. Though Xi Ping was a major boundary above him, he had simply never expected this to happen. He took half a step back under the force of that blow, tripped over the threshold, and sat down on the ground.

Zhou Ying very objectively asserted the reasoning behind his attack: “You have been impertinent.”

Having said this, he nodded courteously, turned into mist, and disappeared.

CHAPTER 191 - A Life of Regret (3)

Xi Ping seemed to have broken his tailbone. He sat there blankly, not getting up for ages.

Zhou Ying was gone. As far as the eye could see, Flying Jade Peak was an unbroken field of white, without so much as a single footprint. In a single breath, you could breathe in three thousand freezing flowers; even his lungs were cold.

Truly lonely.

This was what Xi Ping thought as he sat on the threshold.

But at the same time, he could clearly sense the calm of the hidden bones: *Human events converge and dissipate. They are only a temporary clamor. Loneliness is the eternal norm of the universe. Mortals cling to life and fear death. Starting at birth, they are controlled and driven by all kinds of desires; wanting without having is bitter, and wanting and having is still bitter. Why be blinded by that uproar?*

When he looked again at the boundless snowy mountain through these eyes, he instead felt carefree and happy, forgetting self and the world. Xi Ping knew that if he meditated now, there would be gains to his frame of mind.

But he didn't move. He only sat there single-mindedly pondering—there was a rather eccentric talisman he was thinking of; how did you draw it now?

First he slapped the ground. A somewhat awkward talisman raised the snow on the ground to the height of a person. It went wrong somewhere. The spiritual energy overflowed and scattered. The snow fell back.

“That doesn’t seem right...” Xi Ping pressed on the center of his brow, scrutinized the talisman carefully, then tried changing a few places.

A breeze flitted by. The thick snow congealed into a snowman, his features and form identical to the living Zhou Ying. His whole body flashed with spiritual light.

Xi Ping gave a laugh. Before the snowman could find his footing, Xi Ping grabbed a clump of snow, jumped up, and threw it at the snowman. “I’ll show you impertinent!”

The snow Zhou Ying stumbled when he was hit. But something else had gone wrong with a certain ascended spirit “master”’s talisman. When the snowman was attacked, not only did the talisman not disperse, it even drove the snowman to retaliate!

A snowball the size of a head flew straight at him. Xi Ping swore and dodged. The snowball hit General Zhi’s little cottage so hard that it shook a few times.

Out of consideration for the fact that he would want to be alone, Zhi Xiu hadn’t meant to disturb him. When he heard some noise, he only took it for Xi Ping venting his emotions. But the noise became more and more off. When he went out to look, he was astonished.

Flying Jade Peak had never been so lively: as if a market were being held on the slope, it was densely covered in moving, running snow people. Chunks of ice and snowballs flew everywhere in a chaotic battle. The snow people were separated into an unknown number of camps, hurling ice and snow at each other and sending each other flying head over heels. Hardly any of them had all their limbs intact. Even after losing their heads, they still battled ferociously.

The snow that had been untouched by signs of human life had been stamped full of potholes by the dismembered snow people. The prime culprit, a certain individual named Xi, had found a cape to block snow and rain somewhere and put it on. He was riding a sword, observing the battle from midair, occasionally jumping up and down to dodge several groups of besiegers. His hair was covered in ice. Seeming to think this still wasn't lively enough, he pursed his lips to whistle. Another dozen snow people formed from the snow and changed into the courtesans who had once contended with each other for beauty beside the Lingyang River. They began to sing and dance to boost morale.

There were few people on Flying Jade Peak, and there was a new shed skin. Since the mountain seal had been opened, it had drawn quite a few auspicious animals who didn't mind the cold to hide there for the sake of quiet. Now, the auspicious animals were all in midair, the "quiet" of the war on this mountain rendering them unable to land. When they saw Zhi Xiu, they began to curse and scold in chorus, accusing him of not keeping his evil disciple under control.

At his age, this was Zhi Xiu's first time being besieged and scolded by a flock of birds. Wishing he could find a hole to crawl into, he cupped his hands toward the auspicious animals in apology. "I am ashamed, I..."

Before he could finish, a tactless snowball came flying straight at him.

Naturally the snowball couldn't get him. It broke apart before it got close. Zhi Xiu took a deep breath and steadied his expression, then raised his head and "genially" asked, "Shiyong, what are you doing?"

Xi Ping answered, "Don't you think Flying Jade Peak is too quiet? We've just opened the mountain seal. I'm adding some ambience."

A vein jumped on Zhi Xiu's temple. "Don't you think this ambience is a little too grand... Xi Shiyong!"

The beautiful women made of snow who were going around boosting morale suddenly turned toward Zhi Xiu in a body. A dozen snowballs came flying toward him from all directions. Zhi Xiu's figure flashed, and he was elsewhere. The next moment, he landed right behind Xi Ping.

Xi Ping was no longer the little wretch he had once picked up one-handed in the Blissful Village. He had become a big wretch who had torn open the Impassable Sea, blown up the Sea of Stars, and caused havoc in the South Sea—he was unusually rich in experience when it came to being hunted. Without so much as turning his head, he switched places with a reincarnation wood tree that had just sprouted from the snow, sending a snow person flying with a headbutt. "Heh-heh."

Zhi Xiu snapped his fingers and sent a chestnut shell flying. It easily pierced through the spiritual energy shielding Xi Ping and headed straight toward his forehead. Seeing that he couldn't dodge it, Xi Ping once again disappeared, then burrowed out from another snowdrift.

Zhi Xiu: "..."

He had to give him a seeing to today!

Zhi Xiu rolled up his sleeves. He casually snatched an ice club from the hands of one of the snow people on Flying Jade Peak to use as a sword. "This will give me a chance to see how your cultivation is progressing—"

Lin Chi and Wen Fei had gotten Rosy Cloud Peak and Moon Plated Peak settled down. Supposing that the teacher and disciple on

Flying Jade Peak ought to have finished any private discussions they needed to have, they had met up and gone over together.

The two of them didn't talk much on the way there. They were both somewhat weighed down: concerning what had gone wrong with the strange star stones on the bottom of the Sea of Stars and why they could pollute the spiritual senses of cultivators with Ways of the Heart of common origin, that mystifying way of clarity cultivator had in the end explained nothing. Inside the Unbound Furnace, Lin Chi had been pushed out by Xi Ping before he could see anything clearly. Though he didn't know the reason, whenever Lin Chi recalled that moment, his heart would palpitate out of nowhere... as if he'd had a narrow escape.

How long could the Xuanyin Mountains' situation be concealed? The inner sect wasn't much of a problem, but what would the outer sects scattered throughout the nine provinces think? And what about the other four nations?

In a hundred years, when the spiritual mountains collapsed and their people and gods all vanished, would they receive posthumous calumny or posthumous praise?

The power structure of the Xuanyin Mountains had basically collapsed. The new shed skin had no choice but to become a pillar holding up the heavens on his own, and he was hardly over two centuries old. He didn't have the backing of a family with hundreds upon thousands of years of history behind him. He was isolated and without help.

Wen Fei waved his fan, saying to Lin Chi, *If I were Zhi Jingzhai, I'd pack it in and flee into the night.*

Lin Chi had no need to imagine himself in Zhi Xiu's place. His fellow clan members currently locked up in the Yuntian Palace were already making him want to shut himself up.

The two of them exchanged looks, both fretting on Zhi Xiu's behalf. Facing the wintry wind, they walked into Flying Jade Peak and were met by a beam of sword energy.

Wen Fei: "..."

Lin Chi: "..."

Was this how Flying Jade Peak treated its guests?

The sword energy was faint, dispersing as soon as it touched someone. All the snow on the mountain and in the valley seemed to be boiling. The sky was clear, but there was a blizzard on the ground. From above, at first you couldn't clearly see what had happened.

Wen Fei craned his head and tapped on the ribs of his fan. *Is there a rat infestation on Flying Jade Peak? I have rat poison...*

Before the writing could finish popping up in midair, the northwest wind blew a headless snow person into the sky.

Wen Fei was wondering where this cunning talisman had come from and was just about to go take a closer look when he saw that snow person get out a cannon made of snow and loose a shell toward his chest.

Another beam of sword energy flew over to break up the offending snow person. Zhi Xiu's weary voice came from the middle of the mountain: "Please wait, gentlemen, my peak is suffering a.. Xi Shiyong, what a disgrace!"

Wen Fei fanned the snow: *I think our worries were superfluous.*

Lin Chi stayed far away, sorrowfully thinking, Indeed, having an unprecedented and inimitable brilliant disciple like this is equal to having a whole island of spiritual beasts. You won't be isolated at all. What do those clan members of mine locked up in Yuntian Palace amount to? Put together, they aren't as vexing as that guy.

Wen Fei said, *Why don't we try again later? Lin-shixiong, why don't you come over for a visit to my place first?*

Lin Chi, who had put up with Xi Ping for eight years while General Zhi was in seclusion, ran away with him without demur.

Xi Ping scurried like a frightened rat. While the snow people on the ground had been made by him, when the disparity in cultivation level was too great, a talisman's master could also change. The snow people seemed to know who was in charge on this mountain. They had defected in favor of the shed skin's aura, stopped their civil war, and set about encircling and intercepting Xi Ping. In no time, he had plowed through all the frost and snow that had accumulated on Flying Jade Peak for over a decade. Finally, there was a rumble...

Xi Ping and the avalanche on the north slope fell off the cliff together.

But times had changed. Fourteen years ago he had still needed his shifu to fish him up. This time, never mind the mere north slope, if Flying Jade Peak itself fell, it couldn't have crushed him to death.

So Xi Ping relaxed his limbs and tumbled down the cliff along with the boulders and accumulated snow. Amid the chaos and the noise, he laughed—not only was he unwilling to quietly “forget self and the world,” he also had to drag the shed skin sword cultivator who had spent centuries in solitary contemplation down to his own level.

“A handful of damn bones...” He fell straight into the valley, making a big hole. His ascended spirit’s spiritual bones, forged in a heavenly tribulation, were entirely uninjured, only slightly shaken. Xi Ping felt the collision of his joints almost with pleasure. Nothing was left of his earlier feeling of being on the point of “enlightenment.” “You think I need you to teach me how to live? ... ow!”

A chestnut at last struck his forehead head-on. Xi Ping had been sitting up halfway. Now he was knocked down and flipped over to face upward.

So he simply lay on the ground, not getting up. “Shifu, you don’t love me anymore.”

“That was for Xi Yue.” Zhi Xiu, tidy as could be, stood firmly beside him. There wasn’t a trace of ice on him. “Scoundrel.”

“It was a stopgap measure. That brat is stubborn as a pig.” Xi Ping reached a hand out of the hole to make Zhi Xiu pull him up. “Shifu, look after the Marquis Manor for me while I pay a visit to Tao County to deal with that red-eyed evil cultivator. When I get back, I’ll send them to the South Sea Hidden Realm... Hey, what’s that you’re wearing?”

He had suddenly discovered that an archery thumb ring had appeared on Zhi Xiu’s thumb. It wasn’t an immortal tool, wasn’t even made of Moon Plated Gold. It was so archaic it seemed to have been dug up out of a tomb. All the patterns engraved on it had rusted away, leaving only indistinct traces... Xi Ping had never seen Zhi Xiu wearing this thing.

“An old thing.” Zhi Xiu pulled him and said nothing else about it, only sighed and said, “Prince Zhuang, Xi Yue... and your parents. You’re really going to sever all your family ties, be alone in the world?”

“Not at all,” Xi Ping said with an almost careless smile. “Affections hinge on their origin, not their focus. They originate with me, so as long as I’m alive, they still exist. Anyway, I’m not all that alone. Don’t I still have you, shifu?”

“Spare me, ancestor,” Zhi Xiu scolded jokingly. “You’re too filial, I can’t take it... Go on.”

Xi Ping agreed, swept the ice and dust off himself with spiritual energy, then turned and put on a mask—while by now his identity was probably known to everyone who ought to know, it was still embarrassing going to see Zhao Qindan, so he was planning a conspicuous cover-up at first—then passed through the reincarnation wood and left.

Xi Ping’s aura disappeared in the blink of an eye from Great Wan territory. The spiritual mountains could no longer trace him. Zhi Xiu stood alone beside the reincarnation wood tree growing there for a while, gently stroking the ring on his thumb—it wasn’t his size; it was plainly a size up, hanging loose.

“What elder would hide in a paradise and leave you out in the open?”

Once again, he glanced south and tucked the thumb wearing the ring into his palm.

The Zhang family... along with the overwhelming majority of Great Wan’s influential families outside the four great families, had all believed that if their family only produced an ascended spirit peak master, the family’s descendants would from then on have a foundation in the spiritual mountains; they could be confident in receiving a selection card, and entering the inner sect would no longer be unattainable for the talented ones. Even someone as reclusive as Lin Chi, while he didn’t have a single direct disciple, still

had a whole bunch of disciples “of record” on Moon Plated Peak whose names he had never recorded in his memory.

Only Flying Jade Peak had none of this.

Zhi Xiu was his parents’ youngest son, born late to them, with two older brothers and one older sister. His eldest brother was sixteen years older than him, practically halfway to a father. He had been a lot like Xi Ping in his youth, also growing up pampered and doted on by his family in myriad ways, thinking everyone should love him... though there were still somewhat more rules in a military family, and he hadn’t dared to overstep the bounds of propriety like that brat.

The third year after he had gone to the Xuanyin Mountains, his parents had died one after the other. The ninth year, his older sister, who had moved far away after marrying, had died of illness. After fourteen years, his second older brother had retired to the country, moving his whole family back to their ancestral residence in Hongyin. A few of his siblings’ children went into the military, though they had no real chances to distinguish themselves; they worked at it smoothly until old age. One had been a rather successful scholar and had become a provincial magistrate in Ning’an. Beyond that, he didn’t know any of them... None of them had vied for Xuanyin’s selection cards under his banner; they wouldn’t even mention being related to Zhi Xiu in front of outsiders. They settled down wherever their official appointments took them, indifferent to their clan and surname.

By the time Zhi Xiu became an ascended spirit and opened Flying Jade Peak, the later generations of his family had scattered all over the place, all with their own lives to live, making him think that he would be disturbing them if he so much as gave them an extra look.

When Zhi Xiu had first entered the immortal mountains, Zhang Jue had placed hardly any restraints on him. He could always leave the mountains and return to Jinping to celebrate the New Year. He had

been the one to arrange funerals for his relatives one after another... all except his da-ge, who had raised him.

During the Wan-He War, after the siege of Jinping, Zhi Xiu had been severely injured and remained in the capital, and the one to take his place leading troops south to retake lost territory had been his da-ge, who had rushed back from the northern border.

Da-ge had pursued the remaining stragglers of the Southern He army, fighting all the way into Southern He territory. When he requested instructions from Jinping, Emperor Renzong ordered them to go straight to Southern He's capital to demand justice from the Yang clan. But on the way, they encountered Lancang's mad sect leader escaping imprisonment; the mortals were drawn in, and of the Wan army and the He people alike, hardly anyone survived.

To this day, his da-ge had only a cenotaph.

Centuries later, Zhi Xiu had at last returned to the Land of Turmoil. Following his tie of blood, he had found a relic his brother had carried with him.

The strange thing was, this thumb ring, which his brother had never been without while with the army, hadn't ended up in the place where he was said to have died in battle. Instead, it had been not far from the feet of the Lancang Mountains... at the location of a break in a vein of the earth.

In order to calm Northern Li, he still couldn't touch the southern mines at the moment. He understood that without needing Zhou Ying to tell him.

But... he had picked up a profound injustice from that thumb ring.

The southern mines—Great Wan's encampment.

Yao Qi returned hurriedly to his lodgings, keeping his head down. His colleagues saw nothing out of the ordinary. He was always like this. In order to avoid greeting people and making small talk, the emperor's little brother-in-law used his spiritual sense to the utmost, detouring whenever he sensed an acquaintance in the distance. He would rather walk an extra eight li than exchange some empty pleasantries face-to-face.

He closed the door and locked it. Talismans against being overheard or spied on appeared on the door and window. Then he took a deep breath and took two things from his clothes.

One was a downgraded white jade proximal. His father had grit his teeth and doled out a colossal sum to have someone buy it when he had succeeded in opening his spiritual eyes and received his transfer order to go to the southern mines. He could use it to correspond with his family. After his father passed away, the other proximal had come into his half-sister's hands. His big sister had a different mother from him and ordinarily had nothing to say to him. Only at the Mid-Autumn Festival and New Year would they exchange brief messages and ask after each other's wellbeing.

Now, the proximal was covered in writing. Yao Qi knew each word individually, but put together, they were simply about to cook his brain. His big sister's letter said: There was going to be a comeback. The rebels were going to be wiped out. They needed spiritual stones, so the resources in the southern mines were of utmost importance. Fortunately, the majority of people in the southern mines were noble scions. They wouldn't just stand by and watch as Zhi Xiu pulled the wool over everyone's eyes at home. They would be sure to help Yao Qi. She wanted him to calm everyone's minds as soon as possible, stabilize the southern mines, and wait for someone to come meet him.

The other thing, meanwhile, was a Heavenly Question from the Xuanyin Mountains, with only two words written on it in strange yet

familiar handwriting, telling him to run now.

CHAPTER 192 - A Life of Regret (4)

Yao Qi remembered Xi Ping's handwriting. Though over a decade had passed, he still recognized it after a moment's blankness.

For one thing, Xi Shiyong's handwriting was sloppy and arrogant, ugly in a very distinctive way. And also... apart from the Latent Cultivation Temple, no other place would have forced Yao Qi to live with another person in a single compound, seeing him whether he wanted to or not.

His associations with his colleagues were indifferent. Everyone just got along on the surface. If he didn't go out of his way to make friends with others, of course they wouldn't deliver themselves to his doorstep.

Sad to say, in Yao Qi's whole life, the only peers he had closely associated with were the two classmates who had shared the Qiu courtyard with him back at the Latent Cultivation Temple—and one of them was a regular visitor in his nightmares, his number of appearances second only to Luo Qingshi.

His own sister had explained the whole sequence of events to him without regard for importance, mapped out a detailed plan of action for him, as if afraid that an idiot like him would misunderstand something and ruin things, while his “nightmare” had written two pithy words.

Yao Qi took a deep breath, yet again rejoicing that a half-immortal body couldn't get diarrhea.

He leaned against the door, closed his eyes and muttered irresolutely, then suddenly straightened up, quickly swept the things he usually used into his mustard seed, stuck a stealth talisman onto himself, snuck outside, and made straight for his only friend—the

other classmate who had lived with him in the Qiu courtyard at the Latent Cultivation Temple, Chang Jun.

The year he had entered the Latent Cultivation Temple, Yao Qi had been only sixteen, just over the line for the Grand Selection's age requirement, still a confused and timid half-grown child. Now over a decade had passed; he had at least reached the age of thirty. Though he hadn't improved, at any rate his wits had slowly all grown in.

The Land of Turmoil was a single mountain occupied by four nations, with those great evil cultivators, the Three Heroes of Turmoil, next to them, eyeing them menacingly. The circumstances were unusually complicated. Never mind downgraded immortal tools; ordinary immortal tools that hadn't undergone special encryption could easily be spied on. When conducting business, the southern mines' cultivators took care to use special communication tools or Heavenly Questions as a precaution against being targeted by evil cultivators while transporting spiritual stones.

When the cultivators used their own communication devices to contact their families, they weren't permitted to pepper in a single sentence that could reveal the situation at the mines. The personal letters of all the nations' mines were practically semi-public; they could only be sent after undergoing inspection. In other words, the moment Empress Yao's letter had come to Yao Qi's hands, Great Wan's mines, the surrounding friendly neighbors who were constantly spying, and the malignant evil cultivators hidden in the shadows had all known about it.

It was easy for Empress Yao to say that the mines were full of noble scions, that they would never permit rebels against the spiritual mountains to hold Xuanyin; but why hadn't she thought—when had Great Wan's "noble scions" ever belonged to the same family? And what about the other nations, and those three ascended spirit evil cultivators who had nearly seized the Lancang Mountains? In such a

complicated situation, if he, Yao Qi, could figure out how to operate, would he still be doing odd jobs in the southern mines?

His sole remaining blood relation in the world hadn't asked him once in fourteen years how he was doing in the southern mines, whether the work was hard. Now, with a single letter, she had turned this little half-immortal with his meager cultivation into a public target. If he didn't run, what was he waiting for?

Xi Shiyong was the son of the "enemy," arrogant and bossy; he hadn't made the slightest positive impression.

But the Heavenly Question he had sent contained only a hasty warning and didn't mention any request... In his whole life, Yao Qi had encountered too little friendship and too many requests.

"A-jie," Yao Qi thought, "if only you'd gone through the motions, put down one sentence telling me to be careful, look after myself if things went wrong."

Just one sentence.

Yao Qi had never been resolute. Just this once, he came to a prompt decision. While others were still digesting the information, struggling to confirm its source and veracity, two little half-immortals from the southern mines—Yao Qi and Chang Jun—furtively snuck out of the mining area, taking advantage of their familiarity with the terrain.

In Tao County, a person walked out of the reincarnation wood tree growing in Zhao Qindan's little courtyard.

"Senior Tai Sui."

Xi Ping: "..."

Under his mask, he sucked in a breath. He couldn't answer, but he couldn't not answer—thanks to that damn baldy of a Heartless Lotus, now that the incident in Jinping had gotten out, of the thousands of masks plastered to him, only a single layer of garlic skin remained; it would tear as soon as it was poked. It would all depend on when Zhao Qindan had time to collect the news.

He'd spent eight years pretending to be her elder, putting on the bearing of an enigmatic uncle and making her call him by a respectful form of address. He'd listened to Zhao Qindan mention "that classmate of mine who blew up half the Latent Cultivation Temple" several times while maintaining an air of propriety... Too awkward. How was he going to talk to her after this?

In her place, had he been Zhao Qindan, he would have spent a year cursing himself in the toilet bulletins.

Thus it is said that in human interactions, one must treat others with sincerity. Those who wear masks will sooner or later be exposed to public ridicule.

Fortunately, Yu Chang came to his rescue.

Yu Chang put down his teacup and said with a fake smile, "Grand Duke Tai Sui, we met so briefly in the South Sea, I didn't even get a chance to say hello. Hope you've been well."

Xi Ping put himself between Zhao Qindan and Yu Chang and made an obscure gesture toward her behind his back. Then, smiling, he said, "Quite well, thanks to you."

Zhao Qindan understood and remained calm. At the same time, she couldn't resist taking another look at Tai Sui—Tai Sui was very strange today, not as reserved as usual. Even his voice was slightly higher by half a key. Spiritual image masks were ineffective in Tao County, so every time he appeared, he would be scrupulously made

up. But today, he had only casually stuck a mass-produced mask over his face... the kind of fox mask children wore for the Lantern Festival.

It was as if he were drunk.

Hearing the words “thanks to you,” Yu Chang’s eyes became even redder. “You borrowed something from me before, Grand Duke, and said in the South Sea that you would return it. I wonder if you meant what you said?”

Xi Ping readily consented: “Yes!”

Then he plopped down without any apparent intention of taking out the *Discard the False and Keep the True* book. Yu Chang stared in dismay for ages at the repulsive fox mask. His mild and refined smile nearly faltered. Finally, at the end of his endurance, he said, “So where is my vital weapon?”

Xi Ping grabbed a handful of melon seeds. “I said last time I was going to return it. I didn’t say when I was going to return it. Yu Chang-xiong, wasn’t there something you wanted from me? Why don’t we have a nice chat first and see. Maybe you’ll agree to lend me the book for a little while longer.”

Yu Chang: “...”

With his eyes that seemed to be stained with pigeon’s blood, this great evil cultivator glared at him for a long moment, then said with emphasis, “I never would have thought that *that gentleman’s* teachings could have produced an incongruous ‘genius’ like you, Tai Sui-xiong.”

Zhao Qindan, listening in, thought to herself, “*That gentleman?* Which of Xuanyin’s inner sect elders? Why does this evil cultivator know Tai Sui’s lineage?”

“To my shame,” Xi Ping said magnanimously, smiling, “I am altogether a self-made genius when it comes to the way of shamelessness.”

Yu Chang did not enjoy talking with him and simply stopped trying to probe. He said directly, “First you spoiled the emergence of the hidden realm in the South Sea, enticed the Heartless Lotus into attacking Jinping, and openly took control of the Xuanyin Mountains. You were playing an excellent game. You should have been able to take your time, but because there are too many traitors among the Wan, the information has already leaked out so soon. Even I know of it. Tai Sui, what are you planning to do?”

The great evil cultivator judged others by his own standard. Xi Ping didn’t dispute with him, only calmly said, “Would you like to instruct me?”

“Xuanwu is currently Sanyue’s sole shed skin. You don’t need me to tell you how strong his cultivation is—in Sanyue, no one but Xiang Rong could hold him back. He was previously expelled by Sanyue with a serious injury he was unable to heal from, his boundary fallen, such that we could still contend with him. But once Sanyue legitimizes him again, it’ll take hardly any time for it to repair his damaged essence. And once he has the immortals under his control, Sanyue will return to what it was before, standing alone and impregnable. Nothing good will happen to the local despots who have cropped up in recent years thanks to the Xiang family losing its influence. Therefore, we are preparing a final thrust. While Xuanwu has yet to be fully admitted by Sanyue and the Central and West Peaks are still deadlocked, we will rebel—this is our only chance.”

“Who’s this ‘we’?” said Xi Ping.

Yu Chang quietly met his eyes. After a brief silence, he said, “We offerings, who act against our own hearts, who are kept by the

powerful and ordered around like dogs. We who cannot be free.”

Xi Ping said, “You want to secretly remove the spiritual image brands, join the various local despots in rising in rebellion, and then, once you’ve beaten Xuanwu, turn around and bite your masters.”

“A breeze does not last out the morning, a rain shower does not last out the day. Why should those good-for-nothings be the sky above our heads generation after generation?” Yu Chang said softly. “Shouldn’t the person sitting in the lofty immortal palace on Sanyue’s Principal Peak change? What about your honored teacher...”

The upturned corners of Xi Ping’s cheerfully smiling mouth flattened out under his fox mask. “Watch what you say, Yu-xiong. If you mention my shizun again, I’m afraid your vital weapon won’t be long for this world.”

Yu Chang accordingly took the conversation in a different direction. “Though you control the Xuanyin Mountains and have dominion over the precious territory of Southern Wan, in a hundred years, when there are no more spiritual mountains, what will happen? I can sign a blood covenant—not with you, with the shed skin master; with him a major boundary above me, as far as the blood covenant is concerned, the interpretation of its clauses won’t be up to me. I won’t even be able to find loopholes. Afterward, the nations of Chu and Wan will become eternal allies, mutually advance without invading each other, the spiritual stone resources of the Sanyue Immortal Mountains to be shared between the two nations. When Xuanyin has dissipated, the two nations can even combine into one. Then there will be a blessed land with favorable terrain and climate, and also spiritual mountains. There will be no difficulty in uniting the whole southern continent.”

Xi Ping squeezed open a melon seed shell with a crack. “Wake up, buddy, it’s not dark yet.”

“Then let’s not talk about anything that far out.” Yu Chang smiled amiably. “Under the current circumstances, apart from working with me, do you have any better options?”

Xi Ping met his eyes through the mask. The two of them were like two demons who were always plotting against each other, well-matched, with a tacit understanding. Haggling, they rapidly hashed out all the details.

In the Land of Turmoil—

Chang Jun was also a misfit who hadn’t made anything of himself. Apart from liking to pick up information, he also liked playing around with wicked little toys. Living in the southern mines, where birds didn’t come to shit, he didn’t let a single trend go by. Whatever novelty came into vogue, he would get himself one. Right now, he had a steam carriage in his possession.

Neither of them dared to fly a sword. They drove north in Chang Jun’s steam carriage.

Chang Jun asked, “Ziming, what are your plans?”

Yao Qi answered without hesitation: “Go to the Xuanyin Mountains.”

Chang Jun looked at him in the car’s little mirror. “To see Shiyong? You probably won’t be able to. The inner sect is strictly...”

Yao Qi stared unblinkingly up ahead, rather unskillfully pronouncing his decision: “We’ll return to the Latent Cultivation Temple, see Elder Su and Luo-shixiong.”

Just before they had left the mountains, Su Zhun had said that if he found himself at a loss out there, he could return to the Latent Cultivation Temple. The Latent Cultivation Temple was the starting

point of every cultivator in Great Wan. If you had nowhere to go, you could go back there... He had only said it to him, as if at that moment he had seen his bewildering future.

Luo-shixiong... Luo-shixiong had said he didn't have the makings of a cultivator. He had been absolutely right.

Chang Jun hesitated for a moment. "Leaving Luo-shixiong aside for the moment, I've heard gossip that says Elder Su is good friends with General Zhi... It doesn't make a difference to me, my family is small fry, we just have a few ancestors who did odd jobs at the Latent Cultivation Temple. We have no business picking sides in a fight. But you—after all, your sister..."

"Married into a big family," Yao Qi said softly. "But my—*our* surname isn't Zhang, and it isn't Zhou."

With his background, had he been mortal, his family probably could have arranged a pretty nice wife for him, but in the immortal sect, there couldn't be a female cultivator who would marry down to his level. He would have no progeny. The surname "Yao" wouldn't be passed on.

He was only an inferior tool casually laid out by the big families to be used at need and written off.

Yao Qi smiled, not knowing what he was feeling. "Actually, what do they have to do with me?"

Chang Jun sighed. "Hold on tight."

There were no roads in the Land of Turmoil. The ground was covered in mud pits. As soon as it rained, it became dotted with holes like the sky with stars. The stream carriage suddenly accelerated, limping as it leapt and sprang, spouting steam as though it were choking.

All of a sudden, while the car was caught and sent flying by a big stone, there was a flash of spiritual light, and the car became fixed in midair.

Only when the car wouldn't land were the spiritual senses of the two half-immortals touched... It was already too late.

Seven or eight black figures surged out from the surroundings, tightly surrounding the steam carriage caught in midair. All of them were established foundations or above—all were evil cultivators.

Yao Qi and Chang Jun were like two lambs being watched by a vicious beast. They didn't dare to move a muscle.

A black-clothed evil cultivator stepped forward and tugged on the steam carriage's door. Not understanding its basic principles, he used brute force to pull the door off, then smiled at the two people inside it. "Where are you going, lords? My master requests the pleasure of your company."

As he spoke, he crooked a finger. Yao Qi's proximal flew out. The letters that had previously been erased flashed one by one on the downgraded immortal tool, until the evil cultivator came to the last one. "Hey, there's a letter here Lord Yao hasn't answered yet."

Yao Qi's handwriting appeared automatically on the proximal, subserviently agreeing to all the empress's requests.

Then two black-clothed men left the ranks and each stuck something onto his face. Their figures and features slowly twisted, changing into Yao Qi and Chang Jun's appearances. Even their established foundation cultivation was suppressed.

The Luwu had been running riot for a decade. Their hateful "spiritual image masks" had long since spread throughout the continent. The

spiritual image masks made by Lin Chi himself could deceive an ascended spirit's, or even more powerful, eyes. Others couldn't imitate them, but it wasn't hard to take advantage and go fishing in muddy waters.

Soon after, having left the southern mines without anyone knowing, "Yao Qi" and "Chang Jun" returned without anyone knowing.

Yu Chang had spent the whole day tangling with Tai Sui. The two of them had traded insights and banter in a verbal contest of strength that had exhausted body and mind. When he left Tao County, Yu Chang simply looked a little worn out.

As soon as he walked out of the spiritual energy prohibition, he received a message on an immortal tool—a certain "collaborator" from the Land of Turmoil said: "We have infiltrated the southern mines."

"Eternal allies..." Yu Chang gave a cold laugh and extinguished the spiritual light on the immortal tool. His spiritual sense noticed the Qilin Guardsmen patrolling outside Tao County approaching, so he unhurriedly melted into a shadow.

Tai Sui, Xi Ping—

After events in the South Sea, Yu Chang's hatred for this person had nearly surpassed what he had felt for Yu Family Bend. He would fight him to the death.

Tai Sui was crafty, but he was only an ascended spirit, after all. Without the shed skin sword cultivator behind him, what was he?

And for that shed skin sword cultivator of the Xuanyin Mountains who had quelled its thirty-six peaks upon coming into the world, the only threat was Northern Li. Zhi Xiu must have thought of that and already sent someone to Northern Li for peace talks.

It wouldn't be hard at all to make their talks fall apart. All they had to do was muddy the waters in the southern mines.

As if giving himself up as a lost cause, Xi Ping tossed aside his senior's bearing and sat with one leg crossed over the other in the little house, eating all the peanuts and melon seeds Zhao Qindan had prepared for her young students. Then, under the gaze of the amazed young mistress, he patted crumbs off himself as though nothing were the matter. "Play it, let's have a listen."

So Zhao Qindan opened a stone bench and took a bizarre-looking machine from its fat belly. She fiddled with it briefly, and the machine began to spin with a *creak-creak*. Yu Chang's voice came from it.

A breeze does not last out the morning, a rain shower does not last out the day. Why should those good-for-nothings be the sky above our heads generation after generation...

Zhao Qindan listened for a while. "It's even clearer than I expected — what is it, Tai Sui, do you think this person is untrustworthy?"

"He's very trustworthy," Xi Ping said. "There's a one hundred percent chance he's planning to use me, then kill me. Alas... an ill-fated relationship of mine."

Zhao Qindan: "..."

He must be drunk!

"Use it when I tell you to." Xi Ping smiled at the horrified young mistress, then in a flash passed through the reincarnation wood and returned to Flying Jade Peak.

As soon as he came out of the tree, before he had found his footing, he froze—Xi Yue had woken up. He had just walked out of the mustard seed to meet him face-to-face across the disaster of the snow on the ground.

CHAPTER 193 - A Life of Regret (5)

Xi Ping planted his feet firmly in the ground to keep himself from stepping right back into the reincarnation wood.

The two of them looked at each other blankly. Xi Yue's somewhat confused gaze suddenly focused, and with a flash, he flitted over beside Xi Ping.

Having just established a foundation, his half-puppet body hadn't yet had time to adjust, and what was more, Xi Ping, knowing his own skills to be poor, had only made a core array for him, leaving the rest undone. Xi Yue couldn't quite control his spiritual energy and nearly crashed into the reincarnation wood tree.

Xi Ping shook out his sleeves and brought them together. Rime-frosted branches extended from the reincarnation wood tree, sending ice flying as they caught Xi Yue.

"Da-ge," Xi Yue asked urgently, struggling free of the branches somewhat clumsily and sticking out half his body, "how are things at home? Heaven's Design Pavilion suddenly..."

But the man under the tree froze. With a complicated and unreadable expression, he tilted his head back to look at Xi Yue in the tree.

Only when the ice Xi Yue had dislodged in his struggle fell on his face did the corners of Xi Ping's eyes move slightly, as if he had just come back to his senses. The tree branches relaxed and put Xi Yue down. As though nothing were the matter, Xi Ping said, smiling, "Still asleep? Don't you see that I'm here? What can be wrong?"

Apart from the memories at the moment the eliminate the past had been performed being blurry, there would be nothing wrong with

what was in Xi Yue's head. For him, the Marquis Manor was still the home that had taken in an unrelated half-puppet like him as an adopted son, his parents were still his fondest memories of the human world, and his alarm over what had happened in Dangu Lane had yet to disperse.

It was only that while other people all had loves and hates attached to them, had flesh and blood in his mind, Xi Ping alone had turned into a faded portrait. Xi Yue recognized him when he saw him and could recall past events when they were mentioned. It was just that he would no longer automatically appear in Xi Yue's heart, wouldn't move his emotions.

"Shifu came back." Xi Ping tapped the frost off him at a distance and briefly explained what had happened. Then he added, "Your injuries were too grave. The core array was broken. We caught a worm master to question, and he said that you had to establish a foundation, so shifu gave you his Way of the Heart. Don't forget to thank him when you see him."

Xi Yue at last came back to his senses and remembered that the person in front of him was the Marquis Manor's legitimate Viscount. Just now, he had been anxious, and this detail actually hadn't come to mind. He was a little embarrassed. Moving his arms and legs unfamiliarly, he respectfully stood with his hands together and said, "I will."

When your older brother admonished you, you had to listen deferentially to his instructions.

Suddenly, a hand fell on his head. Xi Yue dodged automatically, leaving that hand hanging in midair.

This was a beautiful hand. The evil cultivator who had wanted to snatch his body had admired it tremendously. Now, on the snow-capped mountain, the ice and snow had frozen it to a chilly ashen

pallor, like a dull marble carving. For some reason, when Xi Yue saw that hand hanging emptily in the air, there was a blunt ache in his heart for no reason—as if the sense of pain had been damaged at the skin there; there was pain deep down, which he could feel, but he couldn't tell concretely where it was coming from.

While he was at a loss, he was grabbed by the back of the head and dragged over.

“Huh, you dare to dodge?” Xi Ping wasn't at all disappointed. He pushed his head down hard. “Is your head a tiger's ass? It can't be touched?”

Xi Yue: “...”

“You stay on Flying Jade Peak for now, finish altering your arrays and practice the sword. Shifu isn't very good at teaching. When he's explaining proper things, it's always a little bit here, a little bit there, without tying it all together. You can ignore him. Flying Jade Peak is covered with his leftover sword cuts. At the established foundation level, if you can comprehend one of them, you'll be able to climb up a minor boundary. I won't have time to look after you for now, so work hard, you hear?”

At this point, Xi Ping seemed unable to restrain himself from glancing downward, seeming to be mocking himself—how strange that he would be instructing someone else to work hard.

With Xi Ping's arm around his neck, Xi Yue moved stiffly as he was dragged. Because he was a half-puppet, he very rarely got close to people; this was extremely awkward. But when your older brother was admonishing you, you just had to put up with it.

“The life of a sword cultivator is a hard one, but once you've learned it, you'll be good in a fight. Look at how impressive shifu is. Presiding at Flying Jade Peak, he can imprison anyone he wants to.

All the birds on the mountain don't dare to land..." Before he could finish, Xi Ping nimbly cast Xi Yue aside and dodged a jet of spiritual wind Zhi Xiu had sent toward him. He burrowed into another reincarnation wood tree, leaving behind these words: "Come to me if you have any problems, you know how to contact me, don't worry, I'll look after Mom and Dad!"

Zhi Xiu had seen him bump into Xi Yue head-on and hadn't meant to show himself... until his rebellious disciple had started spreading rumors about him in broad daylight.

Xi Yue stumbled after that last push and instinctively reached out to stop Xi Ping. But both a shed skin's blast and an ascended spirit's movements were too quick for him. The half-puppet who wasn't yet accustomed to his established foundation body only came up with a handful of wind. He looked down at his hand in confusion, as if he couldn't understand where that gesture had come from.

After using a few words to "fish up" his shifu, who had been playing dead, to come and take responsibility for Xi Yue, Xi Ping finally relaxed and sent a sliver of consciousness to the Land of Turmoil—he had succeeded in sticking a disguised tree under the Emperor of the East's window, and never mind freeloading off his spiritual energy every day, he also eavesdropped.

He hadn't expected the Emperor of the East to turn on his allies at the bottom of the South Sea and be sent running by A-Xiang's gunshot. His vital weapon, the Emperor of the East Halberd, had cracked a little while going up against Xuanwu, and after that blow, it was said that he had suffered serious damage to his cultivation. The structure of the "Three Heroes of Turmoil" was immediately broken. Right now, the Emperor of the East had gone to hide out and had only moved over his spiritual stones, immortal tools, and other such crucial objects, and all the major and minor evil cultivators under his command had also made themselves scarce.

The reincarnation wood tree had been left in the abandoned little courtyard.

The domain of the Queen Mother of the West and Lord Guang'an wasn't so easy to infiltrate, and the reincarnation wood trees around the southern mines had all been wiped out long ago. His field of vision was too limited... Annoying.

Xi Ping casually sent Wei Chengxiang a letter, then took a deep breath and went in his true body to the rear garden of the Marquis Manor.

On returning home from Southern Shu, before he could finish absorbing the changes to Jinping, he had learned that san-ge had entered the way of clarity and had charged into the spiritual mountains in the heat of the moment. The next time he returned, the whole of Jinping City had been pried up and put back anew.

Before, rather than saying he had brought his shifu home, it would be more accurate to say he had snuck into the Marquis Manor under the guise of "entertaining shifu." Everyone in the manor had been going in nervous circles around the shed skin sword cultivator, so no one had noticed that he was at a loss.

Over a decade had passed. He had no idea what face to put on in front of his parents. He was worried that his mom and dad would notice how he had changed, and he was also afraid that the rapid passage of time had left him unchanged.

Xi Ping came to the reincarnation wood tree but didn't dare to leave it at first. He only furtively looked out.

The Marquis Manor didn't know that Xi Yue had been injured. They only thought Heaven's Design Pavilion had official business. Seeing General Zhi leave, they had once again gone from chaotic tension to sluggishness, returning to normal.

In the garden Xi Ping had spent half the night laying out, the Marquis was performing the Five Animal Exercises,⁹⁹ and Madam Cui had taken up a corner of the garden and was drawing something by the light of the setting sun. She was getting on in years. Her hand shook, and her eyesight wasn't so good anymore, either. She was wearing reading glasses, and her technique was no longer so meticulous.

In the drawing, large swathes of colorful freehand brushwork sketched out the plants in the garden. The Marquis wasn't in it—the Marquis's beauty had faded with age, and passion had cooled, as well. He had been removed by Madam Cui from the category of "beautiful scenery." She was even annoyed that the rotten old man was so tactless as to block her line of sight entirely. Before the Marquis had finished a full set of Five Animal Exercises, he had been ousted and made to change places several times by his wife.

"So who's handsome, that eldest son of yours?" In front of juniors, the Marquis was solemn and reticent, but in front of his wife, he didn't dare to revolt. He shuffled aside slowly, quietly muttering in dissatisfaction, "He's plainly ordinary, he only looks something like me. That brat comes and goes without a word. He's getting more and more disgraceful... Oh, right, send someone to deliver a box of spiritual stones to Heaven's Design Pavilion. I hope Xiao Yue won't be away for several days again. General Commander Pang really knows how to take advantage of well-behaved people."

Madam Cui agreed, gave the order to a servant, then said, "Advancement is a good thing. Do you think everyone's like you, doing nothing but lazing around all day? I really got taken in when I married you. Move over, you're blocking my osmanthus flowers again."

“Back when you married me, I didn’t say I was planning on any civil or military accomplishments...”

Xi Ping felt the freezing of the hidden bones. They seemed to be telling him, *There is no more place for you here, why disturb this calm?*

Just then, he saw Madam Cui draw a few strokes on her paper. A person appeared amid the gorgeous gathering of flowers. This was a child running around holding a ball, with a flower on his head, blissfully frolicking through the garden.

Only one child had frolicked in this garden...

Xi Ping stared at that drawing for a long moment, suddenly thinking that he was being ridiculous—perhaps he had spent too long wearing masks and was unused to being bare-faced; he had actually been caught up wondering which face to use to come home.

No matter what face he put on, he was still that wretched child dripping pee and mud.

Xi Ping didn’t hesitate again. He strode into the courtyard, not concealing his movements at all, scaring off the bees, butterflies, and birds filling the garden.

He saw the Marquis stop dragging his feet, his bearing abruptly turning solemn, and couldn’t help laughing. He quietly reached out to put his hands in front of Madam Cui’s reading glasses. “Immortal lady, guess who?”

Madam Cui was startled and even dropped her brush. She blurted out, “Hey, Xiaobao, you rotten...”

Halfway through, she thought she'd slipped up and called the wrong name again and cut herself off out of habit. After a moment's pause, she finally turned her head, a little slow to catch up.

"Wrong." Xi Ping snapped his fingers. The child in the drawing began to move at the sound. With a flash of spiritual light, he flew out of the picture and landed on the ground, turning into a living, breathing little boy.

The little boy turned his head and pulled a face at the deadly serious Marquis. He rushed away howling like a steam donkey, then bumped right into Xi Ping and turned into fragmentary light, which ran along his arm to congeal at his fingertips and turn into a folding fan. Xi Ping covered his face with the "Peerless Beauty" written on the fan in large writing and said, laughing, "I'm a painted immortal."

In Jinping City, not waiting to be announced, Pang Jian charged into the Kaiming Department's headquarters. "Where's Bai Ling? Where have you gone to pass yourself off as funeral money? Get out here, quick, quick! What's going on? Zhou Huan has been missing for a whole day, what are we going to do about Guangyun Palace? What am I supposed to say to the courtiers? Should the Zhang family arrange a funeral? Who's going to stand in as emperor? ... Good heavens, don't tell me it's that aggravating demon boss of yours, or else I'm asking General Zhi to let me resign my post!"

Bai Ling commanded the whole nation's Kaiming Cultivators. With Zhou Ying gone, he had to make up his mind about everything himself. He was also hard-pressed. Hearing Pang Jian, he had just come out to meet him when he heard someone answer, "No need, General Commander Pang, I will not undertake government affairs in Jinping."

Bai Ling went rigid. He twisted his head and saw that a patch of mist had at some point floated over to the gate of the Kaiming Department. Like a photograph developing, it slowly congealed into

a person... Though they had been separated for only a few days, he felt that he hadn't seen him in half a lifetime.

Pang Jian had never seen a power like this. He instinctively put a hand on his talisman gun, until he got a clear look at the newcomer. "Zhou Ying? What's this power of yours...? Where did you come from?"

Bai Ling shook, then quickly lowered his head to hide his expression. "My lord."

"Heaven's Design Pavilion and the Kaiming Department together can handle government affairs. Follow the old system in everything. If there is something you do not know how to handle, you can send word directly to the Xuanyin Mountains. I need to take a trip to Northern Li."

This tone was still his familiar tone, but the half-demon was extremely sensitive to the fluctuations in human emotions. As soon as he saw him, Bai Ling perceived at once that he was different from before.

But there was an outsider present, so Bai Ling forced down the silt clogging his chest. "Yes, my lord, I'll go prepare..."

"No need," Zhou Ying said, taking a mustard seed from his sleeve, which he gave to Bai Ling. "The Kaiming and Luwu's spiritual seals are all inside. This time, I'll go by myself."

As if he had been struck by lightning, Bai Ling actually no longer cared that Pang Jian was there. All the blood abruptly left his face.

After just the brief span of time this conversation had taken, the Kaiming Department's affairs, numerous and jumbled as snowflakes, would no longer wait for him.

“Mr. Bai, Guzhou’s spiritual stone supplies are in a critical state!”

“The border inscriptions in Yuzhou have been damaged, many Western Chu evil cultivators are trying to cross the border, Heaven’s Design Pavilion doesn’t have any established foundations who can repair the inscriptions...”

“The Train Department has sent a representative to ask whether they can run the trains domestically. Passenger transport is one thing, but the seasonal freight can’t wait.”

“Notice of a flood!”

“The Ministry of Works...”

“Mr. Bai...”

Bai Ling’s ears roared. Twenty-some years ago, he had been only a half-demon orphan who had escaped to the human world. He’d had nowhere to go but to Zhou Ying. Since when had he become so deeply wrapped up by the mundane dust?

“The Kaiming Department cannot spare you,” he heard Zhou Ying say amid the clamor.

Bai Ling turned his head abruptly and found that during the time his attention had been called away by his subordinates, Zhou Ying had already turned back into mist.

Where others couldn’t see, a small box shot out a slip of paper. Zhou Ying scanned it, then fulfilled the past Zhou Ying’s wishes: “You’ve always managed the Kaiming and the Luwu very well. It is your achievement, so you can settle down here. They’re all relying on you... Xiao Bai.”

The speaker had dispersed before his words did. Pang Jian looked up. With his established foundation barrier dispelling eyes, he still could hardly see where Zhou Ying had gone.

A Luwu far off in the area of the Beijue Mountains received word and flew away on a sword to report to the person in charge of this branch.

Shortly thereafter, an exquisite visiting card brimming with Southern Wan style flew on a frosty wind into a cave dwelling in the Beijue Mountains and landed in front of a curly-haired man who was meditating.

Three days later, all of Western Chu's counties dispatched troops, and, in the name of "destroying evil," attacked the Sanyue Mountains. For the first time, the "spiritual image brand offerings" hidden in the depths of the great and wealthy families appeared in public.

In Southern Shu, Lingyun's inner sect dispatched an ascended spirit to put down the Miah rebels in the Three Islands. The legendary next life spiritual fish of Ancestor Tianbo appeared out of nowhere, bringing Wangge Luobao. All the panicked spiritual beasts on the Three Islands bent their heads to the sound of a flute.

Wei Chengxiang silently returned to the Land of Turmoil.

CHAPTER 194 - A Life of Regret (6)

The rain of the Land of Turmoil had washed the sky white.

The nation of He had been at the southeastern extremity of the southern continent, at its far end even further south than Shu's Three Islands, to the north sharing a border with Great Wan. The eastern part of Wan had no mountains to block the wind, so every autumn and winter, the cold wind from the northern continent came south without impediment, meeting the damp and warm sea breezes head-on, bringing several months of wind and rain to the Southern He Peninsula, with hurricanes rolling one after another over the ocean.

Before, while there had been a great deal of rain, there would rarely be instances of people and animals fleeing before a hurricane, as happened on Shu's Southern Islands. This was because the Lancang Mountain Range stood at the center of the peninsula like a stabilizing force. Whether the hurricane came from the East Sea or the South Sea, as soon as its edge touched the immortal mountains' great mountain array, it would be bounced away automatically. This was where the name "Lancang," green waves, came from.

While the great mountain array had now vanished, the gentle ridges still blocked the wind on either side. But the fertile earth at the feet of the mountains was covered in mutated weeds.

Grains could no longer be planted here. After the veins of the earth had been severed, the animals had degenerated and the plants had withered. Only a few lucky mutated species had survived and spread rapidly where they had no natural predators. Ninety percent of the mutated plants were poisonous. On their own turf, where their roots were intricately interwoven, not a single blade of foreign grass could live.

For the local Turmoilers, the only thing that amounted to a “crop” was a shrub called the “bramblefruit.” The fruit it produced was about the size of an apricot. It was bitter and bland, and it made your mouth swell when you ate too much of it. But it was easy to grow and filled your stomach. When people couldn’t find work, they had to rely on it to survive. Anywhere the Turmoilers congregated, they would plant large bramblefruit forests nearby.

Even reincarnation wood, a tree that could easily put down roots in a crack in a wall or next to water, became a “delicate flower” in this place. If you left off caring for it for a moment, it would be strangled by poisonous insects and parasitic vines. If it hadn’t been a master’s accompanying plant, it would have gone extinct long ago. It had only become plentiful in recent years. The Turmoilers liked reincarnation wood, viewing it as a sacred tree. When they saw one, they would protect it, pouring insecticide in a ring outside the tree to get rid of insects.

As the gradually congregating Turmoilers gained a means of survival, they stopped eating the bodies of their loved ones and began making “offerings” of these cherished bodies to the sacred tree—plants and animals were poisonous, so naturally people’s bodies were as well. The Turmoilers’ corpses buried beneath the trees would attract the persistent parasitic plants to “eat” the bodies first, which would kill off the rootless parasites.

All living things competed for survival in this abyss of suffering.

Here, every reincarnation wood tree growing in the wild was a grave marker... for more than one person.

Right now, a number of Turmoilers were holding a “funeral”: they buried the body beneath the tree, with two people to fill in the grave and the rest standing in a circle around the tree, holding hands and singing a funeral dirge, solemn and pious.

When the body's head was still exposed, without warning, the weather throughout the Southern He Peninsula changed.

Innumerable bolts of lightning came down from the sky, scattering throughout the wilderness of the Land of Turmoil. One bolt struck that tree with relentless accuracy. The reincarnation wood tree was instantly burned away. The Turmoilers surrounding the tree were all sent flying by the lightning strike. They landed in a scattered mess on the ground and didn't move again.

Before the lightning had dispersed, two figures wearing rain cloaks came down. Without a single look at the Turmoilers who had been struck by the lightning, they put down a talisman, destroying the remaining roots of the tree as well.

Then, from the withered roots, a red light spread down and around like ripples. Flame-colored vines appeared. When they touched earth, they began burrowing into it like leeches. These thin, flame-red vines were extremely swift. In the blink of an eye, they had covered everything in a hundred li radius. Where they passed, even the Land of Turmoil's native mutated plants withered and died.

The remaining grass roots, seeds, and insect eggs underground were all lapped clean by these monstrous vines.

This vine was called "wildfire." It was a forbidden technique of the way of medicine making, used specifically for clearing spiritual fields. Once the wildfire vine entered the earth, it would snatch away the vitality of all the living things in the soil. It could help "clear the field" before planting finicky medicinal herbs, completely destroying any seeds that had been blown in by the wind. Where it had passed, not a blade of grass would remain, like a wildfire on a prairie. This was how it got its name.

In the space of a few breaths, as far as the eye could reach, all the grass withered, and the leaves on the trees also began to change color. In less than a day, this would become a wasteland akin to a desert. Nothing could grow anymore.

When news of the unforeseen events in Southern Wan had gotten out, the southern mines had descended into chaos. But never mind the surging undercurrents between various powers; what practically everyone reached a consensus on right away was: as a matter of vital urgency, they had to wipe out reincarnation wood.

With the Lancang Mountains as the center, the Land of Turmoil had been split up into four pieces. Among the four nations, Chu, Shu, and Li had no common border with Southern He, and Great Wan, which did share a border, had the encampment at the very south of the Southern He Peninsula, cut off from their native soil by the three other nations' encampments. In other words, absent special circumstances, another country's sovereign territory would stand between the four nations' masters and their own encampments in the southern mines. Once the other nations upgraded their defensive inscriptions and activated their great arrays to create interference, it would be hard for anyone to control the southern mines remotely from within their own borders.

The "special circumstances" were reincarnation wood.

Starting from the ascended spirit boundary, an accompanying plant could swap places with its master's body at any time. No matter what obstruction there was in between, it couldn't block his gaze.

Zhi Xiu was no problem. A tree from a snow-capped mountain wasn't so easy to grow in a land of pestilence. And he had come in a hurry. He had just reached the Land of Turmoil when he had been called back by Dwarf Luo's complaint. He hadn't had time to get set up. The trouble was that tenacious crooked-necked tree, the reincarnation wood.

It shamelessly grew everywhere, not the least selective about water and soil. And as soon as Xi Ping noticed that people were getting rid of his accompanying plant here, it would be the matter of a moment for him to pass through a tree and arrive. So if they wanted to wipe out these trees, the four nations had to strike simultaneously while his attention was held by Great Wan's domestic affairs, deal a single conclusive blow, quickly clear the fields and the land, not letting a single sapling escape.

The cultivators of the four nations' encampments in the southern mines came out practically in full force. At the same time, they stood at battle-readiness, setting up all their immortal tools for monitoring fluctuations in spiritual energy. If they failed, as soon as the ascended spirit set foot in the Land of Turmoil, they would be able to sense his movements.

When the thunder passed, countless consciousnesses nervously observed the spiritual energy fluctuations in the surroundings. After the span of a whole incense stick, when the scorched scent of the lightning-struck earth had already been washed away by the rain and the wildfire vines had spread throughout the Land of Turmoil, the cultivators from each nation's mine encampment finally relaxed.

"It's done. Even if someone with unfathomable designs scatters seeds, no tree will grow in earth that's been fully occupied by the wildfire vine." When the cultivator who had placed the talisman spoke, a genuine Jinping accent came from his mouth. He glanced beneath the charred tree, then averted his gaze in disgust. "Trees that grow on corpses... This truly is an evil cultivator."

His companion sighed and said, "It's a lucky thing these monstrous Turmoilers have buried so many bodies under each tree. You just have to do a sweep with a filth-removing talisman, and it's obvious at a glance where these evil trees are. How else were we supposed to ferret out the evil cultivator's 'eyes' without missing a single one

in a desolate wilderness like this? We wouldn't have had time if we'd only used the wildfire.”

“The next step is to lock down the coasts, protect the southern mines. In our mines, those with the highest cultivation are still only early stage established foundations. I hear that back home, practically all the seniors of established foundation level or above have been imprisoned by that traitor to the spiritual mountains. You and I are only open-eyed cultivators, and we have the spiritual stone mines at our backs... With traitors on the inside and evil cultivators on the outside, what are we supposed to do?”

“The head supervisor has already gone to Northern Li's encampment to request aid. A great personage has come there from the mountains to oversee the situation. With her there, unless Zhi Xiu wants to fall out with Northern Li, he certainly won't dare to touch the southern mines lightly. Northern Li has three great shed skin sword cultivators, twelve ascended spirits, and it has the Wanshuang Sword's Sword Slave bearing the ancestor of all swords. No one on earth would dare to be Kunlun's enemy.”

“Aren't we getting ourselves in over our heads with them?”

“This is a great tribulation for the Xuanyin Mountains. Sheltering with Northern Li is a necessary but temporary measure. Suffering some losses after the fact is unavoidable. The southern mines are the greatest source of spiritual stones apart from the spiritual mountains. Now that the Xuanyin Mountains have come to grief, we must safeguard the southern mines. Once we make it through this crucial moment and get rid of the traitor, with so many capable seniors in the inner sect, there will be new shed skins.”

“It must be so. Like it was in the beginning at Xuanyin—four great shed skin elders, thirty-six peak masters, unrivaled under the heavens, better than those snow-dwelling...”

“Shixiong, take care!”

“Ah! This awful weather. The rain is like a steamer. It’s nearly cooked me.”

Fretting over great national affairs, the two of them didn’t so much as glance at the bodies of the Turmoilers all over the ground. They left on their swords.

A moment later came the sound of jumbled footsteps. A number of Turmoilers who looked like they were still children ran over and immediately saw the charred reincarnation wood and the bodies. They spent a long moment staring blankly at the disorder, then began thumping their chests, stamping their feet, and wailing.

While they were crying their hearts out, the rain pouring down on their heads suddenly stopped for a time. The children raised their heads and saw a piece of thin gauze descend from the sky. It floated down slowly and covered the bodies when it landed. Then a sumptuous carriage drawn by flying horses passed through the air. It didn’t stop.

Jade horses, a gilded carriage—this was the legendary equipage of the Queen Mother of the West.

All the Turmoilers had heard that this lady was a descendant of Southern He’s ancient imperial family, attended on by the few remaining people of He—not the Turmoilers, who had turned into monsters, but true and mighty humans.

She was the only hope for restoring the nation of He. Perhaps only when she succeeded would Southern He return to what it had been two hundred years ago. They wouldn’t live to see it, but there was probably some hope for posterity.

But where was their hope?

In the carriage, a hand blocked the Queen Mother of the West's gaze as she peered outward. She sighed and squeezed Lord Guang'an's wrist. "I'm all right... The people of Northern Wan have gone too far."

"With matters having reached this stage, there is no point in continuing to look. The Turmoilers cannot change back into humans," Lord Guang'an said. "We have planted our seeds. Our nation is separated from Northern Li by Wan. As long as those two countries are at each other's throats, they will have no more time to attend to the Lancang Mountains. We have already signed an alliance contract with Yu Chang. Western Chu will stand with us, and we will be able to cut off travel routes through the South Sea, so Southern Shu will be unable to reach us. Only if we take back the spiritual mountains and find a way to restore the veins of the earth will we be able to cure the poison in this earth. There will be many generations afterward."

Those engaged in great affairs hurried by, going to arrange for their "many generations afterward." Only a few Turmoiler youths remained standing blankly in the wasteland, looking at the gauze sheet bestowed by the merciful lady, not even able to cry.

When the jade horses and gilded carriage disappeared beyond the horizon, there suddenly came a sound of bells ringing from behind them. The Turmoiler youths turned their heads and saw a mule with a patchy coat pulling a worn-out cart, coming slowly out of the curtain of rain. The driver was a tall and skinny "fellow," weathered by wind and frost that even the driving rain couldn't wash away. On the cart was a big box over half the height of a person. Even the edges of the words "Silver Tray Lottery" on the box were blurred—this was Wei Chengxiang.

The Silver Tray Lottery was the favorite dream of every child who had grown up in the Land of Turmoil. If you came upon it once, you

could have a year of good luck. You only needed a small stone to play it once, and inside there was good food and fun toys, even life-saving medicines. All wishes could be granted.

Furtively saving up pretty stones to compete with each other was the only experience the children here had of childhood.

For the Turmoiler youths, seeing her was like seeing a family member. Crying out inarticulately, they surrounded her, howling like wounded wild beasts.

Sadly, the fantasy only went so far. It couldn't bring the dead back to life.

Wei Chengxiang patted each of them on the head, took out tools, and led the youths in burying the dead, as usual taking one stone from each of them. The small case in the Silver Tray Lottery spouted thin steam and began to revolve as though it were in need of repair. This time, the machinery produced supplies—a reincarnation wood amulet... and a map.

“Can you read a map?” Wei Chengxiang said very slowly in the Southern He language. “Go here, your own people will be there to look after you, I’ve already told them. If you run into danger, use the amulet to call for help. Your people are nearby, they’ll come rescue you when they hear... Hurry up.”

The Turmoiler youths crowded around her for a long time, then put the things away and reluctantly left. After going a long way, they turned back and saw that a fog lamp had been hung from the Silver Tray Lottery cart. The cart and the person were no longer clearly visible; only the milky white light saw them off.

Wei Chengxiang withdrew under her bamboo hat, slowly drank half a pot of cold wine in the heavy rain, used spiritual energy to string the little stones she had just collected together and hung them from

the charred reincarnation wood tree. She sent word to Xi Ping: “The four nations have joined forces in the Land of Turmoil to enforce martial law over the whole area while using over a thousand lightning talismans to clear away the reincarnation wood.”

There was no need for her to say this. When the reincarnation wood trees in the Land of Turmoil were blasted, Xi Ping had immediately sensed it.

He fed the cat he had just taken in and placed it in the courtyard, then looked at the Marquis Manor uneasily. He seemed a little care-laden. He passed through the reincarnation wood to Flying Jade Peak.

“Nothing strange about that. Now that they know the reincarnation wood is like me being there in person, it would be suspicious if they didn’t clear it away,” Xi Ping said. “That said, they ought to know that I can go over there by getting someone to toss out a seed. Striking the trees down is no use. What else did they do?”

Wei Chengxiang threw a reincarnation wood seed on the ground. This seed that ought to have started growing as soon as it got a chance seemed to dry up in the wind the moment it touched the earth. “They’ve planted wildfire vines in the Land of Turmoil.”

Xi Ping froze, then blurted out a question: “What scope? Will it affect the bramblefruit?”

Of course he knew what wildfire vines were. At his most incensed, he didn’t bother reading about any talismans or arrays that weren’t forbidden arts.

It was strictly forbidden to use wildfire vines in the countryside, because they would get out of control as soon as they spread. While it wasn’t hard to get rid of the vines, you had to use a special array to wipe out all of them. If only a single root remained, it would

soon rise from the ashes to set the prairie ablaze once again. Where the wildfire had crept, the poison in the soil and waterways couldn't be fully removed for forty-nine days. During this period, even plants growing in a flowerpot, not "in touch with the earth," would be entirely done for when they were touched by the local rain.

Wei Chengxiang didn't respond for quite a while. After a long moment, she finally said, "No scope. It must have spread throughout the whole Southern He Peninsula by now."

Xi Ping: "..."

What the hell! Just so they could burn him, they couldn't even leave people some grass roots or tree bark to gnaw on? Without plants, wouldn't the Land of Turmoil become a complete deathtrap?

"Gather everyone up as much as possible, don't leave anyone alone," Xi Ping said quickly. Scattered Turmoilers, finding nothing to eat, would return to eating people after three days of hunger. "I'll think of something for rations. Use the amulets as a medium, move some through the Law Breaker. I know the coastline has been sealed, but they can't have that many people, there'll have to be gaps. If it really won't work... if it really won't work, then divide the ones you can count on and the weak and elderly into batches and send them to the South Sea Hidden Realm..."

Wei Chengxiang, leaning against the mule-drawn cart, interrupted him: "But why is this happening?"

"I'm in Great Wan's encampment now. I've followed the Queen Mother of the West and Lord Guang'an all this way. They're rushing to the southern mines. They've changed their contact signals. I'm not sure who they're taking precautions against—it might be me... After all, the legendary 'Tai Sui' has suddenly turned out to belong to the spiritual mountains' orthodoxy." Wei Chengxiang paused,

then said, “The jade horses and gilded carriage didn’t land just now.”

The lady wanted to restore her country, but she didn’t want the Turmoilers. After all, in her mind, the citizens of Southern He shouldn’t be like the Turmoilers.

However good the South Sea Hidden Realm was, it was still a place of hiding, not seeing the light of day. The Southern He Peninsula was their native soil. Their country had been partitioned by foreigners and turned into a battlefield where immortals and demons grappled for resources. The former master was putting in painstaking efforts, but she already viewed them all as dead.

“I can try,” Wei Chengxiang said with a bitter laugh. “I might send a group of the weak and elderly, but the rest won’t necessarily be willing to go.”

The wintry wind of Flying Jade Peak dashed against Xi Ping, making his temples ache. “The South Sea Hidden Realm has a set of spiritual mountains at least, it’s not like being banished to some penal colony, right? One or two might not be willing to go..”

The Marquis had just categorically refused to move the Marquis Manor to the South Sea Hidden Realm. The old man was extremely obstinate, and he hadn’t given a reason, only brushed him off with “a falling leaf must return to its roots,” and then it was as if the crack between his lips had sealed up.

Xi Ping had reasoned with him in every possible way without success. He was used to being rude and had blurted out, “No matter where you’re buried, you still won’t cultivate into an earth immortal,” then been knocked aside with a teacup lid by the Marquis, whose mustache quivered; he was just preparing to commit the high treason of forcibly transplanting the “old tree” when

he was reduced to submission by a few light words from Madam Cui.

Madam Cui's current unhurried manner of speaking was very like his old grandmother's. She said, "We can go into that place, but you can't, and we would have to talk through a plant. When we missed you, we'd have to go to no end of trouble to get someone to take us out to have a look at you. As for you, you'd only be able to kowtow every year on Qingming out here, and we'd have no way of knowing whether you'd done it for real—how is that any different from being interred in the ancestral tombs? We two old things will be going to see our ancestors in a few years, anyway, so why take this unnecessary step? Xiaobao, once we're gone, you'll have no family left. Why are you in such a rush?"

Madam Cui was the master of the house. Under normal circumstances, she didn't lightly display her prowess. With a few words, she cut her unfilial son down to size and sent him fleeing, grief-stricken, back to Flying Jade Peak.

Now that Zhou Huan had disappeared and the Li and Zhang families had defected en masse, Zhi Xiu, along with Lin Chi, Wen Fei, and other such people, were combing through the domestic situation in Great Wan, deliberating what to do in the future. Xi Ping listened outside the cottage for a while. It made his head ache, so he didn't go inside. He sat on the courtyard wall which always seemed in danger of collapse, watching Xi Yue meditating in the snow to comprehend the sword heart.

Suddenly, a piece of information from the north came through the reincarnation wood.

Zhou Ying concisely and comprehensively said, "Wanshuang's Sword Slave has gone south. Once again I warn General Zhi, Zhaoting must not face Wanshuang."

“Then Northern Li had better not strike the first blow,” Xi Ping muttered. “The Queen Mother of the West and Guang’an are prudent people. To be making a beeline toward the southern mines now, they must have support. That bastard Yu Chang is colluding with them...”

The Land of Turmoil also contained the missing Emperor of the East. Given Xi Ping’s understanding of that conjunctivitis-sufferer, he wouldn’t only be carrying on with one side.

In Southern Shu, the Miah and Xiuyi clans had entirely fallen out. Wangge Luobao didn’t have the South Sea Hidden Realm and would have to find other resources. There was a one hundred percent chance he would set his sights on the southern mines. That barren place was something else... Would shifu really be able to restrain himself and watch while they all fought over the southern mines right in front of his eyes?

Xi Ping’s brow furrowed. He hesitated briefly, then sent another Heavenly Question to Yao Qi to tell the southern mines to look out for evil cultivators—Yao Qi seemed not to have listened to him last time; he hadn’t responded to the Heavenly Question. But he still had to warn him... It might do some good.

The Heavenly Question flew away with a snap of his fingers. Xi Ping stretched anxiously and leaned back. Before he had finished flexing his shoulders, the Heavenly Question he’d just sent flew back and vanished before his eyes—it couldn’t find its recipient.

Right now, the real Yao Qi and Chang Jun were locked up in a tiny underground prison. All their possessions had been removed—not even the few little jade stamps hidden in Chang Jun’s belt had been passed over.

They were both half-immortals, without essences. For drawing talismans and using powers, they relied entirely on spiritual stones.

Had they been elsewhere, in a pressing situation, if they really had no spiritual stones, they could have made do with draining spiritual energy from the surroundings, but there was nothing to drain in the Land of Turmoil.

There were inscriptions and arrays all around. They couldn't understand them, but their tense spiritual senses were clearly telling them that they were being watched.

The evil cultivators who had caught them were all established foundations. They really couldn't have escaped even if they'd had wings.

CHAPTER 195 - A Life of Regret (7)

Yao Qi had a miraculous brain. It was a pity he hadn't gone into playwriting.

Back at the Latent Cultivation Temple, if Xi Ping so much as gave him an extra look, he could automatically plot out over a hundred twists in his mind: if Xi Shiyong was glancing at him for no reason, he must be planning to make mischief; Prince Zhuang's evil forces would seize on that incident for their own ends. When the fox demon Imperial Consort's fox demon prince son had the power, he would usurp the throne and take over, and then wouldn't the Crown Prince, along with the Yao family, be decimated?

With the decimation of one's family near at hand, no one could be calm and breezy. That Yao Qi had only been scared into some bouts of diarrhea could simply be described as showing great heroic spirit.

This time, Yao Qi and Chang Jun had seen with their own eyes how those evil cultivators had put on spiritual image masks and taken on their own appearances. Even without Ziming-xiong's "prophetic" mind, you could deduce that those evil cultivators definitely wanted to use their identities to sneak into the southern mines.

They were both perfectly well aware of what their own colleagues' cultivation levels were. They certainly wouldn't be able to tell. Wouldn't those evil cultivators be like vipers in a mouse hole?

Moreover, all of this had been caused by the two of them running away from the southern mines!

Chang Jun clutched his head, feeling that his neck could hardly support the uproar of his thoughts. In his head there was now the suffering at the southern mines, images of the colleagues he usually

drank and chatted with dying wrongful deaths, and now himself being condemned, implicating all of his relations...

“No, Hongzheng-xiong,” Yao Qi pointed out when he had listened to his long-winded babbling, “I don’t think the two of us are going to be condemned.”

Chang Jun looked up at him, full of hope, waiting to hear his brilliant escape plan.

“The two of us are probably going to die here,” said Yao Qi.

Chang Jun: “...”

Ziming-xiong had in fact not been body-snatched.

Looking gloomy, Yao Qi comforted him. “I’m used to this kind of thing. It’s nothing.”

Wanting to cry, Chang Jun thought, You’ve even gotten used to being at death’s door.

Yao Qi sat curled up and hopeless in a corner as if he had bowed out of the struggle and was waiting for fate to trample over him. Staring at the inscriptions on the wall, he said, “I’ve spent all my life feeling uneasy, thinking again and again that I was about to die. It’s just come true now... Back at the Latent Cultivation Temple, Luo-shixiong wanted to kill me every day. It was only because of the sect rules that he held back and didn’t do it.”

Chang Jun said numbly, “Luo-shixiong wasn’t that murderous...”

“And there was what’s-his-name,” said Yao Qi, “he left too soon and didn’t get a chance to kill me.”

Chang Jun froze.

The slight unilateral “grudge” that had once existed between the Xi and Yao families had become a joke as the two respective princes had each found his place.

Concerning the hidden bones, the Latent Cultivation Temple’s stewards hadn’t explained the ins and outs to them in any great detail, but they still dimly knew that Xi Ping had done many things against his own will then. With age, the slight youthful conflict had gone. While Yao Qi didn’t often mention Xi Ping, when he did occasionally bring him up, he calmly said his name instead of using a label of childish hostility like “what’s-his-name.”

Why had he brought this up again? Had he been scared out of his wits?

Automatically, Chang Jun looked in the direction Yao Qi was looking and found that Yao Qi’s grim gaze was focused on nothing other than an inconspicuous inscription in an out-of-the-way place.

A fireproofing inscription routinely used by established foundations.

Back when Xi Ping had still been a mortal, in order to keep the evil cultivator from snatching his body, he had ordered the half-puppet who lived with him to steal an activating inscription from the fireproofing inscriptions at the Yanhai Building and use a tinderbox to ignite it—in order to keep other ignorant people from imitating him, the Latent Cultivation Temple’s official report had omitted this detail; only those who had been in the Qiu courtyard at the time knew.

“I really did quite dislike him... I can’t say clearly now whether it was my family’s influence, or whether I just plain couldn’t stand his mannerisms. I’ve thought sometimes, he and I actually have similar backgrounds, but he became the Flying Jade Peak’s only disciple in the inner sect. As for me, I’m hardly worthy of being among the

dregs at the southern mines. I don't even qualify to travel with the spiritual stone convoys. Are people really so different?" Yao Qi slowly turned his head and said to Chang Jun, "I've always wondered, if I were in his place, would I have dared to do what he did?"

"Yao Ziming?" The Latent Cultivation Temple's Luo Qingshi listlessly raised his cat's eyes.

Luo Qingshi had first been knocked silly by the steam donkey and then besieged by a gang of established foundations. He had been carried back to the Latent Cultivation Temple. Though he had taken elixirs now, he was still having difficulty sitting upright. He was leaning against two straw children, exerting all his willpower to receive his guest, making him look even more displeased—especially when he'd found out that the uninvited guest Xi Ping was already an ascended spirit.

Luo Qingshi was doubting everything he knew: could it be that the reason his cultivation had stagnated was that he wasn't wicked enough?

The Latent Cultivation Temple was at the edge of the Xuanyin Mountains, only a couple of steps away for an ascended spirit. As soon as Xi Ping had found that he had lost contact with Yao Qi, he had immediately run out to the outer sect—the Latent Cultivation Temple had the outer sect disciples' name tokens.

Xi Ping thought he couldn't remember him, so he said, "Personal name 'Qi,' from the class of the twenty-eighth year of Tai..."

Luo Qingshi waved a hand impatiently. His feeble drawl was even lengthier than usual. "Cut the crap, I know who Yao Ziming is. He was single-handedly responsible for fertilizing the spiritual fields out back for a whole year."

Xi Ping: "..."

Then Luo Qingshi took a key from his mustard seed and tossed it toward the door. When the key fell, a building comparable in height to the Qiankun Tower rose steeply from the ground.

"The name token store. All the outer sects are there," Luo Qingshi said indifferently. "Call whoever you're looking for yourself. If you can't get him, he might be dead."

Xi Ping cautiously asked, "Might be?"

Luo Qingshi raised his eyebrows. "It also might be because you're useless."

Xi Ping really did seem to have matured. He didn't get angry at all. He said mildly, "I understand. The disciple name token is imprinted with the disciple's own spiritual image and connected to his feelings. What you mean, Luo-shixiong, is that if Ziming-xiong himself really doesn't want to see me, his name token will also be in a hurry to avoid me."

Luo Qingshi rolled his eyes heavenward.

"No wonder you're having me call it, Luo-shixiong. It turns out that you aren't being unhelpful. You're worried that Ziming's name token won't dare to come out... What's to be done? I'm not that close to him, either."

As he spoke, Xi Ping walked up in front of the outer sect disciple name token store and touched it, seeming a little fretful.

Luo Qingshi watched, waiting for him to make a fool of himself. Sneering, he said, "Let's have a look at the methods of an 'inner sect master'..."

The veins on the back of Xi Ping's hand suddenly stood out. That consciousness far more concentrated than those of ascended spirits of similar grade came pelting down right onto the tower. This could be described as "the strength of one overcoming the skill of ten." The several-zhang-high tower was instantly pressed down to only three chi high. It trembled beneath the "great evil cultivators"'s hand; had it had legs, it would have knelt.

Xi Ping gently tapped on the forehead of the auspicious animal on top of the tower and said mildly, "Yao Qi, Yao Ziming, born in the twelfth year of Taiming, entered the Latent Cultivation Temple in the twenty-eighth year. Is his name token here?"

No sooner had he spoken than the tower itself hastily spat out a name token, not caring whether the name token itself was willing or not. Then it returned to the key without demur and scrambled back to Luo Qingshi.

Luo Qingshi: "..."

Xi Ping bent down and picked up Yao Qi's name token, which was trying to flee after the key. Seeing that the name token had abundant spiritual energy and was even quite vigorous, he knew that Yao Qi himself was also doing just fine. He relaxed, then casually smiled at Luo Qingshi. "Fortunately I have plenty of brute strength—and also, Luo-shixiong, according to Xuanyin's rules of precedence, you ought to be calling me 'shishu.' But it's all right, I'm not particular, we can each say what we like."

When Su Zhun heard the news and rushed over to Chengjing Hall, he saw Luo Qingshi, who hadn't even been able to sit upright for long periods before, fly up red-faced from anger on his sword and even roar powerfully, "Xi Shiyong, you've let power go to your head!"

Su Zhun turned pale with fright when he saw the situation. “Luo-shixiong, take it easy and give your wounds time to heal, haste makes waste, you mustn’t take medicine too strong for you to handle!”

Luo Qingshi flew into a rage. “You’re the one who’s been taking medicine!”

Xi Ping stepped lightly onto the needlepoint top of a slender bamboo tree, like a leaf moving on its own. He “dutifully” saluted Su Zhun. “Elder Su, my shizun sends his regards and asks after your health.”

“I’m pretty well, and grateful for his concern,” Su Zhun said falteringly, hand pressed to his chest. “I suppose your shifu has quite a few white hairs now?”

“He’s in fine health. Set your mind at ease, Luo-shixiong hasn’t taken any harmful medicine, he was just so overwhelmed with joy at seeing me that a miracle took place.”

A talisman flew toward him. Luo Qingshi said, “That’s—bull—shit!”

An established foundation talisman was like being tickled. Xi Ping didn’t even turn his head. He waved his hand, and the talisman stopped in midair and warped. Xi Ping collected the spiritual energy from the talisman like coiling string. As soon as he touched it, he knew that Luo Qingshi’s wounds weren’t serious. He was only exhausted from draining his essence, and there was a knot in his heart puzzling him; his Way of the Heart wasn’t very steady.

“Luo-shixiong is worthy of being the Latent Cultivation Temple’s guide. It’s been many years since I’ve seen such an accurate talisman.”

“I’ll show you some more accurate talismans!”

“Hey, come down here and talk it out, gentlemen! Have a heart, come back to earth, sit down... Luo-shixiong, think of your health!”

Xi Ping ran all around the courtyard taking Luo Qingshi for a stroll, clearing out his essence. Seeing the gloom on Luo Qingshi’s face dispersed by vigor, he at last abruptly restrained his mischievous grin.

He landed in front of Chengjing Hall and saluted Luo Qingshi almost solemnly. He said, “I’ve seen quite a few sages over the years. Sages know everything under heaven, and each of them indeed has their own way. Only their ways are different, like fleeting clouds to me. Among the immortal mountains, of those who have passed on teachings to me and dispelled my doubts, there have only been two and half people...”

Luo Qingshi, panting, heard these last words and thought this rude brat was once again playing dirty. He was just about to get worked up.

Xi Ping realized what he had said and quickly backtracked: “You’re one, my shizun is another, and there’s another senior who, because I was born too late, I was unable to meet in life, so I can only count her as a half.”

Luo Qingshi finally realized that he was actually in total earnest. He was slightly stunned.

Xi Ping shook Yao Qi’s name token. “As I see it, half of the Xuanyin Mountains’ dignity is held up by you, Luo-shixiong.”

Then he saluted and asked to be excused. When he was just about to leave, he heard Luo Qingshi call him back. “I’ve heard that the ‘way of death’ has no Way of the Heart. Is that true?”

Because of the unique method of the hidden bones and being crushed to dust, the immortal mountains usually called Yuan Hui's ungovernable way the way of death.

Xi Ping laughed, silently acknowledging it.

Luo Qingshi was silent for a moment, then suddenly said, "Then you are very fortunate... Ah, the heart is a servant to circumstance..."

Xi Ping gazed at him briefly—on learning that Luo Qingshi had openly rebelled against the "heavenly edict" from his Way of the Heart and sent Zhi Xiu a message, Xi Ping had known that his Way of the Heart must be even more contrary to his nature than Princess Duanrui's. A person of the orthodox way rebelling against his Way of the Heart was just like Yu Chang rebelling against his spiritual image brand, a terrifying mortal combat held in silence.

So Xi Ping didn't pick up the topic he had raised with his "you are very fortunate." He glanced north. "Sooner or later, the day will come when the shackles will be destroyed. Take care of yourself, Luo-shixiong. Wait and see."

He vanished where he stood, then sent Zhou Ying a message: "In the current battle, a struggle over the southern mines is unavoidable—our country's mines have already been infiltrated by evil cultivators, and the other countries' mines aren't necessarily clean, either. That Sword Slave or whatever is a stranger in a stranger land. It'll be hard for her to avoid getting caught up in things. If shed skin sword cultivators come to blows, won't that harm heaven's order? It would be better for them to be in the open while we stay in the shadows. If someone sows discord, we'll pretend to have a falling out, lure out all the evil cultivator forces in the Land of Turmoil. How does that sound?"

Zhou Ying responded very quickly: "Which side has struck so quickly?"

Xi Ping considered. "I think it must be the Queen Mother of the West. Her name is Yang Wan, a former inner sect disciple of Lancang, an ascended spirit medicine cultivator and descendant of Southern He's imperial family."

Yao Qi hadn't received the second Heavenly Question; there were two explanations for this: either the Heavenly Question he had received before had been discovered, and the southern mines had requested a master to come and block Heavenly Questions; or he himself had been locked up.

The likelihood of the former wasn't great.

Yao Ziming had been narrow-minded when he was young, and there was no saying whether he had improved now that he was older, but while he might be timid, he had always been highly wary of others. Just on that point, it was impossible that he had no ideas of his own. Even if he hadn't trusted the anonymous Heavenly Question, he still wouldn't have been so stupid as to tell others about it. The Heavenly Question was the Xuanyin Mountains' most highly encrypted communication immortal tool. As long as Yao Qi wasn't stupid enough to show it off himself, it would be very hard for others to become aware of it.

As for the latter...

When Empress Dowager Zhang had ordered Empress Yao to send Yao Qi a letter through a downgraded immortal tool, it had been like making an announcement to the southern mines. She knew that no matter what the state of the fight among the four big families, at this moment crucial to the survival of the immortal mountains, everyone's standpoints would be unanimous. The southern mines' people wouldn't have attacked Yao Qi.

Then there was only one possibility: Yao Qi had trusted him, hadn't listened to his sister, and had run off, not expecting to be possessed by the god of misfortune and captured along the way.

Had those who caught him been people from the other immortal mountains, they ought to have notified Southern Wan's mines—there were Luwu around the mines who were disguised as traveling merchants, always mingling in that area, and they had yet to hear of the mines "losing" anyone.

So most likely it had been a force of evil cultivators that had captured Yao Qi and sent one of their own to pass themselves off as him to sneak into the mines. Had Yao Qi fallen into Wangge Luobao, Yu Chang, or the Emperor of the East's hands, he would be dead. Those three, the dregs of society, were each more ruthless than the next. If they had caught a young half-immortal disciple, they would certainly have brought out the works—soul-searching and silencing.

Only Yang Wan, who had come from an orthodox sect, would hold back, avoid indiscriminate slaughter.

Xi Ping had hung around the Land of Turmoil for eight years. While he hadn't had direct contact with the Queen Mother of the West, A-Xiang had been with her all along. And the Emperor of the East had always been furtively keeping an eye on the Queen Mother of the West's every move—was there anyone on earth who could understand a person better than an ex-husband driven by bitter hatred?

In fact, there was: the vulgar sapling who had been eavesdropping outside the windows of both the ex-husband and the concerned party.

If it was Yang Wan...

Xi Ping said, “What a sword cultivator fears most is an untraceable poison miasma. My guess is that that will be the Queen Mother of the West’s first move. San-ge, convey that to Northern Li as a show of our good faith in working together. If my guess is wrong... then we’ll give you to Northern Li as collateral. With your talents, if you spend a few years herding sheep in the Beijue Mountains, you’re certain to bring the Kunlun Mountains tumbling down.”

Zhou Ying ignored him. He picked up a cup of tea being warmed on a specially-made heater to warm his hands.

Right now, the Land of Turmoil was unbearably stuffy, Great Wan’s Jinping was going from the end of summer to the beginning to autumn, and in the Beijue Mountains, the hoary winds had already begun to blow.

Flying Jade Peak was also a snow-capped mountain, but that kind of cold was nothing to a cultivator. It would only chill their flesh a little. With spiritual energy to protect them, it wouldn’t feel unpleasant. But the north wind blowing from the unpeopled Beijue Mountains seemed to want to freeze your very essence. Cultivators below an ascended spirit would freeze to death overnight if they hadn’t brought a special warming immortal tool.

In precise Northern Li language, Zhou Ying unblushingly bragged to the Crown Prince Snow Wolf in front of him, “The Land of Turmoil is Demon Country, with three great ascended spirits and hundreds upon thousands of evil cultivators under them, including those who cleaned out the Lancang Sect’s secret arts in Qiu Sha’s hidden realm. Some are in collusion with Chu and Shu. They will be hard to guard against. Apart from the Luwu, no one can get a handle on these people’s movements.”

The Crown Prince Snow Wolf—the Blind Wolf King’s heir—hesitantly scrutinized this young man... Southern Wan’s Prince Zhuang of the

First Rank, an “infant” who had only set foot in the cultivation world a few years ago.

“As far as I know, your esteemed nation’s Luwu are only a group of open-eyed cultivators from common backgrounds. They were established less than twenty years ago.” From top to bottom, the only part of the Crown Prince Snow Wolf that curled was his hair. His words were as straight as a cudgel. “The waters are muddy in Demon Country. After two hundred years, the four nations’ mining encampments still do not dare to say they have ‘cleared the water.’ Do not boast.”

There was one good thing about the way of clarity, and that was that it would show no weaknesses under the scrutiny of an ascended spirit sword cultivator showing off his talents—never mind his gaze; even if the Snow Wolf really had pulled his sword, Zhou Ying would still have been as unmoved as a mountain, carrying his magic trick of getting something for nothing through to the end.

He unhurriedly drank a few mouthfuls of crude tea, scalded the warmth back into his lungs, then calmly said, “Beware of poison miasma—that is our show of good faith. Future information won’t come free. Take me to see the Blind Wolf King, and recommend me to the Kunlun Mountains.”

CHAPTER 196 - A Life of Regret (8)

The Luwu's roots in the Land of Turmoil were indeed not deep enough. A very practical reason for this was not enough money.

The Kaiming and the Luwu's expenditures had always been very tight. The Luwu went around cheating and swindling on the black market, and, for the sake of their cover identities, had also purchased quite a few legitimate properties and businesses. Putting these two sides together, they could just make do and call the books balanced.

But expenses in the Land of Turmoil couldn't be compared to those in other places.

When mortals went to the Land of Turmoil, it would damage their health over time, so while they couldn't cultivate, they would still provide themselves with spiritual stones to maintain their health. Cultivators—especially open-eyed cultivators without an essence—had even more sensitive constitutions. The cost in spiritual stones for the Luwu's operations in the Land of Turmoil was tenfold and more what it was elsewhere.

Even in Southern Wan, where the price of spiritual stones had been dropping steadily in recent years, the market price of one liang of ordinary white spirits was still nearly a thousand liang of silver. However massively profitable business in the Land of Turmoil might be, it still wasn't enough for tenfold spiritual stone consumption, and the most remunerative snow wine business was against Zhou Ying's taboo; they couldn't touch it.

Furthermore evil cultivators “going it alone” were rare here. Even Wei Chengxiang, a lone wolf who had never acknowledged herself to be an evil cultivator, had been compelled to follow the local customs and join the Queen Mother of the West. The evil cultivator

gangs were extremely close-knit. The situation in Wild Fox Country, where each side only did business without inquiring into each other's background, was simply unimaginable here.

Thus far, the Luwu who had been planted there years ago could only operate around the mines, buying and selling supplies, making themselves familiar fixtures in all the mining areas.

The Territory Map melting into the veins of the earth and the Ways of the Heart of common origin making mischief had happened in a single night. It had been too sudden. No one had been prepared.

Now that the battlefield had suddenly moved to the Southern He Peninsula and the reincarnation wood had been destroyed, there were no eyes on the Three Heroes of Turmoil...

Xi Ping sighed. Given his understanding of Zhou Ying, the tone san-ge was currently taking with Northern Li was certain to be "The Luwu already have the whole of the Southern He Peninsula in their grasp, nothing has happened that I did not foresee."

Looking at Zhou Ying, he seemed to be the sort of steady person who schemed before acting, who was always looking three steps ahead, keeping himself hidden behind the scenes... but in fact, that was completely a false front. Xi Ping had always thought that in san-ge's bones lay a latent daredevil tendency. When others called something "reliable," they'd have to be seventy or eighty percent sure, but with him, if "reliable" could have meant fifty percent certainty, Bai Ling would have gone to burn incense in gratitude. Had he not been born into the Zhou family, the profession of gambling addict might have been tailor-made for him.

But they had let him go, and they couldn't haul him back. What else was there to do? He'd just have to do his best to lie and swindle, cover for him.

Xi Ping suddenly realized that, since losing the burden of one of them being an “older brother,” the “troublemaking” and “covering” roles in their relationship had been reversed.

“Not for nothing is the way of clarity the start of the three thousand paths of the Great Way. Very useful,” he thought. “If I’d known it was like this, I’d have gone for it, too.”

Xi Ping felt very conscious of the passage of time, so he “suited his image to his sentiments,” changing to a sedate posture—sitting cross-legged on his sword, he flew back to Flying Jade Peak.

That night, after being constantly on the move for several days, Wei Chengxiang’s consciousness entered the Law Breaker space in Tao County. Zhao Qindan had already prepared a batch of supplies and was waiting for her.

“The Luwu stored these in Tao County. Take them to meet the emergency for now.” Zhao Qindan filled up her empty wine pot. “If it’s not enough, I’ll think of something else. Let me know if you’re short on anything. Those are Senior Tai Sui’s orders.”

“We need the coal used by the factories. If they start fighting, they won’t care whether the Turmoilers live or die. They might have to move underground, and the ventilation machines burn coal. Also, medicine—poisonous insects and pestilence grow easily there. An epidemic is likely to break out when a large number of people are gathered together.” Wei Chengxiang chugged a mouthful of wine. Sighing, she said, “Finally I’ve warmed up.”

Curiously, Zhao Qindan said, “Is it cold enough on the Southern He Peninsula to freeze you?”

Wei Chengxiang felt cold at heart. She had grown up stumbling along after her grandfather, without a mother. She had an instinctive yearning toward adult women. The Queen Mother of the West was

both powerful and gentle, reliable yet never arbitrary. All the people of the former Southern He were willing to lay down their lives for her. Wei Chengxiang had thought that if the goddess who blessed the common people in folklore and plays had had a human face, she would have looked like the Queen Mother of the West.

Wei Chengxiang had sometimes even imagined that if the Queen Mother of the West restored her nation, it would be a wonderful place. Chief Li and the others might be able to go home.

But it turned out that they didn't travel the same path.

She didn't explain it to Zhao Qindan, only smiled with some self-mockery, then casually changed the subject. "Why are you still saying 'Senior Tai Sui'?"

While tailing the Queen Mother of the West, Wei Chengxiang had heard her fill of gossip concerning the shocking battle in Jinping. When it came to whatever peak's disciple or whatever Marquis's son, she couldn't really tell these Jinping bighats apart, but there was one thing she had understood from people's shocked accounts: just as she had faintly guessed, this "senior master" was no "senior" at all.

He was probably the same age as Zhao Qindan. They might even have been classmates at the Latent Cultivation Temple.

It was no wonder that brat who always talked a cartload of nonsense became unusually silent and "dignified" and kept his voice down every time he saw Zhao Qindan.

The daffodil had spent fourteen years refusing to bloom, pretending to be a bulb of garlic, to the point that he had become a garlic spirit!

Western Chu was unstable, Zhao Qindan had too much to do; she hadn't had time to fill up on gossip, so she asked in confusion, "Oh?"

What should I be saying?”

Wei Chengxiang looked at her tenderly. “Come, I’ll give you the details. Don’t be angry when you hear. This Tai Sui, he’s..”

A total bastard.

Before she could finish speaking, she was interrupted by a long series of coughs, as if someone had just eaten a whole feather duster and was coughing it up.

A certain man who had spent over a decade taking advantage of others entered the Law Breaker with his consciousness, still wearing a fox mask over his face.

Zhao Qindan politely greeted him: “Senior.”

Wei Chengxiang said nothing, looking with a false smile at the mask on his face, which looked like a last-ditch effort.

“Inedia pills and antidote pills from Rosy Cloud Peak.” Xi Ping tossed some pill bottles to her. “The Queen Mother of the West is skilled at poisons. The antidote pills are in case someone is accidentally infected. Just take the inedia pill, a single pill will let you not eat for a month. If the mortals really can’t get enough to eat, you can dissolve a bit in water for them to drink, but only in the event of an emergency. They can’t take it long-term, it’ll damage their organs.”

Wei Chengxiang took the medicine, but she didn’t thank him. She kept looking at him with that false smile.

Xi Ping took one look and saw that it was no good counting on her to keep silent out of respect for the favors he had done her, so he submitted himself to the situation. In front of Zhao Qindan, he looked like nothing was the matter, squarely maintaining his senior

master bearing. Privately, through the reincarnation wood amulet Wei Chengxiang carried, he got straight to the point and said, “Aunt, I was wrong.”

Wei Chengxiang choked on a mouthful of wine. This garlic spirit was truly no ordinary human!

The most amazing thing was, Xi Ping’s two faces were completely different. Outwardly, he was still saying in deadly earnest, “Slow down. How many Turmoilers have you taken in over there? How many are unwilling to leave?”

Bearing dignified, tone sedate, just as if he hadn’t been the one calling her “aunt” just now!

Wei Chengxiang didn’t have his acting range. She coughed until she was red in the face.

“Don’t rush.” The young mistress who had been left in the dark patted her anxiously on the back. “We haven’t finished removing the spiritual image brands from Yu Chang’s subordinates yet. If it comes down to it, we can extort another payment from him. Heaven always leaves a way out.”

Xi Ping solemnly chimed, “Yes, that is true.”

“Ahem...” Wei Chengxiang couldn’t look at him. “I-I’ve filled up a dozen villages. The underground city previously used to shelter from disasters has been opened up. I figure it can hold some tens of thousands of people. People have been streaming in to take shelter these last few days.”

As she spoke, her voice turned gloomy. “The newcomers don’t know the ins and outs, and I’ve asked all those who were with me before. It’s about what I figured. There aren’t many who are willing to leave their native soil for the South Sea Hidden Realm, less than

one in ten. Some are afraid of traveling over the ocean, some are unwilling... Actually, if this hadn't happened, they wouldn't have been this opposed. The Turmoilers are born deficient. They do indeed lack intellect. But they don't lack souls. They have feelings, and they understand grief and anger."

"If they won't go then they won't go." Xi Ping's voice cooled. "The Southern He Peninsula is their territory to begin with. With random nobodies all coming to fight over it, they ought to have a say."

Saying so, he took something out and offered it to Wei Chengxiang. "Find this thing's master."

Zhao Qindan recognized it at a glance. "Yao Ziming's disciple name token?"

"Yes. I believe he's fallen into the hands of the Queen Mother of the West. When the name token approaches him, there will be a special reaction. When you find him, you'll have found where the Queen Mother of the West and her people are hiding," Xi Ping said. "It ought to be within the scope of Great Wan's mining area."

The Land of Turmoil was different from other places. With the veins of the earth severed, outside of the mining areas, there was practically no spiritual energy. If someone had no spiritual stone resources, you could outwait them to death. So all sides wanted to go on the offensive. Whoever first took control of the spiritual stone mines' resources would occupy an invincible position.

Right now, the only cards Xi Ping held were the Luwu and the Turmoilers. Taking part in a competition like this would be self-destruction. Great Wan would have to be the first to "bow out."

"An ant can't shake a tree, and a mantis can't stop a carriage. Fortunately, there are many kinds of insects in the world," Xi Ping said. "In this game, we'll be the fleas biting the wild beasts."

Remember, we only have a chance because they don't see the Turmoilers as people, so we must act in total secrecy, or else the small villages we've spent so many years building up will take them only a single talisman to destroy."

In Great Wan's southern mines, as usual, "Yao Qi" carried out his daily assignment: patrolling and inspecting the mines' safety equipment and lighting.

The new Moon Plated Gold could save a large quantity of spiritual stones. Many of the machines in the southern mines had been changed to the New Gold. This new equipment was very easy for a cultivator to inspect. One sweep with your consciousness, and you would know at a glance whether the machine was in good condition or not. There was no need to carefully study a lot of arrays. If a cultivator who did this kind of trifling work wasn't purposeful, their cultivation would never advance; there was absolutely no future in it.

Only someone like Yao Qi, who had no backing, would be assigned this kind of work.

Today's "Yao Qi" dawdled even more than usual. Seeming extremely lonely, he touched practically every machine. When he met a colleague on the way, he only nodded hastily, deliberately avoiding their gaze—no one took notice; he was always like this.

From a distance, "Yao Qi" exchanged looks with "Chang Jun."

The machines that didn't stop for a moment spat out snow-white steam, which fell on a miner getting off work. This miner felt out of nowhere that he had something in his eyes and carelessly rubbed them. The invisible miasma had silently stuck to him.

The spiritual stone mines were under strict surveillance. When they got off work, all the miners had to go to the supervisor on duty that day to be "searched," in order to prevent smuggling. This miner

walked into the inspection array as usual. There was no reaction from the array. The frosty-faced supervising cultivator next to the array nodded at the miner, indicating that he could go. The miner respectfully bowed to the Exalted, who naturally didn't return the salute.

When the two of them passed by each other, the mine supervisor's nose, bearing his spiritual sense, acutely smelled the odor of sweat coming off the miner. He couldn't resist frowning. He covered his nose and mouth with his hand.

The miasma infecting the miner floated toward him on the breeze.

A miasma that the Queen Mother of the West had personally fabricated wouldn't necessarily have been noticed by an ascended spirit cultivator of the same grade as her, never mind the cultivators at the southern mines with their meager cultivation.

The miasma in the steam was carried all over by the miners coming and going through the spiritual stone mines and infected the cultivators. The miasma put down roots as soon as it came upon a living person. It unnoticeably extracted weak spiritual energy from their bodies, strengthening, passing quickly from person to person.

Each mining area contained scattered traveling merchants and cultivators passing information to each other. The miasma quickly spread outward from Great Wan's mining area.

The mine envoy of Northern Li's mining area hastily walked into the mine office. Mine envoy was the foremost position in the mine's hierarchy. The guard at the gate gave him an orderly salute. He had come to his own domain, but he didn't go inside, only deferentially saluted at the door. "Lord Sword Slave."

A person answered him in the Li language from inside: "Yeah, come in."

This was a somewhat strange female voice.

The Li language was pronounced far back in the throat, making their voices sound deeper than those of people from other places, but this person's voice was a little unnaturally high, as if there was a reed in her throat.

The mine envoy cautiously inspected his hair and clothing, then walked in demurely.

Inside the room, there sat... a "mountain."

The people of Northern Li lived in company with wind and snow. They were usually tall and sturdy. This mine envoy himself was a powerful and robust man with thick hair and beard, but the person sitting in the room was even taller than he was standing. The arms hanging down at her sides were as thick as the mine envoy's thighs. The veins were exposed on hands so big that they could squeeze a person's whole head when spread. There were innumerable sword cuts on the palms.

This "giant"'s broad shoulders had to be over three chi wide, but on them was set a normal-sized human head. Her face was covered in scars, with raised flesh around each scar, cutting her features into ribbons. On her back was a heavy sword with only its hilt exposed.

All the warmth in the surroundings had been sucked away by that sword. It was plainly the most sultry season on the Southern He Peninsula, yet inside the room it was cold enough to make you shiver.

The mine envoy only took a hasty glance, then didn't dare to look again—that was Kunlun's Wanshuang Sword, the chief of the world's three famous swords, the wisest and most ancient of weapons.

With his cultivation level, his spirit was already aching from a single glimpse. If he stared at it, he might lose his mind.

After Kunlun's founder, the Sword Ancestor, had "ascended," Wanshuang would take no other master. Only the Sword Ancestor's sword-bearing half-puppet could pick it up. Once the sword-bearing half-puppet had gone in their former master's wake, Wanshuang had been forced to seal itself.

Without Wanshuang, there was always a link missing in Kunlun's great mountain array, which the shed skin masters had to take turns making up with their essence so they could resist the frigid cold coming from the northwest. The sword cultivators of later generations came in waves, but not even the shed skin elders, the Sect Leader included, could do anything with Wanshuang. That ancient sword was exceptionally disdainful, unwilling to yield to any common fool.

Until a ruthless person appeared.

This individual blazed a new trail. Using the core array of the Sword Ancestor's sword-bearing half-puppet as a model, she refined her own near-ascended spirit sword cultivator body into a half-puppet body. This was unheard of. It shook the whole Kunlun Sect. And she really did manage to survive. Since then, she had become the successor to Wanshuang, calling herself the Sword Slave.

Everyone in Kunlun was respectful to her on the surface. Behind her back, they all feared her—anyone this ruthless was somewhat inhuman.

The mine envoy was scared stiff every time he spoke to her. Almost holding his breath, he said, "Lord, I just saw off the representatives from Southern Wan. Just as the person from Xuanyin said, an evil cultivator's miasma was on them. It seems that power really has

changed within Xuanyin. The southern mines believe themselves to be the orthodox ones, and Zhi Xiu, who has occupied the Xuanyin Mountains, isn't ready to deal with them. The new and the old groups are both roping us in."

The Sword Slave didn't so much as look up. "They're seeking shelter."

The mine envoy lowered his head. "Yes."

"I came south because I wanted to have a look at this supposed two-hundred-year-old shed skin Sword of the South... Ah, before I could come across the sword, the man has given us a peace offering. It's true that there are no sword cultivators in the south." It took the Sword Slave some effort to talk. Her words came out one at a time. "Notify the Blind Wolf King not to mingle with them. We're not missing these good-for-nothings' support. Tell that 'Porridge' or 'Soup'¹⁰⁰ or whatever his name is to scam. If the Wan can't hold on to their mines, then let's take them. Who'd say no to more spiritual stones?"

CHAPTER 197 - A Life of Regret (9)

The Blind Wolf King seemed to be neither old nor blind. He didn't even look much like a person from Li. Large patches of shadow cut across his lean face. His flat wrist wasn't even as wide around as a person's grasp. Its protruding tendons and bones were connected to a bloodless hand. He was nearly buried in his thick fox-fur robe.

Amid Northern Li's crowd of big, strong-featured faces, with him sitting across from Zhou Ying, you couldn't say which of them was frailer. They looked rather like two sickly sprouts that had climbed out of the same salt lick.

Zhou Ying had grown up in Guangyun Palace. Each and every one of his movements was cultured and regulated. Sitting there, he still had some backbone. But this Blind Wolf King was like a noodle that had been soaked overnight and was coiled up all limp and moldering. He could hardly keep his eyes open. "Who are you to Xi Zhengde? You look rather alike... Not the eyes, though."

"His nephew," Zhou Ying answered.

"Oh, no wonder," the Blind Wolf King mumbled indistinctly, as if he had just drunk snow wine, then languorously said, "That little devil. He sure knows how to live. He's had a pretty peaceful time these last few years. He only used up that sword attack I gave him just now, when Jinping got turned upside down. Who did he stick with it?"

"Western Chu's Heartless Lotus," said Zhou Ying.

The Blind Wolf King froze, his eyes instantly opening. He stuck a slender neck out of his fox-fur robe. "Who? That eyelash-batting monster from Western Chu?"

Seeing Zhou Ying nod, the Blind Wolf King suddenly laughed loudly. His naturally thin willow leaf brows were more precise than if they had been plucked, but the outlines of his features were very deep. His appearance lay somewhere between effeminate and sinister. But this laugh was very bold. “Your Xuanyin Mountains’ shed skins and ascended spirits are as thick on the ground as dumplings boiling in a pot, you’ve got those Heaven’s Design—Earth’s Chickens—whatever running around all over the place... and in the end, none of them caught that baldy. Instead, he got stabbed by a sword attack I passed off to a mortal to protect himself with eight hundred years ago?”

Zhou Ying cupped his hands. “I have not yet expressed my thanks, Wolf King.”

“No need for thanks.” The Wolf King waved a hand. “I’m not sure I’d be able to catch the Heartless Lotus myself—good for Xi Zhengde! Ah, none of these whelps I have here are up to the mark. If he’d stayed here to be my disciple, how could that good-for-nothing have gotten to be the Snow Wolf?”

The Crown Prince Snow Wolf next to them kept his head down. His expression couldn’t be seen clearly.

The Blind Wolf King didn’t give him so much as a glance. He suddenly seemed to become a little interested in Zhou Ying. He shuffled fluffily toward him. “Little devil, since you’re Xi Zhengde’s nephew, is your spiritual sense strong?”

Zhou Ying raised his eyes slightly. The faintly discernible heart demon seed in his eyes showed a trace of itself. “It’s acceptable.”

The Blind Wolf King met his eyes and immediately leaned back. “What the hell have you put into your eyes?!”

Zhou Ying smiled without answering.

The Blind Wolf King suddenly remembered something. “Wait a moment, what did they just say your name was? I seem to recall Xi Zhengde’s nephew is...”

The Crown Prince Snow Wolf deferentially prompted, “Southern Wan’s Prince Zhuang, Zhou Ying.”

Having heard this, the Blind Wolf King slowly sat up straight, staring thoughtfully at Zhou Ying. “You’re that pestilential paramount spiritual sense from Southern Wan. I know what you’re here for, then.”

Zhou Ying sat upright across from him and composedly poured himself a cup of tea.

“Tradition has it... that the Sword Ancestor was the first person in the world to form a heart and enter a way, and the Kunlun Mountains are the first spiritual mountains, the origin of all mountains. The divine tool of the mountains, the Ceaseless Mirror, can resolve all doubts,” the Blind Wolf King said. “You’ve come for the Ceaseless Mirror.”

Zhou Ying said, “The Wolf King is wise.”

The Blind Wolf King waved a hand. “Won’t do. Give it up, kid. Do you think the Ceaseless Mirror is a dressing mirror at the door to an inn, that they’ll let anyone come and look in it? No one knows where it’s hidden. The Sect Leader, the High Priest, and Wanshuang’s Sword Slave all have to cooperate to obtain it. Why would they show it to you? Anyway, with your measly cultivation, the light reflecting off the divine mirror would chop you into mincemeat—stay with me for a few days, then head on back, I’ll get someone to take you.”

Zhou Ying's expression didn't waver a hair. "Events are determined by human effort."

"When the Kunlun Mountains first formed, the old Heartless Lotus from Western Chu was also always coming over to harp on it and getting beaten back time after time. What's the matter with all you paramount spiritual sense types? If you're tired of living, go get yourselves some drugs. Don't go looking for trouble." The Blind Wolf King rolled his eyes. "Never mind the Ceaseless Mirror, you won't even get into Kunlun's inner sect. The Sword Slave has gone to the southern mines. That freak only knows how to kill people. She never gets up to any schemes, overt or covert. If you can't meet her in battle, you're not worthy of speaking to her. Forget those 'Three Shoes of Turmoil' or whatever, she doesn't give a damn about them, and she wouldn't condescend to ally with you people. If Southern Wan can't hold on to their mines, she'll be happy to take over."

Having heard this, Zhou Ying nodded. "Thank you for your guidance, Wolf King."

"...What?" said the Blind Wolf King. "What guidance?"

At Xi Ping's end, Wei Chengxiang, having carried off Yao Qi's disciple name token, had just turned up a slight trace—a Turmoiler who came seeking refuge had seen Yao Qi and Chang Jun fleeing in a steam carriage. When he'd set out from the southern mines, Yao Qi had certainly wanted to run back to Wan. His starting point and ending point were obvious. Following the Turmoiler's clue, Wei Chengxiang and her team quickly found the steam carriage abandoned in the rain.

Searching the car, she turned up a pocket watch that had been broken when it fell. On it was a rather fashionable little compass needle. Masters who flew through the sky and burrowed into the earth in this backwater had no interest in a mortal trick like this: the compass needle was pointing in the wrong direction.

Wei Chengxiang squeezed her dice and cast them; they came up all-of-a-kind. She immediately went in pursuit, holding the disciple name token.

Xi Ping had just instructed her to be careful when he heard a message from Zhou Ying: “Wanshuang’s Sword Slave refuses peace talks. She believes that while she is overseeing Northern Li’s mining area, she needs no allies. Kunlun won’t see me, either.”

Xi Ping frowned. “So we can’t get through this way.”

As he kept an eye out in Wei Chengxiang’s direction, he quickly calculated: Northern Li was quite strong; it wouldn’t be susceptible to trickery and deceit. It seemed they would have to temporarily avoid its spearhead...

Zhou Ying interrupted his train of thought: “What I mean is, you just have to make her need us.”

“... San-ge,” said Xi Ping, “you’ve only been gone a few days, why has your accent changed already? Say that again, I didn’t hear it clearly. What?”

Zhou Ying patiently said, “If a shed skin wants to conceal her whereabouts, the major and minor evil cultivators of the Land of Turmoil won’t necessarily notice her. The Three Heroes of Turmoil may well not know yet that Wanshuang has come south. With the methods available to them, they might well not be worth mentioning in front of a shed skin sword cultivator. Give them a hand from the shadows. Don’t let the Northern Li people stay above it all, or else we’ll have no bargaining chips here. We’ll have no way to continue talks.”

Xi Ping numbly said, “I, right now, am in the Xuanyin Mountains. I can’t plant a single reincarnation wood tree. The Land of Turmoil is

out of my reach. All I have at my disposal are half-immortal Luwu and not at all immortal Turmoilers—and you want me to plot against a shed skin... sword cultivator, and it has to be done in secret, without revealing myself, because afterward we're going to use this as a bargaining chip to trick them into working with us?"

"Right," said Zhou Ying.

"Your Highness," Xi Ping said softly, "why don't you stay where you are and herd some sheep? Don't come back."

Last time in the Xuanyin Mountains, as soon as he'd opened his mouth, it had been to tell him to "hold off Zhang Jue," as if it were that easy, and this time, he was casually telling him to "plot against a shed skin sword cultivator"! Did he think Xi Ping was the Southern Sage reincarnated, capable of punching full moon sages and kicking shed skins, working miracles on command, ready to answer every plea?!

If the Zhou family had known about this earlier, they wouldn't have bothered raising demons in the Impassable Sea. They'd only have needed to raise one Xi Ping! Feed him anything at all, he'd be grown up in twenty to thirty years—save time and money!

"Stop talking crap, it can't be done. Do it yourself if you're able." Xi Ping decided not to indulge his misapprehension. In a tone of finality, he said, "If we can't protect the southern mines, we'll let them go, whoever wants 'em can have 'em. I won't be short on spiritual stones in the near future, I don't give a rat's ass. I only care about my people. Since this Northern Li sword cultivator is so powerful, we'll just let her kill off the whole crowd of evil cultivators. She can kill them, and we'll plug the leaks. A whale sinking to the depths creates enough resources for everything to live on for quite a while. When I've cleaned up Western Chu and Southern Shu, we'll see about..."

Apropos of nothing, Zhou Ying said, “In the Wan-He War, the master of Flying Jade Peak’s older brother General Zhi Yi received orders to pursue the surviving Southern He forces. He died in the line of duty and was buried in Southern He. Did you know that?”

Xi Ping froze.

“The way the history books tell it, ‘The mad Sect Leader of Lancang escaped captivity and came to blows with a group of masters, which involved passing Wan soldiers and Southern He mortals.’ As for what the reality was, you’d be best off asking about it obliquely,” Zhou Ying advised mildly. “The Sword Slave going south probably means that Northern Li is getting greedy. They want to take advantage of the disorder among the other three nations to take the southern mines all to themselves. When the Wanshuang Sword is planted in the Lancang Mountains, I don’t know what will happen... Perhaps it will turn Lancang into a miniature Kunlun, completely alter the topography of the Southern He Peninsula. I’m afraid that will be the last straw for your honored teacher. He won’t accept it.”

Xi Ping returned to Flying Jade Peak in one step, just in time to see Wen Fei and Lin Chi going off each to his own work. After seeing them off at the gate, Zhi Xiu instructed Xi Yue to go practice swordsmanship out back.

While Xi Ping was off running around all over the world and not on Flying Jade Peak, Xi Yue was always automatically looking for him, but when he saw him, for some reason, he always wanted to avoid him, so he bowed to him from a distance and swiftly flew away on his sword.

Zhi Xiu beckoned. “Come here, Shiyong, tell me what’s happening in the southern mines now. Has there been any word from His Highness Prince Zhuang?”

Xi Ping lied automatically: “Oh, they’ve wiped out the accompanying trees over in the south, but I have other eyes. I’ve managed to plant agents beside the Three Heroes of Turmoil. My san-ge has reached the Beijue Mountains and seen the Blind Wolf King. Everything is going smoothly. We control the Xuanyin Mountains at home and have eyes all over the southern mines. Aren’t we doing better than the mine supervisors down there, spending all their time on tenterhooks? Northern Li knows whom to heed, set your mind at ease.”

Zhi Xiu sensed that there was something untrue about what he had said, but Northern Li and the Southern He Peninsula were both outside the country; they were beyond his amateur fortunetelling skill level, and there were ascended spirit masters involved, each with their own tricks. He only felt that the stars were in such disorder that he couldn’t see them clearly, so he said, bluffing, “Do you think I’m blind? Tell the truth.”

Xi Ping was a practiced hand at bluffing; how could he be taken in? So he collapsed weakly against the little cottage and covered his face with his hands, his eyes spinning quickly behind them. He wailed convincingly, “I didn’t want to upset you... To put an end to the accompanying trees, that bunch of rotten bastards planted wildfire, I’ve been stressed to death trying to get enough provisions and supplies to the Turmoilers, it’s awful!”

This was actually somewhat believable. Zhi Xiu patted him on the head. “Why didn’t you say so? I’ll have Pang Jian and Bai Ling help you transport some from inside Wan. If it really comes down to it, you can send them away in batches to your South Sea Hidden Realm... Great Wan can take them, too. Kunlun’s sword cultivators won’t make trouble for mortals.”

Xi Ping felt something on Zhi Xiu’s hand rubbing against his head. He looked up between his fingers and saw that archery ring on his hand.

When he had casually asked about it last time, shifu hadn't picked up the subject. Tying it in what Zhou Ying had just told him...

Xi Ping rolled over and sat up. Contrary to Zhou Ying's instructions, he didn't try asking obliquely. He said straightforwardly, "I haven't seen that thumb ring before, and it's the wrong size. My san-ge says your older brother died in service to the country during the Wan-He War. Shifu, was that thumb ring his?"

Zhi Xiu, startled by his candor, drew his hand back.

Xi Ping said, "I thought it was strange when I saw it that day. Aren't all archery rings made of rustproof Moon Plated Gold? Moon Plated Gold hadn't become popular yet back then, right?"

Zhi Xiu slowly twisted that overly loose thumb ring. "Yes... As young as you are, you actually know when Moon Plated Gold became popular?"

"I do," said Xi Ping. "Great Wan's first gold smelting furnace is in Suling. The year you went to the mountains, shifu, Moon Plated Gold came to the mortal world. Shifu, did you pick it up that night you went to the Land of Turmoil?"

"Do not be indecorous in word or deed"—that was what the Wan people said. Attempts and evasions were both subtle; if you avoided a question, the other person would know not to bother you about it again.

Zhi Xiu was briefly rendered speechless by his open prying. Exasperated, he said, "How clever of you."

Xi Ping was indifferent, overbearing in his reliance on being favored. "Dear shifu, why would I be tactful? When I want to know something, I just ask."

Zhi Xiu was silent for a moment. “A close personal possession left behind by a deceased blood relative will always have some reaction.”

Old items that stayed with a person over the years, like a pendant or a personal sword, would pick up their owner’s aura. A cultivator only had to be familiar enough with that person’s aura to locate it with their spiritual sense with ease.

And at Zhi Xiu’s cultivation level, as soon as he touched that thumb ring, he would have known what had happened to the ring’s owner shortly before his death.

Xi Ping said, “They say that it was because he was caught up in a battle among cultivators.”

“When troops go abroad, they have to carry a ‘spirit scouter,’” Zhi Xiu said softly. “You’ve never led troops, you may not know what a ‘spirit scouter’ is. It’s a special kind of immortal tool that can be used by mortals—because it doesn’t need to be activated with spiritual energy, you only need to hold it and know how to read it. It is extremely sensitive to fluctuations in spiritual energy. If there are strong cultivators in the area, the spirit scouter will warn them so they can avoid them... This thumb ring, I found it at a place where one of Southern He’s veins of the earth was severed. Go get me a pot of wine.”

Xi Ping swiftly went inside. He saw that the little cottage was covered in papers. There were blueprints for tools, inscriptions he couldn’t understand, sketches of arrays, as well as carelessly scribbled down notes, a bunch of plans for restructuring the Kaiming Department and Heaven’s Design Pavilion, for allocating spiritual stones... All kinds of matters, big and small. And weighing down the pile was an automatic abacus.

The three peak masters who had just been in here must have been working themselves to death.

“It’s said that the Lancang Sect Leader was the one who severed the veins of the earth.”

“He didn’t do it,” Zhi Xiu said. “When the Lancang Sect Leader discovered that the Lancang Mountains were ‘pilfering heaven’s order’ from the mortal world due to the spiritual stone deficit, having no alternative, he only sealed a portion of the veins of the earth, to prevent the spiritual mountains from draining the mortal world dry. At the time, while trying to think up a way to replenish Lancang’s spiritual stones, he also wanted to convey the spiritual energy back to the country. The spiritual stones weren’t replenished. Instead, because the Sect Leader fell into obsession, he lost his mind and provoked the war between the two nations. But he did in fact find a means of conveying spiritual energy back to the mortal world.”

Xi Ping had a faint guess.

Zhi Xiu nodded. “That’s right. It was that spirit-conducting gold you and Lin-shixiong have been cooking up on the sly.”

After Hui Xiangjun’s death, the Unbound Furnace had remained in Southern He. Though the Eternal Flame had been taken away by Qiu Sha, Southern He had been the forebears of the way of toolmaking since antiquity. They had plenty of superb toolmaking master. With Hui Xiangjun’s genius before them, they had by some means made something very similar to spirit-conducting gold.

Xi Ping’s eyes abruptly opened wide. “I’ve always said that ordinary Moon Plated Gold wouldn’t make for such a big deficit. So the real reason for the Lancang Mountains’ spiritual stone deficit was that they were researching spirit-conducting gold on the sly!”

His thoughts moved rapidly: once you knew the secrets of the spiritual mountains, much of the fog of history suddenly dispersed.

Apart from Zhi Xiu, every shed skin accepted by the spiritual mountains was controlled by the spiritual mountains. Why had the Lancang Sect Leader been so susceptible to the heart demon seed back then? Could it be that a mortal like Renzong had also been able to plant the heart demon seed inside the divine tool of the Lancang Mountains?

Xi Ping snapped his fingers. A history book with a copious covering of dust jumped into his hand from a corner of the cottage and automatically opened to the page concerning the Wan-He War. A minute series of cause and effect was recorded there—among the emissaries that had been sent on a diplomatic mission to Great Wan at the time, there had been an established foundation from Lancang’s inner sect.

If they had inherited a Way of the Heart and could receive “heavenly edicts,” any established foundation could become the puppet of some group of Ways of the Heart of common origin from the spiritual mountains... In other words, the Lancang Spiritual Mountains had likely “dispatched” someone to bring that heart demon seed back!

Because the heretical Sect Leader had betrayed the will of the spiritual mountains.

No wonder that though the Sect Leader had been the only one in the Lancang Mountains to lose his mind, the whole sect, from top to bottom, seemed to have had a psychological break; none of them had tried talking him down—invading Southern Wan to plunder spiritual stones had been the spiritual mountains’ intention.

“Though Lancang’s Sect Leader had come to an impasse, he maintained a thread of clarity to the end and thought of a way to

return spiritual energy to the mortal world,” Zhi Xiu said. “I can understand what he was thinking then—with the four nations invading, their nation would certainly be destroyed, and the Lancang Sect would be wiped out. It would be better to dissolve the immortal mountains into the veins of the earth, give them back to the common people... like what is happening with the Xuanyin Mountains now. The common people would be fine as long as they could live and work in peace and contentment. They wouldn’t necessarily care who was in power. Had they succeeded then, there would have been no southern mines.”

CHAPTER 198 - A Life of Regret (10)

Evidently, they hadn't succeeded.

Zhi Xiu took off the old thumb ring. The thumb ring flashed with spiritual light in his hand. Then an image appeared above the antiquated metal and came striding toward Xi Ping. This human figure was too lifelike. Xi Ping leaned back automatically, then distinguished that this was an armed and armored man, wearing that archery ring on his thumb.

This person's features somewhat resembled Zhi Xiu's, but his temperament was vastly different: there was a stern wrinkle between his brows; his lips, thin as a thread, were turned slightly down at the corners; his gaze was like a knife, so one did not dare to look directly at him.

He seemed to be in the midst of a heavy rain. The rainwater dripped from his armor.

"This is my older brother." Zhi Xiu sat upright where he was and calmly gave his junior an introduction across a distance of over two centuries.

Out of nowhere, Xi Ping's heart skipped.

He saw that this armored general's brow was tightly furrowed as he watched his soldiers push forward a captive.

Xi Ping recognized that captive at a glance and blurted out, "That looks like Southern He's last emperor, Yang Zou."

The first time he had gone with Pang Jian to the Land of Turmoil, they had ended up by mistake in an underground palace and seen a statue of Yang Zou kneeling in penitence. The people of He were

indeed skilled craftsmen; the stone statue could be matched to the real person at a glance.

General Zhi Yi had captured the enemy nation's emperor!

Xi Ping made a last-moment effort, quickly scanning through the history book he had on hand. He found no record concerning this. It only said "Zou died in the midst of battle."

This obsessively ambitious last emperor was around thirty, tall and broad, with wide shoulders and a narrow waist. He looked like a military officer. Under his thick brows was a pair of imperious eyes. There was a distinctive tempo to his step, graceful and confident, as if he were still the master of Southern He looking down on all under heaven, inspecting his own domain. A soldier escorting him couldn't stand the sight of this and gave him a shove. He stumbled, then adjusted within three steps. Fallen into these dire straits, he was having no difficulty maintaining his strength of character.

There was no sound in the image. The soldier escorting the prisoner of war quickly said something.

Xi Ping was still struggling to read his lips when two soldiers came forward and tore apart this emperor's lapels.

Across a distance of two centuries, Xi Ping had an illusion of the smell of blood hitting him in the face—on this last emperor's chest was a palm-length wound, the flesh around it blackened and necrotic; on it, a talisman had been drawn in blood. Something had been sewn into the wound, pushing the flesh there slightly outward. This must have been discovered when he was searched.

No one knew what kind of evil art this was. A number of soldiers holding immortal tool "spirit scouters" trotted over and surrounded Yang Zou in full battle readiness, scanning him up and down. After

working at it for ages, it seemed that they hadn't made any sense of it.

The last emperor stood with his chest and back exposed in the rain, letting them surround him and inspect his body. After briefly observing with no trace of shame on his face, he said, "General Zhi, this is only an ordinary sealing talisman. An open-eyed cultivator can use it. It seems there are no cultivators among your forces."

Yang Zou was speaking in the Wan language. Because he was a foreigner, he spoke slowly, and his articulation was so precise it was a little exaggerated. Lip reading his speech took only one look. When he had spoken, he stuck his hand right into his wound and pulled the flesh apart as though it were clothing.

All the soldiers surrounding him looked alarmed and scolded loudly. Scorching light was coming from his wound. A piece of the sun seemed to have been sealed there, bloody and brilliant. The mortals could no longer open their eyes, but Xi Ping saw that what he had pulled out of the wound was a coil of gold wire. Its texture was extremely similar to Lin Chi's newly made spirit-conducting gold. "So that's..."

"There are special miniature inscriptions inlaid in the gold wire that can naturally blend into the veins of the earth and conduct spiritual energy from a place where it is dense to a place where it is sparse," Zhi Xiu explained to Xi Ping as he watched Yang Zou's lips moving in the image. "Lancang's situation was somewhat similar to Sanyue's, with the imperial Yang family having a great deal of power in the Lancang Mountains, but unlike in Sanyue, it did not hold sole power. The Sect Leader and many toolmaking masters in venerated positions weren't surnamed Yang. Under those circumstances, internal strife was unavoidable. At the time, all the Yang cultivators, guarding He's Emperor Xiaohuai, broke the siege, hoping that they could later stage a restoration. So His Majesty sewed the spirit-

conducting gold wire into his own body, concealing it with his mortal aura, and secretly smuggled it out.”

Xi Ping took note of his shifu’s respectful address. “Why was the emperor being so furtive...? Oh, I get it.”

At the time, the vast majority of the Lancang Mountains’ cultivators —at least among the cultivators of the Yang family—were being controlled by the will of the mountains. They wanted to retake the spiritual mountains, not “break up the spiritual mountains’ fortune.”

And this Emperor Xiaohuai was an oddity. As a mortal in these circumstances, he had refused to be his family’s obedient puppet. He had used the Yangs’ protection to escape and had even used his own body to transport spirit-conducting gold wire.

“But his luck was poor. After direct encounters with several waves of cultivators, when he was captured by my da-ge, he only had his mortal personal guards beside him. The Yang family wouldn’t search him, but our troops did. They felt it at once,” Zhi Xiu said. “As for whether it was ultimately that his luck was poor or that something unseen was struggling in its death throes, that can no longer be verified.”

Xi Ping saw the last emperor who had died over two centuries ago suddenly raise his head and aim a strange and mocking look at the sky.

“Shifu, I think he actually felt it then—the so-called ‘Will of Heaven.’”

Zhi Xiu nodded. “The final outcome of a state, whether tragic or glad, is written with the flesh and blood of its sovereign.”

In the image, Yang Zou pulled together his lapels, bowed to General Zhi Yi, straightened up, then didn’t move again.

A soldier next to him fearfully touched him. Yang Zou's tall body came crashing down. Only after the eye-searing spirit-conducting gold wire was removed did everyone see that in order to hide the gold wire, he had simply broken his ribs and dug out a big chunk of his heart and lungs. He had been living off the spiritual energy that the gold wire was carrying through his meridians and veins.

Looking at it, Xi Ping felt his own heart and lungs contract.

Recalling the insane Renzong, and Emperor Taiming, Zhou Kun, whom one didn't know what judgment to make of, and adding in this Emperor Xiaohuai of Southern He... They were all weak, short-lived mortals, but their actions could scare the "immortals" who moved the wind and rain to tears. It was clear to see that ruthlessness didn't depend on cultivation!

"He gave that thing to High General Zhi because there were no cultivators among the troops?"

Zhi Yi had been over the age of forty at the time. He wasn't a wet-behind-the-ears hothead. Of course he understood that in attacking Southern He, the four nations were blowing the Wan-He war out of proportion in a plot to seize the Lancang Spiritual Mountains. At the time, the Lancang Spiritual Mountains had already "pilfered heaven's order" from the mortal world. During their pursuit, they had seen barren earth all around, marshes running wild, worm masters come to take advantage of the trouble as plentiful as carrion-eating vultures, the cawing of crows falling incessantly on the ears.

The least complicated choice that General Zhi Yi could have made would have been to report this thing to the court and the immortal mountains, stay where he was and await orders... He was only a mortal who worked for a salary. In the eyes of the sect, he was no different from the Latent Cultivation Temple's straw children. These were the people of an enemy nation, anyway; whether the Way of the Heaven or the imperial edict was virtuous or sinful was nothing

to do with a person like him, who was there to obey orders. The most adroit method, meanwhile, would have been to temporarily conceal it and delay his report. Yang Zou couldn't be the only person in Southern He secretly transporting spirit-conducting gold wire. If others succeeded, he could be said to have saved the common people here at very little cost in effort to himself; his conscience could rest easy. If they failed entirely, it wouldn't be too late for him to make good his delay—a mortal wouldn't have seen this kind of unbelievable immortal tool before; it was understandable that he would be slow to react; at most he could be said to have been careless in his work, not a major fault.

But Xi Ping had already guessed it—after hesitating for a long time, this man who had brought up his shifu had chosen the stupidest path. When he had received the spirit-conducting gold wire and the torn flesh of the enemy nation's last emperor, he had been not far from one of Southern He's veins of the earth that had been temporarily sealed. He determined to take some trusted subordinates to travel there through the night and quietly disperse the spirit-conducting gold wire into the vein of the earth.

Before General Zhi Yi set out, he said something to one of his personal guards. Surprisingly, Xi Ping understood it.

What he had said was: "I don't know what condition Jingzhai's wounds are in. There hasn't been a letter from home today. I'll treat it as collecting good karma for him."

The general left and didn't come back again.

Xi Ping's heart jumped. He automatically snapped his fingers and produced a qin note, wanting to interrupt the image from the thumb ring. There was a *twang*, but Zhi Xiu pinched the qin note. The remaining sound fell from high to low, then was eliminated at his fingertips along with the spiritual energy it carried.

“Watch,” Zhi Xiu said to him. “It is already a matter of history. Whether you watch it or not, it still happened. Do not deceive yourself.”

The thumb ring had recorded intact the final period of its owner’s life: the mortals thought themselves to be acting undetected, but they were under the gaze of the “Way of Heaven,” and those frightened spiritual mountains were like a bloodsucking jiangshi, preferring to be split up rather than be destroyed like this.

In the image, spiritual energy and sword energy flew wildly. Xi Ping’s eyes were dazzled. He saw talismans that were clearly of Chu make, wintry cold sword light, and amid the sword light, the flitting figures of enormous beasts... There were even Wan maneuvers mixed in.

The image abruptly vanished. The spiritual light dispersed from the thumb ring, and it fell tottering back into Zhi Xiu’s palm. “They did not deliberately kill mortals. It was only that when they learned of it, they didn’t know how many ‘lunatics’ had smuggled out this gold wire. After a negotiation among the masters from the four nations, they determined to join hands to sever Lancang’s veins of the earth, keep the spiritual energy within the spiritual mountains forever. Because of his presumptuous actions, my da-ge just happened to be there—it isn’t false that he accidentally got involved.”

Xi Ping’s heart slowly sank. “Shifu...”

“I am weak and vile. Only now have I dared to look directly at the Land of Turmoil, seek out my older brother’s relic, and learn the truth. Even when you asked me just now, my first thought was still to avoid it and not speak of it.” Zhi Xiu very candidly waved a hand toward him. “Timidity is sometimes even more dangerous than arrogance. You have the heart of a newborn babe, open and forthright. That’s good. Don’t be like your shifu.

“But to shift some of the blame, when the Ways of the Heart of common origin hadn’t yet revealed themselves on a large scale, the Sea of Stars would have automatically obscured my vision. Even if I had obtained this thumb ring, I still wouldn’t have been able to see so clearly.” Zhi Xiu glanced at Xi Ping. “I suppose that while my older brother was unable to save the Southern He Peninsula, due to his sacrifice, the karmic reward still came to me... and allowed me not to bungle matters due to timidity, and by a series of coincidences, to reach this day.”

Had it not been for Xi Ping, perhaps he would have ignorantly cultivated on Flying Jade Peak, cultivated for centuries or millennia according to the prescribed routine, become a shed skin as was only to be rationally expected and taken his place as a sage, in the future also become a stone complicit in the spiritual mountains’ villainy... Wouldn’t that have been a sad waste?

From the Xuanyin Mountains, a shed skin’s consciousness could just cover the whole territory of Great Wan. Zhi Xiu inspected the border inscriptions. He scooped a handful of chestnuts out of the fire and gave them to Xi Ping. “If you have nothing else to ask, Cui Jui’s cousin, come and take up your old profession. Help me do some accounts—none of the cultivators above an established foundation can be trusted, Great Wan’s internal defenses have been emptied out. I’ve asked Lin-shixiong to alter the spirit-conducting gold as soon as possible. But that thing’s destructive force is too strong, and it automatically pilfers heaven’s order. If we are to give it to low-level cultivators or mortals to use as ‘downgraded immortal tools,’ we must add all kinds of restrictions. Come and count up for me, how many spiritual stones will it take...”

As Zhi Xiu spoke, he recalled something else. “With turbulence in the southern mines, Northern Li ought to be sending an inner sect master to oversee things. Since His Highness Prince Zhuang is in contact with Kunlun, does he know who their representative is?”

From the identity of the representative Northern Li had sent, Li's plans for the southern mines would be evident.

"Yes," said his "open and forthright" disciple who had the "heart of a newborn babe," not missing a beat. "An ascended spirit sword cultivator, called... Cheng something?"

There weren't many famous sword cultivation masters in the world. One hand might not be enough to count them, but you wouldn't need more than two. Moreover, this "Cheng" wasn't a common surname. As soon as Zhi Xiu heard, he knew who this was. "Kunlun's Cheng Yu."

Xi Ping's expression didn't waver. "Right, him."

Northern Li was always locked up. He'd had little contact with Kunlun's people. The only one he remembered was the sword cultivator who had exchanged greetings with Lin Chi during the siege on Qiu Sha in Wild Fox Country, so he had casually taken him out to use as a shield.

"That's all right. I've heard he is very talented, and of steady temperament and good character. He isn't unreasonable." Zhi Xiu nodded. "When I've handled matters within Great Wan, I'll go pay a visit."

"Sure, then I'll have a chat with him first." When he lied, Xi Ping was never afraid of being seen through. After his answer, he turned around and said to Zhou Ying through the reincarnation wood, "San-ge, stay in the Beijue Mountains for a few days, wait for Kunlun to invite you."

CHAPTER 199 - A Life of Regret (11)

Chang Jun was muttering all kinds of frightening outcomes, pacing back and forth like a trapped beast, his hands shaking fretfully.

Yao Qi, meanwhile, seemed to be in a daze, staring “blankly” at him —he had to stare, because Chang Jun’s seemingly random hand movements were “tapped sweet notes.”

The Yao family’s discipline was too strict. Yao Qi had never gone out fooling around when he was young. He had forced himself to memorize the “sweet notes” because, after learning that Xi Ping had used them to transmit information, his persecution complex had acted up, and he had worried that someone would use this technique against him one day. Strange to say, secret signals used for mischief were extremely easy to learn. He muddled through and then suddenly picked them up, himself not knowing when he had learned them. But if you wanted to study them properly, as a language of code, it would have been even harder to memorize than *Detailed Account of Meridians*.

Yao Qi wasn’t all that familiar with sweet notes. He was trying to stare a hole into Chang Jun’s hands.

Chang Jun, tapping out sweet notes, asked, “Are you ready?”

Yao Qi miserably knocked his head against the wall, indicating that they were all set.

Chang Jun said, “We can’t put it off any longer. It has to be tonight.”

After getting the idea to blow up an inscription to escape, the two of them had rummaged through their brains to fish out and recall the basic knowledge concerning inscriptions that Luo Qingshi had taught them fourteen years ago—inscriptions were profound, and

the Latent Cultivation Temple was only the place where mortals opened their spiritual eyes; originally he hadn't taught inscriptions, but thanks to Xi Shiyong's blessing, the provisional disciples who came after him had inexplicably acquired an additional class, giving the mighty Luo Qingshi and the disciples yet another opportunity for mutual torment.

Finally, according to the Land of Turmoil's monsoon climate, the two of them had calculated that blowing up the inscription at midnight ought to create the least harm. It wasn't hard to reckon the time, since those evil cultivators had disdained to so much as lay hands on mortal objects and had left them everything in the nature of pocket watches. But the two of them had already missed two midnights because they had gotten cold feet.

Chang Jun said, "It's almost time. We're on our last legs. If we can't do it now, then we really won't be able to do anything ever again!"

When he was finished tapping out these sweet notes, without waiting for Yao Qi to respond, he exhaled and plopped down next to him. "How could Shiyong be so decisive back then?"

Yao Qi pursed his lips and shamefacedly lowered his head. "Perhaps that's the difference between mediocrity and genius."

Chang Jun didn't bother tapping out sweet notes. He opened his mouth and said, "Come to think of it, if I die like this, there'll be nothing about me worth recording apart from my dates of birth and death... Ziming-xiong, what do we amount to?"

For some reason, these words seemed to stab Yao Qi to the heart. "What do we amount to?" echoed repeatedly in his mind.

Yao Qi suddenly remembered the Latent Cultivation Temple's Su-shixiong. On the last day, when he had seen them off, he had gone through them one by one giving instructions and encouragement.

When it was his turn, as the last disciple in line, Su-shixiong had perhaps truly been unable to think of any good points, so he hadn't given him any false praise but had only said to him, "Ziming, the Xuanyin Mountains have one Grand Selection class every ten years. From each generation, in all of Great Wan, only twenty or thirty people are chosen. Having come here, you are already the best of the best. You must do right by yourself."

You must do right by yourself...

The Turmoilers scattered throughout the wilderness seemed to be making a futile effort to find food in the gaps between the wildfire, occasionally letting out shrieks that only they themselves could understand.

The meaning was "no clues."

Wei Chengxiang, receiving their secret signals, took out Yao Qi's disciple name token and glanced at it. She didn't dare to use her own half-immortal level talismans and was wearing a set of "invisible snake scale armor" that Xi Ping had turned up, her hidden figure mixed in among the Turmoilers.

"The Queen Mother of the West's hidden realm must be a relic of Lancang. It's too powerful," Wei Chengxiang said to Xi Ping. "There's no reaction from the disciple name token. I don't know whether it's because the hidden realm is blocking it, or because we're looking in the wrong place. What do we do? Listen, nephew, when the name token's owner—this Yao Qi—gets close to his own name token, will there be any particular reaction?"

Xi Ping was silent for a moment, then, enduring humiliation for the sake of his objective, he answered, "Supposedly. Outer sect disciples only take back their name tokens when they're transferred or return to the Latent Cultivation Temple to advance their cultivation. The thing's supposed to come with a warning system

and be able to make a person bear in mind their position or something. I've never felt it, anyway. I figure it's only a sense of ritual, don't rely too heavily on it."

Wei Chengxiang thought, What kind of useless flummery is all this? The Xuanyin Mountains are made of nothing but unnecessary formalities. She was just about to say something when her spiritual sense was suddenly touched. She raised her head abruptly and saw something come out of nothing amid the obviously empty and deserted wasteland, splashing out a bit of spiritual energy. The weather on the Southern He Peninsula was so humid that the air was about to start dripping, but a cluster of sparks had flown out of there!

"What kind of power is that?"

A thread of Xi Ping's consciousness was inside the reincarnation wood amulet hanging around her neck. He froze abruptly, past events suddenly reappearing before his eyes.

"That's no power... Someone's ignited an inscription."

Though they had made all possible preparations, the result of igniting the fireproofing inscription was outside of Yao Qi and Chang Jun's expectations: this inscription didn't make anywhere near as much of a commotion as when Xi Ping had blown up the Qiu courtyard. It only blew open the cell the two of them were imprisoned in. Before the sparks could break through the ascended spirit hidden realm, they were knocked back.

But the harm to them was enormous. They were both simultaneously sent flying.

Yao Qi's vision darkened. He had the impression of shattering on impact. For a moment, he became confused in his daze; his unremarkable life even began to flash before his eyes.

The sounds of angry cursing and jumbled footsteps came much faster than his hearing could recover. Before Yao Qi could come back to his senses, he felt a constriction around himself. He had been bound by a spirit-binding talisman!

The evil cultivators under the Queen Mother of the West's command had reacted extremely fast, swiftly coming to take care of them.

Yao Qi was lifted off the ground. There was a roaring in his ears. Someone dealt him a heavy blow, knocking his murky mind awake.

This was it. They had failed completely!

Yao Qi knew that evil cultivators often put their hidden realms in remote and deserted places, and those without an inscription key couldn't even find the entrance. The explosion that had just nearly jolted him to bits had not only not gotten out, it had also angered the evil cultivators here!

Yao Qi struggled to open his eyes and saw Chang Jun also being dragged like a dead dog, blood flowing from the orifices of his face; it was unclear whether he was dead or alive.

The evil cultivators tossed them into the same place, and they didn't lock them up again. Instead, they surrounded them murderously, talking over each other in the ancient Southern He language. They seemed to be debating whether to kill these two Wan dogs. One of them lost his patience halfway through his sentence, pulled his sword, and slashed at Chang Jun's leg.

All the blood in Yao Qi's heart froze into ice: no!

Just as his eyes were about to burst from their sockets, all of a sudden, the whole hidden realm shook violently. The evil cultivators went silent and raised their heads in alarm to look around.

The invisible inscriptions in the air above the hidden realm lit up one after another. Next, there was an alarm whistle and the sound of tearing silk. With each tear, an inscription disappeared. Aggressive talismans burst in.

They'd been discovered! A master was attacking the hidden realm!

The Turmoilers who had just been searching in the wilderness had vanished like voles. Wei Chengxiang, recovering from her shock, had withdrawn two li away. She landed at the foot of a withered reincarnation wood tree and stumbled for half a step before finding her footing.

She swiftly let loose her consciousness and scanned the surroundings, saw that it was relatively safe, then reached into a hole in the reincarnation wood tree and twisted.

There was a creak as gears and bearings began to revolve. A boulder at the foot of the tree moved aside, revealing a concealed mechanical door.

Wei Chengxiang took out the qiankun pouch she had just used to scoop up the Turmoilers and shook it out; one after another, the Turmoilers who had been protected inside the immortal tool ran out of the pouch, and then, without needing her to instruct them, filed into the mechanical door under the tree, going underground. A thread of steam emerged, perfectly blending in with the water vapor on the ground.

Only then did the spiritual wind raised by cultivators fighting at close quarters surge their way. As if verifying something, Wei Chengxiang touched the intact stealth armor she was wearing. "Damn it, who's that? They came so fast!"

When Yao Qi and Chang Jun had desperately set off a few fleeting sparks, Xi Ping had confirmed the location where the Queen Mother of the West's hidden realm was concealed. Making a prompt decision, he'd had Wei Chengxiang ignite a signal flare specially used by Great Wan's southern mines.

While these things were specially provided for use by the mine supervisors, when it came down to it, they were made by the Xuanyin Mountains. Xi Ping could get his hands on as many as he wanted.

The signal flares were divided into different grades. The one Wei Chengxiang had set off was an "emergency" flare, visible throughout the whole Great Wan mining area. After tossing it, she had immediately fled without hesitation. But despite this decisiveness, she had a thrilling close encounter with a group of black-clothed people... Fortunately, the Queen Mother of the West's hidden realm had captured their attention, and the immortal tool from Moon Plated Peak was reliable.

Without further ado, the black-clothed people began wildly hammering at the Queen Mother of the West's hidden realm. There was no lack of established foundation masters among them.

Wei Chengxiang couldn't quite catch her breath in the sudden spiritual wind blowing her way. "Are they from the Mining Office? No, never mind the Mining Office, not even Heaven's Design Pavilion would necessarily be able to react this rapidly."

"Well, of course," Xi Ping said. "Apart from the bitter ex-husband, who else could it be?"

Wei Chengxiang: "..."

She'd forgotten that detail.

“While all the nations are in turmoil, the situation is in constant flux; it’s hard to be sure of anything. If anything happens to one of the other nations’ Mining Offices, they can bring inner sect masters in at any time. Only Great Wan effectively has no inner sect now,” Xi Ping said. “People go for soft targets. Even thinking with his toe, the Emperor of the East could have guessed that the Queen Mother of the West and her people would move their hidden realm to Great Wan’s encampment. Out of twelve shichen in a day, he spends ten and a half of them sticking pins into a doll of the Queen Mother of the West. If he had been following that as his way, he might have become a full moon sage by now. He understands Yang Wan better than you do.”

“What a guy.” Tightly wrapped in the stealth armor, Wei Chengxiang returned to the vicinity of the Queen Mother of the West’s hidden realm. “You men truly have a breadth of mind that never disappoints.”

“What are you talking about? You can’t tar us all with the same brush. Look at me—I’m very broad-minded.” In order to demonstrate his “breadth of mind,” Xi Ping cast aside his face and sat on it. “Aunt—look out for the Emperor of the East. The stealth armor won’t hide you from an ascended spirit’s eyes. Change to a Luwu mask.”

No sooner had he spoken than Wei Chengxiang saw the Emperor of the East Halberd descend from the sky, leaving a tear in the hidden realm.

The Queen Mother of the West and Lord Guang’an weren’t there. As the sole ascended spirit present, the Emperor of the East steamrolled over everyone else.

While the two sides were locked in battle, Wei Chengxiang pressed the spiritual image mask onto herself, changing her appearance to match the black-clothed people and removing the armor. She mixed

in with the Emperor of the East's people. The Emperor of the East's self-satisfied laughter sounded above her head. "That woman and her little boy toy have some nice stuff! You can keep whatever you take!"

The Emperor of the East's subordinates were true evil cultivators who were in the Land of Turmoil year in and year out—of the type of the former Exonerators. These types established foundations just for the sake of running amok. They didn't care about cultivating their hearts; when their Ways of the Heart backlashed against them, they lost their minds and died. They had no bottom line. Hearing these words, their eyes glowed blue with avarice. As if they had taken a strengthening tonic, they strove against each other to be the first to charge in.

With the hidden realm broken, there was no more obstruction between Yao Qi and his name token. The name token immediately warmed up slightly.

Xi Ping instructed, "Half-immortal, act within your capabilities. Don't show off."

Wei Chengxiang said, "Cut the crap."

She made a dash following the name token's directions. When she spoke, it was in a deep masculine voice: "Over here!"

The black-clothed people running around like headless flies thought that she had found some great treasure and instinctively followed her. The evil cultivators guarding Yao Qi and Chang Jun saw a large-scale attack and were forced to join battle.

An established foundation cultivator in front of her stabbed at Wei Chengxiang with his sword. Wei Chengxiang ducked under the sword, leaving him to the black-clothed person behind her, and rolled into the thicket next to her. The thicket and the stealth armor

concealed her. She went into and out of the armor. When she rolled back out, she had already used the spiritual image mask to turn herself into the person who had just tried to cut her down.

Yao Qi and Chang Jun had already recovered by this point, escaping death by the skin of their teeth... though they hadn't escaped altogether. They were fearfully looking at each other in dismay.

When cultivators fought, naturally there was spiritual energy scattered everywhere. There was spiritual energy for them to use now!

Chang Jun was the first to come to his senses. He breathed deeply from the diaphragm and used spiritual energy to burst the cords binding him. When he had just freed his legs, he saw an "evil cultivator" running toward him.

Chang Jun turned pale with fright, wriggling on the ground like a big caterpillar. In his flurry, the top of his head banged against Yao Qi's nose. The magic iron-head attack nearly brought Yao Qi to tears.

"Don't cry, stop struggling!" Wei Chengxiang, who was always fighting evil cultivators, tossed out talismans with a swiftness comparable to Pang Jian's in the past. Two silencing and paralyzing talismans fell on the two of them. She held her fingers together like a knife and cut apart the spirit-binding cords on the two of them, then tossed Luwu masks, reincarnation wood amulets, and Yao Qi's disciple name token toward them all together. With a snap of her fingers, she undid her own talismans. "Don't just sit there!"

Yao Qi and Chang Jun both had civilian posts at the southern mines and were unaccustomed to using Luwu masks. In this emergency, their brains overheated, and they both took on the appearance of Wei Chengxiang's current disguise. The three of them stared at each other like triplets.

Wei Chengxiang: "..."

Was it possible that among the criteria orthodox sects used to pick their disciples, one was "stupid enough"? This had also been Zhao Qindan's style when she had first defected... So how had that Tai Sui, who was always pulling evil tricks, managed to get in?

"It shames me to say," said Xi Ping, "that my respected teacher, moved by my kindness and sincerity, recommended me."

Yao Qi and Chang Jun reacted half a beat late. They used the Luwu masks to change into different evil cultivators who had been guarding them and followed Wei Chengxiang outside the ring of battle. When they had just gone around the cell where they had originally been imprisoned, they saw two of the Queen Mother of the West's people running over in a panic. From a distance, they called in the Southern He language, "Sneak attack, think of a way to notify Her Highness..."

Then the two evil cultivators' voices abruptly came to a halt as they stared at Yao Qi and Chang Jun in shock—by coincidence, these two evil cultivators were precisely the "templates" Yao Qi and Chang Jun had used.

Wei Chengxiang's vision darkened: amazing.

Not waiting for them to speak, she jumped out of the circle of the two pairs of "twins" to demonstrate her innocence and cautiously called the nickname of one of the two evil cultivators: "Ergui, what's going on with you guys?!"

She had been a visiting courtier serving under the Queen Mother of the West. Though she had made no close friendships, there were still many people she recognized. As soon as she called the name,

the evil cultivators immediately tacitly acknowledged her as one of them.

The original evil cultivator was beside himself with rage. “Spies! Get them!”

Yao Qi and Chang Jun had been dizzy to begin with. Adding in that they couldn’t speak ancient He, their expressions as they stood there were already giving them away.

Wei Chengxiang quickly joined the evil cultivators, then pulled her sword on the two “brilliant products” of the Latent Cultivation Temple. Outwardly boiling with rage, she said, “How bold!”

Her words were dramatic, but her feet were half a beat slow. When the two evil cultivators had charged forward, she struck like lightning, bringing them down from behind. Then she smoothly cut their fingers open and smeared them over a reincarnation wood amulet. Xi Ping effortlessly snatched away their consciousnesses—ultimately, Wei Chengxiang couldn’t bring herself to kill the Queen Mother of the West’s people; this was safest.

She took everything off the two evil cultivators and put their senseless bodies into her qiankun pouch.

Only then did Chang Jun force out the words, “Might I be permitted to ask, Your Excellency...”

Wei Chengxiang smiled. “A Luwu. I’m nobody.”

Yao Qi: “...”

This person turned out to be a commoner, a Kaiming Cultivator whose spiritual eyes had just opened. What kind of “best of the best” were they? Su-shixiong had lied to him!

Wei Chengxiang skillfully hid to observe the battle, taking the two useless clubs with her. “Coming this aggressively to ransack the place, the Emperor of the East must know that the Queen Mother of the West and Lord Guang’an aren’t here?”

“Ah,” said Xi Ping. “Yu Chang is wavering between the Three Heroes of Turmoil, and the Emperor of the East can’t be colluding with only Yu Chang. He must also be in contact with Wangge Luobao.”

Wei Chengxiang said, “... So they’re all secretly grouped in pairs, fine, I got it. The Emperor of the East must be thinking of a way to cut the Queen Mother of the West off in the southern mines—listen, is it really a good idea to make Yang Wan be the first to be eliminated from this game? The rest are even worse.”

“Yang Wan won’t be eliminated,” Xi Ping said slowly in a strange tone. “There’s something I want to verify—”

CHAPTER 200 - A Life of Regret (12)

Wei Chengxiang concealed herself snugly in the stealth armor and kindly provided stealth talismans for the two who would draw the wrong talisman when they got excited. After doing all this, she still hadn't heard a follow-up from Tai Sui. "Verify what? Why did you stop talking? Are you out of oil?"

"Have you heard of Wanshuang's Sword Slave from Kunlun?" Xi Ping said unhurriedly then. "I have it on reliable information that she's currently next door in Northern Li's mining area. I want to verify whether something can restrain her."

Hearing this, Wei Chengxiang pondered carefully for a moment, then advised, "Why don't you go over there and hang yourself at her doorstep, see if you can extort her to death?"

Xi Ping: "..."

He seemed to have learned the meaning of the phrase "the scenery is the same but the people have changed." Over a decade had passed, and the Land of Turmoil still couldn't grow a single shoot of wheat, but the cute little girl who'd believe anything you said to her had "changed" into this.

Wei Chengxiang said, "The Sword Slave is the extant pinnacle of the way of the sword. With Wanshuang, even Kunlun's Sect Leader gives way to her somewhat. Are you planning to invite your esteemed teacher here? Let's not talk about whether he'd be able to defeat her after having just become a shed skin. Right now, Great Wan is relying entirely on one Zhaoting. It's no joke. And he isn't going to cast aside the whole domestic situation and run over to duel Wanshuang just for the sake of a little patch of land like the southern mines, is he?"

“Do you remember the Law Breaker?” Xi Ping said. “Once the Law Breaker’s rule—its axiom—is fixed, it can carry off dozens of ascended spirits all at once, and even Xuanwu had to poke holes in his mask when he came inside. Sometimes, cultivation isn’t all that important. That time in Tao County, when Qiu Sha and that whole crowd of masters were having their earthshaking battle, in the end, it was a ‘half-immortal who would die at a single prod,’ a ‘little pretty boy who only knows one ascended spirit talisman,’ and a temporarily paralyzed wise man who took control of the situation.”

“Please put on some clothes, immortal.” Wei Chengxiang didn’t understand. “Wait... what? Where are you going to get another Law Breaker?”

“Someone once told me that the spiritual mountains are big Law Breakers. That might be true. We’ll see.”

In order to protect themselves, the Lancang Spiritual Mountains had forsaken their native soil and people and lingered on at death’s door until today. What were they thinking now? If the jiangshi-like Ways of the Heart were still buried under the Lancang Mountains, they might very well take this opportunity to choose Yang Wan... without her knowing about it.

Wanshuang’s Sword Slave didn’t take the southern continent seriously and thought she could cut a swath through all monsters and demons, but could she handle “fate”?

“Someone is cursing me. I figure it must be Yu Chang.” Xi Ping’s spiritual sense was giving him a faint signal. “Ah, I hope that four-hundred-plus-year-old bachelor from Western Chu will learn something from this campaign. Since time immemorial, when caught between a married couple, who can come to a good end apart from their son?”

Yu Chang had wanted to be the hidden hand behind the scenes, not expecting that hand to get stuck full of thorns. He was currently paying his respects to each of Tai Sui's and the Emperor of the East's ancestors in succession.

After Western Chu's Xuanwu had met the crowd of orthodox cultivators advocating for having him branded as a rebel, he courteously fought a battle with them.

Naturally, the "orthodox cultivators" were inspirational in their devotion to righteousness when provoking the enemy into battle with their curses, but when it came to blows, they were scared enough to wet their pants. When it had looked like the spiritual mountains were about to change hands, of Sanyue's three great Principal Peaks, the Central and West Peaks had simultaneously displayed their prowess in a moment of crisis—with Xiang Ning's corpse dissolved, his Way of the Heart had returned to the spiritual mountains, joining the ranks of the ghosts. The Silver Moon was pulled over. Its stabbing gaze was full of enmity as it looked upon Xuanwu.

Xuanwu was only a shed skin whose grave injuries had yet to heal. He didn't dare to act as a tassel on a divine tool of the mountains, and now there was no more Heartless Lotus for him to use. All he could do was stay his hand and temporarily retreat to the East Peak, standing alongside the other two peaks and vying for the right to control over the Silver Moon. According to Yu Chang's eyes in Dongheng City, the Silver Moon hanging in the sky was currently like the hand of a watch, revolving back and forth among the three mountain tops.

Sanyue's traditions had always been iron-handed might and lax government, never looking down. The ascended spirit masters were all currently engaged in a tug-of-war over the moon. No one had attention to spare for the mortal world. Their outer sect, the Qilin Guard, had for the most part relied on spending money and taking

elixirs to get their positions. They were either the children of some bully somewhere or nobles from Dongheng. The former had already revolted along with their families, and the latter, after losing support from the inner sect, were running around like headless flies in a state of anxiety.

All the bullies were falling over each other to stake a claim. In the whole Sanyue Spiritual Mountain Range, apart from the three great Principal Peaks, which no one dared to approach, practically everything had been snatched up by them. These arrogant local thugs had at their disposal the “offerings” their families had spent over a thousand years accumulating, all masters past the established foundation boundary. Dealing with the imposters in Sanyue’s inner sect took them no more effort than blowing away dust.

But these offerings had suffered from spiritual image brands. They were like evil spirits kept by their masters. If they only had the chance, they were sure to turn on them.

While Yu Chang had been in the Slumbering Dragon Sea, he hadn’t lost contact with the circle of offerings within Western Chu. While he helped these offerings deal with their brands, he had also imperceptibly influenced them with the “grit projections.” It could be said that all the powerful offerings in Western Chu now were under his control. Once he could secretly remove their brands, Yu Chang would be the most powerful and influential person in the whole country, and he would be perfectly concealed in the shadows as he sat and waited for the Xiang family and Xuanwu to destroy each other.

The plan was seamless. But there were always unexpected rotten branches popping up to make trouble.

The spiritual image brands could only be removed every day precisely at noon. In fact, with the concentration of Tai Sui’s

consciousness, even if he brought in the whole country's offerings all at once, he would still be able to control the papermen. But that slick bastard's excuse was that he had been injured while fighting the Territory Map. If it wasn't his head that hurt, it was his ass. Every day, he only returned to Tao County briefly, accepted two or three people if he was happy, or even only one person if he was in a bad mood, deliberately extending the battlefield!

Yu Chang had slipped up. He hadn't specified in the blood contract when the brands were to be removed.

That had been all right to begin with. Tai Sui wouldn't go back on his word about removing the brands. There was no benefit to him in those local despots who used spiritual image brands to control these masters gaining power. Yu Chang had kept calm about it at first. But he very soon discovered that that Tai Sui brat had given them rope to hang themselves with—once he slowed down, there had to be an order of priority among the offerings. Once there was an order of priority, there was disparity; they immediately split into many different levels.

All the offerings had been tormented by the spiritual image brands for over a century. No one had suffered less than anyone else. Having made it past establishing their foundations, no one was more cowardly than anyone else. Those who first had the opportunity to remove their spiritual brands were naturally a cut above the rest. Cries of discontentment could be heard everywhere about the delay. Before great matters had begun to move, these brothers had shown faint signs of falling out. Every day, they annoyed Yu Chang into a terrible state. And perhaps it was his mistake, but it seemed that the offerings whose consciousnesses had come in contact with Tai Sui, once their brands were gone, had become far less susceptible to the influence of the "grit projections."

Yu Chang had just been preparing to get out his trump card ahead of time, give Tai Sui his punishment, when the Land of Turmoil escaped his control... because of a cuckold.

The chief offering had his sights set on the Sanyue Mountains. He had no interest in the Southern He Peninsula, a garbage heap that the four nations had spent over two centuries vandalizing. He had been acting purely to muddy the waters and arrange a deathtrap there for foreign powers that could endanger him—primarily a certain individual surnamed “Tai.”

Making contact with Yang Wan hadn't been hard. That woman might have been the only evil cultivator in the world who still considered herself to be orthodox. After all this time, she had heard of the trouble in Southern Shu's Lingyun Mountains and had worked things out. She knew that in a momentary slip, she had nearly let herself become a knife for that evil Wangge Luobao to use to harm his country and bring calamity to its people. Naturally she understood the “secret troubles” that had led to Yu Chang's last-moment defection. She had quite a good opinion of him.

She disdained to associate with the hardly human evil cultivators of the Land of Turmoil. Her eyes and ears in the Land of Turmoil had never been as keen as the Emperor of the East's. And Yu Chang had perfectly made up for her shortcoming: Western Chu's mining area, an outer sect far from the capital, had long ago been secretly taken over by him. The two sides had readily accorded.

At the same time, to guard against the Queen Mother of the West standing alone and getting out of control, Yu Chang had prepared another move: he had colluded with the Emperor of the East.

Before the Queen Mother of the West had released her miasma, he had turned around and notified the Emperor of the East and given him the antidote, hoping that the Emperor of the East could ready

the million evil cultivators at his command and make the battle in the southern mines an even more interesting spectacle.

But with such a great opportunity, heaps of spiritual stones and mines right in front of him, the Emperor of the East was actually resisting the temptation, not plotting to take them. Like a fly chasing a fart, the only thing on his mind was his ex-wife!

When Yu Chang learned that the Emperor of the East had somehow found his way to the Queen Mother of the West's den and immediately attacked, he was simply stupefied: the four nations' spiritual mountains were still waiting to wipe out the evil cultivators, and the evil cultivators themselves had broken out in internal strife before they could get to it.

There were thousands of poems in the world about abandoned wives, and tens of thousands of verses about resentful wives, all of them unable to match up to the thrill of a single cry from the Emperor of the East as he came out of nowhere. What a great husband!

Yu Chang's intuition said that the course of events wasn't right and immediately sent a warning to his people in Western Chu's mining area, but it was already too late—

The fireworks display Wei Chengxiang had put on when impersonating Yao Qi and Chang Jun had carried no small force. It had blown all the snakes and rats hidden in the southern mines out all at once.

Since the Zhou family's schemes had been revealed, there had been no one like Zhou Qing at the southern mines, able to oversee the situation openly and in secret. The seniors who'd had brands stamped on them had died or sunk into the sea. Those who came after them were all trembling with fear, wanting not to win merit but to avoid fault and just get by. Seeing the "emergency" flare in the

sky, the “brilliant” mine supervisors collectively froze, having no idea what to do. The evil cultivators who had infiltrated the southern mines, however, were as perceptive as could be.

As soon as they saw the flare, the fake Yao Qi and fake Chang Jun knew that it had come from the direction of their lair. They thought to themselves that something drastic must have taken place to let those two little half-immortals escape.

Fortunately, they had already released the miasma. Without needing to consult, the two of them left the southern mines by night in perfect silent accord, heading toward the place they had arranged ahead of time with Her Highness.

And behind them, in a puddle along a street in Southern Wan’s mines, a pair of yellowish brown eyes emerged. A little water snake no thicker than an earthworm watched the direction the two of them went in.

The information the snake saw flew over the sea and landed in the hands of a beast-taming Miah cultivator.

Right now, Wangge Luobao was standing on a waking dragon’s back, playing the flute. The next life spiritual fish, flickering in and out of sight, circled him, and behind him was a great number of spiritual ships. The waking dragon stuck to the surface of the water. This whole area of the sea seemed to be covered in a layer of moonlight, protecting the boats and ships that the Miah were using talismans to propel.

The Miah cultivators were singing softly in chorus to the flute music. Their song was full of grief and anger—the flute player was false, but the singers were true.

Of the Miah who hadn’t escaped from Southern Shu’s main peninsula, over thirty thousand had died, male and female, young

and old—the enraged Xiuyi hadn't let any of them go. The Three Islands were now also held by the aggressive Xiuyi cultivators. Fortunately, Wangge Luobao had appeared. They had fled their native land and were on their way to seek out new resources and take back what was theirs.

The seething Miah cultivators were now hardly more than a hundred li from the Southern He Peninsula. Like starving carrion-eating vultures, they had their eyes on the corpse of Southern He.

“Clan leader, our eyes in Southern Wan's mining area have confirmed it, the Queen Mother of the West and Lord Guang'an must be hiding in Western Chu's mining area.”

“Western Chu's Yu Chang...” Wangge Luobao put down his flute. “What does the Emperor of the East say?”

“The Emperor of the East has some skill. He has already found the Queen Mother of the West's den. He says that Yu Chang really is worthy of his red-eyed little face—as expected, he's a wretch trying to score a meal at both ends, and only we are true allies. Western Chu's mining area, where the Queen Mother of the West and her people are hidden, isn't far from the Xiuyi's spiritual beast farm. The Emperor of the East is asking us to help him hold up those two ascended spirits, and afterward we'll split the resources in the Queen Mother of the West's Hidden Realm. The blood covenant signed by one party has already been sent over.” The Miah cultivator suppressed his greedy excitement, presenting the blood covenant sent by the Emperor of the East.

Wangge Luobao took a glance at it but didn't accept it.

“Yu Chang certainly won't want to see the Three Heroes of Turmoil exhaust themselves in an internal struggle before they can provoke a disturbance. He's sure to think of some way to protect the Queen Mother of the West. If we go ashore now, we'll be exposing

ourselves too early. We'd make ourselves into targets for the Xiuyi and the Chu," Wangge Luobao said softly. "The Emperor of the East is only using us to exhaust the Queen Mother of the West and Yu Chang. When we've pretty much all died off, naturally there will be no one to split resources with... What is it with these easterners always taking other people for idiots?"

The greed on the Miah cultivator's face was wiped off his face by this bucket of cold water. Ashen-faced, he said, "These sly easterners go too far!"

Wangge Luobao waved a hand, indicating for him to keep calm. He slowly stroked the flute's fingerholes. "Don't worry. We'll leave it up to the immortal mountains' orthodox cultivators to punish evil."

As soon as the Emperor of the East touched the hidden realm, Lord Guang'an and the Queen Mother of the West immediately perceived it.

The two of them had scattered poison miasma in Great Wan's mining area and hidden in Western Chu's mining area, which was in reality controlled by Yu Chang—Chu's mining area was to the north of Wan's mining area, very close, a place they could control the whole situation from; at the same time, if the miasma was discovered by a master when it spread to Northern Li's encampment, the chaotic Southern Wan mining area could block the first wave of searchers and give them room to escape.

The two of them had even buried another kind of miasma in Western Chu's mining area that they hadn't set off, in case Yu Chang betrayed them at the last moment.

Who would have thought that it would be their own backyard, which they had thought was absolutely safe, that caught fire first?

Just as the two of them were planning to withdraw to the Wan mining area and rescue their home, a huge gold-armored zheng somehow came over from the Shu mining area's spiritual beast pasture to the north.

The Shu were always letting gold-armored zheng graze in the canal, but each country's mining area's borders had inscriptions. Spiritual beasts wouldn't approach the borders. But this gold-armored zheng had somehow gone crazy and simply charged the border between the two countries' mining areas. It was disemboweled by the triggered border inscriptions. Dragging along all its internal organs, it rammed right into Western Chu's mining area.

The Chu guards and mine cultivators were startled by the huge falling corpse. Before they could come forward to investigate it, the gold-armored zheng's corpses exploded into a pile of bits. The bloody mist was scattered everywhere by the Land of Turmoil's strong wind.

“Careful! There's...”

The Chu cultivator couldn't finish getting his warning out. It was as if he had melted. In the blink of an eye, he had rotted into a pool of corpse water—with the border inscriptions as a barrier, even if all the spiritual beasts in Southern Shu's mining area turned into big bags of poison, at most they could have killed a few border guards. It wouldn't have created such a big disturbance.

But what that gold-armored zheng carried wasn't miasma, but a talisman to activate miasma. It had activated the poison that the Queen Mother of the West and Lord Guang'an had buried as insurance against Yu Chang.

The intensity of an ascended spirit medicine cultivator's miasma could paralyze all of the Chu mines within a few breaths. The Queen

Mother of the West had intended to use it to keep herself from being trapped by the Chu.

The dense fog exploded instantly. The Queen Mother of the West was caught off guard, her own miasma getting out of hand in the place where she was hidden.

Curing poison was always slower than doing the poisoning, and the wind just happened to be blowing from the west.

Everyone involved in this was too clever. Each person had prepared a trap, hollowing out the earth.

A firecracker had been cast and was scattering in all directions. It would remain to be seen who would be the first to be buried.

The rolling miasma was taken to the eastern side of the Northern Li mining area in a flash by the evil wind from the sea, touching Northern Li's border inscriptions.

A terrifying consciousness immediately locked onto them.

Lord Guang'an felt his spine turn cold. He backhandedly clapped a suit of protective armor onto the Queen Mother of the West and pushed her away. "Go!"

CHAPTER 201 - A Life of Regret (13)

The Chu had been taken down by the Queen Mother of the West's own miasma. Yu Chang wouldn't have had time to rescue her even if he had wanted to.

A beam of sword energy like the wrath of heaven smashed the border inscriptions of both Chu and Li encampments, tore right through the immovable miasma fog, and in a flash surged up in front of Lord Guang'an. Like a piece of paper in a hurricane, this ascended spirit sword cultivator who had laid siege to Xuanwu in the South Sea was held down by that sword energy, unable to resist. In an instant, he was gone.

The Queen Mother of the West's dismay hadn't even had time to appear on her face!

But the sword energy had yet to stop. Going in the direction the west wind was blowing from, it split apart the whole Chu mining area at once and surged toward the South Sea.

Though Wangge Luobao was caught off guard, his reaction was extremely swift. In a flash, he blew a sharp whistle inaudible to the human ear. The ships on the water were tightly wrapped in spiritual energy and sank into the sea. All the waking dragons underwater flew out, swapping places with the ships.

The dreamlike sacred beasts let out frightened wails, but they couldn't disobey a beast tamer's command. They shielded the ships with their bodies. The sword energy fell in the South Sea with a boom, cutting a "wound" ten li long in the sea. The seawater on either side took a long time to fall. The blood of the waking dragons dyed that sea trench a dense, milky white.

Even Wei Chengxiang and the others hidden in Southern Wan's mining area felt it. The Emperor of the East gripped the incessantly buzzing Emperor of the East Halberd in terror. All the established foundations and half-immortals locked in battle on the ground momentarily forgot to breathe.

Xi Ping was far away in the Xuanyin Mountains, but that sword energy seeped from the reincarnation wood amulets in the hands of each Turmoiler and each Luwu, sweeping out in front of him. He immediately pulled his consciousness out and leaned back. He practically had the illusion of having his throat cut by the sword light.

Oh no. The shard of Zhaoting was still in his spirit!

In his desperation, Xi Ping's first reaction was to make a shield of his consciousness, acting as a firm barrier between the two famous swords of the north and south, taking on all the sword energy from Wanshuang without letting a thread leak out.

His consciousness was nearly cut open by the sword energy. He took a breath, and his back was already soaked. There was a chill on his face—a cut on his left cheek ran all the way down to the corner of his mouth. In the blink of an eye, the cut was healed by the formidable restorative powers of an ascended spirit.

This was... the extant pinnacle of the way of the sword.

Upon making an appearance, she had cleared away all the interwoven schemes and intrigues on the continent!

The whole of the Southern He Peninsula trembled in the midst of that attack. Before the major and minor evil cultivators could come to their senses, in the miasma-congested dense fog of Western Chu, a mountain of a "person" slowly walked out, half a head taller than even the steam cars in the Chu mines.

The half-puppets on the southern continent primarily used Moon Plated Gold and wood to make up for shortcomings in the human body; the lighter the material, the better. Xi Yue had been lighter than a wool blanket when he was little, so a mortal young man could pick him up one-handed and run all over the mountain with him.

But this Sword Slave from Northern Li was extremely heavy. The ground trembled beneath her feet. Each step carried the distinctive trill of a sharp blade slicing the air. The inscriptions on the ground in the Chu mines were like water, breaking apart where she stepped and “rippling” outward in all directions. In the blink of an eye, the better part of the Chu mining area’s defenses had crumbled!

The better part of her body was a heap of ghastly pale bone jade, with metal varying in hue and texture exposed at the joints. At a glance, the metal looked like a random pile of scraps, but from every bit of it came a harsh energy. If you stared at it casually, it would pierce your eye and unsettle your spiritual sense—it was said that the iron in the Sword Slave’s body wasn’t mundane iron, but the shards of a hundred and eight sword cultivators’ vital swords. She was like a walking sword crypt.

This was what Xi Ping saw through the reincarnation wood amulet of a Luwu in Chu’s mining area.

This Luwu was pretending to be a traveling merchant. He had fallen under the tables and chairs along with the other travelers and put a poison repelling pill from Rosy Cloud Peak in his mouth. Though it wasn’t the right antidote, it could still ameliorate the effects. The Queen Mother of the West’s strong poison hadn’t taken him down, but the sword energy that the Sword Slave brought with her as she passed nailed him firmly in place. Xi Ping distinctly sensed that the half-immortal Luwu didn’t breathe for a long moment.

The moment he saw that person... that sword-wielding puppet, Xi Ping understood why the Sword Slave didn't take the southern continent seriously, and why san-ge had said that Great Wan couldn't oppose Northern Li under any circumstances—they would have no chance at all.

And apart from her, Northern Li had three other shed skin sword cultivators and a dozen ascended spirits!

Xi Ping wiped the blood off his face. A thread of his consciousness curled up in the Luwu's palm, which was covered in cold sweat. He began giving earnest consideration to A-Xiang's suggestion of going to hang himself at the Sword Slave's doorstep.

Where the Sword Slave passed through Chu's mines, gas lamps exploded, train tracks snapped, burning boilers and passing cars were soundlessly extinguished, their casings slowly cracking open—she seemed to hate all of these machines. “Evil cultivators are openly hiding in Chu. It seems that Western Chu's mining area has escaped the Sanyue Mountains' control. The death penalty may be dealt.”

As she spoke, she had already arrived in front of the Queen Mother of the West. In her face overgrown with rifts, a pair of eyes like inanimate objects looked down, fixing on the Queen Mother of the West's face.

The Queen Mother of the West seemed to have been frozen. The Sword Slave coldly said, “Yang clan remnant, I hear that you people recently joined hands and nearly brought down the Lingyun Mountains. Do you think that all orthodox cultivators of the immortal mountains are worthless wretches like those Shu cowherds?”

Yang Wan was trembling. As hot sweat steamed off her, it actually turned to frost in the sultry heat of the Southern He Peninsula, coating all her finery.

“Toying with diabolical inventions to the point of forfeiting your nation’s blessings.” The Sword Slave snorted quietly. “Is your Lancang Sect worthy of being called the ‘sword sect’?”

No sooner had she spoken than the protective armor the Queen Mother of the West wore abruptly cracked open. Xi Ping’s field of vision suddenly cleared—the spiritual energy stirred up by that protective immortal tool that was of at least ascended spirit grade practically turned into a hurricane, blowing the roofs off all the buildings in the area!

When the gale had passed, the miasma that had been covered up hit the Sword Slave right in the face at extremely close range. The part of it that fell on the ground corroded it, making a hole. The Queen Mother of the West got on a sword and was about to leave.

But the Sword Slave shifted her heels slightly. Unflinchingly, she raised a hand and grabbed the deadly miasma.

The Sword Slave’s protective spiritual energy was at least as thick as Xi Tai Sui’s face; even Jinping’s city wall couldn’t quite compete. The Queen Mother of the West’s miasma, which could make all the fish in the East Sea go belly up, was powerless against her. Yang Wan’s feet had just left the ground on her sword when the sword snapped. She tumbled to the ground along with her sword—for ten li around Wanshuang, no sword dared to fly.

Even through the reincarnation wood, Xi Ping felt that overbearing sword aura. Comparing it to Zhaoting, which he had with him and which didn’t even give him a headache when it beat him, he couldn’t say who was being insulted by putting the names of the swords of the north and south together.

The richly attired Queen Mother of the West landed miserably and “melted” where she was without making a sound.

When the seven great ascended spirit evil cultivators had besieged Xuanwu in the South Sea, Wangge Luobao had obviously not used his full strength; his depths were unknown. The Emperor of the East had an unorthodox background and the most contemptible tricks. Zhuoming and Yu Chang were both schemers full of guile. The Snow Wolf and Lord Guang'an were two great sword cultivators, one with a soft sword, one with a firm one, equally matched. They were at their strongest directly facing the enemy. But the Queen Mother of the West basically hadn't attacked. A medicine cultivator only seemed capable of playing an auxiliary role against an enemy. She had always been under the protection of her loyal sword cultivator.

Only now did Xi Ping learn why the Emperor of the East said that Lord Guang'an was her kept little boy toy—facing a powerful foe, the Queen Mother of the West was exceedingly calm. The craftiness of her methods actually exceeded Lord Guang'an's. The poison miasma blended into the wind, the water... even into the light. It was everywhere, getting in by every opening. Xi Ping's vision suddenly blurred. He realized with a start that it included a poison that could numb the consciousness.

He quickly put a mind calming pill under his tongue. In just this brief span of time, without him noticing it, the better part of Xi Ping's protective spiritual energy had dispersed. The wintry wind of Flying Jade Peak chilled him to the marrow. He turned his head and sneezed. He hadn't sneezed in over a decade; he wasn't used to it anymore. He accidentally bit his tongue, even bringing tears to his eyes.

It turned out that Wen Fei's fighting skills weren't the exception.

And yet the ways of medicine and toolmaking had always been discussed on equal terms in the cultivation world! If this wasn't a

misunderstanding, then the toolmaking cultivators must have been surreptitiously talking themselves up!

The Sword Slave's protective spiritual energy was quickly being nibbled away in bits and snatched away in chunks. That monster made of stone and iron didn't move a muscle. She stood calmly amid the pernicious fog. The fog was like the acid in a factory, quickly scouring away her invisible "armor." As soon as it found a crack, that miasma seemed to come alive and "prick" at her.

Just then, sword aura that made it hard to catch your breath burst from the Sword Slave. Xi Ping didn't even get a clear look. He only heard a woman give an extremely brief scream.

The churning point of the sword stirred the surrounding fog like a turbine, forcing out a faint human figure inside it. The Sword Slave didn't even touch the Wanshuang Sword. She reached out and wrung the Queen Mother of the West's slender neck.

In a daze, Xi Ping seemed to hear the sound of her neck snapping. All he could see was a vague, ornately-dressed, wide-sleeved outline in the fog. Then there was a sound like tearing silk. His heart gave a fierce jump. That woman's body disintegrated in the Sword Slave's hand, her precious pearl and jade ornaments shattering all over the ground!

But soon after, he realized that he hadn't sensed the spiritual energy fluctuation of an ascended spirit's demise.

Xi Ping threw caution to the wind, taking his life in his hands to go meddle. Avoiding the sword energy, he released his consciousness within a narrow range. The miasma nearly soaked his spirit. He saw some bits of rag bearing sword cuts fall to the ground. It was a substitute that had been torn to pieces by the Sword Slave!

The real Yang Wan's figure flashed quickly. She was just about to escape under cover of the fog. The Sword Slave gave an angry shout and formed a sword seal with both hands. A gust of sword wind flew from her palms. Her puppet body was extremely heavy, but she was as agile as lightning in motion, even more rapid in her pursuit than the sword wind.

Yang Wan was entirely enveloped in a heinous murderous will. At last, she was out of tricks. Panic appeared on her face. The Sword Slave was just about to disappear from the reincarnation wood amulet's field of vision. As Xi Ping coughed, he rapidly sought his next vantage point...

Just then, the Sword Slave's enormous body went rigid. The blow she had aimed at Yang Wan went astray!

Even Yang Wan was stunned.

Xi Ping's eyes lit up. Without further ado, his consciousness rushed to the reincarnation wood amulet under the Beijue Mountains. Giving no explanation, he simply snatched away Zhou Ying's consciousness as he was drinking tea with the Blind Wolf King—there was no need to bother with empty formalities with a cultivator of the way of clarity.

“San-ge, *cough-cough*...lend me your eyes, look at the Sword Slave!”

Zhou Ying saw through the miasma at a glance. The demon eyes gazed upon the Sword Slave's body. The Sword Slave's protective spiritual energy was evidently in perfect condition, yet each and every joint made from the shard of a sword was infected with poisonous miasma.

With a thought, Xi Ping used a talisman to weave a big net inside the reincarnation wood, snugly shielding Zhou Ying's

consciousness, blocking the miasma. He felt the poison invading his lungs and coughed so hard he couldn't catch his breath. Yet there was the excitement of wishing to see the world in chaos in his voice: "She... she's been infected, hasn't she?"

The power that had been hidden in the shadows all along, without anyone knowing about it, had struck.

Zhou Ying said, "With something other than what you're infected with."

"Obviously, I know that. How did she get infected? Even if Yang Wan had simply torn open her protective spiritual energy and poured in her poison, it still wouldn't have had this effect."

In the cultivation world, poison wasn't a dirty trick. It was a method of doing battle.

If you just put poison into food or drink, no one would be poisoned. It had to be made into a miasma. And making a poisonous miasma was a great test to one's cultivation. Generally speaking, an ordinary cultivator's miasma could only take down a cultivator at their own level or below. Those who could poison someone above their grade were all masters. And so-called going "above their grade" only meant taking one small step forward—like a near-established foundation killing an established foundation. In a single step, you couldn't do the splits right up to the sky.

It was said that Kunlun's Sword Slave had already wielded Wanshuang in excess of two centuries, even longer than the master of Zhaoting, the new Sword of the South, had been cultivating at all. And the Queen Mother of the West had only become an ascended spirit after Qiu Sha had pierced the sky. Her cultivation level was about the same as Xi Ping's!

Zhou Ying observed briefly, then slowly said, “The Sword Slave is a half-puppet.”

Xi Ping’s ears were already starting to ring, but after a moment’s blankness, he immediately caught on: the Sword Slave was too terrifying, which had made him forget for a moment that, strictly speaking, she was the same as Xi Yue.

All cultivators starting from the established foundation level had an essence. The higher their cultivation, the thicker their essence.

As an ascended spirit fighting with a cultivator of the same level, after exhausting his essence, he had needed Bai Ling to feed him spiritual stones transferred from all over the country. But shed skins were different. Zhi Xiu didn’t need to take spiritual stones when he went out. He was practically half a spiritual mountain himself. That was why there was so much damage when a shed skin’s essence was exhausted or they passed away.

But the Sword Slave wasn’t a cultivator. She had to eat spiritual stones.

“She’s eaten spiritual stones from the Lancang Mountains!”

The Sword Slave only felt indescribable sluggishness coming from each and every one of her joints. Her spiritual energy actually went out of control. The confused Queen Mother of the West suddenly seemed to hear something. She abruptly turned her head to glance at the Lancang Mountains, dim amid the fog.

In this brief moment, the Sword Slave had already forcibly suppressed the miasma that had contaminated her whole body. She slashed at the Queen Mother of the West. The west wind suddenly changed direction, pushed all the miasma in the sky toward the Sword Slave. The sharp sword only cut off part of the hem of Yang Wan’s skirt—she had escaped!

The Emperor of the East sensed something. Without a word, he vanished, abandoning all his crowd of henchmen where they were.

Wei Chengxiang heard Xi Ping's hoarse voice: "Poison-repelling pills, take as many as you have, quick!"

No sooner had he spoken than the Queen Mother of the West's entire hidden realm moved as though it had grown legs, carrying away all the cultivators inside it. An ominous poison mist emerged from the inscriptions on the ground, turning the black-clothed people coveting the hidden realm's resources into the hidden realm's resources themselves.

"Bring a drop of blood into the Law Breaker and give it to me." When Wei Chengxiang had finished getting the blood with a struggle, he pulled the three people's consciousnesses into the Law Breaker all at once to take shelter temporarily. He didn't have time to give too many instructions. He hurriedly ran off with that drop of blood to Rosy Cloud Peak—poison-repelling pills that weren't the right formula could only delay the effects of the poison. To cure it, they would have to rely on Wen Fei.

Zhao Qindan happened to be in the Law Breaker space, helping Tai Sui prepare things for a fresh round of brand removals. She turned her head and saw to her surprise the three people who had dropped in. "A-Xiang, are you... Chang-shixiong? Yao-shixiong?"

At the same time, Zhou Ying's consciousness was delivered back to the Beijue Mountains in perfect condition by Xi Ping. When he opened his eyes, he saw the Blind Wolf King craning his neck to look at him. "This is my first time seeing an established foundation cultivator who didn't establish his epilepsy away. Listen, little devil, what's the matter with you, having a fit just like that?"

Zhou Ying politely pulled back his hand and stood. “Wolf King, there is a letter from Kunlun.”

CHAPTER 202 - A Life of Regret (14)

“Peak Master Wen—”

When Xi Ping reached Rosy Cloud Peak, the miasma was already choking his throat and lungs. He could no longer speak. This cry had come from Xi Yue, who had seen him nearly fall off his sword on Flying Jade Peak and had kindly escorted him here.

Wen Fei took one glance at Xi Ping’s face, utterly bloodless as a fierce ghost’s, and was so scared he even dropped his fan. “Wh... where h-have you been... h-haunting?”

Xi Ping staggered and stuffed his blood along with that of Wei Chengxiang and the others into Wen Fei’s hands. He mouthed, “Find a cure.”

Having said this, he ignored Wen Fei stammering over every word to say, “Don’t die on my doorstep,” closed his eyes, and collapsed.

Next to him, Xi Yue was startled. He held him up and saw that his chest had stopped rising and falling. He looked at Wen Fei in agitation. “Peak Master, he...”

Wen Fei calmly picked up his fan and waved his hand, using the fan to say, *An ascended spirit doesn’t give up the ghost this quietly. His consciousness has just departed.*

Xi Yue thought that this sounded like a very serious symptom. He quickly asked, “Why would his consciousness depart?”

Wen Fei was perplexed. *How else is he supposed to make trouble?*

Xi Yue: “...”

He had thought that Xi Ping had been injured by the poisonous miasma, that he was urgently seeking help from Rosy Cloud Peak, so weak that he couldn't even maintain the presence of mind to speak a single sentence; but it turned out that he had run over, peeled off his damaged skin sack, tossed it to the "tailor," and gone back out to cause mayhem without even taking the time to give detailed instructions.

He was so busy!

Xi Yue came to his senses, and exasperation welled up in him. This feeling of being dejected and short of breath was inexplicably familiar, making him freeze in spite of himself.

He was nowhere near old enough to be having memory problems. Watching Xi Ping lying there motionless, Xi Yue suddenly remembered that this person seemed to have frightened people with quite a few wretched actions of this nature before. But strangely, these things seemed to be buried deep in the corners of his memory, like long and redundant texts memorized and recited in childhood. Though he remembered them all when he was prompted, he normally wouldn't remember them.

Frowning, Xi Yue pressed a hand to his chest—even now, he had only recalled the events. No matter what, he couldn't remember how he had felt at the time. He had evidently experienced them, but it seemed as though he hadn't been present.

Moreover... he and this nominal older brother had gone through so many things together. Why would he feel like such a stranger?

Xi Ping had no time to attend to anything else right now. He sank his consciousness into the reincarnation wood, rushing to wrap up this chaotic situation, his will firm despite his failing frame.

On the Southern He Peninsula, all the Turmoilers furtively holding reincarnation wood amulets received “Tai Sui”’s signal to “take action.”

The Sword Slave was after all one of the extant ultimate masters. After briefly cycling her energy, she broke through the poisonous miasma twined around her. She was in an incandescent rage. Ignoring all the nations’ borders, her tyrannical consciousness covered the whole of the Southern He Peninsula.

There was no trace of the Queen Mother of the West. There seemed to be some peculiar link between her and Lord Guang’an. As soon as she escaped, Lord Guang’an, who had been pounded into the earth by a beam of Wanshuang’s sword energy, had also disappeared. And these two evil cultivators’ hidden realm, concealed in Great Wan’s mining area, had relocated unnoticed, leaving behind only some corpses and marks of a fight between cultivators.

In Western Chu’s mining area, there was dead silence.

Yang Wan’s hiding place had been located at the heart of the Chu mines. The most important parts of each nation’s spiritual stone mines were heavily guarded, and she had not only been able to enter, but had also been able to comfortably set up housekeeping; obviously she had been invited. That Yang clan survivor had deep ties to the Chu!

On the Chu-Shu border, the blood of the gold-armored zheng had yet to dry. It was that animal that had triggered the poisonous miasma.

A master like the Sword Slave, who looked down upon all creation, had long been accustomed to being the focus of everyone’s attention as soon as she appeared. She frequently considered events from only two angles—“Is this person trying to get on my

good side?” or “Is this person trying to counter me?” Therefore, she believed as a matter of course that the Queen Mother of the West had activated the miasma in order to escape from her. It hadn’t entered her mind that this was a muddled internal conflict brought about by mutual wariness among the evil cultivators. The workers in Shu’s mining area’s spiritual beast farm were all Turmoilers. At Xi Ping’s request, the Turmoilers had now deliberately herded all the large spiritual beasts far away from the Chu-Shu border, leaving behind only a crowd of snakes and rats and such, which peered sneakily in the direction of the Chu mines, perfectly “substantiating” the Sword Slave’s conjecture: the Yang clan survivor was also colluding with the Shu.

As for Wan’s mining area, which was teeming with worthless wretches—the miasma that passed from person to person had come from the Wan mining area to begin with, and Yang Wan had hidden her den in it. It went without saying that there was something fishy going on there.

Finally, she turned her gaze upon Northern Li’s mining area. A bloody light emerged in her asymmetrical eyes.

The Sword Slave absolutely refused to believe that a mere early stage ascended spirit medicine cultivator could create a miasma that would poison her. While she didn’t understand these underhanded tricks, at her level, she could sense that what she had been infected with was something different from the miasma spread throughout the surroundings. In other words, the poison that had infected her had been planted ahead of time “in her own home” — even Li’s territory contained Yang Wan’s moles!

And just then, where the Sword Slave’s consciousness was located, a peculiar scene took place.

The Turmoilers that could be seen everywhere, whether doing hard labor in the mines or wandering through the wilderness... all

suddenly stood in place, motionless. Though they clearly hadn't discussed it ahead of time, they raised their heads simultaneously, looked in a certain direction, and recited something while bowing. The kneeling homage looked like it was being performed by puppets on strings, the movements done in perfect unison, as if they had all been possessed by ghosts!

The Turmoilers couldn't speak clearly. No one understood their "bestial language." Because their intellects were incomplete, there wasn't even a way to soul-search them. But there was one term that appeared repeatedly in the mumbling that sounded like a call to draw the soul from one's body. This term was "Your Highness" in the ancient He language!

Had the Sword Slave not been made of iron and stone, she would have broken out in gooseflesh by now. Her figure flashed as she suddenly flitted in the direction those Turmoilers were bowing. At her cultivation level, it took only the space of a few breaths for her to reach the mountaintop. To her horror, she found that those Turmoilers were bowing in the direction of the Principal Peak of the former Lancang Sword Sect—the place where its long-vanished divine tool, the Lovebird Sword Array, had hung!

After the Lancang Sword Sect had been destroyed, the four nations had deliberately obliterated the traces of those traitors to the cultivation world. Even the juniors in the mines now didn't know which mountain had been Lancang's Principal Peak. How did these short-lived Turmoilers know?

The Sword Slave's heart went cold. Looking at the southern mines again, she thought that the waters here were deep indeed, the situation knotty and deep-rooted. The ascended spirit Yang clan survivor was only the tip of the iceberg. At her back there seemed to be an abyss gazing at her. Even her own people couldn't be trusted.

On the southern continent, Xuanyin was under threat, and Sanyue and Lingyun couldn't control their rebels. All powers would have their eyes fixed on the resources of the southern mines, so the Sect Leader and the High Priest had sent her to oversee matters. Apart from the new Sword of the South being able to raise her interest slightly, the Sword Slave hadn't taken any of it seriously to begin with. She had even been planning to take advantage of the chaos to simply swallow the Lancang Spiritual Mountains in one gulp... Now it seemed that the Sword of the South, tied up with domestic trifles, was the least of her problems.

The Sword Slave's expression became grim. She blew a long whistle into the sky, sending a message back to the Kunlun Mountains.

She wasn't the only one to see the Turmoilers behaving strangely. Before Yu Chang in Western Chu and Wangge Luobao in the sea could recover from the aftereffects of Wanshuang, they learned that the Queen Mother of the West had escaped safely, as if by miracle.

While the two of them didn't have the same aims, the same thought appeared in their minds without prearrangement: that woman hadn't shown her hand during the battle in the South Sea; it turned out that she had been hiding such depths!

All clever people knew to be flexible, and evil cultivators in a turbulent world had waists more pliant than the dancing girls beside the Lingyang River. Wanshuang's Sword Slave was an enemy who could never be converted into a friend, but the Queen Mother of the West perhaps wouldn't object to some more allies.

Even Yang Wan herself was shaken.

When the Sword Slave's attack had gone astray, her consciousness and the spiritual sense attached to her physical senses had been seized by a "heavenly edict." No one could describe what her

emotions had been at that moment—after two hundred years, the scar-riddled spiritual mountains of her homeland had protected her. They had spoken to her.

Guang'an's essence had been pierced by Wanshuang, his meridians shattered. She had only brought him out through the special marriage contract between the two of them. He was now lying unconscious in her carriage. Yang Wan had fled all on her own. Just as she was beginning to suspect that the voice of the spiritual mountains had been her own illusion caused by Wanshuang's attack, she saw a miracle before her eyes—tens of thousands of Turmoilers prostrating themselves in the direction of Lancang's Principal Peak. They evidently couldn't speak, yet they were struggling to recite her name in Southern He's ancient language.

In that instant, Yang Wan made her decision. She grabbed a handful of barren earth and piously kissed it—she believed that the soul of her native land, which had suffered its fill of devastation, still remained, and she was the chosen one of heaven.

Xi Ping, having cooked up a god so effectively that no one had the slightest doubt, still felt that there was something missing, so he transmitted the Queen Mother of the West's likeness to the Turmoilers. Skilled hands may have been the natural gift of the people of Southern He. In hardly any time, the Turmoilers' deformed claws had carved lifelike wooden statues.

“Right, just like that. Stone and clay images are good, too. From now on, make them whenever you can. Try to spread the statues throughout the mining areas. Bow to them when you see them,” Xi Ping said. “By the grace of heaven, we'll all be Her Ladyship's people from now on!”

In this way, all living creatures in the Land of Turmoil—including even birds, beasts, insects, and fish—had come “under suspicion” of being the Queen Mother of the West's people. The Sword Slave

couldn't cleave a hundred million ants to death with one blow. She was alone and unaided. All she could do was abandon her posturing and retreat to the northern border of the Southern He Peninsula and cooperate with the Xuanyin Mountains' upstart.

They both belonged to the immortal mountains' orthodoxy and ought to be as close as twins. Wouldn't it be nice if Zhaoting and Wanshuang could fight the demons hand in hand? Why insist on a fight to the death?

If this Yang clan survivor turned out to be like the last emperor Yang Zou and wanted to "disperse" the Lancang Spiritual Mountains, then that really would be...

Just wonderful.

"The Sword Slave has been poisoned? No... Her!" The Beijue Mountains' Blind Wolf King was so shocked that he stretched out his two scrawny arms and mimed the shape of a block. "She's made of iron, carved of stone. Is she even capable of being poisoned?"

"It seems she is," said Zhou Ying, in accordance with the facts.

The Blind Wolf King, pinching the letter that had just come from the Kunlun Mountains between two fingers, looked at him with the same marveling gaze, feeling that the way of clarity was a wonder. "Not bad there, kid. No wonder the Xuanyin Mountains have changed hands. How did you people do it?"

"I'm no expert in the way of medicine and poison," Zhou Ying said, lying through his teeth. "The word from the Southern He Peninsula is that the birds and beasts all stop to bow when they see the Queen Mother of the West. Presumably she really has been chosen by fate and has means we know not."

The Blind Wolf King slowly settled into his heap of fox-fur robe and narrowed his eyes, looking at Zhou Ying. “The High Priest has agreed to see you. The southern continent has a foul atmosphere. I’ve heard that people even shut themselves up in metal cages and ride around in the streets. Kunlun does in fact need a reliable ally, and the Sword of the South is a decent choice, but you had better not get any ideas.”

Zhou Ying looked at him candidly, his gaze as limpid as a mountain spring... except that in the spring was a demon seed.

“If you hadn’t already established a foundation, you could have studied under me. What a pity.” The Blind Wolf King clicked his tongue and waved a hand. “Wu Lingxiao is proud and arrogant. She’s fallen flat on her face this time.”

Having said this, he picked up a small wine pot, executed a “winding” stretch, and noodled away... not noticing that he had accidentally used the Sword Slave’s real name.

Zhou Ying looked thoughtfully at his retreating figure. When he raised his head, he met the gaze of the Crown Prince Snow Wolf, then nodded courteously to the Crown Prince Snow Wolf.

The Snow Wolf pretended not to see. He coldly lowered his gaze and went chasing after the Blind Wolf King like his shadow.

Zhi Xiu had been at the border to begin with. On receiving Wen Fei’s message, he had passed through a snow shuffler on Flying Jade Peak in a blink. He was just about to go to Rosy Cloud Peak to see his encumbrance of a disciple, reported to be “so badly poisoned he had turned into a withered eggplant,” when all of a sudden his consciousness noticed a drop of blood.

Xi Ping had been cut by Wanshuang’s sword energy when it had leaked from the reincarnation wood. He had been busy looking for a

place to get a closer view, so he had casually wiped the blood off, not noticing that it had stained the small table.

Zhi Xiu frowned. His spiritual sense moved faintly. He reached out to touch the bloodstain. After a moment, he turned and ran. “Little whelp!”

Before Xi Ping could give Lin Chi a full description of that special spirit-conducting gold that could reconnect veins of the earth, the tail end of his words changed key into a scream.

The corner of Lin Chi’s eye twitched, his delicate features twisting into a peculiar expression that lay between “Revenge at last” and “I can’t bear to watch.”

Wen Fei said, “Deal— with — it.”

Using the poisoned blood, Wen Fei had first created an antidote for the three half-immortals who hadn’t been heavily poisoned, then gone to concentrate on dispatching the miasma Xi Ping had contracted.

According to this wicked stutterer, Xi Ping had picked up a dozen different kinds of poison. Taking antidotes for them all might have been enough to burst his guts, and refining the medicine would have been too time-consuming. It was better to “go to the source.”

It was only then that Xi Ping learned that “the strength of one can defeat the skill of ten” also applied to the way of medicine making. Wen Fei didn’t even look at what kind of poisons the Queen Mother of the West had used. He simply dismantled the miasma she had made with brute force, scattered the poisons, and left Xi Ping to digest them himself.

Wen Fei shot a beam of essence into his meridians. It was as if a crash of rhinoceroses with cannons strapped to their backs were

charging madly through Xi Ping's bones, exploding when they hit an acupuncture point. Xi Ping seemed to become the sky over the Sea of Stars the other night, several hundred fireworks exploding simultaneously in his body, making him want to get up and turn cartwheels.

The Queen Mother of the West hadn't managed to poison him to death, but he was going to be nearly beaten to death by Wen Fei.

"Ah... Do all you medicine cultivators smash rocks against your chests...? Hss, Wen Fei! How many patients have you killed with your cures... ah! Fuck!"

In the end, the Master of Moon Plated Peak found his conscience and feebly put in from the sidelines, "Wen-shixiong, can... can you just tear open a miasma in a living person's body like this?"

Of course you can't. Wen Fei's fan, hanging in midair, fanned a breeze toward him, writing in small, stylish running-standard script.¹⁰¹ *Otherwise, would I have needed to stay at the Latent Cultivation Temple for three years back then? It would break a person's meridians.*

Lin Chi said, "Huh?"

Wen Fei wrote, *But he's unbreakable, isn't he? And we haven't got three years.*

Xi Ping: "..."

This stutterer was abusing the power of his office for personal revenge!

Before the rictus of pain could recede from his face, a sly smile appeared at the corners of his twitching eyes. He was just about to

make a scene when a loud shout came from outside Rosy Cloud Peak: “Xi Shiyong!”

“Shifu!” Seeing that his solid mountain of support was on the way, Xi Ping’s spine stiffened. He got ready to lodge his complaint. “Peak Master Wen is...”

Then he saw Zhi Xiu stride in with his face as grim as deep water. “Explain this to me. Cheng Yu is an ascended spirit. Where would he get shed skin sword energy?”

Xi Ping: “...”

His mountain of support had collapsed and was about to crush him!

While Rosy Cloud Peak was in utter disarray, Zhou Ying left the Beijue Mountains, heading toward the Kunlun Mountains. The Snow Wolf had been ordered to see him out. As he watched that frail established foundation’s figure vanish amid the heavy snow, the look in the Snow Wolf’s eyes grew grim. A concealed communication immortal tool emerged in the palm of his hand.

CHAPTER 203 - A Life of Regret (15)

The thing in the Snow Wolf's palm was called a Linked Heart. Like Xuanyin's Heavenly Question, the Linked Heart was Kunlun's most heavily encrypted communication immortal tool. Not even the Blind Wolf King had better think of spying on it—it was for the exclusive use of the inner sect.

The Snow Wolf had obtained it when he had just become an ascended spirit.

Since he was little, people had told him that the way of the sword was impartial.

This way didn't rely on external objects. Unlike the medicine and toolmaking ways, it didn't require a large quantity of material resources and at least as much financial wherewithal as luck. And unlike other ways, it wasn't so dependent on spiritual sense and natural talent; neither a first-class spiritual sense that gave you twice the results for half the effort, nor the innate spiritual bones that would put you half a step from an established foundation as soon as you opened your spiritual eyes would give you an edge over anyone else. It didn't even rely on a person's physical condition—Zhi Xiu's martial skills had been thoroughly mediocre. Opening your spiritual eyes cleansed your vigor and strengthened your marrow. As long as you didn't get an eye-opening wound bad enough to leave you missing a limb, the slight differences among mortals would all be evened out.

This was a way for those who were best at tolerating loneliness, at hardening their hearts and tempering themselves, at being staunch.

So when Kunlun selected its disciples, it was much more fair than the southern continent, where you could get in on surname alone.

Every year, the immortal mountains would pick a group of children around ten years old and lock them up in the outer sect Disciple Hall to focus on training. They were tested once a month. The standards for elimination were harsh. Between entering the sect and opening their spiritual eyes, ninety percent or more would wash out. Those who succeeded in opening their spiritual eyes would still be faced with a once-in-fifteen-years contest, where one of a hundred would be chosen to enter the inner sect. The rest would go to the outer sect called the Night Revenants.

But spiritual mountains were spiritual mountains. No matter how fair, as long as the Disciple Hall wasn't so large that it could contain all the young students of the sword on the northern continent, this road to heaven requiring a bitter trek had nothing to do with the common people.

The Snow Wolf was one of the people who had been shut out. He had fallen just one step short.

He had been born into an official's family and had held sword since the moment he could walk. He was the eldest son, the one destined to enter the crucible cast of iron that was the Disciple Hall and shoulder his family's great expectations. Any willfulness or pampering would have damaged him. His father had never smiled at him, as if he was never good enough. His mother's love was all for his younger siblings, as if the warmth of affection would have melted the sword heart he had yet to find.

There were two things that the Snow Wolf hated most in his life. One was a high courtyard wall, and the other was the sword.

Since he was three years old, he would get up in the morning to practice swordsmanship, then study in the afternoon. He hadn't known a single day of idleness. Apart from making offerings to ancestors at their graves, he couldn't go out. There were stringent rules for what he could eat and drink. He was nearly ten years old

when he ate candy for the first time—it was a mass-produced malt sugar candy that glued your mouth together and had a bitter aftertaste. The very last of his family's guards to be dismissed had given it to him, just before leaving.

The year he was to formally enter the Disciple Hall, there was a rupture among Northern Li's military families, caused by Moon Plated Gold. The progressive party was utterly routed. His whole family suffered. His father was stripped of his rank and banished into the wilderness. His mother committed suicide. The Snow Wolf no longer needed to study the sword.

His childhood had been more austere than the harsh winter of the Beijue Mountains. He had become experienced in loneliness.

A large enough forest contains all kinds of birds. There are people in the world whose love turns to hate, and there are also freaks like the Snow Wolf, whose hatred had turned to love. From that day forward, the sword became the Snow Wolf's first obsession.

In Northern Li, if you couldn't follow the orthodox way of the sword, all you could do was go to the Beijue Mountains to seek asylum with the Blind Wolf King.

The Blind Wolf King had originally belonged to Kunlun's orthodoxy. He had already been an ascended spirit when he had rebelled against Kunlun. It was said that he had rather good connections in Kunlun's inner sect. Kunlun had turned a blind eye and only ordered him never to leave the area of the Beijue Mountains. It amounted to a disguised exile.

The Beijue Mountains guarded the Beijue Pass. They were the extreme boundary, beyond which humans could not live. Past the Beijue Mountains, even a master's essence could freeze in the unpeopled northern plains. Cultivators all had to rely on external objects to keep warm there. Mortals couldn't get near.

The Snow Wolf came up with a “masterstroke.” He spent ten years getting a Lingchi Lantern off the black market. This thing had initially been an implement of torture. You couldn’t use it unless you bore an enmity built upon the extermination of your family and the desecration of your ancestral tombs. Using a person’s flesh and blood as kindling, it could burn for a month without dying. Even the evil cultivator who had sold him the Lingchi Lantern had been on the point of speaking, advising him, “Burning another means burning yourself. Think it over. It isn’t worth it.”

The Snow Wolf had run up to Beijue with the Lingchi Lantern and lit himself on fire. Heaven had been merciful, allowing him to walk clothed in flames yet, on the point of death, come to the Beijue Pass before he burned up and find the legendary Blind Wolf King.

One of the Blind Wolf King’s followers put out his fire, went to marvel at him, and told him, “The Perplexing Sword will not accept anyone without at least a first-class spiritual sense.”

The Snow Wolf couldn’t speak his despair—his throat had been burned useless long ago. He scraped the ground with his head, dropping blackened bits all over the snow and letting the sword he carried fall.

The snakelike Wolf King strolled over then, hands tucked into his sleeves. He had smelled something from afar and thought that someone had burned a roast lamb. He came over, yawning, ready to curse them out and, as soon as he looked down, saw the family emblem on the Snow Wolf’s sword.

It sounded like a joke when you said it. The Snow Wolf had suffered untold hardships and finally been burned to charcoal, and it had been his family background that had allowed him to become an “evil cultivator.”

Because his spiritual sense was inadequate, the Wolf King didn't accept him as a direct disciple. He was only a disciple of record.

This rule was unheard of: none of the extant masters of the way of the sword had ever been said to have a strong spiritual sense. For one thing, a first-class spiritual sense appeared in less than one in ten thousand people. You could only come upon it by chance. And furthermore, too "spiritual" a person often couldn't put in the rote work. As far as the way of the sword was concerned, a first-class spiritual sense wasn't a good thing.

The Wolf King held him in contempt and couldn't even be bothered to come up with a convincing reason.

The Snow Wolf couldn't get over it. After continuing to practice swordsmanship, "make the Wolf King acknowledge me" became his next obsession.

He took everything the Wolf King said to heart. He was like his shadow and also like his dog. Apart from waiting on the Wolf King, he spent all the rest of his time cultivating. Others in this awful place would become unbearably cold if they put down their cold-repelling immortal tools for a moment; only he would grit his teeth and go into the depths of the Beijue Mountains, bare his back and use the harsh cold to temper himself. Several times his essence almost froze, and he nearly died out there.

After two hundred years, following close upon Qiu Sha's heels, he broke the heavenly commandment that "evil cultivators cannot be ascended spirits" and bore the punishment of heavenly lightning. Even the inner sect had begun to look upon him with interest.

Everyone called him "Crown Prince Snow Wolf" and thought he was the Wolf King's successor. But the Wolf King to this day wouldn't let him call him "shifu."

The Snow Wolf had perfectly demonstrated that the way of the sword had nothing to do with spiritual sense. He had wanted to show the Wolf King. But the Wolf King wouldn't even open his eyes — that old fool had spent decades hung up on some mortal in the south, had casually said “what a pity” to a Southern Wan established foundation with inferior cultivation who had lived a life of ease, as if anyone at all could inherit the Perplexing Sword, it was only he who was unworthy.

Since he held him in such contempt...

No sooner had Zhou Ying left than the Snow Wolf sent a Linked Heart: *The Wan were involved in the Sword Slave's poisoning. Wan's envoy Zhou Ying means ill. He is looking for an opportunity to pry into the immortal mountains' Ceaseless Mirror. The Blind Wolf King frequently gives tacit consent for Southern Wan's Luwu to operate at the feet of the Beijue Mountains. I suspect him of collaborating with the enemy.*

Soon after, an answer came to the Linked Heart: *Understood. A position remains open in Posuo Palace.*

In Kunlun, each ascended spirit master had a small hidden realm in the immortal mountains belonging exclusively to them. These were called sword manors. Inside were precious swords and rarities, all the spiritual stone resources one could need, as well as eighteen lower-level cultivators assigned to act as retainers; you could establish a lineage and accept disciples.

Posuo Palace had been the Blind Wolf King's sword manor before he had defected from the sect.

The Snow Wolf took a deep breath. The corners of his eyes twisted slightly.

He had finally accepted the situation. When he stood so high, why should he continue to be an “evil cultivator”?

Kunlun—the Kunlun Mountain Range—was to the north of Northern Li’s capital Yanning, like a white-haired giant, blocking the wind out of the utter north like a protective screen. Every year, from the start of spring to the first snowfall, an endless stream of people travelled from far and wide to make obeisance at the feet of the immortal mountains; from the nobles of Yanning to commoners, all kinds of people came in great numbers.

Now, the harsh winter was almost here. The pilgrims had already left. From top to bottom, the Kunlun Mountains had become cold and cheerless. In the Sect Leader’s residence on the Principal Peak, the main hall carved of ice had over a zhang of snow covering it, but inside it was as warm as a late spring day in Jinping. Four sword cultivators dressed for fighting flew in bearing a sedan.

On the sedan sat an old man, his hair and beard white, collapsed into a heap, the sort of old man it seemed a matter of urgency to get measured for his burial robes.

He wore a special cape with extravagant first-class inscriptions sparkling on it, keeping him warm in the wintry wind. Spiritual energy hardly paused within his body. Any cultivator would have seen that this old man was only a half-immortal whose lifespan was nearing its end.

This puny half-immortal was trespassing in the Sect Leader’s immortal palace, not even descending from his sedan when he came in.

But one of the three shed skin sword cultivators in the world—Zhi Xiu had become the fourth upon becoming a shed skin—the Kunlun Sect Leader, who was foremost under heaven, trotted forward to welcome him, personally helping that old half-immortal who already

couldn't move very well off his sedan. Respectfully, he said, "High Priest."

Eighty percent of Kunlun's cultivators were sword cultivators. They didn't have as many useless twists and turns as Xuanyin; normally, whoever had the strongest fist was entitled to speak, and if it really came to a dispute, they would hold to their traditions. Routine business was handled through discussions among the Sect Leader and the two other shed skin sword cultivators; the Sword Slave's ideas were to be taken into account if she disagreed... but luckily that sword lunatic didn't have all that many ideas.

But above the Sect Leader was a special individual.

Kunlun's High Priest only spoke when major events transpired. As soon as the venerable old fellow made a pronouncement, the three men and one puppet who, working together, could have cut down the five great spiritual mountains, had to shut their mouths and obey.

No one would have thought that this supreme High Priest was no master of the way of the sword, that he was so aged that he practically couldn't walk anymore.

Kunlun's Sect Leader was the direct disciple of the Wanshuang Sword Ancestor. Like the other spiritual mountains' shed skins, he was over a thousand years old. Yet he held himself to be a junior before a half-immortal whose lifespan wouldn't exceed two centuries, his bearing almost obsequious. He helped the High Priest sit down on a small couch. "These are all trifles. Wan's envoy is only an established foundation junior. How could he disturb the High Priest?"

The High Priest slowly said, "The master of the Luwu, with a gang of half-immortal peasants under him, in less than twenty years has

stirred up trouble that has brought turmoil to the southern continent. This junior is more than he appears.”

The Sect Leader was rather disapproving of this. He thought that a wretched place like the southern continent wouldn't be calm even if there was no one to stir up trouble. But since the High Priest had said so, he couldn't very well refute it, so he didn't respond.

The High Priest continued: “I hear that the Sword Slave was the target of a conspiracy. That she was poisoned.”

“Yes,” Kunlun's Sect Leader said, “this is also incomprehensible to me. Even disregarding her cultivation level, the Sword Slave bears Wanshuang and ought to be impervious to all evils, and aside from that, she is a half-puppet. How could she be poisoned?”

The High Priest narrowed his clouded eyes and glanced at one of the sword cultivators who had been carrying his sedan. That sword cultivator immediately stepped forward and handed a Linked Heart to the Sect Leader. This was the Snow Wolf's secret letter.

“The Beijue Mountains' Xie Chu?” The Sect Leader frowned. “All these years, it has only been on account of his shifu's reputation, as well as the Sword Slave... How could he be so heedless of right and wrong?”

“I do not believe Xie Chu would deliberately injure the Sword Slave.” The High Priest waved a hand, and a map of the northern and southern continents flew out of his sleeve. “At the outset, in the siege upon the Late-Autumn Red in Western Chu, we lost quite a few juniors. Cheng Yu and the others who returned gave a detailed report and mentioned that inside the Law Breaker at the time, a large quantity of reincarnation wood was growing wild. The local ignorant masses called it ‘Tai Sui.’ This ‘Tai Sui’ didn't show his face at the time, but there was something fishy in the breaking of the Law Breaker. Not long after, spiritual energy was suddenly prohibited in

Tao County, turning it into a place where cultivators dared not tread. Then Sanyue's Xiang Rong passed away, Xuanwu fled, and Western Chu thus sank into chaos.”

As he spoke, he pointed to Southern Shu. “At the time of the Dragon Boat Festival, there was trouble in the Lingyun Mountains. We all know the inside story. The Miah evil cultivators wanted to seize the immortal mountains' spiritual energy. They failed to obtain the South Sea Hidden Realm when it was just within reach, but the Lingyun Mountains still lost half of their spiritual energy then. Spiritual energy wouldn't vanish into thin air. Where did it go?”

The Sect Leader said, “It is said that this Tai Sui is a disciple of the Xuanyin Mountains who has just become an ascended spirit. He was born in Jinping and studied under Zhi Xiu... Not long after he returned to Southern Wan, on top of everything else, there was a change of power in Xuanyin.”

“An ascended spirit less than fifty years old.” The High Priest looked up at the Sect Leader. “You have wielded power in Kunlun for so many years—have you ever heard the like? As far as I know, the evil god ‘Tai Sui’ has been spoken of among the common people much longer than that little devil has been alive. Then there is the Land of Turmoil. The abandoned people of the Land of Turmoil have no intellects, yet they like only reincarnation wood. Could it really only be because that tree is both common and not poisonous?”

The Sect Leader frowned. “Do you mean, High Priest, that the evil cultivator called the Queen Mother of the West in the Land of Turmoil and this so-called ‘Tai Sui’ are both only cover-ups? Behind them, there must be...”

“An abyss that can draw in all five great spiritual mountains,” the High Priest said gravely. “Since the Wan envoy is coming, we will not let him leave. Search his soul yourself.”

Kunlun's Sect Leader hesitated briefly. "If I soul-search an established foundation, he is certain to die. Even in a war between two nations, they won't kill each other's envoys, and we are currently engaged in peace talks with Southern Wan on the surface... High Priest, the situation in the southern mines is currently unclear. If we rashly kill Wan's envoy, will we be alerting the enemy in advance?"

The High Priest said, "The Wan won't know."

The Sect Leader froze.

The abyss that could "draw in all five great spiritual mountains" was running around being hacked at by Zhaoting.

Xi Ping fled like a frightened rat. His ability to run was hampered by his injuries from the poison, which had yet to heal. He couldn't dodge, so he simply tossed his "corpse" away; he closed his eyes and absconded into the Law Breaker—at any rate, no matter what, the mighty Sword of the South wouldn't descend to whipping a corpse.

The upshot was, as soon as he stepped into the Law Breaker, he regretted it. What the hell, why was the young mistress still here?

Chang Jun was gesticulating and hopping with Yao Qi next to him woodenly agreeing from time to time. Zhao Qindan was sitting across from the two of them. They must have finished recognizing each other and had now moved on to reminiscing about former times!

Xi Ping was just in time to hear Chang Jun say, "Ziming-xiong only found out when he received a letter from the inner sect..."

He turned and was about to run for it.

Wei Chengxiang had deep ties to the reincarnation wood. As soon as he came in, she noticed it. Eager to make trouble, she called to him, “Are you back, Tai Sui?”

In a flash, Xi Ping quickly plastered a spiritual image mask over his face and narrowly managed to put up his elevated senior act in time.

Zhao Qindan, hearing this, stood up, called “Senior Tai Sui,” then made introductions: “This is the master of this place that I was just telling you two about, the Luwu’s Tai Sui.”

Xi Ping hadn’t seen Yao Qi and Chang Jun for over a decade. Though a cultivator’s outward appearance wouldn’t change, seeing them again, they seemed as unfamiliar as though he had last seen them in a past life. So, judging others by his own standards, he presumed that the two of them wouldn’t necessarily recognize his voice. He immediately calmed down. On the one hand, he silently implored Wei Chengxiang: “Grandma, spare me.”

On the other hand, he “calmly” waved a hand to Zhao Qindan. Treasuring words like gold, he said, “Well done.”

He had no sooner spoken than he saw Yao Qi, who had had his head down, abruptly raise his eyes and stare at him in shock.

What... was he looking at?

Xi Ping met his eyes and suddenly had an ominous premonition.

Then he heard Zhao Qindan ask, “Yao-shixiong, what did the letter from the inner sect say?”

“The letter told Ziming-xiong to run away,” said Chang Jun. “You know the letter writer, too, it’s the guy who lived in the Qiu courtyard

with us back then. Ziming recognized his handwriting at a glance. Otherwise, we wouldn't have gone so quickly..."

Xi Ping's mind roared. He stared at Yao Qi in disbelief—his letter had been anonymous and had comprised two words in all, hasty and illegible. After fourteen years, how had Yao Ziming been able to recognize his handwriting "at a glance"?

That kid didn't have presumptuous designs on him, did he?

Wait, if he could even recognize his handwriting at a glance, then his figure and voice...

Wei Chengxiang grabbed a handful of melon seeds and, calm amid the chaos, crossed one leg over the other as she sat by and watched the atmosphere inside the Law Breaker's space suddenly congeal. Tai Sui and Yao Qi were staring at each other as if they had turned into two statues.

A moment later, without a word, Xi Ping put down the antidote and vanished right where he stood, resolutely going back to the Xuanyin Mountains to take his beating.

But Zhi Xiu didn't hit him. He was holding a Heavenly Question and frowning.

Xi Ping silently climbed to his feet. He had meant to pretend that he wasn't there, but he heard Zhi Xiu all of a sudden ask seriously, "Didn't His Highness Prince Zhuang say he would use reincarnation wood to stay in contact? Why would he suddenly send a Heavenly Question?"

CHAPTER 204 - A Life of Regret (16)

Zhou Ying's Heavenly Question was very routine. It was a report on his rate of progress. It said that the peace talks had been successful and, with the Beijue Mountains' recommendation, he had now already arrived at the feet of the Kunlun Mountains and was waiting.

"I know the peace talks were successful. How could they have been anything else, when he was even willing to risk me..." Xi Ping muttered, reading that Heavenly Question over and over several times.

Currently, they were only hoping that Northern Li wouldn't take advantage of the situation to profit from their misfortune. After all, they knew very well where they stood. Apart from one Zhaoting and one semi-stutterer, Southern Wan really had no presentable fighting force right now. Even if the great weapon of the spirit-conducting gold was to spread among the Kaiming Cultivators, it still needed time.

If they could only fool the Sword Slave and make Kunlun willing to see Zhou Ying, Xi Ping thought that the trip to Northern Li would be no problem. After all, they didn't have any extravagant demands. Never mind that their envoy was Zhou Ying; even if it had been Lin Chi in his place, he still probably wouldn't have been able to mess it up.

The reasons Zhou Ying hadn't used the Heavenly Question were, first, that he wasn't very well-acquainted with Zhi Xiu and there was some mutual repugnance between them, so communication would have involved wasted words; and second, he had probably calculated, rightly, that if Xi Ping threw a temper tantrum and quit in disgust, he would be able to go around Zhi Xiu and use him as a threat...

So san-ge had even correctly predicted that after Xi Ping's success, he would make a careless slip and be found out by his shifu? What was he doing considering such meaningless trifles? Did he have nothing better to do? He'd entered the way of clarity and everything — did he still have a vulgar interest in seeing others come to grief?

Xi Ping had practically been raised by Zhou Ying. The tacit understanding between them had long ago become a part of their lives. But now, with the way of clarity between them, Xi Ping felt that the one manipulating him from the other end knew better than ever how to do it, but he could never quite get hold of san-ge's thoughts.

For sending a superfluous Heavenly Question like this, the only explanation seemed to be that he was "sending it for someone else's benefit" — but... whose?

Though the Heavenly Question was an external object and slightly inferior to reincarnation wood as far as secrecy went, it was still part of Xuanyin's image and its insider information; it wasn't like Yao Qi's sister's downgraded immortal tool, which announced everything far and wide. Moreover, the recipient was a shed skin sword cultivator. Even if someone was powerful enough to pry, it was impossible that Zhi Xiu wouldn't notice at his end.

Xi Ping's heart, which had settled down because he had stirred up the situation in the southern mines, once again came up to his throat. He tried using reincarnation wood to contact Zhou Ying.

There was no answer. Zhou Ying wasn't carrying his reincarnation wood amulet. Xi Ping turned around and asked Bai Ling to contact Northern Li's Luwu; the Luwu responded that everything was proceeding smoothly, the general idea of their reports no different from the summary in the Heavenly Question.

What the hell was san-ge doing...?

The northern continent and the southern continent were like two different worlds. Past Yanning, all the plants became withered. In the off-white wasteland, craggy and zigzagging paths were laid with greenish stones. Now and then, beasts of burden as skinny as rakes passed over them, pulling huddled people. The crack of the whip and the sound of the wind were equally distant.

The residences were for the most part short and thickly encased in mud. From a distance, they looked roly-poly. There were axes mottled with rust atop towering stacks of firewood and straw; only in the vicinity of the capital could rising steam be seen, scattered and rare—the previous generation of Northern Li's people still remembered those who had died unjustly in the battle over Moon Plated Gold. Though later Northern Li hadn't prohibited buying and selling Moon Plated Gold goods from abroad, and more recently had permitted factories of the new Moon Plated Gold that didn't burn up spiritual stones, the fear still remained in the bones of several generations.

But the loftiness of the palaces far exceeded the imaginations of southerners; it was as if they wished to challenge the mountains and the wasteland. At a glance, you couldn't see to the top of the main hall of Kunlun's Principal Peak. On its enormous stone pillars were carved the heads of twelve beasts, their beards and hair flaring in anger, roaring as they met the wintry northwest wind. Even the rabbit head had tusks taller than a man.

The snowstorm around the Principal Peak was blowing so hard you couldn't open your eyes. The sounds of swords clashing fell incessantly on the ear. With Zhou Ying's cultivation level, he couldn't quite keep steady flying his sword. While the sword cultivator guiding him didn't show it, he was inwardly somewhat disdainful of pretty boy cultivators from the southern continent who never trained their bodies. So, half-pityingly, he took a small pill bottle from his mustard seed and passed it to him. "The weather of the northern continent is different from the south. This is a 'warming pill' that the

Kunlun Mountains specially prepare for guests from abroad. Will you take it, envoy of Wan?”

“Thank you.” Perhaps Zhou Ying was too trusting of Kunlun; he accepted the bottle and didn’t so much as inspect it. He tipped out a pill and swallowed it right away. “If you had taken any longer to give it to me, fellow cultivator, I might have had to make a brazen request.”

The sword cultivator quickly said, “The warming pill cannot be dissolved all at once. Take care not to scald your internal organs.”

There was no need for him to give this instruction. Zhou Ying was digesting the warming pill with great restraint. His stagnating spiritual energy began to flow at an even rate. He smiled at the sword cultivator guiding him. Once the great mountain array had inspected his token, the two of them landed on Kunlun’s Principal Peak one after the other.

The Kunlun Mountains’ Principal Peak had a commanding view. With a cultivator’s eyesight, you could pierce the clouds, the snow and wind, and see north of the Kunlun Mountain Range. Like the Beijue Mountains, beyond the Kunlun Mountains, there was also a no-man’s-land.

“Beyond the Kunlun Mountains is utter north. I suppose there’s no such desolate place on the southern continent. There’s nothing there save ice and snow.” The sword cultivator guiding him continued, “I’ve heard that you came from the Beijue Mountains? We’re a little better off here than the Blind Wolf King. We have some hill to the north to block the wind. It isn’t as cold as the Beijue Mountains.”

Zhou Ying averted his gaze, dropping his eyes and shielding his pupils, which gradually shrank back to a normal size—he hadn’t seen the “ice and snow” and “hills” that the sword cultivator had

spoken of. It was plainly broad daylight, but to his eyes, in the lands of the utter north beyond the Kunlun Mountains, there was solid blackness. Only in the immediate area of the Kunlun Mountains was it slightly lit up by the daylight from where they stood.

The impression was as if... as if it were the dead of night, the time when nothing was stirring, and the world of the Kunlun Mountains was a house with its lights on.

Zhou Ying's gaze continued to scan the whole of the Kunlun Mountains. As the Blind Wolf King had said, he didn't see the Ceaseless Mirror.

Divine tools of the mountains like the Bell of Tribulation and the Cauldron of Nine Dragons were normally invisible, too, but they were always present. The divine tool of the mountains and the great mountain array coordinated with each other at a distance; shed skins and paramount spiritual senses could both see them. But of Kunlun's legendary divine tool, the Ceaseless Mirror, there wasn't a trace. The Kunlun Mountains' great mountain array was more savage than even the frosty wind. There was an unspeakable deathliness about the silent spiritual mountains.

"We're here. Please enter." The sword cultivator guide led Zhou Ying to the main hall. The lofty palace doors opened to either side. A warm breeze blew against their faces. A layer of rime instantly formed on Zhou Ying's eyelashes.

His guide would go no further. Head lowered and eyes averted, he stepped aside. Zhou Ying walked in.

Just then, a faint pain came from his chest. The warming pill Zhou Ying had taken earlier had been fully consumed. When swallowing the pill, unnoticed, he had put a reincarnation wood seed into it.

Now, the seed that had been lying dormant in the harsh cold was aroused by the spiritual energy of the warming pill. Under Zhou Ying's deliberate guidance, it took root in his flesh and blood.

Xi Ping, who was constantly probing north, sensed it immediately. "San-ge, where are you... where the hell is this? It's so dark. Where have you tossed this reincarnation wood tree? Why can I hear water, and that pounding?"

Zhou Ying said, "That is my blood flowing and my heart beating."

"What?" said Xi Ping. "What the hell have you..."

"Shh," Zhou Ying interrupted him. "Don't distract me. Watch closely."

Having said this, concealed beneath his skin, he turned a part of his organs and the reincarnation wood sprout that had taken root in his chest into mist. Xi Ping's field of vision instantly filled with bloody mist. His scalp went numb, and his chest began to hurt in sympathy — in the future, apart from planting hairs on people, it would be for the best if san-ge didn't use his incomprehensible power much; it was too horrifying to watch.

Though the reincarnation wood sapling that had taken root in Zhou Ying's chest had also dissolved into mist, because it had fused with his flesh and blood, fantastically, it was still alive.

So that when Zhou Ying walked into the lofty main hall, Xi Ping obtained a new point of view and met a pair of clouded old eyes.

The height of this point of view was approximately san-ge's height.

Xi Ping immediately deduced that he was currently sharing Zhou Ying's senses.

Sadly, this kind of “sharing” was only the reincarnation wood that had been turned to mist being attached to Zhou Ying’s senses and being able to look where he looked. The two of them each still had his own perceptions. He couldn’t use this as an opportunity to take a peek into the world as seen by the eyes of a paramount spiritual sense.

In fact, the effect of this was no different than Zhou Ying carrying a piece of reincarnation wood with him. It was only that attached to a person, his field of vision was a little wider and more flexible.

Xi Ping became even more puzzled: what kind of superfluous strangeness was this? Was san-ge actually afraid that the Li would search him and seize the reincarnation wood amulet by force?

Just then, he saw Zhou Ying salute the old man who looked ready to be buried. In the Li language, he called out, “High Priest.”

Xi Ping was startled. “What?”

Of course he had seen that this old man was only a half-immortal with one foot already in the grave. “What kind of peculiar hobby does Kunlun’s High Priest have? Why would he use such a shabby puppet to...”

Aloud, Zhou Ying was readily exchanging pleasantries with the High Priest. Meanwhile, splitting his attention, he used his consciousness to answer, “No, this is the man himself.”

“Isn’t this an open-eyed...”

“Kunlun’s High Priest is always an open-eyed cultivator,” Zhou Ying said. “You can understand this as a particular lineage of the Kunlun Mountains, and you can also believe that Kunlun’s High Priest has only been one person since antiquity. When each successive High Priest nears the end of his lifespan, a batch of infants will be

prepared in advance, I'm not sure according to what criteria, and taken to be raised in the Kunlun Mountains. These infants' consciousnesses are blocked using a secret art, and they are placed into an array to receive nourishment, until their bodies finish growing and their spiritual eyes open. Then Kunlun's divine weapon, the Ceaseless Mirror, will appear, and choose the most suitable among them to be the next priest—when the old priest passes away, the new priest inherits all the memories of the previous one and continues to wield the foremost power under heaven.”

Hearing this, Xi Ping broke out in gooseflesh. He blurted out, “Isn't that body-snatching? No... wait, body-snatching also takes a certain cultivation level. A half-immortal can't snatch someone's body.”

Zhou Ying didn't respond.

Just then, Bai Ling sent him a message asking whether he had gotten in contact with Zhou Ying.

“I have,” Xi Ping answered hastily, “the situation is a little strange, I'll tell you in a little while...”

“Viscount,” Bai Ling suddenly said in a grave voice, “I think I never told you that my lord came to see me before he left.”

Xi Ping was left behind. He blankly asked, “Huh? What?”

“He came to tell me that he was going to Northern Li as an envoy and to entrust the Kaiming and the Luwu to me.”

Running the Kaiming Department was no easy task. Zhou Ying held the official seals of both the Kaiming and the Luwu; naturally he had to hand over the power and responsibility before undertaking a long journey... though it was a little excessively grand for him to go to Jinping in person.

Then Bai Ling continued, "... He called me by my nickname."

Xi Ping—in his true body in the Xuanyin Mountains—abruptly stood up.

A chill went up his spine.

Yes, and san-ge had hit him with a talisman on Flying Jade Peak.

Xi Ping wouldn't be so optimistic as to think that this meant that Zhou Ying's own heart was resisting his Way of the Heart. That Way of the Heart of clarity belonged to Princess Duanrui. The distance between their two levels was like the distance from Jinping to Yanning. Never mind resisting, Zhou Ying probably hadn't even fully accepted it yet.

Stepping back further, even if he really was resisting, he would use any gains he made with knife-edge precision. He wouldn't waste them on these trifles.

So... there was only one possible reason for him to do these things clearly out of keeping with the way of clarity: before entering that way, he had left instructions for himself.

Chiding him and bidding farewell to Bai Ling had both been arranged ahead of time... Before entering the way of clarity, under what circumstances would san-ge have gone out of his way to bid Bai Ling farewell?

"Shiyong?" Zhi Xiu put a hand on his shoulder. "Focus. What's wrong?"

The sword cultivators of Northern Li's Kunlun were unmatched in fighting prowess; they weren't experts in plots and connivances. Xi Ping hadn't been concerned about Zhou Ying to begin with. After all, all the people the two of them working together had tricked to

their deaths before Zhou Ying had entered the way of clarity could have lined up from Jinping to Ning'an. And after entering the way of clarity, he had been even more unfeeling, capable of using anyone...

Capable of using anyone!

A thought suddenly streaked through Xi Ping's mind: Including himself!

"Shifu, I have to go to Northern Li, I..."

CHAPTER 205 - A Life of Regret (17)

“You can’t come here now.” Zhou Ying seemed to know what he was thinking. “Listen carefully, don’t get distracted.”

Xi Ping could swap places with reincarnation wood, but there was no living reincarnation wood in the north of Northern Li—unless it was enabled and protected with spiritual energy, like on Flying Jade Peak, naturally-growing reincarnation wood had nowhere near the requisite tolerance for cold.

And the sapling inside Zhou Ying had been “dissolved” by him; there really was no one who understood this power of his. No one knew what would happen if Xi Ping rashly swapped places with that sapling.

There was a droning as the main hall’s doors slowly closed, interrupting Zhou Ying and the High Priest’s insipid small talk.

Northern Li’s frightening High Priest, leaning on a cane, slowly got to his feet. His aged and hollow voice echoed in the main hall. “We people of the northern continent don’t like to shilly-shally when we talk. You aren’t the first possessor of a paramount spiritual sense to come seeking Kunlun’s Ceaseless Mirror, Your Highness Prince Zhuang of Great Wan.”

Xi Ping very rarely went to Northern Li, so he could only speak enough of the Li language to get by, a sloppy and incompetent affair. Amid the overlapping echoes, he was pricking up his ears, struggling to distinguish what was being said, and of all things, “Ceaseless Mirror” was a rare specialized term in the Li language. Xi Ping didn’t understand it.

Possessor of a paramount spiritual sense coming for what in the hell...? As expected, this had been premeditated!

As a fellow possessor of a spiritual sense, Western Chu's Zhuoming over there spent all day killing people if he wasn't getting revenge, and if he really had nothing else to do, he could play around pulling out his hair—a full and simple schedule. Why did the one who had fallen to them have to be more perilous than the Bell of Tribulation?

No, the ineffectual Bell of Tribulation might as well be Zhou Ying's grandson! One slip, and he could provoke a major event; when he got up to killing and maiming, he made no distinction between himself and the enemy.

“It seems that the Wolf King has a traitor in his ranks,” said the Bell of Tribulation's grandpa, putting on a fake smile copied from Yu Chang's face. “I came as an envoy to Northern Li under orders from the immortal mountains. If possible, from a selfish desire, I would like to pay my respects to the legendary Ceaseless Mirror—if I have violated a taboo of the Kunlun Mountains, I ask the High Priest to take into consideration the brevity of my time spent cultivating. The ignorant cannot be held responsible.”

The High Priest's brows crouched over his eye sockets. “You do not appear ignorant to me, Your Highness. Rather, you appear to feel secure in the strength of your position.”

Zhou Ying then said, “High Priest, the nations of Li and Wan, one north and one south, have been friendly neighbors for generations. For food and textiles, metals and building materials, we have always given Yanning the most favorable prices. If I were to come quaking and trembling to a friend's house, wouldn't it mean I doubted the master's moral character? The Lingyun Mountains have taken a severe blow to their vitality through the schemes of evil cultivators. Because the positions of Sanyue's shed skins have fallen vacant, tyrants throughout the country are drooling over its immortal mountains. The Land of Turmoil goes without saying—if everything were going smoothly there, I suppose you would not have found

time in your busy schedule to see me, High Priest. In a tumultuous world filled with such dangers, what reason can there be for our two nations not to go forward hand in hand?”

“That is a question I must put to your nation,” the High Priest said gravely. “What means have you used to cause the southern continent to sink into such pandemonium that you could even poison Wanshuang’s Sword Slave? Your Highness Prince Zhuang, once and for all, who is behind you?”

Xi Ping wasn’t sure that he had understood this last part correctly: behind... what? Had this mystical-looking High Priest seen through the little tricks he had played in the Land of Turmoil and not been taken in or what? Damned Northern Li language!

Zhou Ying, seeming impervious, said, “I am afraid I do not understand you, High Priest.”

“The power behind you.” The High Priest beat his cane heavily against the ground again and again, the tempo becoming more and more urgent. “Don’t make up stories about that new shed skin sword cultivator and his disciple who isn’t even as big as a sesame seed. The five great spiritual mountains have punished evil and put down demons for over a thousand years. Through many generations and many disasters, they have kept hundreds of millions of common people safe and sound. And in a mere couple of centuries, they have one after another fallen beyond redemption! The person behind you—all of you—is truly skilled. What, will they still not come out to face me?”

His voice became louder as he spoke. He seemed to be shouting the last words at someone else through Zhou Ying. Had Xi Ping not been the “disciple who isn’t even as big as a sesame seed” that he had spoken off, he practically would have thought that the High Priest had seen him.

Xi Ping tied together his earlier speech with his later speech and finally worked out what the old man was saying. He discovered to his shock that before anyone else could come along and lie to him, this old fellow had imagined for himself some vast and powerful force that could equal the spiritual mountains; he thought that this was a big game board filled with conspiracies!

And this included his own contribution in the form of deliberately mystifying to scare the Sword Slave...

Wait!

Other people didn't know the true nature of the spiritual mountains and Ways of the Heart, but san-ge knew. Given his degree of understanding of Xi Ping, it was likely that when he had used his shifu to threaten him, he had already guessed what he would do!

Zhou Ying smiled. Not only did he not dodge the question, he talked back directly: "High Priest, I am an envoy, not a criminal under interrogation."

"Envoy of Wan, do you think that Kunlun would not dare to harm you?"

As expected, Northern Lil's High Priest became enraged. His voice became even lower, a little hard to distinguish to Xi Ping's hearing— Xi Ping suspected this was another thing that damned way of clarity cultivator had done on purpose!

When the Luwu were infiltrating neighboring countries, Zhou Ying took a very free hand in ordering him around, as though he was planning to extract from him all the spiritual stones he had once given him as pocket change. Chu went without saying; he would order him to lay a trade route whenever anything in Southern Shu wasn't going smoothly, and urge him to go to the Land of Turmoil to make up for the Luwu's shortcomings... but he had very rarely sent

him on errand to Northern Li, so that it was a struggle for him to even understand the language, and there was no chance he would compete with him for the opportunity to go to Northern Li as an envoy!

“I think,” said Zhou Ying slowly, seeming to tacitly acknowledge that the High Priest’s delusions were true, “that while you do not know the details concerning my backing, rashly injuring me could easily alert your enemy in advance. It would be unwise.”

“What the hell are you trying to do? Zhou Ying, have you gone crazy?”

As Xi Ping cursed him, he turned around and contacted Bai Ling: “You have the Luwu’s official seal. Get in contact with the Luwu who went with san-ge to the feet of the Beijue Mountains. Starting now, they aren’t to listen to Prince Zhuang’s orders. They will obey centralized deployments from the Kaiming Department’s general headquarters.”

Bai Ling only hesitated for the time it took to blink, then decisively defected in Xi Ping’s favor. “I hear and obey.”

As long as Bai Ling gave him the authority, Xi Ping could contact the Luwu directly, so as soon as Bai Ling gave the nod, he immediately sent a message to the Luwu who had traveled with Zhou Ying: “Luwu brothers, I need to trouble you to run a slight risk and plant some reincarnation wood trees for me, the closer to the Kunlun Mountains, the better.”

There was no “wildfire” at the feet of the Kunlun Mountains; anyone could spur a tree to grow!

Meanwhile, in Kunlun’s main hall, as soon as Zhou Ying spoke those almost provocative words, the High Priest broke out in cold laughter.

There was a low shout in the main hall: “Do not be arrogant, little brat!”

Once again, Xi Ping sensed shed skin level sword aura at a distance. “San-ge!”

No sooner had he spoken than Zhou Ying was frozen in place by chilly sword aura.

But the way of clarity was without sorrow or joy, without worry, and naturally without fear, also. Beneath the frightening aura that could make an ascended spirit master go rigid, Zhou Ying immediately turned entirely to mist.

Xi Ping’s point of view was compelled to change as he did so. Far away in the Xuanyin Mountains, he no longer had any sense of where was reincarnation wood and where was Zhou Ying!

The next moment, an aggressive talisman came right toward them. Zhou Ying, like sediment separated out from the waste water of the factories, was forced to congeal anew into a human form and fell to the ground.

He rolled aside without so much as thinking about it. Xi Ping’s point of view quickly shrank once again. He found that during this dispersing and fusing, Zhou Ying had turned the reincarnation wood tree that he had quickened with his flesh and blood into a part of his body. Xi Ping found to his surprise and bewilderment that he could simultaneously see Kunlun’s main hall... and Zhou Ying’s spirit.

The clarity Way of the Heart that had come from Princess Duanrui was suspended on the spiritual foundation, like the sun. All the flashes of enlightenment that had gathered in that Way of the Heart over eight centuries tried to drill into Xi Ping’s ears all at once in sequence. Fortunately, while Xi Ping’s cultivation was a little shallow,

the concentration of his consciousness belonged to a genuine article ascended spirit. He focused and warded off this external noise.

Before he could work out what was happening in front of him, he heard Zhou Ying say “angrily,” “My disciple name token is still in the Xuanyin Mountains. Kunlun has lured me to its Principal Peak under the guise of peace talks. If you brazenly harm an envoy of Great Wan, aren’t you afraid..”

He wasn’t permitted to finish his sentence. The next moment, ice-cold and irresistible sword energy came slicing right toward Zhou Ying’s spirit.

A soul-searching!

Princess Duanrui’s indestructible Way of the Heart of clarity met the sword energy of a shed skin’s soul-searching. Xi Ping’s eyes nearly burst from their sockets. “Luwu!”

Was it so hard to plant a tree?

But just then, he realized that the Luwu hadn’t responded to him!

Bai Ling was far away in Jinping now and didn’t know what had happened, but he dimly sensed something. “Viscount, could I ask you to use reincarnation wood to try getting in contact? Northern Li’s Luwu have suddenly fallen out of contact all at once!”

Xi Ping’s pupils contracted sharply.

Meanwhile, the Luwu who had been left behind around the Beijue Mountains and those who had gone with Zhou Ying to the feet of the Kunlun Mountains all stopped moving. It was as if they were meditating. Their expressions were calm, their eyes half closed. A light like a spiritual snake seemed to be flashing in their eyes.

The Beijue Mountains' Blind Wolf King had his head propped on his hand. In his palm, he held sword energy like a tangled skein.

The Perplexing Sword, soft and treacherous, incompatible with Kunlun's way of the sword.

Its sword energy could take form, and it could also be formless. Those infected with the Perplexing Sword would fall into perplexity; even masters like the Heartless Lotus Zhuoming would be infected. For low-level cultivators, it was even easier for this sword energy to invade their consciousnesses and spirits without them noticing, allowing them to be led by the wielder of the sword.

Before leaving, Zhou Ying had asked him for a beam of sword energy.

Xi Zhengde was a mortal. In order to activate the Perplexing Sword, he needed to prepare an array in advance. But Zhou Ying was a genuine article established foundation cultivator, and the Luwu with him obeyed him. They wouldn't take any precautions!

Even Princess Duanrui hadn't become a shed skin while living, never mind that her Way of the Heart was now with an established foundation whose cultivation may as well have been nonexistent.

At the tip of the soul-searching blade, that Way of the Heart trembled and began to disintegrate.

On the mauled spirit, something once again began to flow. Zhou Ying's consciousness, close enough to touch, was like an open book.

Beneath the might of a shed skin, Xi Ping couldn't move at all, but he could see innumerable images flashing by—the wet moss in Jinping's lanes, the cold and cheerless Guangyun Palace, the snow

wine's mist like fragrant miasma, the Marquis Manor where flowers seemed to bloom in all seasons, the kitten, the rather distant Marquis of Yongning, the small child always wiping saliva all over his sleeve and the paperman following him like his shadow...

At the deepest, deepest place, there was a warm hand belonging to an old woman. Xi Ping could clearly sense a longing that did not belong to him. He wanted to hold that hand again.

But the person performing the soul-searching had no patience for watching these dull trifles and quickly passed by them.

Anyone who had spent time among evil cultivators understood soul-searchings. The consciousness of a half-immortal or mortal would simply dissipate under a soul-searching. Starting at the established foundation level, the Way of the Heart would shatter first, and the consciousness would die before it could dissipate due to the shattering of the Way of the Heart.

Xi Ping had vainly hoped in his blind optimism that one day he would be sure to find a way to remove the fetters of Ways of the Heart, be sure to thoroughly remove that hateful Way of the Heart of clarity...

His optimism had turned to sorrow. Now all he wanted was to beg Princess Duanrui, if she could hear him, to freeze san-ge back into a heartless demon.

With a crisp sound like glass, the world's purest Way of the Heart of clarity shattered.

In that moment, Xi Ping fought free of the fetters of the shed skin master performing the soul-searching. Blood flowed from the eyes of his true body. His consciousness was on the verge of going mad, becoming a demon.

The next moment, a weak light flashed before his eyes. Xi Ping's vision blurred. There seemed to be countless prisms before his eyes, reflecting his face. His consciousness landed inside something. In a tone he seemed not to have heard in half a lifetime, a familiar voice said, "I knew you would have to come here. You're an ascended spirit and everything, why can't your will be a little firmer?"

Xi Ping quickly turned his head in the direction of that voice, but before he could get a clear look at the speaker, he was flicked on the forehead.

"Inadequate instruction is the result of the teacher's laxness. Your honored teacher... *tsk*, there's no helping it. After all, he has so many cares to attend to." The person who had flicked him on the forehead had followed it up by badmouthing Zhi Xiu, then making it worse by trying to soften the blow. "All right, I guess I haven't loved you for nothing. Focus. This is a heart demon seed. Do you really want to lose your mind?"

CHAPTER 206 - A Life of Regret (18)

Xi Ping's mind was a blank. As if dreaming, he called out "san-ge," not knowing whether he had made a sound.

Illusions flashed before his eyes. He dimly heard running water on the bank of the Lingyang River twenty years ago. He forgot where he was.

Zhou Ying flicked his sleeve. Something seemed to knock the top of Xi Ping's skull open and pour in a ladle of cold water. It chilled him from the top of his head to his tailbone.

The illusions lingering around him dispersed, and he got a clear look at the person in front of him, as well as the surroundings—on the mirrored plane closest to him, a bald acquaintance was just tangled up yet again in the endless cycle of his fate, single-minded, not taking a single glance outward.

Xi Ping gave a start. He had no time to think of anything else. He hauled back his scattered intellect. "Is it the one that the late emperor fished up from the Impassable Sea? Can it stop a shed skin?"

"Of course it can't. Didn't you personally kill the heart demon itself?" Zhou Ying raised his eyebrows. "Why haven't you woken up yet?"

Xi Ping said, "Wha..."

There was a whistling like a hurricane. The shed skin consciousness performing the soul-searching knocked aside the shattered Way of the Heart of clarity, rooted out Zhou Ying's wavering spirit, and pressed directly forward.

Xi Ping abruptly turned his head. He saw that this so-called “heart demon seed,” which sounded quite mystical, was in fact just a layer of glass as thin as a cicada’s wing!

That heart demon at the bottom of the Impassable Sea had been blown up by a half-immortal’s spirit collapsing when he established his foundation. How much better could a heart demon seed do? A shed skin could destroy it utterly with a single deep breath.

They were like two small insects hiding in a paper lantern amid strong winds and heavy rain. The heart demon seed was a barrier scarcely better than nothing; it couldn’t shield them. Xi Ping nearly felt the sword energy pressing against the center of his brow. He couldn’t open his eyes.

He didn’t know whether the heart demon seed had already broken. He instinctively leapt forward to shield Zhou Ying, transparent qin strings flashing at his fingertips, like a mantis prepared to hold back a chariot, desperate and awkward.

But the anticipated pain of being hacked to pieces didn’t fall on him. The countless mirrors of the heart demon seed reflected the sword light, and all its dim and clouded “mirrored planes” cleared, countless scenes flashing over them: Zhou Ying sending the Heavenly Question back to Xuanyin, Zhou Ying starting to collude with the Blind Wolf King over a decade ago, the Luwu lying low in Northern Li...

Xi Ping’s back was as rigid as a coffin. He unconsciously held his breath.

The images reflected on the facets of the heart demon seed must have been a projection Zhou Ying’s consciousness had left behind before entering. Right now, the shed skin master performing the soul-searching was like someone who had just walked into a dark

place with limited light sources. He had seen the images in the mirrors and, at a distance, had been deceived on first glance.

But the images in the mirrors were certainly different from his true consciousness. Once this person noticed that something was wrong, he would immediately be able to catch the two of them.

Xi Ping quickly asked, “San-ge, did you use the way of clarity to collect this thing? What kind of powers do you get from a heart demon seed?”

Zhou Ying said, “For this heart demon seed, I am like the heart demon itself.”

After hearing this “crazy talk,” Xi Ping’s head began to ache—the heart demon itself had been a good-for-nothing that got by on its mouth; it was only good for being fodder at the bottom of the Impassable Sea.

What was the good of being like that thing?!

He struggled, still holding on to a thread of faith in the fact that “san-ge is reliable.” “Then can you control what the mirrors on the heart demon seed reflect? Can you think of a way to concoct some false ‘memories’ to fool this person with?”

“I can concoct something, but it would be impossible to fool him,” Zhou Ying said, his voice still even. “My guess is that the shed skin performing the soul-searching is likely to be Kunlun’s Sect Leader. It will take him only a breath to finish flipping through my whole life. At your cultivation level, you can only just barely keep up with the images. A mere established foundation like me can’t concoct fast enough to keep up with his flipping. It’s all right as long as he’s flipping through for himself, but if I step in to meddle, he’ll notice at once that something isn’t right. Do you think death isn’t coming fast enough? Stop trying to be clever.”

Xi Ping fell apart. “Has your brain been addled by not being able to think up sarcastic things to say while you were inside the way of clarity? Do you have an escape plan or not?!”

“Don’t get excited.” Zhou Ying frowned as he spoke. “Why are you so impertinent now?”

Xi Ping: “...”

His consciousness was special. Even if it broke, he wouldn’t necessarily die. But that scoundrel Zhou Ying hadn’t slipped away, and his Way of the Heart had already shattered. He didn’t know how many more breaths his body could hold out for. All he had left was this bit of consciousness!

“I kneel before you, brother dear. You subduing the heart demon seed after establishing a foundation was a recent event, he’ll turn that segment up right away, and then what will be left for us to...”

But just then, on the heart demon seed’s mirrors, the scene of Zhi Xiu and Zhou Ying discussing the diplomatic mission to Northern Li suddenly flashed.

Xi Ping’s spiritual sense was currently tensed to the utmost. As soon as he glanced over, he saw what was wrong with that picture: when they had been discussing the journey to Northern Li, there had been only three people present in the little cottage on Flying Jade Peak; even Xi Yue had been resting next door. But now, in the heart demon seed’s mirrors, while there were only the three of them inside the small room, on the ground there were human shadows belonging to far more than three people.

Even more bizarre, while the other images had flashed by and vanished, when the person performing the soul-searching flipped to

this scene that was like something out of a ghost story, the speed suddenly slowed.

Xi Ping's heart was in his throat. He didn't know what was happening. He shot a questioning glance at Zhou Ying.

“Don't look at me, I'm not doing it. I told you, I can't keep up with the speed of a soul-searching shed skin and don't dare to play tricks at random under his nose.”

“So what's...”

“Legend has it that the heart demon seed has nine thousand facets, in which anything with a mind can see itself reflected,” Zhou Ying said softly. “Naturally they can also reflect this soul-searching master.”

No sooner had he spoken than Xi Ping heard a soft crack. He thought that something had broken, and his heart nearly stopped. But when he raised his head, he found that a mist had appeared over the heart demon seed, which had originally been thinner than a sheet of paper. That mist seemed to be quietly absorbing the soul-searching shed skin's spiritual energy, letting out minute crackling sounds like freezing ice. The heart demon seed's shell was actually thickening bit by bit. The oppressive might of the shed skin sword cultivator, which sent prickles up your spine, instantly lightened a good deal.

At the same time, as the soul-searcher “examined,” the images projected on the heart demon seed's outward facets became more and more lively.

Xi Ping was dazed. He almost thought that all the people in the mirror were real people. He could even sense each person's cultivation level and aura.

And that image was a projection of the soul-searcher's consciousness. The more detailed it was, the further he had been taken in, and the more spiritual energy the heart demon seed had absorbed from him, making its outer wall sturdier as well. In hardly any time, the oppressive might that had nearly broken Xi Ping's spine had almost entirely been cut off by the heart demon seed, their "paper lantern" turning into an impregnable fastness... It was like a metaphor: the further you probed, the further you were from the truth.

Xi Ping was dumbfounded: that worked?

With all the real memories belonging to Zhou Ying that had just shown up on the heart demon seed, the soul-searcher had only flipped through them without taking a close look. He had only picked out this one, which had been tampered with.

"No matter how true the truth is, what a person believes will always be what they wish to believe." Zhou Ying audaciously reached out to tap on the outer shell of the heart demon seed. The soul-searching master outside had absolutely no idea. "I can't trick him, but he can trick himself."

On the heart demon seed's facets, the surplus shadows beside Zhi Xiu and Zhou Ying caught the soul-searcher's notice and became even clearer; among them was one Xi Ping's couldn't fail to recognize—you couldn't find a second cultivator who was that bald and legless. That was Zhuoming.

The soul-searcher thought that Zhuoming was working with them.

Xi Ping was briefly stunned. When he tried to appraise the battle to defend Jinping from the point of view of an outsider, he found that this matter really didn't bear close examination: Zhuoming had traveled vast distances to entice the Sanyue Mountains and Xiang Ning to throw themselves against Xuanyin's Territory Map; Xiang

Ning had been written off as soon as he was used, Sanyue had sunk into chaos, but Zhi Xiu had taken the opportunity to throw off the spiritual mountains' fetters and break through the shed skin barrier; also, two of Xuanyin's three High Elders had died in the battle, leaving only the Dignitary of Fate, who was least adept at fighting... as well as Zhi Xiu's shifu. The millennia-old spiritual mountains, unassailable as a fortified city, had changed hands overnight.

Zhuoming, who had played a major role in this, really did seem to have been working with them. It made perfect sense!

Continuing along this train of thought, a large part of the reason that the Xuanyin Mountains had tolerated the birth of the Luwu was that Qiu Sha had suddenly towered into view. And Sanyue losing its new full moon sage and waning from its full splendor also seemed inextricably linked to Hui Xiangjun's tampered-with Unbound Furnace...

In a case of "great minds thinking alike," the soul-searcher had obviously had the same thought as Xi Ping. The other shadows in the image took on Qiu Sha and Hui Xiangjun's appearances.

Reincarnation Wood, Heartless Lotus, Eternal Spring Brocade, Late-Autumn Red, Snow Shuffler... Inside that tiny cottage, ancient demonic gods from antiquity to the present were assembled. The mysterious powers that had once been throttled and put down by the spiritual mountains had once again ganged up to conspire to topple the spiritual mountains.

And in the subconscious of this soul-searching master, these ancient demonic gods' manner of existing was very particular—they were all in shadows. In that image, even the living Zhi Xiu and Xi Ping were sitting with their backs to the light, their faces indistinct.

Great Wan's Territory Map... and even the South Sea Hidden Realm – both just happened to be the shadows of spiritual mountains.

Xi Ping thought: He doesn't think that the Territory Map and the South Sea Hidden Realm are what's behind us "evil garden cultivators"?

As soon as this thought flashed by, he saw the outlines of a dragon and the next life spiritual fish added to the complex shadows in the little cottage. Evidently, the soul-searcher did think so.

Next, this huge fabricated conspiracy, like a Way of the Heart, became a framework to perfectly explain all the things Xi Ping had more or less understood in recent years.

In the images flashing on the heart demon seed, Zhou Ying's real memories became vaguer and vaguer, while that heart demon seed, once again like a Way of the Heart constantly being refined, developed a shell that grew ever sturdier and thicker.

Suddenly, the soul-searcher seemed to notice something. The images on the heart demon seed's shell, which had been unusually limpid, blurred. Without warning, the focus of the images on its facets fell on Zhou Ying, whose role had been minimized.

Next, the heart demon seed quaked, and Zhou Ying's real memories were turned up once again. The heart demon seed's outer shell cracked open layer by layer. The shed skin sword cultivator's oppressive might once again pierced through the heart demon seed's shell.

All the hairs on the back of Xi Ping's neck stood up. "What now?"

"A shed skin's spiritual sense is connected to the spiritual mountains," Zhou Ying said. "It seems that the Kunlun Mountains can't stand by and watch anymore."

The soul-searcher had evidently noticed something was off about Zhou Ying. His speed in flipping through his memories slowed considerably. He “saw” Zhou Ying fly toward the Principal Peak after receiving Princess Duanrui’s Way of the Heart...

It was on the Principal Peak that Zhou Ying had taken the heart demon seed. And once the heart demon seed was seen, all the hallucinations would fade. It would be like a glass sphere.

Oh no!

Xi Ping backed up, guarding Zhou Ying. “Coming to someone else’s den to swindle them, what were you thinking... What are you doing?”

Zhou Ying had reached past his shoulder to press his hand against the heart demon seed. An image was suddenly inserted into a corner of the heart demon seed’s shell: the Beijue Mountains’ Blind Wolf King receiving a letter from the south and tearing it open in front of Zhou Ying.

With Zhou Ying’s cultivation level, if he did too much, he would certainly be overreaching himself. Therefore, he only pushed this segment of memory into a very out-of-the-way place and let it flash by, so quickly that even Xi Ping didn’t see it clearly.

But an unbelievable thing once again took place. The soul-searcher who was just about to turn up the heart demon seed caught that image that flickered by like lightning and seemed all of a sudden to lose interest in Zhou Ying. The image that had been out at the edges was pushed into the center of all the facets on the heart demon seed.

Xi Ping’s gaze immediately fell on the letter in the Blind Wolf King’s hand. There was oppressive sword energy on that letter, its might

even more fulsome than that of the soul-searching shed skin.

“That’s...”

“A letter sent to the Blind Wolf King by the Sword Slave,” Zhou Ying said. “That’s real. I didn’t see the contents of the letter, but I figure it’s most likely scolding him for blindly messing around in affairs between our two nations... but Kunlun’s Sect Leader might not think that. The word is that the Blind Wolf King and the Sword Slave were once shixiong and shimei, studying under the same teacher—and the matter of the Sword Slave being poisoned in the southern mines is so suspicious.”

Before he had finished speaking, the soul-searcher stopped paying attention to a mere established foundation like Zhou Ying. The “shadow conspiracy” in the little cottage on Flying Jade Peak was once again turned up.

This time, apart from the baldy, the tower, and the beauty, there was another shadow among them—in the corner, merging with the cottage’s ceiling beams because her physique was too large, only a slight edge of the shadow showing... It was the hilt of a big sword.

It looked like Wanshuang!

Violent light instantly exploded inside the heart demon seed. A tiny seal... in the shape of a sword flew out through that soul-searching consciousness.

Before Xi Ping could ask what this meant, he and Zhou Ying simultaneously heard voices from outside.

An unfamiliar man—this must have been the soul-searching shed skin master—said to the High Priest, “Wu Lingxiao. It’s her, just as I thought.”

The High Priest sighed. “The Sword Slave... Alas, the Sword Slave. As expected, she and Xie Chu still harbor resentment over what happened in the past.”

Xi Ping turned his head to look at Zhou Ying in astonishment, unable at first to keep up with this shed skin master’s thoughts: did this gentleman suspect that the Kunlun Mountains had a mole, that that mole was the Sword Slave herself, and that she had faked her own poisoning?

Not even the brush that had written in the toilet bulletins of unseemly relations between Zhuoming and Xuanwu belonged to a mind this broad!

Zhou Ying laughed and stuck up a finger toward him: *Shh—*

Then the unfamiliar man who had performed the soul-searching continued, “The spiritual mountains were created to punish evil and suppress demons. Our nation has an ancient saying—*there is a shadow beneath the light; bliss gives rise to danger*. Xuanyin has that overweeningly ambitious Territory Map, Southern Shu has an abyss at the bottom of the sea, Western Chu’s danger lies among its many mountains, and it seems that Kunlun’s ‘shadow’ is among the spiritual mountains themselves... No wonder that though we inherited our shizun’s Way of the Heart and reached the shed skin boundary, we were all refused and turned out by Wanshuang.”

The Sect Leader and the elders had quested bitterly along the way of the sword, yet they had never been able to draw Wanshuang from its sheath. They had stood by and watched as the foremost sword under heaven fell into the hands of a nobody, a puny junior. This was no different than their shizun the Sword Ancestor reaching out from a thousand years ago to slap them in the face.

Such that a mighty thousand-year-old shed skin was now kept in check by a brassy, ugly woman.

Could it be that they were no match for that Sword Slave?

That was impossible.

So there could only be one explanation: Wanshuang had betrayed its master.

“This is a shed skin’s heart demon. The heart demon seed has already been planted,” Zhou Ying said. “This is what the Dignitary of Rule Elder Lin taught me. Fun, isn’t it?”

“Lin... What did he teach you?”

“While it is true that shed skins are puppets of the spiritual mountains, these puppets’ humanity will sometimes struggle free of the ‘heavenly ordinances’ of the spiritual mountains, for good or ill,” Zhou Ying said “as long as the thought is strong enough—look. I’ve won my bet.”

All of Xi Ping’s thirty-two teeth began to itch at once. For a moment, he knew why Xi Yue liked biting people. “Are you crazy?!”

Before Zhou Ying could scold him, Xi Ping quickly said, “The Luwu losing contact, was that your doing? Undo it, let me come over there, hurry!”

When the Way of the Heart shattered, the body would die. Fortunately there was the heart demon seed to temporarily protect Zhou Ying’s consciousness. Xi Ping didn’t especially understand the heart demon seed, but he sensed that Zhou Ying’s condition now was the same as Liang Chen’s when he had taken the spirit-protecting pill.

If that was the case, there ought to still be time to take him back to the Xuanyin Mountains and ask shifu to think of something. If there

was really nothing else for it, they would have to find a freshly dead body for his consciousness to snatch.

Though that would mean severing the immortal path, and his lifespan would also...

Zhou Ying was watching him in amusement. “What, becoming an ascended spirit right under a full moon sage’s nose wasn’t enough for you? You want to steal a corpse out from under the swords of three great shed skins, too? That’s some skill you’ve...”

Hearing the words “steal a corpse,” Xi Ping exploded. “You’re talking nonsense again!”

Zhou Ying suddenly reached out and patted him on the head, as if he were still eight years old. Then from outside came the Kunlun Sect Leader’s voice: “High Priest, the demons are running rampant, and the Sword Slave holds Wanshuang. Wanshuang is connected to Kunlun’s great array. It would be easy to slip up and shake the foundations of the spiritual mountains. We cannot alert her too soon. This Wan envoy is already dead. I froze his consciousness just now, to guard against it dissipating and being noticed by Xuanyin. You said that you had a way. What must we do now?”

The High Priest beckoned. Zhou Ying’s body floated up.

“It’s no matter,” he said. “All we need to do is break the connection between him and the disciple name token in the Xuanyin Mountains. We will only announce that the Wan envoy is staying as a guest of Kunlun—since we are to have peace talks, Xuanyin can leave a hostage here. There is nothing Zhi Xiu can say about it.”

Xi Ping’s first reaction was that this ought to be impossible. If Kunlun could sever the connection of a Xuanyin disciple’s name token, they could have seized the Xuanyin Mountains long ago.

“With your cultivation level, coming to Kunlun would be offering yourself to the slaughter. What, are you going to ask your shifu to come be my backup?” Zhou Ying said, smiling. “I couldn’t stand the shame. The heart demon seed has been planted in the Kunlun Mountains, and you know the whole story. Go on, my destination has arrived.”

“Your...”

Before Xi Ping could finish speaking, his consciousness was irresistibly pulled away—his consciousness was relying on the reincarnation wood sapling that Zhou Ying had planted inside himself. That sapling had been enabled by spiritual energy, and Zhou Ying had removed the spiritual energy!

He heard Kunlun’s Sect Leader say, “You mean... there?”

What?

Once again, he said that specialized term that Xi Ping didn’t understand.

Xi Ping had never before regretted not having made an intensive study of the Northern Li language.

“He’s talking about the Ceaseless Mirror, the Kunlun Mountains’ divine tool.” Zhou Ying’s figure was already gone. Only his consciousness spoke into Xi Ping’s ear. “The foundation of the first spiritual mountains in the world, the place each possessor of a paramount spiritual sense spends his life wanting to have a look at. I won’t die. Look after Bai Ling for me...”

“San-ge!” said Xi Ping.

“Xiaobao, we will meet beyond the bounds.”

CHAPTER 207 - A Life of Regret (19)

“Th-th-this has nothing to do with me!”

Xi Ping had collapsed without warning, his out-flung consciousness refusing to be called back no matter what. A sword cultivator only knew how to kill, not how to heal. Zhi Xiu didn't know what to do. All he could do was call over Wen Fei.

When Peak Master Wen came, before he could even take a close look, he saw tears of blood suddenly start to flow from Xi Ping's eyes. Wen Fei was so scared that he snatched his hand back as if he had touched a hot iron, as panicked as a young wife who had knocked over a vase left out deliberately by a ruffian working a scam.

Zhi Xiu sensed the sword shard concealed in Xi Ping's spirit trembling incessantly. Cracks suddenly appeared on that spirit. He quickly reached out to put a hand on the center of Xi Ping's brow. Just then, Xi Ping abruptly opened his eyes.

Flying Jade Peak's ice-cold spiritual energy rushed toward him in a body, nearly forming a vortex around him. Everything next to Xi Ping was knocked aside. Wen Fei waved his fan, picked up Xi Yue, and hid at the door. Zhi Xiu, afraid of hurting Xi Ping, took half a step back, not daring to touch him.

The surge of spiritual energy broke his hair crown. With a crisp crack, the jade crown fell to the ground. His spirit healed. Xi Ping sat up. When he moved, the caked blood in his eyes fell along with his hair.

He covered his eyes with his hands. For a long moment, he didn't make a sound.

There was no need to check Zhou Ying's disciple name token. Right now, there was a high-level "bone-sharing" talisman floating in his spirit, brought back by his consciousness. This could let him share in a portion of the vital power the person who had drawn the talisman—through this talisman, he could easily locate the hair san-ge had planted on Zhou Huan; it had already reached Northern Li's capital city Yanning.

The flames of war were everywhere on the southern continent. It was perfectly reasonable for Great Wan's exiled nobility to choose to go north. Kunlun, for its part, believed that the Xuanyin Mountains had been occupied by demons and would need to secretly unite with the old noble families. Zhou Huan, a game piece buried in advance, was perfectly suited to being a "plant"... but that wasn't the important part.

The important part was that a dead person's aura would dissipate. When a person was dead, some talismans would indeed have residual power, but the bone-sharing talisman, which was so closely bound up with the one who had drawn it, would certainly lose effect.

A dead person couldn't share his bones!

The Ceaseless Mirror was the most mysterious of the five great divine tools of the mountains. Since the spiritual mountains had formed, it had practically never appeared. There were vanishingly few records. Xi Ping didn't know why it could overpower the Xuanyin Mountains and sever a person's connection to a name token linked to his life, and he wasn't planning on getting to the bottom of why it could allow a person whose Way of the Heart had shattered and whose body had been destroyed to leave behind an intact bone-sharing talisman.

He wiped away the blood on his eyelashes. He would rather trust san-ge.

Supposing that the Ceaseless Mirror was the origin of the spiritual mountains, supposing that through it one really could reach the so-called “place beyond the bounds”...

Wen Fei met his still bloodshot eyes and hung back by the door, not daring to enter. Standing on tiptoe, he tossed a bottle of mind calming pills to Zhi Xiu. “Y-y-you give it to him.”

Then he nervously held his fan up in front of himself, saying, *Do you still recognize us? Who am I?*

Xi Ping said, “... You’re that quack from next door whose ancestral tombs have just been dug up.”

They saw that he hadn’t lost his mind and wasn’t going to bite anyone; they heaved a collective sigh of relief.

“What happened?” Zhi Xiu asked. “Did your consciousness just go to Kunlun? What happened to His Highness Prince Zhuang? Is he well?”

“He’s been taken hostage by Northern Li,” Xi Ping said, clenching his teeth. “The Xuanyin Mountains aren’t so well off, we don’t have the money to ransom him, so let him stay there for now. He’s poison, Kunlun will regret it sooner or later. Right now, I want to find out what history the Blind Wolf King and the Sword Slave have.”

The heart demon seed had already been planted on the Kunlun Sect Leader’s Way of the Heart, and it pointed directly at the Sword Slave. Something would have to happen soon... Reasonably speaking, the Sword Slave was far below those ancient shed skins in generational ranking, and the sturdiness of a shed skin sword cultivator’s Way of the Heart was something that an outsider was incapable of imagining. Being jealous of a junior, to the point of leaving an opening for a heart demon to slip in, was altogether too petty.

Zhi Xiu and Wen Fei exchanged a look. Wen Fei became serious and waved his fan toward Xi Ping. *The north has little contact with us, and you joined the sect late. Before refining herself into a puppet, Wanshuang's Sword Slave was a nobody. I don't know much about her. But I did see Xie Chu once...I mean that so-called "Blind Wolf King."*

Meanwhile, the Luwu on the northern continent were gradually breaking free of the Perplexing Sword. They woke and looked around themselves in confusion.

The sword energy that had done them no injury returned unnoticed to its master's hand.

When the Snow Wolf entered the room, the knickknacks the Wan envoy had brought were spread out all over the small couch at the Blind Wolf King's feet—an exquisite desk clock, a tinderbox, a quicksilver mirror, a flying goose machine, and so on.

On the Blind Wolf King's nose were a pair of glasses, with their thin chain of new Moon Plated Gold hanging around his neck. He was just staring blankly at a ball of sword energy like a tangled skein.

The Snow Wolf saw at a glance that this sword energy came from the Perplexing Sword. He instantly stopped in his tracks in dread.

Then he calmed himself and thought, The old fool is content with his lot ruling over the feet of the Beijue Mountains. If he's not drinking or hibernating, then he's wandering around the Beijue Pass staring blankly at the snow. I haven't seen him practice the sword once in all these years. His cultivation hasn't advanced. We're both ascended spirits now. What's so scary about the Perplexing Sword?

Remembering that Linked Heart promising him Posuo Palace, the Snow Wolf came to the sudden realization that he was already

qualified to stand on a level with the Blind Wolf King. He felt an involuntary surge of emotion. He believed himself to be a person unmoved by honor or disgrace, so after a few breaths, he restrained himself and determined to play up earnestly to the last shred of cover. He paid his respects to the Blind Wolf King, a grasshopper at the end of autumn. “You wanted to see me?”

The Perplexing Sword’s energy was like the silk spat up by spring silkworms, spinning as it twined around the Blind Wolf King’s fingertips.

On being addressed, the old Wolf King raised his eyelids and looked at the ice all over the Snow Wolf. “Have you been hard at work in the snow again?”

The Snow Wolf responded, “Oh, no, I picked it up outside. The weather is strange today. It was fine in the morning, but earlier a gale came out of nowhere, and it started snowing like mad.”

The Blind Wolf King cocked an ear to listen to the shrill north wind. He muttered, “The wind from the Beiyuan Plains has come so early this year. I’m afraid it’s going to be another bad winter.”

With harsh winter coming early, the farmers who relied on the weather to eat had once again ended up in trouble because the heavens had turned on them. The beasts of burden had it as hard as the people. Who knew how they would get through the winter?

“Now that the Wan envoy has come, I hope that Kunlun’s divine swordsmen, apart from thinking of the southern mines and the struggle between the righteous and the evil, can also remember that the people need to eat,” the Blind Wolf King said slowly, “and not forget to ask for some provisions from the south.”

The Snow Wolf rather critically thought, And you’re still worried about the people and the nation? That’s really all you need. I figure

the Wan envoy is already cold by now.

But what he said was, “Quite right. What instructions did you have for me?”

“Oh, a trifle.” The Blind Wolf King dispersed the sword energy in his palm. “Send the Lord Sword Slave a letter for me. It’s nearly the anniversary of our shizun’s death. I don’t know whether she’ll be able to make it back in time this year. Remind her to burn some paper for him if she can’t.”

The Snow Wolf took a quick glance at him and agreed unreservedly. Seeing that he had nothing else to say, he respectfully withdrew.

The Blind Wolf King’s gaze passed through the glasses, watching the Snow Wolf’s retreating figure with an ambiguous look. He knew that every word of the letter he sent the Sword Slave would appear on a desk in Kunlun’s inner sect.

He gave a grim, soundless laugh, drew his fox-fur robe tighter around himself, picked up a pot of wine, and in a flash blended with the heavy snow, arriving at the Beijue Pass in an instant—this was the end of the Beijue Mountains.

The accumulated snow was already thicker than the height of a person. Only a straw pavilion stood out, floating on the ice. The fierce gale that could have swept cattle and sheep away couldn’t budge the pavilion’s thatch. Evidently, this was an immortal tool.

The Blind Wolf King landed in the pavilion. He waved his sleeve, and an earthenware pot on a small stone table inside the pavilion filled with clean snowmelt. He put a blue jade under the stone table, and soon, the water in the earthenware pot began to boil. Warm, enshrouding steam filled the small pavilion. It seemed to have nothing to do with the whistling snowy wind outside.

This was the Blind Wolf King's Snow Observation Pavilion. It burned one blue jade per day; he was the only one who came here—low-level cultivators wouldn't approach the Beijue Pass without reason, and the Snow Wolf was busy climbing up to heaven. He turned his nose up at this "indulgence," spuriously cultured and expensive besides.

The Blind Wolf King took off his fox-fur robe and tossed it aside. He brewed tea and cast his gaze onto the vast and unpeopled Beiyuan Plains.

North of the Beijue Mountains was a vast expanse of no-man's-land, a place of utter cold that could freeze even a cultivator's essence.

Outside the Beijue Mountains was a great array left behind by the Sword Ancestor, which shielded the continent from the fatal cold. That was a place where only a master near the full moon boundary could reach. It was hard for even Kunlun's great sword cultivators to approach. The great array had had no one to repair it for a long time, and the north had been growing colder year by year. There had been nothing Kunlun could do. They had had to patch it up with an array to block the wind and snow at the Beiyuan Pass and spend a large quantity of spiritual stones here every year, but the results were hardly better than nothing.

It was said that this was the most difficult time in Northern Li's history. Unnumbered people froze or starved to death. This continued until a rare talent refused to inherit Kunlun's ninefold sword and established a sword heart for the sake of the people, creating his own "Heart Sword," which did not rely on external objects, using his body as a sword and his consciousness as its cutting edge. Without the Sword Ancestor's cultivation level, his physical body couldn't go to the edge of Beijue's great array, but a sword cultivator cultivating the Heart Sword could use his consciousness to penetrate the utter cold and reach the Beijue

Array to repair the Sword Ancestor's relic—this genius who had suddenly emerged had been the Second Elder of the Kunlun Mountains.

But sending your consciousness to travel beyond the Beijue Mountains was extremely dangerous. It was said that the place that could freeze your essence would make your consciousness hallucinate; the least slip, and it would never return. Over two hundred years ago, while patrolling the Beijue Array, the Second Elder had disappeared, body and mind, at the Beijue Pass.

Not long after that, Xie Chu, the sole disciple to inherit his Heart Sword, was expelled from his sect for questioning Kunlun's ninefold sword, violating the sect's rules, and fighting fellow sect members.

Kunlun's treatment of rebels and evil cultivators alike had always been utterly merciless, but the Heart Sword was unique, and Xie Chu was its only inheritor. If there was no one who could repair the Beijue Array, Kunlun would once again have to pile up a "wall" of spiritual stones to block the wind. That would be far more costly than supporting a rebellious ascended spirit. Kunlun could do the math on this, so, on the pretext of fellow sect members interceding on his behalf, they had only banished Xie Chu to the Beijue Mountains, ordering him to tend to the Beijue Array.

Since then, he had wandered between righteousness and evil. He had given himself a pseudonym, the Blind Man. Because each time his consciousness left by the Beiyuan Pass, it would have to find the way back facing near certain death, he changed the name of the Heart Sword to "Perplexing."

The people of Northern Li worshiped wolves and honored him as the Wolf King.

Right now, outside the Beijue Pass was chaos and darkness, the blizzard tying sky and earth together, the frigid wind like a

gluttonous wild beast, roaring as it tried to charge through the pass.

The Snow Wolf had been right. Even in the place of utmost cold, a blizzard still wouldn't strike entirely without warning. There was something strange about this frosty wind.

The Blind Wolf King's consciousness pierced through the frigid wind and landed amid the vast wasteland—the Beijue Array had been subject to major repairs only forty-some years ago. He had remained here for forty-nine days and nearly perished. Reasonably speaking, there shouldn't have been a problem this soon.

The ancient inscriptions that the Sword Ancestor had left behind were like ice sculptures carved at the end of the wasteland. Every extra moment you stayed here added to the danger. The Blind Wolf King didn't dare to linger. His consciousness flitted quickly over the Beijue Array.

Just then, he heard tapping coming from the depths of the Beijue Array.

The Blind Wolf King concentrated to the utmost and determined that this wasn't the sound of the gale hurling around chunks of ice and stone.

Holding his breath, he listened for a long moment. His consciousness abruptly returned to his true body. He fished up the flying goose codebook from his fox-fur robe and quickly compared the knocking he had just heard against the code written in it, translating it into Wan writing.

My...Way...of...the...Heart...has...broken...

The Blind Wolf King's pupils contracted slightly. The fierce winds of the Beiyuan Plains struck the little cottage with a rumble; half of the blue jade supporting the immortal tool turned grey in an instant.

He was afraid he had misunderstood the Wan language and quickly found a Li-Wan dictionary to carefully consult it and make certain. He saw that the following code read: *My body is dead. I have entered the Ceaseless Mirror. If you are receiving this message, then you and I have guessed rightly.*

The Blind Wolf King's hand holding down the codebook trembled slightly. He took out a name token—as the envoy of Great Wan's Xuanyin Mountains, Zhou Ying, in order to prove his identity to low-level cultivators when crossing the border, had brought along one of his own disciple name tokens.

The characters “Zhou Ying” on the name token were flashing brilliantly, indicating that the name token's owner was unharmed and in good health; everything was normal.

A person whose body had died and been sent into the Ceaseless Mirror—why would his name token be unscathed? Could this divine tool of the mountains that no one had seen conceal a person's death?

And why would a message from a “dead man” appear in the unpeopled Beiyuan Plains?

Or rather, what was the connection between the Ceaseless Mirror and the Beiyuan Plains?

In the Xuanyin Mountains, Zhi Xiu asked, “You've seen him? When you pursued that evil cultivator to the Cangye Plains?”

Wen Fei nodded. *He was the ascended spirit sword cultivator that Kunlun sent to clean up. If it hadn't been for him, we might all have frozen under a snowdrift in Northern Li and turned into fertilizer. It's said that he was the direct disciple of Kunlun's Second Elder, originally an inner sect master with boundless future prospects...*

Oh, the people of Northern Li don't care for all these convoluted titles. That crowd of warriors all talk with their swords. Apart from the extremely mysterious High Priest, the best fighter is the Sect Leader, and after him comes the Second Elder and so on according to strength. This Second Elder was younger than all the other shed skins. He wasn't even born in time to study under the Sword Ancestor. And he didn't cultivate Kunlun's ninefold sword. If he weren't gone, it's hard to say who the Sect Leader would be now.

“He passed away?” Zhi Xiu was somewhat taken aback. “I don't think I've heard of a master sword cultivator passing away in recent years...”

Wen Fei shook his head. *It doesn't count as passing away. There were no unusual phenomena in the heavens, and we in fact didn't hear of anything here. Kunlun announced that he had “gone into seclusion.” This seclusion has gone on for over two hundred years, since before you entered the sect. I feel that this seclusion is of the same nature as Li Fengshan and Xiang Rong's. I'm not sure what went wrong, but his seclusion turned into a permanent one. Otherwise, how could he not have come out to say something when something as major as his head disciple betraying Kunlun took place? When you were half-dead and caught on the shed skin threshold, you were still always coming out to wipe your Flying Jade Peak ancestor's ass for him.*

Zhi Xiu had been prepared in advance; he flicked his fingers, knocking aside the spiritual energy his rebellious disciple had sent flying toward Wen Fei's fan. “Impudent.”

Then he turned around and gave Wen Fei a look, frowning. With a sigh, he said, “How old are you?”

Wen Fei waved his hand indifferently. *As for that Sword Slave, I don't know anything for sure — aren't there Luwu in the Beijue*

Mountains? Why don't you get in contact with them and ask around?

Xi Ping was just about to say something when suddenly, his spiritual sense moved slightly. He immediately turned his gaze onto Jinping.

In the Yongning Marquis Manor, the Marquis, who was writing out large characters, froze. A thread of light like silk flew out from the center of his brow and struck the wall of the study. Before he could get a clear look at it, Xi Ping had already returned to the Marquis Manor through the reincarnation wood. The sound of a string, like tearing silk, broke off contact between the Marquis and that light.

The shadow on the wall cried out in oddly-accented Wan language: "Wait!"

The Marquis abruptly stood up. "Shiyong, do not be rude!"

CHAPTER 208 - A Life of Regret (20)

The shadow spread out feebly on the wall. A big shining white furball appeared. Xi Ping couldn't tell at a glance whether it was a dog or a bear.

He saw the furball shake. A skinny face like a Chu person's emerged from the pile of fur, with a pair of glasses that wouldn't fog up no matter what sitting on its nose.

The head looked around the Marquis's study as if it had just cultivated a human form for itself and had never seen anything before. On this "expedition to the big city," it examined the desk lamp, the desk clock, and the pot of hot water as though they were novelties, then finally met Xi Ping's eyes.

As soon as they looked at each other, each guessed the other's identity—that furball wasn't a dog, and it wasn't a bear, either; it was an old grim-toothed wolf of the north.

"The Blind Wolf King?" said Xi Ping.

"Tai Sui?" said the head.

"You flatter me." Xi Ping rolled a qin string at his fingertips. "What, didn't His Highness Prince Zhuang tell you how to safely get in contact with me?"

After beginning to cultivate, he had spent less than half a year on Flying Jade Peak. Before he'd had time to work out the rules and etiquette, he had been kicked straight into the Impassable Sea by the cultivation world. Since then, he had grown lawlessly in lawless places. Adding in his nature and the influence of the ungovernable way, he had an arrogant air of scorn for everything around him. On

first sight of him, outsiders' first thought was always of "Tai Sui," not some rule-abiding disciple of an immortal sect.

"I do in fact have a piece of reincarnation wood. It's only that there just happened to be some remnants of the Perplexing Sword's energy I gifted many years ago that had yet to dissipate. Since I was going to contact Jinping, I wanted to look in on my old friend while I was at it." In order to demonstrate his good faith, the Blind Wolf King was speaking clumsily in the Wan language. He vaguely probed, "I didn't expect that Tai Sui would come so fast. It seems that Jinping City is indeed Your Excellency's territory. The Chu fell against a worthy opponent here."

From the speed of his reaction, it could be perceived that Great Wan's domestic situation was busy but not chaotic; it probably wasn't anywhere near as desperate as outsiders imagined.

"Naturally," Xi Ping said, deflecting. "Since the Blind Wolf King has honored us with his presence, if I had come late, wouldn't I have been snubbing our distinguished guest?"

Xi Ping had never shown this aspect of himself in front of his family. By the time the Marquis of Yongning came to his senses, these two gentlemen had already exchanged several rounds of incisive remarks.

The Marquis took a deep breath. He felt that this was no time to be reasonable. He interrupted to pull the rug right out from under their feet: "Exalted, there is a reincarnation wood tree right under my study window. He can get here from the immortal mountains more easily than from the garden—also, this is my son."

The Blind Wolf King: "..."

Xi Ping: "..."

Tai Sui's identity was no longer a secret: the Sword of the South's only direct disciple, the son of... some marquis or other of Great Wan's Jinping—the Blind Wolf King was careless and had only remembered that much. He couldn't even speak the Wan language smoothly. Not everyone would necessarily know the era and the emperor of a neighboring country, so who could be expected to remember how many marquises or monkeys or orangutans there were in Jinping?

The old fellow suspected that his Wan language was so bad that he had misunderstood. "Your what?"

Xi Ping spoke almost at the same as him, his voice lowering considerably: "Dad."

The Marquis unhurriedly saluted. "My son is ill-mannered, an embarrassment in front of the Exalted. In the recent turmoil in Jinping, it was owing to your Perplexing Sword that my whole family's safety was secured. I have not yet expressed my gratitude."

Xi Ping only now remembered that such a thing had happened. You had to give way to someone who had done you a favor. All he could do was shut his mouth sullenly.

The Blind Wolf King stared so hard that his eyes nearly burst out from behind his glasses. He was so shocked that he broke into Northern Li language. "Him? Your son? Isn't that... Well, did that talisman I gave you back then work out? How is the child's spiritual sense?"

Xi Ping was feeling very bewildered by the strange turn this dialogue had taken. Then he heard the Marquis answer with a trace of a smile, "A little better than third-class. Thank you, Exalted."

As far as the cultivation world went, only a first-class spiritual sense was a natural talent; everyone who didn't meet that criterion was

ordinary, without much difference between the slightly quicker and the slightly slower, so there was no need to deliberately separate them; they were generally termed second-class. Below ordinary people were the disabled, born with lacking wits, those for whom a soul-searching wouldn't turn anything up; these were called "third-class."

Translating the Marquis's words into plain language, he had just proudly and gratefully told an outsider, "My son is a little better than an idiot."

If Xi Ping hadn't been hiding under the "Tai Sui" mask year in and year out, having developed the skills not to let his emotions show on his face, he wouldn't have been able to keep his expression intact.

"Hahaha." When this Blind Wolf King who looked like a little pretty boy laughed, he actually did rather show the distinctive characteristics of the people of Northern Li. It was as if there was a trumpet in his chest. "Sadly, with my cultivation level, I could only give you a seal that worked up to a point. I suppose this is your only son and heir... Sit down, let's talk, sit. Alas, a mortal's lifespan is brief. Just the blink of an eye, and you've aged so much. You would have been much better off if you had stayed to cultivate the Perplexing Sword with me in the Beijue Mountains."

Having said this, on his end, he plopped down into his nest of furs and very familiarly crossed one leg over the other. Pointing at Xi Ping with the "I held you when you were a baby" attitude of an uncle, he said, "Nice kid! An ascended spirit before you're fifty, and the southern continent is about to go to pieces from all your messing around! What an achievement! Be sure to pass along my respects to your shifu... That unreliable Zhou Ying, he didn't make it clear, either. If I'd known you were part of the family, I wouldn't have bothered with all of this, I'd have just planted a tree and called you over here to have a drink with me. Wouldn't that have been nice?"

Xi Ping: "..."

Senior, aren't you being a little overly familiar?

The Marquis of Yongning, seeing his son's completely lost foolish look, said, "Our family has always been small. You know that."

Xi Ping nodded a little woodenly: Jinping was his family's ancestral home, but apart from Zhou Ying, all the cousins he had played with as a child were from his mother's side. The only close relative on his father's side was his aunt, who had gone into the palace when she was young. This was in fact quite strange.

As the capital city of Great Wan, Jinping was precious land that very rarely experienced natural disasters. The locals lived fairly well. While the Xi family wasn't illustrious, they had never been destitute. Their ancestors had passed down some farmland, and generation after generation would turn out scholars; occasionally, someone might get lucky and even snag a position as a petty bureaucrat. A family like this, while they wouldn't necessarily spread to the four corners of the nation in a few generations, at least wouldn't be nearly childless... Xi Ping had always thought that this was down to their family's unhappy fates as beauties.

"It's because there is an illness in our bloodline that makes it difficult to have children." The Marquis raised his head to look at the family tree on top of the bookcase. "In your grandfather's generation, there were four brothers to begin with. Two of them died while still in their swaddling clothes. Then there was another one who you'd be calling your fourth grand-uncle if he were alive. He was deranged from a young age. You always felt that he could see things others couldn't. When he spoke, what came out was nonsense that no one understood. He got to thirteen or fourteen, then jumped into a well and died."

Xi Ping had a faint impression of having heard about this when he was little, but he hadn't taken it to heart. Now he froze, feeling that this manner of lunacy sounded like an unusual spiritual sense.

Indeed, the Marquis went on, sighing, "Practically every generation of our family has had such a person. Your grandfather lived to be nearly fifty, and he brought up your aunt. Seeing that she was lively and healthy when she was young, like a normal person, the family thought that the illness in their bloodline had weakened, not expecting that it would manifest again in His Third Highness."

Indeed, they were speaking of the paramount spiritual sense, which made survival difficult!

Then Xi Ping suddenly caught up. The Marquis had only said his aunt was a "normal person"; he hadn't mentioned himself!

The Blind Wolf King casually interjected: "Your father is very fortunate, being a little beneath those lunatics. He barely falls into the category of a superior first-class spiritual sense."

"I do well enough during the day. Apart from being a little sensitive to small noises and disturbances, there's nothing inconvenient. Only when I was young, I often had palpitations from fear in my sleep, which left me with slight heart disease." The Marquis looked at Xi Ping, for once not so sternly, and softly said, "I wasn't planning to get married. I hadn't counted on meeting your mother. She knew perfectly well what my situation was, but she was still willing to throw off her family and fortune to marry me. There is no way to repay that favor... But because of me, we didn't have children for several years after our marriage. She didn't say anything, but she regretted it. She often went to pray for children at the Southern Sage Temple."

The Blind Wolf King, laughing, said, "As if he would help!"

“Of course it did no good,” the Marquis said. “I was young and impetuous then. I decided to go to the black market and try my luck, see if there was any way to seal off my bloodline.”

Xi Ping suspected that something had gone wrong with his ears. “You went where?”

Nine out of ten evil cultivators were short on money. Many people would in fact take on work from mortals for a high price—but for one thing, the price was extremely high, and for another, you needed to find connections. If you just went to the black market and tried your luck, if it was good, you might come across a Wei Chengxiang, and if it was bad, you might run into someone like Wild Fox Country’s Snake King.

He felt that his family’s inheritance wasn’t a paramount spiritual sense, it was extreme daring... No wonder they had nearly all died without issue!

“A family like ours, while we couldn’t reach to the immortal sect above, we would always attract some monsters from below. Our forebears had had dealings with evil cultivators.” The Marquis sighed, saying, “I exchanged a protective immortal tool handed down from my ancestors for information, and they instructed me to go to the Beijue Mountains to ask His Highness the Wolf King.”

At this point, the Blind Wolf King dinned, “They were telling you to find a disciple of the Beijue Mountains, but you, you misunderstood and just ran off to the feet of the Beijue Mountains.”

Xi Ping could no longer feel surprise. “... How could you find the Beijue Mountains without cultivation?”

“A path I left behind.” The Blind Wolf King blinked at him. “The Beijue Mountains have a secret passage built of talismans that mortals can also pass through. Only a person with a high enough

spiritual sense and good enough luck can come upon it... I've always wanted to take someone with a high enough spiritual sense as my successor. I placed that hidden realm back when I took up residence in the Beijue Mountains to use to filter disciples. But it turns out that people with high enough spiritual senses are so rare that no one found that door in centuries. As time went on, I forgot all about it."

Xi Ping: "..."

If the Crown Prince Snow Wolf found out about this, he would probably be mad as a gourd. The Beijue Mountains, which he had only reached by the skin of his teeth, nearly burning himself to ashes, turned out to have another entryway!

"I suppose I owe you my life," the Blind Wolf King said, sighing. "For certain reasons, my consciousness was nearly lost at the Beijue Pass then. If not for the fire you started in the pavilion, I'd have frozen there forty-odd years ago."

The Marquis said, "I only unintentionally lent a hand, while the talisman you personally conferred upon me sealed my bloodline and allowed me and my wife to live normally for many years and have offspring. I cannot thank you enough."

"Don't mention it, you're making me regret it—think of the fate that brought us together. You'd have been much better off as my disciple, you good-for-nothing. All you can think about is a wife and kids." The Blind Wolf King waved a hand. "Since I'm already here, it's pretty good to look in on an old friend, and now I can rest easy. I hear my sword attack cut down the Heartless Lotus, so I suppose it must have been just about used up. I'll make a long story short. I just sent my shimei a letter, and I figure that idiot spy working for me has already copied it and passed it on to the Kunlun Mountains—I suppose you know who my accomplished shimei is?"

The Sword Slave—Wu Lingxiao—was right now standing on the border between Li and Chu’s southern mine areas. She had received the letter that the Snow Wolf had penned in the Blind Wolf King’s stead. No expression could be seen on her ravine-crossed face. Whenever she received Linked Hearts from the inner sect or official documents and letters, she always destroyed them once she was finished reading, but this time, after a slight pause, she put that letter away.

The two Northern Li sword cultivators following her exchanged a veiled look, then heard a bone-chilling *clank* as Kunlun’s Wanshuang left its scabbard and sliced at Chu’s border inscriptions.

It was as if the ground had been slit open. The hum of the sharp sword bounced around throughout the whole of the Lancang Mountain Range. The spiritual energy on the inscriptions all flowed away like steam. Even the Northern Li cultivators were silent as cicadas in winter.

“It seems that all the friendly nations of the southern continent can no longer spare the attention to control the southern mines, such that evil cultivator are running amok here,” the Sword Slave said slowly, holding up Wanshuang. “That being the case, I will temporarily assume control over the Lancang Mountains in their stead.”

Having said this, she waved a hand. Armed and armored Northern Li cultivators and soldiers poured into the other nations’ mining areas.

“Among the cultivators of the Shu and Chu mines, many are suspected of colluding with evil cultivators. They must not leave the camps at the mining areas. They will all be kept for later interrogation. Southern Wan’s mining area has disobeyed the Xuanyin Mountains. Tie them all up and send them back to Zhi Xiu as a token of our good will to buy their information. I want to

dismember that Yang clan survivor.” The Sword Slave gave instructions without so much as turning her head. “Starting now, I am in charge on the Southern He Peninsula.. Stop all those steam engines, their noise is annoying me to death!”

The Kunlun Mountains had never acknowledged that the Second Elder was dead. It was only her shixiong Xie Chu who, for reasons unknown, persisted in believing that shifu was gone. But he knew how strained her relationship with shifu had been at the time. He never mentioned shifu to her in private.. The Sword Slave had grown up with her shixiong. She knew that this was the Blind Wolf King subtly warning her.

Her interaction with the evil cultivators was hard to explain, and Kunlun had grown suspicious of her; he was telling her to watch her step.

The Sword Slave appreciated his kind intentions, but she didn’t take the warning seriously. With the Wanshuang Sword in hand, they were welcome to suspect her; anyone who objected to her could come for a fight.

CHAPTER 209 - A Life of Regret (21)

The lead story of toilet bulletins from every nation and every organization suddenly became this shocking news: “Northern Li sends troops to the southern mines, occupies Southern He Peninsula.” Every toilet bulletin sent a “scribe” — the writers who penned the articles — to risk themselves hitching rides with merchant ships going to Southern He to get firsthand information.

There was endless gossip.

“Wanshuang has cut through every nation’s border inscriptions, one strike for each border, and those inscriptions that even masters can’t get through evaporated faster than steam.”

“If Wanshuang can cut through the border inscriptions in the southern mines, then aren’t the ones on the continent also..”

“It’s over, it’s over.” Some elderly people started seizing the opportunity to make alarmist statements to demonstrate the profundity of their experience. “The northerners are going to go south, just look, it’s the same as back in Renzong’s time, there’s going to be a war!”

“The weather is cold and the earth is frozen on the northern continent. The northerners all eat raw flesh like savages. I’ve heard that in their capital city of Yanning, it’s common for people to be beaten to death if there’s a disagreement in the street. Once the sun sets, no one without self-defense skills dares to go out. Bandits break down doors in the middle of the night, and when food is scarce, they’ll eat anything they can catch! They’ll even eat humans!”

“They’re all barbarians, it’s common for fathers and sons or brothers to share wives!”

“Th-that... My word, are they beasts?”

Unless matters rose again to the pitch of the Wan-He War, reasonably speaking, a struggle between immortal sects wouldn't make it into the mortal world's "current events" toilet bulletins—for one thing, mortals wouldn't understand, and for another, they were afraid of casually bringing up the names of the Exalted and accidentally violating some taboo.

But this time, events in the Southern He Peninsula turned out to be a falling stone that raised a thousand ripples.

It wasn't that the common people had nothing better to do than worry about a "deserted" place like the Land of Turmoil. It was that the Sword Slave cutting through the border inscriptions then giving the order to destroy all Moon Plated Gold products had frightened them.

There was a toilet bulletin called the *Tao World Record* whose scribe had taken a picture of the Northern Li people destroying steam engines, just one picture—it was said that afterward the scribe's camera and flying goose machine had been crushed by the northern barbarians, and it was unknown whether the scribe was dead or alive. That day's *Tao World Record* sold out three extra print runs. Everyone in all the nations who could read Western Chu writing was trying to get their hands on a copy.

All kinds of rumors flew around, making a tremendous clamor. There were even people saying that Northern Li, after a serious outflow of money in recent years, was jealous of the southern continent's prosperity and wanted to ban Moon Plated Gold again—there were rumors that Moon Plated Gold ought originally to have come to the mortal world eight centuries ago, and it had been the Northern Li people who had hindered that plan, as well as forcing Xuanyin to lock up the Golden Hand.

The wealthy were on tenterhooks: looked at this way, if Northern Li really did invade, all their immovable factories and industrial properties would come to grief. For the poor, it went without saying; their farmland was long gone. Many factories, trains, and ships settled their accounts daily. Workers were living hand to mouth. If war came, they would be finished.

The *Tao World Record* seemed determined to shock the world. Following on the heels of that precious photograph, it came out with an article that once again jabbed people in the spot they were most concerned about: the well-known scribe “Sir Xu” wrote copiously and fluently for over ten thousand words concerning the mysterious northern continent’s centuries-long struggle over Moon Plated Gold.

Moon Plated Gold had come from the immortal sects. It had always spread “from the top down.” Long before old Moon Plated Gold gold smelters had formally appeared, the immortal sects had already shed a great deal of blood on this account.

The southern continent had had the Wan-He War. Far away on the upper reaches of the Tianze River, the northern continent’s disturbance hadn’t been so large, yet in degree of cruelty, it had perhaps even exceeded it—Northern Li’s struggle between progressive and conservative parties concerning Moon Plated Gold had extended for several years.

Yanning’s progressive party at the time, perhaps for their own ambitions and ideals, perhaps because they had seen enough of barren earth and fellow countrymen who looked like starved corpses, had asked for change. Kunlun, however, had split internally into two groups on this account: the conservative party opposed to Moon Plated Gold naturally opposed it on the basis of spiritual stones, while Kunlun’s inner sect also had inextricable ties to Yanning’s nobles, and another portion of its people decided to stand with their families.

The people of the north were savage and combative in their hearts. With the attitude of Kunlun's masters ambivalent, the battle between the progressive and conservative parties escalated rapidly. At first it had only been open dispute and veiled strife at court, but starting from the assassination of Prince Jialuo, the second prince at the time, it quickly became tainted with blood. After that, the "flames of war" spread to the immortal mountains.

The two parties created a hopeless situation, which at last was resolved with a final word from Kunlun's Second Elder—when news came of the outbreak of the Wan-He War, the Second Elder publicly said, "Moon Plated Gold is inauspicious."

The Second Elder didn't have the longest record among the elders, but his position among Kunlun's shed skins was the most unique. There was a rumor that said even the Sect Leader yielded to him somewhat. With his airy sentence, the progressive party, which had had the firm upper hand, was uprooted overnight.

The attitude among the Night Revenants altered greatly. They tacitly acquiesced to Yanning's conservative party mobilizing the imperial guards to storm the capital and place on the throne a new emperor who killed his own father and brothers. Many of the progressive party's nobles, caught unawares, simply died in the fighting.

In this battle, the streets of Northern Li's capital were covered in blood. The stench took months to disperse. History called it the Dark of the New Moon Incident.

Apart from the Second Elder who had wrought such a great change with a single sentence, the article also mentioned another great personage: Wanshuang's Sword Slave.

The scribe Sir Xu, whether to avoid violating a taboo or as a show of respect, did not mention the Sword Slave's full name and only used

her title—she was the daughter of the old Prince Pingyang; after being selected to enter the inner sect, the title of Princess Changji had been conferred upon her. She was the Second Elder's sole other direct disciple.

It was said that this princess had been outstanding while still in the Disciple Hall. Before reaching her fifteenth birthday, she had opened her spiritual eyes, beating out a whole crowd of fellow disciples who were senior to her and stronger than her.

Other ways might have moments of enlightenment through happenstance, but there were no shortcuts for sword cultivators. Everything came of hard work, day after day. Princess Changji was a natural genius. She established a foundation at thirty, unprecedented and unrivaled in the way of the sword, such that the Second Elder couldn't bear to make her give up Kunlun's ninefold sword. It was said that by the time she was in her sixties, this frightening genius of the way of the sword had already reached the late established foundation stage. The Second Elder was holding back her progress only because he was afraid that her emotional state was unsteady and something would go wrong when she faced a heavenly tribulation.

And this genius who was unusually young for the cultivation world was also confronted with a problem for which the Kunlun Mountains had no precedent: her nearest blood relation in the mortal world was still living.

Princess Changji's twin brother had inherited their father's rank, becoming the new Prince Pingyang. Twins of mixed sex were much closer than an ordinary brother and sister would have been. While one of them had been rejected by the Disciple Hall and the other had become its legend, they had always been very close. For the New Year or on important days like Prince Pingyang's full decade birthdays, the sword-obsessed princess who was normally

unmoved by anything would be certain to make an appearance in the mortal world, even if she happened to be in seclusion.

When he was sixty years old, Prince Pingyang suffered a serious illness. The princess, who had never liked meeting strangers, had on this account gone south to Shu to request medicine—apart from the Kunlun Mountains and Yanning City, Southern Shu unexpectedly became the third place she had been to in her life.

Prince Pingyang was no good at swordsmanship, but he was a cunning and crafty politician. Throughout his life, he performed countless great feats that were recorded in the annals of history, and he was hated bitterly by his political opponents.

Of this brother and sister, one didn't understand swordsmanship, and the other didn't understand subterfuge. Ordinarily, they each moved within their own unconnected spheres, without mutual interference. At any rate, the close ties that came from being born of the same womb couldn't be broken.

But fortune makes fools of people. This Prince Pingyang just happened to be one of the leaders of Yanning's progressive party.

On the night of the Dark of the New Moon Incident, the manor of Prince Pingyang, who was already past seventy, was broken into by enraged rebel troops. He was strung up with gashes cut into his neck and thighs and bled to death. Everyone at his manor was punished.

“On the one hand was her blood brother, and on the other was the shizun who had doted on her to no end since she had joined the sect. The tragedy of some geniuses lies in excessive concentration. Apart from what they love, they think that nothing else has anything to do with them. They forget that they are human—you and I are nothing but two-legged beasts, asking for nothing in this life but ‘power.’ Whether they concern scholarly research or

swordsmanship, the three thousand paths of the Great Way are three thousand paths for the pursuit of power. Anyone who insists on lying to themselves and others, refusing to acknowledge this point, will come to a bad end.” At the bottom of the South Sea, Wangge Luobao sighed as he pointed to the toilet bulletin spread out on the table, saying, “It’s said that Wu Lingxiao nearly lost her mind. This probably explains why she hates Moon Plated Gold so much.”

Across from Wangge Luobao, the Queen Mother of the West raised a cup of tea and sipped it. “Come to mention it, she isn’t very old.”

Disregarding the sovereignty of the four nations, the Sword Slave had smashed the border inscriptions on the Southern He Peninsula. Her consciousness was no longer limited; it could embrace the whole of the Southern He Peninsula at a glance. It was no longer safe for the Queen Mother of the West to remain on land. All she could do was hold her nose and form a temporary alliance with Wangge Luobao and move her hidden realm to the South Sea as well.

There might be hundreds of thousands of mu of land within a hidden realm mustard seed, but the space it took up in reality could be boundlessly small—as long as you had enough spiritual stones to supply the space-collapsing arrays.

Right now, the Queen Mother of the West had moved her hidden realm, which could hold hundreds of people, into the mouth of the next life spiritual fish.

“That’s correct.” As they spoke, Yu Chang’s image appeared above a communication device on the table.

As soon as he appeared, Yu Chang affectionately greeted Wangge Luobao and the Queen Mother of the West, entirely ungrudging, as if the Queen Mother of the West enjoying his protection while

scheming against him and Wangge Luobao secretly playing dirty and setting off the poisonous miasma had never happened.

“This ‘Sir Xu’ is no ordinary scribe. She’s a cultivator backed by a powerful individual. Her article ought to be reliable. She doesn’t write about what happened to the Sword Slave afterward. When I was hiding out in the Slumbering Dragon Sea, though, I had dealings with the northerners and heard some things.”

“Goodness, you’ve come just in time, Yu-xiong.” On seeing him, Wangge Luobao was even more affectionate. The two of them seemed to be brothers who had been separated for many years. “Please do go on, we must know ourselves and our enemy.”

“It seemed that this battle between new and old had come to an end, and the punishments of mortals wouldn’t spread to the immortals of the inner sect. Sadly, immortals also have emotions. While Kunlun’s inner sect prohibits fights among disciples, the conservative party’s suppression of the progressive party was evident. Wu Lingxiao’s plight also became extremely awkward. On account of her shifu, the progressive party were bitterly resentful toward her, and the conservative party knew her family’s standpoint and also treated her as an outsider. Wu Lingxiao was leading an extremely stifled life, so she left Kunlun’s inner sect, requesting to go into seclusion in the Disciple Hall... Before the rancor between teacher and disciple could be resolved, the Second Elder got in trouble in the Beijue Mountains.”

Yu Chang paused, then gave the two other evil cultivators a brief explanation of Kunlun’s Beijue Array. “It’s said that this Second Elder might have had a slight disagreement with the Sect Leader at the time and perhaps got distracted while repairing the Beijue Array and carelessly became trapped in it. He has not been found to this day, dead or alive.”

Wangge Luobao said, “Princess Changji was in an awkward situation to begin with. Once her shizun left, wouldn’t it have become even harder for her to find a place to shelter?”

“Yes.” Saying so, Yu Chang suddenly gave a faint sigh, then said with slight ridicule, smiling, “Kunlun is swamped with sword cultivators. Female cultivators are very rare. Though Wu Lingxiao had no reputation as a beauty, her appearance must have been dainty enough when she was human. She didn’t have an androgynous look. A woman like her had overpowered her peers... even her elders. Naturally there was as much idle gossip as you could ask for. When the Second Elder was there, they didn’t dare to raise their voices to say it, but once the elder left, naturally they couldn’t be held back.”

Women didn’t understand shit about the way of the sword. It was just that her fellow disciples had been too uncomfortable to fight her in earnest and had given way. That was how she had earned her false reputation in the Disciple Hall.

Her rapid progress—how could the direct disciple of the Second Elder not make rapid progress? A single pointer from the Second Elder would be enough for anyone to spend decades cudgeling their brains to comprehend.

As for why she should have been so fortunate as to not only enter the inner sect but even be able to take one step right to heaven, be accepted as the Second Elder’s direct disciple... Well, who knew?

A woman always had a woman’s “advantages,” anyway. It was pointless for others to envy her or be jealous of her. They couldn’t compare.

While Yu Chang was base and shameless, saying this kind of thing, regardless of whether the person he was speaking of was friend or foe, his manner was always somewhat restrained. After all, when he

was young, he had personally thrown himself at the burning stake planted on all the women in the world.

The Queen Mother of the West's expression softened slightly. She asked, "Is that why she gave up her human body, preferring to transform herself into a half-puppet?"

"Kunlun's sword cultivators have had a tradition of holding competitions since ancient times. That year, the prize for the established foundation cultivator competition was a valuable whetstone—said to have been used by Western Chu's Hui Xiangjun when she repaired the famous sword Xiuluo. Once news got out, everyone's eyes turned red with desire," Yu Chang said. "Wu Lingxiao was in fact remarkable. There was absolutely no doubt that she would take first place among her peers. She was conceited and arrogant to begin with, and adding in the ostracism she had faced from her fellow sect members at the time, perhaps she had some premeditated intention of getting revenge. In short, she practically humiliated her opponents when they fought, leaving no margin, provoking general outrage.

"Before the final round of the competition, thirteen of Kunlun's sword cultivators who had suffered defeat at her hands banded together to waylay her. Wu Lingxiao knew very well that she couldn't defeat them, but she still refused to dodge their attack and save herself, and said some nasty things. So the two sides came to blows, in violation of sect rules. Her fellow sect members had taken pointers from each other and attacked in earnest. By the time the sect was alerted, she had killed one of the thirteen sword cultivators laying siege to her and crippled six. Of those remaining, all had been wounded in the fighting. She herself was seriously injured. Her meridians were destroyed. She could go no further in the way of the sword.

"The casualties on both sides were quite disastrous. Kunlun at first wanted to smooth things over, but the dead cultivator's teacher

wouldn't let it go and used his family connections to compel them. This was when the Second Elder's other disciple—Wu Lingxiao's shixiong Xie Chu—happened to return from his travels. The two of them cultivated different sword paths and had an age difference of several centuries. Adding in that men and women must not associate closely, I figure that they normally didn't have much to say to each other. Shortly after Wu Lingxiao entered the sect, her shixiong became an ascended spirit and left the Second Elder's tutelage. I haven't heard that they had an especially close relationship afterward... Otherwise, there wouldn't have been people bullying her like that. After all, she had plenty of fellow sect members. Weren't the ones who wanted to kill her also fellow sect members?

“In fact, the inner sect had hinted that everyone should patch it up to avoid trouble. But when Xie Chu heard what had happened, he didn't say a word. That very night, he ripped out and severed the meridians of the other twelve sword cultivators involved one by one, then went to find the dead cultivator's shifu and have a public debate match with him, in which his opponent's Way of the Heart was damaged. Had Kunlun's Third Elder not come and put a stop to it in time, there might well have been a death. Xie Chu defected from Kunlun then. I'm afraid you aren't familiar with the name 'Xie Chu,' but you must have heard of his nickname—the Beijue Mountains' Blind Wolf King.

“Think of Kunlun's Second Elder at the time. He was so high and mighty, and then in the space of a few brief years, he disappeared, one of his disciples departed, and the other fell to the brink of death. But Wu Lingxiao truly was a lunatic. She came up with a wild notion. She turned up a forbidden art somewhere and found an alternative path, turning herself into a sword-bearing half-puppet, not quite human and not quite monster—the most shocking thing was that Wanshuang, which no one had been able to take up for over a thousand years, actually accepted her. That was how she became the Sword Slave she is now.”

At this point, Yu Chang sighed slightly. “That is how ruthless this person is, arrogant to the point that none of her fellow sect members can stand her. It’s said that with Wanshuang in her hand, she doesn’t even pay attention to the Sect Leader’s edicts. Appeasement and schemes will both be ineffective against her.”

Wangge Luobao shook his head, his passionate and sinister eyes turning toward the Queen Mother of the West. “The Sanyue Mountains are still sealed. Chu is powerless. The Xiuyi of my nation have always bullied the weak while fearing the strong. They only dare to bark a little from a distance. They don’t even dare to dispatch a presentable ascended spirit. As for Southern Wan—as can be seen from Wanshuang’s differing policies toward the various nations, Kunlun must have reached some private agreement with Zhaoting. Your Highness, the road ahead of us might be said to be full of obstacles. Apart from you, there is no one on the southern continent who can control the Sword Slave.”

The Queen Mother of the West’s expression grew slightly grave.

CHAPTER 210 - A Life of Regret (22)

“I am only a junior who recently became an ascended spirit, and I am an unremarkable medicine cultivator.” The Queen Mother of the West used a slight verbal dodge. “With Guang’an gravely injured, I have no decent fighting force at my disposal. When my poisoning succeeded by a fluke last time, it still only held her up briefly, just enough for me to escape. Please instruct me, Fellow Cultivator Wangge, how ought I to handle the Sword Slave?”

Wangge Luobao had his eyes fixed unblinkingly on the Queen Mother of the West. His odd-colored irises seemed admiring and also enticing. He seemed to be looking at a waking dragon with magnificent scales. “Having inherited Wanshuang, the Sword Slave’s cultivation level is on a par with a shed skin’s, but there is an object of full moon grade.”

The Queen Mother of the West didn’t respond. Her shoulders and back were even more tense than usual.

Then a smile slowly emerged on Wangge Luobao’s face. “The Lancang Mountains’ former divine tool, the Lovebird Sword Array.”¹⁰²

“The Lovebird Sword Array disappeared, I saw it with my own eyes,” the Queen Mother of the West said gravely. “Even if it still existed, it is common knowledge that you must have shed skin cultivation at the very least in order to control a divine tool of the mountains. The Sanyue Mountains’ Xiang Ning wasn’t able to control the Silver Moon. So you think that I am superior to him? Fellow cultivator, what are these fanciful notions of yours?”

“As long as the spiritual mountains exist, their divine tool exists.” Wangge Luobao leaned forward slightly, his protruding brow ridge and deep eye sockets forming a shadow. That shadow was dark,

seeming to stain half his face. With a trace of temptation, he said, “When your Sect Leader went mad, the divine tool of the mountains went out of control. The four nations invaded together when it was at its weakest. That was why the Lovebird Sword Array vanished. Now Your Highness has received the heavenly edict and become the chosen one of the Lancang Mountains. The miracle has already taken place. The divine tool will appear.”

The Queen Mother of the West’s eyes wandered for a moment as she remembered something and became distracted. Wangge Luobao’s hand, hidden in his wide sleeve, flicked gently. On the ground, the Queen Mother of the West’s shadow moved slightly.

In the communication device, Yu Chang’s red eyes flickered.

Wangge Luobao and Yu Chang, two villainous evil cultivators working hand in glove, quickly exchanged a look. Then the Southern Shu man went on painting beautiful fantasies in broad strokes, as if the three of them were already the masters of the spiritual mountains, dominating Southern He, ready to take affairs of state into their hands.

Wangge Luobao’s buttocks were unusually heavy; once he showed up, he could sit for half the day.

Everyone understood that this Southern Shu man’s face ought of have been drawn in the dictionary as an illustration for the term “conniving,” but the way of beast-taming had its own mysterious properties: if you just spent some time with him, you would form a favorable impression of him, involuntarily set aside your mental defenses. Intellectually, the Queen Mother of the West knew that he was no good, but she couldn’t help but have a feeling of friendliness when she saw him. All she could do was match wits with him while inwardly reminding herself over and over of the dirty things this southern barbarian had done. After half a day of this, she was starting to get a headache.

But she was alone and helpless. She couldn't leave the wretches in this rubbish heap.

Having managed to hold out until Wangge Luobao took his leave, the Queen Mother of the West—Yang Wan—breathed a sigh of relief; she was emotionally exhausted.

When she had seen the two great evil cultivators off, she began to meditate and circulate her energy.

As her spirit quieted, her consciousness spread. It wasn't long before the susurrating "heavenly edict" once again came to her ears. This wasn't a human voice—it sounded something like poor quality factory-made stiff brocade rubbing against itself—but Yang Wan understood it. This voice wasn't communicating with her ears or her mind. It was tapping on the Way of the Heart on her spirit, instructing her in cultivation.

Since the day she had escaped the Sword Slave, whenever she meditated, she could immediately hear the heavenly edict clearly. Many difficulties that she had previously been stuck on were cut apart as though meeting a knife edge. The enlightenment that she had previously sought through strenuous effort was like water that had washed away the top of her skull, almost too much pouring in for her to attend to. During this time, her cultivation had been taking great strides forward on an almost daily basis. It was only that...

As she focused, a path once again appeared before Yang Wan's eyes, too long to see its end at a glance.

She remembered the shape of this path. Each new group of disciples to enter the Lancang Mountains had to go to the Principal Peak to pay their respects to the sect's founders, the Gold and Jade Sages. In order to demonstrate sincerity, they had to walk up step by step. Even going quickly, it would still take two shichen.

As long as the spiritual mountains exist, their divine tool exists...

“The Lovebird Sword Array was suspended above the Principal Peak,” she said, tentatively questioning the heavenly edict, “so if I follow this path to the end, I’ll be able to find it, is that so?”

The heavenly edict did not respond, only faintly conveyed a sense of urgency, telling her to follow this path forward.

This was the decree of the Lancang Mountains, leading her to seek the divine tool that could contend against the world’s foremost masters. She ought to have followed without hesitation. But perhaps her cultivation was too meager or her natural endowments too poor; each time Yang Wan set foot on this path, an unreasoning fear would emerge from the cracks in her bones.

She clenched her teeth and calmed herself, struggling to dispel her preoccupations and walk forward following the heavenly edict.

But as soon as she set foot on that path, all the events of her life appeared before her eyes like a swarm of bees: her humiliation at marrying the Emperor of the East for the sake of establishing a foothold in the Land of Turmoil; her resentment at watching the sages’ spiritual mountains stuck full of vulgar street signs and boundary markers; her rage at her favorite maid being seized by evil cultivators on a rampage; then there was Guang’an... The nameless youth she had happened to save on a stormy night, the man who had desperately cultivated the sword, the shadow that had been with her for a century...

Lord Guang’an’s delicate, silent face was impossible to get rid of. It seemed to be putting her to some test. When Yang Wan thought of him, she couldn’t resist getting distracted. Her spiritual sense suddenly moved. That was when she found that her senses had been opened at some point. The sight and hearing of an ascended

spirit were extremely acute. The sound of one guard saying to another a hundred meters away “It’s time to change Lord Guang’an’s dressings” instantly pricked her ears.

Yang Wan gave a start. The path of the spiritual mountains beneath her feet vanished once more, and her meditative state was interrupted. She fell into the mortal dust. She sat there blankly for a moment. She studied herself inwardly and found that her essence had once again concentrated considerably. There was quite a bit of progress. But in her heart she didn’t feel the smallest bit of pleasure at having “made a gain.” Cold sweat had nearly soaked through the outermost layer of her gauze robes.

Almost simultaneously, far away in Western Chu, Yu Chang also opened his eyes.

During their conversation, Wangge Luobao had used his beast-taming methods to distract the Queen Mother of the West without her noticing it and seized the opportunity to place one of Yu Chang’s grit worm projection talismans in her shadow—apart from the Queen Mother of the West herself, no one could hear the so-called “divine edict” of the Lancang Mountains. The existence of such a thing relied entirely on a single person’s story. Two great evil cultivators weren’t so easily fooled; they had to get to the bottom of her situation.

The Queen Mother of the West wasn’t a low-level cultivator that he could manipulate at will, so Yu Chang, residing in her shadow, hadn’t dared to do anything rash. He had only quietly entered meditation with her.

Yu Chang reached out to knock on a communication device beside him that looked like a mirror. Wangge Luobao’s face quickly emerged. “Already? Yu-xiong, what happened?”

“Her meditation period was in fact much shorter than average for an ascended spirit. I couldn’t see very clearly,” Yu Chang said seriously. “There was a mysterious external force guiding her consciousness, I didn’t dare to get close. I think that the Queen Mother of the West probably isn’t making up the ‘heavenly edict.’ But... it’s a strange thing. It looked to me like during the latter half, she herself was constantly struggling to get free.”

What was this princess’ problem? She was like a small child with her head held down by a teacher being forced to study; as soon as the adult wasn’t looking, she tried to make a run for it.

Wasn’t she in a hurry to restore her nation? Was she planning to meet the New Year in the fish’s mouth?

But when Wangge Luobao heard this, his eyes lit up, and he broke into peculiar laughter.

Yu Chang felt that this southern barbarian’s laugh sounded like an owl’s; this bird was no good. But on the surface, he said as urbane as before, “Wangge-xiong, would you care to instruct me?”

“This is a good thing,” Wangge Luobao said. “Yu-xiong, you have always been a free agent, so presumably you are not aware that among the spiritual mountains, there has always been a saying that ‘An ascended spirit’s body enters the high heavens, while a shed skin’s soul enters the universe.’ The masters of all the great sects, once they become shed skins, have a part of their consciousness fuse with the spiritual mountains. The Lancang Mountains have only recognized Her Highness the Queen Mother of the West. They must want her to perform the duties of other spiritual mountains’ shed skins, but her cultivation is in the early ascended spirit stage, and her mental state is nowhere near the level of a shed skin’s. It is normal for her to instinctively fear and reject it.”

The person with an “orthodox” background believed that having a part of your consciousness fuse with the spiritual mountains was a good thing. This symbolized being “supreme” and “all-knowing.” Yu Chang, however, was a “feral cultivator” who had been stamped with a spiritual image brand as a child. Hearing this explanation, a thought quickly flashed through his mind: Why does that sound like a spiritual image brand?

But in order to avoid seeming ignorant and making a fool of himself, he didn’t show any unusual reaction. “I see, she must be getting stuck there, then. The ways of medicine and toolmaking have concentrated consciousnesses and meticulous thoughts. Their courage is always a little lacking.”

Wangge Luobao’s brows moved slightly. “At a time like this, her friends need to lend her a hand.”

Yu Chang said, “You mean...”

“When she is in conflict with the heavenly edict, she will be at her most confused, her consciousness at its weakest. She will have no attention to spare to take precautions against your grit worm projections. Think of a way to give her a push forward each day.” Like a teacher who had taken an idiot for a student, Wangge Luobao patiently encouraged, “It doesn’t have to be much, just one step. Over time, small steps will accumulate into a thousand li. Sometimes, with just a bit of external strength, a person can step over their own obstacle. Once she fuses with the spiritual mountains, the divine tool will certainly reappear. The Silver Moon and the Cauldron of Nine Dragons aren’t at leisure to attend to anything but themselves, and the Bell of Tribulation... Ha, I think the Wan allying with the Li is only a temporary measure. My informers say that Southern Wan’s border inscriptions have just undergone a major renovation, and each Kaiming Department’s numbers have been increased to double or more. Zhi Xiu is only taking this opportunity to catch his breath. He might turn on them at any time.

If Wu Lingxiao really does get chopped into mincemeat by the Lovebird Sword Array, they won't do anything about it. When the time comes, the Lancang Mountains will be ours for the taking."

For some reason, Yu Chang felt a little uncomfortable listening to him, so, with a kindly expression, he splashed cold water on him. "Wangge-xiong, don't be so optimistic. The Queen Mother of the West is right. In order to control a divine tool of the mountains, one's cultivation must at least be at the shed skin level—and it must be a shed skin master acknowledged by the spiritual mountains. She is an ascended spirit, and in the early stage. Isn't asking her to control the Lovebird Sword Array like forcing an infant to heft a cauldron?"

Wangge Luobao was proficient in the languages of all the nations, but under the influence of his Miah mother tongue, when he spoke quickly, his speech was slightly indistinct and elided. When he spoke quietly, his voice sounded soft and slick. "Why would we want her to 'control' the Lovebird Sword Array?"

Yu Chang froze.

Wangge Luobao, in his voice as soft as silk, said, "As long as the Lovebird Sword Array is released, it will wipe out the 'outsiders' on the Southern He Peninsula by itself. When that happens, while the Lovebird Sword Array is locked in a life and death struggle with Wu Lingxiao, you and I will seize the opportunity to come in with tools and just take the resources we need... Are you really thinking of sharing the Lancang Mountains with the Yang family? One mustn't be too greedy, Chief Offering Yu."

Yu Chang and Wangge Luobao both had slightly stronger cultivation than Yang Wan, so she was totally unaware that plans were being made for her behind her back.

When she recovered after her terrifying meditation, she briefly sat on her own, then stood up, changed clothes, and went to the courtyard

where Lord Guang'an was resting.

The guards and attendants looking after Lord Guang'an had just changed his dressings. When they saw her, they saluted respectfully. Yang Wan nodded and dismissed a guard who was about to step forward to hold up a lantern for her.

For some reason, she seemed a little preoccupied. She accidentally left a strand of long hair hanging on a tree. Yang Wan was completely unaware of it. She only stood at the door of Lord Guang'an's room for a while. In the end, she didn't go in. She left in a hurry.

The "guard" holding the lantern kept himself to himself, like a mural on the wall. Only when she was far away did he squeeze a piece of reincarnation wood in his hand.

Xi Ping had the Luwu at his command. Toilet bulletins from all over were delivered to his desk at once.

The *Tao World Record* had begun the wanton dramatization of Northern Li's assault on the Southern He peninsula. Though it was a Chu publication, it was printed in Tao County, and the writer was Zhao Qindan.

Even he hadn't expected such a surge of publicity in the mortal world. That article had in fact mainly been written for Kunlun's benefit.

The heart demon seed had been planted, but Zhi Xiu said that as long as a sword cultivator's sword heart was steadfast enough, if he focused and introspected in time, he would actually be able to notice that there was something the matter with him. Xi Ping didn't know whether this was shizun judging others against his own standard—even having his brains turned to paste by an abacus

wasn't enough to stop him making time to go to the north slope every day to practice the sword, regular as clockwork.

But Kunlun's Sect Leader was after all a thousand-year-old shed skin. He wasn't to be underestimated. So Xi Ping had decided to give the Sect Leader an occasional prod, so it wouldn't be so easy for him to focus his sword heart.

The day he had seen the Blind Wolf King, Xi Ping had roughly grasped the awkwardness of the Sword Slave's position in Kunlun, but there was still something he didn't understand: why the Kunlun Sect Leader's heart demon would settle on the Sword Slave.

Loathing her, fearing her, even suspecting her would all be normal, but reckoning it up, the Sword Slave was three centuries old at the outside, so for a thousand-year-old shed skin to develop a heart demon over her... such a shed skin would have to be rather too lacking in self-possession, something of Xiang Ning's ilk. Kunlun's Sect Leader surely wasn't so badly off.

The Blind Wolf King had mentioned two very thought-provoking points: the first was his belief that the Second Elder's "disappearance" was connected to the Ceaseless Mirror.

The flying goose messages sent by that crazy bastard Zhou Ying confirmed that this divine tool of the mountains that no one had ever seen had a hidden link to the no-man's-land of Beiyuan, and evidently it could easily sever the connection between a disciple of the Xuanyin Mountains and his name token, make a person disappear without anyone the wiser. The Second Elder had been missing for two centuries, and his vital lantern in the Kunlun inner sect was still doing just fine, very like Zhou Ying's current situation, with his body dead and his name token in perfect condition.

Second, the reason that the Second Elder, after repeatedly hesitating, had ultimately stood with the conservative party, had

been Southern He's dilemma—the Second Elder had been the one primarily responsible for handling this matter for Northern Li.

While the old version of Moon Plated Gold hadn't been as earth-shaking as what Hui Xiangjun had made eight centuries ago, after all was said and done, it was sustained by spiritual stones. The Second Elder had said to his quick-witted head disciple, "While the innovations the progressive party describes are admittedly good, other nations are other nations, and Northern Li is Northern Li. One knows one's own family affairs. If that spiritual-stone-burning Moon Plated Gold comes to the mortal world, in the end, I'm afraid it will only warm the hands of the nobles in Yanning. Won't the common people turn into ashes beneath the fires of the gold smelting furnaces?"

And when later Southern He had turned on the other nations, when the four nations had gone to settle the accounts with Lancang, it had been the Second Elder who had originally gone south to take charge. It was only due to a sudden change in the condition of the Beijue Array that he had handed the Southern He business over to the Third Elder midway and temporarily gone back himself. He hadn't returned.

Comparing this against the clues Zhi Xiu had found in General Zhi Yi's relic, when the four nations had joined hands to sever Southern He's veins of the earth for the sake of spiritual stones, it had just happened to be right after the Second Elder had left...

Xi Ping had a faint guess. If it were true, then the Sword Slave might only be a projection of the Sect Leader's heart demon.

Wu Lingxiao's current conduct, in the eyes of the Sect Leader, would look like she was preparing to openly seize the southern mines, enough to trouble him so much that he wouldn't be able to meditate.

After setting the toilet bulletins aside, Xi Ping swiftly flipped through the secret reports submitted by the Kaiming Department—the first batch of spirit-conducting gold “upgraded immortal tools” had already been delivered to the borders. What had been sent out were improved versions of what Wei Chengxiang had used in the South Sea: they didn’t waste as much spiritual stones, the sword energy and talismans they shot were all established foundation grade, and they could be used repeatedly; they could make up for Southern Wan’s current shortage of established foundations... but they were costly.

Xi Ping was just musing on how to trick someone else out of some spiritual stones to bring back when he heard Chang Jun’s voice coming from the reincarnation wood: “Shiyong, Shiyong, guess what, the Queen Mother of the West and Lord Guang’an are on the outs!”

Wei Chengxiang had to look after the Turmoilers, who had nothing to eat or drink, so Yao Qi and Chang Jun had volunteered to remain in the Queen Mother of the West’s hidden realm wearing spiritual image masks.

While Xi Ping knew the ins and outs about the Queen Mother of the West, to guard against the evil cultivators making fresh difficulties, he had still wanted to keep an eye on her.

After squandering over a decade in the southern mines, Chang Jun had at last found his “true calling.” This person seemed to have come out of his mother’s womb as a “busybody.” When his initial confusion and fear had passed, he had taken to it like a fish to water, spending every day cautiously and conscientiously looking around with his little eyes fixed on all kinds of slight clues.

Xi Ping’s train of thought had been interrupted. He said in exasperation, “Didn’t I tell you two to just keep an eye out for trouble and avoid getting close to the ascended spirit evil

cultivators? Especially that conjunctivitis sufferer with his ‘grit projections.’ Luwu masks aren’t that secure. Listen, Hongzheng-xiong, how can you still be so full of curiosity at your age?”

Chang Jun chuckled. “When all this is over, seeing as we’re classmates, can you use some pull to get me into the Luwu?”

Xi Ping perfunctorily said, “My word doesn’t carry weight. For that, you have to ask Lord Bai...”

Chang Jun said, “Oh, right, I hear Zhao-shijie is drafting a ‘Faithful Account of the Deceits of Evil Gods,’ recording cases from antiquity to the present of evil cultivators duping people by passing themselves off as authority figures and causing disaster throughout the lands. She says she wants it to stand as a warning to later generations. She promised to let me read the draft...”

Xi Ping didn’t hesitate. “The Luwu are an outer sect, too, no different from the southern mines. It doesn’t amount to much. Register with the Kaiming Department, train for half a year, and you’re all set! Get on with it, what’s going on with the Queen Mother of the West and Lord Guang’an? Who’s stepping out? I’m so eager to find out!”

“What are you thinking? Lord Guang’an was seriously injured by the Sword Slave. His meridians were all ruptured. Do you think he’s stepping anywhere? Right after the Queen Mother of the West returned, she was always clinging to his hand, so worried she forgot her department. But it’s been only a few days, and it looks to me like her manner has suddenly cooled. She just came around and didn’t even go inside.”

Another voice interrupted from the reincarnation wood. Yao Qi briefly said, “The two evil cultivators from Chu and Shu have just been here.”

“Oh?” said Xi Ping.

At first he couldn't work out what the connection between these two things was. It couldn't be, he thought, that those two shameless wretches Yu Chang and Wangge Luobao, for the sake of getting close to the Queen Mother of the West, were planning to sow discord by offering their own services as bedfellows?

They were both all-powerful great evil cultivators, surely they wouldn't have to resort to that...

Suddenly, for some reason, Xi Ping's spiritual sense moved slightly. He had a faint, rather ominous premonition.

CHAPTER 211 - A Life of Regret (23)

This was no ordinary spiritual sense perturbation.

Actually, a cultivator's spiritual sense was always being touched by the outside world. The higher one's cultivation level, the more one would be aware of—for example, next door in the Latent Cultivation Temple, the mighty instructor Luo Qingshi cursed him by name three meals a day, rain or shine—but those who persistently brought down curses on his head were too numerous; for Xi Ping, this was all “background noise” that he could easily ignore.

But just now, that had been different. It had been weak and remote, as if something were gently dragging his heart down. It was fleeting, so quick it seemed to have been an illusion. Xi Ping couldn't grasp it.

Just then, in his spirit, the bone-sharing talisman Zhou Ying had left him with showed signs of movement.

Unskillfully, Xi Ping concentrated. Through the bone-sharing talisman, he sensed that Zhou Huan, carrying the strand of hair his brother had planted on him, had reached a place brimming with spiritual energy.

Zhou Huan had first lost the mother who had been his backbone and then been forced into exile, turning in the blink of an eye from the sovereign of a nation to a stray dog. The drop was truly too great. When he had first reached Yanning, the climate had disagreed with him, and he had fallen seriously ill. Xi Ping had been afraid for a time that he would die. Fortunately, the cultivation world had elixirs and medicinal herbs that could preserve a person's life. Zhou Huan had recovered only after nearly a month of nursing, then had gone north to the Kunlun Mountains.

Before immortals, Zhou Huan had no place to speak. He was trotted out, bewildered, only an “item” worn by the Li and Zhang families, amounting to a white cloth these people were wearing in mourning for their native land.

Through the black hair planted on “White Cloth Zhou,” Xi Ping heard Kunlun’s Third Elder, who was receiving them in secret, constantly sighing and wringing his hands, on one hand recalling his friendship with Li Fengshan, on the other hand commenting in strong terms about demons bringing chaos to the world. After they had gone back and forth for several rounds, the Third Elder swore up and down that Northern Li would not stand by and watch as their good neighbor fell into the hands of evil cultivators.

The “evil cultivator” silently pricked up his ears on Zhou Huan’s head and heard the Third Elder say, “‘Zhaoting’ holds all of Great Wan’s veins of the earth in his hands, and he has locked up many of my fellow cultivators from the thirty-six peaks in the Xuanyin Mountains. He is holding the entire country hostage. We cannot harm the common people. In order to avoid doing more harm than good in our attack, we must contend with them for now.”

Great Wan’s fugitive cultivators were moved to tears. In unison, they exclaimed in admiration of the Third Elder, finding in him a soulmate as far as “concern for the nation and the people” went.

The Third Elder said, “If we can lure him into leaving the Xuanyin Mountains, we will have no further reservations. Even if Wanshuang will not leave its sheath, I am willing to petition the Sect Leader and go see that so-called ‘Sword of the South’ for myself.”

“And just who do you think you are?” Xi Ping thought derisively.

At the same time, he was a little curious to know what Kunlun was planning to use to lure his shizun away.

Then he heard one of the Wan cultivators obediently ask that question for him.

The Third Elder said, “The Xuanyin Mountains’ spiritual energy is draining away. They will not hold out for more than a century. ‘Zhaoting’ will undoubtedly covet the southern mines. It is only because he fears Kunlun’s Wanshuang that he temporarily does not dare to act rashly. That is why he has hypocritically sent an envoy to sue for peace. By my reckoning, in another seven days, it will be the anniversary of the day that the Sect Leader of Southern He’s Lancang Sect died and Lancang’s great mountain array and Lovebird Sword Array vanished. The Lancang survivor has always held this as a day of disgrace for her vanquished nation. She is certain to act on that day. The Lord Sword-bearer will pretend to be incapable of defeating her and ask for help from her nearest ‘ally.’ Zhaoting will not be able to sit tight. We have already placed an impregnable net in the Land of Turmoil. If he so much as sets foot there, he won’t be able to escape.”

Overhearing this plot that exceeded his imagination, Xi Ping’s first reaction was: What kind of idiocy is this? Do you think everyone is like you?

Then he mulled it over briefly and noticed something else not quite right: the commemoration day for Southern He’s destruction happened every year. It had been happening for over two centuries, and he had never heard of there being any particular ceremony to celebrate it. How could Kunlun’s old man be so sure that the evil cultivators would do something on that day?

Also, didn’t their Sect Leader suspect Wu Lingxiao of betraying them?

Why was this plan still treating her as one of their own, making her “pretend to be incapable of defeating” a foe? With the Sword Slave’s bull-headed character, if Kunlun really did order her to play

dead and be “incapable of defeating” a few ascended spirits for the sake of trapping Zhi Xiu, she might very well cut down the official sent to deliver the order on the spot, then send a written challenge to war directly to the Xuanyin Mountains.

An exiled Wan cultivator asked the Third Elder, “How do you know that the evil cultivators will act, elder?”

“I will not conceal from you, fellow cultivator,” the Third Elder said, “that we also have an ally from another nation, an orthodox cultivator who, like you, has been forced to leave his native soil. He has given us a guarantee that he will facilitate this matter. The Li family has concealed considerable forces in the southern mines over the years. If we join forces and act with one heart, we are certain to prevail in defeating evil and defending the Way, returning the world to purity.”

The group of Wan cultivators exchanged looks. From the consideration that they had no bargaining chips, they offered up all the agents they had left in the Land of Turmoil.

Xi Ping split his attention, listening in and recording while thinking, An “orthodox cultivator” forced to leave his native soil who knows the Queen Mother of the West’s movements like the back of his hand. He can’t possibly be talking about that purebred evil cultivator Yu Chang.

He narrowed his eyes. “Wangge Luobao.”

There had been a schism between Southern Shu’s two clans, the Miah had revolted against Lingyun, and Wangge Luobao was the Miah’s savior, as well as a former Dragon Subduing Knight. If you insisted on calling him an “orthodox cultivator” who had been forced to leave his native soil, it didn’t seem entirely unfeasible.

Wangge Luobao had always mingled ambiguously with people like Yu Chang and the Emperor of the East, not doing anything major, so Xi Ping had automatically viewed them as all of a kind. If not for Zhou Huan's hair, he never would have thought that this Shu cultivator who secretly had a foot on eight different boats would also be colluding with Northern Li.

That person was like the legendary next life spiritual fish. You knew full well that he existed, but he could always make sure he was overlooked at the critical moment.

Wait!

Xi Ping had suddenly realized that among all the evil cultivators who had made names for themselves to this day, Wangge Luobao was the only one he wasn't very familiar with. The one and only contact between them—and even that one-sided—had been the invitation to the South Sea Hidden Realm.

It was clear that the lunatic tone for that sloppy plan had been set by Zhuoming.

A thought appeared in Xi Ping's mind: if not for Zhuoming, Wangge Luobao wouldn't necessarily have invited him.

He had been spending the vast majority of his time "in seclusion" in the Land of Turmoil, splitting his attention eight different ways, occasionally running the Luwu's errands for san-ge. He hadn't actually had any time to be a social butterfly among the forces of evil. But the Luwu were drinking straws that had taken root in the black markets of all the nations. Apart from those who had personal grudges against him, the overwhelming majority of known evil cultivators had had some dealings with him.

The sole exception was this Lingyun rebel who went around everywhere seducing everyone and repeatedly selling himself... It

might have been a bit self-aggrandizing, but Xi Ping thought that Wangge Luobao seemed to have been deliberately avoiding him.

As a mixed-blood Dragon Subduing Knight who had shown himself to be a singular talent among his fellows, he ought to have been a person that both the Xiuyi and the Miah couldn't stand, but he had risen above the rest and become Southern Shu's sole ascended spirit outside of the spiritual mountains. As soon as he appeared, he had cut the Lingyun Spiritual Mountains down to half their size and led the Miah clan's leader and its two elders to their deaths, swallowing what they had accumulated over many years in a single gulp. And that was nothing; after all, looking throughout the northern and southern continents, masters of the way of "digging pits and burying people in them" existed in some number. But he had turned around and recovered the whole Miah clan, making the Three Islands—from the common people to the cultivators—all worship him as a god.

It was very easy to pry apart the conjunctivitis sufferer and his band of die-hards; Xi Ping and Zhao Qindan between them had already pulled it off... While lately he had persisted in fooling himself and her, playing dead and not daring to go talk to the young mistress, always beseeching his Grandma Wei to pass on messages for him, it hadn't held up their business.

The Queen Mother of the West had personally opened a back door for him; Yao Qi and Chang Jun were keeping an eye on her. And the Emperor of the East's lackeys were plentiful, it wasn't hard to find them if you put in some time.

Only Wangge Luobao and the Miah clan were like sealed drums. An outsider could find no crack to get in.

Xi Ping looked and scanned the history book on his desk. In seven days...

When he paid attention to Wangge Luobao, Xi Ping had a sudden sensation of being unable to sit still, urging him to go investigate Wangge Luobao's plans at once.

He had faced countless frightening enemies in his life, but whether it was the full moon sage or the divine sword Wanshuang, his intuition had never given him such a strong warning.

“Queru.” Through the reincarnation wood, Xi Ping sent a message to Li Manlong in the South Sea Hidden Realm. “You haven't checked in with an all's well yet today. Has there been any change?”

After discovering the Ways of the Heart of common origin lying silent in the spiritual mountains, when Xi Ping had finished being run off his feet dealing with Great Wan's domestic affairs, what he had been most concerned about had been the South Sea Hidden Realm.

After all, what the South Sea Hidden Realm contained were also “spiritual mountains.”

He had almost wanted to move Chief Li and the others to Tao County there and then.

Once Wangge Luobao found out that a crack had opened in the South Sea Hidden Realm, the Miah half-immortals under his command would be able to get in and seize the hidden realm. It was Southern Shu territory. Xi Ping's reach wasn't long enough, no matter what.

But the Turmoilers couldn't bear to leave.

Chief Li had said, “This so-called heavenly edict can come in the blink of an eye. If the spiritual mountains in the hidden realm really could communicate with Wangge Luobao, the Miah cultivators would have been here long ago. Why would they give us time to

react? My people have only just managed to build a home for themselves, and in a few months, little Hope will be born... Tai Sui, however good Tao County may be, it is a human place.”

Xi Ping had nothing to say to that—in the eyes of the world, the Turmoilers in fact didn’t really count as human. Even with the toilet bulletins, people’s deep-rooted notions weren’t about to change overnight.

Most importantly, he couldn’t enter the South Sea Hidden Realm; he couldn’t force the Turmoilers who had gone there to pack their bags and go.

Xi Ping was helpless. All he could do was make them report with an all’s well every day and ask the Southern Shu Luwu who hadn’t withdrawn to keep a constant eye on the situation in Shu.

But very soon, he had realized that what Li Manlong said made sense. Since the Xuanyin Mountains speaking and his fireworks blowing up the Sea of Stars, nearly a month had passed, and all the Xiuyi and Miah had done was kill each other. No one had gone to the depths of the South Sea... and Wangge Luobao, who was said to have inherited Ancestor Tianbo’s Way of the Heart, had been loitering in the vicinity of Southern He with no idea that the South Sea Hidden Realm he had worked so hard to pursue had opened a crack.

This was very delicate.

The spiritual mountains of all the nations had begun secretly taking part in human wars through their heavenly edicts. Reasonably speaking, since Wangge Luobao, who had inherited Ancestor Tianbo’s Way of the Heart, could summon forth the South Sea Hidden Realm using that Way of the Heart, he ought also to be receiving the spiritual mountains’ “heavenly edicts”... so why weren’t the hidden realm’s spiritual mountains paying attention to him?

This Wangge Luobao, who was so mysterious it made Xi Ping's blood run cold—what Way of the Heart had he actually inherited?

Was the crack in the South Sea Hidden really a coincidence?

Why had that ascended spirit sword aura knocked open precisely a passage that would only permit those below an established foundation to pass? Was there some peculiar law of conversion at work here, or... did the spiritual mountains in the South Sea Hidden Realm only accept people “without a Way of the Heart”?

Just then, a ray of light came flying from Rosy Cloud Peak like a shooting star and landed in the snow with a bang, knocking out a string of big, gaudy writing, like implanting a set of big gold teeth in the snowy mountain; it interrupted Xi Ping's train of thought.

Wen Fei wrote: *Tai Sui, when can you provide the silk dragon hearts?!*

Heaven's Design Pavilion had a group of elites who were as remarkably talented as Pang Jian, who had happened to run into unique turns of fortune in life and had been able to refine Ways of the Heart for themselves. Facing the current instability, while “upgraded immortal tools” had already been sent out in secret, ultimately, external objects still couldn't match up to genuine established foundation cultivators. With Pang Jian's tacit consent, this group of elites had been writing to request the immortal mountains to release established foundation pills.

Here in Southern Wan, while the key figures all knew that inherited Ways of the Heart of common origin were no good, they still didn't know that they themselves had already fallen into the trap. Xi Ping, the only one who didn't fear his Way of the Heart shattering, was destined to find the truth difficult to proclaim, while the only person

in the world who could discuss these matters with him... had gone on a long journey.

Xi Ping had already been fretful. When he thought of Zhou Ying, it increased his despondency. He was extremely unhappy and not in the mood to respond by sending a message back, so he walked out the door, plastered a talisman to his throat, and shouted in the direction of Rosy Cloud Peak: "There aren't any! The Territory Map nearly drove the silk dragons to extinction! It's hardly been a month! Do you think silk dragons breed like maggots?"

His voice raised echoes. All of Flying Jade Peak quivered to the shout of *like maggots...maggots...* until the snow massed on the north slope was on the verge of collapse.

A tree branch flew from the snow shuffler at the cottage door, coming toward Xi Ping's forehead like a sword.

A human voice came from the snow-white tree trunk: "Not only have I not taught you swordsmanship over the last decade and more, it seems I also haven't taught you that you—can't—make—a—racket—on—a—snowy—mountain!"

Xi Ping had no time to dodge. The tree branch left a red mark on his forehead. He leaned backward quickly and scurried off like a frightened rat.

At the same time, he livened up again and thought to himself, Right, silk dragon hearts are in short supply now, especially in places where they haven't realized the danger of Ways of the Heart of common origin yet. Their price has gone sky high on the black market. Only Northern Li hasn't made a peep. I suppose they must have hooked up with Lao Wang from Southern Shu's Three Islands, the source of spiritual beasts.

Silk dragons were rare on the outside, but there were plenty of spiritual beasts in the South Sea Hidden Realm. Before, he hadn't dared to let Li Manlong and the others get near spiritual beasts, but lately he had sent over a batch of spirit-conducting gold weapons, making it much easier for the Turmoilers to deal with spiritual beasts. The silk dragon itself wasn't a ferocious spiritual beast, anyway, and the Turmoilers had been occupied in rearing spiritual beasts. They were familiar with their habits.

They could scare up a batch of silk dragon hearts from the South Sea Hidden Realm and hand them over to Wei Chengxiang to sell off, pretending that they had come out of the Southern He peninsula. They would earn spiritual stones, and the supply of silk dragon hearts would be imputed to Wangge Luobao. Teach him to lurk!

But before he could say anything, in the South Sea Hidden Realm, Li Manlong sent a reply through the reincarnation wood: "All's well today. It's only that my people probed deep into the mountains and discovered an unusual situation, which held them up for a while. I was just about to tell you, Tai Sui."

Xi Ping said, "You're exploring the spiritual mountains? I wanted to ask a favor to do with that. What unusual situation? You first."

"Before, when Miss Zhao was transferring silk dragon hearts from the black market, she practically talked her mouth raw. We were helpless spectators, powerless to help. So we were thinking that these things are rare on the market and can't be quickly restocked, and Tai Sui was sure to need some later, so we had better prepare some for you ahead of time."

Xi Ping raised his eyebrows, thinking, Queru is wonderful, always ready with whatever you need.

But Li Manlong said, “But we searched for nearly a month, in all the places silk dragons could dwell—Tai Sui, there are no silk dragons in this hidden realm.”

Xi Ping froze, letting the tree branch chasing him hit him full in the back. He fell face first into a snowdrift.

In the South Sea Hidden Realm, which was like a twin to the Lingyun Mountains, all kinds of living things existed, including the extinct eternal spring brocade... with the sole exception of one species of spiritual beast?

CHAPTER 212 - A Life of Regret (24)

Apart from the established foundation pill, there was no other method for establishing a foundation recorded in the ancient texts. The history of using silk dragon hearts to create established foundation pills was far more ancient than the sages who had ascended and left the mortal dust; naturally it was also more ancient than all the extant spiritual mountains.

Silk dragons were only valuable because they grew slowly and had been overhunted. This species of spiritual beast didn't actually have strict requirements for its environment. While they liked dampness and warmth, as long as there wasn't thick ice, an adult silk dragon could maintain its body temperature and survive using its heart, which was like a spiritual energy pump; it would only stop growing. They weren't picky eaters, either. They could eat small marine animals as well as aquatic plants. They were much easier to rear than gluttonous and vicious beasts like gold-armored zhengs.

Li Manlong hefted a newly-arrived upgraded immortal tool and pressed a button on it. The surrounding spiritual energy was absorbed by the spirit-conducting gold. It let off a faint greenish light that could shine through the water's surface and strike the heart of the lake.

At the bottom of this forest lake grew a dense layer of a strange aquatic plant. When touched by the light, the slim, graceful plants moved on their own, beginning to dance in large swaths. Filaments like hair reached out from their crowns, scrabbled around in a panic in the water, then retreated back among the plants.

"This is 'three-day dream,'" Li Manlong said distinctly with his bothersome throat. "According to legend, one plant can extend the lifespan of a mortal on their deathbed for three days. Though it can't save their life, for those three days, the dying person can be without

pain or illness, even recover their youth, and die with dignity. Tai Sui, I've only read of this kind of plant in a scroll fragment in the spiritual beast farm. It's said that in ancient times, the favorite food of wild silk dragons was the leaves of three-day dream. When they died and their corpses sank, the silk dragon hearts could cause a large number of three-day dream seeds to sprout. Wherever there was three-day dream, there would be silk dragons. Later, this symbiotic relationship was broken off by humans. Large quantities of three-day dream were eaten by silk dragons, but it couldn't obtain silk dragon hearts, so it gradually went extinct."

Xi Ping asked, "But without silk dragon hearts, won't three-day dream not sprout?"

Li Manlong said, "We dug up some seeds and took them back to the village. We found that as long as you spread a layer of green ore powder at the roots of the plant, it will sprout—it seems to be different from the records. Though the scroll fragment I read was only the leisure reading of the low-level cultivators on the spiritual beast farm. We do not know its level of precision."

Xi Ping shook his head. "It isn't likely that the record was incorrect."

It wasn't that he had faith in the Shu's academic standards, it was that "the dragons and plants lived in symbiosis," "the symbiotic relationship was severed by humans," "the delicate and precious aquatic plant went extinct" all hung together. Supposing that three-day dream could also be grown with spiritual stones outside the hidden realm, then it would be impossible for a good thing like this, which could prolong life as well as feed silk dragons, not to have been preserved. The wealthy might have planted their fish ponds full of the stuff.

Outside the hidden realm, silk dragons bred by humans had led to the extinction of three-day dream; inside the hidden realm, the silk

dragons had disappeared, leaving only a large quantity of three-day dream... Neither of these conditions was natural.

In other words, it was likely that the South Sea Hidden Realm was like Tao County enveloped by the Law Breaker, with certain man-made rules—for example, you couldn't be an established foundation.

Or rather...you couldn't have a Way of the Heart.

The person who had formulated the rules had only rejected the silk dragons, and had even tampered with the attributes of other plants and animals that had “predation symbiosis” relationships with silk dragons!

Xi Ping was silent for a long while. “Let me ask you again, Queru, are you sure you don't want to take temporary refuge in Tao County? Don't you think that this place... that this place seems like a manmade glazed ball? Isn't it frightening to live inside it?”

There seemed to be goosebumps even in his voice, but Li Manlong laughed—he had heard recently that this mysterious Tai Sui of the Luwu was actually a young man, not even as old as an ordinary mortal senior.

For some reason, Li Manlong hadn't had any sense of disillusionment as at the collapse of a divine figure. Instead, he had felt somewhat more affectionate: lately, he was always remembering how Tai Sui's voice in the reincarnation wood had sounded, mixed in among the inarticulate Turmoilers, learning Southern He songs along with them.

“Tai Sui,” Li Manlong said slowly, “isn't Tao County's spiritual energy prohibition illusion also manmade?”

Xi Ping froze, then heard this old man who had tasted all the sludge in the world say, “So when you leave Tao County, leave the hidden realm, does that mean you are no longer inside an illusion woven by some person or another?”

“Humans live by creating illusions and rules.” Wangge Luobao had noticed Yu Chang’s hesitation. He smiled. “If you don’t fuse with the spiritual mountains, you still fuse with something else—aren’t people’s perceptions of what is right and proper, of correct order and tradition, all the same thing? Otherwise, why can a civil servant without the strength to truss a chicken kill a person just by writing out a verdict? Spiritual stones at least have some use, but you can’t eat or drink gold, silver, or copper coins, so why can having them make you want for nothing?”

Yu Chang smiled and didn’t argue back verbally. He thought, You can live eating shit just as well as eating food, so why don’t you eat shit?

He detested all things that made him think of spiritual image brands.

Wangge Luobao was like a well-trained dog. When he tilted his head, he could sniff out what another person was thinking. He nodded amiably and said, “My mistake. In fact, there’s some wishful thinking on our parts in this. How about this, we’ll come at it indirectly, ask the Queen Mother of the West her views—see whether she chooses to yield to her instincts, or whether she wants to step forward in spite of heaven.”

“How are you planning to ask?” Yu Chang asked coolly. “Say, ‘We planted grit projections in your shadow and spied on you while you were meditating, and we have a tiny piece of advice from a clear-headed outside observer’s point of view to give you’? Listen, Wangge-xiong, do you want to eat poison miasma buns for breakfast tomorrow?”

Wangge Luobao said, smiling, "Why would we need to say it ourselves?"

Yao Qi was quite fortunate. The guard he was impersonating with the Luwu mask was quite similar to him, the timid and taciturn type that wanted nothing better than to go unseen. And it turned out that the Queen Mother of the West liked quiet, and this type of person, who was like a shadow, suited her tastes, so Yao Qi stood guard outside the Queen Mother of the West's courtyard every day, closer than Chang Jun.

Though the great evil cultivators wouldn't let a guard overhear their secret conferences, being around them day and night, you could still pick up many things.

But Ziming-xiong had really never had much luck in his whole life. Today, for example, his horoscope probably said, "It is inadvisable to arrive early."

Yao Qi relieved a colleague at his post one ke early. As soon as he had taken up his position, he ran up against Wangge Luobao, who had been paying his customary visit, on his way out. This Shu master was ardent and courteous, never haughty in the way other ascended spirits were. All of the Queen Mother of the West's guards liked saying a few words to him. Only Yao Qi felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up when he saw this Xiuyi-Miah mixed blood man. With his spine as upright as a flagpole in his back, he stiffly joined his colleague in respectfully seeing the guest out. Perhaps because Yao Qi's posture as he moved the arm and leg on each side in unison was too distinctive, Wangge Luobao gave him an extra look.

His affable smile raised gooseflesh on Yao Qi's back. His chin jabbed against his chest. He didn't notice that after Wangge Luobao left, his shadow and the shadow of the other guard standing at the gate both began to ripple slightly at the edges, like water.

As soon as Wangge Luobao left, the Queen Mother of the West's gates and doors all closed automatically. Dealing with a great evil cultivator was undoubtedly emotionally exhausting. Every time she had seen him, she would meditate to cycle her energy; in this respect, Yao Qi was profoundly sympathetic.

But the time she spent meditating had been growing shorter and shorter, and when she finished, there would be a somewhat unstable overflow of spiritual energy—normally only young disciples just starting out meditating who accidentally fell asleep would produce this kind of spiritual energy fluctuation when they woke with a start.

At the Queen Mother of the West's cultivation level, reasonably speaking, this shouldn't happen. What kind of difficulty had she encountered?

Yao Qi thought, I suppose that the “heavenly edict” isn't so easy to receive. She bears the heavy responsibility of restoring the nation, and her every step is met with obstacles. Cultivation is swimming against the current to begin with.

As soon as this thought flashed by, Yao Qi froze. He smacked himself on the forehead. “What am I thinking?”

Yu Chang had just tried implanting an idea in the heads of this pair of little guards, and one of them had nearly struggled free of the grit projection. In spite of himself, he was rather taken aback. His gaze fell on Yao Qi.

Was there anything unusual about this kid?

A person enveloped by the grit projection would, without knowing it, have thoughts that did not belong to them implanted by their

shadows, and say all their thoughts aloud for the evil cultivator inside their shadow to hear.

Yu Chang immediately poured a thought into Yao Qi's head: As an ascended spirit, she wants to obtain the authority of the spiritual mountains that only shed skins can approach elsewhere. It must be a torment to her. Without some of the bravery of being "without self," she wouldn't be able to take it.

Before this thought could settle, Yao Qi gave another start. What kind of nonsense am I thinking? he thought.

Yao Qi was certain to unconsciously think in the Wan language. Fortunately, neither he nor Chang Jun was proficient in the Southern He language; guessing and groping, they could manage to understand it, but it was asking too much of them to expect them to speak it fluently. This had forced Moon Plated Peak to make special improvements to the Luwu masks it had given them—while they wore them, no matter what language these two fakes spoke in, others would understand what they said and automatically hear it in their own language and accent.

There were only two issues: if Yao Qi was speaking the Wan language, then his listener had to coincidentally also understand the Wan language. Also, each language had different meanings attached to its words, and wording that couldn't be perfectly matched would sound strangely out of sync. So while wearing this kind of Luwu mask, it was best to speak as little as possible.

Had the person using the grit projection now been from Southern He, they would have noticed something strange about Yao Qi's unconscious speech within a few sentences. Fortunately, Yu Chang was from Chu and had lived at the Wan-Chu border. He was far more familiar with the Wan language than the Southern He language, which was close to being dead. Not only did he not hear

a problem, he actually thought that this Southern He man spoke more clearly than the others.

Yu Chang was astonished. With a bit of probing, he learned that this was only a little half-immortal, the kind that hadn't even finished rinsing his spiritual bones. He was just about to investigate more closely when he saw another Southern He person run over. Perhaps afraid of disturbing the Queen Mother of the West's meditation, the newcomer didn't speak, only gestured from a distance at the strange little guard, seeming to be telling him to go somewhere.

Yu Chang wasn't in the South Sea himself. He had to rely on Wangge Luobao to place his grit projection talismans for him and couldn't freely control them. Once this little guard left, today's talisman would have been wasted. Yu Chang made a quick decision. He stopped inspecting this little half immortal whose name he didn't know. Relying on his own higher cultivation, he forcibly snatched the minds of Yao Qi and the other guard on duty—they were only half-immortals; afterward, they would have some memory loss at most. They wouldn't necessarily be able to find the remnants of his talisman.

The gazes of the pair of guards standing at the Queen Mother of the West's gate stagnated simultaneously. They turned into the grit projection's marionettes.

Yao Qi stiffly waved his hand, sending off his colleague, then said, "I've heard that shed skins accord with the Way. According with the Way means that a part of you belongs to the universe and the spiritual mountains. You are no longer merely a commonplace person. Since Her Highness has been granted a heavenly edict, will she accord with the Way in advance?"

The other marionette's consciousness was also being suppressed by Yu Chang. With his mouth, Yu Chang answered himself, "I don't know. My cultivation is low, I can't imagine it. But when I think about

it carefully, it's very frightening. Wouldn't the spiritual mountains be controlling 'me'?"

Yang Wan meanwhile had hit her usual stumbling block during her daily lessons and was once again dragged back from the road to heaven by fear, and her senses, which had automatically opened at some point, had heard every word of the private conversation between the guards outside her gate.

"It's called 'according with the Way.' What do you mean by being controlled by the spiritual mountains? I am a cultivator of the orthodox Way. What I want is to comprehend the inheritance of the spiritual mountains."

"Comprehension is one thing... but if you accord with the Way, afterward, everything you think and feel, will it come from your own heart, or from the spiritual mountains?"

Yang Wan's heart jumped. What these two guards were saying struck precisely at her mood as she had meditated.

"If you 'accord with the Way' naturally, your cultivation level and boundary must be extremely high, so your own heart will be the heart of the spiritual mountains. What difference does it make where anything comes from? It's only that Her Highness has just become an ascended spirit, and her boundary is still far from according with the Way. I'm afraid the spiritual mountains have given her a heavier burden than she can bear and spoiled things in their haste."

"Won't it be cutting the foot to fit the shoe, then? Alas, I'm afraid Her Highness will have a hard time making it through this. I've been watching her periods of meditation get shorter day by day."

Yang Wan automatically glanced at the clock hanging on the wall and found that from when she had begun to meditate to when she

had woken with a start, not even the time it takes to drink a cup of tea had passed.

Then she heard her usually reticent guard sigh. “I’ve heard that our Lancang Mountains used to have the Lovebird Sword Array left behind by the Two Sages. Our Sect Leader went astray in his cultivation, and the Lovebird Sword Array was forced to dissipate by the four other nations’ shed skin masters working together. If a new person who had accorded with the Way came along, I suppose that the Lovebird Sword Array could reappear in the human world... Alas, the anniversary of our national crisis is nearly here.”

Just then, there came the sound of urgent footsteps. Another one of their people came along and pulled away one of the guards, as if he needed his help with something. The Queen Mother of the West was very lenient in her rule. It was all right as long as her sentries weren’t so neglectful as to both run off. As a bereaved people in exile, rather than being like master and servant, they were more like family.

The dialogue had come to an abrupt halt. Yang Wan was dazed for a long moment, then suddenly understood what the barrier she couldn’t get past was. She walked to the window, the look in her eyes growing steadfast.

At the same time, the grit projection in Yao Qi’s shadow abruptly dispersed.

Yao Qi gave a cry. His temples ached fiercely. Holding his head, he squatted down—Chang Jun had been the one to drag him away.

Though they were all half-immortals, Wei Chengxiang was a seasoned adventurer who had cut a bloody streak through a heap of evil cultivators, while Yao Qi and Chang Jun were hothouse flowers.

If it hadn't been impossible for Wei Chengxiang to be in two places at once, Xi Ping really wouldn't have felt comfortable leaving the two of them to squat beside the great evil cultivators, so he had stipulated that they report their safety in the reincarnation wood every half shichen, in case they encountered any unexpected danger.

Chang Jun held up Yao Qi, letting Xi Ping pull Yao Qi's consciousness into the Law Breaker's space and send it back—inside the Law Breaker, all cultivation techniques attached to the consciousness could be rinsed off.

“It was as if your consciousness had been paralyzed. You just wouldn't answer.” Chang Jun's voice trembled slightly. “Was... was it the grit projection?”

Yao Qi panted for breath. His back was covered in cold sweat. The two of them found a deserted spot and took out a tiny upgraded immortal tool to block the scanning consciousnesses of any masters.

Then Yao Qi took a small trumpet from his clothes—this was a mortal recording device. He pressed the replay button.

His talking to himself, as well as his dialogue with his colleague, played back perfectly.

On Flying Jade Peak, Xi Ping abruptly sat up straight.

The Lancang Mountains' divine tool? Why would Yu Chang mention that?

CHAPTER 213 - A Life of Regret (25)

Yu Chang had borrowed the mouths of the two guards to sow doubts under the Queen Mother of the West's window; the half-comprehending tone had been played quite accurately—Xi Ping figured that the conjunctivitis sufferer had been playing to his strengths; he himself only half understood. The chief offering couldn't have been doing this out of having nothing to do, just to relieve the Queen Mother of the West's boredom.

The Queen Mother of the West had suddenly turned cold toward Lord Guang'an. This symptom sounded like the Dignitary of Fate Elder with only the Sea of Stars in his heart.

Yao Qi had said that her meditation periods were becoming shorter and shorter. Tying in Yu Chang's "debate" with himself, it was likely that the Queen Mother of the West had encountered the same predicament shifu had while becoming a shed skin.

But a "near-shed skin" and an "early stage ascended spirit" couldn't be discussed in the same breath.

The former, if he obeyed heaven, would naturally become part of the "Way of Heaven"; even if he was determined to resist heaven, he would still have a fighting chance. The magnificent spectacle of Zhi Xiu grappling with the "the spiritual mountains' Way of Heaven" was still fresh in Xi Ping's memory.

The latter... The Queen Mother of the West's circumstances were easy to imagine. Her cultivation level was about the same as Xi Ping's. Perhaps she was even worse off; after all, Xi Ping had no Way of the Heart and had used the flame of the sole "sage" that he acknowledged to see these so-called "Ways of the Heart," while the Queen Mother of the West was full of longing to return to Lancang's "orthodoxy."

Xi Ping had had a wild thought and pushed the Queen Mother of the West to the forefront as a scapegoat in order to divert the Sword Slave's notice. Who would have thought that the Queen Mother of the West, a hero who "would start to pant if you told her she was fat," rather than just finding a place to hide temporarily, had really decided to become the "goat"!

"What kind of dumb luck have I... no, have we wandered into? Ziming-xiong, another time, let's find a temple and pray together, all right?"

Yao Qi, numb, politely declined. "If the Southern Sage really could work miracles, he'd use divine lightning from the nine heavens to hammer out a 'Song of the Phoenix' on the tops of our skulls."

Chang Jun had yet to notice that events had taken a grave turn. Hearing this news, he was so excited that he seemed ready to contribute to a toilet bulletin. "So she's going to become the first person in the world to 'accord with the Way' as an ascended spirit? Can the legendary vanished divine tool of the mountains really return to the human world through her...? Goodness gracious, what talents emerge in every generation! Shiyong, if the Lovebird Sword Array and the Sword Slave face each other head on, who would you bet on?"

"It would be for the best if the two of them got together and died in a pit. Don't talk about things like you understand them!" Xi Ping said irritably. "Do you still remember the rule that the Bell of Tribulation can't pass beyond the Latent Cultivation Temple?"

Yao Qi and Chang Jun froze.

In all these years, the Bell of Tribulation had only left the mountains once, and the place it had gone to was the Resurrection Vortex in the East Sea, a place mortals would never approach.

It was unknown whether the legend that “Each toll of the Bell of Tribulation will be followed by three years of drought” was true or false, but Tao County had only barely been restored with a hundred thousand white spirits after the Silver Moon had shone on it—and at the time the Silver Moon had been under the control of Xuanwu in his prime, its impact dampened practically to the minimum.

The Queen Mother of the West might not be able to reach Xuanwu’s cultivation level in another thousand years of cultivating. Moreover, Qiu Sha had been only an ascended spirit; a single sweep of the Silver Moon had destroyed her. A powerful shed skin master could contend against a divine tool of the mountains.

If the Lancang Mountains’ divine tool reappeared in the mortal world, it was up for debate whether it would be able to overcome the Sword Slave, who bore Wanshuang, but at any rate the Queen Mother of the West certainly wouldn’t be able to control it.

“When that whatever-it-is sword array disappeared, it wasn’t necessarily scared to death by the alliance of the four nations. It may very well have been that their crazy Sect Leader was afraid that the divine tool would go out of control, so he ‘took it away’ with him.” Xi Ping waved a hand, wiping away the “why” written all over Chang Jun’s face. “Anyway, what kind of wastrel is Yang Wan, anyway? If she really does get her hands on Lancang’s divine tool of the mountains and lets it flash and bang over the Southern He Peninsula for one ke, never mind the animals and plants, there won’t even be a single wildfire root left underground. She...”

At this point, Xi Ping’s words came to an abrupt halt, because he had suddenly remembered that Lancang’s veins of the earth had already been severed.

On the whole Southern He Peninsula, there were “no more people” to begin with. The survivors of the former nation of He were all on

the South Sea. How could the Turmoilers count as people? All that remained were the shameless unwanted guests from the various nations. If they died, it would be just what they deserved.

Whether the Lovebird Sword Array did or didn't go out of control was no problem at all for the Queen Mother of the West.

Xi Ping looked fretfully at the calendar block. Since he had overheard Northern Li's reception of Zhou Huan, over a day had passed... Less than six days remained until the "memorial day of national humiliation" that the evil cultivators had spoken off.

Chang Jun waited a long time without hearing Xi Ping continue. "Shiyong, why did you say... that it might have been their late Sect Leader who got rid of the divine tool of the mountains?"

"When Lancang's Sect Leader sent troops north, he was under the influence of a heart demon seed." Xi Ping paused, then briefly told the story hidden beneath the historical record. "Until his death, he maintained a thread of lucidity. He wanted to place a special kind of spirit-conducting gold into the veins of the earth to make the spiritual mountains return spiritual energy to the human world... He didn't succeed. There were too many people who wanted spiritual stones. So all the people of Southern He turned into Turmoilers. Who would have thought that two centuries later, even being Turmoilers would become a tricky proposition."

"Then what do we do?" Yao Qi was the first to come to his senses. His first thought was of the mortal miners and minor tradespeople in the southern mines. "Since we've already formed an alliance with Northern Li, why don't we tell 'Wanshuang' about this? Perhaps she will be willing to avoid the fight temporarily."

"That won't necessarily work. Leaving aside that an unsociable and self-important person like the Sword Slave won't necessarily be willing to avoid battle, even if she were willing, it might not be

possible—she’s Kunlun’s envoy. If she hands the southern mines over to the evil cultivators, won’t she be disgraced on her return? How will she account for herself to her sect?” Chang Jun rejected Yao Qi’s proposal and came up with a lousy idea himself. “But couldn’t we exchange this information for some people? Have her help find a suitable place for the innocent miners and Turmoilers...”

“The miners are all right, but the Turmoilers... I might as well stick a note on my forehead telling her that when the Turmoilers paid obeisance to the Queen Mother of the West, it was my doing,” Xi Ping said with a sigh. “Stop talking nonsense. You two focus on eavesdropping! I’ll say it again, listening for signs of disturbance is enough for us, don’t get near the evil cultivators again—Yao Ziming, what’s your problem? You’re so dedicated to your job of guard in an evil cultivator’s den that you even showed up early for your shift! It’s not like the Queen Mother of the West is Rooster Luo.”

Yao Qi, an iron-willed, heroic man who had maintained the Luwu mask in the face of a great evil cultivator’s grit projection, on hearing the words “Rooster Luo,” was so scared that his little face turned ghastly pale. “How... how can you dare...”

“I even dared to tell him to call me shishu to his face. You still can’t get over this shadow from your childhood, huh?” Through the reincarnation wood, Xi Ping swiftly sent messages to Wei Chengxiang and the Blind Wolf King. “I’ll have the Blind Wolf King send a personal letter and go myself to see Wanshuang and have a try... I figure there’s not much chance. A-Xiang will plan for the worst outcome, immediately think of a way to get people out. Six days. There’s still time...”

At this point, he paused, then said seriously, “I was joking just now. We were fortunate to have you here, Ziming-xiong. If not for you, I don’t know how far behind our information would have lagged. We really wouldn’t have had a chance then. Ziming, when you two come back safe, I’ll come pay a visit to express my gratitude.”

Yao Qi's ghastly pale face turned bright red in the blink of an eye, like one of the stop-and-go lights for cars in Jinping's streets.

Fortunately Xi Ping wasn't in the mood to tease him now.

Pang Jian, patrolling Great Wan's borders, was the first to receive the warning Xi Ping sent via Heavenly Question, telling him that the danger on the Wan-He border had escalated. Therefore, Pang Jian transferred all the forces Heaven's Design Pavilion still had available to Great Wan's southern border.

The Grand Canal passed through the border inscriptions, surging like an artery. Since Northern Li had dispatched troops, the bustle of steamships at the canal's southernmost port, "Port Lookback," had vanished. The water dragons disappeared, the fragrant jade scent had vanished. Countless snow wine merchants crowded anxiously into the little post station on the port's wharf, coming to inquire about the situation every day.

Holding a stealth talisman between his fingers, Pang Jian landed at the southern border's Heaven's Design Pavilion branch. When he walked in, spiritual energy smacked him right in the face.

The space expanded by mustard seeds was packed full of spiritual stones and "upgraded immortal tools," among them a shocking row of ascended spirit grade ones; if they were fired with enough spiritual stones to burn, they were sufficient to briefly hold up even an ordinary shed skin. These dangerous objects that had at one time nearly blown the Xuanyin Mountains sky high were snugly sealed under five locks. They required Xuanyin's inner sect, Heaven's Design Pavilion's headquarters, the Kaiming Department's head office, the local Kaiming Department, and the local government yamen to open the locking inscriptions simultaneously. Their operating manual was even thicker than the Four Books and Five Classics all stacked together. It was said that Moon Plated

Peak was still working around the clock to come out with a revised second edition.

Pang Jian glanced in the direction of the southern mines. The Barrier Dispelling Bow in his femur was shaking slightly. The little girl who had buried her bone in his body a hundred years ago seemed to be crying for those spiritual stone miners who had left their homes for the sake of making a little more money.

“Don’t be scared, don’t be scared...” Through his outer robe, Pang Jian gently tapped his own leg, silently comforting the girl who would never grow up. He turned his head and saluted to the big, snow-white tree in the courtyard, then provided another talisman to lower temperature and reduce dampness for the tree that ought to have been growing in the cold heights. “Look, what’s this? General Zhi is here, too. Didn’t you love to hear stories about him when you were little? When you see this tree, it’s like you’re seeing General Zhi. The Kaiming Department’s geges and jiebies have named it ‘moonlight frost’...”

Bai Ling, who had been overseeing Guangyun Palace, had already received word through the reincarnation wood. He turned around and ordered the Luwu in the Land of Turmoil to make ready to withdraw at any time.

“Viscount,” the taciturn half-demon exhorted, “with His Highness away, please be sure to think things through carefully.”

“You’ve said it,” Xi Ping said with a bitter laugh. “He says ‘we’ll meet beyond the bounds,’ then goes off without even taking any luggage, leaving me to provide for the family and drag them all over the four seas and five continents. I suppose the way of clarity’s ultimate attack is dodging responsibility?”

“His Highness never carries his own luggage,” said Bai Ling.

“Right, and he never walks by himself, never combs his own hair or dresses himself—I’ve always wondered, with you out on Kaiming Department business, how did he manage not to get into better habits during those five years at the Latent Cultivation Temple?”

“There were paperman puppets to wait on him,” said Bai Ling.
“Otherwise, he and the cat would have starved to death together in the immortal mountains.”

Xi Ping: “...”

The two of them shared a brief mutual silence, then simultaneously laughed aloud.

“You’ve spoiled him!” said Xi Ping.

“Yes,” said Bai Ling, “I admit that I am to blame... Also, Viscount.”

“Yeah.”

“I have a rather bad feeling. You must be careful.”

Whether the half-demon’s feeling was accurate, Xi Ping couldn’t say, but hearing this warning of Bai Ling’s, something flitted through his mind that he couldn’t catch.

Dimly, Xi Ping sensed that he had overlooked something important. But after thinking it over backward and forward several times, he still couldn’t find and fill the vacancy. All he could do was temporarily set it aside and go bid farewell to shifu.

Xi Yue was practicing swordsmanship.

A half-puppet’s method of practicing swordsmanship was different from a human’s. When a human studied swordsmanship, they needed to imitate, then comprehend, then at last make it their own

before they could have a full grasp of the technique. Even if they inherited their shifu's sword heart, when the way of the sword was passed down from person to person, it couldn't remain completely identical.

But for a half-puppet, it was much more mechanical. Except on Flying Jade Peak, there was likely no half-puppet in the world with the right to address a sword cultivator as "shifu." "Sword-bearing puppets" were always attendants and slaves. For a half-puppet, practicing swordsmanship meant working hard to understand the sword aura, then altering their own arrays apart from the core array, making every effort to come as close as possible to the "master's" sword technique. If they only worked hard enough, a half-puppet's rate of progress would be faster than a human's... except that they could never surpass their "master."

When Xi Ping landed on the rear of the mountain, Xi Yue's beam of sword energy, like a rainbow, raised the accumulated snow and *whizzed* as it flitted through the valley. This was precisely the first sword move that Xi Ping had learned.

When the icy clang of metal and hard frozen stone collided, there was an effect as if the mountain were being used as a qin.

Zhi Xiu, directing him from the sidelines, raised his eyebrows slightly —Xi Yue put in all and more than all his effort and could learn anything else just fine, but with this move, perhaps because he had seen Xi Ping use it so many times, little Xi Yue was always going "off-key." Rather than say this was his sword aura, it would be more correct to say that it belonged to his rebellious disciple. Though the form was similar, perhaps because that rotten disciple had only known this one move for a very long time, there was a wave of "I'll die if I can't beat you to death" running through it.. When Xi Yue performed it, there was an indescribable sense of staking everything on a single throw about it.

Xi Yue put away his sword, seeming to have noticed something himself. He automatically glanced at Xi Ping.

Xi Ping applauded supportively. “Good! You’re as good at receiving enlightenment as I was when I was little.”

Zhi Xiu said, “Have some shame. Come here.”

Xi Ping patted Xi Yue on the head in passing, instructed him to “work hard on your swordsmanship,” then flew up to the sword platform with shifu.

“This time, you pick for yourself.” Zhi Xiu pointed at the various deep and shallow sword marks on the sword platform. “With the present state of your meridians, you’ll be able to store at most three beams of my sword energy. But shed skin sword energy will empty out your essence, and you’ll only just be able to sustain one move at a time. You might not be able to stand up after using it. Unless it’s a matter of absolute necessity, be cautious.”

“Understood.” Xi Ping had plenty of experience where this was concerned. He went around the sword platform picking and choosing. “But while the sword energy will be gone once I use it, afterward, I can learn the moves!”

He’d have a handful of “Anger Shifu to Death” moves.

“Afterward, you’ll misinterpret the moves.” Zhi Xiu sighed helplessly. “It ought to be me going to see Wanshuang...”

“Kunlun and Wangge Luobao have hooked up and are targeting you and the Sword Slave.” Xi Ping made a mark next to a sword cut he liked. “If you go, won’t you be running straight into their arms?”

“Even with the Blind Wolf King to mediate, you still can’t be willful and reckless. Wanshuang isn’t one of the Xuanyin elders, to tolerate

your impertinence and rudeness.”

“You can set your mind at ease about that,” Xi Ping promised seriously. Before Zhi Xiu could nod, he added, “It’s not worthwhile for Wanshuang to sink to my level.”

Zhi Xiu: “...”

Fair enough.

“Lin-shixiong hasn’t yet found a way to imitate Lancang’s spirit-conducting gold that could connect to the veins of the earth. If possible, stop by the Lancang Mountains on your way to see if there are any traces of it,” Zhi Xiu continued. “Also, if it is indeed as you have guessed, and the Lovebird Sword Array was dispersed by Lancang’s Sect Leader, perhaps there will be something you can use against it in the Lancang Mountains.”

As Zhi Xiu spoke, he glanced in the direction of the Bell of Tribulation—in fact, the Bell of Tribulation hadn’t acknowledged him, but the Xuanyin Mountains and the Territory Map had already merged. The divine tool of the mountains had had to surrender to the Territory Map. It was tightly imprisoned on the Principal Peak, waiting to wear away along with the spiritual mountains.

But now he thought more and more that letting this thing be might cause disaster.

As they spoke, Xi Ping had already chosen two sword moves. He was going south to the Land of Turmoil to rescue people, not to do battle, so the sword auras he had chosen both inclined toward “defense” and “protection,” so honest and mild they didn’t seem like choices he would make.

“The way of the sword most values defense through offense,” Zhi Xiu warned him. “Don’t only pick that type.”

Xi Ping hopped off the sword platform. “Shifu, there’s a sword move I want to learn.”

A night passed, and Xi Ping, like a force-fed duck, managed to carry away three beams of sword energy that were very burdensome for an ascended spirit. Carrying a letter the Blind Wolf King had written in his own hand, he passed through the reincarnation wood directly to the Wan-He border, said hello to Pang Jian, then silently set foot on the Southern He Peninsula.

At the same time, Wei Chengxiang was working around the clock to count and sort people and goods. There was no time to go to Tao County or the South Sea Hidden Realm; in case things went wrong, they would have to temporarily take to the sea.

CHAPTER 214 - A Life of Regret (26)

“The evil cultivators are in the South Sea. When you take to the sea, do your best to head for the shore of the East Sea, don’t approach the west,” Xi Ping said in a message to Wei Chengxiang. “Those beast-taming Shu have too many aquatic spiritual beasts. Your field of vision will be limited in the sea. Except as a matter of absolute necessity, don’t go into the water. Keep an eye out for information from Hongzheng and Ziming.”

“To tell you the truth, we can just run off ourselves if we hear a stirring. Our so-called ‘goods’ are only old grain stocks,” Wei Chengxiang said with a somewhat bitter laugh. “In such a tumultuous world, everyone is busy striving for power. Who has the free time to fool around killing a dog by the road? We’ll be jumping barefoot into the water. If we run into those great personages head on, it’ll be a loss for them to so much as give us a second look. Apart from you, no one would take us seriously.”

“Stop grumbling, it’ll be your luck if the great personages pay no more attention to you than to a fart. Are you all right on your own?”

“Dandan is helping me purchase old ships, and the mustard seeds for storage are ones I laid in years ago. They should be enough for storing mortal articles. If it really won’t do, we can turn to the black market and think of something. These low-level open-eyed grade storage mustard seeds aren’t expensive. Each village has a visionary in charge. Everyone is being very cooperative.”

In the underground of the Southern He Peninsula, the deformed descendants of master craftsmen had dug out passageways leading in all directions, connected to the inhabited villages on the surface. Underground, they stored provisions and exchanged information; a set of leaders had even emerged naturally, called “undoubting visionaries” in the He language.

The only point of similarity among the “undoubting visionaries” was their age.

The usual lifespan of the Turmoilers was around twenty years; their intellects were generally weak. A longer lifespan meant that they had been born stronger and healthier, and their intelligence was greater as well. Virtually all the parents of these “extraordinarily gifted” people had done hard labor in the mining areas and had scrounged some amount of nourishment from spiritual energy. If they were lucky and encountered no natural or man-made disasters, they could often live past forty.

A mortal who lived past forty became free of doubt; a forty-year-old Turmoiler had sampled all the world’s bitterness and became an “undoubting visionary”—for example, Li Manlong.

The immortals could easily spend decades or centuries in seclusion. Except when they had nearly reached the end of their lifespans, the passage of time had absolutely no meaning for them. A hundred years passed in the blink of an eye. Their expressions and temperaments might as well have been welded in place; there wasn’t the slightest alteration to them. Their Ways of the Heart were even more immobile.

But the lives of the Turmoilers were reckoned by the day, by the shichen. The visionaries frantically exchanged all their extra time for knowledge. After several generations rising to pick up from the ones who had gone before, they even had an unsteady, limping tradition; they had preserved Southern He’s language and craftsmanship techniques intact. So when Wei Chengxiang and Xi Ping had brought them under protection, knowledge had spread like sparks from one village after another.

Each Turmoiler habitation had its “visionary.” The visionaries used reincarnation wood amulets to communicate.

Wei Chengxiang tallied the goods and numbers of people they reported then sent the information out through the reincarnation wood, and under the organization of individual visionaries, they systematically moved house.

An unprecedented mass migration was brewing in silence.

“We can provide for ourselves, you look after yourself, ‘flying goose relay station.’ All our communications rely on you. Don’t drink, don’t go looking for fights. If you get disconnected, none of us will be able to get in touch with the rest.” After joking with him, Wei Chengxiang added, “Oh, right, what are we doing about the miners?”

“Don’t you worry about it, I’m going to ask Wanshuang. On the off chance it goes well, perhaps you won’t even have to take to the sea and will be able to evacuate via the canal directly.” Xi Ping paused, then said, “This relay station has already relocated to Northern Li’s mining area.”

“What?” Wei Chengxiang was startled. Remembering that earthshaking Wanshuang leaving its sheath, she gave a firm shudder. “Her? She... doesn’t seem very good-natured.”

“At worst I’ll hang myself at her doorstep, shame her with my death.” Xi Ping stood up, smiled at the Northern Li cultivator scrutinizing him warily, and followed the messenger beckoning him into the Sword Slave’s living quarters.

Xi Ping had lived in luxury since birth. He had never missed a meal. On the southern continent, his height was enough to make him stand above the crowd—even mixed in among the northerners, who were each the height of a tower, he still surpassed the average height; but now he had to tilt his head back to look at the Sword Slave sitting in front of him.

The suffocating force that came from her hit you right in the face. Everyone who came into her tent felt themselves become a chi shorter out of nowhere, nearly pressed into a crack.

But Xi Ping could see that the Sword Slave wasn't deliberately frightening him. She was dressed in casual clothes, without armor, and Wanshuang was propped up in a corner. Her manner was relaxed. For her, this probably counted as amiable.

It was the Sword Slave who was taken aback when she saw Xi Ping. "Wow, an ascended spirit?"

Xi Ping: "..."

What had the Blind Wolf King said to her?

The Sword Slave muttered, "The Blind Wolf King said you're the son of a little friend he made among the mortals, that you've come here to rescue some people... Who's your dad?"

"Southern Wan's Marquis of Yongning," said Xi Ping.

The Sword Slave clearly hadn't heard of him. She casually asked, "Marquis of which reign?"

"... The current one," said Xi Ping.

The Sword Slave froze slightly, then at last remembered. She sat up straight. Her face couldn't produce ordinary expressions; it looked fierce in joy and sorrow alike. Xi Ping distinctly felt the weight of her gaze. "So you're that... that whatchamacallit?"

Wu Lingxiao was supremely haughty. When going south to the Southern He Peninsula, she had half-heartedly learned about the "important figures" of the southern continent just before leaving, and after hearing about them had felt that apart from Zhi Xiu, all the

other good-for-nothings were a waste of her time. She'd had a general idea that there was a survivor of the Yang clan in the Land of Turmoil, but as for what she looked like, she could work that out once she was done beating her up. She knew that the Chu and the Shu each had a lead evil cultivator; the southern barbarians' names were too long, she hadn't remembered them, and she hadn't taken any of these clowns seriously... Then there was another one; she hadn't been able to work out whether he counted as one of Xuanyin's or an evil cultivator. There were open questions about several things being connected to him or not. The most noteworthy point about this person, apart from being Zhi Xiu's first disciple, was "becoming an ascended spirit after less than ten years of cultivation."

The Sword Slave had thought that this rumor was nonsense; even a reincarnated pile of dog shit couldn't have that kind of dumb luck. She had automatically classed him with freaks that had some inhuman blood.

But it turned out that this person was actually a completely standard cultivator.

Xi Ping said respectfully, "I belong to Xuanyin Mountain's Flying..."

The Sword Slave said, "You're that disciple of Zhi Xiu's who grows rotten firewood!"

The northern and southern continents had different climates. The Li couldn't tell apart the many plant species of the south, so many of them had no corresponding names in the Li language. The ones that were good for timber were generally known as "southern wood," and the rest were all called "rotten firewood."

Xi Ping: "..."

He believed now that the Sword Slave was the Blind Wolf King's very own shimei.

The Sword Slave seemed to have come upon a cat or dog that could recite doggerel rhymes; she suddenly developed a slight interest in him. Because she didn't think of Xi Ping as a person, she became increasingly loose-tongued, asking without any sense of propriety how he had cheated his way into becoming an ascended spirit.

Had it been a respectable cultivator in his place, this interrogation alone would have caused him infinite shame. Luckily, Xi Ping wasn't actually a respectable cultivator. Not only did he not think being an ascended spirit was anything to be proud of, he was even quite pleased to grumble about his tale of woe. Tilting back his head made his neck too sore, so he simply abandoned politeness and found a chair with a backrest to lean his head against, thoroughly practicing his Li language on the Sword Slave.

The Sword Slave listened with keen pleasure to her heart's content, and then, still having something on her mind, delivered her brilliant opinion: "The Sword of the South is done for. If he coddles his disciples like this, he'll never have a qualified successor."

Xi Ping waved a hand carelessly. "Since antiquity to the present, what virtuous sage hasn't been 'unprecedented and unfollowed'? The blue dragon births a chimera, the phoenix births a peacock, and the weasel's son is a rat. Why talk of 'successors'?"

The Sword Slave froze. Since she had abandoned her human body, people had either trembled with fear before her or been vigilant and restrained. Low level cultivators didn't dare to look her directly in the face. No one had ever said anything like this.

"Little devil, you're actually pretty fun." A creaking laugh came from her throat. "The Blind Wolf King said you came to see me because

you want to rescue some people. Who? Go on, tell. Apart from that Yang, I'll let you through with anyone for his sake.”

Xi Ping uncrossed his legs. “Senior, I have a presumptuous request to make. Could you permit a flotilla of steamships to enter the peninsula?”

The Sword Slave looked him over with narrowed eyes; she didn't immediately erupt into fury, only calmly said, “Don't you think that... you're a little too bold?”

In the corner, Wanshuang shook gently. The Sword Slave, who had been listening to his storytelling with her head propped on her hand, abruptly raised her eyelids. In an instant, silent and formless yet seemingly omnipresent, sword energy was flying past him. A tearing sound came from Xi Ping's snow-white collar as a hole half a cun long ripped open, right up against the artery on the side of his neck.

Xi Ping was unmoved. “I'm all right. Heaven is jealous of heroes. Too many shed skins have hunted me. Senior, I would like you to issue an order, under whatever pretext you like, expelling the miners and merchants in the Southern He Peninsula—all extraneous personnel. I will ask a number of brave trading companies to unite and send in a flotilla of ships to transport them away as quickly as possible. Ordinary fishing boats don't have the necessary speed and capacity. Please make this exception, senior.”

As Xi Ping spoke, he took out another letter written in the Blind Wolf King's own hand and presented it to the Sword Slave with both hands spread. “Then we will discuss what is written in this letter.”

The Sword Slave raised a hand to summon that letter into her hold. She read it quickly, then didn't respond for a long time. Wanshuang's hum became more noticeable.

Then she gave a “ha”; it was as if a reed in her throat had been blown. The Blind Wolf King’s letter broke apart at her fingertips. “Is that so? That’s new... No wonder those little Turmoiler monsters were bowing in the direction of Lancang’s Principal Peak.”

Xi Ping: “...”

Actually, that was another matter.

He gave a dry cough. “Senior, this business...”

The Sword Slave once again roughly and discourteously interrupted him. “Fine, I understand. Send your boats, I’ll give you three days at most. After three days, I won’t permit a single smoke-belching thing to disturb people’s sight and hearing. Make them stay quiet when they come, no horns, or I’ll flatten them on the spot. I’ll be waiting here to see whether the Lancang Mountains will allow a mere ascended spirit to control them—I haven’t had a chance to see Lancang’s Lovebird Sword Array yet.”

Before Xi Ping had come, the Blind Wolf King had given him some pointers: “She’s willing to see you to oblige me. Since she’s obliged, she won’t lightly quibble with a junior. When you see her, say your bit. If she agrees, she’ll do it, and if she doesn’t agree, don’t nag her... If she were the sort to listen to other people’s advice, she wouldn’t be where she is today.”

But after restraining himself for a long moment, he still couldn’t manage to hold back. He blurted out, “Senior, if the spiritual mountains’ divine tool really does emerge, it’ll be of full moon grade.”

The Sword Slave said, “Obviously. So what?”

Xi Ping tactfully said, “Senior, if you’re confident of being able to handle a full moon divine tool, then do you have a way to keep that

divine tool from emerging? After all, the Southern He Peninsula is already completely devastated.”

Bewildered, the Sword Slave said, “Haven’t I agreed to let you get the people out? What do you care about the place? Could this damn place get any worse?”

Xi Ping had nothing to say to this.

“I’m a stranger in a strange land. Those evil cultivators are having a good time fleeing here and there. If they want a fight, isn’t that for the best?” The Sword Slave coldly said, “I’d like to see what a full moon divine tool without a master can do. What kind of sneaking things are buried under these Lancang Mountains? You’ve brought the news, now go help the needy, don’t get involved in what doesn’t concern you. In the future, I’ll have to come pay a visit to your honored teacher, see whether Zhaoting is worthy of having fame equal to Wanshuang’s.”

Kind words couldn’t persuade someone who was determined to die. It was enough if she remembered his petition.

Anyway, his shifu wasn’t interested in a single stone from the southern mines, and Kunlun’s calculations were doomed to go astray. It was currently unsuitable for Xuanyin to go to war. If others lost their heads fighting, it wouldn’t get in his way. Wu Lingxiao was right. As long as he could get the people out in time, this damn place really couldn’t get any worse. Maybe when the Lovebird Sword Array appeared, all things would wither, and they could get rid of those hateful wildfire vines in the earth. There was no knowing whether it might be a case of no making without breaking.

So Xi Ping stopped fooling around and stood up. “If the Lovebird Sword Array really does appear, could you do your best to keep the battlefield small, senior, to avoid harming innocents?”

“Fusspot. Piss off.”

Xi Ping nodded and lowered his voice. “Then I’ll give you another piece of news, senior, for free—the day before yesterday, Kunlun’s Third Elder, at the Sect Leader’s instigation, saw the remnants of Xuanyin Mountain’s Li and Zhang families. I used special means to overhear some information from that gathering. Kunlun is in contact with Southern Shu’s Miah traitor Wangge Luobao. I’m afraid some people won’t be coming to your aid.”

The Sword Slave abruptly froze.

Her face was half bright and half drowned in the shadow cast by a lantern, making her look even more horrifying. After a long time, she finally nodded at Xi Ping. “Understood.”

Xi Ping didn’t say anything more; he took his leave and went. At the same time, he contacted Wei Chengxiang: “The Sword Slave is more good-natured than imagined. She’s agreed to expel the mortals on the Southern He Peninsula and permit merchant steamships to travel on the canal. I sent people to say a word to all the major trading companies. The profit-motivated ones certainly won’t waste their very last chance to collect snow wine, and those moving their own people will also want to take the opportunity to earn some money. The nations’ navies will also come in an orderly fashion to collect their own nationals. When the news gets out, they’ll flock over. Take advantage of the commotion and leave—the Luwu’s ships have ‘upgraded’ mustard seeds stowed at the bottoms of their holds. With spiritual stones to support them, a single ship can hold a hundred thousand people. If it really comes to... Those living inland and on the west coast will travel by canal, those in remote locations on the East Sea coast will take shelter in the East Sea without having to go far. Is three days enough?”

“Plenty...” Wei Chengxiang said. “Will this activity alert the evil cultivators?”

“It’s no problem, the Emperor of the East is behind more than half the snow wine trade,” Xi Ping said. “When the Queen Mother of the West escaped the Sword Slave, he sniffed out that something was wrong. He wants to move and doesn’t dare to show his head. He won’t let this opportunity go by. This time we’ll use him as a shield.”

Wei Chengxiang unconsciously rolled her dice in her palm. “Why did it go so smoothly? Young master, I don’t suppose you prostituted yourself?”

Xi Ping was utterly shameless. On hearing these words, he gave a gusty and complicated sigh and said in an affected voice, “It’s a hard life out there, and we must bow to circumstances beyond our control. Why must you bring up such a painful sore spot? How dreadfully uncivil...”

Wei Chengxiang dropped the reincarnation wood amulet into her mustard seed.

The Sword Slave was never slow in action. She immediately issued a completely unreasonable expulsion order—ever since she had occupied the southern mines, the various obstinate and unreasonable prohibitions had been too numerous to count; everyone was used to it.

Then Pang Jian received a message from Xi Ping and tentatively sent the first merchant ship, which had already been waiting, out onto the water. The steamship, even faster than in the past, braved the winds and battled the waves and reached Southern Wan’s mining area that same night, picked up the traveling merchants and miners who were quickest to react, and simultaneously carried away a large quantity of rock snow.

Once the signal went out, steamships of all sizes vied to be the first. The trading companies that had dealings in the Land of Turmoil

were all used to running risks. There were even some people, supposing that the canal would be jammed, who audaciously circled around by the South Sea, instantly cutting Wangge Luobao and his folk off from the Southern He Peninsula.

The Miah cultivator responsible for keeping watch on the Southern He Peninsula didn't know what had happened. He reported it nervously to Wangge Luobao at once, but Wangge Luobao put down the leaf flute he was holding, and a peculiar smile appeared on his face.

“Clan leader?”

Wangge Luobao stuck up a finger toward him. “The fish is on the hook.”

CHAPTER 215 - A Life of Regret (27)

Inside the next life spiritual fish's big mouth, the seawater sucked in by the big fish formed a small puddle, containing quite a few small fish and crustaceans that had been swept up.

When Wangge Luobao had spoken, he picked up a miniature fishing rod lying beside him. The fishing line on the rod was made of concentrated spiritual energy. With a flick of his wrist, he pulled a leaping and frisking fish from the small puddle. As soon as the little fish left the water, the puddle began to move as the next life spiritual fish slowly swallowed it up. The "shrewd" living creatures that had been unwilling to take the bait landed in its stomach, all unawares, about to share in the fate of this enormous body that had lived for over a thousand years.

"We can't say right now whether it's fortunate or unfortunate." Wangge Luobao held the little fish in both hands, considering, then tossed it to his clansman. "Take it out and set it free. Gluttonous dumb fish have dumb luck."

The Miah all had superstition in their bones; they believed firmly that all living things had souls. Cautiously taking the little fish that had survived the disaster, the Miah cultivator said, "Clan leader, there are gold edges to this fish's scales, like the golden arrows of the sea god. It must be a lucky omen, a sign that the sea god will bless us and let everything go smoothly, right?"

Wangge Luobao gave him a profoundly meaningful smile. "Well, of course. We Miah have always been the favorites of the gods. Run along."

Southern Shu's Three Islands were far from the continent, and they were the origin of the vast majority of medicinal herbs and spiritual beasts. The people there could pick up some straw and throw

together a shack to keep from freezing, head into the mountain forest and pluck anything at random to eat their fill.

From the pampering of this environment blessed by heaven had come the stupid Miah clan.

The majority of Miah didn't consider progress, never took the long view, treated not considering progress as glory, even believed that their clansmen who had gone to make a living on the main peninsula were aliens who didn't know their place.

But as generation after generation of Moon Plated Gold had upgraded, the narrow strait between the southern continent and Shu's Three Islands seemed to have been blown ever wider by the steam. The Miah, unable to keep up with the times, were excluded everywhere on the outside; many people had been forced to return and had indignantly denounced the corruption and decadence of the "outside," so the stagnant and isolationist trends of thought on the Three Islands had become increasingly intense. The Miah preferred to hole up on Southern Shu's Three Islands, stick together keeping their eyes shut and their ears plugged, waiting for the gods they had created to reward them for their piety and purity.

And what had come to them were the misfortunes of being expelled and enslaved.

Wangge Luobao had heard the exhausted blubbling of many elderly Miah. They said, Clan Leader, can it be wrong to believe that "All living things have souls, and man ought to live in harmony with heaven and earth"? Are we really supposed to be like those greedy Wan and Chu barbarians, hustling all day, belching smoke and polluting the waters?

He generally didn't answer, only gently listened to these old infants' bawling, and when they had cried themselves out, said some

nonsense along the lines of “This is a test,” stuffed a pacifier into their mouths and sent them on their way.

In fact, the ignorant masses could never grasp the critical point. It didn’t matter one bit what you believed in. Even if you believed that “Eating shit will give you immortality,” as long as you had the power to influence the five nations, extol these words repeatedly, thousands upon thousands of times, there would be scholars renowned for erudition conducting textual research, writing books, and establishing canons for the sake of this legendary wad of “divine shit,” and experts and masters of all factions falling over each other seeking it.

Hadn’t the spiritual mountains and the Great Way all developed like this?

In the Queen Mother of the West’s hidden realm, Yang Wan had been in seclusion for a day and a night.

Before, she had plainly woken with a start as soon as she began to meditate, but all of a sudden it was as if she had found the main thread. Yao Qi was closest; he could clearly sense that the spiritual energy in the large quantity of spiritual stones stored in the hidden realm was all flowing toward the Queen Mother of the West’s meditation chamber, growing increasingly urgent.

Ziming-xiong couldn’t resist silently expressing his doubts to his classmate through the reincarnation wood: “Why can she make such quick progress after just a bit of advice from someone else? Is this enlightenment?”

So when he had been at the Latent Cultivation Temple, having eight enlightenments a day in his determination to better himself and make Luo Qingshi see him in a new light, why had he still not succeeded?

Could this really be the difference between him and an ascended spirit master?

Xi Ping was traveling in stealth along the canal, personally overseeing the first group of Turmoilers safely boarding a Luwu ship. With the support of an upgraded immortal tool, while tens of thousands of people boarded the ship, its waterline didn't move a sliver. The frothy surface of the water stilled where it had been quietly parted amid the disorder.

Hearing Yao Qi's description, his thoughts worked.

"Enlightenment," in fact, was something like a firework streaking through the night sky; while it glimmered, heaven and earth were crystal clear, but when it had ceased to glimmer, it was still quite dark. After all, it was hard for people to control themselves. If they wanted to soar up to the sky all at once, they couldn't keep themselves from lazy dawdling, and if they wanted to become wholly absorbed in something, they couldn't keep their thoughts from wandering; otherwise, there would be no mediocrities left on earth. Who didn't want to be outstanding?

The ascended spirit boundary wasn't sufficient to "accord with the Way." To force yourself to go on was to hover on the edge of becoming obsessed and losing your mind. It would become difficult to move forward. It wasn't enough just to be firmly resolved.

Xi Ping considered, then contacted another person through the reincarnation wood. "Yu Chang-xiong?"

No answer.

Xi Ping grossly called across the distance, "Hey, Yu Chang, I've been busy with stuff at home, I haven't had time for you. I've come to settle my debt. How about we meet tomorrow at noon in Tao County and I'll remove some more brands for you?"

Still no answer.

Because Xi Ping had deliberately dragged his feet, a large number of evil cultivators within Chu waiting to have their spiritual image brands removed had nearly lost their minds. Every time Yu Chang saw him, all the curses he wanted to hurl at him were written in his bright red eyes.

The one who owed the debt called the shots; all along, it had been Xi Ping keeping him in suspense. Never before had Yu Chang not answered when he had voluntarily reached out.

Xi Ping sighed. “As I thought—Ziming-xiong, do you know where the difference between you and the Queen Mother of the West lies?”

“Oh?” said Yao Qi.

“A great teacher—what a pity that a genius like the chief offering was forced by the state of the world onto a wrong path and to this day remains mixed up among a heap of evil cultivators, acting as accomplice to the villains,” Xi Ping said. “If the Latent Cultivation Temple had him, it would have turned into a ‘Seven-Day Half-Immortal Crash Course’ by now. There would have been no need for Dissatisfied Luo and the provisional disciples to spend so many years in mutual torment. Gentlemen, who will help me out?”

Yao Qi and Chang Jun thought he had more important business. They quickly got worked up.

“What is it?”

“Tell us.”

Xi Ping said, “Tell Zhao... er, Zhao-shijie to reckon up what proportion of Western Chu’s common offerings have had their

spiritual image brands removed. If the pan's hot enough, it's time to drop them in and start stir-frying."

Yao Qi and Chang Jun: "..."

When Zhao Qindan received word from the two human-shaped mouthpieces, she gave a peculiar laugh. Tao County was separated from the Land of Turmoil by the sea, yet her laugh still struck terror into Chang Jun's heart. He suspected that tomorrow the *Tao World Record* would publish an article—discussing muteness as the result of wickedness: the riddle of Tai Sui losing his voice.

Yu Chang had in fact sensed that there was a message coming through the reincarnation wood, but he wasn't at leisure to divide his attention right now.

He was hidden in the Queen Mother of the West's shadow, bearing witness as she was eaten alive.

The grit projections could only be used undetectably when bullying low-level cultivators, or when one spent several years influencing imperceptibly by degrees. In the short-term, they weren't of any great use against a master of the same grade. At most they could distract the person; they had to be paired with other means for a stealth attack.

If he were discovered using this method against an ally, it would mean an immediate falling out. Therefore, Yu Chang didn't dare to casually butt in, and he hadn't hoped to hear her speak her innermost thoughts. At first, he had only used the grit projection talisman to curl up in the Queen Mother of the West's shadow, observing the changes to her aura in echo of the spiritual mountains far away on the Southern He Peninsula, the connection intermittent.

As Yang Wan's consciousness had sunk deeper and deeper, her state had become increasingly wavering, such that starting from the

latter half of last night, without Yu Chang applying any pressure, Yang Wan, under the weak influence of the grit projection, had actually begun automatically speaking aloud the thoughts that passed through her consciousness.

Hearing it had brought Yu Chang's heart up to his throat. Most of what she said was disconnected ravings, completely incomprehensible; he had been afraid she would wake up.

Just as he had been on the point of dispelling the grit projection talisman and running away, the Queen Mother of the West had suddenly pronounced, ice-cold and crystal-clear, the phrase "for the cause of righteousness."

Across mountains and seas, through the grit projection, these words made Yu Chang shudder. They had absolutely no connection to the Queen Mother of the West's previous empty ramblings. It was as if there was a trumpet in her brain that from time to time stole away her voice.

Was this the legendary "heavenly edict"?

This was nothing like what Yu Chang had imagined, an earnestly good and guiding heavenly edict that would lead a person to sudden enlightenment. This voice seemed to have absolutely no undulation, and there wasn't a trace of emotion in it; it didn't even seem to be a human voice...it was like an old jiangshi pounding on the casket in a folktale!

But it seemed that human nature was indelible. When the "heavenly edict" fell, it aroused the Queen Mother of the West's struggles.

The indistinct, incomprehensible ravings she had been speaking before abruptly came clear. Two hundred years of the struggles of this princess of a vanquished nation were all revealed before Yu Chang's eyes.

The beloved daughter of heaven, her county and her sect had been overthrown overnight. From the high clouds, she had tumbled down to an abyss of misery. There was no way that the righteous cause of her country could be the only thing in her heart... and the Wan-He War hadn't been her fault, but by some mysterious series of coincidences, the consequences had been hers to bear as the survivor. Yu Chang heard her clearly articulate, "Why must it be this way?" several times.

Aside from panic and helplessness, there was also Yang Wan's hatred and resentment, aimed in part at the Lancang Sect.

Countless times she had wanted to abandon her people, change her name, leave the stifling Land of Turmoil.

But what chilled Yu Chang to the bone was that her struggles and complaints would now and then be followed by an ice-cold "for the cause of righteousness," or "a hundred generations of Lancang depend on you alone."

Pulled in two directions, the Queen Mother of the West several times nearly woke from meditation again.

The surrounding spiritual energy was in disorder. From the grit projection, Yu Chang sensed her willpower, on the point of collapse, and at last recalled what he had come here to do. Quickly, he carefully activated a slight "grit projection."

Each time the Queen Mother of the West's jumbled babble became vehement, Yu Chang promptly said something like "There's no turning back," or "You're the only one the Lancang Mountains have left," or "All your people are looking to you" into her ear through her shadow, pushing the wavering scales slightly onward.

The Queen Mother of the West's thoughts of resistance were several times broken off promptly by the grit projection; after a difficult night of back-and-forth, they finally lost the high ground. The frequency with which that heavenly edict came out of her mouth became higher and higher... Yu Chang listened from the shadow as the Queen Mother of the West chanted "for the cause of righteousness" again and again, an expression clearly not her own appearing on her features, as if she had been possessed by a ghost.

All of a sudden, she twisted that face, high and stern as an ancient divinity's, and sorrowfully cried out "Guang'an," clutching in a panic at her very last trace of connection to the mundane world.

Not far, as if he had sensed it, the unconscious Lord Guang'an's finger twitched.

The utterly unscrupulous red-eyed great evil cultivator abruptly shut his mouth. Yu Chang couldn't quite bring himself to go on.

What is this heavenly edict? he thought. Do those who accord with the way actually become gods, or do they become ghosts who help the force that had devoured them do it to others?

"Fellow Cultivator Wangge!" Yu Chang decisively withdrew the grit projection. "Do you know..."

"Senior Yu, we have a problem! We've been exposed!"

Western Chu was the birthplace of the toilet bulletins. It had been the malicious Luwu who had once launched the first issue in Dongheng.

Various forces had soon discovered that this thing couldn't be prohibited, so they had all followed suit. The *Tao World Record* had even appeared only at a rather late stage.

Apart from serious commentary on important news, the toilet bulletins also contained quite a lot of vulgar gossip... the sorts of things everyone loved to see and hear, used to attract eyeballs. These ornamental miscellanies also needed specialized reporters to write them. Ultimately, literate people formed the minority among common people, and not all educated people would lay aside their self-respect to engage in these unprincipled writings to eke out a living. Because of this, good “gossip scribes” were always in great demand. All the toilet bulletins tried to snatch them from each other.

Zhao Qindan took her money directly from the Luwu. Her financial resources were ample. She had many gossip scribes snatched from other toilet bulletins in her employ.

Among them was no lack of spies watching Tao County.

Zhao Qindan, alias “Sir Xu,” came out of the *Tao World Record*’s secret warehouse holding a stack of drafts that blocked her line of sight.

Over the last few days, everyone at the toilet bulletin had been working like crazy. In the bulletin’s general office, there were virtually no two-legged creatures with both feet on the ground at the same time. In a single moment of carelessness, she bumped into someone, and the odds and ends in her arms dropped all over the ground. A big crowd of people was jammed there, some muttering “sorry” and helping her pick them up, some standing on tiptoe and straining to squeeze out through the stack of papers while crying “excuse me.” In the chaos, a set of keys dropped by Sir Xu were picked up. In Tao County, where spiritual energy was prohibited, the half-immortal who had lost her spiritual sense seemed not to notice it at all.

So that same day, the secret warehouse of the *Tao World Record*, which only the Luwu and the editor-in-chief could enter, was quietly opened, and one “critical” thing was circulated—precisely the

recordings of the secret talks Yu Chang had with Tai Sui every time he came to Tao County.

The interference and noise hadn't even been cleaned up.

The tape immediately came to the hands of all the local forces mustering troops for an armed rebellion. It was simply a bolt from the blue.

These were spiritual image brands, a stamp you weren't born with but would take with you when you died!

The heads of these local forces were all half-immortals laden down with trifling affairs who didn't cultivate at all and had only opened their spiritual eyes in order to prolong their lifespans and preserve their youth. All their fighting capacity and confidence came from the "offerings" their families had kept for generations.

It turned out that Yu Chang, who had broken free of his spiritual image brand, wasn't a solitary exception. There really was such a thing as a technique for removing spiritual image brands!

You needed only to look at Yu Family Bend to know what would come of the evil spirits slipping their leashes. The heads of Western Chu's various local forces were all so scared their souls left their bodies and only then remembered to check the conditions of the spiritual image brands of the offerings at their command. Checking in secret wasn't a big deal, but they were astonished to find that nearly forty percent of the evil spirits they had domesticated had already freed themselves, and moreover, virtually all of these were chief offerings with high cultivation.

Even the expression "fit to burst their livers and galls" couldn't describe the fear felt by the masters of the spiritual image brands. The cowardly ones might have lost control over their excretions on the spot.

Fear aroused the desire to kill. Right away, the masters of the spiritual image brands gave an absolute order to the offerings who had yet to remove their brands—kill.

There was no way to refuse a spiritual image brand. The offerings who hadn't yet had time to remove their spiritual image brands locked the gates and were compelled to attack the brothers who had formerly shared in their misery... and perhaps some among them weren't all that "compelled." Ever since there had come to be an order of precedence and a division of rank for removing the spiritual image brands, the offerings who had been put at the back of the line by Yu Chang had felt the imbalance.

The offerings who had already recovered their freedom could no longer sense their masters' condition through the spiritual image brands. They were taken unawares; they had no idea that they had been exposed. When they were suddenly attacked, they thought that it was their own people's jealousy and hatred that had turned against them, that they had been sold out by traitors within their own organization. While irately striking back, they began to implicate each other.

The game board Yu Chang had spent eight years setting out in Western Chu was overturned by a single tape. Before the Sanyue Mountains could fall, his own people had started fighting... and the fight was evenly matched, likely to end in mutual destruction!

Yu Chang immediately had no more time for any Queen Mothers of the West or North. Wangge Luobao saw his face turn green, extraordinarily festive paired with his red eyes. He let out a long string of curses in the Chu language and hurriedly broke off communications.

Wangge Luobao wasn't in the least surprised. Through the eyes of the next life spiritual fish, he looked up in the direction of the

Southern He Peninsula.

Tai Sui...

This well-informed, preternaturally crafty holder of the “undying bones” was as agile as expected. As soon as he stepped in, he had lit Yu Chang’s backyard on fire.

Though this time he had burned the wrong person.

Meanwhile, the Emperor of the East, mixed in among the merchant ships carrying a large quantity of snow wine and withdrawing out to sea, kept cautiously sweeping the surroundings with his consciousness. His spiritual sense was suddenly touched by something. His gaze swept out to sea as fast as lightning. A beam of spiritual energy fell into the water and caught a little fish whose scales seemed inlaid with gold at the edges.

There was a hole in the fish’s mouth. It had been fished up and then set free again. There was a familiar aura about the wound in the fish’s mouth—

When the Emperor of the East had invaded the Queen Mother of the West’s hidden realm, he had naturally left a spiritual energy mark behind while fleeing in confusion so he could regroup and come back stronger in the future. The upshot was that when the mark had gone into the South Sea, something had blocked it. Right now, the critical thing was running for his life, and the Emperor of the East wasn’t in the mood to investigate. Who would have thought that, as though it were fate, he would run into the aura of the Queen Mother of the West’s hidden realm here.

The Emperor of the East was just about to extend his hand to summon the Emperor of the East Halberd when his eyes suddenly spun, and he thought to himself: That woman is very sly. What if it’s a trap?

But when it came to giving it up, there was no way he would be willing to do that, so the Emperor of the East raised a hand and placed a talisman on that fish. He ordered his subordinates to leave that area of sea with all haste.

Who didn't know how to let someone else take a loss in their stead?

The little fish, released back into the water by him, stiffly bent backward. Then, fast as a shark, it swam through the waves, strangely backtracking the way it had come.

The Miah cultivator on patrol held in his mouth a talisman that let him breathe in the water. Treading on the head of the invisible next life spiritual fish, he kept watch while hidden at the bottom of the sea. He saw at a glance the peculiar behavior of the little fish he had set free earlier and instinctively reached out to catch it.

The next moment, golden light flashed over the fish, just like the golden arrows of the sea god—it pierced through that established foundation Miah.

Established foundation grade essence exploded in the South Sea, impacting a number of innocent merchant ships. This commotion wasn't a small one. From the Southern He Peninsula, Xi Ping and the Sword Slave's consciousnesses swept over simultaneously!

CHAPTER 216 - A Life of Regret (28)

The might of the Sword Slave swept right over, trapping in place the next life spiritual fish that could disappear as soon as it entered the water.

What was happening? Xi Ping froze at first, but he was well aware of the principle that “Those who enjoy watching the fun too much can easily end up unlucky.” What did he care what was going on? What was he doing watching other people fight? Run!

He quickly sent a warning to the Luwu and ordered everyone not to detour to the South Sea, to stay as far as possible from the Southern He Peninsula’s west coast—the South Sea coast, that was.

Just then, Chang Jun and Yao Qi spoke almost simultaneously.

Chang Jun said, “I think Lord Guang’an has woken up.”

Yao Qi said, “Strange, the spiritual energy around the Queen Mother of the West’s meditation chamber has suddenly gone wild.”

“Because the wicked ghost luring the Queen Mother of the West toward the spiritual mountains has caught his pants on fire,” Xi Ping quickly said. “You two, stop watching the tearjerker, get away from the ascended spirits at once. Take out the protective immortal tools I gave you before—use the ascended spirit grade ones, Wanshuang’s about to...”

No sooner had he spoken than Wanshuang was already there!

All the seawater in the area was locked in place by the Sword Slave’s sword energy, but perhaps she was too robust; she still

didn't see the next life spiritual fish, said in legend to be caught on the border between life and death.

Though the next life spiritual fish counted as large among fish, it still wasn't large to the magnitude of a steamship. It was big at the head and small at the tail. Opening its mouth to the widest, it could in fact hold a few people at most. That the Miah cultivators and the Queen Mother of the West and her people could live as completely separate neighbors relied on mustard seed hidden realms that could collapse to be extremely small. The scope of an established foundation cultivator's essence exploding was much larger than the fish.

But the sword energy locking the seawater in place had already permeated the fish's body. The mustard seeds inside the fish's mouth trembled, like one little world after another, on the point of collapse.

Everyone inside the mustard seed hidden realm was panicked and at a loss, yet they couldn't find their backbone—Yang Wan was trapped, unable to move forward or back.

With a shed skin approaching, her spiritual sense was about to explode; there was no retreat. But having lost the grit projection, no matter what, it was almost impossible for her to take another step forward!

The matchlessly domineering ancient sword of Kunlun raised huge waves in the South Sea, bringing misfortune to the merchant teams that had turned to the South Sea route from fear of traffic on the canal. These huge steamships were like withered leaves, nearly thrown into the air by the sword thrust that hit like a flood dragon entering the water. The ships that had yet to leave port were pushed into a heap; fire broke out in places.

“Help—”

Xi Ping, who had remained on land, casually pulled a sword from the mustard seed he carried and soared up into the sky riding it with the Tai Sui Qin floating in front of him.

Where the sound of the qin passed, the ships on the South Sea, big and small, were enveloped in an invisible membrane. The sparks that had just shot out were pushed back and extinguished, and the ships that were about to collide were separated, gently bouncing apart.

Xi Ping had meant to fly a little higher to get a clearer view, but the sword at his feet wasn't very attentive to his commands; it stopped at a certain height and wouldn't move. But the Sword Slave, from dozens of li away, gave him a strange look.

Xi Ping looked down and only then discovered that the sword he had hastily summoned just now had been Zhaoting. He nearly split his sides laughing: It's been nearly fifteen years, Master Zhaoting, thank you ever so much! He'd even become an ascended spirit, and he had been the one to go to Sanyue to steal the furnace that had reforged Zhaoting. How had the prohibition on flying too high once put down on the north slope not yet been lifted?

He was just about to switch to an ordinary sword that wouldn't get in his way when Wei Chengxiang sent him a message: "I think this time it's the Emperor of the East."

The Emperor of the East's subordinates were a bunch of evildoers with no bottom line; their loyalties lay with whoever benefited them. Wei Chengxiang had drifted through the Land of Turmoil year in and year out, so she had a number of not overly reliable informants at her disposal. She hurriedly said, "The Emperor of the East's people are on the South Sea. Originally they were mixed in among the mortal merchant teams. I heard that one ke ago, word suddenly came down from above, ordering them to leave this area of the sea

with all possible haste. It couldn't be a coincidence. The Emperor of the East must have done something."

Xi Ping's consciousness swept toward the South Sea again. He conjectured that the Emperor of the East must have used some means to discover the Queen Mother of the West's hiding place. That old geezer's "die of frustration if he wasn't stirring shit up" problem had flared up again, and he had deliberately attracted Wanshuang's notice, planning to use a borrowed sword to kill his target.

Soon, Xi Ping locked onto a small clutch of ships that stuck out—he had just disseminated talismans with his qin music, covering half the South Sea. Even the Dragon King's shrimp soldiers and crab generals in the water must have gained extra shells; only on that team of ships fleeing at full speed was there no trace of protective talismans.

And at the speed they were going, the ships had even forgotten to belch steam.

These ships weren't propelled by steam engines; they were propelled by spiritual stones!

"You're right," said Xi Ping, "I see them."

Wei Chengxiang said, "Are you going after them?"

Of course not—he was shielding the alarmed mortals, keeping the battle of the immortals from mistakenly injuring the ants. Though the Sword Slave had made no move against him, that was after all the foremost sword in the world. He could hardly withstand even a glancing blow. Being in two places at once was impossible.

With a thought, Xi Ping threw out an immortal tool snatched from Lin Chi, which landed precisely in front of the Emperor of the East's

ships. The seawater immediately congealed into countless watery ropes, which tied themselves into a big net, catching the Emperor of the East and his people “in a single net”: “With all this excitement, don’t be in such haste to leave, sir!”

An ascended spirit immortal tool could of course be torn open by the Emperor of the East Halberd, which was of the same grade, but it was another question whether the Emperor of the East would be willing to show himself in front of the Sword Slave... and if he didn’t dare, what would his subordinate low-level cultivators, currently wishing they could sprout wings and fly away, be thinking?

In a flash, a number of great “evil cultivators” had gone a round of mutual trickery and even turned a corner.

Wei Chengxiang cried out an approving “well done” to him. “When enemies meet on a narrow path, the low-life wins.”

Xi Ping said, “Oh, why don’t you piss off already!”

While these great masters coming and going in the heights had wrestled themselves into a heap, under the all-enveloping spiritual energy screen of the Tai Sui Qin, Wei Chengxiang seized the opportunity to audaciously toss out a string of talismans and sweep the Turmoilers right onto the Luwu ships.

Xi Ping didn’t stop playing. At the same time, alarm bells were ringing in his mind.

In a single move, he had driven away Yu Chang, then pinned down the Emperor of the East. Ordinarily, his tail would have been sticking up by now, but instead, he had no leisure to feel complacent.

Something’s wrong, he thought. This can’t be an unexpected development.

The next life spiritual fish, which the Cauldron of Nine Dragons and Xuanwu back then and Kunlun's Sword Slave now had been unable to grab—how could a measly Emperor of the East catch a trace of it? He supposed it couldn't be because there was a dark pall upon his brow and he was an expert in courting death.

The only explanation was that someone had deliberately let that idiot find it.

Who? What were they playing at?

Didn't Kunlun and the Li-Zhang remnants want to lure his shifu into a trap in Southern He? Wasn't it a little too early to strike now?

Could it be that they had finally discovered that they couldn't defeat Wu Lingxiao no matter what and had decided to simply kill themselves and take a bunch of mortals with them?

If he had been on his own, with Xi Ping's impetuous temper, regardless of anything else, he would have activated the reincarnation wood seeds Yao Qi and Chang Jun carried and gone over in person to investigate.

But right now, he was "Tai Sui."

Amid the murderous aura of Wanshuang that blotted out the sky and covered the earth, relying on the fact that Zhaoting could reliably catch him, Xi Ping laboriously used talismans to weave a hasty protection array over the Southern He Peninsula. The only lucky thing was that he had brought enough spiritual stones this time.

Wangge Luobao gently stroked the inner wall of the next life spiritual fish's mouth. In his nose lingered the smell of age and decay coming from the fish's belly. "Truly a pity. I was born too late. Your lifespan has nearly run out."

Vibrant and unrestrained echoes came from the fish's belly, rising and falling, a little like a whale's song.

The next life spiritual fish's answer to him was brimful of sorrow.

The gentle smile on Wangge Luobao's face disappeared. His odd-colored eyes set into his ice-cold mixed-blood countenance made him look like a statue of an evil god. "It was the ancestor who chose this road. I am only his chosen successor."

The Sword Slave didn't have the patience to go fishing in the sea. Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed the evil cultivators Xi Ping had trapped. She reached out and scooped, simply snatching up an evil cultivator.

An established foundation evil cultivator on the Emperor of the East's ship felt dizzy. Before he could work anything out, he was already dozens of li away. His essence was instantly pierced by sword energy, and he hadn't even realized that he was dying, looking blankly around himself.

On the boundless South Sea, a strangely-shaped big fish finally attracted his line of sight. That fish had a pair of clouded, sorrowful eyes. Looking into them made a person want to cry, overwhelmed in the crush of all their life's regrets.

The evil cultivator whose hands were stained with blood couldn't help crying. He was cold and scared. He felt the sea wind blow through his body. His flesh was as flimsy as paper, blending with the sea wind.

His last thought was: Oh, so there's a hole in me.

The dying could see the next life spiritual fish.

The Sword Slave tossed the useless corpse into the water and, following that good-for-nothing's line of sight, she slashed at the next life spiritual fish with a beam of sword energy. "Mystifying trickery!"

A lament fit to break your heart reverberated throughout the South Sea. On land, in the sea, all the beasts both spiritual and mundane, so long as they could produce sound, began to wail in unison.

In the Heaven's Design Pavilion branch on the Wan-He border, Pang Jian, tense because the border inscriptions had been aroused by a large quantity of spiritual energy, suddenly noticed something. He raised his head and found to his astonishment that the karma beast avatars on the mural were standing up one after another, facing south. The karma beasts were vigorous, always glaring, with faces that naturally looked like they were fuming with rage. Pang Jian had never before seen such obvious grief in those enormous eyes.

The instant Wanshuang fell, Wangge Luobao had already unfurled the protective immortal device in his hands. At the same time, he pried open a mustard seed with absolutely no hesitation.

Waking dragons, gold-armored zhengs, flood dragons, silk dragons... Innumerable spiritual beasts exploded from inside it, layer upon layer of them shielding him, against their own instincts willingly meeting Wanshuang's blade, dying in his stead.

Wangge Luobao didn't so much as blink. He swiftly rolled up another mustard seed containing Miah cultivators and instantly disappeared.

Only the Queen Mother of the West's hidden realm remained, exposed and unprotected beneath the Sword Slave's sword. Its inscriptions were destroyed by the sword energy, and layer after layer of the mustard seed's edges were worn. The mustard seed hidden realm, which had only taken up a fist-sized space, was

forced to expand to hundreds of mu, abruptly floating up on the South Sea.

Yao Qi and Chang Jun had made their preparations when Xi Ping had warned them. They had shifted to the inscription border. After the world turned upside down, they came right to the edge of the hidden realm. The two of them wrapped protective immortal tools around themselves and jumped into the water.

The instant they entered the water, both of them were stunned.

“Shiyong!” Chang Jun’s voice had changed pitch. “What the hell did Wanshuang just slash?”

Xi Ping said, “What?”

Yao Qi said, “The water’s changed into...”

There was nothing else.

When the mysterious next life spiritual fish crashed into Wanshuang, the fish’s body went to pieces and scattered in the sea. But there was no blood.

It turned all the surrounding seawater into semi-transparent mist, lifting the Queen Mother of the West’s hidden realm and swiftly rising. Before Yao Qi could finish his sentence, he was swallowed up by the mist. Instantly, all his senses cut off. He couldn’t even hear the voice through the reincarnation wood anymore. Unspeakable cold crept up his spine.

Around him was boundless darkness. A beam of weak light swept over him. The faces of all his family and friends flashed before his eyes, approaching then passing. He glimpsed his hometown of Jinping, and its bustle turned to ashes in the blink of an eye. Clamoring voices that flooded his ears came and went. Yao Qi

instinctively reached out to make a grab but came up empty. He could only watch as all activity left him behind.

No one instructed him, but Yao Qi knew—this was life and death.

Humans were transient, and the dust of the mundane world was transient for them.

Humans came from nothing, were awakened for an instant by illusion, then returned to endless nothingness.

Amid illusion, all things were inconstant.

In the corpse of the next life spiritual fish, all human thoughts turned to dust.

When her single blow fell, the Sword Slave already sensed that something was wrong. She quickly retreated, watching the mist rising over the South Sea in bewilderment.

The Queen Mother of the West, wrapped in mist, also seemed to enter a crevice between life and death. The voice of the “heavenly edict” in her ears abruptly increased tenfold. The marriage contract that bound her wavered on the point of collapse.

Just then, the door of the meditation chamber was broken open. Lord Guang’an charged in, staggering. His legs went weak, and he fell to his knees on the ground.

He panted for breath sharply, the veins on his head and face standing out. He crawled toward the Queen Mother of the West. “A-Wan...”

He came from Chu, the child of a spiritual stone miner. There was a tiny minority of people who devoted their attention more fully to anything they did and regularly drew spiritual energy into

themselves unconsciously. Even with no one to guide them, living year in and year out in such surroundings, they could open their spiritual eyes through unexpected chance—compared to those in Western Chu who faked and flattered to force their way into the inner sect and remained mortal all their lives, it was hard to say who was more unfortunate... after all, not every miner who opened his spiritual eyes was like Pang Jian, with a conscience-stricken Liang Chen behind him, willing to busy himself to get him vouched for by the inner sect.

How his spiritual eyes had opened, the honest and timid family of miners couldn't say. Despotic superiors and fawning subordinates were common practice in the Chu mines. They had immediately charged his family with the serious crime of "stealing spiritual stones," with the punishment of execution for the whole family.

At the time, Yang Wan had been increasingly unable to bear the Emperor of the East. She had just begun to arrange her forces in secret; she was short on people. While she was at it, she had picked up this teenage boy who counted as a half-immortal and taken him to her newly-established hidden realm. At first, she hadn't shown him her true face. She had disguised herself as a plain, ordinary woman, saying that she was a servant acting on behalf of her master. To save trouble, she had picked herself the ugly-sounding alias of "Wan-niang."

She wasn't the Queen Mother of the West, wasn't the Emperor of the East's wife, wasn't a princess, wasn't surnamed Yang.

"A-Wan..."

Guang'an was the only thing in this whole world that belonged to A-Wan.

Amid the whistling sea wind, he grabbed Yang Wan's hand.

The sword cultivator's palm was covered in calluses. In an instant, it nearly yanked the Queen Mother of the West's consciousness out of meditation. The mist surrounding the two of them abruptly withdrew slightly.

Those clasped hands seemed to form a resonance with the Lancang Mountains—the founders of the Lancang Sword Sect had also been husband and wife, together called the Gold and Jade Sages. The “Gold Sage” was a sword cultivator, and the “Jade Sage” was one of the toolmaking cultivators that had been most numerous on the Southern He Peninsula.

Perfect harmony, walking hand-in-hand, immortal lovers... In a daze, Yang Wan couldn't distinguish whether she was the Queen Mother of the West or the Jade Sage. A faint smile appeared on her lips.

Lord Guang'an's expression relaxed slightly. He was about to continue waking her when he heard a roar. Aggressive spiritual energy came right at him. The heavily injured Lord Guang'an was thrown aside without making a sound.

This spiritual energy like a hurricane came from the southern mines. The Lancang Mountains were quivering violently. Countless plants grew from the immortal mountains; strange and splendid flowers bloomed. The wildfire vines that had despotically occupied the Southern He Peninsula fled like scared rats.

Dense clouds gathered over Lancang's Principal Peak. An enormous thundercloud, like a vortex, hung in midair. Something flashed in and out of view.

The Sword Slave frowned. She forgot about the strange mist and hacked at the Queen Mother of the West's hidden realm.

But the sword energy was knocked astray by brutal spiritual wind.

Right now, Xi Ping was simply trapped on the Southern He Peninsula. At his feet there were mortals everywhere. He didn't dare to budge.

“Ziming, Hongzheng!”

There was no answer from the two of them.

Xi Ping felt his vertebrae and ribs pounded like a big drum by Wanshuang's sword wind flying by, constantly split open and constantly repaired by the hidden bones, making teeth-aching creaks.

The ice-cold sword aura seemed to want to invade the cracks in his bones, but it was blocked by Zhi Xiu's three beams of sword energy stored inside him. The swords of the north and south crossed through him. Xi Ping's bones broke even faster.

The Sword Slave... What kind of monster was she?

How could the major boundary between shed skin and ascended spirit make such a big difference? In pain, Xi Ping came to a decision. If he made it through this and returned to Flying Jade Peak, he would definitely work hard!

When this thought quickly streaked by, a light suddenly came on in Xi Ping's head. He captured a thought that had been hanging around in his mind.

Wait, he'd remembered!

Shed skin masters—except for the kind like Xiang Ning, only there to make up the numbers—might not be able to overwhelm an especially remarkable near-shed skin, but overwhelming an early

stage ascended spirit... or even a middle stage ascended spirit certainly wouldn't be a problem.

Xuanwu in his prime had been able to contend against a full moon master for half a night; even when his essence had been damaged and his boundary had fallen, he had still been able to send seven great ascended spirits scampering in the South Sea. It was hard to say whether Xuanwu's cultivation surpassed that of Lin Zongyi, Wu Lingxiao, and others like them, but it was certainly stronger than Zhang Jue and Zhao Yin's. When he had come down from the mountains in person to arrest Qiu Sha, why had he brought a murder weapon like the Silver Moon?

Couldn't he have crushed Qiu Sha with one finger after she had lost the Law Breaker and the Riverward?

Wangge Luobao had already sunk to the bottom of the sea. He waved away the waking dragon corpse still wound around him and sent a message to Kunlun: *There's been an unexpected development.*

From his expression, nothing seemed to have been "unexpected."

Wangge Luobao paused, then wrote: *We didn't lure in Zhi Xiu. I'm afraid Wu Lingxiao has met the Lancang Mountains in battle ahead of schedule. Our plan has already been exposed. What should we do?*

After sending this, he calmly restrained his aura and found a place to sit amid the spiritual beast corpses. He considered, took a piece of reincarnation wood from his clothes, and boldly spilled his blood on it.

"I've heard a great deal about you, Tai Sui."

CHAPTER 217 - A Life of Regret (29)

Xi Ping was a prodigy who could spend a whole night wagging his tongue on the strength of two liang of wine, but at the crucial moment, he knew how to come to blows directly without wasting a single droplet of spit.

As soon as he heard Wangge Luobao's Miah-accented Wan language, Xi Ping smacked a lotus seal copied from Zhuoming at his consciousness through the reincarnation wood.

The Xiuyi-Miah mixed blood man had been prepared. He parried that amateur lotus seal easily. "Not even a hello? Are all young people so short-tempered these days?"

No sooner had he spoken than the reincarnation wood in his hand seemed to turn into a vortex, trying to suck in his consciousness.

But Wangge Luobao was no lightweight established foundation or half-immortal. Trying to wrest away the consciousness of a cultivator of the same grade as you was comparable to trying to haul around a person of about your own build; it would only work if the other party was willing.

A number of flute notes came from the other end of the reincarnation wood, interrupting the consciousness-sucking vortex in the reincarnation wood and crashing against Xi Ping's ears.

The flute music of the beast-taming way wasn't jarring to the ear; hearing it only made a person feel longing—not a specific longing, just a sudden surge of emotion.

Xi Ping had had practically no dealings with beast-taming cultivators. As soon as he got distracted, a number of beams of

sword energy wildly splashing out from the sea broke his talismans and crashed into the canal.

In his hurry, he only had time to toss out a handful of papermen to block the sword energy. The papermen with his consciousness attached to them were obliterated along with the images of swords. It was as if something had given his brains a forceful stir. His vision darkened. He sent a message nearly a hundred li away: “Senior Wanshuang, what did you promise me?!”

The Sword Slave ignored him. With her sword energy sent rebounding by the Lancang Mountains, she glanced somewhat uncertainly at the corpse of the next life spiritual fish.

The mist that the big fish’s corpse had turned into had already swallowed up everything around it. This thing was more ancient than even the spiritual mountains. After Ancestor Tianbo had left the mundane dust behind, the next life spiritual fish had vanished from the mortal world. Not even Lingyun had records of it; it had seemed to be a myth. With the Sword Slave’s cultivation level, though her inborn spiritual sense was only average, she could still easily distinguish whether something before her eyes was a threat. Not only did she not sense danger from that mist, she dimly had the impression that some fortuitous opportunity was hidden inside it.

But fortuitous opportunity or no, she didn’t care. The way of the sword didn’t take shortcuts, and it wasn’t subject to temptation.

Wanshuang pointed straight at that strange mist. The Sword Slave hacked at the Queen Mother of the West’s hidden realm, which had nearly been buried inside it—it was said that Zhaoting had cut through the clouds of tribulation; was it possible that she couldn’t cleave apart a mist?

But the matchlessly sharp sword wind couldn’t blow the mist apart. When Wanshuang landed in the mist, its blade seemed to melt

inside it. The Sword Slave's consciousness sank; before she could struggle her way free, she and her sword had been sucked in by the strange mist!

The eyesight and consciousness of an ascended spirit could see this scene over a hundred li away. Xi Ping's pupils contracted abruptly—his powerful weapon was gone!

Though from his point of view, as a weapon, Wanshuang was a double-edged sword. At the same time as he lost a thigh to cling to, the pressure on him was also greatly reduced. Matters were divided by gravity and urgency; Xi Ping had no time to consider the causes. He swiftly tossed a handful of lotus seals at Wangge Luobao to keep him from making trouble; then talismans fell on the canal as though they were free.

It was as if he had turned all the water in the Grand Canal into a factory conveyor belt; it flowed north against the current.

Just then, a whistle came from the South Sea. With Wanshuang's sword energy gone, the Emperor of the East had dared to come back out of his shell!

The Emperor of the East Halberd forced apart the big net in the water. The evil cultivator's snow wine ships fled in all directions. With his halberd in hand and new grievances added to old hatreds, the Emperor of the East drew countless bolts of lightning without restraint, striking at Xi Ping and the canal.

At the same time, clear and melodious flute music floated over the South Sea. From the portion of the canal belonging to the Shu mining area, countless red-eyed carnivorous spiritual beasts suddenly emerged.

Xi Ping was besieged by two great evil cultivators... and one of them he had himself insisted on keeping around with his meddling!

The longer this dragged on, the worse it would get for him.

“Luwu—”

On the steamships on the canal, Luwu made up to look like boatmen and merchants emerged. Talismans fell like rain on the maddened spiritual beasts.

Xi Ping held up Zhaoting and shot out the first beam of sword energy that Zhi Xiu had given him.

On Flying Jade Peak, Zhi Xiu, just about to say something to Lin Chi, felt a sudden lurch in his heart.

Hadn't the information said that the evil cultivators were planning to move on the anniversary of the destruction of Southern He? Why had they started several days in advance? What had gone wrong?

That blow whistled as it knocked apart the lightning drawn by the Emperor of the East, but the sword energy didn't pause. Before the malicious smile on the Emperor of the East's face could fully form, the dreadful sword wind had already reached him. The evil cultivator chief who had run rampant throughout the Land of Turmoil for centuries was instantly swallowed by the sword light. Not one of the evil cultivator's ships that had fled into the distance managed to get away. They were all enveloped by Zhaoting's light.

The South Sea was clear.

Zhaoting had killed the Emperor of the East with the swiftness of a falcon swooping after a bolting hare, but Xi Ping was hardly any better off—with his cultivation level, using Zhaoting was too much of a strain.

When he fell out of the sky, the better part of his tendons, bones, and meridians had snapped.

“Ouch,” Wangge Luobao lamented in his stead, knowing that he couldn’t speak now, “that hurts.”

Xi Ping blacked out briefly. Nothing remained in his mind but profanity.

“While the undying bones are admittedly mystical, you still have to be able to bear it,” Wangge Luobao said, sighing. “There aren’t many who could maintain their reason when crushed to dust. I couldn’t. I acknowledge my inferiority. But you’re being overhasty. The highlight still lies ahead.”

The whole of the Southern He Peninsula seemed to applaud him. A bolt of lightning struck Lancang’s Principal Peak. The enormous sword array seemed to have nearly taken shape.

Xi Ping reached the only hand he could still move into his mustard seed and groped around at random, not caring whether he came up with whites spirits or blue jade. His shattered bones repaired themselves almost violently, slashing his flesh. Xi Ping had no attention to spare for it—what the hell was so special about that dead fish? He had already driven away the troublemaking Yu Chang, why was the Queen Mother of the West...

“The next life spiritual fish is the messenger between life and death,” Wangge Luobao said softly. “Cut it apart, and you can open the Gate of Life and Death. Through that mist, the consciousnesses of the living can temporarily be projected onto their predecessors who have died in this area, attach themselves to predecessors who have some relationship to them, or some inheritance in common, some karmic connection, or some chance similarity... How many living people in the world have a chance to truly ‘learn a lesson from the mistakes of one’s predecessor’ like this? No need to worry about

your people. This is an incredibly rare opportunity. If a person of great understanding goes through it, they might even find their Way of the Heart.”

Xi Ping: “...”

As he'd thought, Yao Qi and Chang Jun had long ago been discovered by this bastard. Here he'd been wondering how Ziming-xiong could have gotten “lucky” enough to be chosen by the grit projection!

“As for Her Highness the Princess, I'm afraid she has seen the Two Sages now.”

Xi Ping knew Lancang's history. It had once had the Gold Sage and the Jade Sage, the Two Sages. These were the founders of the Lancang Mountains, a divine couple. The Gold Sage had also been a sword cultivator, and the Jade Sage had also been a Yang.

His meridians were struggling to absorb shifu's sword aura. It hurt so much that he gave way to wild thoughts in spite of himself: Could it be that you only had to get hold of a sword cultivator husband to attain the personal instruction of the Gold and Jade Sages through that dead fish? Were the single unworthy of inheriting the Lancang Mountains? If he'd known that, he wouldn't have killed the Emperor of the East. He'd have left the three of them to fight it out in the sages' grave...

“At the soaring heights of the cultivation world, a person is no longer themselves. Of what significance are husbands and wives?” Biting his words off strangely, Wangge Luobao laughed. “The Sanyue Mountains' fallen Xiang Rong was of the same lineage as his shifu the Black Emperor, and he had used the Unbound Furnace to refine himself until he resembled him so closely, yet their two Ways of the Heart are still tearing the Silver Moon in two. Never mind a sword cultivator and a toolmaker.

“One range of spiritual mountains can have only one full moon sage. The Ways of the Heart of this loving husband and wife gradually grew apart. The Gold Sage was a sword cultivator, and a husband. From either perspective, he thought himself superior and believed as a matter of course that he ought to be the master of the Lancang Mountains. He wanted to kill his wife.”

Xi Ping: “...”

Couldn't they have just broken up? Why go so far?

“A husband and wife who fall out due to incompatible Ways of the Heart can never rest until one or the other is dead,” Wangge Luobao said. “After all, that's the bedfellow who knows all your weaknesses. Besides which, that Gold Sage... well. I've heard that there are sword cultivators for whom the man makes the sword, like the Sword Ancestor, like your honored teacher. Wanshuang and Zhaoting were both mundane iron to begin with and became renowned as their masters did. There are others, however, for whom the sword makes the man, like the famous sword Xiuluo, which let Western Chu's Xiang Zhao squat on the title of Sword of the South for so many years. Unfortunately, the Gold Sage was the latter. He had attained divinity relying solely on the famous sword forged by the hand of that toolmaking master, the Jade Sage. How could a mighty full moon sage have such a shortcoming?”

“But the women of Southern He...”

Wangge Luobao spoke the Wan language with a particular clinging quality at the ends of his syllables, as though he were about to break into song. All of a sudden, Xi Ping remembered how long, long ago, when he had still been a clueless brat, he had played dumb and made Jiangli so angry that she had shooed him out of the House of Overflowing Splendor.

Back then, she had played a Southern He tune upstairs.

The women of He were as passionate as summer flowers, but if their love was unrequited, or they were betrayed, they would kill.

“It turned out that the Jade Sage had been prepared. Before he could strike, she turned the attack on him. Let me tell you a secret, Tai Sui. The Lovebird Sword Array was made by the Jade Sage herself, and one of the materials she used was a rarity, the only one of its kind...” Wangge Luobao laughed. “The Gold Sage.”

Yang Wan could no longer tell who she was, couldn't distinguish Lord Guang'an and the Gold Sage. The next life spiritual fish had joined the souls of the living and the dead. The sage's love, no shallower than her own, mingled with her longing for the mundane world. After love came nothingness, only a sky filled with ridiculous ashes.

She felt herself dropped into a boundless frozen wasteland. The Gold Sage and Guang'an both became muddled.

When a person came to the extreme limit of heaven, all their close kin left them; all they had for company was their Way of the Heart.

In that moment, it was as if the Lancang Mountains had come back to life. On the whole Southern He Peninsula, everyone temporarily lost their senses.

Spiritual energy intolerable to the body of an ascended spirit poured directly into the top of the Queen Mother of the West's skull. The marriage contract between the two of them broke apart.

Lord Guang'an suddenly found the strength to throw himself at her.

Everyone was on the border between life and death, their gazes drawn by the far shore of the Wangchuan. Only he still had but one

person in his eyes; he had even defied the influence of the next life spiritual fish.

Vast spiritual energy pierced ruthlessly through his chest. With the body of this sword cultivator as sacrifice, the flood of spiritual energy crashing against the Queen Mother of the West slowed until she could manage to channel it into herself.

The Queen Mother of the West's essence increased dramatically, and her cultivation jumped a small level up. A beam of sword light lit the Southern He Peninsula. The Lovebird Sword Array reappeared in the human world. Lancang had a master!

She suddenly opened her eyes. The medicine cultivator's grief-laden eyes with their faint trace of fragility were icy and serene, like the "heavenly edict" repeatedly sounding in her mind. Lord Guang'an's body fell with a crash. At the last, his fingers moved slightly toward the hem of her skirt.

He hadn't found A-Wan's eyes.

This was the Lovebird Sword Array; one person had to become material for it.

A thousand years ago it had been a man who had broken faith; a thousand years later, it was an infatuated sap... In fact, it was all the same.

Love was more terrible than a poisonous miasma, more cruel than a sword. Its mortality rate was one hundred percent.

The instant the Lovebird Sword Array appeared, Xi Ping's spine, which had just repaired itself, seemed to snap under pressure—he became the first objective of that divine tool of the mountains.

Xi Ping had seen the Bell of Tribulation, had seen the Silver Moon, and had seen the Cauldron of Nine Dragons, but those divine tools had either not been aimed at him, or they had been used up. This was his first time being the target of a divine tool of the mountains.

He finally knew why Xuanwu had brought the Silver Moon to kill Qiu Sha.

The moment the sword light pointed at him, Xi Ping's connection to the reincarnation wood was severed.

The divine tools could cut off the accompanying plants of evildoers like him, leaving their consciousnesses with nowhere to run.

And he also finally knew why, when the mysterious next life spiritual fish had such an ingenious use, Wangge Luobao had insisted on the superfluous gesture of making Yu Chang fool around with his grit projection.

Because in these desperate straits, only Yu Chang could have turned traitor and saved him—he was the only person in the world who could remove spiritual image brands, and his deal with Yu Chang wasn't yet concluded.

But in order to keep Yu Chang from manipulating the Queen Mother of the West, he had single-handedly triggered internal strife among Western Chu's warlords, sent away Last Straw Yu!

Wangge Luobao sighed, looking at the reincarnation wood in his hands, which no longer glowed. His expression was regretful.

Zhi Xiu's older brother was buried on the Southern He Peninsula.

Yu Chang and Kunlun alike had hoped that Zhaoting and Wanshuang would fight each other to a standstill. If only Zhi Xiu fell

into the trap in the southern mines, the precious territory of Southern Wan would be up for grabs.

Having built a temporary peace with the Sword Slave after great struggle, that preternaturally clever Grand Duke Tai Sui certainly wouldn't let his shifu come south.

After receiving word, Tai Sui was certain to come himself, because he would think that the Sword Slave had no reason to make trouble for a junior like him, and had no reason not to let him leave with the mortals under his protection.

And as soon as the merchant ships to pick up those people moved, even without spies, Wangge Luobao could tell that Tai Sui had reached the Southern He Peninsula.

From beginning to end, none of this had been played out for Zhi Xiu's benefit. What was so scary about the Sword of the South? It wasn't like he was the only sword cultivator in the world.

The Lovebird Sword Array had been waiting to bury the successor to the ungovernable way.

"A pity we couldn't chat." Wangge Luobao stroked the reincarnation wood. "Tai Sui, it's very lonely. All the paramount spiritual senses have passed away. Once you're dead, I'll have no one in the world to talk to—ancestor, when you schemed to kill Yuan Hui back then, I suppose you were also quite sad?"

"Raise the casket, hang two mats," he began to croon softly in a slightly foreign accent. A waking dragon emerged from the bottom of the sea to carry him. "Shelter it fully seven days..."

CHAPTER 218 - A Life of Regret (30)

There were too many souls of the dead in this awful place.

After the next life mist had diffused from the corpse of the big fish, Chang Jun, who had jumped into the sea, bore the brunt, becoming the first person to be swallowed by the mist.

Yao Qi, not far away, saw countless shades instantly attach themselves to him. There were common people, and there were low level cultivators in miserable plights; the majority of them were ants who had fled during the war two hundred years ago and had died on the way when some part of the fighting had touched them. The faces, frightened or blank, were projected one after another onto Chang Jun's face, like the images on a revolving lantern; it was like the stories about being possessed by ghosts!

Yao Qi was a step behind him, still climbing over the edge of the hidden realm. His first instinct was to run ashore. He watched in bewilderment as Chang Jun, his consciousness hopelessly tangled with the dead, cried out on behalf of tens of thousands of ghosts: "Help... help..."

Then something seemed to yank at his feet, and Chang Jun sank into the water.

By the time Yao Qi recovered his senses, he had already thrown himself forward to catch his classmate and friend's arm. The outcome was that he couldn't pull him back but was instead dragged into the sea with him. His ears filled with the flow of water. A phantom passed through Yao Qi's body. He was dazed, having the sudden feeling that he had eaten fertilizer. He grew a full palm-width taller and more, so tall he felt a little dizzy... Fortunately, he then went down on one knee.

Yao Qi heard himself pronounce a string of rapid words in the Southern He language. Steeped in the next life spiritual fish's mist, he was in a stupor, but because it was truly a struggle to speak the Southern He Language, he accidentally bit his tongue and, like a miracle, his head cleared.

“I've also been possessed by a ghost!” he thought fearfully.
“Hongzheng! Shiyong! Where are...”

Just then, he heard what the ghost that had “possessed” him was saying: “... that Lancang has reached this present pass is my fault. Not with a hundred deaths could I atone. But the people are innocent. The spiritual mountains no longer recognize me as Sect Leader, and the Lovebird Sword Array is out of control. If it is permitted to go into battle against the masters of all the nations, how can the people of the He Peninsula survive? Fellow cultivator, I beg you!”

Yao Qi was stunned.

This was Lancang's Sect Leader?

To hear him talk, Shiyong had guessed right. It really had been their own Sect Leader who had caused the disappearance of the Lovebird Sword Array and the great mountain array!

Looking where the gaze of this thousand-fold condemned man from two centuries ago was pointed, Yao Qi raised his head and saw an even taller man with the typical appearance of the people of Li; but at his waist twined a very special soft sword.

As soon as the Sword Slave Wu Lingxiao landed amid the life and death mist of the next life spiritual fish, she noticed that her consciousness was being invaded by the mist. She seemed to be in another person's body, with many thoughts that didn't belong to her welling up in her mind.

The will of the foremost sword in the world wasn't to be carried away so easily. Wu Lingxiao couldn't figure out what was going on with this mist; she didn't act rashly, only tightened her hand on Wanshuang. Suddenly, she realized something was wrong. She looked down and saw to her surprise that Wanshuang had changed into an exceptionally familiar soft sword.

Shizun...

Next, a man with his hair loose down his back was on one knee before her. "Fellow cultivator, I beg you!"

Wu Lingxiao was stunned; then she recognized him. This was Lancang's Sect Leader.

During the Wan-He War, she had just moved to the Disciple Hall and had heard a rough account of events in Southern He. It was said that this matter had originally been her shifu's responsibility, but the Beijue Array had acted up at the last moment, and he had been replaced by the Third Elder, who had rushed south.

Hadn't they said that shifu hadn't had time to reach Southern He?

Then why was he on Lancang's Principal Peak, speaking to its Sect Leader?

Just then, she saw the former great array of the Lancang Mountains begin to heave. Blood surged in the Sect Leader's eyes. "The great mountain array has broken. Fellow cultivator, I can't suppress the Lovebird Sword Array much longer. You have spent hundreds of years sealing Beiyuan's north wind on behalf of the continent. I've heard that the Heart Sword is a good..."

This was when the four nations joined forces to attack the Lancang Mountains.

Wu Lingxiao worked it out: yes, her shifu was always repairing the Beijue Array. He was an expert in array techniques. He would have been a step ahead of the others in reaching Lancang's Principal Peak.

But... why had Kunlun hidden this portion of history? What honor was there in the four nations besieging the Lancang Mountains, ganging up on a single old lunatic who had lost his mind to an obsession? Why had the Third Elder found it worthwhile to compete for the credit?

Before the Lancang Sect Leader could finish speaking, there came a boom. The Lovebird Sword Array flickered in midair.

“Fellow Cultivator Heart Sword!”

In the next life mist, Wu Lingxiao, acting with Kunlun's Second Elder the Heart Sword, shifted the point of that sword, joining Lancang's Sect Leader in meeting the Lovebird Sword Array. Even with her present cultivation level, it was still appalling. The Heart Sword cut through the clouds of tribulation over the Lancang Mountains. Her shizun had been in his prime then; with a shed skin cultivation level, he was capable of curbing the divine tool of another nation's spiritual mountains. He turned to ask Lancang's Sect Leader, “Hey, this is a full moon grade immortal tool, what are you planning...”

Looking through the eyes of the Second Elder in the past, Wu Lingxiao froze along with her shifu. They saw Lancang's Sect Leader, that old lunatic, beneath the divine tool of the mountains, tear open his inner store of essence. “Thank you. Move aside.”

The self-destructing shed skin blocked the sword light of the divine tool of the mountains. Wu Lingxiao saw for a moment how something like a prism flew out from the center of the Lancang Sect Leader's brow and hit the Lovebird Sword Array.

The Lancang Sect Leader had sealed the divine tool of the mountains with his own Way of the Heart, corroded by the heart demon seed!

Yao Qi, whose consciousness had unhappily ended up inside the Lancang Sect Leader, had been truly unfortunate. He felt himself crushed flat, embedded in the Lovebird Sword Array.

Meanwhile, outside the mist—

Xi Ping had never been good at focusing, but the moment the Lovebird Sword Array descended, all the distracting thoughts in his mind suddenly vanished. Everything around him slowed.

The spiritual wind of the Lancang Mountains suddenly gained direction. The simple equipment and arrays in the various nations' mining areas were swept up by the wild wind and utterly destroyed. On the ground, rows of inscriptions appeared automatically all of a sudden and spread in all directions like waves—this was the great array of the Lancang Mountains, lost for many years, appearing along with the Lovebird Sword Array.

When the inscriptions swept out, Xi Ping had no attention left to consider where the Sword Slave had been swept off to; he didn't think of Qiu Sha, who had been destroyed upon meeting the Silver Moon; he had no leisure to consider why Wangge Luobao, whose acquaintance he had hardly made, would scheme so resolutely to get rid of him... he didn't even have time to assess to what extent his meridians had recovered after being shattered by Zhaoting.

Beneath the light of the Lovebird Sword Array, which had lit up practically the whole Southern He Peninsula, all Xi Ping saw were the people looking up into the sky in panic.

Northern Li's mine envoy, the Luwu, the common cultivators scrabbling to survive in the cracks, the mortals, the Turmoilers.

Countless people.

There was no retreat. He couldn't die.

With a crack, Xi Ping's dislocated spine returned to its proper location, holding up his wound-riddled body.

Zhaoting...

The jaws, an unimportant location, were always the very last to be fully repaired. Xi Ping hadn't had time to get to them yet, so he couldn't speak. He only reached out for the Sword that Mended the Heavens, which had fallen not far from him.

The shard in his spirit responded to the sword. In that moment, Zhaoting, a divine shed skin sword he found it difficult even to hold, came in answer to his thought. It flew straight into his hand, which had only three fingers remaining.

From the shard in his spirit came shifu's voice. Xi Ping didn't even split off his attention to listen to what he was saying.

When shifu had passed along the sword energy to him, he had teased him, saying it was too tiring to stand guard for his rebellious disciple; he didn't even dare to breathe too loudly, since at the slightest sound, that disappointment would start looking this way and that.

Xi Ping had never accepted this—his spiritual sense was primarily attached to his hearing, anyway; it wasn't like he was deaf. Of course he would hear.

Now, however, he had at last understood the meaning of “turning a deaf ear” and “forgetting world and self.”

Sword light blazed high. The second of Zhi Xiu’s attacks stored in his meridians flew out with a whistle from his hands with their incomplete fingers, meeting the Lovebird Sword Array head-on.

The effectiveness of the Sword that Mended the Heavens was at a discount in his hands, but fortunately, the Lovebird Sword Array had been sealed two hundred years ago by Lancang’s Sect Leader. Now, without a shed skin master to act as its mainstay, it seemed ancient and slow.

A bit of the next life spiritual fish’s mist was cleaned up by the sword wind. On the South Sea, Yang Wan shook. Her eyes cleared for an instant, and she saw Lord Guang’an. Blood flowed from all the apertures of her face.

The Lovebird Sword Array instantly stagnated.

But at the same time, Xi Ping was like a sandcastle on the shore amid the wind and rain. After sending out two shed skin sword attacks in a row, he seemed to dissolve entirely into dust in the sword light.

Wangge Luobao slowly wiped his beast-taming flute, trying out high and low notes.

When Qiu Sha had seen the Silver Moon, she had stood stock still and met her death. On the South Sea, upon seeing the Cauldron of Nine Dragons, everyone had scattered in all directions. This was the first ascended spirit in history to dare to point a sword at a divine tool of the mountains.

It truly filled one with admiration. A pity it wasn’t any use.

The Sword Slave was trapped, and there were no accompanying plants on the Southern He Peninsula; even if Zhi Xiu immediately reached the Wan-He border, he would be too late to bury his disciple.

The courage of an ant trying to shake a tree.

Yang Wan meanwhile seemed to have fallen into a nightmare she couldn't wake up from. She was trapped within her spirit, not one of her movements free.

Lord Guang'an's corpse hung in the depths of her pupils. She stared at that unmoving person, a frail sliver of her consciousness struggling wildly in her spirit. She herself tore a rift in the Way of the Heart on her spirit.

No, I'm...

I'm...

The next moment, the inexorable mind of the Lancang Spiritual Mountains swallowed her up. Yang Wan's consciousness let out the most mournful shriek.

The stagnating Lovebird Sword Array concentrated its sword energy with a rumble. Xi Ping, who could no longer feel his body, couldn't manage to put himself together no matter what to use the third sword attack.

But just then, three bursts of gunfire flew into the sky like shooting stars, precisely hitting the Lovebird Sword Array.

Wangge Luobao instantly raised his head: ascended spirit grade!

What was this?

Apart from Tai Sui, there could be no other ascended spirit on the Southern He Peninsula!

Wei Chengxiang dropped out of midair, creating a deep pit in the ground where her knees hit.

She was only a half-immortal. She had been unable to move a muscle under the Lovebird Sword Array, until Xi Ping had blocked it with Zhi Xiu's sword.

Xi Ping had brought three sword attacks from Flying Jade Peak. The first two had been of the defense and shielding type. His second attack had won a moment's breathing room for all the people frozen beneath the sword light.

In that moment, Wei Chengxiang had seen the Lovebird Sword Array.

The reincarnation wood's connection had severed. She didn't know whether Xi Ping was dead or alive. She couldn't contact the Luwu or the Turmoilers.

But no one who could survive in the Land of Turmoil would cry until they had seen the coffin.

In a flash, Wei Chengxiang took from her mustard seed the upgraded immortal tool Xi Ping had given her to protect herself with — a cannon over four chi long; instead of cannonballs, what it had inside it were three ascended spirit grade talismans.

In a last ditch effort, Wei Chengxiang emptied the cannon all at once.

Wangge Luobao ordered the waking dragon to swim further away. He frowned. "Fighting with their backs to the wall."

Though Zhaoting's effectiveness was at a discount in Xi Ping's hands, it was still a shed skin sword. If even a shed skin sword's wind couldn't force the Lovebird Sword Array to retreat, what could an upgraded immortal tool that was at best of ascended spirit grade do?

Those three shots that could overturn mountains and shift seas were only enough to make the Lovebird Sword Array momentarily indisposed.

The sword array paused slightly. Its sword light blazed more and more fiercely. Wei Chengxiang almost had the impression that her eyes were being stabbed.

"It's over," she thought. "It's no use."

But then, before she could despair, an earthshaking rumble reverberated over the canal.

Wei Chengxiang's three breakthrough shots hadn't managed to harm a single one of the Lovebird Sword Array's hairs, but they seemed to have been a signal.

On the steamships, on land, the Luwu brought out the upgraded immortal tools they had brought along!

They had brought ten ascended spirit grade ones in all, and each person had an established foundation grade one.

Unable to contact each other, the Luwu acted with perfect coordination, firing on the Lovebird Sword Array almost simultaneously.

Fierce light exploded over the Southern He Peninsula, shoving the Lovebird Sword Array up into the sky.

The spiritual wind on the Southern He Peninsula was like knives, sweeping into the sea, stirring up countless vortexes of varying size.

The Eternal Flame had not seen the light of day in eight hundred years. On the first public appearance of spirit-conducting gold, manmade tools flagrantly matched themselves against a divine tool of the mountains.

Aside from the people of Wan, there was universal shock.

CHAPTER 219 - A Life of Regret (31)

While the Southern He Peninsula was large, apart from the Lancang Mountains, there was no other high ground. Therefore, the Heaven's Design Pavilion branch on the Wan-He border had a full view of the clash between the upgraded immortal tools and the Lovebird Sword Array.

But they only knew that their own upgraded immortal tools had “sent up fireworks”; they didn't know concretely what had happened. The eyesight of an established foundation cultivator couldn't reach that far, and it couldn't see the divine tool of the mountains wrapped in fierce light and raging wind. Right now, Pang Jian, guarding the border, was completely in the dark. He only felt wave after wave of violent spiritual energy slamming against the border inscriptions—from north to south, the southern peninsula spanned nearly ten thousand li; even after passing through the better part of the Land of Turmoil, the spiritual energy waves were still so strong when they hit the border—how big must the mess be?!

Pang Jian pinched the piece of reincarnation wood that had dropped the ball at the crucial moment. It had recently been sent to him by the Kaiming Department's head office; they had said it was secure and efficient. The upshot was that it seemed to be dead now. Pang Jian spilled blood on it, drew talismans, poured in spiritual energy; none of it was of any use... After reaching the end of his endurance, he even spat on it.

Ptui. He had actually believed that Xi Shiyong could be reliable!

And beside him there was a foolish blue-clothed half-immortal with his head tipped back, standing there marveling, “It's... a miracle...”

Pang Jian slapped his subordinate on the back of the head. “Some damn miracle!”

Who—or what—could cause so many ascended spirit grade upgraded immortal tools to fire simultaneously?

If it wasn't Wanshuang, then it was the Lancang Mountains' divine tool.

At present, the spirit-conducting efficiency of spirit-conducting gold could reach sixty to seventy percent of a cultivator's meridians. In comparison to true immortal tools and masters, a portion of the spiritual stones would still be wasted—and what was more, no matter how ample the Luwu's preparations, they had still gone in ships; they hadn't brought the Xuanyin Mountains with them. Their opponent, meanwhile, had the southern mines... in other words, the former Lancang Spiritual Mountains.

Pang Jian did swift mental calculations. How many rounds of fire could the Luwu hold out for?

Most critically, there were still so many mortals on the peninsula who hadn't evacuated. Why hadn't Xi Shiyong prevented the Luwu from staking everything on a single throw like this?

Was he... still alive?

Pang Jian broke out in cold sweat and quickly formed Heavenly Questions to send flying to the Xuanyin Mountains and the Kaiming Department's head office.

Was Xi Shiyong—Tai Sui—dead or not? Wangge Luobao also wanted to know.

The passing of an ascended spirit would indeed make as much noise as the collapse of a mountain, but compared to the present

circumstances, it wouldn't have been worth a mention.

Wangge Luobao narrowed his eyes. Never mind approaching the peninsula, the spiritual wind dashed against him so hard that he could hardly stay in place.

He'd known that the genius on Moon Plated Peak would be doing what he could to make up for the "drought of high level cultivators"; besides, as big as Southern Wan was, though the upgraded immortal tools were a close-kept secret, it would have been impossible for a single word not to leak out.

But no one had expected these so-called "upgraded immortal tools" to debut in such a startling fashion.

Wangge Luobao's throat was a little dry and his pupils had yet to recover from shrinking rapidly. The Luwu let off a second wave of firepower, and he suddenly cried out, "Oh!"

Compared to the first earth-shattering wave, the might of the second wave seemed to be considerably reduced, discounted by around twenty to thirty percent. The reaction of the Lovebird Sword Array verified his observations—this time, the divine tool of the mountains that had nearly been blown sky-high before didn't move a sliver. It even bore down slightly.

Wangge Luobao worked out the crux at once: spiritual stones.

The Wan's mysterious magic weapons also needed spiritual stones. The spiritual stones they had brought with them wouldn't stretch far enough to match the Lancang Mountains!

"Ha!" Wangge Luobao at once sent separate messages to Kunlun, Yu Chang, and even the Sanyue and Lingyun Mountains—for the latter, he didn't have means of contact and simply sent unencrypted notes flying to the nearest post stations to spread far and wide.

“How could I be alone in witnessing such a spectacle? I must invite my fellow cultivators from the various nations to have a look how the Xuanyin Mountains do without the stamina of cultivators who had established foundations... *Hss*, strange. Why is this evil wind so strong?”

To the east of the Southern He Peninsula was the East Sea, and to the west was the South Sea. Of them, the South Sea side was connected to the nations of Chu and Shu on the continent, and there were Southern Shu’s Three Islands on the sea. There was a lot of land to block the wind and waves. The waters had always been calmer than in the spacious and empty East Sea.

But now, a southeasterly wind had come out of nowhere on the East Sea and was blowing directly westward, along with the spiritual wind off the peninsula. The ships in the South Sea all turned into scraps of paper swirling in a gale. If not for the fact that the protective talismans Xi Ping had placed on the mortal merchant ships earlier hadn’t yet fully dissipated, many people would have become dead souls on the sea.

Even the waking dragon could hardly withstand the enormous waves. It wrapped around Wangge Luobao and rolled westward.

Wangge Luobao’s easy smile dimmed somewhat. His spiritual sense moved slightly. Suddenly, he had the sense that something was about to go out of control.

Also being blown around by the wind was the dying but not yet dead Xi Ping.

There was no ascended spirit on earth whose body could sustain two shed skin sword attacks within such a short span of time—not even if they were discounted.

Xi Ping's skin sack had gone entirely to pieces, almost like back at the bottom of the Impassable Sea, when his bones had been crushed and scattered to the wind.

Fortunately, there was no "shizu"¹⁰³ here to trick his consciousness into a star stone. Also fortunately, he had blown himself up instead of being smashed up by the Lovebird Sword Array. His sword attack had won Wei Chengxiang time to react, and the upgraded immortal tools of the half-immortals had shielded him from the Lovebird Sword Array's pursuit and attack, preserving his consciousness, which for him was the most crucial thing.

But the wretched thing was that his consciousness couldn't form new bones at once.

Even with the hidden bones, a consciousness was still very weak. Without a body or the reincarnation wood, which was similar to a body, a cultivator's consciousness was like a ghost in a folk legend; its farts wouldn't even smell. This time he had really shattered too cleanly, like an ascended spirit foretaste of "escaping the mortal dust"... Even when he had been repeatedly struck by lightning in the Sanyue Mountains, he'd still had half of a charred body to take refuge in!

He felt as if he had turned into a puff of air, his dispersed viewpoint making him dizzy. In his daze, he even had a marvelous notion: if he flew any higher, wouldn't he condense into clouds along with the water vapor, turn into rain, and "sprinkle his tears" upon the South Sea?

Goodness, he was even more poetic than the Blissful Village in Jinping's southern outskirts, where thousands of beauties had been buried!

Xi Ping, so “poetic” he was rendered unconscious by it, was swirled out onto the water and bumped into a fierce wind off the sea, which rolled his hardly coherent consciousness into a cylinder. The hidden bones immediately seized the opportunity to rebuild his body with spiritual energy. When they had just formed a rough outline, the fierce wind crashed against an islet, and Xi Ping broke to pieces once again—this really was hovering between life and death in the literal sense. Xi Ping gave a start amid his daze, woken by pain.

The third wave of fire from the Luwu’s upgraded immortal tools surged up to the clouds, exploding in his ears.

Xi Ping was the Luwu’s main planner. How could he not know how things stood with his own people? At a single glance, he knew that the Luwu’s spiritual stones wouldn’t hold out much longer.

While everyone had yet to recover from the shock of the upgraded immortal tools, he took advantage of the wild wind blowing him toward the South Sea and made a prompt decision, leaping toward the “life and death mist” on the surface: there was no time for him to slowly grow a body; supposing there was anyone here who could still put up a fight against the Lovebird Sword Array, it could only be the Sword Slave!

As soon as his consciousness, light as air, landed in that peculiar mist, Xi Ping heard countless voices ringing in his ears. His consciousness seemed once again to have turned into a river, trying to hold the struggling watery ghosts of all those who had died in the vicinity since the time Pangu had cleaved apart heaven and earth to the present.

But Xi Ping breathed a sigh of relief. So this was what “the meeting between life and death” meant. He could relax now.

He was different from the others. Xi Ping had only too much experience with his consciousness fluttering around, being unable

to find himself—when his body had been trapped in the Impassable Sea, his weak consciousness stranded outside had drifted through countless people living and dead. Now, innumerable thoughts flitted through his mind, but he concentrated and skillfully distinguished which thoughts were his and which were external.

He seemed to have turned into the canal, ignoring the swirling silt and garbage in the water, making his own way downstream. Soon he found the Sword Slave.

Xi Ping had never been so grateful for the Sword Slave's conspicuous size!

“Senior, wake up!” Xi Ping's consciousness contracted. Borrowing the spiritual energy inside the Queen Mother of the West's hidden realm, it grew a finger bone and abruptly poked at the center of the Sword Slave's forehead.

The center of the forehead was the seat of the spirit, the most sensitive spot; reasonably speaking, she ought to wake up!

But Xi Ping had underestimated the hardness of a shed skin grade half-puppet body. The weak finger bone which could hardly gather spiritual energy couldn't arouse Wanshuang's vigilance. The Sword Slave stood there unaware, letting him poke, and the finger bone Xi Ping had worked so hard to grow snapped!

Xi Ping: “...”

Another roar. The Luwu's fourth wave of firepower had been shot.

The sound was obviously even weaker. Xi Ping glanced out of the corner of his eye and saw that there were only established foundation grade upgraded immortal tools in that barrage; he knew at once that those colossal ascended spirit grade things had used up all the spiritual stones on the Luwu's ships.

The ascended spirit grade ones could bear up, but beneath the divine tool of the mountains, established foundations were nothing. Facing the upgraded immortal tools whose tempo had become disordered, the Lovebird Sword Array pressed down like a heavenly tribulation upon the ants on the Southern He Peninsula who had dared irreverence.

In a moment of desperation, Xi Ping's broken finger gathered weak spiritual energy and exerted a force that should have been beyond it. He actually succeeded in using his incomplete limb to pull out Yu Chang's *Discard the False and Keep the True* book and used the lowest grade power replicated in it—the discounted version of the grit projection. He burrowed into the Sword Slave's enormous shadow.

The grit projection was either the user's true body hiding inside another's shadow or a grit projection talisman activated at long range; even Yu Chang himself hadn't tried out this method. After all, apart from Xi Ping, anyone whose consciousness left their body would fundamentally be near death.

Moreover, while each person had their own shadow, they overlapped when they fell on the ground or the surface of the sea; the shadow at the Sword Slave's feet belonged to more than one person.

And this was the boundary between life and death.

The special place, the special technique, and the special consciousness all came together. Xi Ping's vision blurred, and a marvelous change occurred to his point of view: he saw a tall, broad man, unfamiliar to him, with a soft sword very much like the Blind Wolf King's wrapped around his waist. Behind him was a half-transparent Sword Slave.

Xi Ping was astonished. He could find people whose consciousnesses were stuck to those from the far side of the Wangchuan River, and he could see what they were experiencing now from a spectator's point of view.

The Sword Slave seemed to be in a daze, following along closely like a balloon. She was looking into the sky along with the man's stunned gaze—Xi Ping also looked in that direction, just in time to see a man self-destruct his own essence and use his Way of the Heart to attack the Lovebird Sword Array.

Xi Ping didn't consider which period of history this was. If he'd had eyes, no doubt he would have used the hands he had spared no effort to grow to rub them thoroughly: he had seen another half-transparent person stuck to the Way of the Heart attacking the Lovebird Sword Array—Yao Qi!

Then, like a stamp, Ziming-xiong pressed against the hilt of the Lovebird Sword Array's main sword with a *bam!*

The place where the Sword Slave had fallen into the mist just happened to be not far from Yao Qi. Their two shadows must have overlapped.

Taking advantage of the way his consciousness could spread and change form, Xi Ping flew in pursuit of Yao Qi. His dispersed consciousness congealed into a hand. A qin string with both ends melting into nothingness jumped out beneath the bones, and he played a shrill note into Yao Qi's ear.

Yao Qi had originally maintained a thread of clarity because of his lack of skill with the foreign language. He was immediately awakened by the music.

Xi Ping heard Yao Qi, stuck face downward to the sword hilt, give a cry of happy surprise: "Shiyong!"

The qin strings held by the bone hand multiplied. Xi Ping played qin sweet notes: *What's happening?*

Yao Qi said, "I don't know. I seem to be possessing Lancang's Sect Leader!"

The Sect Leader had rammed his Way of the Heart against the Lovebird Sword Array, embedding it in the hilt of the main sword; most likely it had yet to break!

And meanwhile, news of the upgraded immortal tools exploded like sudden thunder throughout the northern and southern continents. Kunlun's High Priest instantly looked alarmed. The Sect Leader muttered briefly to himself. "Call the Third Elder. Have him bring some people and come south with me."

In the Sanyue Mountains, the Silver Moon, which had been vacillating among the Principal Peaks, abruptly sank toward the East Peak. In the Lingyun Mountains, the Nine Dragons were uneasy. Yu Chang, desperately putting out fires, suddenly looked across the sea toward the Southern He Peninsula.

On the Wan-He border, a beam of light flew out of the moonlight frost tree in the courtyard of the Heaven's Design Pavilion branch, so fast that even the karma beast on the wall didn't have time to blink. A person had already landed at the courtyard gate—Zhi Xiu had walked out of his accompanying plant in a single step.

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Zhi Xiu's flashing figure paused at the gate, as if he were forcing his steps to slow. He turned and said gently to Pang Jian and the others, "No need for formalities. Thank you all for your hard work guarding the border. When the mortal merchant ships come, as long as it's safe, permit them to pass. I will trouble the Kaiming Department to make arrangements for them."

Pang Jian said "Yes," then carefully asked, "General Zhi, Shiyong..."

"He's still alive," Zhi Xiu interrupted.

His voice suddenly lowered, as if he weren't answering Pang Jian but talking to himself: "Still alive... Don't worry, this time I'm not too late."

Hearing that the source of his voice wasn't right, Pang Jian raised his head again and found that Zhi Xiu had gone into the distance. At the gate there remained only a karma beast hidden in the wall.

When it wasn't doing anything else, the karma beast would run around on Heaven's Design Pavilion's perimeter wall. It wasn't unusual for it to come out to see a shed skin, but Pang Jian's gaze froze—he saw to his astonishment that the karma beast had its head bowed, its forepaws folded in a kneeling posture, watching Zhi Xiu's departure as a vassal watches a ruler.

The karma beast had kept the walkers in the mortal world company for over a thousand years and had always been very friendly toward its own people... not counting some individuals universally hated by dogs and cats. In front of those it was familiar with, it was as playful and affectionate as a big cat or dog. But the sacred beast had a sacred beast's arrogance; Pang Jian had never seen the karma beast pay obeisance so solemnly to anyone.

What had happened?

Zhi Xiu didn't so much as look at the border inscriptions that had been disturbed by his crossing. He flew toward the Lancang Mountains.

The third sword attack Xi Ping had asked him for before leaving hadn't been on the sword platform. Instead, it had been the sword attack he had carved into the snow when he had faced the heavenly might while stuck at the shed skin boundary.

This request was very strange. Normally, what a sword cultivator collected in sword form anthologies or taught to their disciples were only "complete sword forms," also called "standard sword forms," the quintessence that the sword cultivator had repeatedly honed and extracted. But sword moves weren't petrified; they were subject to all manner of changes in the heat of battle. Sometimes, making a rapid response, though an attack had originated from a certain standard sword form, when it was used to meet a real emergency it would be altogether different, only assuming a bit of the standard sword form's sword aura.

Simply put, the standard sword attacks were the origin, and a sword mark left elsewhere was only a temporary manifestation.

"All the standard sword forms of my sword moves are on the sword platform." Zhi Xiu suspected that he had been wasting spit by instructing him. "Was your mind wandering again while I was teaching you about swordsmanship? You've forgotten what a 'standard sword form' is, too, haven't you?"

"It's not that bad, shifu," said Xi Ping. "You may have made a total mess of teaching me *Detailed Account of Meridians*, but you should still have a bit of confidence in yourself..."

His shizun rewarded him with a snowball and a *Still stuck on Detailed Account of Meridians, are you?*

So Xi Ping sloppily rolled up his sleeves and let the introductory text that had caused teacher and disciple to quarrel off the hook. Grinning, he said, "What would I need so many sword attacks for? My cultivation is only so strong. If it really gets to the point of using two sword attacks, I'll already be stone cold. I won't have a use for the third one anyway. Give it to me as a lucky charm."

This was only an incomplete sword form, the outcome of being forced into a hopeless predicament. There was little in it for posterity to learn from. Even though Xi Ping had picked it up by cheating, it would still be very hard for him to grasp intact sword aura from it.

But Xi Ping had said that when it came to the sword, as long as he knew enough to get by, it was fine; it wasn't like he earned his keep as a fighter.

What he wanted was the tenacity and courage of a lone and stubborn person beneath a canopy, still believing in a last gleam of hope at the end of the road.

With the appearance of spirit-conducting gold, spiritual stones were no longer "unusable by mortals"; the insurmountable chasm between mortal and immortal was about to be filled by a mighty flood. Beneath the mansion of the cultivation world, which had stood high and mighty for thousands of years, the foundations were being dug up.

Wen Fei landed at the summit of Moon Plated Peak and went straight to find the shovel-maker.

The storms outside seemed to have nothing to do with Lin Chi. All his focus was on the Unbound Furnace in front of him. He hadn't

moved for days. Wen Fei walked briskly toward him, took out his fan, and waved it in front of Master Lin's face: *I think Jingzhai just went to see the Dignitary of Fate Elder, and then his aura vanished from the Xuanyin Mountains. I hear that in the south... Look at the state of things, Lin-shixiong! How can you still be staring at the furnace?*

Lin Chi's gaze didn't budge from the Unbound Furnace. "General Zhi tasked me with making something, and I haven't figured it out yet... The turbulence is on the Southern He Peninsula, not in Great Wan. If I wasn't staring at the furnace, what else would I be doing?"

Wen Fei reconsidered; that was fair. It seemed that there was no shed skin to oversee Great Wan, but in fact every accompanying tree was like Zhi Xiu himself. He could appear in any place at any time. No one knew right now how many upgraded immortal tools Great Wan had ready domestically, and the Xuanyin Mountains would soon be done for, so there were no ill-gotten gains to be squeezed out; they were just like the cottage on Flying Jade Peak—shabby and safe. It was the Southern He Peninsula, where not a single blade of grass grew and no one could move freely, that had become the contested location.

Wen Fei craned his neck to look. *You're still mulling over that what's-it...that thing that can channel the spiritual mountains' spiritual energy into the mortal world like the Territory Map?*

Before the words had finished popping up on the fan, there was a crisp sound. Spiritual light spread from the Unbound Furnace. Ordinarily, this was a sign that a treasure was being brought into being inside a toolmaking furnace. Wen Fei's eyes lit up, but he saw Lin Chi sigh and withdraw his consciousness from the furnace. He raised his hand and caught a short length of richly colored spirit-conducting gold.

Wei Fei said, *Nice!*

“What’s nice about it? It’s a failure.” Lin Chi shook his head despondently. “Spiritual energy is conducted more or less the same way other things are conducted. It basically all goes from high to low, from dense to sparse. Ordinarily, spiritual energy would naturally flow from where it was highly concentrated to where it was scarce...”

Wen Fei said, *Wouldn’t that precisely mean flowing from the spiritual mountains to the veins of the earth?*

“I said ordinarily. The spiritual mountains are an exception—the accrual and dispersal of spiritual energy in the spiritual mountains is limited. It’s like a heavenly rule, outside of human control. I... I only have an ascended spirit’s cultivation. I can’t get around it.” As Lin Chi spoke, he started giving up on himself again. “But after the Jade Sage left, Lancang had no other shed skin toolmakers. Without having found the Eternal Flame, they made this thing two hundred years ago. I spent so many years on Moon Plated Peak holding my position without doing any work...”

Wen Fei quickly fanned him. *Master Lin, Master Lin, do not be impatient, try this.*

Saying so, he took out a small bottle. Everyone in Xuanyin’s inner and outer sects used pills produced by Rosy Cloud Peak. Lin Chi was depressed. He accepted the pill without even asking what it was and swallowed it, his attitude that of a person committing suicide by poison.

The pill slipped down his throat. Like a potent moisture expeller, it instantly dried up all of Lin Chi’s drippy emotions. He was faintly dazed, feeling that this slightly bitter pill was a little like a mind calming pill. First it stabilized his vacillating mood; then, inexpressible certainty welled up out of nowhere in his chest. It was as if he could do anything, go anywhere.

Wen Fei waved his fan in immense self-satisfaction: *A new pill, I hadn't named it yet. I've decided to call it the Ancestor Pill. Taking it makes you feel invincible. The inspiration comes from that brat Xi Shiyong. I've always felt that the two of you ought to borrow a little from each other's temperaments... Master Lin?*

Lin Chi extended a hand, summoning a worn out history book. "Wait, I remember that General Zhi said that thing that could conduct spiritual energy from the spiritual mountains was something the Lancang Sect Leader obtained at the final juncture. If they hadn't been so hurried and hard-pressed then, they might well have succeeded. But at the time, of the Lancang Sword Sect's three great toolmaking masters, two had passed away and one had turned traitor... so who made that special spirit-conducting gold? The Sect Leader himself was a sword cultivator."

On Sanyue's East Peak, Xuanwu's eyes suddenly opened. The white paper mask on his face went to pieces. Bright, clear moonlight illuminated his snow-white face, identical to Xiang Rong's.

Barefoot, his hair hanging loose down his back, he floated up from Sanyue's East Peak. The Silver Moon gave one final struggle and at last fell in behind him. The Sanyue Mountain Range's great array let out a sigh, and the murderous aura aimed at this so-called traitor to the spiritual mountains sank beneath the horizon like sunlight at dusk.

As if there were no one else around, Xuanwu walked directly into the main hall on Sanyue's Central Peak.

Within the space of a few steps, the silver moonlight had already repaired his damaged essence. The dirt and bloodstains on Xuanwu disappeared bit by bit beneath the moonlight. The oppressive might of a peak shed skin settled over the Sanyue Mountains.

He didn't carry out a slaughter, only fixed each hostile face in turn with his stare. Watching them kneel, unable to withstand the pressure, his deathly pale smile was as cold and treacherous as the Silver Moon.

A Linked Heart from Kunlun landed in his hand.

Southern Shu's Lingyun had also received a letter from Kunlun.

The Lingyun Mountains themselves were in a sorry state, and there was infighting between the two clans. They hadn't wanted to get mixed up in this, but the Xiuyi Sect Leader laid Wangge Luobao's note and Kunlun's secret letter out together, irresolutely read them three times over, and finally, like a punching bag, waved a hand and said with a sigh, "A letter written in the Kunlun Sect Leader's own hand... There is unrest in our nation, half of the Lingyun Mountains have collapsed, and the drained spiritual energy has yet to be traced. Our power on the southern continent is weak. When Kunlun summons us, we are not in a position to ignore it. Fair enough. Everyone, please protect the great mountain array. Do not give the evil cultivators an opening to exploit. I... Alas."

He looked miserable, like a young woman of good family being forced into prostitution. "I will go with the Cauldron of Nine Dragons."

Receiving his Sect Leader's urgent summons, Kunlun's Third Elder actually felt rather disapproving—counting the Second Elder "in seclusion," Kunlun had four shed skins in all. Now the Sword Slave was already in Southern He. Did the Sect Leader have any need to bring him along?

Kunlun's shed skins all assembled on the Southern He Peninsula... Oh, he had heard that Linked Hearts had gone out to Sanyue and Lingyun from Kunlun's heights. Such great fanfare, all for the sake of

a few evil cultivators, some strange immortal tools... and Xuanyin's little sword cultivator, who had just become a shed skin?

Was it worth it? It was giving Great Wan too much respect!

“Whether punishing evil or vanquishing demons, what need is there for my shixiong the Sect Leader to go in person? You can just leave this small matter to me.”

The Sect Leader didn't respond. After a long moment, he extended a hand to catch a Linked Heart that came flying from far away. After reading it through in a few glances, he crushed the paper and turned to say to the Third Elder, “Under the guise of patrolling the Beijue Array, Xie Chu has run off. It is suspected that he has gone beyond the Beijue Mountains.”

When he heard the Blind Wolf King's name, it was as if the Third Elder had a toothache. His face spasmed involuntarily. “In the matter of Southern He, Second shidi did in fact have some disagreements and misunderstandings with us, such that we parted on bad terms. If not for his cultivation level, he wouldn't have ended up trapped in... But for that rebellious disciple of his to harbor a grudge against the sect because of this really is preposterous...”

The Third Elder's words came to an abrupt halt; he looked at the Sect Leader strangely—the moment he mentioned the Second Elder, an ominous bloody light seemed to have flashed through the Sect Leader's eyes, so fast it was as if he had imagined it.

“Sect Leader shixiong?”

It seemed that Kunlun's Sect Leader only then came back to himself. Somewhat sluggishly, he said, “Xie Chu is crafty. He has remained in contact with Wu Lingxiao all these years. If Wanshuang's Sword Slave has believed something she has heard,

she won't necessarily be on our side. In the interest of prudence, the two of us will go together."

The Third Elder was just about to say something else when the Sect Leader waved a hand to interrupt him. "This is also the High Priest's intention."

Wangge Luobao's goals in this instance were first to get the southern mines and second to kill Tai Sui. Even he himself hadn't expected that his usual shit-stirring would deeply provoke the Sect Leader of far-away Kunlun. The world's preeminent masters were coming his way from all directions.

But the spiritual sense of a beast-taming cultivator, acute as the senses of the birds and beasts, was already telling him that the situation had gotten hopelessly out of hand.

Wangge Luobao took a glance at the South Sea, where the mist had somehow become even denser, and decisively sank to the bottom of the sea. Where the light didn't shine, a clamshell over a zhang high obediently opened and hid him inside itself.

He thought excitedly, Things are about to change.

Inside the next life mist, Yao Qi out of nowhere remembered an absurd rumor he had heard when he was young: they said that the Viscount of Yongning had dressed up in women's garb and been chosen as the Queen of Flowers.

Xi Ping's qin-playing fingers were unbelievably nimble—even though his skin hadn't yet had time to wrap up his bones.

Qin sweet notes flowed like drifting clouds from his incomplete fingers. Yao Qi, who didn't have a very strong grasp of sweet notes, had to concentrate with all his might to keep up.

Xi Ping said, *The Lovebird Sword Array has already emerged, I don't think Yang Wan will survive. Millions of lives are in your hands now. Listen to what he's saying. He's the only person in the world who has ever sealed a divine tool of the mountains.*

Yao Qi said in fright, "Listen...listen to whom?"

Xi Ping said, *Lancang's Sect Leader! He has already been destroyed, but your consciousness is still stuck to his Way of the Heart. The Way of the Heart must have something to say.*

Yao Qi said, "I hardly understand the Southern He language, I don't think I'll..."

Xi Ping's note came flying out: *Meditate!*

His consciousness was connected to Yao Qi through the grit projection, which in itself gave him a strong influence over the will of the person whom the technique was being used on, and Yao Qi's cultivation was far below his. Yao Qi obeyed in spite of himself. His senses sealed, and all his distracting thoughts were swept away by the single qin note; in the blink of an eye, he entered meditation.

Xi Ping had never seen anyone meditate like this—Ziming-xiong didn't seem to be meditating; he seemed to have been clubbed unconscious.

He froze where he was, then realized that this was an "ingenious use" of the grit projection; he was immediately inspired. By this time his hands had nearly grown back. Once again assembling a general outline of himself inside the next life spiritual fish's mist, Xi Ping withdrew back to the Sword Slave's side and unstintingly blended the spiritual energy he had just assembled into his playing, exploding it in the Sword Slave's ears.

The Sword Slave's consciousness shook violently. Her half-transparent figure suddenly fell backward, breaking free of that tall man. There was a faint red light in her frightening eyes. Her heavy footsteps fell on the ground, and sword energy spread from her in all directions, blowing up Xi Ping's human form until all that remained of him was one hand.

Xi Ping said, *Wait, senior, listen to me!*

How could the Sword Slave understand these Wan musical embellishments? She only saw a hand like something out of a ghost story plucking a few intermittently visible qin strings. "What manner of villainous ghoulish dares to scheme against me? Show yourself!"

Xi Ping's vital qin had remained in Tao County supporting the Law Breaker, and the qin he carried with him was copied with the *Discard the False and Keep the True* book. When it came within Wanshuang's sword energy, it was immediately obliterated.

And just then, yet another round of fire from the Luwu, obviously enfeebled, not only failed to push the Lovebird Sword Array away one bit, but instead seemed to enrage the divine tool of the mountains.

Outside the Lancang Spiritual Mountains, the great mountain array, which had been constantly spreading outward since the Lovebird Sword Array had appeared, repaired itself and lit up the peninsula.

Like a puppet on strings, the Queen Mother of the West slowly rose from amid the next life spiritual fish's mist. The mist she pushed aside dispersed slightly.

The form of the man in front of the Sword Slave blurred. She unconsciously reached out for him, but they passed through each other. She suddenly came back to her senses. With a shout, she

broke free of the next life mist. Wanshuang had already left its sheath—

CHAPTER 221 - A Life of Regret (33)

Utterly cold sword energy instantly swallowed the Queen Mother of the West in one gulp. Yang Wan seemed to be annihilated amid the age-old dream of restoring her nation.

But the divine tool of the mountains had already manifested; it had repaired the great array and no longer cared for the ruinously rash ascended spirit puppet.

With no one to control it, the Lovebird Sword Array set itself in motion. The chilly light of the array's main sword pierced the clouds. The terrifying array seemed to be inlaid along the edges of the thunderclouds, revolving along with the ghastly pale lightning flashes, scorning the human world.

On land, in the sea, every living creature sensed the murderous aura that had nearly flattened Xi Ping just now.

Everyone below a shed skin was an ant.

Amid the silence, the most authentic ninefold sword of Kunlun penetrated the Queen Mother of the West and struck the middle of the Lovebird Sword Array.

The Lovebird Sword Array swayed.

Inside the mist just now, what had that been?

Hallucination? Imagination? Or some new poisonous miasma that lowly Yang survivor had come up with?

The Sword Slave didn't know, and the only person who could explain it to her now hadn't yet regrown a mouth.

Prior to Zhi Xiu, Kunlun's Second Elder had been the youngest person in the world to become a shed skin, a man who had forged a solitary way of the sword amid the ninefold sword of Kunlun. People had once said that he would perhaps one day equal the Sword Ancestor.

The Sword Slave had thought before that there was something wrong with her shixiong's head. Everyone else said that the Second Elder was only trapped inside the Beijue Array, temporarily unable to leave; certainly no serious harm could come to so awesome a master. It was only that loose-tongued Xie Chu who was always saying that shifu was dead, just as if shifu being dead had some benefit for him. Surely it should have been the other way around? Even if the Sect Leader and the High Priest themselves had said that shifu was in fact dead, as long as they had seen no body, his disciples ought never to lose faith in their shifu being alive.

This devout belief wasn't concerned with the truth, and it didn't need proof. This was filial piety. A junior shouldn't have other ideas.

Besides, could the omniscient High Priest and Sect Leader have made a mistake? Would they deliberately conceal news of shifu's death?

But now, standing on the sea, with the icy mist from the other side of the Wangchuan curling around her and chilling her whole body, a thought appeared in her mind: Supposing that... Xie Chu was right?

As a student of the sword, Wu Lingxiao had entered the Disciple Hall when she was ten years old and entered the inner sect before she was fifteen. She had spent practically all her life in Kunlun.

The Second Elder was self-effacing to the point of coming across a little simple and taciturn. He had few students. Large numbers of sword cultivators set their minds on him every year and tried to pull in all kinds of connections. At the time, he had probably finally lost

his patience with being asked by the Sect Leader when he would take another disciple, so he had yielded and pointed at random, saying, “Well, then I guess I’ll have the best of this batch of students from the Disciple Hall.” The upshot was that he had ended up with a half-grown little girl.

Wu Lingxiao hadn’t even reached marriageable age then. The girls of the northern continent all seemed to develop late. Teacher and disciple had looked at each other in dismay. She might never forget shizun’s expression then—there had almost been a bit of terror amid his blankness.

Such a small living creature, and a girl at that; she hadn’t even reached her full height! How was he supposed to raise her? The Second Elder was afraid lest he make some mistake and kill her, or feed her wrong and stunt her growth. He treated her practically with the greatest care, leading to endless ridicule, like a clumsy old father.

She had thought for a time that apart from the brother she had come hand-in-hand out of the womb with, the best person she had ever met was shifu.

But one sixty year cycle later, because of a single sentence from this best of shifus, her brother had been hanged in his courtyard, dying discontented.

Then there was Kunlun.

Though the sect had injured her, it had also given her her achievements. Every person to come out of the Disciple Hall took pride in being a “Kunlun sword cultivator.”

Two hundred years later, she suspected that shifu’s unknown fate was connected to the sect.

She was a person who sought purity and perfection, who thought that a fast sword could cut through everything. Yet she seemed fated to be pursued eternally by interwoven loves and hates that couldn't be unknotted.

The Sword Slave fixed her eyes on the Lovebird Sword Array suspended above the Lancang Mountains.

Supposing that what she had just seen hadn't been an illusion, then the Lancang Sect Leader's Way of the Heart ought to still be embedded there. Even if she died, she had to pry open the Lovebird Sword Array and have a look.

Moving at the same time as her was Xi Ping.

He had broken and reformed, reformed and broken. Now he was perhaps even a little used to it. Indifferent to further attacks, he chased after her, the speed with which the hidden bones regrew his body becoming faster and faster.

At first, his consciousness had been blown a hundred li away from land, then fluttered around like a kite for ages before finally managing to grow back a few finger bones. Now, after being smacked to bits by the Sword Slave, in hardly any time, he already had his vague outlines. By the time he returned to the peninsula, where the greatest danger lay, Xi Ping's hands had completely grown back.

The moment he landed, a pair of long, slender legs suddenly extended from his formless consciousness, narrowly managing to hold him up. Within ten steps, his meridians had practically finished linking up, and he could even sense his essence. After this dispersal and reassembly, his essence had increased by ten percent over his previous boundary, reaching the middle ascended spirit stage. And the two sword attacks that had smashed him to dust had entered his bones; when he used them again, they would be entirely his own

“Anger Shifu to Death” sword attacks; and because those two sword attacks had broken him from the inside out, the third and fourth “Anger Shifu to Death” sword forms would be far handier than the others.

Before Xi Ping could go streaking, he cloaked himself in a camouflaging robe with a talisman and with another talisman summoned back Zhaoting and his mustard seed.

Next, all the flying goose machines on the Luwu ships received word from Tai Sui: “Cease fire! Leave!”

The Luwu immediately put their scant remaining spiritual stones into their protective arrays. Under the double impetus of mechanical power and spiritual energy, the big steamships of new Moon Plated Gold surged through the Grand Canal that was seething with spray.

The other ships realized what was happening and quickly followed suit, fleeing in all directions.

Xi Ping struck the water with a beam of spiritual energy, which spread like a big net, pointing the way for the wildly darting merchant ships, preventing them from crashing against each other in their haste. Close-knit sword energy hung at low altitude, blocking the fatal attacks dropping out of the sky.

In the sky, the Sword Slave was waging war against the Lovebird Sword Array. When she attacked, the Sword Slave had always acted as though there were no one else around; the Lovebird Sword Array was the only thing that remained in her eyes. This was after all a full moon grade divine tool of the mountains. Sword light tore at her body, revealing the bone jade within, carved all over with arrays and inscriptions. The bone jade was riddled with scars, just like the devastated Southern He Peninsula.

On the ground, Xi Ping would have loved nothing better than to seize this opportunity to pick up the whole Southern He Peninsula, people and all, roll it up like a rug, and toss it out of the way.

The Sword Slave, that sword maniac, cared for nothing. She was determined to pierce the Lovebird Sword Array, trying to reach in and grab its main sword.

Inside the sword array, the main sword was located at the crux of the array. How could it be grabbed just like that? The Lovebird Sword Array's sword energy, which had just been scattered in all directions, all pointed at her, wanting to teach a lesson to this junior who had the audacity to pick a fight with a full moon grade divine weapon.

A loud rumble. Xi Ping went numb all over; for an instant, he even thought that he had been struck dead by that divine tool.

Then, his newly grown cervical vertebrae cracked back into place, and his own skin covered those bones that were always trying to teach him how to become a god. Xi Ping's features were restored. His senses returned. He quickly raised his head and saw the Sword Slave's huge body suspended in the Lovebird Sword Array's sword light like a mote of dust.

But the next moment, a beam of frost abruptly flew through the sword light that was even more dazzling than a gold-smelting furnace; it shot toward the Lovebird Sword Array like a flash of lightning, knocking the big swords around the sword array off their original trajectories!

The Sword Slave's figure reappeared. Her skin and flesh was all gone now, her naked puppet body revealed in the sword light.

She was a monster held together with bone jade, spiritual stones, and a small quantity of human bone. This body had altogether

forsaken a human appearance and lived only for the sword. The hunched shoulders were unusually broad, the eyeballs had vacated. The empty eye sockets were also carved of bone jade. At the outset, perhaps to save herself trouble, she hadn't made herself the curving brow ridge and eye sockets of an ordinary person. There were only flat, functional circles there.

The sharp gaze shooting out from within was still fixed on the array's main sword.

Where Wanshuang passed, the frosty wind of the utter north seemed to blow over the blistering hot Southern He Peninsula. That sword puppet became especially excited when facing a powerful enemy. A battle aura that made you shiver spread in all directions. Instantly, the menacing Lovebird Sword Array actually showed faint signs of flinching.

Fair enough. The Lovebird Sword Array's main sword was made from the Gold Sage, who legend had it was only a coward who had become a god because of a sword.

Xi Ping suddenly remembered how, long ago, the ignorant Xi Yue had shown him a book, which had described "sword-bearing half-puppets"; it had said that they "could travel a thousand li in one day, know no weariness, go until the last gasp and fight the enemy without end."

He had only been a shallow youth then. He had taken one glance and been overwhelmed by ugliness, then impatiently driven Xi Yue off.

But now, witnessing the Sword Slave herself, he had finally discovered that judgments of beauty and ugliness were so much groundless and narrow-minded self-importance; what they revealed were only one's own desires and fears. For a person who frightened others, her ugliness was a great part of her.

The Sword Slave gave a bellow. Wanshuang once again slashed at the Lovebird Sword Array.

Xi Ping anticipated that this blow would be earthshaking. He was about to shove a fleet of ships into the South Sea when, in a flash, his spiritual sense suddenly gave him a warning. Out of the corner of his eye, Xi Ping glimpsed cold light rising over the sea to the west.

The sword array and Wanshuang were locked in close combat. In a moment of desperation, Xi Ping sent a handful of papermen flying into midair to block the sword energy leaking through. At the same time, it was as if a ghost out for vengeance had blown on the back of his neck. All the hairs there stood up one by one. Zhaoting trembled incessantly in his hand.

That was moonlight—not from the moon in the sky, but from the Silver Moon.

“Look out!”

Before his voice could pierce the grit flying through the air, Xuanwu had already glimpsed from a distance the half-immortal ships moving unusually fast on the peninsula and the South Sea.

He lifted his chin slightly and indifferently fixed a look on the Sword Slave tied up in battle with the Lovebird Sword Array. “Evil cultivator.”

As he spoke, the Silver Moon’s perilous light fell.

Oh no!

Just then, Zhaoting slipped out of Xi Ping’s hand.

Xi Ping automatically made a grab and couldn't hold onto it.

He abruptly raised his head. A beam of utterly chill sword light was reflected in his eyes. It instantly spilled over the South Sea.

The seawater rose sharply. Where the sword light passed, countless icebergs rose out of nowhere and grotesquely reflected the Silver Moon's light.

But the icebergs weren't entirely transparent. Inside them were frozen sword cuts, one after another, like whirlpools, layer upon layer of them, destroying or cutting down the Silver Moon's light; not a sliver of it leaked onto the sea or the ground.

Xi Ping almost swayed.

Looking in the direction of Zhaoting's sword light, he saw a man dressed in a light grey scholar's robe come down from the clouds and salute Xuanwu from a distance. "Elder Xuanwu, the Xuanyin Mountains' southern mines are evacuating miners and citizens residing abroad. The cultivators on those ships are subordinates of the Kaiming Department, not evil cultivators. Please let them pass."

Xi Ping was at the estuary, with countless icebergs firmly separating him from Xuanwu.

Zhi Xiu landed lightly on the tip of an iceberg very close to him. He didn't turn his head. With the shard of Zhaoting, he could pinpoint Xi Ping's location. Behind his back, his hands tapped now and again on Zhaoting's sheath.

An ascended spirit like Xi Ping, inclined to attach his spiritual sense to his hearing, could if he so wished hear a little fish burp a hundred li away from the middle of a hurricane.

He could hear that shifu was tapping out tapped sweet notes—not the mismatched old edition from back at the Latent Cultivation Temple; he had actually learned the newest version. *Leave here, don't worry about any of it.*

Xi Ping closed his eyes. A sad and bitter helpless smile appeared on his face.

He was accustomed to making himself master of a situation. As soon as he saw this attitude, he understood what had happened.

When the upgraded immortal tools had unexpectedly made their appearance in Southern He, after the shock, Wangge Luobao must have given a push from behind, immediately transmitting the news all over the world.

Forget about everyone else—Kunlun's Sect Leader had a heart demon seed growing in his head and would certainly have wanted to bury the Sword Slave in Southern He and take back Wanshuang. On the other hand, because of the appearance of spirit-conducting gold in Southern He, he would also have told Lingyun and Sanyue to come with him.

And as Chu and Shu would see it, with all three of Kunlun's shed skins in Southern He, who wouldn't be afraid?

They had to come, of course, but Xuanwu and Lingyun's people were each sure to bring their divine tools—Xuanwu was already here; Lingyun and Kunlun were further away, so they were probably a step behind.

The Silver Moon, the Cauldron of Nine Dragons, and the Lovebird Sword Array would all be assembled here; adding in Kunlun and the Sword Slave on guard against each other, all these sides that each had their own axe to grind would be locked in a to-and-fro struggle,

and they wouldn't yet dare to rush at Southern Wan's interior with its unplumbed depths.

But Zhi Xiu had come.

That crow's mouth of the Dignitary of Fate Elder's had spoken a prophecy—he would be censured by all.

Such an obvious thing—did he really not understand? Hadn't they agreed that he could under no circumstances get mixed up in the Southern He business?

If Tai Sui were so easy to kill, he'd have been crushed to dust by the spiritual mountains at the bottom of the sea eight hundred years ago! Zhi Xiu coming here was as superfluous as Zhaoting with its “fear of heights.”

How could there be such a worrisome shifu in the world?

Zhi Xiu tapped on the sheath again: *Do as you're told.*

His rebellious disciple didn't move. Perhaps he didn't know those words.

Zhi Xiu took a deep breath. *I'm already here, what else can I do? I can't beat them to begin with. Don't distract me.*

As expected, these words jabbed Xi Ping in his weak spot. The next moment, Zhi Xiu sensed the shard of Zhaoting moving quickly from where it had been, landing under the cover of the icebergs on a ship that had fled far away... The aura he sensed was different than usual; it must be that the hidden bones hadn't entirely grown back yet.

Zhi Xiu's fingers trembled slightly as they stroked Zhaoting's sheath. He sighed to himself. Being crushed to dust at every step—why did

he have to walk such a road?

Then he stopped worrying and raised his head to look at Xuanwu, not far from him.

This was Xuanwu's first time publicly revealing the face under his paper mask. He was followed by the silver-colored "moon," like Chang'e. White as the whitest snow, he hung in midair, looking Zhi Xiu up and down.

"Zhi... Jingzhai. Descendant of an illustrious family. Did not go through a proper disciple selection at the outset but entered Xuanyin's inner sect because an exception was made, taken as a direct disciple by one of Xuanyin's four highest managers—his only direct disciple. Progress from ascended spirit to shed skin has been unprecedented and unequalled in speed." With the slightly stiff accent peculiar to the Chu, he enunciated each word of the Wan language distinctly. "Who could hear this and not say that you are a perfect man?"

Zhi Xiu calmly said, "There is no such thing as a perfect man. Elder Xuanwu praises me too highly."

"But heaven has already given you such tender praise—all of you," Xuanwu said softly. "Yet Your Excellency was unable to appreciate the favor. You grew an evil tree in the spiritual mountains, insulted your teacher and besmirched your ancestors—"

No sooner had Xuanwu spoken than there came the sound of a crash. The enormous form of a moon appeared on the South Sea and melted all the icebergs in sight in the blink of an eye.

Right now, Wei Chengxiang was keeping an eye out in all directions. Running the risk of being chopped to mincemeat by the masters, she had expanded her consciousness to its widest amid the wind of knives and rain of swords, blazing a trail for the Luwu.

Two human figures suddenly landed in front of her, moving even faster than her consciousness.

Wei Chengxiang instinctively backed up three chi before getting a clear look at the newcomers. She froze. “You...”

In front of her were two little pretty boy Xi Pings, not wearing any kind of spiritual image mask—and one of them was even paler than the other.

The paler of the two pushed the other Xi Ping toward her. “A paperman, take him away for me.”

Wei Chengxiang said, “What?”

Papermen were only somewhat useful with a consciousness injected into them. Where was Xi Ping going to find the surplus strength to split his concentration?

Xi Ping reached out a hand to touch the paperman’s head, which turned transparent. Wei Chengxiang found to her astonishment that the paperman had a fragment of a spirit, with the shard of a sword suspended on it. “This is...”

“This is the most important part of me,” Xi Ping said seriously. “I’m handing it over to you. Take it away for me along with these people... A-Xiang, you’re the most reliable friend I’ve ever had.”

Before he had even finished speaking, he was gone, vanished into a shadow.

The bone-splitting talisman san-ge had left him with had given him a bit of surplus power, making him temporarily capable of cutting parts off himself.

Many thanks to the Lovebird Sword Array for smashing him up to the middle ascended spirit stage—he had put that cultivation level to use. He could now endure cutting off a tip of his spirit and sneak back to find his scoundrel shifu, still willful even at his age.

CHAPTER 222 - A Life of Regret (34)

A vital power was a thing inextricably linked to the “way” that a cultivator walked.

For a cultivator from the spiritual mountains’ orthodoxy, however useless that person might be, their power would still be honest and aboveboard. When they came to blows, there would be a grand spectacle of real weapons. Those belonging to unorthodox ways were different. With thanks to Yu Chang-xiong, that *Discard the False and Keep the True* book ought to have been called *An All-inclusive Aid to Petty Pilfering* instead; nothing could have been more useful in this instance.

Xi Ping handed over the paperman and the shard of Zhaoting to Wei Chengxiang to take away and passed through the shadows of ships and countless people, as collected as if he had just downed several jars of mind calming pills.

Even though his cultivation had jumped a grade, he still had no standing to get mixed up in a battle of shed skin and full moon grade—never mind a middle stage ascended spirit, with the fighting capabilities of those present, even an individually useless shed skin who showed up would have to stand aside.

This time, he had come to be a shadow hidden in the dark.

Xi Ping guessed that Xuanwu, first, didn’t know about the rift between Kunlun and the Sword Slave, and, second, hadn’t expected his shifu to come; otherwise, that White Hair wouldn’t have come so early. There wasn’t a pig-headed idiot in the world who would throw himself head-on at a sword cultivator’s weapon.

Though that old codger was a master, second in Sanyue’s standing only to Xiang Rong, and, objectively, his cultivation was certainly

considerably higher than that of a sword cultivator who had just become a shed skin, Sanyue's superiority lay in talismans, arrays, and inscriptions. Of these, arrays and inscriptions both needed prior arrangement; it was very hard to deploy an array in the heat of battle facing a powerful opponent at an away game. And while talismans came in all kinds of flashy varieties, in front of a cultivator of the same grade, their destructive power would unavoidably be somewhat inferior. A close encounter with a sword cultivator, capable of overcoming the skill of ten with the strength of one, would put Xuanwu in a comparatively weak position; he would only be able to give play to between sixty and seventy percent of his cultivation.

It was only that Xuanwu had the Silver Moon, while Zhi Xiu still had to mind the mortals and low level cultivators who hadn't yet had time to evacuate.

Luckily, Xuanwu judged others against himself.

Dongheng's Sanyue had always thought that as long as the lofty immortal mountains were stable and capable of maintaining order, mortals would naturally find a means of subsistence. The orthodoxy of the immortal mountains did indeed care for the people, just as a farm protected the animals in its enclosures with utmost care; but it would have been absolutely preposterous for the farmers to die for their animals.

Xuanwu was using mortals to tie down Zhi Xiu, but from the bottom of his heart he didn't believe that there was anything very important about mortals, so he wasn't going to go out of his way to mete out heavy punishment against the merchant ships that were everywhere. He was going to keep within "proper limits," refrain from thoroughly enraging the sword cultivator in front of him, leave those worthless "hostages" alone and go at him with the Silver Moon.

Therefore, both of these shed skin masters wanted to stall: Zhi Xiu wanted to stall the Silver Moon, let his disciple get people away from the battlefield as much as possible; Xuanwu wanted to stall until Kunlun and Lingyun arrived.

The most ideal course of events would be to dispose of the Lovebird Sword Array before the others showed up, release the Sword Slave, and convince Wanshuang to join hands with Zhaoting to get rid of Xuanwu. This way, when the Kunlun sword cultivators came, Zhi Xiu and the Sword Slave could focus entirely on them.

With such a major commotion in another country, both shed skin sword cultivators from Kunlun were probably coming. Two against two—the Sword Slave and Zhi Xiu’s ages added together didn’t come to a scrap of the others’, and there were many aspects in which they would be unable to best them. Luckily, the Sect Leader was carrying the heart demon seed san-ge planted on him; there was still a chance.

Finally, there were the Lingyun Mountains.

All of their shed skins that might come were beast-taming cultivators, with mediocre fighting skills and their immortal mountains cut down by half. How much impact they had on the battle would hinge on other aspects.

Lingyun’s Sect Leader wasn’t like Xuanwu, who urgently wanted to prove something; he would probably be the least proactive in coming.

The way of beast-taming had its own methods. There were plenty of things on land and in the sea that could act as their spies. Xi Ping thought that if he were Lingyun’s Sect Leader, sensing the commotion on the Southern He Peninsula, he certainly wouldn’t rashly show his face. He would cautiously observe the battle from the sidelines and come out to deliver a fatal blow when it was

mostly settled, win himself some sense of presence and right to speak... and if things went badly, he would simply run off and pretend he hadn't come—that would of course be for the best.

But Xi Ping didn't dare to rely on the cards dealt by fate.

Because the greater likelihood was: the half-immortal Yao Qi would have no way to communicate with the Lancang Sect Leader's Way of the Heart, the Sword Slave would be locked in a stalemate with the Lovebird Sword Array, Kunlun's two great sword cultivators would descend from the sky and take a stab at the Sword Slave's completely undefended back, getting rid of Wanshuang first of all. Once Zhaoting was suppressed by Kunlun's ninefold sword, Xuanwu and the Silver Moon's might would be far greater than the dribble it was now; when the time came, the Cauldron of Nine Dragons hiding in the shadows would be delighted to come add some finishing touches.

The shed skin masters of three mountains, the divine tools of three mountains; even the Southern Sage couldn't have escaped if he had come.

Apart from this, there was also an even more dangerous person here.

Wangge Luobao was hidden inside a clamshell on the seabed. He narrowed his eyes. The remnants of a beam of sword energy came to the seabed and scraped the clamshell. Cold sword aura seeped into the clamshell.

Spirit-conducting gold had emerged, and the three nations had reacted quickly, far surpassing his expectations. For the sake of a crowd of half-immortal bandits, they had dispatched so many divine tools. There must be some inside story here unknown to him.

He could leave that aside for now, quietly observe the changing situation from the sidelines, but...

Wangge Luobao reached out and lightly brushed a fingertip over the sword mark. A cut immediately opened on his finger.

He wiped away the blood. "Zhaoting has actually come."

This Sword of the South had just become a shed skin. If he hadn't lost his mind and gone thoroughly insane, he shouldn't have come in person to tread in the muddy waters here. But he had shown himself on such a grand scale, meeting the Silver Moon in battle upon first appearing. He was clearly drawing fire, and that could only be for the sake of...

Wangge Luobao slowly pressed on his temples, a pained expression finally appearing on his face. "It's really no easy matter to get rid of you, Tai Sui."

He was plainly only a "juvenile" ascended spirit, but with this successor, the undying bones were ten thousand times harder to deal with than when they had belonged to Yuan Hui, the original himself.

Where on earth had the ungovernable way dug up this successor?

Of course the undying bones weren't without weak points. If other parts broke, they could be recreated, but if the hidden bones "died," then it was all over. Yuan Hui's hidden bones had been his own skeleton. When they were cut clean in half, he died.

But looking at all of this "Tai Sui"'s miracles in recent years, his hidden bones must be attached to his consciousness. Hidden bones attached his consciousness, added to the reincarnation wood, through which he could travel at will—the style of the undying

bones had instantly gone from indomitable to weird and unknowable.

And as Wangge Luobao saw it, this was simply unbelievable.

At the moment of death and without a Way of the Heart, not to be engulfed by the pain and fear of death, to maintain a powerful will to live and remember his own origins—surely that must take a heart like iron and stone?

All right, it was one thing for his consciousness to become increasingly concentrated as his cultivation became higher, but Wangge Luobao couldn't understand how he had made it past the open-eyed boundary.

A mortal's consciousness was weaker than floating dust. How could a person reputed to be a young master who had grown up in Jinping have remained lucid under those circumstances?

Unless he was one of those one in a trillion pigheaded people. But those people were all firm and unyielding, their weak points very obvious; they couldn't very well be as slippery as this Tai Sui.

It had already been so hard to block Tai Sui's connection to his accompanying plant. If he let him escape from here, he would be his arch nemesis for life.

I can't let him leave here, Wangge Luobao thought.

Meanwhile, Xi Ping, like Wangge Luobao, was soaking in the South Sea, with the same thought running through his head: Where is that jerk hiding?

The shed skins clashed beneath daylight and sword light, and the two neither quite evil nor quite orthodox ascended spirits each sank into the shadows.

Under the circumstances, neither of them dared to send his consciousness out to sweep at random. Wangge Luobao considered and sliced open his palm, but the blood from the wound didn't flow down. The blood droplets floated up, sketching a miniature array.

This array was only the size of his palm, but it seemed to have emptied out the better half of his essence. All the color instantly drained from Wangge Luobao's face. He shook all over. Next, countless eyes appeared in the array, the compound eyes of insects, the vertical pupils of snakes, the cat eyes of big beasts, the lidless eyes of fish... Not one of them belonged to a human, anyway.

After a long moment, when he could hardly remain kneeling, the array fixed on the eyes of a seabird. The seabird's line of sight quickly slipped over a Luwu merchant ship; on its deck were Wei Chengxiang and two Tai Suis.

Wangge Luobao stopped that image and opened his eyes from behind the array. Staring fixedly at Xi Ping's mouth, he read the instructions he had given Wei Chengxiang.

"I've caught you by the tail... It turns out you're still here courting death. Then I can relax."

Wangge Luobao dispersed the array and took out his flute. A sound inaudible to human ears diffused from the seabed.

In the slightly murky water, a line of algae plastered itself unnoticed onto the hull of the steamship Wei Chengxiang was on. A small quantity followed the slashing spray, sticking to the deck and hold of the ship, keeping an eye on the paperman sitting blankly in the hold.

With his connection to the reincarnation wood severed, this paperman was probably Tai Sui's only channel of communication with his Luwu lackeys.

As expected, shortly, the paperman stood up, movements not very coordinated, and walked over to the flying goose machine to send a message to Tao County.

Tao County's Zhao Qindan received the note, and within the time it takes to drink a cup of tea had the outlines of a plan.

Not long after, the *Tao World Record*, just about to go to print, received a notice to insert a news item at the last moment. It couldn't be added to the printer's block anymore, so they simply printed it on a single sheet, attaching it to the main paper as a freebie.

What is said was: *Sanyue's Elder Xuanwu appeared in the South Sea along with the Silver Moon and was ambushed in a joint attack by Zhaoting and Wanshuang; signs point to disaster.*

Zhaoting and Wanshuang hadn't joined forces yet, but that was nothing to worry about. Being a little early didn't count as lying. Though Xuanwu was still hale and hearty, that wouldn't hinder everyone from laying a curse on him.

Since the *Tao World Record* had first published the photo of Northern Li seizing the southern mines, then "carelessly" revealed the recording of Yu Chang, if they didn't have the eyes of the whole world, at least all of Western Chu was watching them.

Because of that recording, there had been infighting among the rebel warlords, and the connections Yu Chang had taken great pains to build up over the course of eight years had been nearly destroyed in an instant. And before Xuanwu had left, because the Silver Moon had recognized him as its master, the great array had

been restored and the disordered spiritual energy of the Sanyue Mountains had suddenly stabilized. Dongheng City's sealed city gates opened. Inner sect cultivators turned out in full force, menacingly bringing down their attacks in all directions.

All the local warlords—including even Yu Chang—had thought despairingly that the game was as good as lost.

Now they were suddenly informed that Xuanwu had left the Sanyue Mountains with the Silver Moon, and there was a good chance that he would die out there!

This was a glimmer of hope appearing at the darkest hour, just like in a novel.

Sanyue had no shed skins apart from Xuanwu now. While the remaining ascended spirits had been forced by Xuanwu to work together, they clearly weren't of one mind. No wonder they were being so heavy handed about "putting down bandits"; it was all empty bluster.

There was no lack of middle stage established foundations or even near-ascended spirit masters among the chief offerings of the rebel warlords, and they were numerous.

So large a range of spiritual mountains, a source of spiritual stones that would endure throughout the ages, right before their eyes...

Greed and ecstasy brought the infighting among the offerings to a stop. Regardless of what came after, they would snatch now and discuss later. So from each side and all points, as if they had taken a strengthening potion, they swarmed like bees upon Sanyue's great array!

At the same time, Xu Rucheng and the other Luwu concealed on Sanyue's West Peak also received word from colleagues in Tao

County. They quietly opened a door from the inside and led the way, helping things along.

The great mountain array was tightly linked to the divine tool of the mountains. As soon as there was turbulence in the Sanyue Mountain Range, the Silver Moon immediately became unstable.

Xuanwu instantly sensed the tumult back home and cursed silently—in fact, before coming here, he hadn't expected Zhi Xiu to appear in the South Sea.

Moreover, while other shed skins reached their positions by obeying the will of heaven, this Sword of the South had cut through the clouds of tribulation on the snow-capped mountain, tearing down a barrier. Like Qiu Sha before him, the first person to tear apart a “heavenly commandment” was far more doughty than the average early stage shed skin.

Xuanwu, who hadn't anticipated any of this, was actually finding himself flustered by this puny junior. Zhaoting suppressed the Silver Moon's light, and Xuanwu was pushed by the sky-blotting sword energy against the Lancang Mountains, smashing into the newly activated great mountain array.

The Lovebird Sword Array also trembled at this. The Sword Slave seized the opportunity to chop off three of the sword array's auxiliary swords. The irresistible Wanshuang aimed at the main sword.

The Lovebird Sword Array's main sword let out what was nearly a wail. Twenty percent of the inscriptions on the sword, which were impossible to look at directly, broke. Its sword light suddenly dimmed. The Sword Slave froze. There was a cloudy and dim “stone” embedded in the main sword, totally at odds with the aura of the whole sword array... Just as she had seen in the “illusion,” it was the Lancang Sect Leader's Way of the Heart.

It was true. Before his death, her shifu really had reached the Lancang Mountains ahead of everyone else and with his own eyes witnessed Lancang's Sect Leader seal the divine tool of the mountains.

The Sect Leader and High Priest holding their tongues, her shixiong's unusual certainty and stubbornness, herself gouging out her flesh and picking out her bones, the unusual expression that had flickered over the Sect Leader's face the moment she had taken up Wanshuang, the veiled hints of Xie Chu and the ascended spirit little devil from Xuanyin...

The intense counterattack of the Lovebird Sword Array's main sword nearly scraped off the very last of her flesh and blood. The Sword Slave abruptly raised her head and fixed her eyes on the main sword, which was repairing itself. Wanshuang hit the whole Lancang Mountain Range like a thunderbolt.

Cuts several zhang deep fell one after another on the mountains.

How much filth were these millennia-old spiritual mountains sitting on top of?!

The full moon grade divine weapon was struck by the foremost sword in the world and retreated over and over in defeat. The auxiliary swords surrounding the sword array fell one by one.

This commotion made Zhi Xiu and Xuanwu both involuntarily divide their attention. Wangge Luobao's vision went dark—the spiritual beasts near the Lancang Mountains had been wiped out by the aftereffects of the sword wind. His “spies” were gone.

Tai Sui had used Western Chu's domestic turbulence to curb the Silver Moon, and here, as if it were part of a pattern, had taken

advantage of the stalemate between the Lovebird Sword Array and the Sword Slave to damage Lancang's great mountain array!

Chief Offering Yu really was a big magical brick. In this chaos, he was being picked up and hurled by each side, back and forth, leaving a hole wherever he fell.

There had to be some hidden story behind the Sword Slave's wild attacks on the Lovebird Sword Array. Wangge Luobao's heart sank slightly. He had already guessed by now that there must be discord between Kunlun and the Sword Slave... and it wasn't what he had guessed—not at the level of an internal power struggle within the sect.

Looking at it now, it didn't seem impossible that Wanshuang and Zhaoting would join forces.

With a little thought, Wangge Luobao understood Xi Ping's line of thinking—Xuanwu was eager to prove to Sanyue that he was orthodox; he had advanced prematurely, creating a fatal time difference. Tai Sui wanted to clean up the scene as much as possible before the great swords of Northern Li's shed skins came. Once Wanshuang and Zhaoting joined forces, adding in an arrow shot from behind by the undying bones' successor, victory and defeat would be up in the air.

“You can't be allowed to have it your way.”

Wangge Luobao turned and looked at the mustard seed he carried with him—inside the mustard seed were the Miah cultivators he had scooped up when the next life spiritual fish had died.

Shut up inside the mustard seed, the Miah cultivators only remembered that when that suffocating sword slash had come their way, their clan leader had protected them without hesitation, and there had been no news of him since.

They didn't know what had happened outside. They were restless with anxiety when a person covered in blood suddenly fell into the mustard seed.

“Clan leader!”

The Miah cultivators turned pale with fright and threw themselves at him. Wangge Luobao opened his mouth to speak, but his lungs were pierced. He choked on his own blood and went to his knees. On his chest was a deep cut that went down to the bone.

The Miah cultivators knelt, their eyes brimming with tears.

“My essence has been used up, the Queen Mother of the West... *cough*... the Queen Mother of the West and Lord Guang'an are dead...” Wangge Luobao spoke in a low voice, as if “on his last gasp,” explaining the situation outside. He seemed to be dying. He clutched a Miah clansman's sleeve tightly, “on the point of death,” and gave him his vital weapon—a beast-taming flute. “Take, take it... I... I'm sorry... Our kinsmen on the Three Islands are still hoping, our brothers dead in battle are still watching us...”

He “laboriously” held out until he had passed along everything that ought to be passed along—certainly nothing like a story in a novel, where a person would whimper for ages without spitting out the name of their killer—then finally “fainted dead away” in peace.

The stupid Miah clan members burst into tragic and moving tears, as if prematurely wailing over their clan leader's death.

Because the mustard seed's owner was “gravely injured,” the originally sealed mustard seed space could be entered and exited at will now. The Miah cultivators, whose feelings were collectively aroused, decided on the spot to leave a few people to take care of

their clan leader while the rest would risk death to race to the Lancang Mountains and fetch spiritual stones.

An ascended spirit whose essence had been exhausted needed a large quantity of spiritual stones to be able to heal. Paying such a high price, they certainly couldn't return empty-handed.

Enormous spiritual beasts moved in single file along the seabed. The Miah cultivators dashing on without regard for their safety took their clan leader's vital weapon, charging toward the feet of the Lancang Spiritual Mountains.

In fact, the Cauldron of Nine Dragons could have controlled the situation at present, but Wangge Luobao understood Lingyun's Xiuyi coward; until Kunlun's sword cultivators had settled the big picture, he wouldn't show his face.

The Miah surging onto the shore would head for the place where the great mountain array was damaged and run right into Tai Sui, who was up to his little tricks. And among the skilled Miah that Wangge Luobao had brought with him, a very large portion came from Lingyun's Dragon Subduing Knights. The conflict and clash between the two clans had escalated at lightning speed. Many people's disciple name plates in Lingyun's outer sect had yet to be removed. Normally, with national borders in the way, it would be one thing, but if a Lingyun master was already nearby, if any of the people those name plates belonged to died, he would notice immediately.

Wangge Luobao was the god of the Miah, the root of Southern Shu's civil strife. Once the Cauldron of Nine Dragons caught a trace of him, it certainly couldn't bear to hole up. It would immediately be drawn to the feet of the Lancang Mountains.

That teacher and disciple pair from Flying Jade Peak really were devoted to each other, so... while being attacked from both sides by

the Silver Moon and the Cauldron of Nine Dragons, could Zhaoting protect his frighteningly destructive disciple?

The Miah cultivators whose blood had gone to their heads reached the peninsula in an instant. They switched to amphibious spiritual beasts and continued their dash. No one noticed when one of the waking dragons that had carried them to shore gave an unnatural shake, then sank into the water in pursuit of a curled up shadow.

There was a distant voice inside the shadow. The waking dragon couldn't understand it, but for some reason, it worked out what it meant.

“You must return to your master,” that voice urged. “Protect your master.”

The bewildered spiritual beast wagged its tail, left its team, and dove toward the depths of the sea.

The grit projection couldn't overcome an ascended spirit beast-taming cultivator and give a spiritual beast reared by another direct orders to do something.

Fortunately, “return to your master” was itself an order that spiritual beasts frequently received.

CHAPTER 223 - A Life of Regret (35)

The waking dragon was one of Shu's Three Islands' sacred beasts, a king in the water, with a special internal spiritual energy pump that let it move freely back and forth between the deep sea and the shallows without being crushed by water pressure. When its body turned into a rainbow, it could move instantaneously.

In the blink of an eye, it was a hundred li away, diving right into an array formation deep in the sea.

This was an array formation full of the characteristic style of the Miah, large and concealed, like a huge beast-catching net. Apart from spiritual beasts reared by the Miah, nothing else could find this place.

The arrays were like transparent passageways in the water, which only manifested when spiritual beasts and cultivators passed through them. Countless arrays were floating there, overlapping, so it was impossible to see what was what—especially since that waking dragon didn't go right through the arrays but jumped from point to point, moving instantaneously... By the time a cultivator's spiritual sense was touched, it was already too late.

Before Xi Ping, who was in the waking dragon's shadow, could finish identifying the first array, his spine suddenly went cold. From the shadow, he shouted resolutely to the big animal, "Stop! Stop it!"

There was no "seeming" about it—this array formation really was a beast-catching net!

The waking dragon's frantic long body was like an insect that had crashed headfirst into a spiderweb, then rolled around in it several times!

Next, the waking dragon turned into foam, and its shadow disappeared. Xi Ping, hidden in the spiritual beast's shadow, was firmly trapped among the array formation pressing toward him from all sides. It was as if there were stones tied to his whole body; he was rapidly pulled to the bottom of the sea—

Not good. This was a trap!

In a moment of desperation, qin strings flew from Xi Ping's hand, and a beam of sword energy shot out. But the instant his fingers touched the Tai Sui Qin, he knew he had made another mistake. The arrays enveloping him turned in a half-circle, like the constellations revolving, rebounding all the sword energy back at him.

Xi Ping narrowly managed to dodge, almost getting a lock of hair chopped off. An invisible array seized this moment to brand itself onto his fingers and instantly climbed all over his body. A white sheen like a pearl's appeared on Xi Ping's body. He went rigid, like a puppet fixed in amber, unable to move a muscle.

The spiritual threads of the array twined around every strand of his hair. The milky white radiance covering him lit up the dark sea depths, where even the fish and shrimp had vanished.

Just then, a large air bubble appeared in the seawater next to him. It refracted the white light that passed through it into all colors. The body of the waking dragon with its rich play of color took shape once again. From its giant python-like big head shot a rather cheerful gaze... a human gaze.

The waking dragon opened its mouth. Its long tongue nearly poked Xi Ping's face. It spoke in a human language: "Fellow Cultivator Tai Sui."

Xi Ping wanted to answer, but the arrays holding him flickered; even his tongue was immobilized.

“If I were you,” said the waking dragon, unhurriedly circling him, “I would think carefully before using a borrowed power. After all, Yu Chang-xiong was also once my ally. We’re all familiar with his methods.”

Xi Ping: “...”

That Centipede Yu had a foot on eight different boats.

“Let’s both put our cards on the table. Even if you sincerely wanted to destroy the Lancang Mountains’ great array, you still wouldn’t have been unable to work out that I would be waiting on the sidelines. You wouldn’t have acted on such a grand scale, and you certainly wouldn’t have chosen to announce yourself in Western Chu. So it must have been... how do you say it in Wan? Oh, ‘giving someone a taste of his own medicine,’” Wangge Luobao said through the waking dragon. “All the clansmen I brought with me have at least established foundation level cultivation, and they’re indignant now. It wouldn’t be so easy to make them turn around. After all, the ‘grit projection’ is of reduced value in your hands. So I guessed that you wouldn’t use people. I’ve finally managed to invite you over.”

Xi Ping’s shortcomings were very obvious. He had no firm foundation in talismans, arrays, and inscriptions. His cultivation level had spurted up too quickly. Unlike others, he hadn’t experienced hundreds of years of accumulation and trial by fire. Though he was very skilled in petty pilfering techniques learned from black markets everywhere, how many ascended spirits could you meet on the black market in a few years? Encountering a cultivator of the same level or higher, he had only a few moves at his disposal. If his opponent set their mind on researching him, they would even be able to figure out what move he would use.

“You really are much harder to handle than Yuan Hui.” Having said this, Wangge Luobao saw Xi Ping’s expression change slightly. As if he could read minds, he laughed. “Don’t look at me like that. I was born less than three hundred years ago. I didn’t have the privilege of knowing that ancient demonic god even older than the spiritual mountains. It’s only that I inherited my sect founder’s Way of the Heart and understand a little more than others.”

As I thought, Xi Ping said to himself. It could have been said that he and Wangge Luobao had neither past resentments nor recent grievances between them. Though he had indeed disturbed his plans in the South Sea, looking at Wangge Luobao’s actions in the aftermath, he felt that this Miah-Xiuyi mixed blood man hadn’t actually been focused on the South Sea Hidden Realm at the time; instead, he had been focused on usurping authority over the Miah clan, provoking internal strife, and freeing himself of Zhuoming while he was at it.

The odd-eyed man had even set aside past grudges to team up with Yu the Great Hole-maker, who had changed sides right before the battle.

Wangge Luobao’s incessant scheming and determination to make trouble for him wasn’t aimed at Xi Ping himself but at the hidden bones he carried.

And to hear him talk, this targeting must have started in the time of Ancestor Tianbo.

Xi Ping quickly recalled the information the Luwu had obtained.

It was said that Wangge Luobao had inherited Ancestor Tianbo’s Way of the Heart. This was very special—while the disciples of the founders of the other spiritual mountains, hindered by the prevailing ideological trends of their generation, hadn’t directly accepted their shizuns’ Ways of the Heart at face value, they had still practically all

used them as reference. The Ways of the Heart of the full moon sages had all been inherited and preserved in greater or lesser part, whether directly or indirectly. Only Lingyun's Ancestor Tianbo had merely given instruction without passing on his way, keeping his Way of the Heart a closely guarded secret even from his direct disciples. On departing the mortal world, he had left behind a beast-taming flute bearing his Way of the Heart; no one who wasn't of mixed Xiuyi and Miah blood could approach it.

In the early years, Lingyun had selected quite a few people of mixed Xiuyi and Miah blood from noble families. No matter how strong their spiritual sense or how good their constitution, not one of them had been able to inherit Ancestor Tianbo's Way of the Heart. It was considered getting off easy if those mixed-blood disciples were disoriented and amnesiac upon waking up, spending the next year or so in a fog; in the most severe cases, they might explode on the spot. Bit by bit, people had stopped daring to touch it.

In modern times, there had been fewer and fewer mixed blood people among the noble families. If there happened to be one from time to time, they would most likely be an illegitimate child born to a mistress, not qualified to enter Lingyun's Grand Selection. Ancestor Tianbo's Way of the Heart had quietly guarded the Lingyun Mountains from beginning to end. In over a thousand years, Wangge Luobao was the first to get a glimpse of its reality.

Why was Ancestor Tianbo's Way of the Heart so picky? It couldn't be that it required its inheritor to have mismatched eyes, could it?

And why would they target the ungovernable way? Even if there had been a grudge back then, he had never heard of anyone's Way of the Heart passing along even a personal grudge from eighteen hundred years back.

Unless Tianbo's Way of the Heart was in conflict with the ungovernable way, in conflict to the point of being unable to live

under the same sky.

But the ungovernable way had no Way of the Heart. It was the most solitary way in the world; with it, you couldn't even have a debate of Ways of the Heart. Its only special feature lay in the fact that no matter what truth a person beheld, there was still no Way of the Heart to shatter.

The waking dragon's big head drew close to him. As if afraid that his voice would get out, Wangge Luobao spoke into his ear as quietly as a mosquito. "For example, you and I both know that the three thousand paths of the Great Way are only a fantasy. We struggle bitterly seeking a Way of the Heart, then we rear it, refine it, and in the end serve up our body to it. When we are dead, our essence returns to the universe, but the Way of the Heart persists forever."

The corner of Xi Ping's eye twitched, his pupils suddenly growing large in the depths of the sea.

Wangge Luobao let out a sigh that was almost a moan. "I've finally... spoken it aloud."

These matters that heavenly commandments kept from being spoken couldn't be revealed to those who didn't know them. The words could only be spoken when both the speaker and the listener were well aware, and there were no third-party ears around.

As if he had seen a ghost, Xi Ping stared at the waking dragon in front of him.

When even the Southern Sage had birthed a heart demon, when the Dignitary of Rule High Elder's Way of the Heart had shattered as soon as he had taken a glance into the Territory Map, why had Wangge Luobao and Tianbo before him been all right?

Why was there someone who knew perfectly well what a Way of the Heart was but had still accepted one and established a foundation, had still jumped further in, could still make sense?

“Because even a monstrous lie has a creator, little Shiyong,” Wangge Luobao said, calling his courtesy name. “You freaks with your plants that reach beyond the bounds really are each annoying in your own way, but the rest of them are all at least influenced by their Ways of the Heart. All apart from you—the two of you.”

At this point, the seawater around them suddenly began to quiver. The mournful roars of dragons came toward them.

The Cauldron of Nine Dragons!

Wangge Luobao sighed. “If not for that, the two of us really would have been kindred spirits. What a pity, our next meeting...”

But just then, Xi Ping, frozen into a puppet by the array, suddenly spoke without opening his mouth: “So the reason you’ve been racking your brain scheming against me is because you want to shut me up? *Tsk*, that obnoxious southern barbarian showed up too quickly. You weren’t finished explaining yourself yet.”

The waking dragon abruptly drew back. A cloud of bloody mist exploded from the “Xi Ping” caught fast by the array, and he turned from pearl white to dead white—it had been a paperman wrapped in a layer of human skin!

The paperman had been “borrowed” by Xi Ping from Bai Ling. It was an established foundation power to begin with, only suitable for camouflage and fooling low level cultivators. At close range, an ascended spirit could even sniff out the difference between a flesh and blood body and one made of paper. So Xi Ping had had a fantastic idea. He had used the bone-sharing talisman from Zhou

Ying to make a “slight improvement” to the paperman, peeling off a layer of his own flesh, blood, and skin to stick it onto the paperman.

Zhou Ying, who had only been willing to pluck out one of his hairs, had probably never imagined that his power could have such an “ingenious” use.

His investment in blood hadn’t been for nothing. Adding in that he had been repeatedly smashed apart by shed skin sword attacks, which had sent Xi Ping’s cultivation level leaping right up to the middle ascended spirit stage, the camouflage technique had been even easier to use. And Wangge Luobao was accustomed to acting from the shadows. He had laid out a big net in order to catch him. Detonating the array formation consumed a large quantity of spiritual energy, which had perfectly covered up the last of the paperman’s slight flaws.

And aside from the paperman, the heartless lotus seal that Xi Ping had stolen from Zhuoming had also risen in power along with his cultivation.

The reason Wangge Luobao was always jabbering on, not letting Xi Ping talk, wasn’t that he was afraid of being scolded; he wanted to prevent him from “speaking a lotus flower” — the heartless lotus’s lotus seal could reach the consciousness through the senses. After establishing long-distance contact with Xi Ping, he could protect his other senses, but he couldn’t stop his voice from coming to his ears.

The instant that Xi Ping’s voice came from the paperman, the lotus seal struck Wangge Luobao’s hearing at the same time as the voice!

Wangge Luobao wanted to withdraw his consciousness from the waking dragon at once.

This hit had been too direct. Adding in the rapid progress of Xi Ping's cultivation level within a short time, while he couldn't simply pull up a person's consciousness like Zhuoming himself, he could still keep Wangge Luobao from escaping at once.

Xi Ping said, "Hehe, big worm, our next meeting is indefinitely postponed."

He tore apart the skin and flesh on the spot and withdrew his consciousness, leaving behind only a wad of paper dissolved by seawater.

The might of the Cauldron of Nine Dragons instantly fixed on Wangge Luobao.

When the roar of the dragons came, Zhi Xiu's heart tightened—Lingyun's people had come!

However powerful a sword cultivator might be, he could hardly withstand two divine tools single-handed.

Instantly, Zhaoting was forced to produce all and more than all of its fighting force. Zhi Xiu, using himself as a shield, protected the thousands of people behind him, hacking at the Silver Moon and forcing it toward the deserted side of the Lancang Mountains.

The Silver Moon, which had had the rug pulled out from under it by the evil cultivators, seemed to be entirely inhibited by the sword light. The Lancang Mountains tottered on the point of collapse from the collision with the falling moon. The spiritual energy of the Lovebird Sword Array wavered. The Sword Slave brazenly reached out and grasped the main sword of the Lovebird Sword Array.

But the nine dragons with their gnashing teeth and flailing claws only appeared for a flash, and then, like dumplings thrown into the

pot, went into the water along with Lingyun's Sect Leader—even the splash was quite restrained.

Xuanwu, who had thought rescue had come: "...”

Zhi Xiu, who had made ready to face an enemy from both sides:
“...”

What was this senior from Southern Shu in such a hurry to go do?

The next moment, a blood-covered “human stick” emerged from the next life spiritual fish's mist. On his way, he scooped up the cultivators who had fallen into the sea, including Chang Jun, dealing each one a talisman to keep them from waking up and being scared to death by seeing a “living ghost.”

Before his skin and flesh could grow back, this “blood person” dove right into Yao Qi's shadow.

Now that Xi Ping had arranged an “assignment” for the Cauldron of Nine Dragons, Lingyun's people temporarily wouldn't come out to make trouble. Xuanwu was under control, the Lovebird Sword Array was being held down by the Sword Slave. The opportunity was too good to miss.

“Ziming!”

The instant the main sword was seized by the Sword Slave, the noise and din about to burst Yao Qi's consciousness suddenly calmed. Yao Ziming, with no idea what time or day it was, opened his eyes in bewilderment and saw the Lancang Sect Leader in front of him.

This was an image floating above the clouded Way of the Heart. The old Sect Leader's hair and beard were white, lines of age carved all over his face. Half the skin of his face seemed to have been charred

black by a fire. His features were twisted, an ominous bloody light emanating from his eyeballs... but that tall figure was still as upright as a mountain range, the tears in his eyes dispersing the grimness and horror of the bloody light.

“S-senior?” said Yao Qi.

The Sect Leader didn’t answer. He had been dead for two centuries.

The eyes of that image looked through Yao Qi and fell on the vast and desolate Southern He Peninsula. Like a recording, he began to recite some words that Yao Qi didn’t understand.

Under the influence of the grit projection, Yao Qi involuntarily spoke aloud the words in his consciousness.

Xi Ping froze. That wasn’t the Southern He language.

An ascended spirit could connect to heaven and earth—though Xi Ping didn’t understand it, his spiritual sense told him what this was.

Inscriptions.

He had never known that the inscriptions said to bear “heaven’s designs” could be recited aloud.

Xi Ping was perfectly well aware of his own worth in this situation. He came to a prompt decision and quickly clapped out a common half-immortal grade talisman. Yao Qi’s voice soared, reverberating through the air over the whole Southern He Peninsula—all the people flying in the sky were shed skins, anyway; someone would have to understand.

But Zhi Xiu, the Sword Slave, Xuanwu, and even Lingyun’s Sect Leader at the bottom of the sea froze simultaneously; all of these masters looked to some extent confused and taken aback.

But the constantly roiling Lovebird Sword Array and the Lancang Mountain Range stilled simultaneously.

Out of nowhere, that instant of dead silence reminded Xi Ping of when the Law Breaker's axiom had descended upon Tao County.

Wait—hadn't Qiu Sha said that the spiritual mountains... were a big Law Breaker?

CHAPTER 224 - A Life of Regret (36)

On Xuanyin's Moon Plated Peak, Lin Chi and Wen Fei stood around the Unbound Furnace and the still warm and toasty failed spirit-conducting gold, striving unsuccessfully to think things through.

Wen Fei considered and said to Lin Chi: *Actually, I have a thought.*

Lin Chi quickly said, "Instruct me, Wen-shixiong."

Wen Fei waved a hand. *Well...I wouldn't dare, I'll just tell you for what it's worth. Just bear with me and listen, Lin-shixiong. I don't understand toolmaking, but I've been neighbors with a sword cultivator for a hundred years, so I understand something about sword cultivators. Our own sword god, regardless of cultivation level, certainly has a temper that's one in a million. You can count him as kind and gentle in disposition and refined in manner. But, look, when it comes to daily trifles, with a few extra sentences, you can always get him to meet you halfway, but the more he's up against a dangerous situation or a formidable opponent, the less willing he is to turn around. To break off their line of retreat in a hopeless situation and use the point of their sword as a glimmer of hope for survival—that's what sword cultivators like him rely on to cultivate their hearts.*

"You mean that this sword cultivator Sect Leader of Lancang..."

Wen Fei said, *He was also a sword cultivator. I've thought all along that instead of thinking up a way to make an immortal tool that would overcome the heavenly commandments of the spiritual mountains, under those circumstances, he might prefer to take aim at the "heavenly commandments" themselves.*

Lin Chi was startled. "How could heavenly commandments break? Was he also planning to level the Lancang Spiritual Mountains?"

Wen Fei glanced at him. *That's not necessarily impossible... Lin-shixiong, he wanted to give Lancang's spiritual energy back to the mortal world to begin with. The spiritual mountains aren't incapable of collapse. Aren't the Xuanyin Mountains already "melting" into the earth?*

"But the Territory Map itself was left behind by the Southern Sage," Lin Chi said doubtfully, coming to his senses. "Perhaps this was just what the sage intended at the time. Otherwise, he wouldn't have sealed the Territory Map into the veins of the earth. We were only following the current, and still we only narrowly managed to survive. I certainly haven't heard that the Lancang Mountains' Gold and Jade Sages left behind anything of the kind. How... how could that be?"

Wen Fei waved his hand. *That's right. He failed, didn't he? The Lancang Mountains became the southern mines, and the Southern He Peninsula turned into the Land of Turmoil.*

"You mean that because he had become obsessed, the Lancang Sect Leader went completely insane then." As if he had swallowed an ice cube, Lin Chi slowly said, "Returning the spiritual energy of the spiritual mountains to the human world might only have been a deranged delusion of his before he died?"

Wen Fei made no comment.

The two of them remained silent for a long time. Then Lin Chi suddenly said, "No. I don't believe it."

Wen Fei raised his eyebrows. *You don't believe he was insane?*

"He was definitely insane, or he wouldn't have done so many improper things," Lin Chi said. "But I still think that if he had a

thread of lucidity remaining, then it was his obsession with returning spiritual energy to the human world... Lancang was *her* sect.”

Meanwhile, Xi Ping was also thinking of Hui Xiangjun.

The Law Breaker that she had made was an immortal tool, powered by spiritual stones.

And the spiritual mountains...

The spiritual mountains also relied on the spiritual energy surging through the veins of the earth to control the landscape and the climate; it seemed that you could also say that they were driven by spiritual stones.

The Ways of the Heart of the sages were like the Law Breaker, which could look for spiritual stones to activate itself; they had amassed a whole country's spiritual stones into mountains. The sages had already left the mortal dust, but the human world was still like Tao County within the Law Breaker, operating under these heavenly commandments.

The Law Breaker, which could keep the Silver Moon outside its boundaries, warp space and time, and prohibit the use of spiritual energy, was certainly no mere toy that Hui Xiangjun had made after getting inspiration from the spiritual mountains. Behind it were very likely hidden the secrets of the workings of the spiritual mountains. And Lancang Mountain, which had been Hui Xiangjun's sect, had had the Unbound Furnace in its keeping for centuries after her death.

Xiang Rong with his headful of marvelous ideas had comprehended how to realize “ashes to ashes, dust to dust” after acquiring the Unbound Furnace. So what had Lancang's half-crazy Sect Leader comprehended?

Everything Yao Qi had seen and heard inside the next life mist was history.

In other words, before his death, Lancang's Sect Leader, witnessed by Kunlun's Second Elder, had rammed his Way of the Heart against the Lovebird Sword Array, and his remaining consciousness had recited this series of inscriptions. What did it mean? How should they be used?

Xi Ping had a sudden intense intuition that if he could work this out, then he would have grasped the crux of breaking through the canopy above their heads.

When speaking of inscriptions, everyone's first thought was of Sanyue. Xi Ping opened his half-regenerated eyelids and placed all his spiritual sense in his vision to sneak a bold peek at Xuanwu while he was being beaten down by Zhaoting, then swiftly ducked back into a shadow when Xuanwu's consciousness swept his way.

Just one look was enough to tell him that Sanyue's foremost inscription master also had no clue.

The Law Breaker was in the Tai Sui Qin, but spiritual energy was prohibited in Tao County; no one could get it.

If only he could go through the reincarnation wood...

Just then, a chill crept up Xi Ping's spine.

Oh no—the thought had hardly had time to flash by when the ice floes on the South Sea mingled with Zhaoting's sword energy all broke, the dispersing sword light almost blinding. The sea breeze turned into sharp blades. Pursuing Xi Ping's talisman, it pierced the next life spiritual fish's mist.

Xi Ping didn't have time to think much. He swept up the Queen Mother of the West's masterless mustard seed and dove into the depths of the sea without a look back, moving instantaneously seven or eight times in a row; he moved several zhang in a flash—when his paperman had been attached to the waking dragon's shadow, he'd had a sudden thought; adhering to the principle of “snatching every possible opportunity,” he tried using the *Discard the False and Keep the True* book to copy the waking dragon's power. Yu Chang himself had probably never done such a thing.

As he'd expected, since he was missing some body parts, bridging the gap between species didn't work very well. The waking dragon could fly a hundred li with a wave of its tail, while Xi Ping could only hop around within a radius of some dozen zhang with his strained copy, narrowly avoiding several beams of sword energy that nearly brushed against the center of his brow.

The voice floating over the Lancang Mountains suddenly broke off. Xi Ping's heart sank.

At the extreme of the fatal sword images, two people holding swords showed their true appearances. One of them was someone Xi Ping had seen before, Kunlun's Sect Leader.

The Kunlun sword cultivators had come faster than he had anticipated, and the cultivation level of this foremost Sect Leader in the world was higher than he had anticipated—the Sword Slave hadn't been able to dispel the next life mist at one stroke!

While the Lovebird Sword Array had temporarily stilled, it was still hanging in the air and could attack at any moment, and Xuanwu and the Silver Moon were still in perfect condition.

The most unfavorable situation had happened!

Shifu!

But Xi Ping quickly found that compared to his shizun, alone and helpless, his own situation was the dangerous one.

When Xuanwu had appeared, he had uttered some pretentious nonsense before attacking, but the Kunlun Sect Leader carrying a heart demon seed seemed to have been drugged. He didn't announce his home sect, and neither did he give a greeting. He raised his sword and slashed—what was more, he ignored the masters filling the sky and only took notice of Xi Ping in the sea!

Xi Ping: "..."

Why slash at him?

He had used a half-immortal grade talisman earlier for the sake of trickery. He was blending in inside the Queen Mother of the West's hidden realm, pretending to be a lackey of one of the great evil cultivators. It was a fact that in the eyes of certain people, half-immortals didn't even count as cultivators. With a crowd of masters gathered together, instead of deliberating national and international affairs, this one was going around all over the place stomping on ants—what kind of unique ideas were driving him?

Wasn't the Kunlun Sect Leader's heart demon aimed at the Sword Slave? What kind of provocation must he have received to flare up in a different direction?

In the sea, he covered his head and fled "like a frightened fish." The fatal sword energy followed him like his shadow. He still had the final sword attack, but he was afraid of disturbing Zhi Xiu and didn't dare to use it lightly. Xi Ping's thoughts moved quickly: Kunlun's Sect Leader wasn't Wangge Luobao. With Zhaoting and Wanshuang right there, how could a mere ascended spirit like him merit such attention? Even if the old man had realized that the amplifying

talisman earlier had been cast by him, his reaction still shouldn't have been this outsized...

Wait!

A thought flashed by like lightning: Kunlun's Sect Leader perhaps had no idea who he was, but he might have recognized those inscriptions that had stumped even Xuanwu!

At the Lancang Sect Leader's death, Kunlun's Second Elder had been next to him!

As his mind wandered for the space of a breath, Kunlun's great sword split apart the South Sea. Since ancient times, it had been impossible to cut water with a sword, but this thousand-year-old shed skin sword cultivator had cleaved a precipice into the South Sea. There was nowhere for Xi Ping to hide.

Just then, another person on the scene moved.

The Sword Slave suddenly gave up on the Lovebird Sword Array, turning Wanshuang against her own Sect Leader.

"Wu Lingxiao!"

Ninefold Kunlun swords of the same origin clashed. The precipice made of seawater collapsed. Xi Ping didn't hesitate. Like a cunning fish himself, he ducked into a fish's shadow and dove into a patch of sea.

Above the Lancang Mountains now, the Lovebird Sword Array was suspended on high, and Wanshuang and the Sect Leader were engaged in a stand-off; Xuanwu was in as sorry a predicament as the Silver Moon, his ruthless gaze fixed on Zhaoting; in front of outsiders, Kunlun's Third Elder, holding back his astonishment and not cutting the ground out from under his shixiong's feet, stood

behind the Sect Leader with his sword raised; Zhi Xiu put away Zhaoting and out of the corner of his eye shot a glance in the direction that the Kunlun Sect Leader's sword had been pointing earlier. He kept thinking that something was wrong and once again quietly sent out his consciousness, calming down only when he had checked on the location of the shard of Zhaoting.

“Interesting,” Xuanwu said gravely. “Evil cultivators are overthrowing the heavens, we are faced with formidable foes, and the Cauldron of Nine Dragons has sunk into the sea without a word, while the masters from Kunlun have gone ahead with a power struggle.”

The Third Elder also thought it was completely unreasonable. He shot a glance at the Sect Leader. Perhaps it was his mistake, but he thought that the bloody light in the Sect Leader's eyes was becoming increasingly ghastly, so he stepped forward and spoke on the Sect Leader's behalf: “Beneath the ninefold sword of Kunlun, all evil retreats. There is nothing to be anxious about. Please do not be impatient, Fellow Cultivator Xuanwu—Lingxiao, what are you doing?”

The Sword Slave was short-tempered and despised intriguing more than anything, but that didn't mean she was stupid.

Cold light flitted over Wanshuang. She aimed her pitch-dark eye sockets at the Sect Leader and rasped in a voice like a crow's: “And I would like to know, shibo, why did the Sect Leader want to break off those inscriptions?”

Xuanwu frowned, at last turning his eyes on Kunlun's Sect Leader. Beneath the astonished gazes of the great shed skins of the era, Kunlun's Sect Leader's features twisted savagely. Xi Ping almost thought he could hear the heart demon seed sprouting.

Zhi Xiu immediately recalled Zhao Yin's self-destruction and death and saw at once that this was an omen of losing one's mind. His

intuition told him that this had to be related to Zhou Ying. He said nothing, only squeezed Zhaoting's hilt. With a wave of his sleeve, he sent some mustard seeds full of spiritual stones to the Luwu steamships bringing up the rear.

Before he could complete his maneuver, he heard the Sword Slave say with emphasis on each word: "Was it because my shifu heard these inscriptions in the Lancang Mountains that you decided he had to be silenced?"

The Sword Slave was only worked up, bluffing at random. She hadn't expected that no sooner had she spoken than the Sect Leader's admonition of "impertinent" would come toward her along with the slashing point of his sword.

Xuanwu and the Third Elder quickly got out of the way to either side. Zhi Xiu leapt down from the clouds, landing on the surface of the sea. Zhaoting caught the better part of the sword energy, and the remainder was promptly parried by the upgraded immortal tools on the Luwu ships.

The stagnating Lovebird Sword Array was assaulted by sword energy from two great swords of Kunlun and seemed to come back to life. The sword array that had nearly been scattered by the Sword Slave took shape once again and pointed at her back.

Xi Ping gasped. His consciousness plunged into the Queen Mother of the West's mustard seed hidden realm. "Ziming-xiong, wake up!"

And meanwhile, the Blind Wolf King Xie Chu was struggling to trek over a field of snow.

This was outside the Beijue Mountains, a place of utter cold that no gaze in the world could reach. It could freeze a person's essence.

And once a cultivator's essence was frozen, all techniques and protective spiritual energy would be useless. Whether ascended spirit or shed skin, they would freeze to death here.

You couldn't even turn back and retreat if you sensed something wrong. Extreme cold caused hallucinations; it was extremely easy for the consciousness to become lost. The Blind Wolf King normally remained in the Snow Observation Pavilion in his true body, only sending his consciousness through the Beijue Pass; this was already extremely dangerous, but this time he had come in his true body.

He was prepared not to come back.

As he went deep into the Beijue Array, it seemed that he couldn't move a sliver of the spiritual energy in his essence. Light like a ghost fire glimmered on his body. He held a Lingchi Lantern in his hand—the Snow Wolf had once used this clumsy method to get to the feet of the Beijue Mountains, burning his own flesh and blood the whole way. Xie Chu had always turned his nose up at this stupid buck's conduct; he had never thought that he would become the next stupid buck.

“I've spent a lifetime building an illustrious reputation. Why the hell did I trust you?” he muttered. His senses seemed to have entirely stopped working. He could no longer distinguish anything; he was simply walking forward on a single held breath... following the dull rhythmic knocking on the Beijue Array. “I'm likely to die today thanks to you...”

The knocking on the Beijue Array ignored him. The knocker couldn't hear what he was muttering, anyway.

“If my guess is correct,” Zhou Ying had said before leaving, “as Kunlun's divine tool, the Ceaseless Mirror is likely to be linked to the Beijue Array.”

“What’s the evidence?”

“The official history of the cultivation world,” said Zhou Ying. “The first lesson that inner and outer sect disciples of each sect are taught upon entering, concerning the origin on the immortal mountains—each sage had their own Way of the Heart and their own strength, but there were so many shed skin masters then, yet only five people stood out and became full moon gods. Do you still recall why this was, Wolf King?”

“The sages had visions of protecting the common people, according with the wishes of all.” After reciting this, Xie Chu rolled his eyes. “Stay on topic, little devil. How old are you? Do you still believe that crap?”

“No, the official history is admittedly whitewashed, but it’s coherent.” Zhou Ying calmly interrupted the Blind Wolf King’s cynicism. “You don’t have to believe that the sages were righteous and selfless, but it isn’t without cause that a balance has been kept between the cultivation world and the human world for thousands of years. Up to the present, while the masters struggle over power and act in all manner of nauseating ways, they still do their best to avoid affecting mortals. Wolf King, is this because they still have some conscience, or because of a warning from their spiritual senses?”

“What do you mean?”

“The Kunlun Mountains are the first spiritual mountains in the world. Legend says that the climate of the northern continent suddenly changed for the worse, bringing punishing cold, causing innumerable people and livestock to freeze to death. The Sword Ancestor took all his disciples and acolytes and used himself as a shield to block the killing wind coming from the north. He became a full moon sage after undergoing this tribulation, becoming the hope of the populace. The northern continent’s spiritual energy gathered

at the border, from east to west, and the Kunlun Mountain Range arose—that is the myth,” Zhou Ying said. “But there’s one part of it that’s right—the Kunlun Mountain Range did rise from east to west, because the east is densely populated. At the northwest corner, the power of the ‘will of the people’ might have been exhausted—that would be the Beijue Pass. Kunlun’s Ceaseless Mirror is perhaps the only divine tool of the mountains in the world that isn’t located within the immortal mountains. It’s likely that it’s located at the extreme end of the Kunlun Mountains.”

“This is pure conjecture.”

“It is,” said Zhou Ying, who had still been in the midst of the way of clarity at the time. “Why don’t we bet on it and perform an experiment? I’ll go to the Kunlun Mountains and think of a way to enter the Ceaseless Mirror. If you can hear our prearranged flying goose signal at the Beijue Pass, Wolf King, then we’ll have bet right.”

“You’ll think of... what? Kid, are you...”

“If that really is the case, we can find the source of the birth of the spiritual mountains,” Zhou Ying said, taking no notice of his views. “And perhaps also the true reason for your honored teacher’s death.”

CHAPTER 225 - A Life of Regret (37)

Xie Chu was conceited, fastidious, fond of wearing snow-white fox-fur robes that were especially hard to clean. His natural talents were unsurpassed. Even without working particularly hard a day of his life, he could stand out among his fellows. Therefore, he was haughty down to his bones. He admitted that this was wrong and rarely spoke his sarcasm aloud, but over time, it would still show in his face; it couldn't be hidden.

He had never been in such a wretched condition in his life. His sense of smell had gone numb, but the foul, charred odor coming from himself still came to him. There was no mirror out in the great northern plains; presumably he didn't look human, either.

Had he known that there would come a day like this, he thought, perhaps he would have been nicer to the Snow Wolf before... That way, when that stupid young man betrayed him, he might have felt more torment over it.

“They said that he had a disagreement with the Sect Leader, and that influenced his emotional state and caused him to be lost outside the Beijue Mountains.” Xie Chu knew perfectly well that the individual knocking on the array to guide him couldn't hear his weak, indistinct muttering, but he still had to talk, or else he wouldn't be able to distinguish whether he was walking a path in the world of the living or in the Yellow Springs of the Underworld. “Bullshit—after so many years, who would get angry at that old coffin board? If only he and that mystifying ‘mirror ghost’ could have spared one of their four eyes in the midst of all their pressing affairs to have a look at the northern continent instead of keeping all those eyes fixed on those trifling heaps of spiritual stones, my shizun wouldn't have wasted so much time he could have spent training with the sword going out to get involved in trifles.”

The Second Elder had spoken very little, but there was weight to each of his words. Because of this, many people feared him. In fact, he wasn't the type of person to get angry. Much of the time, all matters in the outside world were like passing clouds to him. He only concentrated on the things he wanted to concentrate on. Probably only the steadiest hand in the world could wield the nimblest sword; Xie Chu had always thought himself unworthy. That was why, after Shizun had left, he had changed the name of his own sword to "Perplexing."

"No one had a better sense of priority than him. He never ran an unnecessary risk, never had any superfluous curiosity..."

The Heart Sword used the consciousness as its medium; it required no physical form. The Second Elder's physical form had never approached the Beijue Array, not because he feared death, but because he knew that if anything should happen to him, Kunlun had no one who could replace him. His elder disciple was irascible and impetuous; the Second Elder wouldn't have felt easy about either the array or the disciple if he had let him go. His younger disciple was a genius, and all geniuses knew to seek their own path. All a teacher had to do was bless her with a little advice; it would be a waste to compel her to change her way for the sake of the big picture.

Such an introverted and cautious sword cultivator, who never had personal disputes with others—why would he have braved the wind and snow to rush hastily into the Beijue Array, as if he had been possessed by a ghost?

Not long before that, because Xie Chu had gotten drunk and made trouble, Shifu had been sighing that he didn't dare to get old, and he had been fretting about how to coax his little Shimei back from the Disciple Hall.

Just then, a frenzied wind blew toward him—there were often series of frenzied freezing winds outside the Beijue Mountains. Xie Chu's vision, hardly able to see the road, spun. Next, he realized that he had fallen on the ground, and the Lingchi Lantern had nearly slipped out of his hand. He could no longer feel his legs; he didn't know whether they had already burned away.

His mind began to float vaguely. Xie Chu thought that this had been a very foolish thing for him to do—he asked himself the question he had asked he didn't know how many times since crossing beyond the Beijue Mountains: Did your head get sat on by the Snow Wolf? Why did you trust that brat Zhou Ying?

Because he had a paramount spiritual sense and had preserved his reason? Or because he had succeeded in being sent to his final rest in the Ceaseless Mirror?

“I... really... Zhou, how much longer...”

The dull knocking beneath the Beijue Array suddenly paused.

There was a bang. Something blown on the wind had opened a crack in the Lingchi Lantern.

Xie Chu gave a start. His dazed soul returned to position... That had been... the remnants of a beam of sword energy.

The knocking guiding him changed from a uniform speed to a specific rhythm. This was flying goose code—but there were no flying goose machines in Northern Li, and naturally the code only corresponded to a foreign language. Xie Chu's head had nearly frozen, and he couldn't have brought the codebook on his flame-encased body.

“I don't understand, you scoundrel!” While he hunted in his brain for the scant remaining code there, the Blind Wolf King somewhere

found the strength to hold himself up.

Laboriously facing the gale, he looked in the direction the sword energy had come from. He was stunned—

Not far ahead of him at an angle was a sword cut of the kind a master might leave behind, whose sword energy wouldn't dissipate for centuries. The fierce wind had swept away the snow piled on the ground, revealing an enormous piece of "ice" next to the sword cut.

No, that wasn't ice.

All the people on the northern continent were familiar with river ice. No matter how clean the water, there would still be cracks and bubbles on the surface of the ice. It wouldn't have this even and smooth, perfectly clear texture. This was a mirror!

An enormous mirror!

Meanwhile, a Heavenly Question arrived in the Xuanyin Mountains and flew straight to Moon Plated Peak. Attached to it was a strange-looking plate.

"Sent by Heaven's Design Pavilion from the border," Lin Chi said, scanning the writing on the Heavenly Question. "The Southern He Luwu sent it back through an array."

Wen Fei said, *What the hell is this? A plate? It's too shallow. What can it hold?*

It could hold sound.

This was a recording plate. Unlike the mortal things that could only record sound, the sounds recorded by the upgraded immortal tool could also to a certain extent reproduce the spiritual energy fluctuations at the time—when Xi Ping had used a talisman to send

Yao Qi's recitation up to the sky, on a Luwu boat bringing up the rear nearby, a clever Luwu had recorded it, along with the Kunlun Sect Leader's final sea-cleaving attack.

Having listened to the end, Wen Fei nearly hopped up. *Kunlun's ninefold sword? Who struck? The Sword Slave, or one of the other Kunlun shed skins? Zhi Jingzhai, is he... What's the matter with you?*

As if he had seen a ghost, Lin Chi held him down by the shoulder and lit the Unbound Furnace with a snap of his fingers, sending his seventh sense into it. He repeated the inscriptions on the disc.

But compared to Yao Qi, "possessed by a ghost," his pronunciation had some discrepancies. The Unbound Furnace didn't react, until he had recited up to a certain point past the middle, when the furnace fire suddenly quivered, and a fully-formed inscription leapt up inside it!

Wen Fei understood immediately. Without waiting for instructions, imitating Lin Chi, he played the recording again. The two of them tried again and again, going through it over twenty times. The sound of Kunlun's ninefold sword had nearly activated the defensive arrays on Moon Plated Peak. Finally, some more inscriptions rose from the Unbound Furnace.

Lin Chi sent a beam of spiritual energy pointing at the library. Countless texts, new and old, flew toward them like rain, floating above their heads. Lin Chi flipped through the books with his consciousness. "One of these characters is very familiar, I think I've seen it somewhere before."

Complete Glossary of Inscriptions, Ancient Hidden Realm Collection, Analysis of Inscriptions and Arrays... those known to him, those unknown, those that had been lost, those newly made—the two ascended spirits flipped through all the texts on Moon Plated Peak at the speed of "one glance per book" and came up empty.

Where had it been? Lin Chi frowned. It couldn't have been in the Latent Cultivation Temple. Half-immortals couldn't use inscriptions. Before Xi Shiyong had blown up the mountain, there had been very few texts concerning inscriptions in the Latent Cultivation Temple; and his shifu had left nearly all his manuscripts and texts to him, and he hadn't left his peak for eight centuries. Where else could it have been?

Suddenly, Wen Fei carefully prodded him with his fan. For once a little ill at ease, the Tanhua gestured and said, *Well...shixiong, you put it in a book, I didn't look at it on purpose.*

A piece of letter paper pressed very smooth fluttered down from inside a book, landing between the two of them. There was a special protective inscription on it. After eight hundred years, the paper was bright and clean as new.

This was a letter Hui Xiangjun had written to Lin Chi.

It was the last letter Hui Xiangjun had written to him after Lancang's blood moon. There was nothing to indicate that it was a final parting. She only spoke lightly of some trifles and mentioned "two little toys" that she had recently made, with diagrams attached.

The diagrams were roughly drawn with a writing brush, showing only vague outlines—inscriptions weren't like written characters, where a few missing strokes wouldn't keep them from being understood; sometimes two inscriptions that were identical to the naked eye might have totally opposite meanings. Therefore, there was no so-called "rough" version of them; the inscriptions on diagrams of immortal tools mostly only showed general positions. Some lazy people would simply draw a circle as a stand-in... Therefore, Lin Chi hadn't attached any importance to the fact that the inscriptions marked on the diagram were ones he had never seen. He had thought she had just doodled them.

A diagram couldn't indicate all the inscriptions on an immortal tool. Hui Xiangjun had only written two characters, and one of them had just been deciphered by Lin Chi from the recording.

“Write to them, it's incomplete—I need all of it!”

In the South Sea, Zhi Xiu couldn't receive letters for the moment. Never mind Heavenly Questions, even “Earthly Questions” couldn't reach him.

While he hadn't especially understood why the Kunlun infighting was happening, the former high general understood the situation. Right now, he had no help on the South Sea, near or far. The shed skin masters of the various sects were all his enemies. If the Sword Slave hadn't suddenly disrespected her elders and started fighting their Sect Leader, he would have been fighting the whole cultivation world alone.

So when the Lovebird Sword Array moved, Zhaoting also moved.

The Luwu had replenished the upgraded immortal tools' spiritual stones. A strike from Zhaoting came flying, blocking the Lovebird Sword Array, which had taken aim at the Sword Slave's back; the angle was extremely crafty. Zhi Xiu had poked a hole in one corner of the sword array, knocking the main sword off target, touching Xuanwu, who was hiding from the Kunlun sword wind.

The Lovebird Sword Array no longer had a master. How could this big weapon tell who occupied what position? After all, not even the masters flying all over the sky could work it out. As far as the Lancang Mountains went, all outsiders were invaders; they would grab whoever they could get.

Xuanwu was caught unawares. In a flurry, he dragged the Silver Moon over to parry the blow and wretchedly flew half a li away. The

Silver Moon, dragging a tail of light like a comet, slammed against the Lovebird Sword Array. Kunlun's Third Elder, watching the two great weapons aim at his Sect Leader, quickly drew his sword to fend them off. "Fellow Cultivator Xuanwu!"

Xuanwu didn't want to get mixed up with a crowd of sword cultivators and paid no heed. He wanted to withdraw on the spot. Before he could get a firm footing on his curved blade, there was a sudden chill at his back. Xuanwu swept out his snow-white sleeve, spreading a handful of talismans behind himself. In the blink of an eye, spiritual wind congealed into a magnificent miragelike army, which was then pierced by a sword strike.

Nearly jabbing him in the forehead, Zhaoting forced him against the Silver Moon. In order to protect its master, the Silver Moon's radiance blazed, plating the Lovebird Sword Array with silver. The Lovebird Sword Array was unwilling to show weakness. The humming of the swords was deafening. The sword light enveloped Xuanwu, and the Third Elder, caught up in it, certainly couldn't get out.

This was precisely what was known as "war is the art of the unexpected."

While Zhi Xiu single-handedly dragged all the shed skins in the air above Lancang into a chaotic battle, the Heavenly Question from the Xuanyin Mountains, having failed several times, turned and flew toward Pang Jian, then passed through the hands of several Luwu because finally being transmitted to Wei Chengxiang... and Xi Ping's paperman.

Xi Ping's consciousness, searching through his mustard seed, had just found Yao Qi. He saw Ziming-xiong sit upright like a risen corpse. "Ziming, how much of what Lancang's Sect Leader said before he died can you remem..."

“Don’t speak!” Yao Qi sternly cried out in a groundbreaking moment. His lips were trembling uncontrollably.

He took an upgraded recording device from his own mustard seed, and under Xi Ping’s astonished gaze, as if he had eaten too much at once and was vomiting it up, quickly spat up a long string of inscriptions.

Xi Ping: “...”

Was this really his classmate who had spent over a decade in the southern mines without even learning to speak a single foreign language properly?

Then he saw the remnants of a talisman flash on Yao Qi’s brow. He gave a scream and rolled on the ground clutching his head. Xi Ping quickly found a mind calming pill on himself and stuffed it into Yao Qi’s mouth. “Wh-what kind of evil art is this?”

“An eidetic...eidetic memory talisman...it can record everything you see and hear within one day on your consciousness. No matter how difficult and unpronounceable, you can immediately remember it.” Yao Qi turned off the recorder and, trembling, offered the disc to Xi Ping. “It’s just...just when you remember too much, it’s like your brain is boiling... It’s...it’s all here...”

Xi Ping single-handedly drew a transport array to send the disc while clicking his tongue. “Who thought of it?”

Yao Qi glared at him, painted and hateful. “You...you...”

“Huh?” said Xi Ping. “It wasn’t me. I’ve never seen this.”

Then Yao Qi roared indignantly, “After you blew up the Qiu Courtyard, Luo-shixiong went crazy making us memorize *A Selection of Common Inscriptions* in its entirety, and if we got a

single character wrong, we would be beheaded on the spot! I couldn't remember it!"

Xi Ping gasped. "... Brother, my crime is unpardonable."

Yao Qi lay face-up on the ground where he had fallen. Shortly, the mind calming pill had melted away entirely. He took a breath and whispered, "That senior used his Way of the Heart to suppress the Lovebird Sword Array. It seemed like he wanted to disseminate the inscriptions. Then there was an earthquake. The inscriptions for some reason backlashed, sweeping up that senior's consciousness and the Lovebird Sword Array together. Then people came..."

"Who?" said Xi Ping.

Yao Qi slowly shook his head. "They were all masters far off on the horizon. How could I recognize them? Anyway they were all ascended spirits... and there were even shed skins. They said the Sect Leader wanted to counterattack with some kind of evil art... I didn't understand, but anyway he was guilty of the most heinous crimes. They had already completely severed the Southern He Peninsula's veins of the earth, and they said, 'Those inauspicious articles have all been recovered.' I don't know what the inauspicious articles were."

Xi Ping softly said, "It must have been the spirit-conducting gold to be used for repairing the veins of the earth."

"I didn't understand," Yao Qi said quietly. "The sword cultivator senior who was there at the time..."

"Kunlun's Second Elder?"

"Right. He explained to those people, said it wasn't an evil art, it was Lancang's Sect Leader trying to return the spiritual mountains' spiritual energy to the mortal world. While he didn't understand

them, he had already memorized all the inscriptions. All they needed to do was try connecting the veins of the earth and they would know.”

Having said this, Yao Qi saw Xi Ping frown. He was already sighing.

“I saw that when those people heard him, they all had different expressions. They all looked like evil gods in an illicit temple, indescribably stiff and grim. I don’t know who started it, but they said that the spiritual sense of a person cultivating a Heart Sword was too high, and it was easy for him to be influenced by a heart demon. The Second Elder must have been bewitched by evil arts. There was someone who wanted to destroy those things that could repair the veins of the earth—the spirit-conducting gold. They’d heard that the Lancang Mountains no longer had any toolmaking cultivators. Once it was destroyed, that would be it. The Second Elder wouldn’t let them. They started arguing. There was a sword cultivator who called the Second Elder ‘shidi’ who kept trying to persuade him, and finally he brought in Kunlun’s High Priest. The High Priest and their Sect Leader ordered him to return to Northern Li immediately to go into seclusion to calm his mind, handing over the Southern He matter to the Third Elder.

“The Second Elder kept insisting. He said he had seen inscriptions like this elsewhere, they definitely weren’t an evil art. He begged them not to destroy the spirit-conducting gold, to leave the Southern He Peninsula a chance at survival. He would go find evidence... Then a heavenly tribulation fell onto the Lancang Mountains. The Lovebird Sword Array and the last of the Lancang Sect Leader’s consciousness dispersed, and I was thrown out.

“Shiyong, he—that Second Elder, he shouldn’t have said been so honest and said that he remembered everything, and he shouldn’t have said that he had seen them, right? What happened to him afterward?”

On top of the enormous mirror at the end of the Beijue Array, Xie Chu laboriously narrowed his eyes and saw Zhou Ying through the mirror.

Inside the mirror, Zhou Ying was standing next to someone.

That person was tall, plainly dressed, with traces of his solemnity in life remaining at the corners of his mouth and on his brow. He was sitting upright in the mirror... his face seemingly just as it had been over two centuries ago.

Zhou Ying respectfully cupped his hands toward the man, whose eyes were tightly shut, then bent down and turned him over, showing his back to Xie Chu, who was in another world.

Xie Chu forgot to breathe for a moment. His consciousness, which had been barely holding on, seemed to instantly explode. His teeth chattered amid the raging fire.

On that man's back was a gash that went down to the bone. Strike him dead and Xie Chu couldn't have seen wrong—this had been made by Kunlun's ninefold sword.

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Only a cultivator of the same level could have cut a gash like this into the body of a shed skin sword cultivator.

But if two shed skins had been fighting, after over two centuries, the traces still wouldn't have vanished altogether. In other words, the killer had only struck one blow here.

At the time, the Third Elder was on the Southern He Peninsula, Wu Lingxiao wasn't yet the Sword Slave, and the Kunlun shed skin could only have been one person... a person the Second Elder could trust to have his back among the perils beyond the Beijue Mountains.

The Second Elder hadn't been born in time for the era when the Sword Ancestor had widely accepted disciples. While in the eyes of the current younger generations, he was also among the most ancient sword cultivators in the world, he was halfway to a junior in front of the Sect Leader.

The Sect Leader was the person who had led everyone in the struggle to get a foothold on the icy and barren northern continent after the sage had left the mortal dust. Each and every Kunlun sword cultivator had looked to him for guidance and support. Though the times had changed and many of their ideas had begun to clash, the Second Elder still made allowances for the difficulties the Sect Leader had in keeping equilibrium on all sides, and he remembered with gratitude the many compromises the Sect Leader had made for his sake.

To make a somewhat inappropriate comparison, the Sect Leader was to the Second Elder what Zhi Xiu was to Pang Jian.

As reliable and prudent as the Second Elder was, why would he have dared to run the risk of entering the Beijue Array in his true body? It wasn't just because he had a thorough understanding of the terrain after many years of guarding the Beijue Array; it was also because he hadn't been alone then. Another person had gone with him, someone who was like a father and a brother.

The Second Elder's body was with Zhou Ying, and his name token hadn't cracked after his death. That showed that before his essence could disperse, he had been sent into the Ceaseless Mirror.

In other words, the High Priest had also played a role in this.

He had been... killed in a conspiracy by the same Kunlun he had loved and protected for centuries.

Perhaps Zhou Ying had realized that it would be too hard on the Blind Wolf King to make him listen to flying goose code under these circumstances. His hand brushed the mirror, and a line of fleeting mist appeared on the surface.

Before the mist disappeared, as if racing against time, he quickly wrote a line of Northern Li writing—so that Xie Chu could see it clearly, he even wrote it mirrored.

“You can't survive here for long. A person who is dead cannot come back to life. Better to do something more useful than wailing in mourning.” Perhaps because he was no longer in the land of the living, Zhou Ying didn't even bother with basic courtesy, revealing his callous nature, impervious to reason. “Go find the reason your honored teacher was silenced.”

Xie Chu shot him a hateful look and cursed in Northern Li slang.

But after all, he was also a master sword cultivator with many years of fame behind him; even if his heart burst from grief, he still had his

guts. Xie Chu grit his teeth and suddenly clapped a half-immortal grade talisman against the ground—he wasn't a shed skin; his cultivation level was too far below the two who had come here before. Even with Zhou Ying's guidance, he was a spent force. At the slightest movement, his essence would be in danger of freezing altogether. He had to lower himself to being a half-immortal.

Spiritual energy held up his legs, which had only bones remaining. Xie Chu took a bone jade cane from his mustard seed and walked toward the sword cut leaning on it.

The sword cut marked the place where the Sect Leader had launched a sneak attack on the Second Elder. The two of them must have seen something here.

Before Xie Chu could find his footing, another gust of fierce wind came crashing toward him. The mighty ascended spirit sword cultivator was nearly blown away by the wind. In the mirror, Zhou Ying was watching the flying snow filling the sky. He was different from the Second Elder's corpse next to him; his figure was hollow.

Xie Chu followed the direction of his gaze, and his eyes suddenly stopped. His hand, which was like that of a burnt corpse, reached into his mustard seed and pulled out a big handful of spiritual stones. The spiritual stones broke in his palm; they turned into a talisman and flew away. The snow piled over a zhang high on the ground was sent flying. With a loud clatter, the edges of the big mirror on the ground were revealed.

“Inscriptions...”

Inscriptions that clearly belonged to a single set had also appeared now in the Unbound Furnace. The Luwu had come through in the clutch. Lin Chi and Wen Fei had quickly obtained a complete inscription recording. Only by concentrating their full attention and trying innumerable times did the two of them succeed in relaying

these inscriptions to the Unbound Furnace. The Xuanyin Mountains seemed to sense something. The silent Bell of Tribulation on the Principal Peak moved.

It seemed to know that the Xuanyin Mountains' sole shed skin wasn't here, and that he couldn't spare the attention to look after events in the north. It flashed intermittently in the air, turning with unfathomable intent in the direction of Moon Plated Peak.

Just then, an aged hand reached out from midair and touched the Bell of Tribulation—the Dignitary of Fate Zhang Jue landed on Xuanyin's Principal Peak.

Before, his appearance had been that of a sedate middle-aged man, but in a little over a month, his hair and beard had turned white, and of the skin of his hands, only the thinnest layer remained, covered in the wrinkles made by time.

Beneath Zhang Jue's feet was the main hall of the Principal Peak. On the roof tiles, an enormous karma beast appeared. It looked at him as though it understood human emotions, the expression in its eyes affectionate and calm.

Zhang Jue was an orphan picked up by the Southern Sage. He had grown up on the karma beast's back. At the time, the karma beast had not yet been committed to drawings and walls. It had fur like satin and warm breath. Its nature was proud. When it was angry, its furious roars could be heard dozens of li away. But it never screamed at children. When little kids roughly grabbed its ears and plucked its fur and annoyed it, at most it would snort out a breath and avoid them.

Zhang Jue never did mischievous things like that. At seven, he had been as quiet and prudent as he was now. He hadn't been prematurely elderly like Li Fengshan, hadn't had Lin Zongyi's extraordinary natural talents, and he certainly hadn't been as

charming as Zhao Yin. He was always silent, as if he didn't exist. The Southern Sage hadn't been a very strict teacher. If his young disciples violated a rule, as long as they hadn't gone too far out of bounds, he would usually turn a blind eye. Even Lin Zongyi, who later became Yuntian Palace's Dignitary of Rule, had tested their shizun's bottom line and taken beatings for it in his youth. Only Zhang Jue had never broken any rules.

Whether there was someone supervising him or not, he would do whatever shizun said, down to the slightest detail; he had no objections, he asked no questions, he didn't fall short of what was required. He'd known enough of the suffering caused by the turmoil of war. He abhorred all inconstancy. Carefully observing the rules within a framework set down by the strong gave him an unparalleled sense of security. The day that the Sea of Stars had landed in the Xuanyin Mountains, Zhang Jue had become an ascended spirit. In that moment, he thought he had practically found perfect satisfaction—if one could catch glimpses of fate by observing the paths of the stars, wasn't that the best evidence that “everything has its course”?

He became the Dignitary of Fate and in a thousand years hadn't taken a single step out of line. He had taken a disciple just as “rule-abiding and sedate” as himself.

Right up until that “rule-abiding and sedate” disciple forfeited the Xuanyin Mountains in a single strike, smashed the Sea of Stars, and came to see him with a tiny karma beast squeezed into a drawing.

“I've seen that the main hall and the Southern Sage Great Hall have drawings of auspicious signs all over their walls. Those must be provided for the karma beast,” Zhi Xiu said. “I've heard that in earlier years, it often came to play here, but since I came to the mountains, the karma beast never again entered the inner sect without being summoned. Shifu, the sage is gone.”

Zhang Jue hadn't wanted to speak, but hearing this, he couldn't resist opening his mouth. "The sage shed his encumbrances and became free of the mundane dust. He exists with the universe."

"All right," Zhi Xiu said, changing his wording accordingly, "then he evaporated into the air."

Zhang Jue: "..."

"Sages turn into rain and fall to earth, common people fall like leaves and become mud," Zhi Xiu said. "Truly, there is a difference."

After a long moment, Zhang Jue sighed. He said, "Jingzhai, you never learned to observe the stars and natural phenomena. From the bottom of your heart, you never believed that fixed destiny exists. You don't belong to the way of the Dignitary of Fate."

"I don't believe it. Is destiny in the Sea of Stars?" Zhi Xiu calmly asked. "Did you see what the Sea of Stars was when it was turned upside down, see what you have been scrupulously abiding by? Shifu, after all these years, when the Sea of Stars disappeared, didn't you feel the tiniest bit pleased?"

Zhang Jue froze.

"The karma beast misses its former master very much, and it misses you very much... It couldn't come here to see you, so it asked me to bring it." Zhi Xiu looked around the empty walls of the place where Zhang Jue was in seclusion—the karma beast could only appear in a place with human markings on the walls—and bent down to place a drawing in front of Zhang Jue's prayer mat. "Though perhaps you don't remember it anymore."

However much it understood of human emotion, the sacred beast was still only a beast. There were many marvels of the mundane

dust that it could not understand, and it could not interpret the laws and commandments of heaven and earth.

It only loyally remembered its master's heart—the living, human heart buried under history and stone.

Zhang Jue closed his eyes briefly. Spiritual light flashed on his wizened hand laid against the Bell of Tribulation. The unrest and droning of the Bell of Tribulation were suppressed by his hand; it made no more sound.

Lin Chi and Wen Fei's physical senses were fully occupied by the dazzling inscriptions, and their spiritual senses were numb. They had no idea that they had had a close brush with death just now.

Lin Chi watched the inscriptions closely. His seventh sense melded with the Unbound Furnace. The furnace fire of a toolmaking master could read inscriptions.

Inside the furnace fire, an entire universe took shape with a bang.

Lin Chi heard innumerable murmurs. He whipped his head around and saw two ancient cultivators doing battle by debate; he couldn't hear what they were saying—a debate between ancient cultivators wasn't an argument had out in public. There would be layer upon layer of barrier laid down around them, without a single sound allowed to leak out into the ears of outsiders.

Lin Chi saw the eyes of one of them suddenly grow round; signs of age appeared on their face, and their Way of the Heart shattered.

Neither of these two had low cultivation. After the Way of the Heart shattered, the essence would explode. Lin Chi was startled, automatically wanting to dodge, but he saw that the dead person's essence didn't explode; instead, it passed through an inscription

and blended into the body of the winner, the person's aura disappearing entirely.

Lin Chi was all at sea. What kind of evil art is this? he thought. How could they absorb another person's cultivation?

But he quickly found that this was no evil art. The ancient gods and demons had grown strong precisely by consuming each other in this way.

Countless people brushed shoulders with him. The greater the masters, the more terrible their fights. Until recent years, when evil cultivators had frequently emerged and the chaos had been hard to hold back, cultivators of the ascended spirit level had fought very rarely, and it was almost impossible to catch a glimpse of the various nations' shed skins. Lin Chi had never beheld a scene of all the gods and demons of heaven locked in chaotic battle like this.

Through the furnace fire, Lin Chi saw invisible inscriptions "flowing" from cultivators' spirits during debates. The surroundings would immediately change. An ascended spirit could make a river run backward, ignite snow and boil ice. Shed skins could even overturn time and season within a certain scope.

Cultivators who knew restraint would establish boundaries with their arts, but the ones running wild didn't care how many crops in fertile farmlands would be ruined by sweltering heat in early spring or frosty winds at midsummer. In places where cultivators commonly appeared, the four seasons were in total disarray.

But Lin Chi suddenly took a step back, cold sweat rising on his back.

The difference between inscriptions on the one hand and arrays and talismans on the other lay in the fact that talismans and array were manmade; only inscriptions were "made by nature."

Talismans were more convenient and could be activated by a cultivator with spiritual energy. Arrays were a little more complex, relying on the support of additional spiritual stones. In fact, any random cultivator could create their own talismans and arrays any time, it was just that the majority of them weren't very good. Only the most concise and practical, the ones that best economized on spiritual energy, would spread widely.

But inscriptions were different. New inscriptions weren't called "newly made," they were called "newly discovered." Inscriptions in themselves could change the pattern of the spiritual energy flow around them. As long as they weren't in a place like the Land of Turmoil, where the spiritual veins had been severed, they would need no additional source of spiritual energy.

Even mortals knew that inscriptions were the language of the origin of the world, that they had emerged from the primeval universe. The path of the sun and the phases of the moon, the cycle of day and night, living things existing and propagating—all these were contained within them.

But the inscriptions he saw were clearly flying out of the cultivators' spirits and influencing the surroundings!

It was just as if... inscriptions weren't the origin of the world, but the language of Ways of the Heart.

How could that be? Lin Chi had always believed that the vast majority of the time, people acted on their own. Then wouldn't inscriptions each be acting for themselves as well? Wouldn't that lead to total chaos?

As soon as this thought arose, Lin Chi's seventh sense trembled acutely. The wild and disordered struggle of the gods and demons was suddenly before his eyes.

The northerners had been warlike since ancient times, and had had the most sword cultivators. The northern continent had been the first to crumble.

Lin Chi's vision went white. He was nearly buried by the blizzard. In the Unbound Furnace, he saw the boundless snow fields... before the Kunlun Mountains had existed.

He struggled to recall the history books he had read upon entering the sect. It was said that snowstorms in the northern continent had turned into a disaster. The people were destitute. The Sword Ancestor, defending the northern border, couldn't stand to watch. Several times he proposed that cultivators stop fighting, but no one paid attention to him. He tried using his sword to do the talking, beating each one in turn, but cultivators won their fates in defiance of heaven, lived a hairsbreadth from death. Not only did Wanshuang fail to stabilize the four points, it instead provoked even more challenges.

Finally, that famous natural disaster of utter cold descended upon the north. The Sword Ancestor boldly stepped forward, leading his disciples and acolytes, and used his own essence to cast a spiritual shield to block the wind in the north.

That scene replayed within the Unbound Furnace, because the inscriptions flying from the brows of the Sword Ancestor and his followers were precisely the ones Lin Chi was using the furnace fire to analyze.

The disciples with the weakest cultivation were the first to exhaust their essence and die. But when they died, their Ways of the Heart did not shatter. Their Ways of the Heart sank into the earth, still surrounded by inscriptions. The vast majority of the inscriptions disappeared shortly. Only those that shared an origin in the Sword Ancestor were preserved under the influence of that powerful shed

skin, their forms imprinted on the ground. After the deaths of their owners, the leftover inscriptions continued to help draw spiritual energy for their fellows.

The mortals protected by the Sword Ancestor were attempting to send all kinds of goods up to the cultivators. Seeing this, they took rubbings of those inscriptions and took them home to worship them. There were experienced and knowledgeable old people who knew that inscriptions could automatically draw spiritual energy, so they began to draw them as well. They passed quickly from person to person—those inscriptions practically became a sacred totem, covering houses, marketplaces, farms and edges of fields...

Lin Chi thought their efforts were futile. It was common knowledge: only a cultivator of the established foundation level and above could draw inscriptions; even a half-immortal couldn't do it. Even if mortals made identical rubbings, what use...

Could... it...

Lin Chi suddenly held his breath. A spiritual wind rose amid the fire of the Unbound Furnace. Something beyond his imagination occurred.

On the northern continent, in all the places where there were mortals, a sea of inscriptions appeared.

Tied together, they unexpectedly made great waves.

That sea of inscriptions drew frenziedly upon the spiritual energy scattered everywhere, gathering it in the north. Cultivators who wanted to profit from others' misfortunes seemed out of nowhere to encounter a formidable opponent in debate. They didn't even have a chance to learn what the subject of debate was before their Ways of the Heart were shattered by the torrent of inscriptions, and their essences went north after the torrent.

Lin Chi suddenly realized that those who had not established foundations weren't unable to draw inscriptions; it was just that the effects were so feeble as to be practically nonexistent. It took thousands upon tens of thousands at once for the water droplets to form a sea.

He turned and saw the spiritual energy flowing north along human tracks. It penetrated the landscape, became veins of the earth. At the northernmost extremity of the continent, it separated out spiritual stones. The spiritual mountains rose from the ground, moving from the most populous east to the west.

The inscriptions scattered throughout the mortal world all came from the Sword Ancestor, and they were supported by his Way of the Heart as they supported it. When the spiritual mountains began to be pushed up by the veins of the earth with a rumble, his consciousness instantly joined with the whole country—

The first spiritual mountains in the world arose.

The first full moon sage in the world came into being.

The spiritual wind of the northern continent was limpid. His way was quiet and still, leaving no marks.

It continued until both immortals and mortals were exhausted upon reaching the Beijue Pass. There the submerged Ways of the Heart grouped together, sinking into the earth like a mirror. At the mirror's four corners were the inscriptions that had raised the spiritual mountains.

They appeared in perfect detail in front of the Blind Wolf King. Xie Chu used the last of his strength to keep his eyes open, attaching his spiritual sense, which was frozen numb, to his vision. In the

“mirror,” he saw his own reflection—at the center of his brow, there was also a ring of inscriptions.

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“What... what is this?” Xie Chu held his forehead blankly and twisted his head to look at Zhou Ying, but he saw Zhou Ying standing next to the two-century-old remains with his arms folded. Watching the movements of his mouth, Xie Chu thought he seemed to be saying, “I see.”

In the Law Breaker and the South Sea Hidden Realm, Zhou Ying had seen very similar blurred boundaries. At the time, his cultivation had only been a half-immortal's, and he had been unable to pry into it. But when his consciousness, protected by the heart demon seed, had entered the Ceaseless Mirror with his physical body, he had known that he had bet right.

In the Ceaseless Mirror, he could see an identical boundary. This time, he had succeeded in coming to the end of that unclear boundary.

This human world, stifled for a thousand years by the spiritual mountains, was like the Law Breaker, like the South Sea Hidden Realm—it was a manmade universe.

The Law Breaker was Hui Xiangjun's creation and the South Sea Hidden Realm was suspected of being Ancestor Tianbo's masterpiece, while the makers of this human world were the ignorant masses themselves.

The inside of Xie Chu's head roared, whether because he was freezing, burning, or had faintly touched upon a truth that threatened his Way of the Heart; the questions in his mind were so numerous that they jammed together. He actually didn't know which one to spit out first. “You see what? What is it? Just because of this... Nearly a thousand years of mutual support and friendship, and just because of this he actually killed him...”

Zhou Ying looked away from the inscriptions and waved a hand, interrupting him. He wrote: “Your honored Sect Leader wasn’t necessarily acting of his own volition.”

“Who could have coerced him...?” Having said this, Xie Chu suddenly saw the inscriptions at the center of his brow reflected in the mirror. His words cut off abruptly. Before a thought could arise in his mind, he was once again interrupted by Zhou Ying.

Zhou Ying was intentionally keeping him from thinking carefully about the relationship between cultivators and Ways of the Heart. “Certain of my doubts about the Kunlun Mountains have been resolved for the time being. There is another matter of utmost urgency.”

Xie Chu was exhausted, his flesh and bones nearly all burned away. His essence had nearly frozen. His mind was unavoidably going numb. “What?”

Zhou Ying bent his head and looked at the Second Elder’s corpse, which seemed to be sleeping.

The Wolf Kind had said that the Ceaseless Mirror could only be summoned by the High Priest, the Sect Leader, and the Sword Slave together. Of them, there was no need to count the Sword Slave. She had only had Wanshuang for a little over two centuries; he figured that calling her up was only a ceremonial need, to demonstrate respect for Wanshuang—but the Sect Leader and the High Priest, especially the High Priest, must be indispensable to *summoning the Ceaseless Mirror*.

Zhou Ying distinctly recalled that the High Priest had summoned his “corpse” up in front of him. Then a beam of light had flashed from between the old man’s brows, and he had left the human world and

entered the Ceaseless Mirror and, following the boundary that only a paramount spiritual sense could see, had found his way here.

Adding in the peculiar inheritance of Kunlun's High Priests...

“This is the main body of the Ceaseless Mirror,” Zhou Ying wrote, tapping on the surface. “Its entrance is between the brows of your honored sect's High Priests. It seems that they are incarnations of the divine tool of the mountains. Your honored teacher's corpse is here, and the scene of the murder is at your feet. In other words, there was a third person here then... a half-immortal. How did he get here?”

Right now, no one could have answered this question better than Xi Ping.

After he had narrowly avoided the pursuit of Kunlun's ninefold sword and sent his consciousness into the mustard seed to speak to Yao Qi, he hadn't stood around in place like an idiot.

Shifu had been tricked by the shard of Zhaoting, but that mixed-breed Wangge Luobao knew what was up. If that jerk hadn't been bitten to death by the Cauldron of Nine Dragons yet, the Kunlun sword strike earlier must have indicated his position to Wangge Luobao. Therefore, after dodging the point of the sword, Xi Ping, hidden in the sea, raced without hesitation toward the battle of two Kunlun swords—the most dangerous place was the safest place.

As expected, no sooner had Xi Ping left his original position than the huge figure of a waking dragon emerged on the surface of the sea. Furious roaring dragons poked their heads up from the bottom of the sea.

Wangge Luobao, having attracted the Cauldron of Nine Dragons, disappeared in a flash, somewhat flustered and hard-pressed.

Damn that Tai Sui!

Wangge Luobao cursed inwardly: he'd slipped away faster than a loach! Had his flesh healed? He didn't seem worried about his wounds getting steeped in saltwater!

Xi Ping heard dragon roars nearly brush past his shoulder and didn't so much as turn his head. "Come at me if you've got the balls."

It wasn't that Wangge Luobao didn't know that Xi Ping might head for the shed skin battlefield, but with his guts, he didn't dare to barge in boldly with the Cauldron of Nine Dragons after him. He could only lie to himself, betting that Tai Sui was as "rational and cautious" as him, fruitlessly leading the Cauldron of Nine Dragons in the wrong direction to try his luck.

Zhi Xiu had given his rebellious disciple three sword attacks, and the very last one still remained to Xi Ping. It wasn't necessarily stronger than the others, but its keen edge was unmatched—which had aggravated the symptoms of Xi Ping's overweening audacity; right now, he was the exact antonym of "rational and cautious."

Xi Ping slipped through the omnipresent sword wind. If he took a breath wrong, a cleft would appear in his head. Apart from him, there was no other living creature in a hundred li radius beneath the shed skin level.

While waiting for the outcome of Lin Chi's analysis of the inscriptions, he prepared to dig up the foundations of Lancang's great mountain array and trip up the Lovebird Sword Array as necessary.

When the change took place, he had just arrived beneath the feet of Kunlun's Sect Leader and the Sword Slave.

Of course Kunlun's Sect Leader had higher cultivation than the Sword Slave, who was a junior, but the Sword Slave wielded Wanshuang; the two of them were deadlocked.

Actually, thinking about it carefully, this seemed rather like a metaphor—the Sword Ancestor had left the mundane dust and his essence had dispersed into the Kunlun Mountain Range; the Sword Ancestor's Way of the Heart was the foundation of Kunlun, and Kunlun's Sect Leader and High Priest represented the utmost orthodoxy. Only the vital sword that was like half of a sword cultivator's body didn't acknowledge them. It was just like the karma beast, wandering through the mortal world and avoiding the immortal mountains.

“My—shifu!” The Sword Slave met the Sect Leader's reddened eyes and let out an inhuman roar. “Where is he?!”

This howl could have shattered the spirit of a low level cultivator whose mind was unsteady. Not far away, the Third Elder staggered on his sword, his heart and guts ready to burst—he wasn't entirely unaware of the situation. It was just that his understanding was slight.

When the Second Elder had stood his ground and quarreled with all the great sects, the Third Elder had been on the sidelines trying to smooth the situation over. Though everyone's mouths were full of pretentious talk, in fact they all knew perfectly well what was going on, so when the Second Elder was later forcibly summoned away by his sect, everyone present was of one mind and didn't mention him again. He didn't know what had happened afterward. He hadn't asked, and he hadn't investigated. A person who had lived for a thousand years knew when to be clever and when to be dumb.

But having seen the Sect Leader's reactions to this point with his own eyes and now hearing this question from the Sword Slave, it was like a sudden bolt of lightning breaking a stone.

The Third Elder trembled. Beneath the assault of the Lovebird Sword Array and the Silver Moon, his vital sword flew out of his hand. Seeing an opportunity arise, Zhi Xiu reacted swiftly, seizing the chance to deliver another blow; the Third Elder's vital sword flew straight at Kunlun's Sect Leader.

The Sect Leader had no time to turn and dodge. How could Wanshuang permit him to split his attention? It slammed heretically against the Sect Leader's protective spiritual energy. Had Xi Ping, hidden in the shadows, not been afraid of being beaten like a drum by Zhaoting, he simply would have given a cry of *good work!*

Just then, the world fell silent. Time seemed to congeal. A mustard seed flew from the Sect Leader's sleeve and, exposed to the sword wind, was shredded to bits. Light burst from it.

“Wu Lingxiao, you are disobedient!”

The word “disobedient” was pronounced by two voices layered together.

Zhi Xiu, who was nearest to them, suddenly received a warning from his spiritual sense. In a flash, he withdrew several li away. Without so much as turning his head, he used Zhaoting to knock aside several oblique strikes that the sword array had thrown at him. His pupils contracted slightly.

A human figure flew from the intense light between the Sect Leader and the Sword Slave. This person's spiritual energy was so weak it was negligible. It was an old man... an old half-immortal!

In a battlefield of sword cultivators at the pinnacle of cultivation, even a shed skin didn't dare to rashly charge in; an ascended spirit would be more brittle than a piece of old paper, so what about a half-immortal?

Almost as soon as the outlines of that old half-immortal's figure appeared, his body was destroyed. Only a little mirror on his spirit, two cun square, remained, fixing the world and everything in it in place.

The core array of the Sword Slave's half-puppet body was locked dead at once. She froze in place.

Zhou Ying had asked how a half-immortal like Kunlun's High Priest could enter the Beijue Array and place the Second Elder's corpse in the Ceaseless Mirror?

This was the answer: the Sect Leader had brought him.

Apart from the Silver Moon, the Lovebird Sword Array, and the Cauldron of Nine Dragons, which didn't dare to show its head, there was also a fourth "divine tool of the mountains" here.

Wanshuang slipped from its master's hand. The current High Priest's body was destroyed, and his crazed human-shaped puppet of a Sect Leader slashed at the Sword Slave. There was no time for Zhi Xiu to save her.

But just then, a beam of sword energy flew up from the ground, knocking the Kunlun Sect Leader's attack astray—it was of shed skin grade!

Apart from Zhaoting, Wanshuang, and the two Kunlun elders, there was another person here who held a sword attack.

A sword attack that had cut through clouds of tribulation.

After his mind emptied out altogether, Zhi Xiu almost had the impression that he was cracking to pieces. For the first time in his life, the world's most good-tempered sword cultivator understood

that “hair standing up in anger” wasn’t an exaggeration of the ancients.

Xi Shiyong, I’ll break you to pieces!

The Kunlun Sect Leader’s attack brushed past the Sword Slave and was blocked by Zhaoting before it could hit the ground. In the space of a breath, Zhi Xiu landed at the place that sword attack had originated.

After going through a major battle that had made his cultivation leap up a minor boundary, Xi Ping’s hidden bones had obviously firmed up quite a bit. Using that sword attack had only broken him halfway. Just as he was about to duck into the shadow of a wizened tree, a light grey figure appeared before his eyes. Xi Ping’s reaction was extremely fast. As if he had been “rescued,” he used his sole remaining hand to cling to shizun’s leg, pretending he’d had absolutely no intention of running off. “Shifu, the Luwu ship capsized, and that Wang from Southern Shu is drooling over my beauty, he just won’t leave me alone. Because of him I got chased all the way back here by those big worms... by the Cauldron of Nine Dragons. I nearly died! I thought I’d never see you again, shifu!”

There was nowhere for Zhi Xiu’s raised hand to fall. He had to retract it. Zhaoting buzzed as it vibrated; it was unclear whether it was pleading for mercy on Xi Ping’s behalf or lodging a complaint against him.

“Good child.” Zhi Xiu crushed a handful of spiritual stones and elixir pills and sprinkled them over him. Xi Ping trembled, feeling as if what shizun had crushed was his skull. “If I don’t deal with you when we get back, I’ll be calling you something.”

But just then, the east wind suddenly turned keen.

There had been an east wind blowing over the Southern He Peninsula the whole time, strong enough for a hurricane, unusually so. But the fighting among the masters had been too intense. Everyone had been ignoring the wind.

But right after the Ceaseless Mirror appeared, that wind suddenly became an astral wind.

The houses on the ground, the mining machinery... all the remnants were swept away. Zhi Xiu threw out a hand behind himself to shield his wretched disciple, currently an inhuman lump. All the cultivators sniffed out an inauspicious aura.

The east...

In a flash, Xi Ping gave a start.

The Resurrection Vortex, the Impassable Sea!

Not caring that his body hadn't yet regenerated after being shattered by sword energy, his consciousness entered the paperman on Wei Chengxiang's boat—he really had a crow's mouth; the Luwu ship had indeed overturned. It was only that, protected by arrays and immortal tools, it hadn't yet sunk or fallen into the water. It was floating precariously on the sea. The half-immortals on the ship were brandishing all kinds of talismans, struggling to maintain equilibrium. The paperman Xi Ping fought free of Wei Chengxiang's arms and snatched up a Heavenly Question that had just come flying toward them and read it quickly.

Lin Chi's letter discussed the important points about the origin of the inscriptions and the cause of Kunlun's formation.

Since ancient times, the northern and southern continents had been inhabited by different peoples, their cultures and languages incomprehensible to each other. When the Sword Ancestor had put

an end to the natural disaster in Northern Li, it hadn't yet impacted the southern continent.

But there was no barrier between the northern and southern continents, and spiritual energy circulated. After the first range of spiritual mountains formed and heavenly commandments were established on the northern half of the continent, the flow of spiritual energy throughout the whole human world changed its pattern along with him.

The southern continent had no sea of inscriptions created by the common people, and naturally it also had no veins of the earth. But spiritual energy began to assemble around those masters who shared the ideals and followed the way of the Sword Ancestor.

The south had the Two Sages, the east had the Southern Sage, the west had the Black Emperor, and on the sea there was Tianbo. Their cultivation rose with the tide; one after another, they reached the full moon boundary.

Kunlun had formed under the impetus of the people, and the Sword Ancestor had reached his "full moon" position because of the birth of the Kunlun Mountains. The other four ranges of immortal mountains had been made on this basis. First came the full moon sage, and then the spiritual mountains gathered with the sage as a foundation and put forth veins of the earth.

In the present, the cultivation world said that *the Great Way has three thousand paths, all different paths with the same end*; this was because those with different ends had nearly all been eliminated during that period. The ways of those who had fallen behind had shattered, and their essences had been plundered. The remnants of their consciousnesses had been unwilling to scatter; they had formed pestilences or lost their minds, nourishing the shadow beneath the feet of those in the cultivation world—heart demons.

In this way, “demons” had been born.

Lin Chi wrote: *The origins of the world’s heavenly commandments, the origins of inscriptions, are in the Kunlun Mountains, in the Ceaseless Mirror. Lancang’s senior wished to use them to alter the heavenly commandments and disperse Lancang’s spiritual energy.*

Xi Ping: “...”

Well, wasn’t that a coincidence? The demon host was sealed in the resurrection vortex next door.

CHAPTER 228 - A Life of Regret (40)

First the Lancang Mountains had “come back from the dead.” Then, nearly all the extant shed skin sages had assembled on the Southern He Peninsula, where birds didn’t shit, and had started fighting.

Since antiquity, there had been a subtle connection between war and demons. When they had whipped the East Sea and the South Sea up to a boil several times with their fighting, how could the Resurrection Vortex remain calm?

The “shoddy patch” there wasn’t the genuine article, anyway, and of the three great shed skins who had done the patching, in Xi Ping’s current view, at least two had been dodgy goods; their work had nearly been destroyed by a half-immortal.

And never mind the three great divine tools of the mountains already locked in a chaotic battle here like headless flies, the Kunlun Sect Leader with his germinating cranium had also brandished the Ceaseless Mirror—it was said that this thing hadn’t made an appearance since the formation of the Kunlun Mountains.

According to Lin Chi’s interpretation, the Ceaseless Mirror was the origin of the set of inscriptions that had circulated at the time, which also meant that many “new inscriptions” used by later generations were effective because they were built upon the earliest built foundation of the heavenly commandments. The “demon host” in the Impassable Sea were the dregs that had been rejected by that series of inscriptions. When Xi Ping had hit the Ceaseless Mirror with his sword attack, it had amounted to loosening the ropes binding the demon host.

And the demon seal in the Impassable Sea was also written in inscriptions!

What Zhou Ying had done halfway before being desperately held back by Xi Ping, he had now unexpectedly completed himself in a single hit.

In just this brief span of time, a black mist had risen over the Resurrection Vortex and begun to spread in all directions.

And in addition to the demon seal, the great mountain arrays and all the national boundaries were also written in inscriptions.

In Heaven's Design Pavilion on the Wan-He border, the karma beast suddenly stood up. The Kaiming Cultivators on guard watched dumbfounded as the ranks of invisible border inscriptions floated off the ground. Of them, approximately fifty percent of the inscriptions "went out" for a moment before reconnecting. Though it had only been for the blink of an eye, the wildfire on the Southern He Peninsula, driven to the border by the Lovebird Sword Array, seized this opening to squeeze in.

The vegetation at the border billowed like waves on the sea, withering and dying in large stretches. The "wildfire" vines raced in a frenzy into this land of plenty.

Next came the reeking wind.

When the demon seal broke, though the Resurrection Vortex was located between Wan and He, there was a gathering of masters on the Southern He Peninsula, which the demon host avoided, so it was Southern Wan that bore the brunt!

In the Kunlun Sect Leader's bright red eyes there was only "expelling evil"; he ignored everything else. When his first assault missed its target, he cast the Ceaseless Mirror into the sky. That little mirror two cun large grew countless times, blocking out the sun.

The Sword Slave's half-puppet core array originated from the Sword Ancestor's sword-bearing puppet and could be controlled by the Ceaseless Mirror, while Zhi Xiu was afraid of stepping in lest he mistakenly harm the innocent. He scooped up Xi Ping and could do nothing but dodge hastily.

The momentary stagnation of the inscriptions had also made the Silver Moon and the Lovebird Sword Array skip briefly. The Third Elder and Xuanwu had seized that opportunity to escape.

"Don't worry about me, shifu," Xi Ping said quickly, forgetting the lie he had just blurted out. "Go back home! Don't.."

The divine tools of the mountains could seal his link to the reincarnation wood, but they wouldn't necessarily be able to sever Zhi Xiu's link to the snow shuffler. A shed skin was after all a shed skin, and besides, among accompanying plants, there was a difference between "one's own" and "second hand."

Therefore, Xi Ping had used a tiny verbal trick, and as he'd expected, Zhi Xiu didn't respond—Xi Ping knew immediately that shifu indeed still had a connection to his accompanying plant. If it had been impossible, Zhi Xiu would have calmly told him so instead of keeping silent.

There were no trees on the Southern He Peninsula. On the way here, Zhi Xiu had had to fly like the others. But returning would be the matter of a moment; no one could catch up with him, whether full moon or shed skin. This game on the Southern He Peninsula from the very first hadn't been set up to catch him.. If only he were willing.

Xi Ping was only too skilled at hitting people where it hurt. He nearly blurted out, *Don't delay, what do I matter in comparison to the Impassable Sea? Anyway, that was my sword attack just now.*

If he only said it, it would be just like how he had used a few sentences to interrupt Zhou Ying while the latter had been tormenting the demon seal; shifu would immediately be left with no choice.

Could he really abandon his country for the sake of his disciple and his own selfishness?

Even if Zhi Xiu himself were willing to shoulder that eternal infamy, what about Xi Ping? Having personally damaged the demon seal by mistake, if Xi Ping had a rest of his life, how would he live it down?

But when the words rolled up to the tip of his tongue, Xi Ping clenched his teeth and held them back, not spitting them out.

The situation was different from back then, he thought. That time, san-ge had been standing on the edge of the cliff, getting ready to jump. He'd only needed to turn back and see the shore. Therefore, Xi Ping had had no scruples; he only needed to haul him back from the edge, whatever it took. As long as it worked, it didn't matter what he said.

This was different. Zhi Xiu was already caught in a dilemma. If he spoke to compel him, it would be cutting out shifu's heart.

Do not be a hero, and certainly do not be a god. It had sounded like a warning coming from his shifu, but now that he thought about it, it seemed that this was the closest thing to a complaint that shifu had ever uttered in his life.

He had already made a poor showing while taking care of the Territory Map. He couldn't shift all the responsibility simply because shizun was the legendary "General Zhi."

Xi Ping was unfilial, but he wasn't yet unfilial to that degree.

“Don’t... don’t worry about not returning, either. Anyway, you can notify them, and the upgraded immortal tools will hold out for a while.” Xi Ping took a deep breath. “Heaven’s Design Pavilion and the Kaiming Department branch should both have snow shufflers. Have them plant some more, or else your field of vision will be limited... Be careful, the Cauldron of Nine Dragons is still in the seal!”

No sooner had his crow’s mouth spoken these words than a shadow emerged on the surface of the sea. The Cauldron of Nine Dragons was also among the divine tools that had been impacted by the inscriptions, and Wangge Luobao had seized that opportunity to escape. And now that the appearance of the Ceaseless Mirror had suddenly altered the terrain, the “industrious” Lingyun Sect Leader immediately cast aside everything else in favor of “considering the situation as a whole,” taking a side and adding in his own push.

Zhi Xiu pushed Xi Ping aside. Zhaoting’s point forced the teeth-baring, claw-brandishing dragon head away at the last moment. The huge dragon crashed into the water, raising spray to the height of a hill. Through the curtain of water, Zhi Xiu’s complicated and unreadable gaze fell onto the rebellious disciple he had just wanted to give a beating to.

“I’ve really done it this time.” Xi Ping skillfully twisted his wrist, the last to grow back, returning the joint to its proper position. “It’s totally hopeless. If I can’t clean it up, won’t I have to sell myself to compensate for it? *Ptui*, I can’t do that!”

Zhi Xiu: “...”

“I have a way.” Xi Ping’s focus had reached the greatest heights, countless thoughts rising and falling in his mind. His consciousness was invisibly more concentrated than usual, and the speed of the

hidden bones regenerating his body had increased considerably. In the time it had taken to have this conversation, the half of his body that had been shattered earlier had been almost fully restored. The three sword attacks he had taken from Flying Jade Peak had completely fused with his meridians.

No hopeless situation could hold back a heart bent of finding a way out. When he calmed himself entirely, Xi Ping indeed came up with a thought for how to answer the situation.

Wanshuang was being controlled; on their side, they only had shifu left—an ascended spirit didn't count on this occasion; presumably all the gods and demons of heaven were thinking that, too. But he wasn't without new cards in his hand. The first was that when the demon aura had blown toward them, the Kunlun Sect Leader's symptoms had clearly worsened; he had become even more lost. Second was that Master Lin had figured out the inscriptions; if mortals used inscriptions, as long as there were enough of them, there might well be a result, as long as he could restore his connection to the reincarnation wood.

Without Zhaoting, he couldn't fly a sword under the noses of shed skin sword cultivators, so Xi Ping simply stood on a talisman for riding the wind and charged toward the Ceaseless Mirror on the sea wind Zhaoting had raised cutting down the Cauldron of Nine Dragons.

“Keep an eye out for me, shifu. If you see me about to die, stab me!”

Only Zhaoting could shatter his body without harming his consciousness, letting his consciousness slip out through a crack. The others were all determined to destroy him body and soul.

Apart from the others, he also had a third card: Lin Chi's letter contained an enormous volume of information, the most important

point being Kunlun's Ceaseless Mirror.

And inside the Ceaseless Mirror, there just happened to be a person — a consciousness.

If san-ge's word could be relied on, and he really could enter the Ceaseless Mirror without his consciousness being destroyed, then according to what Lin Chi had said, he had likely already found the Beijue Pass, the location of the main body of Kunlun's Ceaseless Mirror.

He couldn't strike at the Ceaseless Mirror again, or else the border inscriptions of all the nations would be damaged, and the situation would be even harder to clean up. But that didn't mean... that the Ceaseless Mirror couldn't escape the control of Kunlun's old lunatic.

Inside the Ceaseless Mirror, Zhou Ying's spiritual sense was touched. He whipped his head around to look back the way he had come.

The aura of the High Priest, fast approaching the grave, had lingered after bringing him inside. Now it had disappeared.

When the previous High Priest's body died, the entrance to the Ceaseless Mirror would settle on the spirit of the new High Priest, but it hadn't; in its place, there was biting cold sword energy. In other words, Kunlun's Sect Leader had temporarily taken over the Ceaseless Mirror — this could only mean that he and the High Priest were no longer in the Kunlun Mountains, and that the Ceaseless Mirror had made its appearance in the human world!

The only person in the world who could force a peak shed skin sword cultivator to brandish the Ceaseless Mirror was the Sword Slave; others weren't qualified in terms of fighting strength, and they didn't have the capacity to provoke the old Sect Leader into frenzy.

Zhou Ying tapped on the surface of the mirror and quickly scribbled a line of writing, asking Xie Chu: *Can you still contact Xi Shiyong?*

Xie Chu was just cleaning up the snow and ice around the Ceaseless Mirror, exhausting all his efforts to record the inscriptions at its edges. He didn't dare to waste a single breath of warmth. Even his breathing was very controlled. He snatched up a handful of the spiritual stones in his mustard seed, which were running out, and while he was at it touched the reincarnation wood, then shook his head.

In other words, Xi Shiyong was likely on the scene.

Zhou Ying cast his eyes down slightly, rapidly deducing the situation in the outside world right now. At the same time, he acutely sensed the aura of the heart demon in the Kunlun Sect Leader's sword energy.

The position of High Priest was temporarily vacant, and the Sect Leader who was pinioned by a heart demon without his knowledge had to control the Ceaseless Mirror; a portion of his consciousness would have to enter the mirror.

Beneath the Ceaseless Mirror was buried the origin of the spiritual mountains. The Way of the Heart of a master who regularly wandered here was likely to be corroded; therefore, the Ceaseless Mirror had always been Kunlun's taboo, controlled by the High Priest, who had a half-immortal cultivation level. Right now, the Sect Leader's reason probably hadn't yet fled entirely; opening the Ceaseless Mirror had been only a matter of convenience. Naturally he didn't dare to probe deeply with his consciousness. He had absolutely no idea that at the end of the divine tool of the mountains was the master of the heart demon seed.

Naturally Kunlun's Sect Leader had seen Xi Ping. A little ascended spirit, and not even a sword cultivator... The Sect Leader didn't

even bother scolding him for overestimating his capabilities. He raised a hand, ready to crush this tiny ant. Just then, a familiar voice spoke into his ear: “Sect Leader shixiong.”

It was as if Kunlun’s Sect Leader had been struck by lightning. The next moment, he suddenly remembered: that person—or rather, his corpse—was in the Ceaseless Mirror.

CHAPTER 229 - A Life of Regret (41)

“Lanze...” The Kunlun Sect Leader moved his lips unconsciously, speaking in a voice as feeble as dust.

But it couldn't escape a cultivator's hearing.

At a distance from him, the Third Elder's heart trembled. He wished he were deaf. The Sword Slave, knocked down to earth by the Ceaseless Mirror, abruptly raised her head—“Lanze” was the Second Elder's courtesy name.

At this stage, Xi Ping had no more time to plan his steps. All his reactions were instinctive.

Synthesizing what Lin Chi and Yao Qi had said, the Second Elder must have gone too deep while repairing the Beijue Array and had inadvertently seen the inscriptions there, then had died there when he had gone in person to verify. The details couldn't be discerned. He processed it roughly, only picking up the irrefutable and vital points. “To launch a sneak attack on a fellow sect member in the place he had guarded his whole life, kill him to keep him silent, then hide his corpse in the Ceaseless Mirror to cover up the truth...”

His words were interrupted by sword wind.

This blow ought to have sliced him to pieces, but this foremost Sect Leader's mind was unstable. Xi Ping's “launch a sneak attack on a fellow sect member” and “hide his corpse in the Ceaseless Mirror” stabbed into his ears, and the “corpse” inside the Ceaseless Mirror was knocking again and again on his consciousness.

“I want to pay a visit to the Beijue Mountain Pass. Please undertake the array for me, Sect Leader shixiong.”

“I know what they’re all thinking, shixiong. You’re the only one I trust.”

“Sect Leader shixiong...”

Kunlun’s Sect Leader couldn’t distinguish whether the questioning voice was coming from inside or outside the mirror. His hand began to shake as it held his sword. Xi Ping, who was richly experienced in being hunted, narrowly avoided the thrust.

On the ground, all the bone jade in the body of the Sword Slave, bound by the Ceaseless Mirror, began to shake. Her mouthful of teeth that could crunch spiritual stones like candy chattered. “What did you say? What did you say?!”

The Second Elder had persisted in believing that if he could only prove that Lancang’s Sect Leader hadn’t been practicing an evil art before his death, no matter what else, the cultivation world wouldn’t openly rob the common people to get spiritual stones. The Sect Leader could do nothing to change his mind. Pleading seclusion as an excuse, he had wanted to paper things over and wait for everyone to cool down, not expecting that when he began to meditate that day, he would for the first time come into contact with something that was almost a “heavenly edict.” The contents of the heavenly edict were vague, but when the Sect Leader opened his eyes, the Second Elder saying *I’ve seen inscriptions like this outside the Beijue Array* lingered continuously in his mind.

Moved by obscure motives, he agreed to go with the Second Elder. Before he left, the High Priest came to see him and requested to come along. That was the previous High Priest, already elderly then, only waiting for a new High Priest from among the bodies with their consciousnesses sealed to inherit the memories and then awaken; it had been a long time since he had made an appearance... The Sect Leader thought that he ought to have known then that the expedition would be doomed.

Outside the Beijue Mountains, even for shed skins, was the most difficult place on earth to survive. To keep their consciousnesses from being lost in the utter cold, the two of them took turns standing guard as the other rested. In recent years, though they had shared control over Kunlun's general affairs, there had been some disagreeable words spoken between them; when they met, they would stick to business. They rarely had a chance to reminisce about past affections.

In a difficult spot, people became much closer.

In order to stay awake, the two of them began idly chatting about the past. The Sect Leader had built Kunlun Mountain's Disciple Hall system single-handed, and the Second Elder had been in the first batch of disciples in the Disciple Hall, personally selected by the Sect Leader, introduced to cultivation by him step by step. They also each spoke of their respective troubling juniors. The Sect Leader brought up Wu Lingxiao; sighing out white steam, he said he had a whetstone, an excellent thing; when they returned to the sect, the Second Elder could take it and give it to his little disciple to coax her into coming back.

They also spoke of all the grave diseases plaguing the cultivation world at the time... The Sect Leader had never revealed so many of his quandaries to another person, not even the High Priest.

When cultivation reached the level of these two shed skins, it became very hard to confide in another. He hadn't thought that what was beyond the Beijue Mountains would drag divine sages back to mortality. The pair of thousand-year-old shed skins had to share their meager resources with each other so both could survive. They dimly returned to their youth, brothers and bosom companions walking shoulder-to-shoulder.

Until they reached the end of the Beijue Array.

Xi Ping said, “Your honored sect merits the position of foremost in the world. After doing a shameful deed, you still aren’t afraid that a ghost will come knocking at your door. I admire you!”

A ghost...

When the High Priest had pushed the Second Elder’s body into the Ceaseless Mirror, his essence had not yet completely dispersed. Was he really dead? Was it possible... that he was roaming in the Ceaseless Mirror, always watching him?

In that moment, the Sect Leader forgot the ascended spirit in front of him, forgot the Sword Slave, and forgot the friends and enemies from all the great sects. Heedless of all else, he sent his consciousness into the Ceaseless Mirror.

Zhou Ying silently turned into mist. The weak aura of an established foundation was matter-of-factly ignored by that sword cultivator. He sensed the Kunlun Sect Leader’s aura charge directly toward the Second Elder’s body.

Oh? So impulsive?

With a thought, Zhou Ying knew that most likely there was also someone outside the Ceaseless Mirror provoking him.

A shed skin sword cultivator’s sword heart was extremely firm. The Sect Leader represented the will of the Kunlun Mountains. This heart demon had been too easy to raise; it couldn’t only have been because he had done something shameful—Xuanwu had mistakenly killed Lingyun cultivators during his destitute wanderings, and Xiang Ning had tried taking advantage of Jinping’s misfortunes and harmed its innocent people; they had both felt that they were *too important to pay attention to such trifles*. Neither of them had wavered.

Zhou Ying's gaze also fell on the Second Elder's corpse. Suddenly, he found that this body was very neat, much more dignified than Xie Chu, who was currently crawling through the snow. His crown was upright, and there wasn't a strand of loose hair—never mind trekking through ice and snow and getting stabbed in the back, he might not even have even been able to wake up this tidy from an afternoon nap.

Who had cleaned him up?

One thing, even if it was the revelation of a colossal secret, was in fact not so likely to incur such a tidy and efficient murderous impulse; at least there would have been a few words of argument.

The average person might think that the reason the Sect Leader had been able to bring himself to kill was that his political views disagreed with the Second Elder's and he bore a grudge, or he was jealous that a junior's cultivation might catch up with and surpass his...but would a shed skin master be base enough to be so shallow and impetuous?

When Lancang's Sect Leader had lost his mind, half of it had been the heart demon seed, and another half had been because he had betrayed the Lancang Mountains. Then Kunlun...

The shed skin sword cultivator's aura charged toward him, so aggressive it was hard to breathe. Fortunately, Zhou Ying was at present only a consciousness that had left its body. He didn't need to breathe.

Dispersed in the mist, a guess suddenly came to him. He changed his line of attack. "Sect Leader shixiong, I know it wasn't your choice to attack me. I don't blame you. I only feel pity that you, the hero of an era, have become the spiritual mountains' puppet and don't know it yourself..."

The Sect Leader's ears roared, his consciousness crammed full of the whispering of the heart demon—back then, when he had heard the happy surprise in the voice of the Second Elder walking in front of him, there had been a moment when he had actually felt a little gratified. In the present cultivation world, there weren't many who could still be so pure.

When he had gone over, he had even thought that Kunlun currently had enough spiritual stones, and it didn't plan on turning over immortal tools for mortal use. There was no need for them to covet another nation's spiritual mountains like the southerners. If Lanze really could give those hypocritical southerners a slap in the face, what would it cost him as his shixiong to cover up for him?

But all his thoughts disappeared the instant he saw those inscriptions. The Sect Leader was engulfed in unreasoning panic, as if the greatest secret of his life had been unearthed. Apart from the icy desire to kill, there was nothing in his head. His memories practically cut off at that moment.

He only remembered that when he had come back to his senses, the point of his sword had already fallen on the Second Elder's back. A single blow had cut through his body and pierced his essence. Next, the High Priest had emerged from the mustard seed hidden realm he was carrying and opened the Ceaseless Mirror in front of him.

The wintry wind outside the Beijue Mountain Pass was too much for an old half-immortal with one foot in the grave. The High Priest's form only appeared for a moment before it was completely frozen. The Second Elder's body disappeared inside the Ceaseless Mirror, and the previous High Priest stood rigid in front of it, having died in the line of duty.

Dazed, the Sect Leader retraced his steps in a panic. Because of his plentiful essence, in the end he didn't freeze to death outside the Beijue Mountains. Holding out with his last breath, he had returned the Ceaseless Mirror to the Kunlun Mountain summit. The new High Priest opened his eyes from among a group of "candidates" whose consciousnesses had been sealed. He had already received all the memories of the previous High Priest. Apart from being young, his manner and tone were in no way different from his elder's.

Seeing the Sect Leader, the first words he said to him were, "Zhu Lanze had become disloyal. Punishing him was the heavenly edict of the spiritual mountains. The Sect Leader only dealt with him fairly. I know that righteousness and personal feelings are hard to separate. The Sect Leader must be suffering now. I offer you my condolences."

The High Priest had been right. When the Sect Leader thought back to it after the fact, he thought more and more that the Second Elder had been heretical, wanting to shake the foundations of his own spiritual mountains for the sake of a few foreigners who had nothing to do with him. It had been a matter of urgency; however broken-hearted he might be, there had been nothing else he could do. Hadn't the High Priest endorsed his righteous choice to murder a loved one? The blankness in his mind then had been only the suffering of being unable to have it both ways.

Lying to himself and others, the Sect Leader had pushed a hidden truth down to the bottom of his heart: he had had no intention of killing then, and the one who had raised the sword to kill hadn't been him at all. It had been that will that had suddenly occupied his body.

But he didn't dare to believe it, didn't dare to think closely about it. He would rather admit that he was base and shameless, that he had been jealous of his extraordinarily talented shidi. Otherwise, in the millennium and more during which he had opened his spiritual eyes

in the chaotic primordial world, refined his sword aura amid the harshest ice and snow, sought high and low in the face of near-certain death, made the difficult trek to the present, had he really been doing it all in order to cultivate himself into a puppet?

The heart demon sighed softly and said, “Mortals always lie to themselves and others and shift blame so they can feel good about themselves. You’re clearly a good person, but why must you contort your own heart for the sake of a Way of the Heart? Sect Leader shixiong, why don’t you take a look in the Ceaseless Mirror, see who is the true ‘sword slave’ of the spiritual mountains?”

The Ceaseless Mirror, suspended in the sky above the Lancang Mountains, suddenly shook, instantly breaking free of the Kunlun Sect Leader’s control.

The Sword Slave immediately fought free of the divine tool of the mountains and took up Wanshuang.

San-ge really was influencing events here through the Ceaseless Mirror! Xi Ping’s chest grew warm, and his vision blurred. But he didn’t delay. He immediately made way for the Sword Slave and escaped.

He needed to find a moment to break again, strengthen his cultivation, then think of a way to pare down the Silver Moon and the Lovebird Sword Array. Only then would he be able to reconnect with the reincarnation wood. Once he was free, he wouldn’t be so passive anymore, and shifu would no longer be held back by him, caught here on the horns of a dilemma.

It was just that while shattering his body was easy, once his body was shattered, his consciousness would be unprotected. Never mind these masters, even running into an established foundation could destroy him. He also needed a chance to regenerate.

Perhaps at the bottom of the sea...

But while all of Xi Ping's focus was on the Ceaseless Mirror and the Kunlun swords, a huge roc beast spirit appeared out of nowhere beside him and slammed into him.

This was a technique of the Shu. That son-of-a-bitch Wangge Luobao!

The beast spirit disappeared. Xi Ping's vision darkened. He had been slammed back beneath the Ceaseless Mirror.

Kunlun's Sect Leader was caught by the heart demon, but the others weren't. For Xuanwu, this could be called new grievances on top of old resentments. He happened to arrive just now, his curved blade pointed right at the center of Xi Ping's brow. The Lovebird Sword Array and the Silver Moon locked onto Xi Ping simultaneously. Immediately, he couldn't move a muscle. Kunlun's Third Elder had heard what Xi Ping had said earlier; his urge to kill rose instantly. He also aimed a blow at him.

Wangge Luobao rejoiced as if he had received a divine blessing. His efforts had somehow been crowned with success. He seized the opportunity to dive back into the water. Countless aquatic spiritual beasts gathered above his head, meeting death with shrill cries, covering him with a thousand-zhang shield of flesh.

This ploy was steady, accurate, and relentless. Even from right next to him, Zhi Xiu couldn't have saved Xi Ping.

In a flash, the veins stood out on Zhi Xiu's hand as he gripped his sword. Then the Sword that Mended the Heavens flew out and pierced Xi Ping's body. If he were touched by a divine tool of the mountains, with ascended spirit cultivation, he would certainly be decimated body and soul. Only Zhaoting, shattering his body and

releasing his consciousness, could leave him a chance to escape alive.

This was a genuine article, full-blown shed skin sword attack, innumerable times stronger than what Xi Ping himself had barely been able to wield earlier. Like a bit of froth, he was instantly crushed to bits. It was too quick. Xi Ping hardly felt the pain.

The force of the sword energy that had pierced him wasn't yet spent. It met the deadly foes.

Xi Ping's consciousness seized the opportunity to flee.

But just then, he saw himself in the Ceaseless Mirror.

Right now, he was plainly only a consciousness, but the out-of-control mirror reflected a complete and entire set of hidden bones—and unlike what he had seen in the Eternal Flame, the hidden bones in the mirror were covered with inscriptions.

When Xi Ping's consciousness was reflected in the Ceaseless Mirror, Kunlun's Sect Leader came back to his senses. He suddenly cast aside the Second Elder's corpse and stabbed at Xi Ping, caught by the Ceaseless Mirror.

Just then, a beam of utterly clear sword light surged upward. Wanshuang brushed shoulders with Xi Ping and blocked the fatal attack for him.

But the rapidly spiraling spiritual energy around him collected and pulled Xi Ping in like a whirlpool.

Zhaoting, Wanshuang, the great divine tools of the mountains, two Kunlun swords... Any one of those gusts of spiritual wind was enough to tear apart an ascended spirit's body. No matter what, the hidden bones couldn't manage to put him together.

“A...A-Xiang, help...help me out!”

“What?!”

Wei Chengxiang had just managed to get the capsized boat upright by using an upgraded immortal tool. When she turned her head, dazzling inscriptions began to emerge on the body of the paperman next to her.

“I’m a half-immortal. If I make a rubbing of an inscription, it’ll just be a doodle,” Wei Chengxiang said. “What kind of lousy idea is this? If you just needed enough people, then that rich and powerful bunch with tens of thousands of people working in their factories would have had them stamping inscriptions on everything, and making offerings and burning incense—wouldn’t the whole world be full of spiritual mountains?”

Xi Ping didn’t have time to answer her.

Luckily, while Wei Chengxiang didn’t believe it, she wasn’t idle. Before she finished speaking, she had already recorded the inscriptions on the paperman onto a seal and transferred them through an array to all the Luwu ships.

All the “survivors” from the Southern He Peninsula just happened to be on the Luwu boats.

Wei Chengxiang said, “I’m telling you, this is ridiculous!”

As she scolded, she “ridiculously” stamped inscriptions all over a potted reincarnation wood tree next to her.

Instantly, through the hands of the Turmoilers and the Luwu, countless inscriptions were stamped on reincarnation wood amulets of all forms. The half-immortals who normally used reincarnation

wood to communicate automatically sent their consciousnesses into it, while the mortals concentrated and called out as usual—

“Tai Sui...”

“Tai Sui!”

A faint warm current seemed to flow over Xi Ping’s trapped consciousness. With a roar, the people’s voices surged toward him like the tide.

Wei Chengxiang, with her hand on the reincarnation wood, heard a familiar voice in her ears: “It’s very interesting when you come to think of it. It seems that not being able to write inscriptions until you’re an established foundation is also something stipulated by these inscriptions.”

The hidden bones abruptly broke free of the spiritual energy tearing at him and gathered up spiritual energy. The outlines of Xi Ping’s body were restored at a previously unheard of speed. The moment his hands grew out of thin air and planted on the strings of the Tai Sui Qin, Xi Ping knew that his cultivation had reached the late ascended spirit stage.

Tao County, the South Sea, Wan, Chu... All the places where reincarnation wood grew once again appeared in his consciousness.

The reincarnation wood amulet Zhi Xiu carried spoke: “Shifu, go!”

Zhi Xiu stopped hesitating. Before the force of Zhaoting’s blow was spent, man and sword light had merged, simply swapping places with an accompanying plant on the Wan-He border.

At the same time, the reincarnation wood seeds Xi Ping had left with Yao Qi and Chang Jun sprouted inside the mustard seed—that

mustard seed hidden realm had fallen into the sea when Xi Ping had been crushed to dust. The next moment, Xi Ping escaped from in front of the Ceaseless Mirror. Through the reincarnation wood saplings, he arrived in the mustard seed hidden realm.

“Your Highness the Blind Wolf King!” In the Beijue Mountain Pass, Xi Ping’s voice came from the seemingly dead reincarnation wood amulet carried by Xie Chu. “Did my san-ge leave word for me?”

CHAPTER 230 - A Life of Regret (42)

When Xie Chu had been selected to enter the inner sect, he had gone himself to find the Second Elder and volunteer his services, because he had heard that the Heart Sword was the only kind of sword that relied on the spiritual sense. Supposing that there was something that required a certain innate talent to learn well, then a person who had that innate talent would certainly have an easier time if he entered that way.

Anyway, that's what he had thought. He had always preferred easy work to hard work.

The Lingchi Lantern burned quietly. All the parts of Xie Chu's body that could feel pain had already burned away. Apart from his skeleton and his charred flesh, only the essence, consciousness, and meridians of an ascended spirit cultivator remained... He thought that the Snow Wolf had been able to burn his meridians back then, too, but for some reason, a cultivator's meridians were like furnace dregs, squalidly left behind. When the fire was extinguished, they would be frozen here forever along with his essence.

"S-since you've guessed where I am..." Xie Chu said, sending out a talisman and revealing another patch of inscriptions, "could you at least... ask whether I'm dead or alive?"

Xi Ping asked in turn, "Well, aren't you already beyond the Beijue Mountain Pass?"

Wasn't that like shouldering a pack of dynamite and charging at the gates of the underworld?

Xie Chu scolded, "Little asshole," while exerting all his strength to wipe the snow from the last patch of inscriptions. His vision

darkened. Next, Xie Chu realized that he wasn't the one who had burned out; it was the Lingchi Lantern.

The fire had gone out.

Once the fire went out, his essence immediately began to congeal. Xie Chu raised his head with difficulty. Through the Ceaseless Mirror, he saw Zhou Ying wipe a patch of mist, about to write something. His almost transparent finger hung there for a long while, then retracted as if he didn't know how to start. He nodded faintly at him.

Xie Chu propped himself up and knelt on the ground. While drawing a little-used array, he said to Xi Ping, "There's a set of inscriptions outside the Beijue Mountains. Do you know about it?"

Xi Ping opened his mouth. His breathing became rapid. He forgot the words that had come up to his lips. All his attention was focused on listening to Xie Chu's hoarse, exhausted voice.

"This is a place of desolation. With no one to guide you, finding your way here amid the boundless snow is impossible, unless you are a full moon sage who can go anywhere. Beneath a full moon sage, without the protection of a Heart Sword, your consciousness will be lost in the Beijue Array. Even if someone leads you by the shortest path, you still won't make it this far. At the feet of the spiritual mountains now, no new full moon sage will emerge. As for the Heart Sword... Kunlun is a millennium-old sword sect, and Zhu Lanze is the only one it has produced. If you want to wait for the next... the next person like my shifu, it might take you another thousand years. This sword he passed down only to me. Because your dad insisted on wallowing in the mundane dust, unwilling to budge, I haven't taken a direct disciple. That bullshit soft sword of the Snow Wolf's is only an imitation in form. So this lineage has been lost."

These were last words—Xi Ping’s throat moved slightly. Exercising his greatest patience, he kept from rushing him.

“Lost... My shifu’s Way of the Heart can’t be passed on, and as for me...” Xie Chu looked at himself in the Ceaseless Mirror. The inscriptions on his spirit began to slowly leave his body, dispersing into the air.

That heartless wretch Zhou Ying, in order to make him finish the work, had interrupted his contemplations several times. But a person couldn’t control their own thoughts. Though Xie Chu had nearly been frozen silly and was slower on the uptake than usual, the truth was still like oil dripping onto paper. Bit by bit, it had seeped through.

He drew on the very last of his essence that could still move and finished drawing the array. The spiritual threads looked like scratches made on a coffin by a person who had been buried alive.

“What I mean is, little devil, in a while, I’m going to die here, and no other living person will come here again. In the world today, no one can obtain a full set of these inscriptions—I... can take a copy of the whole set. Your san-ge is asking, do you want them?”

Xi Ping’s pupils dilated. He was knocked dizzy by this pie falling out of the sky. He nearly blurted out, “So what are you waiting for?”

The whole system of the spiritual mountains was built on this set of inscriptions. These were the extant “heavenly commandments.” If he obtained these inscriptions, he would have the spiritual mountains by the throat. Henceforth, the mountains and rivers, the veins of the earth, the sun, moon, and stars—all of them would be in the palm of his hand.

He could do whatever he pleased, become the sole “true god” in the world, no longer be controlled by anyone, no longer fear any

villain or plot.

“Of course I...”

But just then, in the reincarnation wood, Wei Chengxiang put in a word.

“Though I still don’t understand the principle, that actually did work. You’re really something else... *Hss...*” Wei Chengxiang, exhausted, was leaning against the ship’s hold with her head tilted back. She had used too many talismans. The surge of spiritual energy through her meridians had tied them into a knot. “A cramp—Xiao A-Sui, the reincarnation wood has been restored, so you must still be in good health, huh?”

Her voice instantly seemed to shatter some illusion. Xi Ping gave a start. Before he could answer, he heard a racket in the reincarnation wood. The Luwu, all talking over each other, were reporting something to him.

“...What?”

“Oh,” said Wei Chengxiang. “The ones going quickly are already in sight of the Guzhou port.”

Guzhou was in Wan’s southwest, adjacent to the South Sea. That they could see Guzhou’s port meant that they had already basically escaped the Southern He Peninsula.

With the replenishment of Zhi Xiu’s spiritual stones, the Luwu had finally caught their breath. Though some ships had capsized and some had simply sunk, they were at any rate all immortal tools operated by spiritual stones. While the masters were fighting fit to bring down the sky, they had fled in a frenzy in all kinds of desperate states, and now they had nearly made it.

It was hard to say what would happen in the future, but at least they had all survived.

“We escaped by the skin of our teeth,” Wei Chengxiang said with a feeling sigh. “Though I’m in no position to represent anyone... thank you.”

Xi Ping didn’t know what he babbled in response. His heart, which had just been beating wildly, sank abruptly.

By coincidence, A-Xiang’s interruption had just happened to extinguish the frenzy that had come over his mind out of nowhere. Xi Ping’s mind went blank for a moment. He thought, What was I thinking just now?

Having calmed down, Xi Ping suddenly realized that he actually couldn’t clearly explain what the inscriptions outside the Beijue Mountains were.

Flying Jade Peak had never been expert in talismans, arrays, and inscriptions. His shifu himself could only just muddle through in this respect, and Xi Ping was like a sprout pulled up too early; even his general knowledge lagged far behind those of the same level as him.

Before this, he had witnessed Kunlun’s Sect Leader give birth to a heart demon and had known what had happened to General Zhi Yi before his death, and then he’d seen Lancang’s Sect Leader via Yao Qi and the next life mist... He had collected a whole heap of causes and effects. If not for that, he might not even have been able to understand what Lin Chi’s letter had been describing.

That being the case, when even Xuanwu had been at a loss before Master Lin had deciphered the inscriptions, how had he, upon hearing Yao Qi relate the Lancang Sect Leader’s last words, known at once that they could control inscriptions?

Could his true identity be some rare inscription genius?

Impossible. All learning in the world that required rote memorization was anathema to him!

Afterward, because of Wangge Luobao's sneak attack, he had unexpectedly ended up in front of the Ceaseless Mirror. How had he, after seeing the inscriptions on the hidden bones, been immediately certain that those inscriptions could help him reconnect with the reincarnation wood?

It was true that at the moment of crisis, a person would rely on intuition and instinct to act. But "sowing discord," "exposing illicit love affairs," and "shifting blame" were his usual level. Learning and applying a set of inscriptions he'd never even heard of shouldn't have been included.

Also, he suddenly remembered, his panicked rush to find the Blind Wolf King had been so he could ask about Zhou Ying's current condition. Of course it mattered what was outside the Beijue Mountains, but from his point of view, it had to get in line behind his close kin. But when he had heard about the ancient inscriptions outside the Beijue Mountains just now, he seemed to have actually forgotten Zhou Ying.

The South Sea had been swept by the sword gods from the snow-capped mountains of the north and south. Keen-edged spray flew everywhere.

Xi Ping's chest went cold—the most frightening thing was that since he had seen the hidden bones in the Sea of Stars, he had been able to distinguish which thoughts were his own and which were those rotten bones making mischief. But right now, had the Beijue Mountain inscriptions not made the hidden bones overly excited,

leading them to slip up and expose themselves, he would have had no idea.

After being shattered repeatedly, it was the hidden bones that had brought their cultivation nearly to shed skin level, not him.

“I’m not trying... trying to rush you,” Xie Chu’s voice, weaker than before, came through the reincarnation wood, “but if you dither any longer, I’m going to kick the bucket.”

Inside the Ceaseless Mirror, there was a faint gravity to Zhou Ying’s expression.

Xi Ping concentrated and said, “From what you say, Your Highness the Blind Wolf King, it seems you really can contact my san-ge? How is he?”

Xie Chu paused.

Xi Ping could suppress the hidden bones, but this was a weighty matter. Precautions had to be taken. Xie Chu had received instructions in advance. If Xi Ping didn’t ask about “san-ge,” only set his heart entirely on asking about the ancient inscriptions outside the Beijue Mountains, he shouldn’t give them to him; if Xi Ping immediately answered that he wanted them, without any hesitation, he also shouldn’t give them to him. It wouldn’t be him making the decision.

Xie Chu laboriously turned his head and met Zhou Ying’s eyes. He nodded: normal.

Zhou Ying’s expression at last eased slightly. With a trace of a smile at the corners of his mouth, he raised a finger to his lips and shook his head at the Blind Wolf King: *Don’t create new problems*. There was no need to tell him much.

“He’s fine,” Xie Chu’s consciousness responded to Xi Ping. “The murderer—that Sect Leader of ours, I mean—has gone crazy, hasn’t he? It was your brother’s doing. His consciousness is intact.”

Xi Ping quickly said, “I know his consciousness is intact. Where is he? How can I bring him back..”

Xie Chu interrupted him: “He wants you to mind your own business. For the moment, he doesn’t want to return to the land of the living by borrowing a corpse, and he has his own place to go—have a heart, young master, my essence is already... completely frozen...”

Xi Ping’s scalp went numb from his urging. He spoke quickly: “W-wait, wait... Y-your Highness, hang on a little longer, please! If this set of inscriptions comes to the mortal world, what will happen?”

If it was only something like a codebook or a tool, that wouldn’t matter. He could act as a human flying goose machine and take it back to the Xuanyin Mountains. He didn’t have the final say in Xuanyin. As for how to use this thing, everyone could talk it over later. The whole of Moon Plated Peak was covered in inscription experts, and if there was really nothing else for it, there was still the Unbound Furnace and the Eternal Flame. The sage of the past was still with them.

But what if this was something he had no way of comprehending at his level?

Concerning the heavenly commandments, there were many fantastical details. For example, when Qiu Sha had become an ascended spirit and broken the heavenly commandments, that commandment had ceased to exist, and in a few short years, ascended spirit evil cultivators had sprung up everywhere like bamboo shoots after a spring rain. For another example, Zhou Ying had previously been unable to speak the secrets of the bottom of the Sea of Stars aloud, and even forcing himself to scrape the

edges and disclose a drop had made him cough up gouts of blood, until they had blown the whole Sea of Stars up into huge fireworks, after which they could discuss the fact that “Ways of the Heart of common origin can control junior cultivators.”

What Xi Ping was afraid of was that as soon as this set of inscriptions coveted by the hidden bones flowed into the human world, it might be like a hunk of metal thrown at a spiderweb, piercing right through the human world.

Perhaps the age of the spiritual mountains would end entirely, followed by the landforms altering radically, the sun, moon, and stars adopting new paths. All the common sense familiar and unfamiliar to him might be overthrown... This wasn't something he — a person who had led an idle life in the lands of the living for a few decades — could control.

Xie Chu said, “How... how would I know? Will you...”

After their essence froze, any cultivator would be like a mortal. Xie Chu's life was rapidly draining away, and his consciousness was like a gear about to rust through, getting stiffer and slower. The words that followed were so weak that Xi Ping could hardly hear them.

“Wolf King! Your Highness the Wolf King!”

Xi Ping's back was soaked in cold sweat. He was plainly hidden in a safe place now, but this moment seemed more harrowing than when he had been getting ripped apart by several shed skin masters earlier.

No one knew what would happen after that set of ancient inscriptions appeared in the world, but he thought it was most likely the latter option. Otherwise, if it were a pie falling from the sky, only benefits without shortcomings, san-ge wouldn't have asked an extraneous question; he would simply have tossed the thing to him.

Meanwhile, with Zhi Xiu, Xi Ping, and Wangge Luobao having simultaneously broken away from the battlefield, the Silver Moon and the Cauldron of Nine Dragons had lost their targets. The Cauldron of Nine Dragons once again dove into the sea to observe from the shadows, and the Silver Moon was hanging like a big lantern above Xuan-Chang'e's head, shielding him from the Lovebird Sword Array.

The several great shed skins and the divine tools of the mountains both with and without masters were all spontaneously avoiding the Ceaseless Mirror, looking at each other in dismay as they watched Kunlun's Sect Leader and the Sword Slave having a fight to the death... You couldn't have called either of these two sword gods clear-headed.

Kunlun's internal strife was nothing to do with him. San-ge had planted the heart demon seed precisely for the sake of reaping this harvest. The harder they fought, the safer Great Wan would be.

Shifu must already have reached the border by now. With his shifu to guard the country's gates and the Kaiming Department and Heaven's Design Pavilion's elites assembled at the border with countless upgraded immortal tools at their disposal, taking care of the problem of the Impassable Sea's demon host was only a matter of time.

Even the Lancang Sect Leader's regrets and his shifu's anguish from two centuries back could be brought to a satisfactory conclusion: the spirit-conducting gold that Southern He's last emperor had personally brought out must have been about the same as what Lin Chi was making now, able to surmount the spiritual mountains' heavenly commandments. It was the inscriptions that the Sect Leader had wanted to spread at the very last that would disperse Lancang into the veins of the earth, and Lin Chi had already decoded them. With the inscriptions and the spirit-conducting gold

reappearing in the human world simultaneously, perhaps it wouldn't be long before flowers really could grow once more in the Land of Turmoil.

In this instance, he had been targeted and plotted against. The journey south had been one mishap after another. But this outcome could already be called a successful conclusion to his virtuous achievements. He could take his time settling the account with Wangge Luobao.

Once he fished up Yao Qi and Chang Jun, he would take advantage of the chaos to retire in glory...

All these thoughts flashed through his mind in the space of a breath. Xi Ping came to a decision: he already knew about the foundations of the spiritual mountains, anyway. It would be better to take it steady, take time to discuss and decide, slowly resolve the chronic illnesses of the southern continent. Currently no one could go beyond the Beijue Mountains, but that wouldn't necessarily be the case in the future. What if Master Lin could create upgraded spirit-conducting gold, make some kind of miraculous little car to drive over there?

"Do whatever I please, become the sole true god," Xi Ping thought. "You just looked in the mirror, and already you've forgotten that you're a sack of bones. How about I take a piss and give you another look for free?"

"Thank you, Wolf King," Xi Ping said. "I'm not worthy. I don't want them."

"Fine..." Having heard the response in the reincarnation wood, Xie Chu raised his dim eyes and took a final look into the Ceaseless Mirror at the Second Elder beside Zhou Ying. "Fine... The younger generations will surpass the older. You're a true hero."

“Wolf King,” said Xi Ping, “are you...”

“The Lingchi Lantern can only burn one way, and I don’t have that much flesh. Once I lit it... I didn’t plan to return,” Xie Chu whispered. “I couldn’t let the old fellow remain lost, his fate unknown...”

He had come seeking the truth, and now he had found it. Glimpsing the truth of the spiritual mountains and Ways of the Heart, his Way of the Heart breaking because of it, these were an unexpected harvest.

The ancients said, “If you understand the universe in the morning, you can die in the evening.” He had gone looking for death, and on the way he had unexpectedly comprehended the universe. Wasn’t this a sweet bargain?

Only after these blustering centuries, he had found no soulmate, and he would die without wine. That was a great regret.

“Announce this... to the world for me,” the Blind Wolf King said in an almost inaudibly soft voice. “Little devil... give your mother and father... my regards...”

Emotion was faintly visible on Xi Ping’s face. He was just about to say something when, the next moment, Xie Chu poured all the white spirits on him into the array. The array was instantly activated. The spiritual threads crawled out over the snow, sticking to one inscription after another.

With a *smack*, the reincarnation wood amulet was sucked into the crux of the array. There was an explosion in Xi Ping’s mind. He felt that his consciousness was about to be cleaved apart. Through his consciousness, a group of inscriptions all poured into his head at once.

The Blind Wolf King's hands, burned black and frozen stiff, remained at the crux of the array. He died smiling... though no one could have identified a "smile" on that face.

Just as no one knew that the most crucial answer he had heard in the reincarnation wood hadn't been what Xi Ping had said.

CHAPTER 231 - A Life of Regret (43)

Zhou Ying stood alone inside the Ceaseless Mirror, looking at the starting point of this foul and tumultuous human world.

Five great spiritual mountains, with Kunlun as their beginning.

Whether it was Lancang's Sect Leader wanting to spread the spiritual mountains' inscriptions or Hui Xiangjun taking a section of the inscriptions to create the Law Breaker and the Riverward, both of them could only move bricks around on the foundation, with only localized impact.

This time, they had dug up the "foundation" in its entirety.

The Beijue Array was destroyed the instant the array transmitted the inscriptions outward. The wild wind stirred up the ice, snow, and fog. The Blind Wolf King's charred corpse was mixed up in it, turned to dust in the blink of an eye.

There was pitch-blackness before Zhou Ying's eyes. Supposing there had still been someone here, they would have seen the big "mirror" containing one man and one corpse slowly disappear like vapor. In the mirror, Zhou Ying turned to the Second Elder and at the very last sighed. "This disciple of yours..."

If this set of foundation-like ancient inscriptions fell into the mortal world, what would happen?

Xie Chu had asked this question at the start. At the time, he had just recovered his senses after his grief and rage over his shizun's wrongful death and was mechanically digging up inscriptions on the ground according to Zhou Ying's instructions.

Zhou Ying's answer had been the same as the one Xie Chu had later used to fob off Xi Ping: *How would I know?*

He had also said: *I'm only a young frog at the bottom of the well with slightly better eyesight than most. Do you depend on me to see across the East Sea? If I knew, I wouldn't leave it up to Shiyong to choose for himself.*

Xie Chu gave a *ha*. Anyway, he was charred and flaming; no one could see what shape his mouth made or whether he rolled his eyes. Taking advantage of Zhou Ying's inability to hear him through the mirror, he simply muttered, "Like hell I trust you."

No one, provided they were of average intelligence, would trust Zhou Ying.

A hero sacrificed themselves for others, a villain harmed others for their own benefit, a great person did good for the people that was as plentiful as water and created a lasting institution, an idiot had paste cooking in their head and was driven by their emotions.

Zhou Ying was none of these. Xie Chu thought that this nephew of Xi Zhengde's didn't seem to have been born of the mortal world.

In order to investigate the Ceaseless Mirror, he had simply given up his Way of the Heart and physical body. In a few short months, the Kunlun Mountains had nearly been brought to ruin at his hands. Xie Chu dug up one horrifying ancient inscription after another. He didn't know what the right thing to do was, but at any rate he knew that they couldn't end up in Zhou Ying's hands.

He tapped on the surface of the Ceaseless Mirror and tentatively scrawled a few words: *Well, there's nothing better to do. How do you guess that little devil will choose in the end?*

Zhou Ying was briefly silent. *I don't need to guess. He'll say no.*

Had Xie Chu's eyebrows not been burned away by the Lingchi Lantern, they would have risen all the way to the top of his head.

None of Kunlun's previous High Priests had established foundations. Even though they inherited the memories, each and every one like the same person occupying a different body, they had still all been half-immortals. Everyone had started out in the open-eyed stage—what was a half-immortal's cultivation level? Even with Zhou Ying's paramount spiritual sense, as a half-immortal, he had still been unable to see the boundaries of the tiny Law Breaker Bracelet, unable to see the interference in the Bell of Tribulation. How could an old fogey like the High Priest dare to call himself “omniscient”?

Now it seemed that the Ceaseless Mirror was a higher-level Sea of Stars. Xie Chu even suspected that it didn't predict circumstances but rather determined them, so what the High Priest said must be so... But the High Priest was after all only a half-immortal, with a weak consciousness, clearly unable to control the Ceaseless Mirror entirely. Basically, he was a slave to the mirror. So what if there were an ascended spirit in his place... or even a shed skin?

The former Heartless Lotus—the one that had bloomed in ancient times, that was—had gambled with his life trying to come get a peek at the Ceaseless Mirror.

Who could resist this kind of power?

But Zhou Ying seemed to have read something on his soot-blackened face. He wrote, *Wolf King, have you heard of the Riverward?*

Hui Xiangjun had left behind three great works after her death: the Gold Imitation Technique, the Law Breaker, and the Riverward.

The Gold Imitation Technique was the Eternal Flame's true kindling, while the Law Breaker was a metaphor for the spiritual mountain. The inscriptions it used had been based on the Lancang Spiritual Mountains of eight centuries ago, of the same grade as all the spiritual mountains apart from Kunlun. Only the Riverward seemed to be out of place beside the other two.

Its so-called ability to "step between life and death" was overstating the truth somewhat. The Riverward wasn't the next life spiritual fish, after all. While it also rated as a matchless divine tool, "silently entering and exiting any place" made it sound like a burglar's tool; it didn't seem so high-grade. Moreover, the Riverward had a limited number of uses, also making it look second-rate by comparison.

Considered closely, the limited number of its uses was also very delicate—Zhou Ying thought that if he had been Hui Xiangjun, hiding Qiu Sha would have taken one use. Expecting that if Qiu Sha really could break through the ascended spirit pass, she would be certain to give rise to carnage when she went out and draw the pursuit of all the great spiritual mountains, he would have given her another use as a lifesaving trump card. But there was truly no need for the third time. If a person brought themselves to a dead end twice, a dead person's relic wouldn't be enough to protect them. If he'd had the strength to spare, he would have preferred to use it on the Law Breaker, making the scope that the Law Breaker could envelop a little more useful than the area of minuscule Tao County.

Then why was the Riverward limited to three uses? It couldn't be because this sage had some kind of peculiar obsession with numbers, could it? Where had the third use been meant to be used?

The Law Breaker and Riverward, "children of the same mother," didn't get along; that also seemed to be a metaphor—

Xie Chu was surprised. *You mean that the destination of the Riverward's final use was originally this place?*

Yes. Hui Xiangjun had left behind the Unbound Furnace, created the Law Breaker. That showed that the successor to the Eternal Spring Brocade—who, after Kunlun had formed, had broken through the shackles by force and grown an accompanying plant—had had an understanding of the spiritual mountains' system that far surpassed the average person's. For her to have figured out Kunlun's secret using the other spiritual mountain as leads wouldn't have been surprising.

But in the end, she hadn't revealed this information to anyone, including Qiu Sha, who had taken away the Riverward. It seemed that after consideration, that master had given up on digging up the spiritual mountains' foundations and focused her attention on the Gold Imitation Technique; never mind bringing about her own death, she had also made later generations take an eight-century detour.

Why? said Xie Chu.

Because it would have been meaningless, said Zhou Ying.

If the ancient inscriptions had appeared and the heavenly commandments had fallen into the mortal world, it would only have meant the collapse of the spiritual mountains and the rise of new spiritual mountains.

And between the fall of the old and the rise of the new, there was certain to be instability, certain to be disaster on a grand scale. Where would the ants go to take shelter then? After the calamity, the past sages would be gone, and future generations would follow the same road to ruin. It would only be a sin.

Zhou Ying wrote on the surface of the mirror: *I won't conceal from you—during the Dragon Boat Festival, in the South Sea, I asked him more or less the same question.*

Xie Chu came back to his senses and looked meaningfully at Zhou Ying. *And if he agrees?*

I already told you, said Zhou Ying, if he agrees at once, then it must be those hidden bones he's carrying.

I've never heard of anyone inheriting a way and refusing to acknowledge it, said Xie Chu. Did he actually inherit a Way of the Heart, or did he get possessed? ...Fine, I don't understand this "way of death" anyway—if he keeps calm and thinks it over, and then decides to agree?

Zhou Ying said, Then it means the hidden bones have grown strong enough to be on the point of going out of control. Unable to control him, they'll be controlling the reincarnation wood.

Xie Chu said in surprise, Then why are you still making him choose? To test how far the hidden bones have gone out of control? Then I'm not digging anymore.

Zhou Ying said, What strength you have, you didn't bring with you when you were born won't take with you when you die. If you save it up, there'll only be more here to freeze in a little while.

Xie Chu said, ...The Xi bloodline couldn't produce a scoundrel like you. What kind of bastard did that young lady marry to end up with you?

Having heard this out, Zhou Ying was very approving. Indeed, the Wolf King is wise. Keep digging, trust me. You'll know in the end.

By the time Xie Chu had uncovered all the inscriptions, he would have caught up and looked inward to his Way of the Heart. When his Way of the Heart shattered, he would understand why Xi Ping was completely at odds with the hidden bones, which were like a Way of the Heart.

There was a reason that none of Kunlun's High Priests had established foundations: a person with a Way of the Heart was the Way of the Heart's slave; they couldn't inherit these inscriptions. If the successor to the hidden bones didn't want them, then, starting from the established foundation level, no one could receive this set of inscriptions. Each of the spiritual mountains of the southern continent might dissolve, but Kunlun would be eternally strong as a fortress. This great wall and these shackles cast by immortals and mortals together would live forever.

Here and now, the one who would make the decision wasn't Xi Ping. It was Xie Chu.

Your Highness the Blind Wolf King, you have stood guard at the Beijue Mountain Pass for so many years. When you go, it will be clean, not leaving behind a single remaining shard of a Way of the Heart.

When you reach enlightenment, how will you choose?

For the stability of the overall situation, let the gross injustice done to the Second Elder remain in silence, let the cycle of the puppets of Ways of the Hearts continue? Or make a reckless move, risk the sky falling and the earth cracking, carry away the resentment and indignation of millions of the unjustly dead, shoulder the burden of this heavy crime and pierce the thread of heaven, in the midst of a raging storm place the rudder in the hands of a young man locked in ceaseless struggle with his "Way of the Heart"?

Hui Xiangjun had shrunk back, and Xi Shiyong wasn't so arrogant. He would have to put the Wolf King to the trouble.

Xi Shiyong's constitution, his spiritual sense, his natural talents... even his ability to concentrate were all no better than average. For his cultivation level to have risen to such a degree within a few

decades of beginning to cultivate was completely unreasonable. The only explanation was that his cultivation level had nothing to do with him. Those hidden bones of his had been shed skin bones to begin with. After the Blind Wolf King had told him about the Beijue Array, he had been silent for a very long time. Zhou Ying had known then that he could no longer completely suppress the hidden bones.

Using the ancient inscriptions outside the Beijue Mountains to lure out the hidden bones now would still leave room to maneuver. Once the hidden bones found an opportunity to reach the shed skin level and returned to their peak, that would be when the person who had accidentally picked them up would have come to a dead end.

This was also Xi Ping's chance at survival.

When the Riverward had come into Zhou Ying's hands, he had made the wrong decision to use up the last opportunity. It had been wasted.

Now he had come here in the Riverward's stead. That was probably fated.

Xi Ping felt that his consciousness had been broken up and left behind on the northern and southern continents, among all the mountains of the five nations.

Amid his mixed shock and anger, he sensed the reincarnation wood go out of control—and it was different from when the Lovebird Sword Array had severed his connection to it. Before, the reincarnation wood had been like his hands and feet, his to use at will. Now it was still attached to him, the connection hadn't severed, but it seemed to have turned into a prosthetic limb that wouldn't take orders.

Before, the reincarnation wood had been like an orderly flying goose net, but now it had gotten jumbled up into a knot. The great

mountain arrays of the immortal mountains and all the nations' border arrays were seized by an invisible power.

On the Southern He Peninsula, the Lovebird Sword Array suddenly shrank. The Silver Moon's light dimmed. The Nine Dragons, like dissipating beast spirits, returned to the Cauldron of Nine Dragons, which had floated up. Under the horrified gazes of the great shed skins, the Ceaseless Mirror suspended above the Lancang Mountains vanished like vapor!

At the same time, Xi Ping's consciousness, scattered all over, glimpsed the demonic energy of the Impassable Sea rise steeply and surge over Great Wan's vanished border inscriptions—

Meanwhile, at the Wan-He border, the upgraded immortal tools had put up an initial show of strength against the demons. The demonic energy retreated briefly. Then, an enormous figure identical to the Southern Sage walked out of nothingness.

The sage's face floated in the air, looking ghastly, yet there was a faint smile on it. "Oh? What kind of manmade toys are these?"

Pang Jian certainly couldn't fail to recognize the founder of his sect. He gasped. The karma beast on his sleeve roared furiously.

The "Southern Sage" didn't respond, but someone did answer: "This is the great demon that the Zhou family raised at the bottom of the Impassable Sea."

A white figure landed. Bai Ling, personally leading Kaiming Department reinforcements, had traveled nonstop to get here. "The Kaiming Department has sealed the walls and dropped the arrays. I guarantee that we will burn the wildfire vines dead at the border—there's no need for you to worry about it, General Commander Pang. There are enough spiritual stones, don't stop the upgraded immortal tools..."

Before he could finish, familiar shrill howls came their way on the sea wind. The swarming demon host was sucked in like the tide and swallowed by the great demon with the face of the Southern Sage. A cold that could freeze the blood and a reeking wind rushed toward them—this was the nightmare that Bai Ling had regularly had to face before meeting Zhou Ying. His face paled. He couldn't finish his sentence.

The ascended spirit grade upgraded immortal tools converted spiritual energy into firepower and shoved it out with earthshaking force, but the manmade divine tools that could temporarily hold off the Lovebird Sword Array were defeated. The enormous figure on the sea only paused infinitesimally, then continued to approach step by step.

The murderous demonic energy fell a step ahead on the blue-clothesers and Kaiming Cultivators at the front lines. Like wheat seedlings lodging, the outer sect experts were swallowed by the demonic energy before they even had a chance to struggle.

Pang Jian grit his teeth, raised the Barrier Dispeller Bow, and charged forward with a leap.

Bai Ling just missed holding him back. “General Commander Pang!”

Just then, snow-bright sword light fell like a thunderclap. The seawater surging like a tidal wave was frozen in place. The sword drew a line outside the coast. The chill rushed forward. The demon host, accidentally crossing the sword light, all dissolved in midair. Zhaoting, returned to its master's hand, fell with a whistle and hacked at the all-powerful great demon's head.

Pang Jian nearly burst into tears. “General Zhi...”

The great demon was split in half by Zhaoting. The black fog instantly faded. Heaven's Design Pavilion and the Kaiming Department's cultivators charged forward to save their colleagues who were still living.

Zhi Xiu had just withdrawn from a shed skin battlefield. He was in a wretched state. He brushed a hand over himself and the loose hair that had fallen from his crown, the tears in his robes all returned to position or healed as appropriate. Several heaps of white spirits disappeared in Zhaoting's sword light. Zhi Xiu landed, patted Pang Jian on the shoulder, and pulled him back. "Good work, Wenchang."

Not far away on the sea, the demonic energy that he had dispelled reassembled. The Southern Sage's face looked down from on high at the puny sword cultivator.

"Only fourteen years have passed in the human world, yet it seems that everything has changed." The great demon kept his eyes fixed on Zhi Xiu. "We meet again. This is a truly familiar scene, little General Zhi."

Zhi Xiu didn't fly his sword. He only walked onto the harbor's pier, going around the upgraded immortal tools and the border inscriptions. "I haven't yet thanked you for your instruction last time, senior."

Pang Jian suddenly remembered that last time, during the events in the Resurrection Vortex, General Zhi had nearly died in the East Sea. Alarm appeared on his face.

Bai Ling quietly said, "Don't worry. Fourteen years ago, the Impassable Sea's altar was disturbed by the Viscount. He didn't have time to recover his full glory. The Bell of Tribulation could suppress him then, and now General Zhi is already a shed skin..."

“Oh?” Across several li, the demon with the Southern Sage’s face heard his whisper clearly. “Little half-demon, I wouldn’t dare to be so sure if I were you.”

The great demon’s voice raised echoes amid the freezing tide. As if he had pronounced some final verdict, it was just at that moment that the Wan-He border inscriptions dispersed as the ancient inscriptions from outside the Beijue Mountains came into the world. As a half-demon, Bai Ling was the first to sense something. Under Pang Jian’s shocked gaze, a row of inscriptions like tattoos quickly flashed over his face. Before Pang Jian could see their contents clearly, they disappeared.

Bai Ling’s aura abruptly turned strange. His cultivation, previously around the middle established foundation stage, rose sharply, coming close to ascended spirit level!

The Resurrection Vortex boiled. The Impassable Sea’s demon seal was completely destroyed, both the patch laid down by Xuanyin’s three sages and the one that the demon subduer had created by sacrificing his own body.

Demonic energy slammed against the mark drawn by Zhaoting. It was rebuffed, then slammed again—the tide frozen by the sea wind shattered into splinters and splashed. Each time, that sword mark was weaker than before. After the third time, there wasn’t a trace of it left. The great demon was blocked by Zhaoting.

“Little sword cultivator, enough of this futile effort. It isn’t easy to become a shed skin. You have already betrayed the spiritual mountains and may be said to walk the same way as me and mine. Why waste your strength?”

Zhi Xiu was trapped in black fog. He turned at deaf ear on this. Zhaoting wove a big net of sword light, horrifyingly holding the black clouds trying to ravage the city. Spiritual energy swept by around

him now and then. There were the outer sect cultivators, unwilling to retreat, still helping him with upgraded immortal tools, just like Jinping's Heaven's Design Pavilion two hundred years ago.

Only this time, there might be no help coming when Xuanyin's masters descended from the sky.

Currently, the Luwu who had just made landfall in Great Wan's Guzhou had yet to recover their senses. The paperman beside Wei Chengxiang suddenly fell exhausted to the ground. The broken shard of a sword flew out and knocked a hole in the demonic energy surging toward the sky. It brushed past Zhi Xiu and sacrificed itself for its master.

The great demon's sage's face was distorted by the shard of Zhaoting. He gave a roar of anger and twisted into a ball with the sword energy. He split into three parts, revealing his true body that sucked in all light.

Zhi Xiu turned his head and looked into the crack cut by the broken sword. The vast plains of Southern Wan's nine provinces were dimly visible. He didn't hesitate again. He leapt and went in pursuit of the vanished shard of Zhaoting, charging toward the gathering place of the great demon's demonic energy—

Just then, from the hole cut by the broken sword, an aged hand reached out and held down the young sword cultivator's shoulder.

Zhi Xiu was caught unawares. He dodged. When he saw the newcomer clearly, his eyes abruptly opened wide.

CHAPTER 232 - A Life of Regret (Final)

It was the Dignitary of Fate Elder Zhang Jue.

Zhi Xiu thought that he and Xi Shiyong were different. That brat's shifu was an idler who lived on Flying Jade Peak in company with confusion and doubt, able to devote his own energy to bringing up a fiend.

His shifu meanwhile was one of Xuanyin's four elders, who year in and year out was at his post in the Sea of Stars, where no one but a shed skin could enter without authorization. He had already been over thirty years old when he had entered the sect. He wouldn't venture to say that he had been very steady, but at any rate he hadn't needed to be cared for and disciplined like a half-grown child. The Dignitary of Fate Elder had only come to inspect his progress periodically. After he had become an ascended spirit and left his tutelage, all that had remained were the letters Zhi Xiu sent paying his respects.

The Dignitary of Fate Elder was the most strictly rule-abiding person in the Xuanyin Mountains. Without particular business, not even his direct disciple would break the Sea of Stars' rules. Every ten years, that valley of despair would only be open to Zhi Xiu for half an incense stick of time. He would always deliberately pick a day like the Mid-Autumn Festival or New Year's Eve to go in and have a cup of tea with his shizun.

Unfortunately, the stars didn't celebrate the New Year.

Zhi Xiu didn't avoid people at all costs, and he also couldn't have been called very extroverted. When he encountered someone lively, he would become a little more talkative in response. If he was in company with someone reticent, he wouldn't voluntarily get closer to them. After they had exchanged greetings, teacher and disciple

would basically have nothing else to say to each other. Their lengthy silences were like the thousand years and more that had congealed over the Dignitary of Fate Elder.

Over two centuries had passed in a flash. Now, Zhi Xiu could hardly recall any confidences he had shared with shifu. He only remembered that the bottom of the Sea of Stars was like a prison cell, with everything within sight a taboo.

Before leaving, afraid that the Bell of Tribulation would make trouble, he had gone to see Zhang Jue. He thought that after all the Dignitary of Fate Elder had been personally raised by the Southern Sage and would still remember what the spiritual mountains had been born for. Their ways were different; he didn't dare to have extravagant hopes for anything else. He had only brought over the karma beast, hoping that if anything went wrong, this shizun who was already a stranger would be able to rethink matters, give Lin Chi and Wen Fei some room to maneuver.

But he hadn't expected the Dignitary of Fate Elder to come here.

In only a day or two, Zhang Jue had aged another decade in mortal terms compared to the last time he had seen him. His eyes were deeply sunken in. His flesh no longer seemed capable of covering the bones that had been nibbled away by time.

When Zhi Xiu saw the newcomer clearly, he was even slightly distracted, suspecting that after the Impassable Sea's demon seal had broken, it had released some kind of demon that could disturb the intellect.

In that brief daze, a talisman flew out of Zhang Jue's hand holding his shoulder and permeated all of Zhi Xiu's meridians, locking him in place. Then Zhang Jue gave him a profound look. In the end, the Dignitary of Fate Elder didn't say anything to his only disciple. His

figure flashed, and he landed a hundred zhang away, at the great demon's core.

The Southern Sage had never breathed a single word about the Impassable Sea. Only just before his departure had he instructed his disciples: The Impassable Sea's demon host had been born from the human heart. It could be neither dispelled nor defeated. It could only be sealed with the Ways of the Heart of the immortal mountains' orthodox cultivators. The Bell of Tribulation sustained the Ways of the Heart of the spiritual mountains. If there was a problem with the demon seal, they could request that the Bell of Tribulation come to the East Sea.

If it should happen that the Bell of Tribulation couldn't be moved, then it would remain to be seen whether the descendants of the demon subduer could produce an individual like their ancestor. Otherwise... it would need a nearly perfect shed skin Way of the Heart to debate against the demon host.

Before Zhi Xiu could cry out "shifu," Zhang Jue's aged figure was submerged in the all-enveloping demonic aura.

The Dignitary of Fate Elder was the "most orthodox" among the orthodox, with a Way of the Heart like a tree that had put down deep roots in the spiritual mountains. With the spiritual mountains on the verge of collapse, that tree still refused to budge, dead set on sharing in the destruction of the overthrown mountains.

Zhang Jue's flesh split open bit by bit. Amid the heavy demonic energy, he detonated his essence. It contained boundless spiritual energy, like a small spiritual mountain, almost enough to cover half the East Sea. His decrepit body was destroyed. Only a Way of the Heart remained.

But regretfully, that Way of the Heart was far from meeting the "nearly perfect" requirement. It wasn't even complete. Like the one

Lancang's Sect Leader had slammed against the Lovebird Sword Array, the Way of the Heart of the Dignitary of Fate Elder was in poor condition. Even with no one to touch it, it might have broken on its own. Yet in this intense collision, like a miracle, it held firm. That Way of the Heart maneuvered the plentiful spiritual energy of the shed skin essence, weaving a net, firmly trapping the demon host.

The Sea of Stars was a fabrication. In the life of the Dignitary of Fate, there still remained this final thread of pitiful fidelity.

It took Zhi Xiu only a moment to fight free of Zhang Jue's immobilizing talisman, but he didn't catch up to him in time. The exploding shed skin essence and the demonic energy tangled together, shutting him out.

A drawing flew out of the wild wind. Zhi Xiu automatically reached out to catch it. Unexpectedly, the thin card hadn't torn in this intense conflict. Someone had placed two layers of protective talismans on it. The little karma beast was anxiously trying to run outward, but there was nowhere for it to go. It was only a beast spirit now.

Old acquaintances had changed, young men had grown old, and even the sages had passed away. The divine beast whose roar had shaken the nine provinces was now only a legend on paper.

"You want to debate with me?" Where spiritual and demonic energy collided, the great demon using the Southern Sage's face said loudly, laughing, "The demon host is only the broken dregs left behind by the 'heavenly commandments' when Kunlun formed. As for why they have gained power, my disciple, haven't you understood it yet?"

Zhang Jue's Way of the Heart touched the core of the demonic energy and instantly shook. An even more obvious crack split that Way of the Heart from within—there was a familiar aura in the

depths of the demonic aura. The remnants of Zhang Jue's consciousness in his Way of the Heart witnessed what Zhou Ying had seen through the heart demon seed: the Southern Sage became a full moon god, brought the Xuanyin Spiritual Mountains into being, thoroughly became a portion of the human world's "heavenly commandments." Where the demon host dwelled, he saw his own reflection. The human part of him was unwilling to be annihilated and gave birth to a heart demon; the spiritual mountains cast a shadow.

To keep the spiritual mountains from collapsing, the Southern Sage promptly left behind the part of his Way of the Heart that "didn't accord with the heavenly commandments," just like the adjustment that his juniors would undergo when they became shed skins.

In the millennia-long history of Southern Wan, the Southern Sage had been the first person to cut the foot to fit the shoe.

The name of the great demon at the bottom of the Impassable Sea could not be spoken by anyone, because he, rejected by the spiritual mountains and sealed here by the demon subduer at the cost of his life, was... a part of the Southern Sage.

This was the truth that had caused Lin Zongyi's Way of the Heart to shatter when he had caught a glimpse of it in the Territory Map.

Zhi Xiu saw the captured demonic energy rise steeply, almost breaking through the spiritual energy net made by Zhang Jue's Way of the Heart. Without hesitation, he raised his sword and went forward. The demonic energy was dispersed by Zhaoting, then reformed, and was once again dispersed. Zhaoting's biting cold sword energy seeped in. The Sword that Mended the Heavens touched Zhang Jue's collapsing Way of the Heart. The crack in that Way of the Heart had nearly cleaved it all the way through, but in that moment, the spreading crack stopped, like a miracle.

Though it had been the start of the tragedy, the Southern Sage hadn't been forced to do what he had done. For a hundred generations of peace, he had willingly cut apart and imprisoned himself.

A thousand years later, the rebellious junior unwilling to bend his head to the spiritual mountains was still drawing his sword to mend the heavens.

The ragged shed skin Way of the Heart and Zhaoting, one inside and one outside, forced the captured demon host down toward the East Sea. But in the midst of the stalemate, Zhang Jue's detonated essence had been exhausted until hardly anything remained, and the supply of spiritual stones that Bai Ling had brought was having difficulty meeting the demand. But the demonic energy that had been suppressed for a thousand years at the bottom of the Impassable Sea was still coming in a constant stream.

Meanwhile, Western Chu's evil cultivators charged completely unobstructed into the Sanyue Mountains, which had lost their great mountain array. At the feet of Southern Shu's Lingyun Mountains, the spiritual beasts contained by the spiritual beast farm went out of control and surged toward the human world. Utterly cold wind began to pour in through the Beijue Mountain Pass. The Blind Wolf King's Snow Observation Pavilion was instantly submerged by violent snow.

The sky was falling.

Xi Ping's consciousness, like scattered sand, couldn't assemble, inundated with countless heartbreaking scenes. Amid the billowing demonic energy, he couldn't even find Zhi Xiu.

There was only the great demon with the Southern Sage's face greedily sucking in demonic energy. "Your resistance is a lost cause,

unless the demon subduer who had no offspring can come back to life...”

Just then, a sudden change occurred in the Resurrection Vortex: the direction of rotation of the whirlpools on the surface reversed!

The reversed whirlpools were like an enormous air purifier. As the demonic energy constantly emerging passed through it, it was converted into spiritual energy. A portion of the spiritual energy attached itself to Zhaoting and Zhang Jue’s Way of the Heart, and another portion surged toward the spirit-conducting gold, which automatically absorbed spiritual energy.

Zhi Xiu froze. Swapping between spiritual energy and demonic energy—this seemed to be...

The characteristic power of the demon-subduing Zhou clan’s spiritual bones!

It was said that for the last eight hundred years, the Zhou family had been using precisely this property of their spiritual bones to rear demons.

The next moment, beneath the surface of the whole East Sea, a limpid Way of the Heart emerged—a little smaller than Elder Zhang Jue’s. At the same time, the water carried up the fragments of bones that had sunk to the bottom of the sea during the last eight hundred years. Led by that Way of the Heart, a set of spiritual bones assembled in each of the Resurrection Vortex’s whirlpools.

There was a familiar aura about that Way of the Heart.

“Duanrui-shijie...”

When the Territory Map had been completed, the Dignitary of Rule Lin Zongyi’s Way of the Heart had shattered, and Princess Duanrui

had sacrificed herself to bring him away; she had been caught in the explosion of the shed skin essence and passed away here.

Her body had perished, but her Way of the Heart remained. Though it had been occluded by dust while she lived, after death it had found a resting place.

The reversed Resurrection Vortex replenished Zhi Xiu's nearly exhausted essence, and replenished the upgraded immortal tools' power supply. Zhaoting's chilly sword light slammed against the demonic energy trapped by the Dignitary of Fate Elder, driving the demon host toward the East Sea.

Now was the time to reseal the demon host.

The demon seal's inscriptions were of a kind with the great mountain arrays, not something manmade; they were a portion of the heavenly commandments. You didn't need to be especially proficient in inscriptions. If a cultivator had at least ascended spirit cultivation, as long as they could suppress the demonic energy, the whole set of inscriptions could naturally be obtained through the cultivator's spiritual sense, which was open to heaven and earth.

In these circumstances, the outer sect cultivators on the Wan border still hadn't retreated. Seeing Zhaoting's attack fading, that excellent Pang Wenchang immediately used a row of ascended spirit upgraded immortal tools to help him make up the gap, leaving Zhi Xiu with time to concentrate and place the demon seal.

Spiritual light was already gathered at Zhaoting's tip, but just then, Zhi Xiu's expression changed slightly.

When the demon host in the East Sea had run wild, he had arrived in haste, deluged by the turn of events, so he hadn't even noticed right away that... something was wrong!

Zhi Xiu abruptly raised his head and looked into the sky.

He was an unworthy disciple of the Dignitary of Fate's lineage. Though he had always had considerable misgivings about fate, he still knew the basics of observing celestial phenomena. It was late now, and the wild wind on the sea had blown this patch of sky perfectly clean. The night sky was as clear as if it had been washed —with the great demon falling upon the world, why were there no clouds of tribulation? Why was there no blood moon?

The obscure thing that had pressed down on the canopy above, compelling all living things and also protecting all living things, had disappeared.

Just then, the demon host was beaten into the Resurrection Vortex by the powerful upgraded immortal tools. The spiritual bones and the two Ways of the Hearts of the masters converged. Zhi Xiu didn't have time to think much. He leapt and landed beside Pang Jian and Bai Ling. Zhaoting raised a shield of water like a city wall.

Bai Ling nearly thought he had gone deaf. With General Zhi shielding them, the wild wind that seemed as if it could shake apart the whole continent at least didn't hit him directly, but all the same, he still flew away. His sixth sense was in chaos. He crashed into some unknown colleague and instinctively reached out to hold that person up. He felt unprecedented lightness, a freedom as if he had never been born.

In a daze, he heard a distant voice in his ears: *You can settle down here, Xiao Bai.*

The person who had spoken these words was now somewhere unknown.

The rims of Bai Ling's eyes suddenly reddened. He landed, stumbling, his vision a blur. He blinked hard: the defensive perimeter

established at the border by Heaven's Design Pavilion and the Kaiming Department had pretty much fallen apart. The enormous upgraded immortal tools had tumbled all over the place. He could see at a glance to the surface of the East Sea.

The sea hadn't been this calm and tranquil in a thousand years. The Resurrection Vortex, where unknown numbers of souls of the dead had been buried, had quietly disappeared, and with it the Ways of the Heart of the Xuanyin Mountains' Dignitary of Fate and Dignitary of Rites had been destroyed.

Someone whispered, "It's... it's gone?"

It was gone.

The demon host, said to share in the lifespan of the universe and the gods, which could only be sealed and not destroyed—didn't that mean...

Zhi Xiu suddenly felt bone-deep terror. He had no time to breathe a sigh of relief. His consciousness swept out—everyone said that a shed skin sage's consciousness could encompass a whole nation, but in fact that was far from the limit. When Xi Ping had become an ascended spirit, his consciousness had been able to leap from Sanyue and Dongheng to Tao County. It was only that before there had been inscriptions at each nation's borders, which consciousnesses couldn't easily cross. But now all the border inscriptions had disappeared. Zhi Xiu's consciousness, unimpeded, crossed over vast stretches of mountains and rivers and was startled by the north wind blowing in from the Beijue Mountains.

Other places hadn't worked it out yet, but Western Chu, currently engaged in a power struggle, had noticed something ahead of the rest—there, the cultivation of all unorthodox cultivators spurted up. In the Sanyue Mountains, the Xiangs who lived like princes suddenly lost the protection of the great mountain array and were pushed

back again and again. The assault of the “evil cultivators” who had spent hundreds of years torn this way and that by spiritual image brands and Ways of the Heart changed from a “sneak attack” to a steamroller.

Looking from a distance, Zhi Xiu saw at a glance that the Sanyue Mountain Range had already begun to change form.

The cultivators in the midst of it hadn’t noticed that within Western Chu, all of the mountains had begun to sway. The houses and factories in the valleys, like dust, collapsed as the slowly expanding or wearily lowering mountains changed shape.

“Battles among cultivators impacting the local landforms, altering the seasons, even disrupting time...” This was the chaos that legend said had taken place during the Great War of Gods and Demons, before the spiritual mountains had formed.

“Shiyong?” Zhi Xiu pulled out a piece of reincarnation wood.
“Shiyong!”

There was no answer. He sent his consciousness into it and only got an earful of confused voices that he couldn’t tell apart.

A shed skin’s consciousness couldn’t be easily overlooked anywhere. Of course Xi Ping had heard him, but he couldn’t answer. He seemed to have been shredded to pieces, then tied to the back of a bolting horse. His consciousness was being swept along by the hidden bones, shuttling through all the reincarnation wood in the world. Everywhere they passed, they left some inscriptions in the trees.

Having seized the ancient inscriptions from outside the Beijue Mountains, reincarnation wood became a vortex, sucking in spiritual energy from its surroundings. The trees with their rotten trunks that

grew at will on walls and riverbanks instantly seemed to have been raised to godhood. One by one, they were plated with divine light.

Xi Ping could feel the wild joy of the hidden bones—Kunlun, Sanyue, Lingyun, Lancang... the spiritual energy of four great immortal mountains began to roll in accordance with the inscriptions. Soon it would flow into the reincarnation wood. Even the Xuanyin Mountains, which had become one with the Territory Map—there was reincarnation wood on the inside, acting as a go-between. It was also within their range of control.

They had won. They would soon become the only god in the world.

Last time Xi Ping had been this powerless, it had been back in the Latent Cultivation Temple. He had been only a powerless mortal then and had blown himself to bits. He had felt all his thoughts turn to dust, felt that he couldn't make it past the open-eyed pass no matter what. Duanrui-shishu and shifu had been with him, and those two masters had been unable to help him. At the time, he had thought, Forget it... Until A-Xiang had called from a thousand li away and awoken him.

Now there were too many voices in the reincarnation wood. He couldn't even find A-Xiang. All he had left was himself... a mortal who had spent a few decades shambling through the mortal dust.

But this time, he couldn't say, "Forget it."

He couldn't die, and he couldn't turn to dust and scatter his bones to the wind.

His nearly shed skin cultivation level belonged to the hidden bones, the reincarnation wood that could communicate with all points belonged to the hidden bones, his spiritual sense belonged to the hidden bones, and even his body, regenerated after being shattered,

belonged to the hidden bones; he had cut out the shard of
Zhaoting, the only thing that didn't belong to the hidden bones...

What else was there that could help him?

What else was there that belonged to this person called "Xi Ping"?

BOOK 5 - Travelers' Welcome

CHAPTER 233 - Conclusion (1)

He had a personal name.

He was the only son of the Marquis of Yongning, born on the ninth day of the third month in the ninth year of Taiming, on an evening when gentle spring rain was falling.

Wan's customs had been delicate since ancient times. They preferred refined and gentle men—intellectuals of the sort too frail for the weight of their clothes. Family and friends came to congratulate them, all bringing along pretty-sounding words, saying that this was a “a little gentleman delivered by the apricot blossom rain,” and in the future he was sure to be a romantic person, “graceful as a pine tree, bright as the moon.”

The Marquis even kept his breathing soft. He exerted a great deal of will power to control any other thoughts and, according to what he and his wife had discussed in advance, gave him the name “Ping.”

Later, the apricot blossom rain concerned had cried out against the false accusation. Old Madam Xi claimed that it repeatedly came to her in dreams to defend itself, saying that this fiend hadn't been delivered by the misty rain but instead had been formed of the ooze in the courtyard that had yet to be cleaned up.

After the old lady died, no one could know whether such a thing had in fact taken place.

It was hard to say whether this child was a “natural disaster” or a “manmade catastrophe”—less than half a year after he was born, he had driven two wet-nurses in a row to high blood pressure and made them resign their posts and go home. Madam Cui and Old Madam Xi each lost seven or eight jin, and the Marquis didn't dare to have heart problems for three years.

It was said that when this little master began to crawl, it was as if he were flying a sword stuck to the ground; even dogs couldn't keep up. And once he learned to walk, he turned into a cannon on legs. When he opened his mouth, he could shout the Marquis, who had charged alone into the Beijue Mountains, into a daze, making him suspect that the talisman the Blind Wolf King had given him had been poisoned. He was everywhere throughout the whole Marquis Manor. Only when grown-ups yelled for him to come eat or sleep, he was always hard of hearing.

When he started schooling in early childhood, the number of private tutors who left in a rage was unprecedented and never to be duplicated; it was said that to this day no one in Dangui Lane had broken his record. He was also the only person whom His Third Highness, who even breathed more softly than others, had personally beaten. Soon his name shook the whole of the imperial capital of Jinping. An unknown number of innocent boys ended up getting beaten by their family's discipline rods without knowing what they were about because they had hung out with him.

He had a courtesy name.

According to Southern Wan custom, boys didn't need to reach the age of twenty; once they were sixteen, the age at which they could participate in the immortal selection, a courtesy name could be chosen. The Marquis chose the courtesy name "Shiyong" for him. When His Highness Prince Zhuang heard this, he made no comment, only clicked his tongue as if he had a toothache.¹⁰⁴

Later, the name "Xi Shiyong" leapt from the back molars of countless people.

He also had a nickname, which he had chosen himself.

When he was a little older than ten, he heard that a group of Southern Shu musicians had come to the pleasure boats, and they had spiritual beasts dancing backup, so he had called up a gang of his unruly friends. He had put on platform shoes to increase his height and gone to see the scenes of the south and was unfortunately caught in the act by His Third Highness, who had gone out to a social event for once. In front of others, san-ge kindly and gently patted him on the shoulder and kicked him under the table, squeezing out *Touch the wine and you're dead* between his teeth.

So on Xi Ping's first trip on a pleasure boat he didn't end up getting to see spiritual beasts dance. He was detained and forced to drink tea for a shichen—san-ge himself was drinking jasmine tea, but he had him served with kuding tea,¹⁰⁵ which was said to relieve internal heat.

The beauty serving tea pursed her lips behind her veil, furtively laughing at him. Xi Ping, looking glum, kept his head down, the tea service his only company as time dragged on at a snail's pace. He remembered the words carved on the tea tray: *When drunk of old named Yugan, driving out sleep created the Marquis of Buye.*

"The Marquis of Buye" seemed like he was trying to be equals with his father; he didn't dare to take it, so later he took the characters "Yu Gan" for his nickname, a memento of his first bitter taste of experience.

Mr. Yu Gan wrote many songs that were circulated and sung for a time. Sadly, none of them were worthy of being sung in elegant surroundings. Later, they had fallen silent with the decline of the pleasure boats on the Lingyang River.

A name, a courtesy name, and a nickname. These were the only things left of his life. Could he use these to overcome the near-shed

skin hidden bones, keep the world from overturning?

Oh, yes. He also had an alias—

In the chaotic reincarnation wood, Xi Ping could no longer clearly hear what people were saying. Only the name “Tai Sui,” because it was mentioned too frequently, was constantly slipping past his ears.

“Tai Sui...”

“What are Tai Sui’s orders? What do we do?”

“Where is Tai Sui...”

“Tai Sui” was the one tiny bit of land that had remained to him when he had even lost the name “Xi Ping” and was walking in the mortal world.

It was also one of the reasons why, having come to an impasse, he wouldn’t hand over his consciousness altogether and allow the hidden bones to fuse with him.

“Stop calling,” he thought feebly. “Tai Sui can’t even look after himself!”

The reason that “Tai Sui” could be everywhere was because of the reincarnation wood. Could mortals really overcome the reincarnation wood and fish up his consciousness, which was inextricably linked to the hidden bones?

“Tai Sui!”

Just then, an aged yet powerfully resonant female voice suddenly came from a certain place. There was nothing strange about the human voice to begin with, but this cry of hers resonated with some

qin strings. Those special qin strings droned once, and Xi Ping's scattered consciousness was instantly shaken into some clarity.

He recognized the sounds at once. The qin was the Tai Sui Qin, and the person was his "good neighbor" in Tao County, Tao-er-nainai.

Because of her old age, Tao-er-nainai didn't respect any taboos. She regularly went in and out of his "house" as she liked, and she looked after the yard and the reincarnation wood tree in it when Xi Ping wasn't in Tao County.

His vital qin was hidden in that tree.

Xi Ping suddenly realized that among the places the hidden bones had passed through, it seemed that Tao County hadn't been included... and that ought to have been the place where reincarnation wood trees were densest.

Before Xi Ping could consider why this would be the case, the Tai Sui Qin sounded several more times. While the notes were weak and tuneless, they seemed to form a thread, passing through his scattered and skittering consciousness like threading beads on a string, faintly beginning to pull him back.

This qin was his vital qin, born of his bones, playing his deepest thoughts and feelings, taking its name from him... It really could overcome reincarnation wood.

The only problem was that his vital qin wasn't hanging up on a wall where people could just come up and strum it!

Tao-er-nainai was doing something in his yard, her voice loud and close, and some shout of hers had perfectly shaken the qin strings. But the old lady wasn't a practiced performer who had studied mimicry; not every one of her shouts could shake the qin strings... and at her great age, her lungs wouldn't hold out.

Indeed, after a few notes, the Tai Sui Qin fell silent. Xi Ping's consciousness was once again compelled. He was burning with impatience. Anyone would do, as long as they made the Tai Sui Qin play a few more notes...

In Tao County's Seventeen Li Town, Tao-er-nainai, hands on her hips, took several panting breaths, feeling that her throat had gone hoarse. She turned doubtfully to Zhao Qindan. "Sir Xu, if I shout like this, can Tai Sui hear it?"

Zhao Qindan frowned. She was always a little "deaf" in Tao County, unable to attach her spiritual sense to her hearing like she could outside. She couldn't say whether there was an echo from the Tai Sui Qin sealed inside the tree.

Amid the chaos in the reincarnation wood, Zhao Qindan had been the first to react. She had called over Tao-er-nainai and gotten the keys to Xi Ping's little house.

Before going to Southern He, Xi Ping's spiritual sense had been giving him constant warnings. He had been a little paranoid and made quite a few preparations, both useful and useless, including entrusting Zhao Qindan with the location of the Law Breaker and the Tai Sui Qin, so if anything went wrong, she wouldn't be at a total loss.

Xi Ping sealing his vital qin in reincarnation wood was equivalent to General Commander Pang placing his Barrier Dispelling Bow in his femur; an outsider couldn't remove it—not unless Xi Ping died and the power of the vital qin and the reincarnation wood dissipated.

Currently, there was no response from Tai Sui himself in the reincarnation wood, but the qin was still firmly lodged in the tree; this demonstrated that regardless of what Tai Sui had encountered, he was at least still alive.

How was she supposed to use this vital divine weapon that she couldn't get out to contact him...?

“Er-nainai,” Zhao Qindan said, getting a sudden flash of inspiration, a lousy idea appearing in her mind. She turned and asked, “Would you be able to find a gong?”

“A *what?*” said Tao-er-nainai.

Sometimes sharp sounds could shake the strings of a qin... or at any rate she had heard that it was like this for mortal instruments, and that this had produced rumors of hauntings. She didn't know whether this ascended spirit grade immortal qin would be the same.

Zhao Qindan decided to try her luck. “Have some people come and try striking gongs next to the tree, alternating the pitch. It doesn't need to be the same tune—the more tunes the better.”

Tao-er-nainai was all at sea, not understanding what “Sir Xu” was getting at. But er-nainai was always going to listen to Sir Xu get into shouting matches... no, debating; she admired her tremendously. Though she didn't understand, she still immediately did as she said. While running an inn, she had received people from all walks of life; she was a person of prestige and good moral standing in her community and had extensive connections. She quickly and efficiently accomplished her mission, exceeding the quota—there weren't only gongs; she had called up all the locals from the surrounding towns and villages in Tao County who could blow, bow, pluck, or sing.

Xi Ping's quiet yard was stuffed full of people, and busybodies were constantly strolling over. Soon, even the streets in front of the house and behind it were jam packed.

At er-nainai's order, drums and gongs crashed and suona horns wailed, loud and sonorous human voices mixing with them. No one had a score. Now they played "The Dragon and Phoenix Bringing Prosperity," now they puffed "The Filial Son Kowtows"... They didn't know whether the master of the house was getting married or being buried. Totally confused, they followed Tao-er-nainai's commands, braising marriage and funeral in a single courtyard.

Zhao Qindan: "..."

This wasn't very much like what she had thought of, but this was no time to wrangle. She had to make do. The young mistress stuck close to the reincarnation wood tree, concentrating with all her might on the sounds within. Just when she thought she was about to go deaf, a weak qin note came from inside the tree.

"Stop, stop, stop," said Zhao Qindan, "stop!"

The whole yard full of festivity quieted. Only in the distant alley was there still an occasional toot. You could have heard a pin drop.

Imitating her, everyone pricked up their ears. They heard a continuous hum coming from the tree, like a call to the souls of the dead. After a while, the even note paused briefly, then returned with a tune... the qin sweet notes popular in Southern Wan!

Though Zhao Qindan was a girl from a decent family, she had spent the past several years hanging out with the bunch of spies in the Luwu; she had learned some sweet notes. As she listened, she took out the little notebook she carried with her and, groping and guessing, comparing what she heard against her notes, she succeeded in decoding the qin sweet notes: *Madam, call off your magic power. I surrender.*

Mortal music couldn't very well continuously shake the Tai Sui Qin, but inside the qin there happened to be a Law Breaker, and

everyone present amounted to the Law Breaker's masters. The clamorous gongs and drums had disturbed the Law Breaker, agitating the qin strings from within.

Eight years ago, the Law Breaker's axiom had taken effect and fished Xi Ping's true body out from the bottom of the Impassable Sea. Now, with the Tai Sui Qin moving, they had also serendipitously called back Xi Ping's "soul."

When his consciousness crash landed in the Law Breaker's space, it could hardly keep a human shape. Then, Xi Ping noticed to his astonishment that the Law Breaker actually hadn't stopped working — outside, the sky was falling and the earth was cracking, but inside Tao County, the spiritual energy prohibition still held!

With Xi Ping's superficial understanding, he felt that this was unreasonable: the inscriptions outside the Beijue Mountains were the ancestors of all the inscriptions in the world. The spiritual mountains, the divine tools, the demon seal... even the mountains and rivers were built upon them.

And according to what Lin Chi had said, the inscriptions used by the Law Breaker, a manmade object, came from the same series as the Lancang Spiritual Mountains; Hui Xiangjun must have used some means to decode the Lancang Mountains' inscriptions and made the Law Breaker on that basis.

In everyday terms, the Beijue Mountain inscriptions were a house's foundation, the Lancang Spiritual Mountains were the first floor, and the Law Breaker was a little attic built atop the spiritual mountains.

Now, it was as if the foundation and the first floor had both collapsed, leaving an "attic in midair," hanging there on its own as if it were haunted.

Something stabbed Xi Ping's peripheral vision. He looked down and found that he had picked up a small scoop of inscriptions, which were now falling in scraps inside the Law Breaker's space. These were a portion of the crucial ancient inscriptions.

He had temporarily escaped the hidden bones' control, and he had "made off with the loot"!

CHAPTER 234 - Conclusion (2)

Outside of Tao County, because the inscriptions had fallen short, the collapsing universe froze.

The *Tao World Record's* “eyes and ears” scattered everywhere had no idea what was going on, but that didn't keep them from packaging up the information and sending it back to Tao County—this was their custom; when they couldn't work out what was going on, they would transmit back everything they saw and heard, handing it over to Sir Xu so she could pool it and come to a decision.

Practically all the core personnel of this toilet bulletin were Luwu. When they received the information transmitted from all over, they ran into the little alley swift as the wind to find her but couldn't get through the traffic jam of the spontaneously assembled open air music troupe, so they shouted inward, “Sir Xu, our scribes on the outside say that the abnormal shifts in spiritual energy seem to have stopped all of a sudden!”

The people talked over each other to convey this information inward while chewing it over with relish themselves.

“Fresh news! Fresh news! The ‘earth dragon’ in the mountains has stopped turning over.”

“I was wondering why it had gotten so quiet.”

“They say the avalanches in the Kunlun Mountains have stopped, too...”

“What about Southern Shu? Didn't they say a whole heap of spiritual beasts had gotten loose over there?”

“There may be nothing to be done about the ones that have gotten loose. They can only mend the pen now that the sheep are lost.”

“What a nuisance, I hope they don’t wander over here. Everyone says the beast-taming cultivators these days are useless. All they do is pick out impressive spiritual beasts and raise them for fighting, and herd the rest into enclosures and order servants to take care of them.” An old man who spent all his time hanging out in tea shops launched into an extemporaneous critique of another country’s social ills. “When they’ve lost the tradition of their founder, how can anything go well? Something was bound to go wrong sooner and later, and wouldn’t you just look!”

Some years earlier, it would have been unthinkable for mortals to say things like this. Making presumptuous commentary about immortals was heresy. If the immortals heard and stopped protecting you, what would you do?

But spiritual energy had been prohibited in Tao County for eight years. Everyone felt that “immortals not protecting you” was pretty good.

Tao County had many “Exalted,” which were very easy to pick out. Those whose reactions were slow, who didn’t know when to get out of the way of a car, who always seemed to be trying to stamp on something when they walked, who plainly had no handicap but whose each and every movement made it seem like they were deaf and blind... these were all cultivators. They were restless, and they had an outside observer’s haughtiness.

Before, a single Qilin Guard could have scared the minor merchants out of their wits, but now everyone was eager to receive these cultivators—each one of that bunch had more money than brains; they were particularly easy to fleece.

Adding in the heap of little stories about gratitudes and resentments, loves and hates in the cultivation world that filled the toilet bulletins, which commented on the three thousand paths of the Great Way as though they were commenting on rice seeds, the people who lived here had been subtly influenced by what they saw and heard and had gradually lost their scruples as well.

“Sir Xu.” A person who had just been playing the suona put down the instrument and asked, “What’s going on? Does it have something to do with us?”

“Aren’t you clever.” Tao-er-nainai rolled her eyes and turned to Zhao Qindan. “Sir Xu, does it have something to do with our Tai Sui?”

When the people in the little courtyard and on the courtyard walls heard this, all of them turned their gazes on the reincarnation wood tree in the yard.

Xi Ping lowered his head and looked at the heap of inscriptions he had carried off.

Under the press of a thousand years of the system of the spiritual mountains, something like tens of thousands of people being of one heart and raising the Kunlun Spiritual Mountains on the foundation of the Sword Ancestor’s Way of the Heart couldn’t happen again. The set of ancient inscriptions outside the Beijue Mountains had become the sole “book of heaven”; obtaining it, after the old rules collapsed, you could make the sun and moon go around at your beck and call.

The present situation was: Xi Ping had been yanked back to Tao County by a bunch of musicians and had inadvertently torn off a corner of the “book of heaven.” The inscriptions that the hidden bones had were now incomplete, and the hidden bones were for some reason repelled by Tao County, so the total change in the outside world had gone halfway, then awkwardly gotten stuck.

There was no way of knowing whether Hui Xiangjun had anticipated, when she gave up on using the Riverward to steal the ancient inscriptions outside the Beijue Mountains, that eight hundred years later, the Law Breaker would become the hiding place of a portion of the ancient inscriptions.

At the same time, Xi Ping was trapped inside the Law Breaker—without the hidden bones, he couldn't control the reincarnation wood, and spiritual energy was prohibited in Tao County, so he couldn't make a paperman to use to move around. Apart from the vital qin that was connected to his innermost thoughts, he couldn't make a sound now.

From the Latent Cultivation Temple to Tao County, he had gone from a mortal to a near-shed skin, and when it came down to it, he was still unable to act freely, only able to convey information using qin sweet notes.

“Tai Sui,” said Zhao Qindan, knocking on the reincarnation wood's trunk, “do you have a solution?”

With thanks to the mighty flying goose machine, Xi Ping knocked out a string of qin sweet notes to answer Zhao Qindan: *No, I don't understand it at all, tell the Luwu to contact the Xuanyin Mountains, I need outside aid!*

Xi Ping didn't dare to be too optimistic. Outside were the northern and southern continents, the five ranges of immortal mountains, and countless reincarnation wood trees... and Tao County on a map was only a dot the size of a sesame seed.

Then he tried to tell Zhao Qindan what had happened, but this was a long story, and when it came to the ancient inscriptions, he wouldn't necessarily have been able to explain it properly even speaking, let alone using sweet notes and code. The two of them,

one alternating methods of getting words out, the other groping and guessing, several times ended up at a communication impasse, making the audience sweat.

Fortunately the young mistress had spent eight years cultivating inside the spiritual energy prohibition; her temperament now was unusually steady. “Don’t worry, the Luwu have gone to send the message. However you look at it, we haven’t reached the point of extreme emergency yet..”

Someone must have infected her with a crow’s mouth. Before she could finish speaking, she was interrupted by a dull twang from the Tai Sui Qin.

Zhao Qindan’s eyebrows rose. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

Xi Ping couldn’t pluck the qin right now.

A consciousness could change shape, but that required mental energy to keep up. Under normal circumstances, people would preserve their most familiar state of existence—in other words, their true bodies.

Xi Ping’s consciousness in the Law Breaker looked like himself, but just now, the right arm of his consciousness had broken without warning. This wasn’t a voluntary change on his part, it was an external wound. Xi Ping gasped, and the Tai Sui Qin’s melody went astray.

Nothing in the Law Breaker would attack his consciousness. Feeling the sharp pain, Xi Ping immediately realized: this wound had been inflicted on his true body!

His consciousness had been carried away by the hidden bones. He’d been completely incapable of being his own master. Using the Law Breaker, he had taken refuge Tao County, and his true body

was still in the South Sea. Xi Ping had lived in company with the hidden bones ever since he had opened his spiritual eyes. As long as his consciousness wasn't extinguished, his body could always regenerate, unlike other cultivators, for whom it would be all over when their bodies died; unavoidably, he lacked some precautionary awareness—especially after becoming an ascended spirit, when he could switch places with reincarnation wood trees at will, he had been certain in the knowledge of his safety. He didn't even have any defensive tools on him!

If his physical body was broken, his consciousness would also be heavily mauled. And the hidden bones moreover could grow a new body. If his own consciousness just happened to have separated from the hidden bones at the time, whose body would that be?

And the physical body and consciousness were inextricably linked. Wounds to the body would certainly reflect on the consciousness. If his body was destroyed, it remained to be seen whether his consciousness, lacking the hidden bones, could survive!

Meanwhile, in the South Sea, when Yao Qi and Chang Jun had slowly awakened, they had bumped into Xi Ping coming out of a reincarnation wood sapling. Before the two of them had time to celebrate, they saw Xi Ping's expression suddenly become alarmed. He swayed, then fell over.

Chang Jun said, "...I was hoping he'd come to save us. I didn't think he was coming to run an insurance scam."

"Never mind, let's go."

Yao Qi's mustard seed had been lost and damaged in the chaos long ago; otherwise, the reincarnation wood seeds wouldn't have ended up falling all over the ground. Fortunately, Chang Jun still had his mustard seed. The two of them quickly gathered up the remaining upgraded immortal tools in it. In all, they still had three left

of ascended spirit grade: an underwater boat shaped like a big fish that could disguise itself as a spiritual beast; a protective leaf in the characteristic style of Moon Plated Peak, just big enough for two or three people to crowd into; and a hand cannon in which Xi Ping had personally stored ascended spirit sword energy.

Chang Jun grit his teeth and lifted Xi Ping onto his back. “Fortunately I... I’ve opened my spiritual eyes. The hidden bones of a master like this alone weigh several hundred jin... Ziming, what are you doing?”

Yao Qi was searching the surroundings with a talisman, turning up several reincarnation wood seeds scattered in the vicinity and putting them away in his purse—Chang Jun had been careless; there were no seeds stored in his mustard seed.

“Just in case,” said Yao Qi, who was used to preparing for the worst. “Let’s go!”

Chang Jun laboriously carried Xi Ping into the belly of the big fish. He gasped in admiration: “You’re really an expert at fleeing disaster. You’re always so prepared!”

But to their surprise, that “preparedness” turned out to be somewhat dire.

In the water, the upgraded immortal tool was very covert. Even the living fishes and spiritual beasts shuttling through the sea didn’t notice anything. It even had a close brush with the silent Cauldron of Nine Dragons.

“C-c-cauldron of Nine... Damn it, that s-s-scared me to death...” Only when they had swum a hundred zhang away from the Cauldron of Nine Dragons did Chang Jun, who hadn’t dared to breathe, force a sentence from his throat. Yao Qi also let out a long breath and leaned over as though his strength had been exhausted.

Just then, Chang Jun, pointing at Yao Qi's purse, suddenly said, "Hey, Shiyong, are you awake?"

Yao Qi looked down. Xi Ping himself was silent, but the reincarnation wood seeds in his purse had at some point sprouted. The twigs grew quickly. In the blink of an eye, they had torn the mundane brocade that the purse was made of.

With a bitter laugh, Chang Jun said, "You've picked a great time to wake up. You just wanted to make me carry you, didn't..."

The rest of his sentence was drowned in a gasp of alarm—as if it had gone crazy, the just sprouted reincarnation wood attacked its master like a viper!

Xi Ping's right arm was twisted by vines and immediately broke, drooping limply down.

If not for the fact that Chang Jun hadn't yet had time to put him down and had automatically pulled Xi Ping half a step aside, this strike would have gone right through him!

"What's going... Ziming, look out!"

Yao Qi's purse burst open. The reincarnation wood branches were like a volcanic eruption. It grew wildly, then agitated the surrounding spiritual energy.

It couldn't use talismans; it only forced the surrounding spiritual energy to turn into sharp blades of wind, like knives, slashing as Xi Ping and Chang Jun.

Xi Shiyong... was attacking Xi Shiyong?

Yao Qi quickly took a step back and tossed a fire talisman onto the purse. Sadly, both Xi Ping's true body and the frenzied reincarnation wood were genuine article late stage ascended spirit items. Being hit with a half-immortal talisman was like being tickled!

Chang Jun dodged in a flurry, not knowing whether to toss Xi Ping's body aside or carry it away. "Why is he attacking himself? Is the problem with the tree or with him? Shiyong! Hey! Xi-shishu, listen, can you drop us a word? Say something... or use code... My goodness, Ziming, what are you doing?!"

Yao Qi had taken out the sole upgraded immortal tool that could be used as a weapon—that hand cannon. He put his finger on the trigger and without any hesitation shot ascended spirit sword energy at the teeth-baring, claw-flailing reincarnation wood. At the same time, he opened the entrance to the belly of the "big fish."

Seawater and spiritual energy suddenly poured in. Another big whirlpool appeared in the South Sea out of nowhere. The reincarnation wood was sent flying by that shot. It passed through the fish's belly and fell into the sea. Without a word, Yao Qi threw himself forward and pressed the button controlling the fish's belly. The upgraded immortal tool closed in response.

Almost at the very moment he sealed the fish's belly, the reincarnation wood vines, already as thick as pythons, slammed firmly against the fish.

Those vines actually knocked a crack in the ascended spirit fish. Yao Qi poured all the spiritual stones he had on him into the fish belly's array. The little boat shaped like a big fish paused, then rushed through the vines like an arrow loosed from the string.

Chang Jun's head slammed against the fish's hard belly. He howled, "Wait, wait up! How do you know that the problem is with the tree and not with him? What if there's something improper in his body,

some demon invading him or something, and his consciousness went into the reincarnation wood to eliminate the evil... Don't do more harm than good!"

Yao Qi grabbed Xi Ping, who had slipped out of Chang Jun's arms. "What are you talking about, more harm than good? Whether Xi Shiyong was 'expelling evil' or being expelled by it, when would he ever attack you along with it? Have you forgotten why he wanted the half-puppet to throw an inscription at him back them?"

Chang Jun went blank. But before he could say anything, the big fish suddenly shook. In the sea, the frenzied reincarnation wood had stirred up tens of thousands of deadly spiritual energy blades, and the fish had been slashed. Yao Qi and Chang Jun watched as the upgraded immortal tool's array's spiritual threads burst apart in front of their eyes and the seawater and vines together surged in, bringing the big fish moving stealthily through the depths of the sea to a halt!

And meanwhile, the shed skins in the sky had yet to call it off—the Ceaseless Mirror had disappeared, which seemed to have called back the Kunlun Sect Leader's reason. He realized something. He suddenly withdrew and retreated. "Slow down, Wu Lingxiao! Let's..."

Wanshuang's sword wind interrupted his words. "Where the hell is my shifu?!"

Kunlun's Sect Leader recalled something, and all the blood left his face. He seemed to have become a ghost. The three other shed skins kept to a middle distance, making way for the sword points. They exchanged veiled and guarded looks, keeping their attention on Kunlun's secrets playing out while all extending their consciousnesses without prearrangement, inspecting the situations in their own countries.

At once, everyone's gazes were drawn in by the fang-baring, claw-flailing reincarnation wood.

These days, there was no one who was unfamiliar with reincarnation wood. The Lingyun Sect Leader, who was closest to the sea, was the first to react. "First let's take down that Southern Wan evil cultivator!"

So saying, the old fellow took the lead in hitting the reincarnation wood with a talisman.

Though Lingyun's Sect Leader had a shed skin's cultivation level, he wasn't particularly proficient at talismans. He took the reincarnation wood for an embodiment of Xi Ping. Presuming that this person had only just become an ascended spirit, he had underestimated the enemy.

When the shed skin's talisman entered the water, the South Sea boiled, but the tree reaching up from the depths only shook slightly. It took absolutely no notice!

The expression on the Lingyun Sect Leader's face was hard to describe.

But Xuanwu gave a cry. "What's that?"

Perhaps provoked by the shed skin talisman, inscriptions flashed over the trunk of the rampant reincarnation wood—the fatal inscriptions that, out of everyone in the world, only Kunlun's Sect Leader had seen!

Kunlun's Sect Leader had yielded to several attacks from Wanshuang, only parrying, not attacking. He was about to say something when out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed the inscriptions on the enormous tree at the bottom of the sea. The

thread of clarity in his head instantly snapped. In a daze, he seemed to hear the sound of the sword tearing through Zhu Lanze's back.

The long nightmare descended; the heart demon seed irrigated by guilt, remorse, and weakness burst into bloom. Wanshuang was knocked aside by the furious spiritual energy around him. The Sect Leader's pupils seemed to shrink to the size of pinpoints.

"It...it wasn't me..." He looked through the heart demon that had taken root on his spirit. "I wasn't the one who killed him..."

A voice that seemed to be luring him into something asked, "Then who was it?"

Who infected your mind? Who controlled your hand as it held the sword? Who forced you to murder your own shidi, whom you led into the cultivation world yourself...?

Something was attracting his gaze, making him look at the ancient Way of the Heart on his spirit. The Kunlun Sect Leader's whole body began to tremble. Something was on the verge of appearing, but he didn't dare to look directly at it.

He suddenly gave a loud shout, threw off Wu Lingxiao, and hacked at the inscriptions on the tree—it was the monstrous wind and snow outside the Beijue Mountains, it was the deluding Beijue Array, and maybe it was those strange inscriptions in the snow... In sum, it couldn't have been his Way of the Heart!

This time, the reincarnation wood couldn't remain unconcerned. The tree trunk took the thrust of the Kunlun Sect Leader's weighty sword directly. At the place where a piece of the inscriptions was missing on the trunk, it snapped in half. The branches dispersed. The fish-shaped immortal tool it had captured seized the opportunity to slip away.

Unfortunately, the ascended spirit grade fish couldn't take the shed skin sword wind. It went to pieces from a glancing blow.

The three people inside were immediately dropped into the sea. A beam of sword energy slashed Xi Ping's back. The blood threw itself at Yao Qi's face, entering his lungs along with the seawater.

Inside the Law Breaker in Tao County, Xi Ping felt as if he had been cut in two. His vision darkened. Something flew out of his chest.

Yao Qi swallowed that mouthful of ascended spirit blood. The spiritual energy in his meridians increased dramatically. In a flash, he outperformed himself, casting a talisman that clearly surpassed the level of a half-immortal and coalesced into a shield in the water. Though it broke at a single touch, it was still enough to give him a chance to take out the last upgraded immortal tool—that leaf. It wrapped the three of them up and squeezed out through a gap between the evil vines and the sword energy!

Inside the Law Breaker, Xi Ping fainted briefly before recovering his awareness. He waited for a long while, but no new wounds appeared on his body. Presumably when the reincarnation wood hadn't succeeded in killing him in one blow, Yao Qi and Chang Jun had worked out what was going on.

He'd never thought that his life would be in the hands of those two half-immortal classmates.

Xi Ping gave a bitter laugh and heard Zhao Qindan's already somewhat frantic voice. He was just about to respond to her when his gaze froze.

When his consciousness had taken heavy damage earlier, the thing that had flown out of his chest had been a small flame.

This was the Eternal Flame, which had burned in water and in ice without being extinguished for eight hundred years, the source of the Law Breaker and the Riverward.

Now, the flame had clearly weakened.

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Xi Ping's heart lurched.

Just then, there was a flicker of light and shadow in the flame as Lin Chi's face flashed through it.

Xi Ping froze. Then he immediately realized what was happening: the Unbound Furnace's true furnace flame had been in his hands all along; reasonably speaking, he could control the Unbound Furnace through its furnace flame, and he could use the furnace flame to see what the toolmaker was doing!

Earlier, he had been knocked dizzy by the sudden events and hadn't thought of it right away—Xi Ping hadn't used the furnace flame to peep before, because the Unbound Furnace was regularly packed with all kinds of important materials, and a layman prodding at the furnace flame at random was likely to cause problems. It wasn't like Master Lin was unreliable, and he didn't understand the little universes inside the furnace; what would be the point of blindly messing around?

And if he wanted to use the furnace flame to communicate with Lin Chi, he needed Lin Chi's cooperation. At the very least, he would first have to light the Unbound Furnace and send his consciousness into it. Under ordinary circumstances, if he could contact Lin Chi in order to instruct him to do all these things, he could also say whatever he needed to say. There was no need to use such a valuable thing in place of a Heavenly Question.

No one had expected a situation like the current one to happen.

Zhao Qindan had sent flying goose messages to Luwu outside Tao County, and the Luwu's Heavenly Question had come to Lin Chi's hands on Moon Plated Peak. The information had passed through

many hands, and it was unclear how much of it had been lost by the time it reached Lin Chi. Lin Chi was all at sea when he heard, only roughly understood that reincarnation wood couldn't be used and Xi Ping's consciousness was trapped in Tao County.

Tao County was the place enveloped by Hui Xiangjun's Law Breaker. As soon as Lin Chi heard, he thought of the Unbound Furnace's flame, so, while sending a Heavenly Question to ask the Luwu for concrete details, as though trying his luck, he cleaned out all the materials inside the Unbound Furnace and sent his consciousness into it.

Seeing Lin Chi now, Xi Ping acted as if he were seeing his long-lost grandpa. He even took the initiative to develop manners: "Lin-shishu!"

This form of address took eight centuries off Lin Chi's lifespan. He quickly said, "C-c-certainly not! General Zhi keeps looking for you, are you all right? What's..."

"I'm not all right!" said Xi Ping. "I'm nearly cold! Burn some paper money for me, I'm heading to the Underworld to hire an assassin to take down that wolf spirit Xie Chu for me, then bribe the Kings of the Underworld to make sure he reincarnates as a pig in the next life!"

"Don't joke..." said Lin Chi.

This time, he really didn't joke; Xi Ping poured out the whole sequence of cause and effect for Lin Chi. "The reincarnation wood is out of control, Lin-shishu. The most urgent matter is to work out how long the Law Breaker can hide me and what to do about these damned inscriptions."

Lin Chi seemed unable to digest this information at once. He was silent.

Come to think of it, from Xi Ping's thrilling escape from before the Ceaseless Mirror to the hidden bones showing their true colors, the situation had developed rapidly; in a brief span of time, the world had simply turned upside down. If anyone survived, this single day could fill up a hundred pages in the historical annals.

After a long moment, the stalled Li Chi finally "slowly came to awareness." "Wen-shixiong, give me another one of those pills from earlier—Shiyong, what did you say? I've always thought that the hidden bones were like the ungovernable way's Way of the Heart, how...how could they escape your control and even try to push you into a deathtrap?"

Xi Ping gave a start, immediately realizing that he had slipped up. Lin Chi had personally experienced the inference of the Ways of the Heart of common origin; what if he kept thinking along those lines? Wouldn't that harm his Way of the Heart?

He was just about to touch up his words when he heard Lin Chi continue: "In ancient times, the 'unorthodox ways' that weren't among the three thousand paths of the Great Way disappeared when the Kunlun Mountains formed. Only the demonic gods of the reincarnation wood, the heartless lotus, the eternal spring brocade, and the late-autumn red gave birth to accompanying plants... Their ways are indeed strange. They seem to be entirely different from the present system of the cultivation world."

Xi Ping opened his mouth and realized that Lin Chi had gotten ahead of him to say everything he had been about to say, and this self-deluding talk was more comprehensive than his lies would have been. All he could do was dryly agree: "... Right."

At the same time, something flashed through his mind. Before Xi Ping could catch hold of the idea, Zhao Qindan knocked urgently on the reincarnation wood tree's trunk—

Meanwhile, at the boundary of Tao County, one of the “troops” from the Northern Xia Garrison suddenly opened his eyes wide, a panicked expression flashing over his face.

The person behind Tao County’s Northern Xia Garrison was Zhou Ying. After eight years, a number of Luwu had of course infiltrated the troops. With the spiritual energy prohibition in Tao County, half-immortal Luwu were normally no different from mortals. But just now, one of the Luwu among the troops had suddenly felt his whole body lighten, his eyes and ears abruptly become sharp. Spiritual energy poured through his spiritual eyes into his meridians. He could use spiritual energy again!

The Luwu was startled and thought that he had accidentally stepped over the spiritual energy prohibition line. He quickly raised his head to look at the boundary marker standing on the line, but the boundary marker was still two zhang away from him.

Without the mortals being any the wiser, Tao County’s spiritual energy prohibition line had shrunk by over two zhang.

The Luwu knew very well that this was a matter with far-reaching consequences. He quickly found an excuse to be relieved from his shift by a colleague and hurriedly went back to send a report. Before leaving, he turned his head back to take a look.

After the connection between Tai Sui and reincarnation wood had been exposed, many reincarnation wood trees in Chu outside of Tao County had been torn down... Though in this period of tumult, that sloppy and incompetent bunch of Qilin Guards hadn’t taken care of them all, outside the spiritual energy prohibition line, there certainly weren’t forests of reincarnation wood. Now, because the spiritual energy prohibition line had shrunk, a big swath of reincarnation wood forest had moved outside the line. Perhaps the Luwu was

imagining it, but he suddenly thought that these reincarnation wood trees seemed different from usual.

The lush shadows of the trees flickered, overlapping on the ground. These were clearly the same trees he was used to seeing, but it seemed that countless pairs of ghastly eyes had appeared on them and were watching that Luwu greedily.

The Luwu's blood ran cold. He made a mark at the new spiritual energy prohibition line and raced to a Luwu inn. Without even saying hello to his colleague inside, he rushed straight into the basement and sent a message to Seventeen Li Town.

The area enveloped by the Law Breaker was slowly shrinking!

On receiving the news, Xi Ping and Lin Chi were simultaneously startled.

The Luwu rapidly calculated the speed at which the spiritual energy prohibition line was moving. It was one chi per incense stick, and the rate seemed to be increasing.

The Unbound Furnace flame in Xi Ping's hands, previously steady, began to dance slightly like a candle flame, as if it might go out at any time. Xi Ping's earlier ominous premonition had come true. This was dire!

"Contact my shifu," Xi Ping quickly said. "Lin-shishu, why is the Law Breaker's scope shrinking? Is it running out of oil, or running out of spiritual energy? How can we give it a refill?"

"I've already contacted him." Lin Chi's scalp was numb. "The Unbound Furnace flame isn't her Way of the Heart, it's something she made... She never even mentioned it to me. As for how it was made, how we can maintain it... Fenghan! Give me another pill!"

Wen Fei smacked him with his fan. *If you take another one, you'll be going to see your ancestors.*

Despairingly, Lin Chi said, "I can't do it.."

Wen Fei's fan flew up and stretched to over a zhang wide in midair.

Peak Master Wen, a former Heaven's Design Pavilion thug who had gotten mixed in with the "weak medicine and toolmaking ways," picked up Lin Chi and the Unbound Furnace, then tossed them onto the fan. *The He people have died off, the Xiang family is all useless, Li and Shu have never valued the way of toolmaking. There's no one presentable among them. You're the Golden Hand. If you can't do it, who can? We're going!*

Lin Chi stumbled. "Going wh—"

The words on the fan nearly pierced the clouds on the immortal mountains. *Tao County!*

When Zhi Xiu, at the Wan-He border, received word, the first thing he did was to set off a firework.

Right now, all the shed skins had discovered that the great arrays of all the immortal mountains and all the border inscriptions had collapsed. Their consciousnesses were no longer limited by anything. They could sweep across the better part of the continent.

Though there were some thousands of li between the Lancang Mountains and the Wan-He border, the shed skins could now speak as though they were face-to-face.

"Everyone, listen to what I have to say—"

As Zhi Xiu spoke, his consciousness swept out toward the bottom of the sea, searching for Xi Ping.

To keep Xi Ping away from the pursuit of the reincarnation wood, Yao Qi and Chang Jun were certain to be using ascended spirit grade upgraded immortal tools, all Moon Plated Peak products, familiar to Zhi Xiu. Reasonably speaking, he should have seen them at a glance, but while his consciousness instantly covered the better part of the South Sea, he didn't find so much as a shadow.

Zhi Xiu's heart sank.

Meanwhile, Yao Qi and Chang Jun had escaped with Xi Ping from the reincarnation wood tree that was like a sea monster. The big fish that could travel stealthily over the seabed was gone. They'd had to squeeze into the leaf-shaped upgraded immortal tool.

This was a "protective immortal tool," not a boat, and there was only enough space inside for one person to move around. With three grown fellows stuffed into it, it was almost bulging. It was pushed by the wind and waves on the sea, hopping up and down.

"Ziming... would you kindly lift your foot, you've nearly tapped out a New Year's Greetings song on my belly!"

"It's not my foot!"

"Right... I was wondering why it hurt so much... I'm going to throw up..."

"Hongzheng-xiong, don't—"

Just then, the protective immortal tool gave a violent shake. Xi Ping's ascended spirit heel was thrown against Chang Jun's stomach, nearly twisting his half-immortal brother's spine through the skin of his belly. Chang Jun's face turned green. Exerting every bit of his strength, he freed up a hand to cover his mouth. But Yao Qi gave a start; he had a bad feeling.

The immortal tool that had been rolling wildly through the sea seemed to have been caught and stabilized. Through the half-transparent “leaf,” Yao Qi saw the figure of an enormous snake-like body, wrapped around the tiny protective immortal tool.

It was a waking dragon.

Flute music played in the water. The waking dragon wrapped around them moved as soon as it heard. It jumped several times. The two half-immortals inside the immortal tool no longer knew where they were.

A long, slim hand reached out of midair and tapped politely on the leaf immortal tool. Then came Wan language with the distinctive clinging character of the Miah clan: “There are none of those evil trees here. It’s safe. Gentlemen, come out and have a word with me.”

The legendary ascended spirit evil cultivator of Southern Shu.

Yao Qi and Chang Jun trembled simultaneously, like two frogs with a viper’s eyes on them, not daring to breathe too loudly.

Chang Jun quickly made a “hand cannon” gesture at Yao Qi, indicating for him to take aim at the ascended spirit. But Yao Qi, his expression dismal, shook his head—that ascended spirit grade hand cannon had slipped out of his hand while they were being chased by the reincarnation wood.

Chang Jun: “...”

He yanked Xi Ping’s hair hopelessly: Wake up, brother, save us! The two of us won’t even make a snack for that man!

Wangge Luobao landed on the waking dragon's head like the sea god himself and gently stroked the upgraded immortal tool in the shape of a furled leaf. He clicked his tongue in admiration. "So this is the spirit-conducting gold that lit the red moon eight hundred years ago. Amazing. This manmade object is sixty to seventy percent as effective as a cultivator's essence at conducting spiritual energy. If you had sheer force of numbers on your side, that would be disastrous. Fortunately..."

As Wangge Luobao spoke, there was a tooth-aching crack. He had found the location of the immortal tool's array with pinpoint accuracy. He pressed his flute to it and laughed softly.

Violent spiritual energy, completely out of keeping with that gentle sound, instantly pierced the immortal tool. Whatever other properties spirit-conducting gold might have, it was still a manmade object. Though it was also of ascended spirit grade, it could still never match up to a genuine ascended spirit master who had spent centuries cultivating. The immortal tool's core cracked in response.

In the blink of an eye, seawater was pouring in. Yao Qi and Chang Jun's vision darkened. They were knocked dizzy by a swipe of the waking dragon's tail as it rolled over. Xi Ping's wound-riddled body floated out and landed in a pair of arms.

CHAPTER 236 - Conclusion (4)

“Wan.” Wangge Luobao tilted his head with a trace of ridicule, examining Xi Ping with his odd-colored eyes as he held him.

The Wan and Chu had similar distinctive facial features, but looking closely, there was still a slight difference. Shu’s Xiuyi, meanwhile, looked more like the Chu. It was only that Chu and Shu were next to each other and had a great deal of contact, as well as always clashing at the border. Chu wasn’t like Wan, all the way across the South Sea—between nations, it was also sometimes the case that what was further away would be more attractive than what was close at hand.

As the rich and prosperous home of Moon Plated Gold, Southern Wan satisfied the Shu’s yearning for the land of the blessed: Wan-style aesthetic sensibilities were all high quality, the goods produced by Wan were all valuable. In Zhaoye City, the famous Xiuyi beauties all had some Wan qualities to their looks, while “Chu-style beauties” were often described as “beautiful enough, but a little garish.”

In fact, what was “elegant” and what was “garish”? In the main it was only some ordinary idiots who, having neither literary nor martial accomplishments themselves and incapable of learning those toolmaking arts that were unrivaled throughout the world, felt diffident and disheartened and had no choice but to flaunt their “taste.” It was just like wearing a pair of thick elevated shoes to put yourself a cut above the rest—after all, that was easier than getting taller.

Wangge Luobao said quietly to the waking dragon, “What do you think? A face like this— isn’t it what those pitiable Xiuyi long for even in their dreams?”

The waking dragon had no sense of human beauty or ugliness. It only turned into a rainbow in the sea, picking up Wangge Luobao.

“To have one’s Way of the Heart blend with the immortal mountains and the universe, to become a god and a sage—that is what the ants of the cultivation world long for even in their dreams. Western Chu’s Xiang Rong didn’t stint to refine his own Way of the Heart. No sooner had you entered the cultivation world than you obtained the most extraordinary inheritance in existence. With one more step, you would have been the next Kunlun Sword Ancestor, but you had to rebel...” Wangge Luobao laughed. The beast-taming flute in his hand pressed maliciously against the center of Xi Ping’s brow. “You truly cannot tell good from bad. Truly hateful.”

The beast-taming flute aroused Xi Ping’s protective spiritual energy. A thin layer of spiritual light covered him, turning the beast-taming flute ghastly white with its glow.

But Wangge Luobao only regarded him coldly for a moment and ultimately didn’t blow off his head. He put down the flute. The beast-taming cultivator raised his voice and said, “The ducks know first when the waters are warming. Spiritual beasts react faster than humans. Now it appears that the foundations of the spiritual mountains have already been severed. Without restraints, the evil cultivators everywhere will rise in rebellion. The more vigorous the flames of war become and the more cultivators die, the more essence there will be dispersed everywhere, and the more difficult the position of this Tai Sui of yours will become as he defies the natural order—it doesn’t matter if the two of you don’t understand. You can convey my words to him.”

Saying so, Wangge Luobao snapped his fingers. The waking dragon flew out of the water with a splash, wrapped around him and Xi Ping, then turned into a rainbow in midair and vanished, moving somewhere unknown, leaving only echoes behind on the surface of

the sea. After a long moment, two terror-stricken heads popped out of the sea.

The hard-pressed Yao Qi and Chang Jun had just been knocked a hundred chi away by the waking dragon. They floated in the water staring at each other in dismay.

The half-immortals far away on the fringes of the battle with their incomplete information in fact didn't understand, but Xi Ping understood immediately—Yao Qi sent a Heavenly Question to Wei Chengxiang, which Wei Chengxiang then transmitted via flying goose letter to Tao County. Zhao Qindan asked Tao-er-nainai to disband all the gawping townspeople and moved the better half of the *Tao World Record's* office into the little courtyard to ensure that news from all over could come through without delay.

Zhao Qindan read aloud the message that had come through the machine several times. “What he means is, war will strengthen the hidden bones and weaken you?”

Xi Ping played the Tai Sui Qin like strong wind and swift rain: *That's for sure! The ancient inscriptions are like foundations, and the immortal mountains are roof beams and pillars. When an earthquake collapses half of the house's foundation, the house is left struggling to stand up on a few pillars, and those idiotic sons of bitches are fighting each other for the chance to chop down those pillars so they can bring back some wood to stick together a coffin for themselves!*

As the daughter of an important family, Zhao Qindan had only studied the basics of music, weiqi, calligraphy, and painting as a child for the sake of appearances. Her skills had been trivial and ordinary to begin with, just enough to get by, and after a decade of running around managing people's welfare, she had long ago returned those insubstantial attainments to her teacher. “Wait, wait,

wait, you're playing too fast, I can't distinguish the notes! Can't you make a long story short?"

Xi Ping held down the string and smashed out a few bitter notes:
You—are—right!

Zhao Qindan gasped. The *Tao World Record's* scribes were sending news back in a constant stream from all over:

The great evil cultivators led by Yu Chang had already fought their way onto the Sanyue Mountains. The Xiangs were completely unwilling to abdicate in favor of more qualified candidates and were mounting a defense to the death, relying on the arrays throughout the Sanyue Mountains. The blood on the Sanyue Mountains had nearly dyed the sky above Dongheng City red.

Shu's spiritual beasts were rioting, Lingyun's cultivators were run off their feet, and the Cauldron of Nine Dragons wasn't there. The Miah survivors hidden in Southern Shu had seized the opportunity to launch a counteroffensive.

Never mind that on the South Sea there were still a number of shed skins ready to come to blows without a word.

And the more bad news the flying goose machine spat out, the more rapidly the Law Breaker shrank.

The Luwu were calculating the speed of shrinkage of the spiritual energy prohibition line almost once per intense stick interval. At first it had been one chi per intense stick, but now it had already doubled three times and then some and still showed signs of speeding up. The sacred guardian trees that the people of Tao County had revered in former days were nibbling and swallowing pieces of the paradise-like spiritual energy prohibition.

During this time, Lin Chi and Xi Ping had tried countless methods: piling up spiritual stones inside and outside the Law Breaker hadn't been the slightest use; chopping down the reincarnation wood trees, meanwhile, was completely impracticable—outside the line of the spiritual energy prohibition, the “rotten wood” of former days really had turned into divine trees. Not even the attack of a shed skin sword cultivator had been able to cut through the one in the South Sea—only the ones inside the Law Breaker had yet to “develop intelligence,” but eliminating them would have been meaningless now. Reincarnation wood had always been a tree that could start growing if you shook out some seeds or stuck a budding branch into the earth. Now, controlled by the hidden bones, the reincarnation wood trees outside the Law Breaker were spreading even faster than wildfire vines, on mountains and in water, on roofs and roadsides, in utmost cold, in scorching heat..

“And there’s your body,” said Zhao Qindan, “that Southern Shu evil cultivator...”

She was interrupted by Xi Ping’s irascible sweet notes, which sounded like a qin being slammed: *I’m glad he’s taken it, don’t bother about it.*

If it had fallen into someone else’s hands, that might have been something to worry about. It having fallen into Wangge Luobao’s hands was the safest thing now—though that Southern Shu evil cultivator was inhuman, his understanding of the hidden bones was certainly the most profound. As long as he didn’t want to let the hidden bones jump straight to the shed skin boundary, he wouldn’t want to destroy his body. Right now, the world was full of reincarnation wood trees that wanted to break him to pieces; even the sea wasn’t safe. A beast-taming cultivator who had “spies” everywhere was just the right person to hide him.

As for later...

Xi Ping thought, I may not be able to live to “later.”

The two female cultivators Zhao Qindan and Wei Chengxiang had identical reactions to this: That’s your body! Not bothering about it is outrageous!

Xi Ping ignored the two of them. His thoughts jumped swiftly to another place: first they had to snuff out the flames of battle everywhere. The spiritual prohibition line retreating at a uniform speed was nothing to fear; small as Tao County was, it would still take months to retreat. But if it kept speeding up like this, it wouldn’t be able to take it. The furnace flame was leaping ever more violently. The Law Breaker might come crashing down at any moment.

“Leave the shed skins to my shifu, have the Luwu Xu Rucheng detain Yu Chang. Yu Chang wants the Sanyue Mountains. If the hidden bones get the upper hand, even if the Sanyue mountains don’t collapse, they still won’t belong to him! Tell them to stop fighting and withdraw, and I’ll return his vital weapon! Southern Shu... A-Xiang can contact Queru for me! Master Lin, I’ve gone around the Law Breaker with the furnace flame eight hundred times. When are you going to be through with decoding those inscriptions?”

Lin Chi and Wen Fei had already reached the Xia River.

The Unbound Furnace’s flame was inside the Law Breaker. The whole way, Lin Chi had allowed Wen Fei to fly, carrying him along, while he had flung himself body and heart into the Unbound Furnace, attempting to interpret the inscriptions on that divine tool, the Law Breaker, and work out the connection between the Law Breaker and the furnace flame. But though he had researched Hui Xiangjun for eight hundred years, now he could still only interpret a portion of the Law Breaker’s inscriptions with a struggle. The furnace flame was far outside the scope of his comprehension.

“Wait... this must have to do with the inheritance of the Eternal Spring Brocade, I... I...”

Xi Ping felt that if he pressed him any further, Lin Chi would have an emotional collapse; moreover, if it really was related to the way of the ancient demonic god, pressing him would be no use. His voice softened at once. “Shishu, don’t fret, the Law Breaker inscriptions are enough. Send the inscriptions you’ve interpreted to individual Luwu and have these inscriptions leak out—the people of Northern Li once used inscriptions to carve the Kunlun Mountains, and now we may yet be able to realize the Law Breaker.”

Zhao Qindan, while being run off her feet carrying out his orders, found time among her many cares to contact Wei Chengxiang in private: “He has too many things to attend to at once right now, is there anything you can do?”

“I’m in Great Wan’s Guzhou!” Wei Chengxiang said. “What the hell, that bastard Xi Shiyong really is broad-minded...”

Just then, a Heavenly Question from Yao Qi and Chang Jun flew into her hand.

Yao Qi said that, while fleeing for their lives in the sea, he had been afraid that Xi Ping’s true body would be lost, so he had held onto a bit of the blood Xi Ping had spilled when he had been slashed by the reincarnation wood. With his blood, he could draw a tracking talisman to search for him.

When Wei Chengxiang had read this, her head began to hurt. She thought to herself that this big brother was thinking too much. Track an ascended spirit—even if he’d gotten ahold of the Southern Sage’s blood or the Sword Ancestor’s blood, any talisman he drew would still be of half-immortal grade... and not an especially accomplished half-immortal, at that. Unless Wangge Luobao died,

once the talisman was complete, he would be able to detect it even with his foot.

She rather unskillfully manipulated the Heavenly Question in her hands and was just about to tell those two gentlemen to behave themselves and stay put instead of indulging in wild fantasies when she suddenly noticed the location of the senders—the Heavenly Question was the Xuanyin Mountains' most high-grade communication immortal tool, capable of establishing a one-way link to a specific person without being spied on by masters. When Wei Chengxiang wrote back, she could use this Heavenly Question to sense Yao Qi and Chang Jun's approximate bearings.

Her gaze paused as she found that the senders Yao Qi and Chang Jun had gone very far west.

In the west of the South Sea, apart from Southern Shu, there was also a place very familiar to her!

Shortly, Yao Qi and Chang Jun received a very special guide talisman through the Heavenly Question. Wei Chengxiang's response was: *A half-immortal's talisman will be noticed by a master. Follow the guide talisman, and you will come to a place that may be able to hide the aura of your talisman.*

Meanwhile, Zhi Xiu had succinctly shouted the fight above the Lancang Spiritual Mountains to a stop—he didn't even have time to finish. As soon as he mentioned the words "the ancient inscriptions from outside the Beijue Mountains," that Kunlun Sect Leader suddenly seemed to go into convulsions. His expression became greatly alarmed. Then he turned his gaze across the South Sea onto Western Chu's Tao County and ran off in that direction.

The words "outside the Beijue Mountains" were similarly stunning for Wu Lingxiao, and Tao County was Western Chu's territory, so Xuanwu naturally couldn't just sit by and watch. The two of them

followed the Sect Leader, and soon after that it was Kunlun's Third Elder and Lingyun's Sect Leader, a beat slow. Zhi Xiu said a few words to Pang Jian and Bai Ling, then leapt up and went in pursuit. For a time, all the masters in the world were heading toward Tao County.

The Sanyue Mountains' Xu Rucheng didn't drop the ball at the critical moment. He faultlessly relayed Xi Ping's own words to Yu Chang. When Yu Chang heard the words "vital weapon," the veins on his temples stood out, and he seized Xu Rucheng by the collar. "Tell him—I—will—fuck—his—ancestors!"

Then Yu Chang abruptly dove into the shadow of the Sanyue Mountains—because of that damned Tai Sui's mischief, his control over the evil cultivators and war lords of Western Chu had been pared down by fifty to sixty percent. Moreover, he understood his peers, who had been oppressed by the spiritual mountains for over a thousand years. They didn't give a damn whether mountains collapsed or people died. Their first reaction wouldn't be to prevent loss; it would certainly be to seize spiritual stones.

The shadow of the mountains covered the shadows of all the cultivators in Sanyue. Yu Chang didn't attempt to convince anyone. He only gave a bellow: "Xuanwu!"

He had used the "grit worm projection" to spout out this cry. The minds of Xiangs and evil cultivators alike were simultaneously shaken. It happened to be late already. A night breeze blew by, leaving the moon hanging high in the sky.

Yu Chang's ascended spirit grade illusion went up into the sky, obscuring the gazes of all the evil cultivators. For a time, the cultivators awed by the grit worm projection were incapable of distinguishing the real moon from the Silver Moon. They were overcome with terror. Some whose temperaments were insufficiently

staunch immediately developed marks on their bodies as if they had been swept by the Silver Moon.

All the evil cultivators in the mountains instantly fell into disorder, brandishing precious tools they had kept in reserve and fleeing in all directions. Yu Chang gave Xu Rucheng a cold look and tossed him back where he had found him. He raised a hand and released a signal flare. "Here! Brothers, follow me!"

And in the depths of the South Sea, a "mortal steamship" left the South Sea Hidden Realm. The moment it squeezed out through the crack, the ship shook. The Turmoiler Li Manlong pressed a switch on the upgraded immortal tool. Spirit-conducting gold swiftly collected spiritual energy from spiritual stones, and that "mortal ship," before it could be crushed by the weight of the water, swiftly changed into an immortal tool and parted the waters as if flying.

The upgraded immortal tool flying toward the surface scattered countless tiny flutes, which played a beast-taming melody to pacify spiritual beasts. Though it was only established foundation grade, it was still enough. The melody spread outside the Lingyun Mountains, and the spiritual beasts that had charged in among crowds of people moved slower and slower. One after another fell over.

After a moment's shock, the Lingyun cultivators rapidly got the situation under control and split people off to return to the immortal mountains. The rebel Miah cultivators also received a secret letter from Wangge Luobao and withdrew en masse.

Following the colossal exertions of cultivators everywhere, regardless of orthodox or evil, the flames of war among the five great spiritual mountains were temporarily suppressed.

Starting from the *Tao World Record's* printing depot, printed Law Breaker inscriptions spread out to all points. The toilet bulletins that

had been closely watching the *Tao World Record* ever since the start of the unforeseen events in Southern He fell over each other to imitate. As if they had grown wings, the Law Breaker's inscriptions were transmitted everywhere in the blink of an eye and reproduced by countless hands using different methods—

For the first time, the speed at which the spiritual energy prohibition was shrinking slowed.

“Twenty-four... twenty-three chi per hour.”

Zhao Qindan obtained data about the shrinkage of the spiritual energy prohibition as soon as it was available—not long before, the number had been over a hundred chi per hour.

“Much better, and the inscriptions are still spreading.” Zhao Qindan heaved a sigh of relief and couldn't resist making a joke. “What do you think, Xi-shixiong, is the spiritual energy prohibition going to start widening instead in a while? If the Law Breaker's inscriptions are everywhere, then wouldn't we accidentally be ‘realizing the Law Breaker’?”

Xi Ping went mute for a long moment. The Tai Sui Qin, which had just been strident and commanding, buzzed weakly: *What did you call me?*

Zhao Qindan came back to her senses and laughed lightly. She crossed her arms in front of her chest and, calm under pressure, walked two circles around the reincarnation wood tree. “Come to think of it, ‘Senior’ Tai Sui, don't you still owe me an explan...”

But before she could finish speaking, she was interrupted by the sound of an explosion in the distance.

Zhao Qindan was petrified.

At the Law Breaker's boundary, a Luwu taking measurements of the spiritual energy prohibition line had gone outside the line in his excitement. Before he could realize that he had forgotten himself, he froze in place—a wind blade composed of spiritual energy had flown out of a reincarnation wood tree outside the spiritual energy prohibition line, cutting that half-immortal in two. The protective immortal tool he carried exploded into a firework.

CHAPTER 237 - Conclusion (5)

As the Law Breaker inscriptions spread through the channel of the toilet bulletins, the hidden bones seemed to notice something. The reincarnation wood, which had only been spreading in all directions, started “hunting.”

The cultivators near the Law Breaker’s spiritual energy prohibition line immediately became nervous, facing off against the out-of-control reincarnation wood outside the line.

Southern Shu had luxuriant vegetation. Reincarnation wood saplings were hidden in cracks in rocks and mountain streams, shunting back and forth like mobile tripwires, silently invading the spiritual beast farm standing wide open because its inscriptions had been damaged. The Lingyun cultivators returning from capturing escaped spiritual beasts were sniped head-on!

The reincarnation wood trees even hid in snow and ice and snuck into the Kunlun Mountains.

The fan under Wen Fei’s feet pulled up over ten zhang, evading an attacking beam of spiritual energy. The waters of the Xia River were rising sharply now. He saw at a glance the densely packed reincarnation wood trees under the water; just the sight of it was horrifying.

Wen Fei gave a cry of surprise and tossed poison from his sleeve. The ascended spirit miasma that would have had even wildfire fleeing in defeat met the teeth-baring, claw-brandishing reincarnation wood vines in midair; the vines were burned black and exhausted, but the miasma was also broken!

Wen Fei’s eyelids twitched. He had a bad feeling. As expected, the next moment, the blackened vines rapidly grew new twigs and buds

and went in relentless pursuit.

When this thing had been taking Xi Shiyong's orders, it had plainly been a rotten tree that would bend wherever you pushed it! If its amulets weren't appropriately taken care of, they would get damp and sprout mushrooms. Why had it become so powerful as soon as it mutinied? It was completely absurd!

In Tao County, reincarnation wood was like a town gate, a symbol of safety. For the past eight years, for unnumbered Luwu finding themselves in desperate straits abroad, seeing reincarnation wood had been like seeing a glimmer of hope in their darkest hour.

They instinctively relied on this unprepossessing willow tree. Even though they had suddenly learned that reincarnation wood had gone out of control and intellectually knew that they ought to be on their guard against it, emotionally they hadn't caught up yet.

The Luwu's blood splashed on the brown tree bark. The reincarnation wood amulet that had been carried as a tool and as a protective talisman fell from the body, its owner having forgotten to remove it.

The vast majority of people now knew that reincarnation wood had mutinied and no longer spoke to their amulets. The noise coming through the wood had quieted, so Xi Ping heard that Luwu's cry of *Tai Sui* on the point of death.

Xi Ping was himself inside a tree, but his soul had already gone up in flames. His vital qin made a sound like tearing silk under its master's hands: *There are so many munitions hidden under the Northern Xia garrison. Are they planning to keep them there until they have kids? If we don't blow the reincarnation wood to firewood now, I'm afraid nothing will ever take it out. Have the mortals withdraw, get further from the spiritual energy prohibition line!*

Before he could finish playing this string of qin sweet notes, Zhao Qindan received the latest information: “But it seems that everyone it’s attacking are our people... Strictly speaking, they’re all cultivators.”

Xi Ping froze.

Killing cultivators?

In his rage, his reason laboriously pushed aside the obfuscations and noticed the peculiarity in this.

It didn’t make sense. If the hidden bones had been capable of killing everyone off, they would have done it by now. What need would there have been to lust after the ancient inscriptions outside the Beijue Mountains?

Because Xi Ping had carried off a portion of the ancient inscriptions, the hidden bones had gotten stuck halfway along their road to godhood. They hadn’t yet overturned the old rules and formulated new rules like “spiritual energy gathers in reincarnation wood trees” or “reincarnation wood becomes the new spiritual mountains.” Though the growth of the trees could be hastened with spiritual energy, they still couldn’t store spiritual energy like a cultivator’s essence.

Right now, the reincarnation wood controlled by the hidden bones could only use spiritual energy out in the world, operate near the spiritual mountains or in places where cultivators were plentiful and spiritual energy diffused everywhere.

The hidden bones’ fighting capacity was currently about that of a late stage ascended spirit, limited by Xi Ping’s own cultivation level —and somewhat reduced from that, too, since after all the bones were only a “natural disaster” left behind by a demonic god. Unlike a human, they couldn’t use a wide variety of talismans and arrays.

In Southern Wan, they were being neutralized by the snow shuffler, unable to make mischief in Jinping, so for the moment they couldn't steal spiritual energy from Xuanyin's Territory Map and veins of the earth, either.

When Xi Ping himself ran up against a formidable opponent, even he would have to find a place to replenish his spiritual stones somewhere. So what about the hidden bones?

Even if it was a matter of perfect indifference to the hidden bones whether mortals lived or died, directly pilfering heaven's order and draining every last drop of spiritual energy in the mortal world would still have extremely limited results. Spiritual energy consumed by attacking cultivators would necessarily involve a sacrifice of a large portion of reincarnation wood trees.

And the success of the first attacks had been pure luck. These cultivators had all been honed amid blades of wind and ice. As soon as they became aware of what was happening and started taking precautions, the amount of spiritual energy killing one person would use up would have to be greater than the spiritual energy contained in that person's essence.

Looking at it in the long-term... No, you didn't even have to look at it in the long-term. This muddleheaded move on the part of the hidden bones was like taking down ten of the enemy in exchange for eight thousand of your own.

What were they playing at? Had the hidden bones gone mad from urgency?

Or perhaps it was just that they were merely a dead man's bones, only capable of following their instincts to make trouble, incapable of counting?

With reincarnation wood going wild wherever cultivators congregated, the Sanyue Mountains naturally weren't exempt.

Yu Chang had retreated, leading the recently frightened cultivators, and hadn't yet had time to reach the location of the original great mountain array when his spiritual sense was suddenly touched by something. Yu Chang dodged, and a beam of murderous spiritual energy brushed past him, hitting another cultivator in the chest. Yu Chang casually tossed a lightning talisman in the direction the sneak attack had come from, breaking apart the attacking reincarnation wood tree. He was just about to come to the rescue—a wound to the chest wasn't a fatal one for a cultivator—when he saw a line of inscriptions flash in that wounded cultivator's wound.

His spiritual sense sent up another warning. Yu Chang stopped in his tracks. He saw the inscriptions burrow into the wounded cultivator's spirit. The cultivator went rigid. His spirit was crushed, his Way of the Heart broke apart, and he died.

The victim was an established foundation. A sudden death like this would result in an explosion of essence.

Yu Chang's reaction was extremely fast. He hollered, "Out of the way!" Protective spiritual energy spread out, guarding everyone like a shield.

But the anticipated essence explosion and spiritual energy dispersal didn't happen.

An inscription emerged slowly from the cracked brow of the victim. It hung in midair along with the body, whose eyes Yu Chang met in bewilderment.

Chu's cultivators, regardless of whether they were orthodox or evil, were all learned in talismans, arrays, and inscriptions, but Yu Chang

had never seen an inscription like this. He knew in his heart that this might be one of those mystical ancient inscriptions.

He stared briefly at that inscription, and a faint feeling suddenly emerged in his mind... It was like when he had first become an ascended spirit and discovered for the first time that he no longer needed to consult documents and ancient texts. The laws and commandments of heaven and earth would be self-evident if he only focused and inquired.

Now, that vague intuition was urging him: *Try copying an inscription.*

Try...

An impulse spread from his spirit. While his protective spiritual energy had yet to disperse, Yu Chang extended a hand and copied that inscription in midair. Inscriptions without physical forms had limited effectiveness. If there was danger, he would be able to get out of the way in time.

It seemed that a cultivator's intuition never led them astray. That inscription didn't harm him.

The instant it was completed, a portion of the dead established foundation's essence rushed into Yu Chang along with the inscription. Spiritual energy like cool spring water swept over all his bones in a flash and converged in his essence!

Yu Chang slowly drew in a breath.

He wasn't the only one to have noticed something unusual. What this world was least lacking in were "smart people." Soon, cultivators elsewhere also noticed that by reproducing those inscriptions, you could take the essence of a cultivator killed by reincarnation wood for yourself.

And the spiritual energy obtained from an essence wasn't like the spiritual energy they normally drained from spiritual stones, which they could only take in until their own essence was full. This spiritual energy instead became a part of their essence!

For over a thousand years, if a cultivator beyond the established foundation boundary wanted to take a step forward, they would have to refine their Way of the Heart countless times, make an unending stream of spiritual energy flow through their essence, and in this way they could still only inch forward over the years. Now, however, by using a few inscriptions, they could easily snatch...

No wonder masters had been as plentiful as clouds in ancient times, ascended spirits filling the streets, and cultivators, instead of diligently cultivating, were everywhere risking their lives looking for people to debate and battle.

Unavoidably, people remembered the legends about that "Tai Sui" who had the misty willow for his accompanying plant. He had opened his spiritual eyes only a few months after beginning to cultivate, established a foundation in less than a year, become an ascended spirit within ten years... This explained it!

So this was Tai Sui's secret, they thought.

In that moment, on the northern and southern continents, countless hands reached out for those ancient inscriptions.

With a tremendous enticement, even brothers could fall out, never mind that everywhere the flames of war had only been suppressed with difficulty.

The cultivators had been of one heart; now, that "public-spirited heart" broke easily.

An inscription drawn by an established foundation cultivator might be able to offset an entire prefecture's worth of mortals. After all, it would take effect as soon as it formed.

The reincarnation wood's inscriptions propagated among cultivators far faster than the Law Breaker's inscriptions were spreading between mortals.

In hardly longer than the blink of an eye, Tai County's spiritual energy prohibition line, which had just slowed in its contraction, shrank two or three li. The Luwu near the spiritual energy prohibition line didn't even have time to react before they ended up in the outside world.

Soon after, like fine sand picked up by a wild wind, the spiritual energy prohibition line began to crumble all at once.

The Luwu didn't even need to calculate anymore!

Zhao Qindan said, "The spiritual energy prohibition line will have shrunk to where we are in a shichen or two at most.."

Stop dreaming, said Xi Ping, we don't have anywhere near that much time!

In his hand, the Unbound Furnace's furnace flame trembled violently. Xi Ping's heart nearly stopped for a moment. He cupped that weak flame, only the size of a pea, in both hands, wishing he could turn himself into kindling for the furnace flame.

What should he do?

Suddenly, Xi Ping realized that perhaps the Blind Wolf King Xie Chu forcing the ancient inscriptions from outside the Beijue Mountains on him hadn't been because he had been tricked by false

information from the reincarnation wood... His san-ge had likely had a hand in this.

Those two gambling addicts might well have done it on purpose.

If it was a certainty that the hidden bones would go out of control, then once they crossed the shed skin boundary, perhaps they wouldn't even need the ancient inscriptions. In the current circumstances, the hidden bones would only need to seize the reincarnation wood and escape Xi Ping's control, and they would be able to take the Xuanyin Mountains—Southern Wan's Territory Map and veins of the earth were sewn together with reincarnation wood. If the hidden bones reached the shed skin stage, Zhi Xiu's finicky accompanying plant wouldn't be numerous enough to suppress them.

Lancang had no master, and its great mountain array and divine tool of the mountains had been beaten half to death by the Sword Slave. If another attacker of shed skin grade came along, they'd have no choice but to kneel and surrender. Xuanwu was Sanyue's only remaining shed skin, and he was facing enemies on both sides. There was only half of the Lingyun Mountains left, anyway, so they went without saying. Only Northern Li's Kunlun was formidable, and its Sect Leader had lost his mind, and Wanshuang had revolted... The out-of-control hidden bones could have had the five great immortal mountains in the palm of their hand, even easier than now.

As for how overbearing shed skin hidden bones would be, Xi Ping had no way of imagining. Perhaps his consciousness wouldn't even have had latitude to struggle before it was simply erased.

That being the case, san-ge must have thought that if the hidden bones could be lured out before they reached the shed skin boundary, the situation wouldn't be completely hopeless.

Then where was the breaking point?

It obviously wouldn't do now to rely on interpreting the Law Breaker's inscriptions and transmitting them to people in imitation of the way Kunlun had been raised. This past millennium and more, if the mortal commoners had been able to overcome the greedy cultivators, the spiritual mountains would have fallen long ago. It wouldn't have taken this long.

And the shed skin masters were obviously also unreliable.

At present, even if all the presentable shed skins assembled here, they couldn't cut down all the reincarnation wood trees in the world in a short time. Once the hidden bones got hold of all the ancient inscriptions, then never mind the shed skins, even the full moon sages coming back from the dead wouldn't be able to turn the situation around!

Holding the Unbound Furnace's furnace flame, which was growing weaker and weaker, Xi Ping burned with anxiety. He lost confidence in himself, suspecting that he had been knocked dizzy by the ancient inscriptions coming at him without warning and hadn't understood san-ge's intentions; he had carried out some earlier step wrong, missed his one chance.

Zhi Xiu and a crowd of shed skins arrived hard upon each other's heels. They hadn't been slow, but the whole Xia River was filled with reincarnation wood trees. The ancient inscriptions flashing over the surface of the water one after another were like the lanterns on either side of the Lingyang River.

Before Zhi Xiu arrived, a beam of sword light from Zhaoting flew out, scooping up Lin Chi and Wen Fei.

Xuanwu scolded, "Bold monster." The strength of a shed skin swept the whole Xia River. His curved blade, like a full moon, made a streak of ghastly pale light. The reincarnation wood trees outside the

Law Breaker withered and died in swaths. But at the same time, the light of his blade also delineated the spiritual energy prohibition line, running faster than a Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon. The speed of the Law Breaker's spiritual energy prohibition line's retreat was completely unaffected by the reincarnation wood forest. It seemed to be mocking him.

Zhaoting held up Wen Fei's fan, which had nearly been capsized by the shed skin spiritual energy. He landed beside his own people. "How is it? Where is Shiyong?"

"That... th-that fucking old—old boy toy Xuanwu, is he helping or messing around!" Wen Fei struggled to find his footing and spoke hastily: "O-over there! Y-you can even hear his q-qin!"

Zhi Xiu looked in the direction he was pointing. Across the distance of all of Tao County, with the senses of a shed skin, the tree Xi Ping was temporarily residing in was right before his eyes. Seen from above, the surging spiritual energy prohibition line was charging at that tree like the tide.

Even if the sky fell and the earth cracked, the East Sea overturned... or all the shed skin masters around him collectively lost their minds, Zhaoting could strive to bar the way—whether god or demon, he only needed to know where to strike.

But who could bar the way to all the greed in the world?

The millennia-old spiritual mountains had rotted like this.

CHAPTER 238 - Conclusion (6)

But General Zhi was accustomed to being a pillar of strength, not looking around while wielding his sword. However much of a loss he was at, he didn't show it. He quickly averted his gaze, composed his mind, and found something he could do—

Zhaoting froze the Xia River after Xuanwu had cleaned it up and quickly carved the Law Breaker's inscriptions on it.

As soon as a shed skin stepped in, the spiritual energy prohibition line immediately slowed. The other shed skin masters no longer had the leisure to wrangle over whether the "Law Breaker" was evil or not. All the shed skins here apart from Zhi Xiu and Wu Lingxiao represented their nation's spiritual mountains. In this moment, all grudges and resentments were at an end. Including Kunlun's Sect Leader, who had gone half out of his mind, the masters fell into unprecedented unity: nothing must happen to the spiritual mountains.

Several inscriptions from the hands of shed skins took shape in rapid succession, and the racing spiritual energy prohibition line, like a wild horse towed by a rope, stagnated. People inside and outside the Law Breaker simultaneously breathed a sigh of relief and fell silent on both sides of the spiritual energy prohibition line.

After a long while, Kunlun's Third Elder at last broke the hush. "The ancient inscriptions have come into the world, and chaos has arisen. Even if today's troubles are resolved, vile ambition has everywhere slipped its reins. What course is the orthodoxy of the immortal mountains to follow?"

With a bitter smile, Zhi Xiu said, "The elder is taking the long view—but oughtn't we to put out the fire that's about to burn off our eyebrows? Today's troubles have yet to be resolved. While I was on

the way here, Zisheng disseminated the Law Breaker's inscriptions to the Kaiming Department and Heaven's Design Pavilion, but you all know my country's situation. There are practically only half-immortals who haven't established foundations left in the outer sects..."

The Third Elder took his hint. He glanced at his Sect Leader, whose soul had gone wandering, and sighed. "Yes, we will take it upon ourselves to restrain our sect's disciples."

Having said this, he formed a Linked Heart in his hand and sent it back to the Kunlun Mountains in the capacity of an elder's order, forbidding the sect's disciples from propagating the ancient inscriptions. Lingyun's Sect Leader naturally followed suit.

But when they had issued their orders, the Third Elder and Lingyun's Sect Leader's gazes met; then each quickly looked away. Evidently they were both well aware that these orders were merely self-consolation. The results were likely to be negligible.

Walking a centuries-long road of cultivation in an instant, established foundation ants ranking among the clouds in the blink of an eye—with the road to heaven ahead, how many people could stand the test?

With enemies everywhere striding up to heaven in a single step, if you alone scrupulously abided by orders, apart from proving that you were a fool who couldn't adapt to changing circumstances, what other benefit could it have for the world?

Xuanwu knew the weak characters of everyone in Sanyue and didn't bother taking useless measures. He grimly fixed his eyes on Tao County. The curved blade in his hand rose and fell, slashing at the reincarnation wood tree where Xi Ping was hidden: finishing off the hidden bones within a short time was no longer feasible; if he could finish off Xi Ping here, the portion of the ancient inscriptions that the

hidden bones had lost would never come to light. That boy was bad news, anyway.

Lin Chi gave a cry of alarm.

Zhi Xiu's hand went to Zhaoting's hilt, but then he recalled something and held himself back from drawing the sword—indeed, as soon as Xuanwu's mountain-cleaving blow entered the line of the spiritual energy prohibition, it was wafted apart, making only a shallow groove half a chi deep in the ground.

Xi Ping held the flame of the Unbound Furnace, which had nearly gone out earlier, in both hands. He saw Lin Chi stir. "What now?"

"Xuanwu tried to attack you," said Lin Chi, "but luckily..."

"Luckily, my ass," Xi Ping interrupted him. "If that old pretty boy could shatter my consciousness before the hidden bones get to it, I'd kneel and kowtow to him right now, and to that bald disciple of his along with him! Lin-shishu, I'm not trying to rush you... *hss...*"

Midway through speaking, Xi Ping's spiritual sense suddenly moved. This time it wasn't a sense of danger. Rather, it felt like someone very closely connected to him was repeatedly speaking of him with a cultivator's methods, but for some reason, he couldn't immediately seize on the source.

Meanwhile, Yao Qi and Chang Jun, guided by Wei Chengxiang, had smoothly found the South Sea Hidden Realm. Before they could gasp in astonishment that such a place should exist, the two half-immortals received upgraded immortal tools from the Turmoilers who had stayed back to stand guard and were sent on their way. Screened by an ascended spirit grade upgraded immortal tool, Yao Qi carefully drew a tracking talisman with Xi Ping's blood.

As the strokes fell and the talisman took shape, Yao Qi and Chang Jun held their breaths. The lines of blood on the talisman flowed slowly, pointing the way for the two of them.

“All right, we have a direction.” Chang Jun took out a new Heavenly Question, wrote up his message, and sent it. “We’ll wait here for the masters... Wait, what does this mean?”

The blood on the talisman gave off a milky glare. The blood turned to dust.

“Someone is using a technique on Shiyong’s body,” Yao Qi said. “If I remember rightly, white light means treating wounds...”

Before he could finish, a red glow appeared over the “friendly” white light. The ominous red glow nearly fused with the blood the talisman was drawn in. Yao Qi’s voice cut off.

“Somehow I don’t think this red is for a wedding,” said Chang Jun.

The red glow grew stronger and stronger, “flowing” from the talisman like water. When it fell to the ground, it spread and solidified into a bright red mirror. In the mirror, a pair of odd-colored eyes suddenly appeared, seeming to be looking at the two of them through the talisman. Yao Qi and Chang Jun jumped, stepping back simultaneously.

But under cover of the ascended spirit grade immortal tool, Wangge Luobao’s three successive attempts at inspecting Xi Ping’s body turned up nothing unusual. He grumbled in the Miah language, then went off to continue being paranoid. Only then did Yao Qi and Chang Jun get a clear look at Xi Ping’s surroundings... Xi Ping’s body was floating in water, suspended, causing ripples when he swayed slightly. In the waves, countless slender spiritual threads seemed to be reflected, like some inscription.

Yao Qi and Chang Jun's eyes met. Chang Jun said, "What the hell is that place? He's not trying to make some kind of pill out of Shiyong, is he? Are... are we still going to wait for the masters?"

"By the time any masters get here, he'll be almost fully cooked." Yao Qi grit his teeth and looked around—the Turmoilers couldn't speak well, but they certainly had no hidden selfish designs. The upgraded immortal tools had come from Tai Sui and Wei-laoban. When Wei Chengxiang had issued a request, they had generously given whatever was useful to Wei-laoban's friends. Yao Qi took a deep breath and hung all the upgraded immortal tools he could carry on himself. "With these, who isn't an ascended spirit? Let's go!"

Yao Qi's expectations had been right. Before their Heavenly Question could even reach Wei Chengxiang, the masters were ready to come to blows.

Zhi Xiu's expression was slightly grave. "Elder Xuanwu, what are you doing?"

"If that disciple of yours has any conscience left, he ought to take the initiative to finish himself off."

"The way he cultivates is special. With his consciousness separated from his body now, even if he detonates his essence, it will only be letting the hidden bones have their way. His consciousness can only be destroyed by outside forces," Zhi Xiu said. "If Elder Xuanwu has some means of entering and destroying his consciousness, I invite you to enlighten me. The disciple of my Flying Jade Peak is willing to make the sacrifice for the sake of the world."

Xuanwu clenched his teeth with a click: with the Law Breaker unbroken, there were only mortals inside the spiritual energy prohibition line. He couldn't get rid of that "Tai Sui" and his loquacious qin; and once the Law Breaker was broken, the hidden

bones would obtain the ancient inscriptions ahead of any of them... because that qin was sealed inside a reincarnation wood tree!

Apart from quarreling brothers and idle leeches who forced women into marriage, the Sanyue Mountains' remaining specialty product was schemers. For a moment, judging others by his own standards, Xuanwu suspected that Xi Ping had sealed the qin in the tree deliberately from the start. He glared hatefully at Zhi Xiu. "What an excellent disciple you've turned out!"

"Yes, elder, it shames me." Zhi Xiu cupped his hands gently and perfunctorily. "You're perfectly right, I am far inferior in that regard."

Xuanwu: "..."

In fact, Zhi Xiu really didn't mean anything by this, he just wasn't in the mood to show off his discoursing skills for the benefit of an old fool who had been alive over a thousand years; he had only been trying to put an end to the spat however he could. While, thanks to his busybody disciple, he had heard the tittle-tattle from the Sanyue Mountains, it had after all been most of a decade. Even when he had nothing else to do, Zhi Xiu still didn't have the refined habit of subscribing to toilet bulletins and wagging his tongue. The tangle of grievances between Xuanwu and his brilliant disciple hadn't come to mind, and he had jabbed Xuanwu right where it hurt.

Zhi Xiu only realized what he had said when Xuanwu slashed furiously at him. He parried the blow and simply had no idea how to respond—seriously?!

"Elder Xuanwu, have you no sense of priority?"

Xuanwu was relentless, his curved blade nearly drawing a full moon. Zhi Xiu didn't want to engage in senseless battle and didn't fight back. When he dodged, he suddenly realized that the look in

Xuanwu's eyes was wrong: Xuanwu's eyes, always somewhat cold, didn't seem as calm as usual; they were dimly clouded by madness.

Yes, his impulsive strike at Tao County just now had been a little off.

Zhi Xiu immediately realized: apart from him, the shed skins of the immortal mountains all shared their minds with the spiritual mountains. With the spiritual mountains at a dead end, the shed skins who were normally mysterious or mature and cool-headed would be affected, each one becoming irritable and impulsive!

And just then, the spiritual prohibition line that the shed skins working together had stopped moved again.

This wasn't hard to understand. There were only so many shed skins representing the will of the spiritual mountains in the world, and they were it; their cultivation levels had all reached the pinnacle. But the cultivators being used by the hidden bones and using the bones to broaden their essences were becoming more and more numerous, and their cultivation levels were constantly increasing as they replicated the inscriptions.

"Elder Xuanwu," said Zhi Xiu, "if you still have strength to spare, you might as well go stop those people spreading the ancient inscriptions for their own personal gain."

Wu Lingxiao was disinclined to devote her strength to the Law Breaker's inscriptions. She stood by watching with her hands in her sleeves. Coldly, she spat out a sentence in the Northern Li language: "If we can't resolve this, then let's first finish off the people who have shown themselves to be incompetent."

Xuanwu's icy gaze shot toward her.

Wu Lingxiao hadn't spared him an extra glance with her pitch-dark eye sockets to begin with. Her gaze, like a flame from the

netherworld, only stabbed at Kunlun's Sect Leader. "So the inscriptions on those trees are the reason that my shifu had to die? Ha—the orthodoxy of the immortal mountains, with secrets unfit for the light of day, and if you see them you'll be silenced... What, is there a scandal at the roots of the immortal mountains? In his whole life, my shizun, regardless of merit and demerit or right and wrong, toward Kunlun, toward Great Li, was nothing but sincerely loyal from the bottom of his heart. Even I know that. And you don't believe it?"

The Third Elder dryly attempted to smooth over the situation: "Lingxiao, this isn't the time to speak of..."

But Kunlun's Sect Leader was slightly shaken. For a moment, a thought flashed through his mind: "If Lanze knew that she had said such a thing..."

The heart demon seed, which had calmed temporarily due to the disappearance of the Ceaseless Mirror, once again seized on his flicker of weakness. In the facets of the heart demon that had taken root in his spirit, the meaning behind his own words was reflected.

When he thought of the Second Elder, he only felt infinitely forlorn. No matter what, he couldn't remember how he could have brought himself to kill him.

The heart demon and the despairing will of the spiritual mountains pulled at him from both sides. There was thunder inside the Kunlun Sect Leader's head. And Wu Lingxiao still wouldn't let him off.

She pushed forward aggressively. *She* didn't care what happened to the spiritual mountains—the deceitful heavens were fucking welcome to fall if they liked. Everything in creation had its end; why should the spiritual mountains be able to remain eternal?

"Actually, you believe it, too, you're just playing dumb. Tell the truth, shibo. They were saying back then that if Wanshuang were ever to

take a master, only the Second Elder with his surpassing talents would be worthy of it. I think that's why you hated him, out of jealousy. You were clearly just waiting for an opportunity to get rid of him, but you still insist on giving yourself some high-sounding excuse.”

The Third Elder heard something wrong in the sound of her voice and immediately came forward and drew his sword. He prepared to block Wanshuang, swinging at the Sect Leader. “Wu Lingxiao!”

Lingyun's Sect Leader couldn't resist putting in a word: “Everyone, everyone—”

No one heeded him.

Since Ancestor Tianbo had departed, with the Xiuyi supercilious and the Miah ignorant, Lingyun hadn't been able to hold its head up on the southern continent at all. For over a thousand years, not one person of stupendous talents had come out of the Lingyun Spiritual Mountains at the edge of the South Sea, whether orthodox or evil. Foreign cultivators all privately referred to them with contempt as “farmers.” When their spiritual mountains had been damaged as the result of internal strife, they had really become the laughingstock of the other sects.

With discontented spiritual mountains stirring up an already unsteady mind, Lingyun's Sect Leader was at the end of his endurance. On impulse, he pulled out his beast-taming flute and blew a blast on it. The sharp flute music of a master of the way of beast-taming could make a whole spiritual beast farm's worth of spiritual beasts bend their heads. The consciousnesses of all the shed skins present were violently shaken by that blast.

But Lingyun's Sect Leader had forgotten that there were also two innocent ascended spirits present. He knew that his cultivation gave him absolutely no advantage among those of the same grade as

him, and he had wanted to make everyone listen to him, so he hadn't held anything back in playing that note.

Whatever else he was, he was still a shed skin. The fan beneath Wen Fei's feet instantly cracked, and blood trickled from his ears. Lin Chi's mind was entirely inside the Unbound Furnace. When he was disturbed by the unexpected note of the beast-taming flute, the Unbound Furnace slipped right out of his hands.

Good-tempered as Zhi Xiu was, he still bristled. This crowd of fools only knows how to make things worse, he thought. Zhaoting showed no more mercy, shaking a crack into Xuanwu's round blade. He forced Xuanwu to retreat with a single blow, swept Lingyun's Sect Leader away with the backwash of the sword wind, and caught Lin Chi.

But he only had time to catch him; he couldn't reach the Unbound Furnace.

When Lingyun's Sect Leader was swept away, he just happened to block Wu Lingxiao's path. That overbearing Sword Slave, mad enough to scour heaven and earth, pushed him aside with her sword, and he happened to collide with the Unbound Furnace.

As one would have expected, the item left behind by the ancient demonic god of the eternal spring brocade was no ordinary object. It withstood the collision, but the body of the furnace fell over. The fire inside the furnace, which there hadn't been time to put out, drew in the spiritual energy around it and rolled up right behind Kunlun's Sect Leader.

With Wanshuang crashing down upon his head, the Sect Leader, being torn apart by his heart demon, hastily raised his sword to parry but was a little too slow. In a panic, the Third Elder quickly pushed the Unbound Furnace toward him. The enormous body of

the furnace enveloped the Sect Leader and blocked Wanshuang's blow.

Xi Ping had just gotten halfway through talking with Lin Chi when he heard that the spiritual energy prohibition line had once again taken off. Before he could ask Zhao Qindan what the precise situation was, Lin Chi's consciousness suddenly vanished from the furnace fire, and Kunlun's Sect Leader fell in.

Xi Ping: "..."

What were the ancestors outside up to?!

A sword cultivator lacked the toolmaking way's "seventh sense," so one's consciousness naturally couldn't connect to the materials inside a toolmaking furnace, unless he did what the Sanyue Mountains' presumptuous Xiang Rong had done—made himself the "material" in the furnace.

Kunlun's Sect Leader instantly saw himself in the furnace fire... saw his wound-riddled Way of the Heart huddled on his spirit, and on that spirit, the heart demon growing rampant.

Strangely, he actually felt relieved.

He thought that, having with his own hands killed his fellow sect member and shidi, who had asked him to watch his back, it was only right and fitting that he should be pinioned by a heart demon. Had he been able to assign himself a punishment, perhaps he would have chosen something more severe.

In that moment, this shed skin ancestor could have easily escaped the Unbound Furnace, but he couldn't resist taking a step inward. He couldn't say why; perhaps he wanted to have a look at his heart demon... to see the Second Elder again, who had died unjustly outside the Beijue Mountains.

“Sect Leader shixiong!” The Third Elder’s voice came from outside the Unbound Furnace.

“Everyone stop!” That must be that sword cultivator junior from the Xuanyin Mountains.

“Get the hell out here and give my shifu justice—”

That was Wu Lingxiao.

Kunlun’s Sect Leader turned a deaf ear to it all. He drew near as though entranced. Then he saw that the heart demon on his spirit, beside his Way of the Heart, wasn’t Zhu Lanze.

Just as the Southern Sage had seen in the den of the demon host that he had become the puppet of the spiritual mountains, Kunlun’s Sect Leader saw in the Unbound Furnace the Second Elder’s true murderer.

“It wasn’t me...” This thought came out of nowhere. With a crack, the most ancient Way of the Heart in existence broke.

In that moment, a portion of the Kunlun Sect Leader’s mind suddenly cleared. He remembered his own name, which no one had called him for a thousand years.

His surname was also Wu, personal name Guang, courtesy name Boren.

This name had become a yellowing page in a history book, as if the person who had been known by that name were already dead. Like his shizun the Sword Ancestor, like the Southern Sage and the others, he had long ago become an empty title.

With the Way of the Heart that had fettered and blinded him for a thousand years breaking, he glanced out of the Unbound Furnace, then found that he had no one worth warning, no last words to leave behind. It had been a long time since he had had anything to say to this world.

In that moment, fortune smiled upon Wu Boren's resourcefulness. He did the same thing Xiang Rong had once done inside the Unbound Furnace. In the furnace flame, he quickly formed the Law Breaker inscriptions he had obtained from Lin Chi, and fused his Way of the Heart with the furnace flame—

Xiang Rong had used the Unbound Furnace to remake his Way of the Heart into a copy of the Black Emperor's, and after successfully reaching a full moon position, he had disappeared into the Sanyue Mountains. As the Black Emperor's direct disciple, Xiang Rong's Way of the Heart had followed in a continuous line from the Black Emperor's. It had only needed to be partially altered. Therefore, when he had left the Unbound Furnace, he had still been able to hop around for a while. But the Kunlun Sect Leader's original Way of the Heart was incompatible with the Law Breaker. When he fused the two together, he was immediately destroyed.

But the nearly extinguished furnace flame in Xi Ping's hands instantly grew to more than the height of a person, and the Law Breaker's spiritual energy prohibition line was restored in the blink of an eye to the original boundaries of Tao County and even continued to expand past them, enveloping even the shed skins on the Xia River, who didn't have time to get out of the way.

Apart from Wen Fei, who had just fallen, and Zhi Xiu, who had landed so he could catch Lin Chi, the others tumbled down out of the sky like kites with their strings snapped.

CHAPTER 239 - Conclusion (7)

When the feeling of heaviness he hadn't known for over two centuries came over him, Zhi Xiu, as one of the few present who was still lucid, gestured at Wen Fei, then picked up Lin Chi, who had been shaken into a daze by the flute.

The three of them raced toward the bank of the Xia River, the same weird doubt arising simultaneously in their minds—did it really take so much effort to move human legs?

Just as they reached the shore, they heard an ominous crack from behind. Zhi Xiu turned and tossed the “frail scholar” Master Lin onto the shore and reached back to grab Wen Fei.

The Xia River had been forced to freeze by spiritual energy. As soon as the spiritual energy dissipated, the ice rapidly broke apart. Wen Fei had one foot on a big ice floe. Tugging on Zhi Xiu's hand to give himself momentum, he executed a breathtaking “flight” onto the muddy bank.

His ascended spirit's spiritual energy was gone, but the weight of his spiritual bones remained. Though Zhi Xiu was a trained warrior, he still involuntarily let out a gasp. His shoulder was dislocated, as if he had just smashed through a boulder.

The river thawed, and the bewildered shed skins were collectively dunked in for a “winter swim.”

“N-never fear, th-the doctor's here!” Having said this, without waiting for the “patient” to consent, Wen Fei unilaterally rolled up his sleeves and pressed down on Zhi Xiu's shoulder, pushing the dislocated joint back into place. His stuttering didn't get in the way of him blowing his own horn. “Hey, my skills, they're... they're really smooth. It's—it's been years since I used them.”

As a sword cultivator, bumps and bruises were a common occurrence for Zhi Xiu. He didn't think anything of minor injuries. But his "good neighbor" nearly knocked him over with his bear's paw. He bit back a cry of pain: how many heads of cattle had Wen Fenghan killed with his doctoring before he was forced into changing his career?!

"J-jingzhai, l-l-l-look there!"

Icy wind came at them off the river. The spiritual energy prohibition line had already crossed the Xia River, making straight for Great Wan's Yuzhou. Trapped in the ponderous mortal world, his senses and consciousness limited, Zhi Xiu didn't see at once where the spiritual energy prohibition line had reached. He only felt the surroundings become so silent they seemed to lack civilization.

Only the Unbound Furnace was floating steadily in midair. The overturned body of the furnace had at some point righted itself. It was as if it were offering up a furnace of incense for the universe.

For a time, the only sounds to be heard on both sides of the Xia River were the water flowing and the ice crackling. No one had realized yet what had happened.

After a long while, the Unbound Furnace at last slowly descended. The Third Elder, who had climbed up the bank with difficulty, stumbled forward. He took one look into the furnace and fell to his knees.

The furnace fire was crystal clear. Kunlun's Sect Leader and the most ancient Way of the Heart in the world had disappeared together, as if they had never been.

The Luwu had gone deathly still for a moment when the sudden change occurred. Then information passed through the flying goose

machines, converging on Tao County from all directions—

“The spiritual energy prohibition line has passed Yu Family Bend!”

“The spiritual energy prohibition line has covered all of Chu’s Lingdong County...”

“Talismans and arrays have stopped working in Great Wan’s Yuzhou...”

“The spiritual energy prohibition line has stopped at Qingling in Guzhou. It’s reached the South Sea.”

“The spiritual energy prohibition suddenly expanded six hundred li. What happened?” Zhao Qindan asked.

Xi Ping was the sole eyewitness in the world to what had happened in the Unbound Furnace. Now, everyone wanted to ask him: What happened?

The Tai Sui Qin was absolutely still. Xi Ping was silent, facing the flickering flame of the Unbound Furnace in a daze inside the Law Breaker.

In fact, during the chaotic battle over the Lancang Mountains, he had already dimly guessed where the Kunlun Sect Leader’s heart demon pointed. It had been no surprise to see that most ancient shed skin Way of the Heart go to pieces—since Zhou Ying had used himself as bait and planted a heart demon in the foremost master in the world, Xi Ping had known that that old Sect Leader’s fate would most likely be the same as Zhao Yin’s.

But... it seemed that it also hadn’t been all that similar.

Zhao Yin had remained muddled to the last. Killed by the heart demon and his own obsession, he had brought destruction upon

others in his death throes, making Xi Ping's shifu use up the sword attack he had spent five years saving up to wipe his ass for him.

But Kunlun's Sect Leader Wu had been lucid—perhaps he had never been so lucid since establishing a foundation and entering the cultivation world.

In the end, he had seen through the heart demon, let the heart demon and his Way of the Heart perish together, finding himself an appropriate ending.

When the spiritual energy prohibition line had been almost in front of him, Xi Ping had interrogated Lin Chi a hundred eighty times: what was there that could replenish the Law Breaker?

In fact, there had been no need to force Lin Chi to come up with an answer. He ought to have known the answer long ago.

He had seen with his own eyes how Xiang Rong had dissolved into the Sanyue Mountains, becoming a “complete restorative pill” for the spiritual mountains. And the Law Breaker... had been made on the model of the spiritual mountains.

When the Lancang Spiritual Mountains had been faced with destruction, they had chosen to sever their own veins of the earth, preferring to become the southern mines if it meant their own preservation. Now, all the great spiritual mountains were tottering on the verge of collapse. They were desperate enough to risk anything. What orders would they give those shed skins who were nominally “sages” but were in reality puppets on strings? If Kunlun's Sect Leader hadn't fallen into the Unbound Furnace, it would have been someone else.

Each range of spiritual mountains had shed skins. Though the hidden bones had obtained the ancient inscriptions, ultimately, they hadn't passed the shed skin boundary. Facing the spiritual

mountains, the hidden bones might be said to be evenly matched—the reasoning here was very simple; it was the same as Xi Ping on the Southern He Peninsula using the Lancang Mountains to play a little trick on the Sword Slave.

With his smattering of cultivation, Zhou Ying might not have been able to draw a talisman as skillfully as a disciple who had yet to graduate from the Latent Cultivation Temple. The only two trump cards he possessed—the heart demon seed and the power to turn into mist—he had left to Xi Ping before disappearing in the Ceaseless Mirror. Apart from this, the things he could do himself were very limited. Lately, it had practically all been him tossing out requests for Xi Ping to carry out.

While he was testing the boundaries of the human world, practically all his conjectures had passed through Xi Ping’s hands to be verified. In the situation he had left behind, all the useful means and resources ought to have been more familiar to Xi Ping than to Zhou Ying himself.

But it was only... ”ought to have.”

In front of the flame of the Unbound Furnace, taller than a person, Xi Ping didn’t breathe a sigh of relief. His heart slowly sank.

Xi Ping in fact had no Way of the Heart to break, but neither was he a way of clarity cultivator, without feeling or desire.

Up to now, he had faced the truth concerning Ways of the Heart alone and had thought he had known what there was to know, but actually he had all along been unwilling to face it: his teachers and friends, apart from A-Xiang and the young mistress and the other juniors, practically all had Ways of the Heart.

A “bad Way of the Heart” shattered at a glimpse of the abyss; did that mean that a “good Way of the Heart” could be concerned only

with itself?

Moreover, separating Ways of the Heart into good and bad had been only his way of lying to himself.

He had pushed Lin Chi out of the Unbound Furnace at the bottom of the Sea of Stars and in speech deliberately differentiated his hidden bones from a Way of the Heart, as if a person being at odds with their Way of the Heart was an exception limited to him alone—

He had pretended that he had only to keep the world at peace, plan well enough to deal fairly with both orthodox and evil, both immortal and mortal, and the people he cared about would all be safe and sound; pretended that as long as Xi Yue didn't accept his "ungovernable way," which forced you into lucidity, he would be able to continue on forever like the true "immortal" he yearned to be, grow up to be a sage who wasn't a sham.

As long as the flowers of Jinping didn't wither and the fire in the little cottage on Flying Jade Peak still roasted pine nuts and chestnuts, he was willing to dress up in colorful clothes for the amusement of his family, let his mother and her maids paint him with nail polish that couldn't be washed off for three days, willing to plant flowers and weed the soil and get covered in mud, finish sweeping the snow before repairing the roof; he was willing to walk over mountains of swords and seas of fire, be crushed to dust... even though by nature he was a rich kid who shirked hard work and stuck to easy work, with unremarkable abilities.

Kunlun's Sect Leader had sacrificed himself to the furnace, and the spiritual energy prohibition line had expanded six hundred li. The hidden bones wouldn't leave it at that. The spiritual mountains wouldn't sit back and wait for death. This was only the beginning.

Those who had a Way of the Heart would not come to a good end, no matter how limpid, how aloof that Way of the Heart might be.

It had never been he alone who had taken the wrong path.

“Xi... Tai Sui?” Not hearing a response from him for a long time, Zhao Qindan had sensed something ominous from Xi Ping’s unusual silence.

A few notes flew from the Tai Sui Qin inside the tree: *Send cars.*

Zhao Qindan raised her eyebrows. She thought she had heard wrong.

The shed skins of the various sects are beside the Xia River. Immediately clear a path and find them. Send cars, the fastest steamships, the Cloud...no, the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon won't work, the rails wouldn't have stood up to the strain, they must all have snapped, Xi Ping quickly said. Send them out of the spiritual energy prohibition line, the faster the better. The hidden bones have temporarily been swept away by the spiritual energy prohibition line and lost six hundred li of reincarnation wood trees. They're certain to take this opportunity to attack those spiritual mountains. Hurry!

Making them go put down rebellions, face reincarnation wood trees directly and chop them down, would be better than having the spiritual mountains, cutting off their tails in their bid for survival, treat them as those “tails.”

His shifu, Lin Chi, and Wen Fei were all there. Almost in a panic, Xi Ping thought, Don't look into the Unbound Furnace, don't look into the Unbound Furnace—

But upgraded immortal tools were new and had primarily been supplied to Southern Wan's defenders without established foundations to use against foreign enemies. The large quantity of hastily made tools had all been artillery or shields. The number of upgraded cars and ships was very limited. Tao County, a foreign

locale where deliveries of spiritual stones were inconvenient, hadn't been equipped.

Everything outside the spiritual energy prohibition line had been taken over by reincarnation wood. The troops and the Luwu had been in constant retreat. There was no one left in the area of the Xia River. For masters who could fly through the sky and burrow into the earth, Xi Ping was in arm's reach from the bank of the Xia River. Now that spiritual energy had been prohibited, it would take much longer for cars and horses to get there—especially since motor cars needed good roads, and the roads had all been smashed by Xuanwu when he had lost his temper earlier.

But the hidden bones were unwilling to wait for them. While the masters were trapped inside the spiritual energy prohibition, just as Xi Ping had expected, they abandoned vast tracts of reincarnation wood forest, allowed the reincarnation wood trees that had seized territory everywhere to wither, and concentrated their attack on the spiritual mountains.

The first to be swallowed by the reincarnation wood and the ancient inscriptions were the Lingyun Mountains, of which only half remained.

During the Dragon Boat Festival, Xi Ping had snuck into the Lingyun Mountains, just in time for the sudden change in the evil cultivators' meeting. For ease of movement, he had left behind some reincarnation wood seeds at the feet of the Lingyun Mountains in the spiritual beast farm and the spiritual fields. He hadn't expected that after this Southern Shu would sink into slaughter and civil strife, everyone would be on edge, and to this day no one would have cleaned up the reincarnation wood seeds.

Lingyun's Sect Leader was already mediocre enough, and the shed skin elder he had left to watch the house, having lost the great mountain array, certainly couldn't hold the line. Though Wangge

Luobao had sent orders, he was taking a long time to show himself. The Miah cultivators, with no one to restrain them, had gone out of control after discovering the “wondrous effects” of the ancient inscriptions. The Xiuyi caught up soon after, unwilling to take this lying down. At the feet of the Lingyun Mountains, the Ways of the Heart of common origin struggled with all their might to send “heavenly edicts” to the orthodox cultivators. These voices that struck straight at a cultivator’s spiritual sense had previously succeeded in every endeavor, but now they were being covered up by the multiplying ancient inscriptions.

The ancient inscriptions manipulated the cultivators into killing each other and ruthlessly plundered the spiritual energy of the Lingyun Mountains. The reincarnation wood’s growth hastened. In the blink of an eye, it had covered the whole Lingyun Mountain Range.

Southern Shu’s spiritual veins were completely severed by the reincarnation wood. Li Manlong and the others watched as the battle, which had stabilized earlier, took an alarming steep decline. A certain... certain deathliness exceedingly familiar to the Turmoilers spread through Southern Shu’s peninsula and the Three Islands. Everywhere came the moans of spiritual beasts who seemed to be dying.

The Sanyue Mountains were hardly doing any better. When Yu Chang returned to his senses after his momentary impulse, he had already involuntarily used the ancient inscriptions to drain the essences of a dozen people. He couldn’t remember at first how he had charged up. He only felt that his essence was unprecedentedly abundant, and he was as worked up as though he were running a fever.

This was wrong...

Yu Chang, who had spent centuries struggling against the spiritual image brand that ran counter to his convictions, wasn’t pleased; he

was alarmed. Out of nowhere, he recalled the Queen Mother of the West's condition. He looked all around and saw on the faces of both friend and enemy cultivators alike an inexpressible frenzy, each person forgetting themselves as they duplicated the ancient inscriptions. The originally invisible ancient inscriptions were gradually emerging on the ground and climbing all over the mountains.

A rumble. Half of the colossal statue of the Black Emperor slid down.

And Northern Li's Kunlun had been born through the ancient inscriptions to begin with. The ancient inscriptions brought by the hidden bones were irresistible here and easily covered the Kunlun Spiritual Mountains, nearly frozen by the cold wind from the Beiyuan Plains.

The Blind Wolf King's former subordinates at the Beijue Mountain Pass, including the Snow Wolf dreaming his eternal dreams of being the "master of Posuo Palace," had turned into ice sculptures the instant that the ancient inscriptions had entered the human world. Now that fatal wintry wind was already pressing upon the regions inhabited by mortals. People had just finished packing their bags to flee the disaster. Some didn't even make it out the gate before they were frozen in their tracks.

And with Zhi Xiu trapped in the spiritual energy prohibition, the reincarnation wood in the Territory Map immediately lost anyone to suppress it.

The karma beast gave a sudden wail. Pang Jian abruptly turned his head and saw his old companion struggle fiercely a few times as if trapped by something, and the avatar that had accompanied them disappeared. Pang Jian had no time to pass into the wall to go in search of it before a Heavenly Question crashed into his arms. At the same time, he felt the earth quake.

Xi Yue, left by his elders on Flying Jade Peak, suddenly opened his eyes from meditation. The thirty-six peaks shuddered, the Grand Canal burst its banks, and monstrous vines reached out from underground and tore at Jinping's dragon vein.

Flying goose signals from all over broke off. The machines constantly clicking around Zhao Qindan went deathly silent—

The shed skins trapped inside the spiritual energy prohibition were now like mortals, working blind.

Xuanwu sat on an abandoned damaged boat in the Xia River. His eyes seemed to have been frozen by the icy waters of the river. The snow white irises were blank. He glanced at the Unbound Furnace and in a peculiar tone slowly said, "So—the evil object left behind by the evil cultivator Hui Xiangjun has pointed the way for us: to sacrifice people to her furnace?"

Lin Chi blurted out, "She wasn't an evil cultivator."

But Xuanwu seemed not to hear. He had absolutely no reaction to this junior who dared to talk back.

In some agitation, Lingyun's Sect Leader asked, "So what now? Sect Leader Wu has sacrificed himself to the furnace. That means the tribulation is over, right?"

Everyone ignored him.

As a sword-bearing half-puppet, Wu Lingxiao's human body was incomplete. She was practically paralyzed now. It was Zhi Xiu who, on account of Wanshuang, found a damaged boat and, pooling his efforts with Wen Fei, fished her out with a fishing net.

It was even harder for her to speak. She stared at the Unbound Furnace in bewilderment. “What did he see in the furnace? Why would he want to smelt himself?”

Had he gone crazy?

His crime had been exposed, and it couldn't be denied?

Just then, she heard the Third Elder say in an almost solemn voice, “We inherited the way of the sage who came before us. It is natural and appropriate for us to meet death for the sake of the world. What is strange about it?”

Wu Lingxiao sneered. “Ha!”

But she soon found that apart from her, no one laughed—not even Xuanwu with his customary moodiness.

Within the spiritual energy prohibition line, individual cultivators who were careless about training their bodies might not even have been able to win a fight against a dog. It was a place where all ghosts and gods tumbled into the mundane dust, and the shed skin masters now were in fact all like chickens who had ended up in the soup. Their hair and beards were in disarray. They were either dripping on the shore or half immersed in the water, bumped and slammed this way and that by ice floes. They might have been said to be entirely without decorum.

But Wu Lingxiao thought that apart from the three from the Xuanyin Mountains, who were as confused as her, all the shed skins present had a certain freakish inhumanity about them.

The Third Elder stood respectfully beside the Unbound Furnace. Even his breathing was almost imperceptibly soft. Xuanwu with his white hair and skin was like a marble statue in the main hall on Sanyue's Principal Peak.

Strangest of all was Lingyun's Sect Leader.

Only half of the Lingyun Mountains remained, and Lingyun's Sect Leader also seemed to have been split in two. Wu Lingxiao found to her horror that his eyes were turning in different directions: one eye was wandering incessantly, showing unspeakable panic, as if he were appealing to someone for help; but the other eye was staring fixedly at the Unbound Furnace.

Lingyun's Sect Leader was muttering: "Moments ago I heard the spiritual beasts within my nation's boundaries had escaped, causing chaos. I ought to go back and take charge..."

But his feet, with unwavering resolution, were taking him with heavy steps toward the Unbound Furnace. The unctuous and flabby Third Elder straightened his hair and clothes and executed a bow northward. Xuanwu seemed to have heard something. He suddenly closed his eyes and sighed. He dove into the water and mechanically swam for the shore... His strokes were more regular than the movement of a pendulum.

Wu Lingxiao had long ago lost all sensation of temperature, but suddenly she shuddered from cold.

Lin Chi, beside the Unbound Furnace, automatically leaned back and nearly fell into the water. He was pulled back by Wen Fei.

Wen Fei ducked straight behind Zhi Xiu, as if a sword cultivator could repel evil. Zhi Xiu was knocked a step forward by him and took the opportunity to raise Zhaoting and bar the Lingyun Sect Leader's way. "The spiritual energy prohibition line has been stabilized. My disciple knows our location, he'll be sending people here at once. We can all discuss what happens next. Senior, don't..."

The Lingyun Sect Leader's neck was stuck straight up. The only eye he could turn spun toward Zhi Xiu. Zhi Xiu's voice stopped.

The Lingyun Sect Leader spat out words in the Shu language one at a time, as if speaking a foreign language: "There's no time, the spiritual mountains..."

The words that followed were vague and indecipherable. With Zhi Xiu's not especially firm grasp of the Shu language, he read the soundless movements of the Lingyun Sect Leader's lips. He seemed to be saying "help." Before he could even break out in gooseflesh, the Lingyun Sect Leader, who could have been knocked flat on his ass by Zhaoting in the presence of spiritual energy, somewhere found monstrous strength. He knocked Zhaoting aside and jumped into the Unbound Furnace like a ghost.

Kunlun's Third Elder, coming after him, mumbled, "We inherited the way of the sage who came before us. It is natural and appropriate for us to meet death for the sake of the world... to meet death for the sake of the world..."

But just then, a scream that scraped up your spine suddenly came from the Unbound Furnace. It seemed lucid to the extreme and despairing to the extreme—

The puppet had learned that he was a puppet and watched his Way of the Heart break, offered up on the altar.

The waters of the Xia River gurgled. The Third Elder's quiet muttering was interrupted for a moment by the scream. He seemed to feel something. Breathly noises came from his throat. He wanted to stop, but he couldn't close his mouth. A warped expression appeared on his face, like crying and like laughter.

"Inherited the way of the sage..."

Gurgle—

“Meet death for the sake of the world...”

Gurgle—

CHAPTER 240 - Conclusion (8)

This time Zhi Xiu was ready. He grabbed the Third Elder.

Given Zhi Xiu's age and generational ranking, he hadn't had any prior opportunity to interact with these ancient Kunlun sword cultivators, and since he had become a shed skin, Kunlun had been an enemy to him. He had no admiration, either, for the strict government decrees and protocols, the isolationism and poverty on the northern continent under Kunlun's rule. His older brother's death was even inextricably tied to this Third Elder. If the Third Elder had been killed by Wanshuang or some other person, Zhi Xiu would have had no objection; if the Third Elder had come at him with his sword raised, he also wouldn't have been unwilling to personally help the senior on his way.

But he couldn't stand by and watch him turn into furnace ash in this hopelessly muddled way.

That a shed skin sword cultivator of the Kunlun Mountains, the northernmost end of the northern continent, with wintry skies and frozen earth, who had wielded a sword hundreds of millions of times amid the snow, should in the end come to such a sorry fate.

Too pitiful...and too tragic.

The sword cultivator of the north was beefy. Zhi Xiu barely managed to hold on. Beside him, Wen Fei mimed a joint being displaced.

Zhi Xiu understood. With a "pardon me," he clamped the arm whose shoulder he had dislocated around the Third Elder's shoulders, meanwhile sweeping out with one foot—

But while the veins on his hand were already raised, he loosened his grip before he could exert strength. Zhi Xiu seemed to have sensed

something. He allowed the Third Elder to struggle free of his arms and throw himself into the Unbound Furnace like a moth throwing itself at a flame.

Since spiritual energy had been prohibited, Lin Chi, the only toolmaking cultivator here, could no longer send his consciousness into the furnace. Xi Ping was left alone inside the furnace flame. Now, he could see others, but they couldn't see him.

The scream of Lingyun's Sect Leader had yet to fade from his ears. That shed skin master of the beast-taming way had died like a waking dragon under Wangge Luobao's control. Xi Ping nearly missed a breath. Then Kunlun's Third Elder also charged into the Unbound Furnace.

There was indescribable despair on the Third Elder's face.

A shed skin sword cultivator was the world's apex of fighting prowess. Whether orthodox or evil, no one dared to say one's name directly or look him in the eye... but now he was blubbering.

Xi Ping instantly averted his gaze. It was as if fine pincers had pinched his heart. This past decade and more, he had become accustomed to separation in life and parting by death. He could accept his grandmother passing away suddenly, quiet and serene, surrounded by her family, and even yearned a little to be able to protect his country eternally like Princess Duanrui. But he couldn't accept a death so wretched and utterly without dignity. Just imagining this repulsive fate falling on anyone he cared about was enough to drive him mad.

Tao County's troops simply used artillery fire to blow away the crooked and slanting reincarnation wood trees. Trucks cleared the way, and the first batch of swift horses raced toward the shore of the Xia River. The Luwu everywhere swiftly swapped out their equipment, once again getting in contact with flying goose

machines. The spiritual energy prohibition line, which had come to a standstill, was racing outward once more.

Enough... enough...

Xi Ping wanted to put out the Unbound Furnace, but while he counted as the master of the furnace flame, the “materials” burning in that furnace far surpassed his cultivation level, and he wasn’t inside the Unbound Furnace himself. There was nothing he could do with the furnace flame.

But the spiritual mountains evidently didn’t think it was enough.

Beside the Xia River, Wen Fei and Lin Chi looked at Zhi Xiu, who had suddenly loosened his grip, with doubt all over their faces.

Zhi Xiu was silent. Just then, someone put in a word: “Even if he hadn’t let go, that old fool’s Way of the Heart would still have shattered. Never mind letting it go to waste, the exploding essence could have leveled both banks of the Xia River.”

It was Xuanwu who had spoken.

Xuanwu had swum here through the icy waters of the Xia River. He was even paler than usual. His dripping wet silvery hair hung loose down his back, as if he were coated with a layer of moonlight, or as if frost had formed on him.

He looked like a living Silver Moon.

“Some people think very highly of themselves once they cross the shed skin boundary and no longer cultivate, such that when it comes to the end, they are still torn apart by selfish desires and make a humiliating spectacle of themselves.”

Zhi Xiu quickly said, “Elder Xuanwu, there is something that perplexes me that I would ask for your instruction on: when you did not stint to bring the Silver Moon down into the mortal world for the sake of pulling the Late-Autumn Red up by the roots and nearly turned Tao County into a no-man’s land, I do not see that you had the least drop of pity for the mortals. But now you are prepared to die for the cause of the so-called ‘people of the world,’ blend your thousand years of cultivation with the Unbound Furnace—the relic of a person you scoff at as an ‘evil cultivator.’ Is there no conflict between your past and current actions?”

Wake up!

Xuanwu turned upon him irises that were the same color as the whites of his eyes, finally giving Zhi Xiu a glance.

Zhi Xiu abruptly shut his mouth—Xuanwu’s eyes were full of haughty pity.

“So as General Zhi sees it, before I was ‘damaging the country and causing suffering to the people,’ and now I am ‘sacrificing myself for the public good,’ and you suspect that I have gone crazy?”

“I would not dare...” Zhi Xiu began.

“Ha! No wonder you were unable to enter the mainstream, no matter how good a sword cultivator you might be.” In a voice so solemn as to be peculiar, Xuanwu said, “*Heaven and earth are impartial. They treat all things as straw dogs.*¹⁰⁶ As long as the Great Way is clear, all living things will naturally each have their places, and blessings and disasters will naturally belong to their fates. I have never diverged in the slightest from the Great Way, yet you wish to pass presumptuous judgment on me from a commonplace perspective. You think you are *bemoaning the state of the universe and pitying the fate of mankind*. How is it any different from *killing the tigers and*

wolves to protect the mice and rabbits, destroying a dam to keep an anthill intact? A nobody looking at the sky from the bottom of a well, reckoning based on enough achievements and experience to fill the bottom of a bottle, still dares to speak of 'orthodox and evil, public and private.' Zhi Xiu, who do you think you are?"

Zhi Xiu had no answer to give. This argument was excessively coherent. He couldn't immediately judge whether Xuanwu was being controlled by the Sanyue Mountains or whether his own boundary was insufficiently high and he was incapable of understanding.

Xuanwu surveyed the three from Xuanyin and Wu Lingxiao. He thought that these people had either mistakenly wound up on wrong roads and failed to live up to their potential, or else their cultivation was meager and their ignorance had yet to be dispelled. They were so stupid that there was no saving them, and anyway it would have been wasting words. So he gave a cold laugh, flicked his sleeves without thought of turning back as he went to his duty, and stepped into the Unbound Furnace.

The furnace flames throwing themselves at his face turned the water clinging to him into vapor. Xuanwu's gaze as he stared at the furnace flame was almost greedy and impatient.

Xiang Rong had also once made a futile attempt to use the Unbound Furnace to become a full moon sage and accord with the Way, but he had only bent his Way of the Heart, forcing it into a shape it did not belong in. Xuanwu had sensed that though afterward the soul of that brother of his had gone into the immortal mountains, the Sanyue Immortal Mountains had not accepted him, or else the Silver Moon would not have taken Xuanwu back—the ridiculous imbecile, losing his head because he was caught at a bottleneck. In cultivation, one always had to reject self at pass after pass, cut away occluding thoughts. How could one take a shortcut like this? It was like a joke.

He was different. Now that the ancient inscriptions had come into the world and the world was in chaos, he could sense that this was the true moment to “accord with the Way.”

The moment that the furnace flame enveloped his Way of the Heart, a feeling of freedom that made him wild with joy surged up in Xuanwu’s heart. He felt his heartbeat unite with the Sanyue Mountains far in Dongheng. From now on, he was the spiritual mountains, and the spiritual mountains were him. The spiritual veins spread all around were his body. The mountains and rivers, the sun and moon were all a thought away for him.

Xi Ping watched in terror as Xuanwu was cloaked in flames, his snow white skin and hair put to the torch, his Way of the Heart melting like a wax candle. A thousand years of accumulated essence was drained in an unending stream by the Unbound Furnace. But the “burnt corpse” felt absolutely no sensation. Deranged, he let out inhuman laughter: “Perfect... I have become perfect... I am the only orthodoxy of the Sanyue Spiritual Mountains...”

Evil spawn of an unchaste woman...

His Highness is merciful, taking into account a slight blood relationship... If you want my opinion, in the end, he is a demon’s child.

How could a person like this open his spiritual eyes? And His Highness has even brought him to study under the sage...

He is only a retainer of record, he won’t go far.

Suddenly, a certain peculiar feeling flitted past. There was no need for the Luwu outside to send flying goose messages, Xi Ping already

knew—the widening spiritual energy prohibition line had reached Dongheng!

When the first set of spiritual mountains entered the spiritual energy prohibition, the spiritual energy floating over the mountains like the tide instantly froze. The ancient inscriptions that had occupied the spiritual mountains all lost effect. The cultivators darting through the sky, like locusts that had flown into a cloud of pesticide, pitter-pattered as they dropped.

The hidden bones took heavy losses, instantly losing thirty to forty percent of their reincarnation wood trees. At the same time, Xi Ping recovered control over the reincarnation wood inside the spiritual energy prohibition line.

Xuanwu’s laughter came to an abrupt halt. Xi Ping quickly turned his head and seemed to hear him indistinctly call out “Mother”... It also may have been something else, but there was no way to seek verification now.

He vanished with the smoke and flame, “according with the Way.”

The Unbound Furnace had already swallowed three great shed skins. Zhi Xiu seemed not to have recovered from Xuanwu’s words. He kept staring at the Unbound Furnace, not averting his gaze for a long time. Wen Fei and Lin Chi’s reactions were extraordinarily uniform. They took a step forward simultaneously and put themselves between Zhi Xiu and that fatal furnace.

Xi Ping split off a portion of his consciousness to jump to the shore of the Xia River. A reincarnation wood tree that had been lying along the road scrambled to sprout twigs and catch firm hold of Zhi Xiu’s boots. The first group of Luwu to arrive reined in their horses and raised the loudspeakers they had brought along. A single cry could have scared away all the wandering ghosts in the surrounding towns and villages: “General—Zhi!”

Zhi Xiu: "..."

He came back to his senses and didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "I have no intention of throwing myself into the oven, the Xuanyin Mountains have no influence over me, I was just... Shiyong, you're going to pull off my boots! Let go..."

Just then, Wu Lingxiao suddenly interjected: "*The Xuanyin Mountains have no influence over me*. So what you mean is that it was the spiritual mountains that forced them to die?"

She abruptly raised her head. "*Shed skins accord with the Way and the spiritual mountains, become a part of the heavenly commandments*—is that what you mean? So when Wu Guang killed my shifu, was he also..."

Zhi Xiu sighed softly.

"But... but why not me?" Wu Lingxiao's unfocused gaze fell on Wanshuang. Her mind was in confusion. Her indistinct words were slightly incoherent: "Because I'm a sword-bearing half-puppet? But the sword-bearing half-puppet's Way of the Heart was shared with the Sword Ancestor, even Wanshuang acknowledged me... Can it be that the spiritual mountains are not the sage...?"

"Fellow Cultivator Wu," Zhi Xiu somewhat rudely interrupted her, "matters have already reached such a pass that thinking too far would be unprofitable. The hidden bones have yet to be expelled. Since the three seniors have won us some time, let us all find a place to discuss what to do next, all right? My country has a new material which it now appears can be used inside the spiritual energy prohibition. If you are willing, Lin-shixiong can swap out a portion of your bone jade. At least you will be able to move freely."

Saying so, without waiting for Wu Lingxiao's response, he turned to the Luwu and said, "Fellow Cultivator Wu finds it difficult to move here. Female disciples, come and help her up."

Xi Ping's heart tightened: that tone... He seemed to know something! Then his Way of the Heart...

"Shifu, listen to me..." In his panic, Xi Ping immediately wanted to pull Zhi Xiu's consciousness into the Law Breaker's space, but just then, something tugged fiercely at his consciousness, and the twigs holding Zhi Xiu's calves instantly lost their support and drooped limply.

His true body!

After swallowing the Sanyue Mountains, the spiritual energy prohibition had spread over Xuanyin to the east, fixing Great Wan's collapsing veins of the earth in place. The hidden bones had lost another portion of their spiritual energy source. Then the Lingyun Mountains and a portion of the South Sea were also encircled.

It was just at that moment that Xi Ping's true body, taken by Wangge Luobao, ended up inside the spiritual energy prohibition.

Xi Ping had been forced to part from his true body to begin with. Now, caught unawares, his vision became a blur, and his injured consciousness was pulled right over by his true body.

But before he could react, an invisible barrier was placed on Xi Ping's consciousness and gave him a solid knock. Xi Ping's consciousness was already tensed to the utmost. He nearly fainted.

Yao Qi and Chang Jun had naturally also ended up inside the spiritual energy prohibition. The tracking talisman suddenly lost effect.

The spiritual threads on the blood talisman indicated that Xi Ping's body was within a hundred zhang. Then the bright red blood suddenly congealed and turned rust-colored. It wouldn't react no matter how they poked it. The two half-immortals in the sea were completely in the dark. They wanted to ask for help, but they found that they also couldn't send Heavenly Questions. In the vast sea, they were helpless and alone, having turned back into mortals.

Chang Jun felt that his senses were deadened, too. He shouted into Yao Qi's ear: "This must be that evil cultivator's demonic art! Ziming-xiong, I think I've gone deaf!"

Yao Qi quickly tilted his head to dodge his flying spit. "Not completely deaf, I can still hear a bit... and it seems that we can still use the upgraded immortal tools. Strange, can this demonic art be targeted only at people?"

"The upgraded immortal tools are a close-kept secret of Xuanyin's Moon Plated Peak, only just revealed on the South Sea. How could an outsider know about them? He must not be prepared." Chang Jun analyzed the situation meticulously and came up with a conclusion. "What do we do now? Go back?"

Yao Qi grudgingly looked at the already useless tracking talisman. "But we've come all this way..."

"But we can't use spiritual energy!" said Chang Jun.

"With our cultivation levels," said Yao Qi, "does it make a difference whether we can use spiritual energy?"

Chang Jun: "..."

That was fair enough.

"Let's go!" said Chang Jun. "Search the area!"

Yao Qi pressed a button on the boat. The boat passing stealthily along the seabed extended a pair of thousand-li eyes and took in the whole of the pitch-black seabed. Shortly, the thousand-li eyes stopped moving.

The bottom of the sea was very dark, but there was a place darker than all the rest, as if it was soaking up all the light.

“What’s th...”

Before Yao Qi could finish, the pitch-black spot suddenly became agitated. A whirlpool as violent as those of the Resurrection Vortex arose. Because of the spiritual energy prohibition, the two half-immortals’ eyesight and hearing weren’t very good, and their reactions were unavoidably delayed. By the time they realized what was happening, the whirlpool had already reached them. A gale abruptly rose on the sea and greedily sucked up all the spiritual energy in the surroundings. The upgraded immortal tool, letting out spiritual energy in all directions, definitely couldn’t escape.

Shortly, where the whirlpool had swept, the bodies of marine life appeared. Yao Qi, Chang Jun, and their boat were all gone.

And meanwhile, from chaos, Xi Ping faintly recovered a portion of his senses—the senses of this true body.

He dimly felt that he seemed to be floating in water.

He couldn’t open his eyes, couldn’t move. The spirit at the center of his brow had been pierced by something, and all his meridians and acupoints seemed to have been nailed in place.

Xi Ping belatedly regretted casting his true body aside. What the hell was that bastard Wangge Luobao doing?

“*Tsk*, spiritual energy has been prohibited.” The clinging Miah language came to his ears. Then a finger pressed against the center of his brow. Wangge Luobao switched over to the Wan language and said softly, “The Eternal Spring Brocade, extraordinary—and you’re also extraordinary, little Shiyong. You actually found a way to force the hidden bones to this pass. No wonder you are the one to break through.”

Xi Ping had no way to answer. All he could do was hurl abuses inwardly: I’m your fucking dad!

Wangge Luobao laughed and smoothed his slightly furrowed brow. “Wait a little bit, and we’ll be able to have a chat... No need to worry, where getting rid of the hidden bones is concerned, we’re on the same side.”

Xi Ping wasn’t in the mood to listen to this odd-eyed man’s nonsense. He only hoped that divine lightning would come from the sky and cook this Southern Shu evil cultivator who refused to die, even if he had to go with him to the grave. He had to get back to Tao County. Shifu...

Just then, Wangge Luobao suddenly said, “Do you want to know where accompanying plants come from?”

Xi Ping was startled.

Before the ancient inscriptions from outside the Beijue Mountains had appeared in the world, he and the cultivation world had all believed that “a shed skin outside the three thousand paths of the Great Way” would necessarily give birth to an accompanying plant.

But now that he had learned the whole story of the spiritual mountains, looking back on it, that was a little off.

Before the Kunlun Mountains formed, it seemed that there had been no distinction between “orthodox and evil.” Among cultivators, it was jungle law, the weak prey to the strong, and there had been no concept of “demonic gods.” It was only when the ancient inscriptions had descended and built a great framework of “orthodox and evil” in the world that the “orthodox” cultivators had begun to pursue the selfless and undesigning “Great Way for all,” with the goal of becoming sages who cast off the mundane dust.

The four great demonic gods—Eternal Spring Brocade, Late-Autumn Red, Reincarnation Wood, and Heartless Lotus—must all have become shed skins after Kunlun had formed but before the other spiritual mountains had arisen. The sages who “accorded with the Great Way” had concentrated spiritual energy, laid the foundations for the spiritual mountains, while the shed skin demonic gods rejected by the Great Way had left vestiges of themselves in their accompanying plants, like “impurities” in the system of the spiritual mountains.

So the problem was: while deciphering the instructions in the Unbound Furnace, Lin Chi had seen that after Kunlun had formed, the Ways of the Heart of the people who “did not accord with the Way” had broken, and they had been consumed by the orthodox. The ancient inscriptions had sifted out only the people who were going to the same end as them.

Then how had the four great demonic gods survived and even been able to become shed skins amid the rise of the four great spiritual mountains on the southern continent?

CHAPTER 241 - Conclusion (9)

“You ought to know already that after Kunlun formed, on the northern continent, practically everyone who didn’t accord with the Sword Ancestor’s Way of the Heart passed away, and the so-called ‘demons’ on the southern continent were also rejected and died as the four spiritual mountain ranges of the south arose—they were put to death by ‘heaven and earth,’ irresistible to human efforts. Those who could ‘go against the current’ in the face of this general trend had Ways of the Heart that were unusual.

“The demonic god of the Heartless Lotus was different from that poor sap forced to insanity by Xuanwu. That was a person born with two consciousnesses in one body, capable of containing multiple Ways of the Heart. Even if some of them were put to death, he could always find some others.

“Late-Autumn Red can be counted as one with Eternal Spring Brocade. The demonic god of the Eternal Spring Brocade wasn’t the mild and gentle lover of Xuanyin’s Golden Hand’s dreams. This person’s evil surpassed the Heartless Lotus. The ‘material’ he was most infatuated with was humans. Nearly all the evil arts you’ve heard of in your life, traced back to their roots, originated with him. His highest achievement, apart from the exceptionally talented and beautiful half-puppet of the Late-Autumn Red, was that he could refine Ways of the Heart. The way of toolmaking’s understanding of inscriptions is extremely profound. It’s said that as soon as Kunlun formed, while the vast majority of people on the southern continent were still bewildered, he refined a false Way of the Heart for himself and avoided the heavenly commandments.

“Only Yuan Hui of the Reincarnation Wood was out of place among his ‘fellows.’” At this point, Wangge Luobao paused briefly, then gave a faint sigh. “The ungovernable way has no Way of the Heart. It cannot be countenanced by the world, nor can it be restrained by

the heavenly commandments—haven't you wondered how he could be without a Way of the Heart?"

Of course Xi Ping had wondered. He had inwardly ruminated on this subject more than once—if you had no Way of the Heart while establishing a foundation, as soon as you swallowed the established foundation pill, the spirit between your brows would explode. He had personally experienced this. He had been lucky enough to hide inside the reincarnation wood then, but Yuan Hui had only acquired an accompanying plant upon becoming a shed skin. Where had he hidden while establishing a foundation? When everyone else exploded, what made him special? Was his skull made of iron?

But Xi Ping was really in no mood to listen. Through his eyelids, he couldn't see what Wangge Luobao was doing, only hear water and an ominous dripping. His spiritual sense was sending up frantic warnings, urging him to run, but where was he supposed to run?

He was worse off now than when he had been held in place by the Lovebird Sword Array. Then, his consciousness had been trapped, but at least his true body could still move freely. Now he couldn't move, and his consciousness couldn't run, and there was shifu...

Xi Ping's ears were full of ancient secrets, and his mind was moving rapidly: as he spoke, Wangge Luobao was not only deliberately dragging out his voice, he was also periodically throwing out hooks to entice him to listen.

A great evil cultivator wasn't a tea shop storyteller. This compelling rendition certainly wasn't just for the sake of amusing him. It probably also wasn't to disrupt his train of thought. Thinking about eight things at once was normal for Xi Ping. Never mind a bit of talk, if Wangge Luobao had stripped naked and said that he was actually a girl, it still wouldn't have disturbed him. It also certainly couldn't be to stall for time. Even if Wang didn't make a sound, as a total

paralytic, Xi Ping couldn't pull out a gun and blow his miserable head off.

So...

Xi Ping clamped down firmly on a bellyful of curiosity, turned a deaf ear on Wangge Luobao's voice, full of bewitchment and implication, and meditated—at the same time, he determined something: what was trapping him was this place. Wangge Luobao obviously also couldn't use spiritual energy, or else there would have been no need for him to waste spit. A beast-taming flute could most easily subdue a person like Xi Ping, who was easily distracted by nature.

Xi Ping swiftly restrained his mind, dismissed distractions, and sank his consciousness into his spirit. When his mind was at its calmest, he perceived the thing passing through his spirit—it was an extremely thin golden thread.

Wangge Luobao's incessant talkativeness seemed to be for the purpose of keeping him from finding this.

Xi Ping immediately approached it with his consciousness. Just then, a sharp stabbing pain came from his physical body—Wangge Luobao seemed to have sensed something. He had stabbed through his finger!

While the fingers were connected to the heart, Xi Ping's body and mind both had been shattered countless times. A gentleman could afford to wait a decade for the moment to be ripe to get his own back. His mind only wavered slightly, then ignored it. But Wangge Luobao took this opportunity to slip a sentence into his ear: "Don't you want to know where Ways of the Heart came from?"

Xi Ping was abruptly distracted.

“Don’t you want to know... how the shackles of a Way of the Heart can be escaped?”

To speak of Yao Qi and Chang Jun in the meantime, when the two of them were swept up by the sudden whirlpool in the sea, they seemed to have fallen into an excavator. When they had dizzily revolved for an unknown length of time and nearly gone through the bed of the South Sea, they finally stopped.

Their stealth boat was caught in a narrow entrance.

The two of them consulted briefly, then each arrayed himself with a handful of protective immortal tools. They shouldered upgraded hand cannons, filled them with spiritual stones, and went into the mouth of the cave.

This seemed to be a hidden realm. Though it was in the sea, there was no water inside. Only the passage became narrower and narrower. At last it was just wide enough for a single person to pass through, and it became darker and darker—at last, the two of them were holding onto each other, completely unable to see each other.

Yao Qi kept thinking, What kind of place is this? It’s very uncomfortable. He felt for his upgraded hand cannon and opened the spiritual stone compartment a crack, but there wasn’t a sliver of the spiritual light that ought to have spilled out. There was something here sucking up all the light.

“Hongzheng-xiong, have you noticed, this place...”

Yao Qi stopped talking abruptly. His words just now had been voiceless—even he hadn’t been able to hear.

Yao Qi suddenly realized what the strange feeling he had been having was: in the midst of utter silence, he couldn’t even hear his own breathing and pulse!

Next, his senses of taste, smell, and touch disappeared together.

Once his sense of touch was gone, he no longer knew where Chang Jun was. Yao Qi yelled—as before, there was absolutely no sound. A strange sort of illusion arose: he couldn't feel himself.

It was as if he were dead, nonexistent.

As soon as this thought flashed by, Yao Qi's mind became muddled. It seemed that his awareness was about to disappear as well...

Just then, a protective upgraded immortal tool Yao Qi was carrying exploded. With a snap, the white spirit inside the immortal tool turned to powder, and spiritual energy blasted Yao Qi away, simultaneously blowing a crevice in the narrow passageway. Icy seawater poured in, splashing his head and face.

Yao Qi breathed a mouthful of it into his lungs. His senses abruptly returned, and he was pushed forward by the seawater. Befuddled, he was thrust into a circle of weak light, and the seawater was abruptly blocked out, while Yao Qi toppled in headfirst and slammed the bridge of his nose into the thigh of Chang Jun, who was following closely after him.

Blood immediately poured from Yao Qi's nose and got all over his mouth. It was stinking and salty and suffocating. It was the feeling of being alive.

The two of them, just getting over their fright, looked at each other blankly. Chang Jun began to heave as though he had a collapsed lung.

Yao Qi quickly put a hand over his mouth, sharing the blood that had just come down in a torrent, giving Hongzheng-xiong a handprint "full of life force."

Then the two of them heard a foreign-accented voice speaking: “As everyone knows, establishing a foundation is the only step along the path of cultivation that requires the aid of a pill. The main ingredient of the established foundation pill is the silk dragon heart. Apart from assisting cultivators in concentrating an essence and establishing a foundation, a silk dragon heart can also be made into a special immortal tool, which helps poor half-immortal evil cultivators unable to get spiritual stones ‘pilfer heaven’s order’ — do you know of another ingenious use for a silk dragon heart?”

No one answered him. The speaker paused briefly, then went on, answering his own question: “Hunting silk dragons is a Shu tradition, predating the existence of written language. At the time, the northern continent was still a wilderness, people had yet to domesticate cattle and horses, and there were no nations, no city-states in the world, only one tribe after another, living off the land. Of course, there also weren’t any cultivators... Individuals who were extraordinarily talented and particularly spiritual might by happenstance open their spiritual eyes, but from a modern point of view, they were only half-immortals who knew some tricks.

“Shu was rich in natural resources and overwhelmingly full of spiritual energy, but the ancients inhabiting it led lives of untold suffering and hardship—because they were all slaves of the ‘Shamanic Way.’ They were treated as pigs and dogs under the rule of a small smattering of people.

“Back then, Ancestor Tianbo, of mixed Miah and Xiuyi blood, led one hundred twenty-eight warriors—half Xiuyi and half Miah—and launched a spiritual beast tide, overthrowing the tyranny of the Shamanic Way, which had occupied Southern Shu by force. After this, the Miah and Xiuyi clans, with the founder as a bond, made a vow to join forces and be of one heart, the main peninsula and the Three Islands to keep watch for and aid in defending one another, never to betray each other. The slaves of the ‘Shamans’ became the

mighty Shu. After Kunlun's ancient inscriptions appeared, Ancestor Tianbo as a matter of course became Shu's uncrowned king, attained a full moon position, and raised the Lingyun Mountains.

“‘Shaman’ is a translation into the Miah language. Tai Sui, you have a wide social net and are proficient in the languages of all nations. You ought to know what it means.”

Yao Qi and Chang Jun's eyes met uncertainly: Tai Sui... Was the great evil cultivator talking to Xi Shiyong?

Was he awake?

Chang Jun patted Yao Qi's arm and pointed upward.

Yao Qi raised his head and looked in the direction he was pointing. He nearly had a heart attack. Right above their heads, an adult silk dragon lay on its stomach, its big eyes wide open and staring at the two of them!

But they waited for ages, and the silk dragon didn't move a muscle. Only then did Yao Qi work up his nerve and fumble out a jade stamp, lighting the scene above him with its faint green light: it wasn't a real dragon; it was an incredibly realistic mural.

Around the dragon, graceful aquatic plants grew, with their tips like hair—this was the legendary “three-day dream grass,” said to be extinct.

The form of a peculiar fish was faintly discernible amid the thicket of three-day dream grass. Yao Qi and Chang Jun recognized it at a glance. That fish was the next life spiritual fish.

This place seemed to be a secret underground sacrificial altar. It was all dark, with an unspeakable sense of deathliness. It made Yao

Qi and Chang Jun all at once recall that feeling from earlier, as though they were dead.

Amid the silence, the great evil cultivator said in a singsong voice, “That’s right, ‘Shaman’ means ‘a person with control over life and death.’”

Chang Jun gestured, and the two of them quickly took stock of the upgraded immortal tools they were carrying, then crept in the direction of the voice.

Inside the spiritual energy prohibition, Wangge Luobao was also deaf. Unaware, he spoke to Xi Ping, who didn’t answer: “The ‘Shamans’ had three treasures: the next life spiritual fish, the three-day dream grass, and the silk dragon. The next life spiritual fish could travel between the lands of the living and the dead, the three-day dream grass could pull a dying person back from the abyss, and they also kept ‘living corpse warriors’ —”

For some reason, though Yao Qi and Chang Jun heard this line out of context, their scalps both went numb.

“The silk dragon heart was the main ingredient in refining living corpse warriors.

“The silk dragon heart can ‘pilfer heaven’s order,’ so naturally it can store the universe’s spiritual energy. The Shamans discovered that if a silk dragon heart were put in place of a dead person’s heart, it would keep the corpse from rotting. If they were appropriately remade, the dead person’s bones and meridians would be nourished and fixed in place by the spiritual energy. They would have endless strength and boundless magic power. The Shamans had no writing system, only a set of secret arts used to control living corpses. With this method, they were completely wanton. There was no evil they would not sink to. The other clans did not dare to speak

against them... until the Shaman king became reckless in his lust and abducted a woman.

“This woman... There was no writing then, so no record has been left behind of her name. I only know that she was the holy woman of a certain tribe. It is said that she was unusually beautiful and remained youthful and unaging, that she had eyes that could ‘see through good and evil.’ Working off the records, she must have been a consummate open-eyed half-immortal, with a paramount spiritual sense—before the heavenly commandments of the Kunlun Mountains were created, the paramount spiritual sense had yet to be stifled by the false heavens. It was not yet a curse. It was a rare natural gift.

“The holy woman sent out dozens of tokens asking for help, but all the world’s cowards feared the living corpses, and no one dared to answer. In order to get her, the Shamans ordered the living corpses to slaughter her entire tribe. Apart from the holy woman’s son, who had gone to distant lands to study as an apprentice, not one survived.

“In order to take her revenge, the holy woman endured humiliation for many years. With the gift of her paramount spiritual sense, she saw through the secret arts of the living corpses, committed herself irrevocably. She did a mighty deed: she secretly ate a silk dragon heart and turned herself into a ‘living corpse.’

“Beforehand, she carved instructions to take revenge onto her spirit, to ensure that she wouldn’t be controlled by others. But an unexpected thing happened. Because she already had spiritual bones, when the immense wave of spiritual energy pierced her body, it was mediated by the spiritual bones. The silk dragon heart she had eaten not only failed to kill her, it created a ‘spiritual core’ surrounding the ‘instructions’ she had carved, repairing her shattered spirit... You must have realized that these were the first

ever Way of the Heart and essence. This woman whose name is unknown was the first established foundation in the world.

“But she was only one person, with her foundation newly established. She was no match for a hundred thousand living corpses. So after she escaped, she hid herself, combined silk dragon hearts with the secret arts of living corpses, and created an ‘immortality pill’ that she disseminated. I think that she did it for the sake of revenge. Considering it from her point of view, she must not yet have known what a mighty thing she had done. She must have thought she was only a living corpse, neither human nor ghost.”

Yao Qi was scared witless at hearing this. He slipped. Chang Jun quickly used a protective immortal tool to cushion his fall, at any rate keeping Ziming-xiong from knocking any teeth out.

Just then, Wangge Luobao laughed quietly. His laughter echoed in the enclosed space, covering up the bit of noise Chang Jun was making.

“The established foundation pill... what was then called the immortality pill, became a precious treasure as soon as it came into the world. Countless people were provoked into fighting over it. Those whose spiritual bones were incomplete and whose Ways of the Heart were yet unsettled exploded and died if they took it. Only a tiny number of masters succeeded in establishing foundations. Amid the bloody struggle, the pill spread throughout the northern and southern continents, and belatedly came to the attention of the Shamans.

“The Shaman king obtained three immortality pills. That incompetent fool didn’t realize that this pill had originated in his own clan’s secret arts. At the time, people didn’t know that an established foundation pill needed the two criteria of ‘spiritual bones’ and ‘a Way of the Heart’ to succeed. They had only roughly surmised the magical theory that ‘Only people with sufficiently high

spirituality and firm wills could pass the test of heaven.’ So the Shaman king caught two people to try the pill on.

“These two people to whom good came from ill are both familiar to you. One of them had been sold out by his fellow clansmen because of his parentage and their envy for his talents, a rebel against the Shamans on Shu’s Three Islands, the Miah-Xiuyi mixed blood Ancestor Tianbo.

“The other one was the holy woman’s son who had gone to distant lands to apprentice himself and who now, finally hearing that his home had fallen into enemy hands, had come back to take revenge single-handed... and he was also the person who passed on those hidden bones to you.”

Yao Qi had fallen onto the soft protective immortal tool and was just about to get up, but he saw a sliver of weak light appear in a crack in a nearby stone. He quickly crawled a few steps forward and waved at Chang Jun to shift the stones.

The two of them pried open a little gap and stuck a spyglass into it. Shock appeared simultaneously on their faces—

CHAPTER 242 - Conclusion (10)

Xi Ping was in an enormous pool. The spirit at the center of his brow and all the major acupoints of his body had golden threads passing through them. These golden threads were drawing something out of his body, in texture like mist.

That mist was rooted at Xi Ping's spirit at the center of his brow—a place most familiar to cultivators. Chang Jun pinched Yao Qi hard and silently said: *Consciousness!*

Except in a special location like the Law Breaker, the consciousness of a cultivator, especially a high level cultivator, would be invisible to the naked eye, but now Xi Ping's consciousness was tangled in golden threads, and the glittering thin threads had outlined the form of his consciousness—right now, his consciousness wasn't in the usual human form; it was in the form of a skeleton.

The consciousness, the same height as his body, was about half a cun away from him, making it seem as though Xi Ping, in the midst of brilliant golden light, was intimately embracing a skeleton like mist.

The golden threads drawing out his consciousness were clustered together, the other end of the cluster tied to Southern Shu's great evil cultivator, Wangge Luobao.

Though Xi Ping's present condition was strange, from a distance there was still quite a sense of beauty about it. Wangge Luobao, however, was just plain terrifying.

Yao Qi's digestion had never been good. With spiritual energy prohibited, his tendency to get nauseated or have diarrhea easily seemed to have returned. He nearly threw up on the spot: he

couldn't even figure out what organ Wangge Luobao was using to talk.

The other ends of the golden threads were all wrapped around a thumb-sized piece of bone, and that bone was embedded in the center of Wangge Luobao's brow.

The skin, flesh, and sense organs on Wangge Luobao's face had vanished without a trace, leaving behind only the skull. The little bone wrapped in golden threads at the center of his forehead was expanding at a speed visible to the naked eye, bit by bit taking the place of Wangge Luobao's own bones.

The creeping bone tore violently into the skin and flesh. The drip-dripping was the sound of Wangge Luobao's blood dripping into the pool.

Chang Jun suddenly tapped Yao Qi. He pointed at the spirit-conducting gold on the upgraded spyglass, then pointed at the "golden threads" on Xi Ping: *Don't you think they're similar?*

Yao Qi was startled. He quickly swallowed a mouthful of saliva and looked closely despite his nausea.

The spy glass was an upgraded immortal tool made of spirit-conducting gold. Inside the spiritual energy prohibition, only on spirit-conducting gold could a weak spiritual light be seen. It wasn't only the texture and color; the spirit-conducting gold light on the upgraded immortal tool was identical to that golden thread.

Chang Jun mouthed: *Why does that golden thread look like spirit-conducting gold? How can he have spirit-conducting gold? Is there a traitor in Wan?*

Yao Qi, his expression grave, shook his head. *A traitor wouldn't betray us in this direction. It's too far a drop...*

He suddenly recalled Lancang's Sect Leader. Before his death, the Sect Leader had wanted to destroy the Lancang Spiritual Mountains' inscriptions, make people use spirit-conducting gold to repair the severed veins of the earth, and return spiritual energy to the human world. But he had failed, and the brave people who had escaped harboring spirit-conducting gold had died for their nation. The spirit-conducting gold Lancang had made at the time had been precisely in the form of golden thread like this. A coil of it had somehow ended up in Wangge Luobao's hands.

In the spiritual energy prohibition now, only spirit-conducting gold could conduct spiritual energy. The great evil cultivator had held a treasure that could benefit the world for so many years, and he actually hadn't had any thought of developing it, but now, with spiritual energy prohibited, he had taken it out to use for an evil art.

Goodness, this was what you called "everyone has their own ambition"!

Yao Qi's gaze moved back and forth between Xi Ping and Wangge Luobao. As Wangge Luobao spoke of those deliberately sensational ancient secrets, Xi Ping's mind was evidently wavering. And every time his consciousness wavered, it would be drained a little thinner by the golden threads—when Wangge Luobao had said the part about "the person who passed on those hidden bones to you," the entire head of Xi Ping's skeleton-shaped consciousness had blurred. The parts that dispersed seemed to have been sucked by the golden threads into Wangge Luobao. The great evil cultivator's bald pate turned entirely golden!

Wangge Luobao was saturated in a deathly air, with only the top of his head shining, like a gas lamp that had been made in the shape of a skull—one that had a broadcasting function!

This scene, as Yao Qi and Chang Jun saw it, was the bone wedged into the center of his brow using the golden threads to absorb Xi Shiyong's consciousness.

What kind of evil object was that bone?

Yao Qi waved a hand at Chang Jun, took out an upgraded hand cannon, and gestured: *The rest isn't important, anyway he's not doing anything good. We're too far away, we might harm our own by mistake, let's get closer.*

Chang Jun sucked in a breath. The upgraded immortal tool in his hands imbued him with boundless courage. *Let's go! We'll fuck him up!*

The two of them had been close friends since they had lived in the same courtyard at the Latent Cultivation Temple. They had a perfect rapport. One quickly turned the spyglass to observe the terrain, and the other quickly took notes in a little notebook. Shortly, Chang Jun had drawn a rough map of this awful place: they would work separately, approach from two sides, and whoever was noticed would act as the bait.

Meanwhile, Wangge Luobao was still disturbing Xi Ping with his patter.

“To take the ancestor and Yuan Hui alive to try the pill on them, the Shamans required a great deal of assets and used many underhanded means. The two of them were taken in and brought back in stone coffins used to imprison violent living corpse soldiers. Of course, those Shamans were afraid that if the pills worked, there would be trouble if the two of them simultaneously rebuilt their bodies and joined forces, so they first gave that pill to the ancestor.

“My clan's ancestor was too young then. His Way of the Heart was firm, but his spiritual bones weren't quite 'consummate.' But in

cultivation, the slightest shortfall means going astray by a thousand li. Even one missing sliver wouldn't do. When he was forced to take the established foundation pill, his body couldn't take it, but he also couldn't simply die at once like a mortal. The Shamans observed him for a whole day, saw his spiritual energy constantly attempting to concentrate in his spirit and constantly flowing out of his maimed body. Seeing that he was on his last gasp, they knew that the pill was good, it was only the 'test subject' who wouldn't do. So they opened the stone coffin of the second test subject—Yuan Hui's 'spirituality' was purer than the ancestor's, his spiritual bones a grade higher.

“When the stone coffin was opened, she... the vengeful holy woman hiding nearby, immediately saw her own son, who had been separated from her for many years.”

Earlier, Xi Ping had almost succeeded in entering meditation and had been interrupted by Wangge Luobao. Now he was attempting to restrain his consciousness again—but restraining his consciousness had become unusually difficult. Xi Ping clearly sensed his own consciousness becoming more and more muddled, as if he had returned to when he had been learning to meditate in the Latent Cultivation Temple; he absolutely couldn't control the distracting thoughts racing wildly through his mind.

From the depths of his memory, he turned up *Detailed Account of Meridians* and attempted to recite it verbatim in his mind. When he had recited two lines, he heard Wangge Luobao's voice say: “She had a rare power, the ability to turn a portion of her body into mist...”

Xi Ping felt his heart miss a beat.

Where Xi Ping couldn't see it, as soon as his mind drifted, his skeleton-shaped consciousness nearly disappeared, becoming blurry from the ribs up. The golden light on Wangge Luobao's head

also spread down to his back. His neck tore open like a ghost's painted skin. His shoulder blades, upper spine, and ribs all turned golden.

Seeing the image transmitted by the spyglass, Yao Qi's heart tightened: the evil cultivator had sucked away nearly half of Xi Ping's consciousness. If he was entirely "sucked" up by the evil cultivator, then wouldn't he be dead?!

With his radiant skull, Wangge Luobao's posture, bent over to observe Xi Ping, still exuded an unspeakable avarice. In a voice full of bewitchment, he asked, "What, does that power call someone to mind? As expected, it wasn't wholly without reason that those hidden bones came to you. They have countless connections to you. It was decreed by fate... Viscount Xi, do you believe in fate?"

The words "believe in fate" seemed to knock a bit of clarity back into Xi Ping. His consciousness, which had nearly dissipated entirely, congealed desperately as though struggling to the death. The golden threads between the two of them tensed.

At the same time, Xi Ping inwardly determined something: Wangge Luobao definitely couldn't read his mind, but he could clearly tell whether his mood was stable or agitated. This Southern Shu evil cultivator must be practicing some kind of evil art on his consciousness.

The hidden bones were attached to his consciousness. It was only because he had resisted that he had been able to escape and take temporary shelter in the Law Breaker.

Wangge Luobao had no reason to aid the hidden bones... and those rotten bones wouldn't have thanked him, anyway. So there was only one possibility: Wangge Luobao wanted to go through him to get the hidden bones!

“I know you don’t.” Wangge Luobao didn’t give him time to think carefully. He laughed. “Those of your way have had something demonic about them since ancient times.

“At that time, the cultivation world had yet to work out the system of cultivation. The later ‘crash course’ by which you could take pills, pour in spiritual energy, and open your spiritual eyes in the course of a year didn’t exist yet. Those who could open their spiritual eyes were true cultivators. They had no one to guide them. They either encountered radical transformation or went through lengthy probing and enlightenment. They practically all had Ways of the Heart. And Yuan Hui was the son of the holy woman, richly endowed by nature. It is said that he left his native land when he was very young, precisely because he and his mother didn’t get along. He didn’t believe in the spirituality of the universe, the fate of all things, didn’t believe in ghosts and gods and didn’t believe in the Way. He was a misfit in the tribe he was born to.

“Seeing his plentiful spiritual energy, the Shamans thought that he was stronger than the ancestor and that the test was certain to succeed with him. But his own mother knew that Yuan Hui had been able to channel spiritual energy at a young age only because of his exceptional natural endowments. He had no Way of the Heart to speak of. Since the Shaman king had seized the immortality pills, the vengeful holy woman had been waiting in the shadows. She viewed the cultivators who succeeded in establishing foundations as living corpses. Just think of it.. Suppose that the Shaman king, unable to recognize his own clan’s secret art for creating living corpses, took the pill. Either he would explode and die, or he would succeed through untold hardships in making himself into a ‘living corpse.’ How ridiculous would that be? As she saw it, that would be the taste of vengeance.

“As for the innocent test subjects... When she saw the Shamans carry in the coffins, she only looked on indifferently. There were so many heroes in the world, and when she had been at her most

isolated and defenseless, hadn't there been no one to help her? But an unexpected sequence of events turned her into an evil dragon biting its own tail."

Xi Ping attempted to turn a deaf ear. His consciousness struggled even more fiercely.

Wangge Luobao gave a soft *ha*. "It seems that you still don't believe it. Then perhaps after you've heard the rest of the story, you might have some more veneration for 'fate.'

"When the vengeful holy woman recognized her son, it was already too late. Though his talents were exceptional and he was an open-eyed half-immortal who had finished rinsing his spiritual bones, he was missing the most crucial 'Way of the Heart.' The essence condensed by the established foundation pill had nowhere to alight. His spirit ruptured. Soon he would be beyond saving. So the holy woman used a secret art —"

Xi Ping treated his words like a tortoise reciting scripture and finished reciting the preface to *Detailed Account of Meridians*. Just then, he heard Wangge Luobao spit out two words: "Life swapping."

Xi Ping gave a start. The *Detailed Account of Meridians* in his mind flew up to the high heavens, every last page of it returning to his shifu.

His consciousness, which had concentrated in one place, seemed about to scatter entirely. The "torso" portion of the consciousness had nearly all been absorbed by Wangge Luobao, leaving only two legs.

"Ah... of course you remember 'life swapping.'"

Xi Ping wouldn't forget it even in death.

This was an unrelenting talisman. If you drew it on a close personal possession of yours and at the same time made the object of the talisman drink a drop of your blood, when that person sustained a mortal injury, you could take their place. It didn't require strong cultivation; all it needed was for your cultivation not to be so much lower than the person's being protected that the talisman would lose effect... All you needed was sincerity.

Back during Jinping's Grand Selection, at the same time as Jiangli had dragged him into the whirlpool, she had used her birthday jade and a drop of blood in his tea to cast the life-swapping talisman on him, which had pushed him step by step to where he was today.

Hatred for cruel injustice, an avenger ready to stake everything on a single throw, voluntarily transforming her own body at a desperate pass, all of it falling through because of the games of fortune.

The holy woman of ancient Shu whose name was unknown, and the ill-fated Queen of Flowers beside the Lingyang River.

A rebellious son who had left his native land, and an ignorant rich kid...

These bones seemed like a cycle of reincarnation.

“At the last moment, this vengeful holy woman turned her blood into mist and drew a life-swapping talisman that she cast into Yuan Hui's eyes, nose, ears, and mouth. Life and death were inverted between the two of them. The holy woman's spirit burst, and she died at once. Her established foundation essence exploded, affecting all the half-immortals and mortals in the vicinity. Yuan Hui and the Shamans watching were crushed to dust. The Shamans went down to the Nine Springs of the underworld to keep company with their living corpse warriors. But Yuan Hui was enveloped in a bloody mist with the life-swapping talisman embedded in it.

“The life-swapping talisman protected his consciousness. The remaining spiritual energy in the bloody mist assembled and regenerated his bones and flesh... It was as if his mother had once again given birth to him. When he returned to the world, he had crossed the established foundation boundary.

“He had no Way of the Heart and couldn’t expand his essence by tempering one. Only through the destruction of his body could he die and be reborn time after time, as if he had an eternal mother.

“And of those present at the time, only one survived and witnessed all of this—my clan’s ancestor. The Shamans, seeing him growing weaker and weaker, had treated him as a failed test subject and tossed him into the stone coffin to live or die as he might. With his spiritual bones incomplete, he was in too much pain after being forced to take the established foundation pill, so like you right now, he couldn’t move, but his consciousness was aware.

“When the holy woman was destroyed, her exploding essence was largely blocked by the stone coffin. The spiritual energy and the dust of the holy woman’s bones just happened to make up for the bit of spiritual bones the ancestor was missing.”

Xi Ping’s consciousness was now entirely formless. The golden threads wrapped around him gradually broke away from the main bundle, and his body sank with a deathly air into the water. And Wangge Luobao had turned entirely into a radiant skeleton. His voice grew more and more urgent: “So in the hands of the ancestor, there remained a small portion of bone that shared an origin with Yuan Hui’s hidden bones.”

Ancestor Tianbo had been let down by his short-sighted clansmen since birth. How could he have wished for good things to come to them? The pity was that he had been born at the wrong time. He didn’t have the chance that the Sword Ancestor had, and Kunlun gained power first.

The ancestor had only wanted to climb upward. His Way of the Heart in fact did not accord with the so-called false Great Way. He ought to have faded at this point. He survived thanks to this small segment of bone of shared origin, which siphoned off the spiritual energy accumulated by Yuan Hui.

“Since neither of you wants these hidden bones, you may as well give them to me...”

If he only consumed Xi Ping’s consciousness using the small remaining segment of the hidden bones, once he took a boat out of the spiritual energy prohibition, he would naturally be able to become one with the hidden bones.

What the ancestor had once failed to do just on the point of success in the Impassable Sea, he would succeed in doing.

And by a series of coincidences, this time, the hidden bones had actually also obtained the ancient inscriptions from outside the Beijue Mountains.

Didn’t this mean that fate had decreed that he would rise to godhood?

CHAPTER 243 - Conclusion (11)

Because of his too-rushed table manners during his last few sentences, Wangge Luobao had mixed the Wan and Miah languages. He looked like a demon of the end of the world.

In a moment of desperation, Yao Qi pulled the hand cannon's trigger, sending a shot at the strange bone at the center of Wangge Luobao's brow.

There was a hiss as the upgraded immortal tool cut through the filaments of spirit-conducting gold and bore down on Wangge Luobao... then missed.

Yao Qi: "..."

Why could this thing miss?!

Of course a hand cannon could miss. While it was an upgraded immortal tool, it had been developed from a mortal tool, and mortal soldiers all had to go through training to be able to use it. Cultivators normally relied on their spiritual senses. All they needed was to pull the trigger, and there was no target they couldn't hit. Therefore, it had never occurred to Yao Qi that this thing actually required skill.

What he had been aiming for was the center of Wangge Luobao's brow, but the upshot was that the beam of spiritual light, absurdly, hit three zhang wide of his target, and the sand and rocks it sent flying just happened to strike at the feet of Chang Jun, who was coming around from the other direction.

Without the support of his spiritual sense, Chang Jun was also deaf and blind. Making an unexpected misstep, he plummeted into the pool where Xi Ping was.

“It’s over!” Chang Jun thought despairingly. “If Xi Shiyong can see us from the underworld, he’ll be cursing eighteen generations of my ancestors.”

Yao Qi decided that the damage had been done, and he might as well keep going. He didn’t even bother to aim, prepared to simply shoot wildly and let a stray shot blow Wangge Luobao to his death.

Wangge Luobao took absolutely no notice of him. He grasped the golden threads binding Xi Ping. Chang Jun, who had fallen into the water, just managed to grab Xi Ping’s arm when the last of Xi Ping’s consciousness was broken up by the golden thread.

Xi Ping’s mist-like consciousness turned into a beam of fragmentary light that broke free of his true body and was dragged away along with the golden thread by the bone at the center of Wangge Luobao’s brow.

Wangge Luobao had turned entirely into a golden skeleton. His abdomen was shattered by a wild shot from Yao Qi’s hand cannon, but he laughed heartily. Under Yao Qi’s hopeless gaze, the fragmented bones repaired themselves and became as good as new in the blink of an eye—he had obtained the special power of Xi Ping’s consciousness. The Xi Ping that Chang Jun had grabbed was only an “empty shell.”

Wangge Luobao reached back and activated a mechanism. The boulders around the pool quickly moved toward each other, ready to crush Chang Jun and Xi Ping in the water—that sack of skin filled with cotton waste had no further use.

Wangge Luobao was wild with joy. Having swallowed Xi Ping’s consciousness, he had obtained even more than he had imagined: apart from the critical portion of the ancient inscriptions that Xi Ping had made off with, he could also feel that all the reincarnation wood

trees inside the spiritual energy prohibition line had turned into his “hair, skin, hands, and feet.” Inside the spiritual energy prohibition where even a shed skin would have to ride a horse or take a carriage, he could pluck the Tai Sui Qin just like Xi Ping and swap places with any reincarnation wood tree.

He didn’t even need a boat. In just the blink of an eye, he could go right around the still expanding spiritual energy prohibition line, charge out, and become one with the hidden bones.

The hidden bones would put together all the pieces of the ancient inscriptions, and he would have the hidden bones. When the time came, never mind the Unbound Furnace that had swallowed a few shed skins, even if the Eternal Spring Brocade’s lousy furnace also refined a hundred Swords of the South, it still wouldn’t be able to keep the universe from overturning.

With these hidden bones, the ancient times could recklessly come to the human world. There would be no need to carefully hone a Way of the Heart, no need to worry about being swallowed by masters. No force would need to be feared, all heavenly commandments could be disregarded.

Now, they would be influenced by no Ways of the Heart of common origin and would need to endure no interrogation. Even if they became obsessed and lost their mind, their Way of the Heart still wouldn’t shatter; this was still the sole “way” in the world that could accept the ancient inscriptions from outside the Beijue Mountains without being drowned—this was clearly the unparalleled way to heaven of the son of the holy mother and divine woman who had been the origin of the cultivation world.

Even the spiritual mountains might not be able to last forever, but the master of the hidden bones would live as long as heaven and earth.

But perhaps there was nothing that came with a shortcut. Because this godhood was too easy to attain, two successive masters on the hidden bones had both been ignorant boys who hadn't tempered their minds. Everything had clearly been prepared for them, but faced with the only true godhood, these idiots who hadn't trained their hearts had been only in too much of a hurry to avoid it. In their bafflement, they had even developed the illusion that they were being "controlled" by the hidden bones.

As Wangge Luobao saw it, this was just like placing the mind of an insect into the body of a dragon. Not only could it not experience the pleasure of soaring through the clouds and riding on the mists, it would die of fright on the spot.

Ridiculous.

This road seemed to have no tests, but actually godhood itself was the test. Only a "chosen one" with extremely firm temperament, extremely good luck, extremely high skills could receive such a blessing. How could it be easier than cultivating to become a full moon sage? Even Ancestor Tianbo, who had pocketed all the Shamans' secret arts, had failed to achieve his ambitions. He could only settle for the next best thing, be content to hold the southwest corner of the continent—

Wangge Luobao's flesh swiftly regrew from his bones. His curly hair was as thick as aquatic grass, his odd-colored irises radiant with restrained light. He was tall, peerlessly handsome, like a true sea god.

The Xiuyi had called him a mongrel and put his mother to death for engaging in private dealings with a "Miah inferior." The father whose name he didn't know had lived down to the word "inferior"; after decamping with him, he had sold him for a good price.

His odd-colored eyes and tall figure had made him a “rare product,” and he had passed from hand to hand among the wealthy who liked novelty. He had been a lowly bitch to men and a hand-warming rabbit buck to women. He knew all the ways of pleasing in the world, had developed eyes that could see through people’s desires, and he hoped that all people would die out.

With these abilities, he had changed overnight, become the adopted son of a Miah elder “of good moral standing and reputation,” joined Lingyun’s Dragon Subduing Knights.

As the Xiuyi’s oppression had gone too far, the Miah had become disloyal. The Miah had set their minds on the ancestor’s Way of the Heart. Wangge Luobao, with undivided loyalty to his “clansmen,” had seized an opportunity that no one in over a thousand years had grasped—everyone said that Ancestor Tianbo’s Way of the Heart had been born from the desire for the Xiuyi and Miah clans to be eternally united and of one heart, so none of the babbling idiots had been able to receive Ancestor Tianbo’s Way of the Heart. Only a schemer harboring identical hatred to what Tianbo’s had been a thousand years ago was worthy.

He had risked his life to establish a foundation, “gladly” accepted the dragon-taming chain that the clan had pressed on him, betrayed the Lingyun Mountains; he had submitted to the Heartless Lotus’s lotus seal, betrayed the Miah’s leaders; he had pushed that damn bald donkey Zhuoming beyond redemption and usurped the position of the Miah’s clan leader. Finally, he had used the Miah’s spiritual beasts and the inferior Miah, themselves hardly smarter than the spiritual beasts, to stir up events in Southern He and capture Jinping’s legendary “Tai Sui.”

What had that useless Jinping rich kid ever done to deserve what he had? There was always a crowd of people lining up to protect him, nearly making Wangge Luobao’s efforts fall short just within reach of

success—fortunately, though there had been twists and turns, the outcome had been even more satisfactory than he had anticipated.

This was his reward as the person who had walked a path more tortuous than anyone else's.

Wangge Luobao wasn't in the mood to waste any more time "looking after" those Jinping ants. He turned and passed through countless reincarnation wood trees.

Before exiting the spiritual energy prohibition line, serendipitously, he ended up in Tao County—in a reincarnation wood tree in front of the Unbound Furnace.

The legendary "Sword of the South" Zhi Xiu, the Sword Slave Wu Lingxiao, and a whole crowd of "great personages" whose names could shake the world were a few steps away, yet they had absolutely no idea of his presence.

Wangge Luobao ruminatively watched them circle the reincarnation wood tree like headless flies, not understanding why Xi Ping had once again fallen out of contact.

Then his gaze fell on the Unbound Furnace—this had been the relic of the most evil of demonic gods. Fallen into the hands of the miraculous Hui Xiangjun, it had unexpectedly pried open a thread of sky in the impregnable fastness of the spiritual mountains.

"Nothing remarkable about it." Wangge Luobao walked unperceived toward the Unbound Furnace and glanced into that cremator of sages' corpses. He said to himself, "What am I doing looking at it?"

As soon as this thought arose, Wangge Luobao suddenly froze: yes, why would he want to look at the Unbound Furnace? There seemed to be something obscurely guiding him to it, as if his spiritual sense were warning him that he had overlooked something...

Inside the spiritual energy prohibition, a cultivator's spiritual sense would in fact become inaccurate. Perhaps this was because Xi Ping, whom he had consumed, had "prerogative" here.

What had he overlooked?

Wangge Luobao came over to a reincarnation wood tree next to the Unbound Furnace and peeked at the faintly leaping furnace flames inside.

The next moment, the reincarnation wood tree he had taken shelter in, as if it were haunted, pushed him right into the Unbound Furnace!

It was as if the fire in the furnace had been ready for the rice to be put into the pot. As soon as the raging flames touched Wangge Luobao, they leapt up precipitously. Lin Chi, pushed away from the furnace by Wen Fei, didn't even have time to see what had gone into the pot before the flames had completely engulfed Wangge Luobao's body.

When the mechanism in the pool had been activated, Chang Jun had had no time to react. While he knew that the Xi Ping he held was an empty shell, he still did his best to throw out all the upgraded immortal tools on him so his classmate could have an "intact corpse." Then he was dragged down by the "corpse" and sank with it to the bottom of the pool. There was a blur before his eyes. He didn't know whether it was the water in the pool or tears.

He had thought that with upgraded immortal tools, they could stand up in battle against an ascended spirit, but it turned out that mortals were mortals and ants were ants. They were useless.

"Maybe Moon Plated Peak is wrong after all," Chang Jun thought, giving up on himself as he sank. "The difference between ants and

masters was never a matter of techniques. We...”

Just then, an icy hand turned over and grabbed him by the shoulder.

Chang Jun breathed a mouthful of water into his lungs: Damn it, a walking corpse!

Meanwhile, Wangge Luobao finally remembered what he had overlooked: Zhuoming had once told him that the furnace flame of the Unbound Furnace was in Tai Sui’s hands. Zhuoming had spouted a lot of crazy talk. Apart from wanting to steam Xuanwu, it was all about wanting to eat Tai Sui raw. He hadn’t listened closely and hadn’t taken it to heart.

Yes, just now, he had clearly swallowed Xi Ping’s consciousness and obtained the reincarnation wood and the ancient inscriptions, but he hadn’t seen that legendary Unbound Furnace furnace flame!

The consciousness he had dragged out of Xi Ping’s spirit was incomplete... but that bone, the secret arts the ancestor had gotten from the vestiges of the Shamans...

He had plainly nailed the consciousness of the ungovernable way’s Tai Sui to his spirit! No matter how much of his consciousness had been dispersed, no matter how far it had gone, it would have been snatched back to the main body... How could this be?!

An indolent Jinping-accented voice spoke into his ear: “Heh, can’t I have two spirits?”

Impossible!

“How come?” that hateful voice said cheerfully. “I contain multitudes. Alas, Lao Wang, I don’t mind telling you, after this lesson you’ve given me, I really have started to believe in fate a little.”

Back in the South Sea, in order to fool Zhi Xiu, he had used the power san-ge had left behind to cut off a portion of his spirit to carry off the shard of Zhaoting. Afterward, the sword shard had sacrificed itself to protect its master, and the paperman carrying a portion of his consciousness had remained with Wei Chengxiang, kept perfectly safe by Great Wan's most reliable half-immortal.

Wangge Luobao had used an evil art of unknown name to trap his consciousness on his spirit, repeatedly interrupted his meditation, weakened his consciousness, left him with nowhere to run—but he hadn't expected him to have two spirits.

If what this Miah evil cultivator had said was true...

Thousands of years ago, the rare power to turn into mist had cast a life-swapping talisman, creating the undying bones, unique in this world. Thousands of years later, the same power had dragged down the final zealot who had wanted to reach heaven in a single step.

Xi Ping had guessed that given Wangge Luobao's wickedness, once he had his consciousness, he would be certain to destroy his body while he was at it. He had meant to immediately push through a counterstrike, but those two daring half-immortals Yao Qi and Chang Jun had thrust in their oar, "turning awkwardness into cunning," and kept his body whole. So he'd had a sudden flash of inspiration. Through the consciousness that Wangge Luobao had swallowed, like the Ways of the Heart of common origin in the Sea of Stars, he had sent a "heavenly edict" to the "god-to-be" who had "accorded his temperament with the way," made him come have a look at the Unbound Furnace.

As expected, the god-to-be's heart was sufficiently sincere. Without hesitation, he had "received the grace of heaven."

A portion of Xi Ping's consciousness had been taken by Wangge Luobao into the furnace to act as "material." As a cultivator who didn't belong to the toolmaking way, he once again cooked himself in the pot, obtaining an ability like the "seventh sense," connecting to the Unbound Furnace—

"Wang-xiong, your storytelling was quite well done, nicely modulated, but the style was a little too subtle. I'm still inclined to put more trust in the stories 'decoded' by the furnace flame."

CHAPTER 244 - Conclusion (12)

The Unbound Furnace traced the origins of its “material,” quickly burning through Wangge Luobao's entire hasty life.

For a toolmaking furnace, a person's loves and hates weren't worth ‘decoding,’ no matter how heartrending they might be. Xi Ping hadn't even had a chance to take a close look before the body of Southern Shu's foremost evil cultivator and his centuries of destitute wandering turned to ashes before his eyes.

The only thing that remained of Wangge Luobao was the little bone that had come from Ancestor Tianbo.

The experiment of the greedy Shamans had turned out two incomparable masters, and the only person who knew the full story behind this was Ancestor Tianbo, who had been tormented by the established foundation pill—even Yuan Hui, despite being one of the principal parties, wasn't fully aware.

Yuan Hui had been force-fed the established foundation pill while unconscious. From his spirit bursting to the “life-swapping” taking effect, he had narrowly escaped with his life in confusion, and he had no idea what had happened.

Afterward, Ancestor Tianbo, with his glib tongue and thunderous tactics, united the Xiuyi and Miah clans, raising the banner high. He led the enraged people of ancient Shu in overthrowing the Shamanic Way, committing to the flames the living corpse army that had occupied the blessed land of Southern Shu.

He hogged the secret arts of the Shamanic Way to himself and resolutely destroyed everything, becoming the very last person in the world who knew the history of the established foundation pill.

The fire of the Unbound Furnace expanded Ancestor Tianbo's bone hundreds upon thousands of times. Through that bone, Xi Ping impatiently went in pursuit of the traces that spirit-conducting gold had left behind.

The composition of the bodies of the Shamanic Way's living corpses was very similar to that of cultivators. Their bodies also contained a large quantity of spiritual energy accumulated by a silk dragon heart, analogous to a cultivator's "essence." Once a cultivator's Way of the Heart shattered, their essence would explode; not even a master like Lin Zongyi could survive it. Then wouldn't it have been even easier for the living corpse warriors to "burst their barrels"?

The Shamanic Way had controlled the living corpse warriors for so many years. They must have had a means of destroying the living corpses, committing them safely to the earth.

If there existed a means to allow people to escape Ways of the Heart, then it had to be part of the Shamanic Way!

As soon as Xi Ping's consciousness touched that bone, there was a hum in his mind. He nearly fainted amid the excessively jumbled and complex information—

He bit down hard on the tip of his tongue and held out. Countless secret arts flashed before his eyes, all kinds of complex rites of the ancient Shamanic Way, the worship of death, incomprehensible secret spells and scriptures, the silk dragons that could keep the dead in this world, the three-day dream...

Wait, the three-day dream grass!

With a sudden flash of inspiration, Xi Ping recalled Li Queru telling him that three-day dream grass could only be grown by silk dragon hearts.

From a certain intuition, Xi Ping hung his consciousness from the three-day dream grass flashing by, and saw countless corpses hidden among the thicket of wild grass.

The whole life cycle of the three-day dream grass appeared in the Unbound Furnace's fire. He saw masked Shamans driving living corpse warriors, making the living corpses draw a spell in the altar pool. Large quantities of three-day dream grass grew from the spell. When the spell was complete, the aquatic grass spread over the whole pool and grew hairlike filaments.

The living corpses lay down on their own, and the filaments of the three-day dream grass wrapped them up, like a cocoon, and like a mother's womb.

Then the fine filaments of the three-day dream grass gently pierced the living corpses' brows, and one inscription after another broke free of the center of the living corpse warriors' brows, following the grass filaments, silently dissolving in the thicket of aquatic grass that grew ever more lush. The spiritual energy of the living corpses dissipated, their rigid limbs gradually softened, and they sank with serene looks...

Xi Ping's heart began to beat wildly: it turned out that the Shamanic Way had used three-day dream grass to eliminate living corpses, and three-day dream grass had been preserved in the South Sea Hidden Realm!

Supposing that three-day dream grass could eliminate the inscriptions in the living corpse warriors, then...

There was a light at the end of the tunnel.

Xi Ping thought that he could ask the Southern He brothers in the South Sea Hidden Realm to ship out the three-day dream grass. He would spare no expense.

He could be entirely free of the hidden bones, save many people.

Shifu, Wen Fei, Lin Chi, Pang Jian, Bai Ling... and Xi Yue, who had been forced to establish a foundation. Time could at last be turned back, and the hidden bones and ancient inscriptions would be eliminated, the Law Breaker would be realized, and the spiritual mountains, like those living corpses, would fade from the human world, serene and quiet.

He could go home, take care of his parents in their old age, keep vigil by his grandmother's coffin, make up for the fourteen years of his absence.

He could continue leading the Luwu in business, and he could travel around seeing the sights, ride the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragons from north to south, brag to people and tell them that he was General Zhi's disciple, embarrass shifu all over the world, then pick up a beauty to marry and go home.

When the thousand-year-old shackles disappeared and the Law Breaker was realized, would that human world count as "beyond the bounds"?

Then... would the person who had arranged to meet him beyond the bounds still be able to furiously scold him for being "scandalous"?

The rims of Xi Ping's eyes burned. He lost all interest in ancient secrets.

The Unbound Furnace was connected to the thoughts of the master of the furnace flame. Large swaths of three-day dream grass leapt out of the flames, rapidly "decoding" the secret spell that eliminated living corpses. Xi Ping gobbled it up unthinkingly, carving it onto his consciousness. Meanwhile, through the reincarnation wood he had just regained control of, he contacted Lin Chi.

“Master Lin!” Exhausting the last of his reason, Xi Ping kept himself from telling Lin Chi, who still had a Way of the Heart, the whole story. He only quickly said, “I’ve obtained a secret spell that can eliminate inscriptions using three-day dream grass. Perhaps it can be used to dispose of my hidden bones. Hurry up and take a look for me!”

A beat late, Lin Chi gave an *ah* and said in confusion, “But three-day dream grass won’t work..”

“It’s gone extinct, I know, but I can get some, don’t bother about that, just..”

Lin Chi didn’t understand the details. He only thought there was something wrong with his manner. “Shiyong, what are you saying? What’s wrong? Calm down.”

Xi Ping wanted to laugh. “Lin-shishu, I’m very calm..”

Then Lin Chi gently said, “Three-day dream grass is ‘netherworld grass.’ It repels the bodies of the living. It can only be plucked to use as a medicinal herb. Even if it really can eliminate inscriptions, we still can’t use it on you.”

“No,” Xi Ping retorted instinctively, “you don’t know...”

“Did you decode something inside the Unbound Furnace?” Lin Chi thought the problem was that he was unfamiliar with toolmaking furnaces, so he said, “There are histories behind the inscriptions and arrays that toolmaking furnaces decode. Look closely, don’t be rash—we’ll discuss this later, come out now. What happened earlier? General Zhi is very worried..”

Xi Ping wasn’t in the mood to listen to him. He cast his gaze back into the fire of the Unbound Furnace and found that the Unbound

Furnace was plainly telling him that three-day dream grass repelled living things.

No...

Xi Ping searched desperately for another line of thought: maybe three-day dream grass itself was rather shy, but while this secret spell might not work, something else might. They had the Golden Hand, they had the most powerful medicine making master in the world. The troublesome evil cultivators and pigheaded shed skin puppets had all died off, they had time to do research, there was no rush.

But sadly, he really wasn't a person to lose his head easily. His reason remained lucid.

Xi Ping recalled that the bone the Unbound Furnace had decoded had been left behind by Ancestor Tianbo. If three-day dream grass really could eliminate a living person's Way of the Heart, he never would have allowed records of it to remain, or allowed it to go extinct only several hundred years later.

"Shiyong?" Lin Chi called to him. "Can you still hear me? Shiyong?"

For a moment, Xi Ping was alone in the Unbound Furnace, and he realized that if even the Shamanic Way, the source of all this, didn't have a means for destroying Ways of the Heart, then perhaps... there was no way.

The Unbound Furnace diligently restored all the traces held in the bone—

Because Kunlun had unexpectedly formed, Ancestor Tianbo's "road to godhood" had nearly died prematurely. He set his thoughts on Yuan Hui's hidden bones—only by obtaining the complete hidden

bones could he be free of the restrictions of his Way of the Heart, find an opportunity to overturn the game board.

So in the name of “expelling demons and upholding righteousness,” he had lured Yuan Hui to the Impassable Sea, and, when he encountered the heart demon, used the hidden bones that connected the two of them to tell Yuan Hui about the “life-swapping.” Yuan Hui’s consciousness was infested by the heart demon seed, and Ancestor Tianbo seized that opportunity, meaning to snuff out his consciousness and take the hidden bones for himself. When the two of them had halfway melded together, Yuan Hui had struggled to win back a thread of lucidity and cleaved the hidden bones apart with his own hands. He died, and his way was destroyed, while Ancestor Tianbo’s consciousness was seriously injured.

This had taken place precisely at an important stage in the formation of the spiritual mountains. The Southern Sage glimpsed the truth of Ways of the Heart in the Impassable Sea and gave birth to a heart demon, and Xuanyin’s Territory Map came into the world. Ancestor Tianbo, meanwhile, suffered backlash from the hidden bones. The spiritual mountains that had been born around his Way of the Heart split in two under the influence of the hidden bones and formed a South Sea Hidden Realm that he himself could not enter.

So much commotion couldn’t be concealed from the people around him. Ancestor Tianbo had no choice but to obscure it under the guise of “concern over a future split between the Xiuyi and Miah clans.”

So the South Sea Hidden realm prohibited Ways of the Heart, had no silk dragons, only had pools full of fake three-day dream grass—

Yes, Queru had also said that the three-day dream grass in the South Sea Hidden Realm did not match the historical record. Like ordinary spiritual plants, it could be activated with green ore powder.

Because that wasn't really three-day dream grass, only Yuan Hui's secret and unrealizable wish on the point of death.

The Unbound Furnace's flames rose slightly, cleanly digesting Ancestor Tianbo's Way of the Heart.

Wangge Luobao had only been an ascended spirit, but the origin of his Way of the Heart was too great. The spiritual energy prohibition line had originally been locked in a stalemate with the hidden bones at the Lingyun Mountain Range, which was the extreme end of the western continent, but when that Way of the Heart melted away, the spiritual energy prohibition line suddenly took a great stride forward.

Southern Shu's Three Islands and the South Sea Hidden Realm all entered in the spiritual energy prohibition.

At this point, there was nowhere left for the hidden bones to rest on the whole southern continent.

It wasn't only cultivators—even mortals felt a certain unspeakable sense of wonder. The birds and beasts that had been restless because the ancient inscriptions had entered the world became peculiarly calm. The ant colonies returned to their nests. The strange-looking dense clouds dispersed, revealing clear sky. On Shu's Three Islands, a green-eyed Miah child cried while working up his nerve to whistle. A shaking shepherd's song swept out. A sturdy sable sheep appeared in answer and chased away the flesh-eating spiritual beasts.

In the courtyard of Jinping's Yongning Marquis Manor, in the interests of safety, Zhi Xiu had gotten rid of the reincarnation wood using his own accompanying plant. Now fresh buds once again grew on the dead tree. The Marquis and the little cat stood side by side under the tree, listening to distant steam whistles coming from the Grand Canal.

The dust of the whole world was settling, and some people had come to the end of the road.

Finally, leaving aside Kunlun, all the spiritual mountains on the southern continent had fallen within the scope of the spiritual energy prohibition. The border of the Law Breaker surged over the Hong River and swept across the Tianze River, narrowly stopping at the line of Beijue and Kunlun—the place where the ancient inscriptions had once formed.

At the utterly cold Beijue Mountain Pass, the spiritual energy prohibition line finally ran out of momentum, unable to take another step forward. The world's most ancient spiritual mountains had been entirely occupied by the hidden bones.

The Kunlun Mountains collapsed, rumbling. The spiritual stones within the mountains had been carried away by the hidden bones, and the sword cultivators had turned into one ice sculpture after another. The Wanshuang Sword suddenly cracked and began to tremble as if lamenting.

There was no more barrier against the freezing wind of the utter north. It blew right into the human world. The Law Breaker could stop spiritual energy, but it couldn't stop the freezing wind. The great natural disaster of a thousand years earlier was being repeated. This time, there was no Sword Ancestor to execute the wishes of the people.

Xi Ping's consciousness left the Unbound Furnace.

Everyone saw him emerge from a half-dead reincarnation wood tree as if he had lost his soul, with menacing bloodstains still at the center of his brow. Wangge Luobao had stuck him full of holes earlier, and he still couldn't move very nimbly. He stumbled and went to his knees. A familiar light grey robe appeared in his field of

vision... Shifu had been swapping between just a few robes for centuries.

“Shifu...” Xi Ping had narrowly escaped with his life from the clutches of the great evil cultivator. He was completely disheartened, with thousands of words in his mind, but all he said was, “I’m fine, just wishing you an early happy new year.”

CHAPTER 245 - Conclusion (13)

“Tai Sui!”

“Shiyong, what’s the...”

Doctor Wen said, “Make... way...”

The shrill sound of a horse’s whinny interrupted the chaos of human voices.

A Luwu from the *Tao World Record* came hurrying over. He staggered as he dismounted his horse, bringing the latest news from Northern Li: “The freezing north wind has reached Yanning!”

Lin Chi turned pale. “So fast?!”

Before Xi Ping had come out of the tree, they had just received word of a change in the Kunlun Mountains.

It was over three hundred li from Kunlun to Northern Li’s capital Yanning, and the utterly freezing wind from the northern plains had crossed the distance in the blink of an eye. Without the Sword Ancestor to guard the northern border, would the wind from the utter north freeze all the five nations?

Wen Fei glanced at the Unbound Furnace as if willing to try anything in desperation. Wu Lingxiao, who could move only half her body, on hearing these words pushed aside the Luwu supporting her.

“Fine, then I’ll be firewood. This wretched place has turned me into a cripple. Just as well. My shizun spent his whole life guarding the Beijue Mountains. I can see this trifle through to the end for him.” Her gaze swept coldly over Wanshuang, which she would never

again take up. “I only regret that I never got the chance to fight against Zhaoting.”

“There’s nothing to regret. Even without the spiritual energy prohibition, I would not have fought you face-to-face. Zhaoting is inferior.” Zhi Xiu verbally admitted defeat without any impediment, then single-handedly picked up his disciple, who was full of bloody holes. “All the Kunlun Mountains’ spiritual energy and spiritual stones have been carried off already. There’s no sense in pushing the spiritual energy prohibition further north. There’s no lack of kindling in the furnace—everyone, let me say a few words.”

General Zhi’s tone was even, perfectly steady. As ever, it seemed as if he would never lose his temper. Xi Ping’s blank gaze fell on him, and he wondered whether *Shifu already knows the truth about Ways of the Heart* was a mistaken impression on his part.

Then he heard Zhi Xiu say, “The spiritual energy prohibition line has already forced the hidden bones out of the southern continent. They truly have no spiritual energy to use. Knowing full well that Kunlun is Northern Li’s protective screen, they still drained the spiritual mountains dry. This isn’t necessarily a bad thing—Shiyong?”

Xi Ping responded numbly: “The cold wind of Beiyuan can freeze a cultivator’s essence. The hidden bones’ cultivation level is only late stage ascended spirit. Once they’ve knocked over Kunlun, it will be hard for their heap of reincarnation wood to survive. These are the dying struggles of a trapped animal. Moreover, as soon as the utterly freezing wind comes down from the northern border, those shit-stirring evil cultivators won’t dare to go outside the spiritual energy prohibition line to hold it back again. But, shifu...”

It wasn’t the hidden bones that had driven people to the end of the road.

Zhi Xiu waved a hand, interrupting him again. “Inside the spiritual energy prohibition now, can reincarnation wood serve as a transport array?”

“As long as the person at the other end spills blood on reincarnation wood and lets me pull their consciousness into the Law Breaker.”

Zhi Xiu turned to Wu Lingxiao. “There are flying goose machines in Tao County. Please compose a letter to send to Northern Li to combine the Night Revenants and the other remaining cultivators within the borders. If I recall correctly, areas inhabited by northerners all have arrays and immortal tools to protect against wind and cold, yes?”

“They do have them,” Wu Lingxiao said, nodding, “but hasn’t spiritual energy been prohibited? What can those useless things do?”

“We still have spirit-conducting gold,” Zhi Xiu said. “Lin-shixiong, you go with Senior Wu, see whether you can use spirit-conducting gold to activate some arrays, give people some latitude to temporarily shelter and warm themselves.

“Publish this matter urgently, have the people of all nations prepare. If there are any changes, the *Tao World Record* will print the information at once.” Zhi Xiu turned to Wen Fei. “Fenghan, deal with something for me. When the various forces recover their senses, they’ll all request reincarnation wood for the sake of convenience. Have Heaven’s Design Pavilion and the Latent Cultivation Temple help you draft up regulations, as quickly as possible. This is precisely our opportunity to get this chaos under control. Otherwise, all the nations are like scattered sand. Even if we resolve the danger of the mountains collapsing, it will still be hard to calm things.

“While the wind is fast, the temperature needs time to drop. The northern continent is regularly cold and frozen, and everyone has a

means for handling an emergency. They won't freeze to death at once. They ought to be able to hold out for a few days. Contact the Kaiming Department for me, have them prepare to evacuate everyone to the south—Bai Ling can handle the organization.”

“General Zhi,” a Luwu couldn't resist saying, “even if all the emergency immortal tools and arrays on the northern continent can be activated, without the Kunlun Mountains, there will still be nothing to block the freezing wind from Beiyuan—unless the Sword Ancestor manifests, it will be only a matter of time before the southern continent freezes as well. This...”

Softly but with absolute confidence, Zhi Xiu said, “That won't happen.”

The Luwu who had asked the question stared.

“When the Sword Ancestor raised Wanshuang to block the wind from the utter north, he had not yet become a full moon sage,” Zhi Xiu said. “The world's shed skins haven't all died out yet. Go, get on with it.”

The Sword that Mended the Heavens of a thousand years earlier had cracked, but the one of a thousand years later was still in the hands of the new sword god.

Of the figure of Kunlun's founder, the Sword Ancestor, with Wanshuang in his grasp, only scant words remained in the history books. No one had seen him...but that Luwu suddenly thought that if the Sword Ancestor were here now, he would probably be willing to have a drink with Zhaoting.

He leapt onto his horse, turned, and left.

In a few words, Zhi Xiu had sent everyone running around. At last, only Xi Ping remained beside him.

Xi Ping was a monkey to begin with. He got into everything. And what was more, inside the spiritual energy prohibition, the reincarnation wood, which could connect to the Law Breaker's space, was the sole "spiritual item." Under ordinary circumstances, he would have been hopping by now, but instead he was off to the side, wordlessly lost in thought while things happened around him.

Only when everyone in the vicinity had left did Xi Ping's eyes move. The toppled reincarnation wood trees around them stood up once more and circled around, making a place where no one would disturb them. "Shifu, I..."

"Don't fret," Zhi Xiu said. "You're agitated now. Go get out your qin."

Xi Ping was briefly silent. With a thought, he reached out across space and brought out the Tai Sui Qin, which had been sealed in the trunk of a reincarnation wood tree.

This qin had been born of Xi Ping's bones. At the start it had been invisible and formless, its strings intermittently sounding, so no one could make anything of it, as confused and undetermined as its master.

Immediately upon entering the world, it had met the great tribulation of the Impassable Sea, run right up against the great demon of the East Sea, been sealed away by the sages, remained mute for five years, until it had recorded all the sad cries of the human world.

But while the Law Breaker had dredged Xi Ping's true body up from the abyss, it had also trapped the qin inside the spiritual energy prohibition. For eight years, it had hidden alone in the gnarled tree in the yard of the house in the countryside, with only a replica made by the *Discard the False and Keep the True* book to accompany its master. When one broke, another could be made, in a neverending cycle.

It was like its master, constantly struggling, constantly being imprisoned, but while it was located beyond the reach of the light of day, its sound could still raise countless storms.

Zhi Xiu reached out and plucked a few notes on the Tai Sui Qin, tunelessly, then handed the qin over to Xi Ping. “I studied a bit when I was little, but it seems I’ve given it all back to my teacher. Come here, play something for shifu.”

Xi Ping didn’t move.

He had started messing around with a qin as soon as he could use chopsticks properly. He could reproduce a large majority of all the tunes he had ever heard. But now, when he accepted the qin, the only thing that came to mind was that bleak and desolate Soul Calling Melody.

“What would you like to hear?”

Zhi Xiu considered it. He slouched against the Unbound Furnace. “The one that moved the Lingyang River—the one that won you the camellia crown of the Queen of Flowers.”

“I said that was only a rumor.” Xi Ping forced a laugh. “I was cheering on a friend. With your disciple’s celestial countenance, would there be any need to waste effort singing and dancing to win Queen of Flowers? I could just stand there, and anyone who didn’t acknowledge me as a beauty surpassing all the rest would have to be blind.”

Zhi Xiu: “...”

Xi Ping rolled up his sleeves and pressed his fingers to the qin strings. For a long moment, they didn’t stir. Finally, he sighed. “Shifu, I can’t remember the tune. Can you make do if I switch to

one about hastening home for an elder's funeral? Weddings and funerals are both happy occasions, anyway."

"Get out of here," Zhi Xiu scolded jokingly. His gaze passed over the Xia River, looking at Great Wan's Yuzhou on the opposite bank. With service suspended, the bridge of the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon was cheerless and deserted. Following the tracks, the tall clock tower was visible at a glance.

Suddenly, apropos of nothing, he said, "When I was little, there weren't so many strange cars and ships. It took a day's riding even to take an outing to the southern outskirts. The furthest place I ever went was Yuzhou, sending my a-jie off to get married."

"Oh?"

"My brother-in-law was the son of an old family friend. Their engagement had been fixed since the two of them were little. It was thought originally that this was someone we knew inside and out, but unexpectedly, that old friend was transferred to Yuzhou, and his whole family moved here... All the adults said we might have a hard time seeing her in the future, and indeed, for over thirty years after, there were only rare letters."

Wiping his vital qin, Xi Ping listened quietly, not interrupting.

Mortal carriages were slow, cherished memories were long, and lifespans were short. Everything came suddenly as the dew. What was unusual about separations in life or partings by death?

"But I was still young then, I didn't understand these things. I only thought that the scenery in Yuzhou was very different from Jinping. Everything was fresh. My sister was always a madwoman. She let me pick water chestnuts and catch frogs with the local children, and even had the lousy idea of having me keep one in da-ge's teapot. Then, at the appointed auspicious hour, she was married, and I was

a page at the wedding, and even lost my first tooth when it got stuck in a Yuzhou caramel.” Zhi Xiu turned to Xi Ping. “Have you ever eaten Yuzhou caramel?”

Seeing Xi Ping shake his head, as if struck with sudden inspiration, he patted himself down and unexpectedly really did come up with a few copper coins. “Money for the New Year, go to the opposite bank and buy a bag, then come back.”

“Thank you, shifu,” Xi Ping said, sighing. “You’re so generous.”

He went back and forth along both banks of the Xia River by means of the reincarnation wood. He put the coins in front of a peddler’s window and used a tree branch to snag a bag of candy and bring it back.

Yuzhou’s tastes were similar to the Chu. When they put the caramels in their mouths, teacher and disciple’s expressions turned dismal simultaneously.

“Still the same taste,” said Zhi Xiu. “*Hss...* no better than the rattan pepper sunflower seeds.”

“You really lost that tooth for nothing,” said Xi Ping.

The two of them spoke almost at once, and at once each was interrupted by the other.

Xi Ping was silent for a long time, then finally recovered from his earlier numbness. With his head in his hand, he laughed bitterly.

“I spent most of a month in Yuzhou, enjoying myself to the full, and only right before leaving did I find out that a-jie wasn’t going back with us. I was heartbroken. I jumped out of the carriage and ran back to find her. When da-ge sent someone to grab me, I stayed in her carriage and wouldn’t leave, crying so hard I nearly choked.” Zhi

Xiu pushed the bitter Yuzhou caramel into his left cheek. “Do you know what my sister said to me then?”

Xi Ping’s teeth were glued together by the caramel. Indistinctly, he answered, “What?”

“She said, *Without partings, there are no cherished memories. No one can enjoy themselves to the full at a banquet that never ends.*” Zhi Xiu raised his eyes and calmly looked at Xi Ping. “I have no regrets about entering the Way, but when I think about it now, had I died of illness at thirty, I may have had as much of my fill of joy as now. You are the only one in the world without a Way of the Heart. Shiyong, you’ve been keeping it in for a very long time, haven’t you? In fact, when a person establishes a foundation, it’s no different from dying, right?”

Xi Ping was taken unawares. With a crunch, he bit through the piece of candy.

“Do not worry, my Way of the Heart has not broken.” As Zhi Xiu spoke, he opened his hand. In his palm was a snow shuffler seed. “‘Heretical ways’ are always a little sturdier. What did you see in the Unbound Furnace? Let’s go to the Law Breaker and you can show me.”

Xi Ping hesitated for a long moment, then took Zhi Xiu’s consciousness into the Law Breaker’s space. He had meant to carefully gloss over what he had seen in the Unbound Furnace, but unexpectedly, perhaps because these feelings knotted in his heart had been oppressing him for too long, once he started, there was no stopping—

Xi Ping quickly restrained his consciousness, wanting to push shifu’s consciousness out, but Zhi Xiu held his shoulder down with Zhaoting. The sword cultivator’s hand as he held his sword was steady as Mount Tai.

Even inside the spiritual energy prohibition, a shed skin consciousness was far faster than anything else. In a single glance, Zhi Xiu had seen the whole sequence.

“Three-day dream grass.” Xi Ping was watching for shifu’s reaction in terror, but Zhi Xiu laughed. “I see.

“These second-hand accompanying plants.” Zhi Xiu gave him a smack with Zhaoting and sighed. “Didn’t you notice that when Yuan Hui died, his essence didn’t explode?”

CHAPTER 246 - Conclusion (14)

“Send General Zhi to Northern...” When Bai Ling received word, he was stupefied. “Wait, you’re saying he wants to go *where*? Does the Viscount know?!”

Then he realized that the Luwu passing along the message was using reincarnation wood to speak to him, and Xi Ping, in the reincarnation wood, had said nothing.

“Don’t get excited, Wenchang-xiong.” Bai Ling reached out to hold down Pang Jian, who had jumped out of his chair, and said to the Luwu conveying the information through the reincarnation wood, “Pass on to General Zhi...”

“General Zhi is Great Wan’s stabilizing force. The Kaiming Department is willing to cooperate with all of General Zhi’s dispatches.” Bai Ling mentally arranged his wording in a hurry. One had to honor heaven, earth, one’s sovereign, one’s parents, and one’s teacher—after all, as a junior, there were some things the Viscount couldn’t very well say, so he would have to be the one to give counsel. “But there are thousands of people in the Kaiming and the Luwu...”

Pang Jian cut in irately: “And Heaven’s Design Pavilion hasn’t died out yet!”

“And there are the millions of people of Wan. Since ancient times, it has been a place of culture, a nation of civilization, but while its customs are gentle, its people have pride.” As always, Bai Ling’s voice was restrained and chilly. He spoke with emphasis. “Even if a human sacrifice will create a heroic legend, how can we stand for it?”

How could the Viscount stand for it?

“Please reconsider, General Zhi!”

In the reincarnation wood, the Luwu transmitting the message didn't speak. A very mild voice responded: “Thank you.”

It was Zhi Xiu.

Bai Ling froze up slightly, then said, “Unless you can imitate the Sword Ancestor and raise the Kunlun Mountains again like a thousand years before... But, General Zhi, the times have changed. With how much of the people's resentment the spiritual mountains have amassed to this day, especially in Northern Li, would they be willing to raise another range of spiritual mountains?”

“No,” Zhi Xiu flatly interrupted him, “no new spiritual mountains will rise. You're right, young Mr. Bai, the times have changed. Do not worry, I am only going to scout a trail, verify a hypothesis.”

Bai Ling thought that there was a peculiar joy in his tone and was just about to follow up when he received a private message from Xi Ping sent to him alone.

“Make the preparations,” said Xi Ping, “I'm here.”

Bai Ling: “...”

You're the one I'm worried about!

For some reason, Bai Ling suddenly remembered how, when he had just reached the human world and was hiding in a stack of paper, he had first seen Xi Ping—he had just been at the most insufferable age. This human child who had grown up in a honey jar—seeing him, the half-demon who had neither father nor mother felt deep envy and jealousy, so he had always disliked that young master cousin. He'd just never said anything about it in front of his lord.

But at some point, he had begun to see that person through Zhou Ying's eyes, so in Zhou Ying's place, he felt so choked that his chest ached.

Once Xi Ping had spoken, there was no one who could bar the way to Zhaoting. The Luwu made arrangements with unmatched swiftness. For the first time, Zhi Xiu took a long distance trip in a car.

Northern Li had lost its inner sect, and the members of the outer sect scattered throughout the continent were at a loss, and their manpower was insufficient. The Luwu had brought in a troop of soldiers from Hongyin on the Wan-Li border.

Mortals were repairing arrays!

And succeeding!

While Northern Li was conservative, it was also valiant. The unyielding men and sturdy women who had grown up buffeted by the northwest wind, seeing the situation, ran after the Hongyin troops in rapid succession.

A crowd was the hardest thing in the world to fathom. Sometimes, a crowd would slip collectively into an abyss from unbelievable stupidity, like one hollow, apathetic puppet after another, using the same witless brain; and sometimes a crowd would be like a spark in a gold-smelting furnace, burning with incredible light, unstoppable once it got started.

The knowledge behind arrays and spirit-conducting gold, profound or mysterious, was disenchanting. All kinds of manuals passed through countless hands and were copied. When Zhi Xiu crossed the border into Northern Li, he saw arrays modified with spirit-conducting gold everywhere, spread over the northern continent, golden light glowing like a miracle.

The descendants of the Li people who in their confusion and helplessness had transmitted inscriptions and entrusted their families and their safety to a god had now taken up tools and were choosing to be gods themselves.

Where in the past the ancient inscriptions had been carved, now there were all kinds of arrays to protect against cold. Though they were all low-level arrays—one was useless, and two were also useless—tens of thousands of them had firmly blocked out the bitter cold of the utter north as it came south.

Three days later, Zhi Xiu reached the northern border of the spiritual energy prohibition.

Xi Ping had come with him—he hadn't passed through reincarnation wood; the reincarnation wood trees here had all frozen to death. If not for the effects of a large quantity of warming arrays, Xi Ping suspected that he could only have stuck it out for a few breaths.

Neither of them spoke. The wind was too strong. Even if one spoke, it wouldn't reach the other's ears.

Because of the hidden bones, Xi Ping still didn't dare to leave the spiritual energy prohibition at will. He only stood by the spiritual energy prohibition line, holding up an upgraded immortal tool that protected against the wind.

Zhi Xiu gave Xi Ping a look, and with somewhat stiffened fingers made a *don't be scared* gesture at him: *As we agreed*.

Xi Ping didn't move, as if he had already frozen solid. The milky white light in his hand spilled onto the blank and boundless snow as he watched Zhi Xiu step out of the spiritual energy prohibition.

Zhaoting, which had been as quiet as mundane iron, let out a clear and melodious ringing. Spiritual light spread from it. Next, countless upright snow-white accompanying plants rose steeply from the ground, amid the vast wind and snow forming an expanse, forming a forest, spreading as far as the eye could see.

Zhaoting, leaving its sheath, stirred the surrounding spiritual energy. Amid the cluster of accompanying plants, it replicated the secret spell that the living corpse warriors had drawn amid the thicket of three-day dream grass—

Across the spiritual energy prohibition line, Xi Ping sensed something. He raised his head laboriously, feeling even the violent icy wind stagnate.

When Yuan Hui had hewn apart the hidden bones, it had been equivalent to other cultivators destroying their own Ways of the Heart. His corpse ought to have exploded into dust. But instead he had lain peacefully in the depths of Impassable Sea, amid the forest of reincarnation wood, just like the living corpse warriors who had gone to rest in the three-day dream grass.

When Zhi Xiu had pointed this out in the Law Breaker, Xi Ping had immediately realized something.

Reincarnation wood, three-day dream grass...

“Three-day dream grass repels living things, because it is the resting place of the living corpses,” Zhi Xiu had said. “Have you considered that three-day dream grass may have been the ‘accompanying plant’ of the living corpse warriors?”

“Shifu, why are accompanying plants actually born? Wangge Luobao didn’t explain it clearly...”

“Because he didn’t know either. That gentleman from Southern Shu, to judge from his conduct, would not have had an accompanying plant even if he had lived to become a shed skin. Since ancient times, people have thought that when a person who does not accord with the Great Way drags their existence out to the point of becoming a shed skin, they will give birth to an accompanying plant, but actually that isn’t entirely right—otherwise, while I may be untalented, I suppose I still don’t count as more ‘evil’ than Lingyun’s Tianbo.”

“Then... what is it?”

“It is a resting place. Like the leaves falling in autumn, the summer flowers becoming the next year’s mud—no one and nothing can last forever. In the end, all will change from one thing to another, in an endless cycle. An ascended spirit can put inquiries to heaven and earth, ask questions until heaven and earth have nothing left to say to them, and then another shed skin who ‘accords with the Way and becomes heaven’ will appear in the world. I was willful and unfilial, hopelessly pigheaded, never willing to come to the ‘Way,’ so at the shed skin pass, I was interrogated for eight years—become a god and sage, or be a common fool. Gods do not fail. They last as long as heaven and earth last. But a common fool is forever himself and in the end has a resting place. Accompanying plants are ‘resting places’ for us living corpses. It isn’t only evil cultivators who have them. It is those who know that ‘I’ and ‘my Way of the Heart’ are perhaps not the same.”

The four ancient demonic gods, Hui Xiangjun who had carelessly cast the Eternal Spring Brocade’s Way of the Heart into an old furnace, Qiu Sha who had lived all her life for a single person, Zhuoming who had stored up and played with Ways of the Heart like marbles... Some were venerable, some were despicable, some were detestable, some were hard to describe, but from birth to death, they had all been themselves.

When he felt his essence flow out of him like water, Zhi Xiu suddenly thought that he had just forgotten to say something important to his little disciple.

Xi Shiyong was the wisest person he had ever met in his life.

Though his spiritual sense was average, his constitution just adequate, his heart unsettled and his mind unfocused, and he was the foremost shirker of work and responsibility... Zhi Xiu would forever remember what he had said when he hesitated, unwilling to become a disciple of Flying Jade Peak—

Everyone takes their “Way” and uses it to make inquiries of heaven and earth. If I were heaven and earth, I’d be sick of it.

Then, Zhi Xiu’s spirit trembled, and a certain indescribable calm surged up. His Way of the Heart was melting away along with his essence.

It wasn’t like Lin Zongyi, a resolute destruction, and it wasn’t like Xuanwu and the others, absorbed by force into the Unbound Furnace. When his Way of the Heart quietly flowed out, it was like eating a fruit and burying its pit in the earth.

To an observer, his body was instantly covered with frost and snow, as if he had been frozen solid.

“Shifu!” As if he could take no more, Xi Ping stepped over the spiritual energy prohibition line. His voice was carried away by the wild wind.

As spiritual energy once again began to flow through his limbs, the hidden bones, on their last gasp outside the spiritual energy prohibition, immediately fixed on him. This time, the hidden bones had obtained all the spiritual energy of the Kunlun Mountains. They

threw themselves at Xi Ping with a force to topple mountains and overturn seas!

Just then, the snow shuffler forest suddenly moved on its own, rapidly growing and expanding. The frost and snow on the canopies all fell to the ground, nearly burying Xi Ping.

The secret spell on the snow shuffler was flickering rapidly. A crack that sounded like a wail came to Xi Ping's ears. Next, spiritual energy thousands of times fiercer than Zhi Xiu's shed skin essence poured into the snow shuffler forest.

This could only be the spiritual energy of an entire range of spiritual mountains. The snow shufflers, serving in place of three-day dream grass, had also melted away the hidden bones charging toward Xi Ping!

But Xi Ping didn't pause for a moment. As if he was completely unsurprised, he chose his timing precisely, flew a sword upward, grabbed hold of Zhi Xiu, and retreated back inside the spiritual energy prohibition without a look back, already casting a handful of warming talismans on Zhi Xiu, his hands moving with utmost speed. Then, not pausing in his steps, he charged into a steam carriage modified with spirit-conducting gold and raced south wildly.

"Shifu, shifu, we did it! Accompanying plants really can substitute for three-day dream grass, they can eliminate Ways of the Heart..."

There was no sound from Zhi Xiu. He had entered the spiritual energy prohibition, but the secret spell of "going rest" was still slowly dissolving his essence and Way of the Heart. Xi Ping could feel it.

He didn't dare to look in the rearview mirror. "Shifu! What I did back there, I didn't talk it over with you, I was wrong, you should flog me, shifu..."

Xi Ping's vision blurred, and the modified upgraded car slammed into a big rock. The car leapt up several chi when it hit the boulder and screeched as it scraped a long mark into the ground. Zhi Xiu's icy, stiff body bumped against Xi Ping, just as if he really were flogging him in response to his words.

Xi Ping raised his hand. Over and over, he didn't dare to grasp that stiff sleeve. Outside the car window was a vast sea of snow, the wild wind sobbing. Ever so slowly, he bent down—

And heard a weak voice say: "... What's wrong with you, you unfilial fiend? You wouldn't play some happy tunes when I asked, but you're so proactive when it comes to wailing for the dead?"

CHAPTER 247 - Conclusion (Final)

The next year—it was no longer called by the old era name; when the hidden bones had swallowed Kunlun, Zhou Huan had unfortunately been impacted, dying in the torrent of wind and snow, without time to issue an edict abdicating the throne. But the teenage crown prince, who had remained in Yanning City, was perceptive. He dutifully wrote a letter back to his country, indicating that he had no talents and no virtues and could not ascend the throne. He would leave everything up to the immortal to decide.

Zhi Xiu took him at his word. He decided to change the era name to “Kaiming,” letting the Kaiming Department and Heaven’s Design Pavilion respectively continue to act for him in all affairs of government and defense, with an annual examination to select talented individuals, the subjects and system in the course of slow progressive fluctuation. Zhi Xiu handled matters in much the same way he behaved, without haste.

The secret spell of the Shamanic Way and the accompanying plant had sent ashes to ashes and dust to dust, laying the living corpses to rest in the earth and fully dispelling the sword god’s essence and Way of the Heart, leaving them at the northern extremity of the continent. All that remained to him was his sword. He was no longer a god, having returned to the condition of a half-immortal... like the Latent Cultivation Temple’s Su Zhun.

Although inside the spiritual energy prohibition, there wasn’t much difference between half-immortals and shed skins. They all had to take cars or walk, anyway. The only difference was that the minor ailment he’d had in his youth of being given to coughing when the seasons changed had come back, and the extreme cold seemed to have damaged his joints, so he was always a little uncomfortable on rainy days.

But without discomfort, you couldn't appreciate how pleasant it was to be at ease. He himself thought this was pretty good.

In the second year of Southern Wan's Kaiming Era, in the spring, the baby was born in the South Sea Hidden Realm, a girl, with a voice like a large bell as soon as she emerged. She was born with thick hair and would certainly be strong-featured in the future. In two hundred years, she was the first normal child born among the Turmoilers.

As everyone had previously arranged, Li Manlong gave her the name "Hope."

Hope that with the veins of the earth repaired, the Southern He Peninsula would once again be full of spiritual energy; hope that the drifting exiles would be able to return to their native soil, even if it might take decades.

He wouldn't last that long, but by the time little Hope had become old Hope, they would be able to go home.

Northern Li's tens of thousands of arrays and the towering snow shuffler... no—for public purposes, official documents called it the "moonlight frost" forest—the towering moonlight frost forest there blocked the utterly freezing wind.

The hidden bones seemed to have vanished. Zhi Xiu said that they had only themselves to blame; they had frozen in the land of utter cold.

There were some people with a special bearing natural to them that made others believe what they said. He successfully covered up the secrets of the Shamanic Way's secret spell and the vanished Way of the Heart and essence.

With the crisis resolved, troublemaking profiteers got ready to act up again. The Xiuyi and Miah clans were about to have another falling out; Yu Chang used his numerical advantage to seize the Sanyue Mountains, and the nation of Chu entered the era of *Are those princes and nobles, those generals and ministers born any better than us?*

Northern Li recovered after nearly freezing solid and prepared to repay kindness with betrayal; some powerful officials in Yanning got the idea of attacking the southern continent to demand the annexed territory of the Southern He Peninsula. They were cut down at one stroke by Wu Lingxiao—Wu Lingxiao, with Lin Chi's skillful modifications, had swapped many of her meridians and a great deal of bone jade for spirit-conducting gold and could finally move freely, like a human.

But these were all minor problems. After all, inside the spiritual energy prohibition, reincarnation wood was everywhere, and it couldn't be wiped out if you couldn't use spiritual energy. All reincarnation wood trees were Xi Ping's spies, and he had something on everyone. Moreover, during the emergency, practically everyone had spilled their blood on the reincarnation wood, and who knew what that "Tai Sui" would use it for? Because of this, Xi Ping's word still had weight.

Even Yu Chang was forced to hold his nose and once again indicate that he wanted to work with Tai Sui.

Tai Sui was unexpectedly accommodating. He not only admitted him with pleasure, he even seemed to find his conscience; he returned the Chief Offering's vital weapon, and had only one request: that Yu Chang not leave the spiritual energy prohibition.

The Unbound Furnace would one day burn out. The spiritual energy prohibition was constantly shrinking, some dozens of li per year.

Hearing his unreasonable request, Yu Chang said to himself that of course it had been too good to be true; how could Tai Sui find his conscience? That asshole had no conscience. So he had to go out and have a look around.

So Yu Chang spent three years becoming the new master of Dongheng. When the domestic situation had been stabilized, he impatiently packed his bags and took a ship outside of the spiritual energy prohibition to the south... and was dumbfounded.

Yu Chang found that after spending three years in that cursed spiritual energy prohibition, his cultivation level had fallen from middle stage ascended spirit back to established foundation—a major boundary!

Yu Chang nearly broke down. He cast aside the nation and resolved to live as a savage on a desert island. But he soon found that even outside the spiritual energy prohibition, his essence was constantly draining away. He tried all the means he knew of and finally lost hope.

The great turmoil created by the hidden bones had broken something in the mortal world. He couldn't accumulate spiritual energy, and his Way of the Heart was constantly dissolving.

After returning in dejection to Dongheng, Yu Chang gave no outward signs—no one could know of this. Since he had the initiative, he had to prepare in advance. Therefore he offered Xuanyin a sky-high price to purchase a batch of spirit-conducting gold.

Xi Ping said, “Sell it to him. That's my brother who's shared in mortal peril with me. Even if we give it to no one else, we have to give it to him!”

So Southern Wan cleaned out all the spirit-conducting gold gathering dust in its warehouses and gave it to Yu Chang at a high price. Yu Chang left feeling very pleased, ready to throw all his forces into producing a heap of upgraded protective appliances.

The next month, Moon Plated Peak announced an upgrade to spirit-conducting gold. The new version of spirit-conducting gold could be used by ordinary people; it was cheap, and its output greatly increased. Yu Chang immediately got a headache. Never mind that this later became a much-told tale.

Xi Ping, having tricked him down to threadbare underwear, ran back to the Xuanyin Mountains through the night to tell Zhi Xiu the results of his experiment with the great fool Yu Chang—the Ways of the Heart of the world’s cultivators were indeed silently dissolving.

There was no need to go to the trouble they had taken dealing with the hidden bones. Inside the spiritual energy prohibition, with everyone having spilled blood on reincarnation wood, the Shamanic Way’s hidden spells carved on reincarnation wood trees were like cluster after cluster of three-day dream grass, working day and night to dissolve every Way of the Heart in the world.

And no one knew about it. Thanks to Ancestor Tianbo, the Shamanic Way’s secret spells had died out long ago, anyway.

But for some reason, when Zhi Xiu had heard this, he didn’t look happy. He only gave the “heartless” Xi Ping a somewhat worried look and suddenly said, “Shiyong, I’m in charge of the Xuanyin Mountains, and I don’t hold with so many restrictions and taboos. You... could find a companion and get married. You don’t have to restrict yourself based on family background and history, as long as it’s not someone too preposterous...”

Xi Ping choked on a mouthful of wine. “*Cough-cough-cough...* huh?”

Zhi Xiu said, "Aren't you on good terms with Miss Zhao? And she's a classmate and friend..."

"We won't be friends for much longer!" Xi Ping waved a hand. "As soon as she writes five toilet bulletin articles scolding me this year, I'm breaking off all ties with her... and she's already written four!"

"Miss Wei..."

Xi Ping turned pale with fright. "Unacceptable, there's a generation gap!"

"Then..."

"Shizun, have you been possessed by my mother's second cousin's wife?" Xi Ping made off with two jars of his homemade wine and hugged them to settle his nerves. "It's impossible. But the venerable old lady does send me a gold bar in a red envelope every year. Why don't you learn something from her? Hey, hey, hey, I'm scrambling, I'm scrambling."

Then, in a whirl of bustle and disarray, the fourth year of the Kaiming Era came.

It was the last month of the year.

The Yongning Marquis Manor's Madam Cui stood abruptly, felt dizzy, and fell, dying painlessly. And she was nearly eighty; it was a happy death.

Half a month later, when the first snow broke the branches of the reincarnation wood tree in the garden with its weight, the page went as usual first thing in the morning to get the Marquis out of bed to do shadowboxing exercises, but he couldn't get him up.

Xi Ping, having seen off his parents, cleaned up the house, lived there alone for the better part of half a year, then left Haozhong to take care of it while he returned to the Xuanyin Mountains.

He no longer had a home in Dangui Lane.

In the sixth year of the Kaiming Era, the previous General Commander of Heaven's Design Pavilion and steward of the Latent Cultivation Temple Su Zhun declined, passing away on the praying mat in his meditation chamber. Luo Qingshi became the new steward.

Xuanyin's inner sect no longer accepted new disciples. The Latent Cultivation Temple became the place where the Kaiming Department and Heaven's Design Pavilion advanced their cultivation, a gathering of geniuses and talents. Luo Qingshi was no longer forced to build a wall with muck. He relaxed and grew a handspan.

In the seventh year of the Kaiming Era, the spiritual energy prohibition retreated over a hundred li, and the cultivators at last discovered a problem: a small group of people who had gone exploring outside the spiritual energy prohibition, and some who hadn't gone, began to show early signs of decline. The cultivation world panicked.

For a time, all kinds of explanations seethed and bubbled. Despairing cultivators tried one unbelievable method after another in close succession, trying to hold onto their dissolving Ways of the Heart. They worked at it for a full twenty years—the spiritual energy prohibition was receding faster and faster. The utter north no longer seemed so cold. It wasn't only the Ways of the Heart dissolving, it was also the spiritual mountains, with Lancang and Xuanyin taking the lead, having nearly halfway dissolved; and even the Sanyue Mountains shrank several zhang at a speed visible to the naked eye.

The *Tao Word Record* published an article, the gist of it being: the cause of the great natural disaster in Beiyuan had been uncontrolled fighting among cultivators, which had led to the seasons being turned upside down and the climate becoming changeable. Now the spiritual mountains were dissolving, and cultivators' essences and Ways of the Heart were dissolving—wasn't this returning spiritual energy to the mortal world?

No one paid attention. The cultivators were still in the midst of blank despair.

There followed an incredibly chaotic thirty years, during which one heard all kinds of unbelievable news every day.

Fifty years later, the spiritual energy prohibition retreated to the continent, and high level cultivators began to show signs of aging one after another—began to be plagued by minor injuries and illnesses.

The human world had been changing with each passing day, and the cultivation world at last belatedly acknowledged that there were new heavenly commandments.

In a century, accompanied by a clap of spring thunder, all the spiritual energy of the Xuanyin Mountains melted into the veins of the earth, leaving only the empty mountains and stones.

Wheat seedlings grew in Southern He. Zhi Xiu's hair was grey.

The following year, when the cicadas sang, teacher and disciple were fishing outside the Latent Cultivation Temple when Zhi Xiu suddenly brought up an old topic and said to Xi Ping, "Shiyong, why don't you get married?"

"Mother's second cousin's wife," said Xi Ping.

Zhi Xiu used his fishing rod to splash water all over him.

Xi Ping leapt up and hid inside a reincarnation wood tree on the bank. “I have little Xi Yue to keep me company, shi... uh.”

Before he could finish, he saw a teenage boy dressed in fisherman’s clothes poling a boat, gawking at him from not far away. He had just happened to see him go into the reincarnation wood tree. “Tai... Tai Sui!”

The teenager went to his knees with a thud, planning to kowtow to the legendary divine grand duke.

When he looked up, the two former celestial beings who had come down to slack off in the mortal world were already gone. It was as if he had been hallucinating.

“Shifu.” Xi Ping was carrying their fishing rods and pails. He turned his head and looked around. Seeing that there were no interlopers, he said seriously, “I heard from Master Lin that you bragged to that old monster Xuanwu and said, ‘The disciple of my Flying Jade Peak is willing to make the sacrifice for the sake of the world.’ Look, when you’ve already bragged about it, how could I let you down?”

Zhi Xiu said nothing else, only sighed.

In another three years, Great Wan had been run by humans for several generations and had gotten entirely on the right track, so Zhi Xiu left a letter and went out traveling.

He didn’t come back.

So Xi Ping no longer returned to Xuanyin. The Xuanyin Mountains were no longer his home.

Later, everyone he knew, everyone he didn't know, his kith and kin, old friends and enemies... he saw them off one after another, the Ways of the Heart that had stood as commemoration for thousands of years returning to the earth.

When the first soft shoot grew at the Beijue Mountain Pass, the half-demon Bai Ling disappeared. At the end, he bid Xi Ping farewell.

The half-demon's death wasn't as wretched as a human's. He seemed unharmed, only said, "Viscount—"

Bai Ling had called him "Viscount" all his life.

"Shall we bet?" he asked. "Do you think you'll be the first to see my lord, or will I see him first?"

"Me," said Xi Ping categorically.

Bai Ling laughed loudly and turned into a lump of paper.

He had even saved on paper money.

This was Xi Ping's last friend. From then on, he moved into the reincarnation wood. The human world was no longer his home.

In another two hundred years, one day, Xi Ping sensed something. In a rare occurrence, he walked out of a reincarnation wood tree in Tao County.

He had been sleeping for forty years inside the tree. Seeing the dazzling rays of the morning sun, he only thought it looked unfamiliar to him, as though something were missing.

Dongheng's Sanyue, the very last range of spiritual mountains in the world, had also vanished.

Xi Ping raised a hand and found that not a sliver of his essence remained, but he could use a bit of spiritual energy. The spiritual energy prohibition was gone.

“Tai Sui!” A voice from the South Sea Hidden Realm came through the reincarnation wood—the younger generations didn’t know who he was; they recited this title out of habit like their ancestors. “We’ve floated up! The South Sea Hidden Realm has emerged into the world!”

There was a crack. A little bracelet fell out of the Tai Sui Qin. The Law Breaker’s axiom had been realized; the borders had been broken.

The fire in the Unbound Furnace was extinguished.

A little out of the habit, Xi Ping put a hand to his chest. Suddenly, he recalled something, and began to run like mad—without the Law Breaker and only half-immortal cultivation left to him, he could no longer pass through reincarnation wood. He could only fly a sword.

But soon, he found that technology had developed too quickly in the last forty years. Flying a sword wouldn’t be as fast as taking a train.

After a day and a night, he got off the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon, switched to flying a sword, had his ears filled with fantastic stories of the South Sea Hidden Realm emerging, but he was too busy to pay attention to it and turned a deaf ear, only raced north—further north.

The furious Beijue Mountain Pass seemed to have been appeased by the cultivation world returning its spiritual energy. The snow on the mountain slopes had melted somewhat, and small flowers had bloomed all over it. Some years ago, people had begun mining here.

As soon as Xi Ping arrived, he heard people gathered together talking about some “strange phenomena” and “mirages”... What they were talking about were shepherd’s songs suddenly being heard outside the Beijue Mountains.

In addition to the South Sea Hidden Realm, there was unexpectedly also a hidden realm outside the Beijue Mountains, in no-man’s-land. It wasn’t large, and it didn’t have as many resources as the South Sea Hidden Realm. It was like a paradise. The people there were herders—they said that this was the village where the Sword Ancestor had lived while cultivating.

They didn’t know about Kunlun, but unexpectedly they still remembered the great natural disaster that had brought about the birth of the spiritual mountains. They only said that before the utter cold had come, in a moment of emergency, the Sword Ancestor had sent their whole village into a mustard seed.

After that, most likely the mustard seed’s master had died, leaving it broken, and the people in the little village had never found other outsiders.

Others didn’t understand it and stood around in circles having rapid discussions, but Xi Ping suddenly realized that this hidden realm might have been like the South Sea Hidden Realm and Great Wan’s Territory Map, the unreconciled human heart cut away from the Sword Ancestor, the founder of the spiritual mountains, left outside the “heavenly commandments.”

“Are you a divinity?” While Xi Ping was lost in thought, a curious child suddenly ran over. He wasn’t shy of a stranger, having presumably seen that he had a tidy look. He hugged Xi Ping’s leg and said, “There’s a big mirror hanging on the mountain at the village entrance! There’s a divinity inside the mirror, who looks kind of like you.”

Xi Ping gave a start. “Wh...”

“Nara, don’t talk nonsense, get over here!” The nervous mother snatched back her child and smiled at Xi Ping. In ancient and exquisite Northern Li language, she said, “It’s only a stone that’s been polished very clean. It must have broken in the earthquake. Otherwise we couldn’t have found the way out...”

“Take me there!” The crowd saw the man who looked like a divinity suddenly seem to go insane. He removed practically all the gold, silver, and other valuables he was carrying and shoved them into people’s arms. “Take me there!”

“No need, no need... it’s right there.” The village head assigned a few tall, strong men to accompany him. “It really did break entirely. Look, everyone put the broken stones they cleaned up over there. What divinity? It was just a child looking in a mirror and not being able to tell what he was looking at... Hey, you!”

Xi Ping gathered the remainder of his weak spiritual sense in his eyes and at a glance picked out a smooth stone from the pile. There was writing on it.

“Oh!” His guides also went over to observe. “What kind of writing is that?”

It was Wan writing.

The familiar handwriting on it said: *I was here.*

—

Main Story Ends

EXTRAS

EXTRA 1 - Antiquity

That year, Xi Ping celebrated the New Year with shifu on Flying Jade Peak—the concrete distribution of work was that Divine Physician Wen made the New Year’s Eve dinner, Xi Yue assisted, and Master Zhi, Master Lin, and little Master Xi played cards while they waited to eat.

Zhi Xiu occasionally helped translate the expletives it took Wen Fei ages in puffing and blowing to get out, then gave a few mild and gentle words of consolation; but he had no intention of moving his ass. Lin Chi was responsible for being abashed, and Xi Ping was responsible for answering back on everyone’s behalf amid shifu’s completely insincere *Do not be wanton*.

Just then, Flying Jade Peak received a flying goose message from Zhao Qindan.

“Sir Xu” had lately been writing a history, using popular novels to relate the rise and fall of the immortal mountains. If there was something she couldn’t work out and needed research done on, she would send a letter to ask Xi Ping.

Xi Ping gave a long sigh and craned his neck to lazily read the letter. “It’s the New Year, can’t this lady cool off a bit? Why so much fighting spirit? ... Oh, *the origin of the water dragon beast spirits?*”

Zhao Qindan said that the *Tao World Record* had received letters from its readers asking whether the water dragon beast spirits were actually manmade puppets or whether there had once really been such a spiritual beast, and if they were real spiritual beasts, what heinous crime had they committed to still be imprisoned in Heaven’s

Design Pavilion, serving out their sentences thousands of years later?

“Do all the people in the world already have justice? They’ve even started worrying about the beasts,” Xi Ping muttered. “Shifu, do you know where the water dragon clan came from?”

Zhi Xiu automatically looked up at the sky, then remembered that “observing celestial phenomena” was a trick that no longer worked. Apart from being able to tell whether it would rain tomorrow, you couldn’t see a thing. Therefore, he pretended not to have heard and tossed his cards aside. “Hey, Fenghan, why are you doing all that on your own? It’s a disgrace. I’m coming to help you!”

Xi Ping: “...”

Lin Chi gave a dry cough. “There are records concerning beast spirit arrays on Moon Plated Peak. You could probably look into the history as well...”

“It’s the New Year!” said Xi Ping. “You want me to trek through the mountains to do research? Are you nuts? Am I taking the imperial exams next year or something?”

Lin Chi blinked. “Oh, you don’t want to go look at them?”

Xi Ping fumingly stood up and bundled himself up into a sphere. Humiliated, he said, “...I’m going.”

In ancient times, there had been a clan of water dragons in the East Sea. They had once been auspicious beasts that lived far from the continent, with shrimp soldiers and crab generals as their daily provisions, having no association with humans.

But there were always belligerent people who didn’t know what was good for them. The whole continent was insufficient for them to

show themselves off, and they had to run out and fight in the East Sea as well. When these people fought, their arms and legs would go flying all over the place. The smell of blood and the essence splattering everywhere attracted the enormous beasts from the depths of the sea.

The water dragons had a moment of greed and got a taste. From then on, there was no turning back.

This was a problem. Eating stinking fish and rotting shrimp would at most give you the runs, but eating bits of festering human would go to your head.

These dismembered body parts contained not only flesh and blood, they also contained Ways of the Heart and the consciousnesses of that group of people, dead in the midst of resentment, which tried to snatch the huge dragons' bodies after they were consumed. But how could a human consciousness occupy as large a head as that of a dragon of distant antiquity? The body-snatching failed, and instead the Ways of the Heart and consciousnesses were "digested" by the huge dragons.

The huge dragons today ate ten jin of "insatiable avarice," tomorrow ate a vat of "heinous lust for power," the day after that mistakenly consumed a half-bushel of cultivators gone out of their minds... and thereupon had a change of attitude.

The auspicious animals developed completely unnecessary intelligence and henceforth became vicious beasts, stirring up trouble almost every day, snatching a few people from the shore to munch on.

Seeing that there was no saving them, the masters on the eastern continent could only slaughter a dragon whenever they met one, and the Southern Sage was particularly mean—he created an art to collect beast spirits; when he captured a water dragon, he would

skin it and rip out its tendons, trap it in an array, and go around releasing the beast spirits to clean the silt from the waterways, ordering them around like earthworms or loaches.

This was the origin of the water dragon beast spirits.

“This thing is ancient.” Xi Ping was reading carefully through handwritten bamboo slips, afraid of accidentally breaking them. Casually, he asked, “Whose writing is it?”

The handwriting on the slips, blurred by time, couldn’t be called good, but it was very neat. Supposing that handwriting matched its owner, Xi Ping thought that the person who had written this must have liked cleanliness.

Lin Chi said, “Most of the ancient works on Moon Plated Peak were left by our ancestor.”

Xi Ping stared: the Dignitary of Rule Elder?

Reading ahead, he saw that at the very end of the bamboo slips was written: *The gallbladder of the water dragon is deep blue, like first-rate blue jade, but...*

But what? The bamboo slip broke off there. The remainder of the writing was lost.

Lin Chi held it with both hands and tucked it away in his sleeve. He said, “Traces of the writing remain. The Unbound Furnace ought to be able to restore the missing portion.”

“Eh, that’s enough.” Xi Ping thought to himself that even if a dragon gallbladder could restore life to the dying, the things had been extinct for thousands of years. Even if he read it, the knowledge would be useless—anyway, the young mistress hadn’t asked.

He was in a hurry to report back to Zhao Qindan. He gathered up the main points, copied them out concisely, and sent a letter back, then took the cable car between the mountains to go back and play cards, no longer concerning himself with this matter.

But maybe Master Lin had some “wanting to fix anything he saw broken” problem. After this, he couldn’t let it go until he had asked Xi Ping to use the furnace flame to restore the missing portion of the writing.

The remaining writing contained records concerning living water dragons: “the dragon gallbladder can calm the mind, restore the reason of a lunatic,” etc., etc. It was in fact all useless information. Lin Chi just liked repairing things, he didn’t have a hobby of archeological studies. When it was repaired, he put it away without reading it closely.

It was only many years later, when Xi Ping couldn’t find anyone to play cards with, when he had so much time he didn’t know how to use it up, that he turned up this book on the already cheerless and deserted Moon Plated Peak.

Perhaps it was boredom, and perhaps it was that he was now as old as the Dignitary of Rule Elder Lin Zongyi had been back then. He read about the hundred and eight uses of all the water dragon’s organs, then still felt unsatisfied and dove again into the Unbound Furnace, attempting to use the furnace flame to decode this work, see the ancient story behind the writing.

He found to his surprise that Lin Zongyi had written this book of bamboo slips during his youth. At the time, the Xuanyin Mountains hadn’t yet formed. The Southern Sage made his home in a valley. His disciples and acolytes added together made up several dozen people. His manor was called the Xuanyin Manor.

Being turned into beast spirits by the Southern Sage was the water dragon tribe's great shame. The dragons felt bitter hatred for the Southern Sage. They couldn't defeat him, so they could only bide their time and nurse their grudge. Once, they finally seized upon an opportunity to settle the score and get revenge: during the disastrous snows in the Beijue Mountains, the Southern Sage was called upon by the Sword Ancestor to support the continent's array. He departed in a hurry, leaving only a crowd of young disciples behind in Xuanyin Manor.

While the Southern Sage himself was gone, the manor's array remained. The water dragons brought a flood that submerged the valley, but not a drop of it penetrated the array. That vile manor seemed to be wrapped in an inflated fish bladder. The dragons, mad with rage, slammed against the array while opening their bloody maws wide, spitting obscene language meant to provoke the enemy.

Li Fengshan was the eldest of the Southern Sage's direct disciples. All the members of the sect called him "da-ge." Naturally he had taken responsibility for the manor's defenses.

"Chunsheng!" Li Fengshan held up the young shidi who had run into him in a panic. "Don't be scared. Did you send shifu the letter?"

"Chunsheng" was the nickname of his shidi Zhao Yin. He had been born with a smiling, round little face. He always appeared full of joy; everyone liked him on sight. Though he wasn't very talented and liked to slack off, his progress so slow it gave you a headache, shizun still couldn't bear to criticize him harshly.

His little round face was all red from running. Amid the earsplitting roars of the dragons, Zhao Yin raised his voice and cried, "Shizun didn't answer! Da-ge, can that 'Heavenly Question' or whatever really reach the northern continent?"

Li Fengshan wasn't sure himself, but he couldn't very well show it. All he could do was console his shidi, saying he was certain it could while inwardly considering who else they could reach out to for help.

As soon as he was finished placating Zhao Yin, he turned his head and saw another shidi, Zhang Jue, still slowly drawing talismans to reduce noise and disturbance. "A-Zhuang, that's useless, don't waste spiritual energy! We may have to face a tough battle soon."

Zhang Jue was an orphan with a painful childhood, but he had been born with the body of a young master.

When other children went out to play, they would get as tan as frisking little potatoes and come back covered in calluses. Zhang Jue couldn't do that. If he was out in the sun too long, his skin would start peeling, and before he could get calluses from his straw sandals, his feet would become a bloody mess. All shifu could do was give him the nickname "A-Zhuang" and hope that he could become a little sturdier. Sadly, events had run contrary to his desires; having grown to the age of starting to grow facial hair, Zhang Jue was still more delicate and fair than a little girl. He stayed indoors all day, like an ice person, only capable of melting, not sliding. It was frustrating to behold.

Zhang Jue said, "Their speech is filthy. Listening to it may easily distract hearts."

Li Fengshan waved a hand restlessly. "Distract which hearts? Who's going to listen to the howling of some beasts? Not even an idiot would fall for those serpents' tricks, don't..."

No sooner had he spoken than he heard a cry of alarm: "Lin-shixiong!"

He'd forgotten about that one!

Li Fengshan's heart stuttered; he instantly had an ominous premonition. He looked up and saw a green streak shoot into the air, with a sword pointing straight at the lead water dragon's head. "Brutes! You dare to insult my shizun!"

There really was an idiot who would fall for it.

Li Fengshan sucked in a breath and yelled so hard his voice broke. "Lin Xiaoman, you get back here!"

"Lin Xiaoman"'s full name was "Lin Zongyi."¹⁰⁷ He was the outstanding figure of their generation, phenomenally talented and a hard worker, eager to be best in everything. In the whole of the Xuanyin Manor, among the disciples and the acolytes, none could surpass him.

However, he still got on well enough with people and didn't attract much jealousy, because all his smarts seemed to be devoted to cultivation. He would answer any question he was asked and believe anything anyone said. His thoughts were straighter than a ruler; he always seemed a little slow.

Lin Zongyi turned a deaf ear on the rebuke. The manor's great array only blocked external enemies from invading; it couldn't stop those inside from getting out. The green-robed teenager formed a hand seal and rushed out of the great array. Before his fellow sect members could react and back him up, he had already charged solo among the dragons.

Naturally the foremost disciple of Xuanyin Manor wouldn't go down without a fight. He cast three talismans, drawing lightning into the water. Apart from Lin Zongyi, who had a lightning-repelling talisman on him, everything in the water crashed against the lightning. The

huge dragons slowed. Lin Zongyi raised his hand and brought down his sword, severing one obscene water dragon tongue.

The shocked and furious roars of the water dragons nearly shook the disciples with weaker cultivation off their feet. Amid the reek of blood, the dragons went berserk, easily breaking through Lin Zongyi's protective talisman. The teenager's form vanished amid the forms of the demonic dragons.

Even the most phlegmatic Zhang Jue looked alarmed. He jumped to his feet. "Xiaoman!"

Without hesitation, Li Fengshan flew up and went in pursuit, meanwhile pushing back Zhao Yin and Zhang Jue, who had followed him. He shouted at his shidis, "Stay back, look after the crux of the array, wait for shifu!"

Only after he had burst out of the manor's array did Lin Zongyi realize he had been reckless. He was only an early period established foundation; he hadn't had time yet to travel alone to gain experience. He had only seen plenty of the water dragon beast spirits in the manor and had thought they were just big and thick-skinned.

But compared to the originals, the beast spirits were nothing but paper kites made to look like them. The water dragons that had swallowed the consciousnesses of countless cultivators had a viciousness that was practically demonic. Even a peak established foundation master meeting one in the wild would have a tough battle cut out for them if they weren't adequately prepared, never mind him—never mind that there were seven or eight water dragons surrounding Xuanyin Manor now!

The dragons' breath passed over him, and Lin Zongyi's physical senses stopped working altogether. He could only just barely dodge

by relying on his spiritual sense. A glancing blow from a dragon's tail shattered his protective spiritual energy.

At the same time, Li Fengshan flew out of the manor's great array carrying dozens of talismans. He parted the water in the valley and flew among the group of dragons. "Xiaoman, run!"

He had meant to catch them off guard and give Lin Zongyi a chance to escape back into the array, but unexpectedly, the water dragons who had just been struck by lightning had learned the lightning-repelling talisman from a single sight of it. The talismans that had scooped out nearly half of Li Fengshan's essence were easily brushed aside like a heap of scrap paper by the water dragons.

An ominous undulation passed through the water. Li Fengshan hurriedly stuck his sword out behind him. The sword struck the fangs of a water dragon launching a sneak attack and broke into several pieces. Li Fengshan was sent flying. Another water dragon opened its bloody maw, ready to snatch its meal out of the air.

The corrupted water dragons were ruthless and base; they took pleasure in tormenting living creatures. When eating a cultivator below an ascended spirit, they never swallowed them in one gulp; they would pierce the cultivator's essence with their fangs, relish the excitement of the essence bursting in their mouths, then, when the cultivator's consciousness was delirious from the torment of their body being crushed, tear it apart and fuse it into themselves bit by bit.

Li Fengshan thought, It's all over.

Just then, an invisible whip made of spiritual energy split the "lake" filling the valley in two and struck the water dragon with its mouth wide open head on. The moment Li Fengshan fell into the dragon's mouth, the dragon's head was torn off by the brutal spiritual energy.

Hard bone fragments and gore knocked the early stage established foundation junior dizzy.

The headless dragon corpse flew straight forward and crashed into the group of water dragons surrounding Lin Zongyi. The water dragons were all intelligent; they understood what they were up against and immediately fled in all directions. But it was already too late.

Li Fengshan, shielding his head with his arms, pushed aside the gore covering his eyes and looked up with difficulty. He saw a man dressed in a short jacket of coarse cloth land on the surface of the water.

Though he was shabbily dressed, he was tall and imposing, with a well-developed skeleton of the sort only possible in a person who had never gone hungry, who had never stooped or cowered while being beaten and scolded. His cuffs were faded from many washings, and his hair was perfectly arranged to the point of constraint, in complete contrast to the fashion of the day, which sought to be wanton and unrestrained. His cold gaze met Li Fengshan's for just an instant. Then he went straight along the path that had just been opened in the water.

At the man's feet was a tree vine that had grown halfway up the mountain. Such a tree had never been seen in Xuanyin Manor's valley before. It was like a willow, with a trunk more indolent than the willows that trailed into water from the shore.

The vine had already extended dozens of zhang, and it was still endlessly extending. When the water touched that vine, it parted automatically, only too eager to avoid this divine killer. Dazzling talismans flowed from the vine, wrapping around the water dragons' necks and limbs.

Next, there was a crisp pop.

It was like the sound of dry kindling splitting apart in a gentle heat. Li Fengshan and Lin Zongyi's eyes opened wide simultaneously—

The talismans of varying size wrapped around the water dragons burst one by one like water spraying. The dragons wrapped in them burst into bits, chunk by chunk.

This was a slaughter that looked like a fireworks display, almost magnificent. The noiseless talismans silently dissolved in the water, and all was still. Even the ripples fell silent. A dozen water dragons big enough to form hills when coiled up had instantly turned into a bloody mist. The whole valley had turned into an enormous pool of blood.

The unknown man landed in front of Lin Zongyi. Lin Zongyi instinctively wanted to retreat, but his body was still paralyzed by the remaining dragon breath. He couldn't budge. The man didn't so much as look at him. He reached into the water, fished up a deep blue water dragon gallbladder, and instantly disappeared.

The scene in the Unbound Furnace disappeared there. Xi Ping reached out to clasp the restored manuscript under his arm.

There were only fragmentary imprints on the ancient manuscript. Even with the Unbound Furnace, it was hard to see especially clearly. And what was "soul-stirringly alarming" to an established foundation could hardly help making Xi Ping, who had experienced the collapse of heaven and earth, yawn.

But...

The person that the sage had asserted "couldn't slide" had in the end become covered in grime, the person who answered every question had shut his mouth, the loyal and charming little shidi had grown into an able schemer backed by wealth and power, the "da-

ge” shielding his brothers from their own shortcomings had fallen out with them... The mutual reliance and closeness of youth had become a thing of the past.

Time changed all, people and things. Nothing was the same.

He would have been better off not looking. Xi Ping was even more lonely. Only after a long moment of blankness did he force his wits to perk up and try to distract his attention. He thought, The man who came along to save the show was treading on reincarnation wood. It must have been Yuan Hui. What did he want with dragon gallbladders?

EXTRA 2 - Antiquity Continued

The deep blue water dragon gallbladder could treat insanity. That was what the Dignitary of Rule Elder Lin Zongyi had said.

Lin Zongyi’s research was quite rigorous. Xi Ping judged that his notes wouldn’t be too unreliable. But at the time, the array of the Beijue Mountains had yet to form, and the spiritual mountains were still who knew where. The forces of evil were running wild everywhere, and even Yuan Hui, one of the four great demonic gods, looked like a righteous man willing to help others. With the world so deranged, who would need to be treated for insanity?

Xi Ping pondered it backward and forward until he had worked up an interest in getting to the bottom of things, so he went to the karma beast.

When the hidden bones had invaded the Territory Map, they had gravely damaged the karma beast’s beast spirit. The beast spirit had disappeared from the ground, and everyone had thought that the sacred beast was dead. Pang Jian had been inconsolable. From

then on, he avoided cats and dogs. He couldn't bear the sight of four-legged animals.

This continued until Xi Ping, on his shifu's order, had been inspecting the veins of the earth through the reincarnation wood in the Territory Map as usual and had happened to find traces of the karma beast spirit's dwelling place—the hidden bones had been very quickly expelled by the Law Breaker back then and hadn't had time to destroy it completely. So a whole crowd of Xuanyin masters had gone through all the inner sect's texts, looking for the Southern Sage's way of reining beast spirits. They spent several years on it, and finally, with Lin Chi responsible for giving instructions and Xi Ping controlling the Unbound Furnace, they at last brought the sacred beast that had nearly followed the sage in casting off the mundane dust back to the human world.

Based on this contribution, Xi Ping thought that the sacred beast ought to recognize him as its second father.

But this rebellious child was very unfilial, without any sense of gratitude to its second parent. When others summoned the karma beast, it would always be an avatar that came, a little palm-sized lump, which would sometimes even roll over and expose its belly, demanding pets without any shame. What Xi Ping summoned was always the ferocious original form of the giant beast, which would shake its whiskers and glare at him as soon as it came, provide a complimentary series of furious roars... though that was also a matter of a very long time ago.

Summoning beast spirits was an ancient art. No one knew it now. The karma beast was always in hibernation underground, with Xi Ping as its only remaining old friend, who occasionally called it back to the human world. However much they didn't get along, over these many years, they had still developed affection for each other. The karma beast wanted to be a little nicer to him every day. During the New Year, it even delicately changed its fur to red... then was

angered by the nuisance surnamed Xi into changing it back to its original color.

To summon the sacred beast, Xi Ping drew a portrait of the karma beast on the wall. He was convinced that it was absolutely lifelike.

When the sacred beast came and saw it, it not only didn't appreciate the sentiment, it bared its fangs and waved its claws, biting that drawing to pulp, and in one breath paid its respects to eighteen generations of the artist's ancestors.

Xi Ping wasn't having it. "Do you know how much money my authentic works are worth now?"

The enormous, hill-like beast, on hearing this, dug irascibly with its paws, expressing its view: *Ptui*, stinking dog shit!

A certain individual surnamed Xi, having forgotten his own surname amid the plaudits of the auction houses, angrily said, "Ignorant brute!"

Man and beast, trading words and howls in equal portion, cursed at each other for a while. Ultimately, a human throat couldn't outshout a beast. Xi Ping shouted until his lungs hurt and had to bow out of the battle.

He poured himself a cup of homemade wine, tried a mouthful, then sucked on his gums—his winemaking technique could be called an authentic tradition handed down from his teacher; it was extremely inconsistent. Each time he opened a jar, it was like playing A-Xiang's Silver Tray Lottery. There was no way of knowing whether he was opening good wine or dregs. "This batch is no good. Karmie, let me ask you about something."

The karma beast waved its big tail indifferently.

Xi Ping said, “Yuan Hui once cut out a heap of dragon gallbladders. What was he doing with them? Selling them wholesale to the Heartless Lotus to fix his head?”

The karma beast snorted and became thumb-sized. It jumped onto the bamboo slips and left a paw print on the ancient Wan writing.

Xi Ping looked where the paw print indicated and saw a record there about water dragon pearls. “Don’t mess around, I know what water dragon pearls are for, I used to have one. I asked you...”

The karma beast rolled its eyes at him—it had learned this expression specifically to use on Xi Ping—then raised its front paw again and tapped heavily against a line of small writing at the edge.

“Lacking the aura of the water dragons, only a master with cultivation that can overpower a water dragon can activate...” Xi Ping froze. “Huh?”

Water dragon pearls were extremely precious. After so many years of dawdling in the human world, Xi Ping hadn’t seen another one. The one in Zhou Ying’s hands must have been unique. Presumably apart from the infinitely resourceful demon of the Impassable Sea, no one would have been willing to take it out and use it casually. Therefore, he had nothing to compare it with.

But putting himself aside—he had at any rate been a near-ascended spirit then—san-ge had plainly just opened his spiritual eyes; he couldn’t even draw a talisman properly. But hadn’t he just waved a hand and flicked the water dragon pearl into him?

Had Lin Zongyi gotten it wrong?

Xi Ping stared at the karma beast in bewilderment. “You don’t mean that...”

The karma beast drew near, sniffed his fingers where they were holding down the bamboo slips, then once again acted like it was burying shit.

Xi Ping stood up, turned, and passed through reincarnation wood, returning to the Yongning Marquis Manor, which he had not seen for a long time.

Jinping no longer had nobles. When his friends and relatives in the mortal world were gone, Xi Ping had handed the Marquis Manor over to Jinping's authorities to have them take care of it.

This was a gift that burned the hand. Who would dare to overstep their authority to live in his former residence? Finally, the Kaiming Department made a decision. They put protections on the buildings and changed the Yongning Marquis Manor into the "Tai Sui Manor" — also popularly called the "Tai Sui Temple" — and it became a famous former residence for people to come visit.

Now the Yongning Marquis Manor was full of dense ancient trees. It was one of the eight sights of Jinping. It received an endless stream of tourists every day. There were many rumors circulating among the people about "burning incense in the Tai Sui Temple working a miracle" and "seeing a reincarnation wood tree cast a human shadow in the temple."

It was all pure nonsense. Xi Ping might not go back for centuries, and when he did go, he didn't go during the day. He didn't like to see people.

It was midnight now. The Tai Sui Manor's guards had locked the three gates. The incense smoke had dissipated. When Xi Ping came out of a reincarnation wood tree, he first attended to the sounds in the vicinity, then laughed in spite of himself, feeling like a thief.

He bowed to that somewhat divine ancient moonlight frost tree in the garden and passed through the garden to the rear courtyard.

The rear courtyard wasn't open to tourists. The Yongning Marquis Manor's old possessions were all stored there. The order of the books hadn't even been disarranged. Only a layer of protective film to guard against water and insects had been put over them. They seemed to still be waiting for their master to return. On the innermost bookcase, Xi Ping found the Xi family's genealogical record.

The genealogical record was quite long. Many generations had lived calmly in Great Wan.

Thinking about it, this was actually strange. The paramount spiritual sense appeared among people at random. It wasn't passed on between generations, because those lunatics not only didn't leave behind descendants, beneath the spiritual mountains, they were certain to lead lives plagued with disasters. Whole families dying out was the standard.

But the Xi family seemed to be an exception. Though it was also very hard for them to have children, and they often had children who died young due to their unusual spiritual sense, the bloodline had survived in fits and starts. The possessors of paramount spiritual senses born into this family, while they couldn't necessarily preserve their reason with dignity to the last, they had all had company in life and death; they were already greatly fortunate as compared to their fellows... Why was that?

It couldn't be because each generation had a reckless person like the Marquis who colluded with foreign evil cultivators, could it?

Xi Ping had found a new riddle, and he pursued it in high spirits. Following his family's genealogical record, he first found the origin of recent generations—they had migrated from the west after a

plague of locusts—then used the reincarnation wood, which could get in by every crack, to wander all over, sneak into storehouses of records everywhere. He consulted ancient texts, compared historical events, researched local guides.

Unfortunately, it wasn't so easy. Xi Ping went all out for thirty years, but the leads still broke off. But he wasn't worried about doing useless work, anyway. He treated it as travel for pleasure.

During this time, he became a true scholar. He read too many documents and texts containing difficult and unpronounceable words. No matter how out-of-the-way a thing was, if it mentioned a few key terms, he could work out its entire history clearly. He more or less knew all the writing systems that traces could be found of. He also made himself a fake identity and went to the nation of New He to take part in the civil examinations, easily passed based on the fact that he had been reading longer than everyone else's grandfathers had been alive, and got himself a position in an archeological office. From time to time, he went to lecture to the college students.

If Dandan were still writing histories and wanted to consult him again, he wouldn't have to run muttering from the New Year's Eve dinner to flip through books now.

“You missed the good times.”

Inside the Law Breaker, Xi Ping spoke regretfully to the Zhao Qindan duplicated by the Tai Sui Qin's melody.

Zhao Qindan pushed up her reading glasses impatiently and gave him a stern glare, and asked him a number of questions she believed to be cunning. Wei Chengxiang, sauntering over to invite her out on a stroll, just happened to overhear. She plastered herself to the wall and slunk away, ashen-faced.

Xi Ping sighed. From past experience, he easily pretended to be stumped and begged her for mercy.

Because spiritual energy was prohibited, the “people” inside the Law Breaker couldn’t leave it using papermen. And inside the Law Breaker, by nature each was only a segment. Though they could talk and move, they were eternally static, stopped at a certain moment. They couldn’t change.

So Zhao Qindan always used the same questions to put him in a difficult spot, and Wei Chengxiang didn’t know that she had already overheard this conversation countless times and could never remember the answers.

The Wei Chengxiang in the Law Breaker was A-Xiang when she was young, duplicated by Xi Ping according to the melody he remembered. She had gone out to sea adventuring and disappeared, dying on the way to the unknown. There had been no time for her to say anything to her friends and loved ones.

She had lived her life beset by perils, left Jinping alone at sixteen, always rushing ahead to where the road was wider, not stopping until death.

Zhao Qindan, however, had the appearance of an old lady, after she had begun to show signs of decline—in fact, he could have duplicated any segment he wanted; her residence had been fixed in Tao County most of the time, and she was the most frequent visitor to the Law Breaker. From the twenty-something ignorant young mistress escaping a marriage to the renowned scholar Sir Xu who could summon hundreds with a single cry, Xi Ping had the “score” for every age. It was Zhao Qindan who had insisted shortly before her death that it be the very last portion of her lifespan that remained in the Law Breaker.

“The young me won't do,” she said softly on her deathbed. “I was just a pretty face then, without all my wits. I didn't understand anything. I'd have nothing to say to you. I couldn't keep you company.”

There was no concern about keeping a distance between men and women then. Xi Ping sat alone at her bedside to see her off.

Each day the Law Breaker enveloped the human world, each day the axiom had yet to be broken or realized, as the “steward,” he couldn't fail or age. When they had met, they had been classmates of about the same age, but on parting, he looked like her grandson.

He coiled up her white hair and mixed up rouge. Before he could apply the rouge, he looked around and saw that the young mistress, who had kept to Wan manners all her life, was clinging to his sleeve, weeping.

“Hey, old woman, can't you hold out a little?” Xi Ping spoke rudely, but his hand as he wiped away her tears was very gentle. “You'll make the makeup run. How am I supposed to apply the rouge?”

“Get... get out.” Zhao Qindan couldn't catch her breath. “Don't think... that I don't know, back then... you dressed up as me, and made yourself up like a ghost... nearly scared off the great evil cultivator Yu Chang...”

“You're nearly a ghost yourself, what do you care if I make you up like one?” Xi Ping laughed. Then, as if humoring a child, he said, “The banquet's festivities are all over, and the drunks have all gone home. Someone ought to clean up, right? Fine, fine... Anyway, you're all still here. When I've had enough of idling outside, I'll come back to the Law Breaker.”

In the Law Breaker was A-Xiang, not yet set out on her journey, the young mistress who had returned, Lao Pang who couldn't eat

enough osmanthus duck, the eternally calm and quiet Bai Ling.

There were also the seniors—as the masters’ essences flowed away and their cultivation levels gradually dropped until they reverted to half-immortals, to mortals, ceasing to be divinities and once again becoming human, Xi Ping was finally able to hear the melodies of their consciousnesses in the Law Breaker. So inside the Law Breaker, Master Lin stayed inside every day tinkering with odd bits of machinery and gears; shifu had a fish pond, where he took out a small boat to catch shrimp and fish when he wasn’t practicing swordsmanship; Divine Physician Wen had planted a field of flowers beside the pond, and the flower dew and petals became ingredients for shifu to make wine...

Though no matter what was planted, only a few types of flowers would grow, and no matter what was brewed, the results would always be the same jar of wine, it was still lively.

But there was a person missing amid the excitement. Xi Ping could never duplicate san-ge’s “score.”

Zhou Ying’s consciousness was nowhere to be found in the known realms.

At last, when Xi Ping had grown tired of archeology and was ready to “retire in order to return home” in New He, people discovered a tomb at the bottom of the sea—it ought to have been an islet, but it had been submerged by seawater as the terrain had altered. At the depths of the tomb, people discovered an altar and some leftover “deep blue gemstones.”

Historical circles boiled over; everyone had different opinions, proposed all kinds of conjectures. Only Xi Ping recognized at a glance that the “deep blue gemstones” were fragments of the legendary water dragon gallbladders.

Exploiting the perks of his position, Xi Ping pilfered a piece of water dragon gallbladder, used a reincarnation wood seed to slip into the altar, and used the Unbound Furnace to decode it.

In the furnace flame, he once again saw Yuan Hui.

“The water dragon gallbladders you wanted.” Yuan Hui placed a mustard seed in front of a woman.

The woman had a blind person’s cane in her hand. Her eyes stared directly ahead. She was not only blind, she also seemed to have trouble moving, unable to stand up on her weak, slender legs.

Xi Ping was slightly surprised—the woman’s features were very similar to Yuan Hui’s. It was clear at a glance that they were close kin.

“Then we’re even.” The woman felt around for the mustard seed and laughed softly. “Da-ge.”

Yuan Hui shook his head and dully said, “It’s not about being even or not. I owe you my life—when I had just established a foundation and was trapped among the Shamans’ living corpses, I would not have escaped without your help. If you want anything in the future, just notify me. You know how to contact me.”

The woman smiled brightly and said, “I am a humiliation left behind by our mother. My father the king saw me as a stain and never treated me as his own child. If I hadn’t helped you, I would also have died trapped there.”

Xi Ping understood at once and said to himself: After the holy woman was abducted by the shamans, she had a daughter.

Yuan Hui didn’t stand on any further ceremony with her. He only asked, “What do you want the water dragon gallbladders for?”

The woman gently pressed down on her underbelly. Yuan Hui's gaze followed where she indicated. "You..."

"I can feel it, this child is the same as me... and our mother." The woman sighed softly. "It will be hard for the child to survive."

Yuan Hui, frowning, said, "It is indeed difficult for children that are born frail to inherit your gift. Why don't you look after your health and not deliberate so much, don't use things at random. The water dragon gallbladders are..."

"For treating insanity," the woman interrupted him quietly. She raised her head. Silver light flashed over her unfocused pupils as she looked out into emptiness. Those eyes possessed of a paramount spiritual sense couldn't see the human world, but they seemed to see the future. Suddenly, out of nowhere, she said, "Have you heard of the spiritual mountains that have arisen in the northern continent?"

Yuan Hui seemed a little bewildered, not knowing why she had suddenly mentioned the northern continent.

"Our mother opened the way to chaos, da-ge. The world is going to change." The woman spoke as if chanting. "The canopy of heaven will descend, and those who can see the stars will always be insane. In fact, there's nothing wrong with being insane. It's easy. I just hope that I can leave a sliver of another choice for later generations... If our bloodline isn't extinguished, perhaps one day, someone will be able to escape the prison."

Yuan Hui was all at sea. "What are you even talking about?"

The woman smiled without answering. Her strange eyes looked through him and met Xi Ping's eyes as he spied through the Unbound Furnace. Her eyes suddenly moved, as if they had pierced

thousands of years of time to meet Xi Ping's gaze. She smiled at him.

She said, "Perhaps because of the water dragon gallbladders mixed into their bloodline, later generations will be able to activate dragon pearls, just like the dragons, command the clouds and rain."

"What do you mean, like water dragons?" Yuan Hui shook his head. He seemed to be accustomed to his sister saying mysterious things that he couldn't understand. He stepped forward to push her wheelchair. "I'll take you back... Why are you turning your head? Is something wrong with your neck?"

The woman sat in the wheelchair, turning her fine long neck, her blind eyes "watching" Xi Ping from start to finish. "It's nothing. I'm looking at the future."

Yuan Hui shut his mouth. He was a little anxious, feeling that it seemed that she ought to eat some dragon gallbladder. Their two figures slowly vanished from the furnace fire.

Xi Ping abruptly left the Unbound Furnace, suddenly remembering the power of the first established foundation paramount spiritual sense in the world to turn into mist. This power had been unheard of for thousands of years, yet when the spiritual mountains had been nearly at their end, it had appeared in Zhou Ying.

A beginning and an end.

Before the spiritual mountains had formed, had the eyes of an unsuppressed paramount spiritual sense really been able to see the future?

Had the Xi family's bloodline really originated there?

That he and san-ge could easily activate the water dragon pearl, was that really because the bloodline passed down to them from antiquity contained the aura of the water dragon gallbladders?

The water dragon tribe had died out, and there were no more dragon pearls. The people from thousands of years ago had also long ago become unfindable vestiges. There was no way to investigate any of this.

But there was one thing he could be certain of. San-ge, having passed through the Ceaseless Mirror, must have escaped the prison and glimpsed the sky beyond the bounds.

When he thought this, Xi Ping suddenly felt that he didn't regret not being able to see him in the Law Breaker as much.

He turned to leave. From familiar habit, he arranged to fake the death of his identity in the mortal world and escape.

Xi Ping thought that he was a little tired. He would return to the Law Breaker to dream.

EXTRA 3 - New Capital

Those who had gone to work in the factories earliest of all had been craftsmen, each and every one possessing some unique skill. Wei Chengxiang had mixed with these people since she was little and had been imperceptibly influenced by what she heard and saw. In the usage of axe, chisel, adze, and saw, in woodworking and carving seals, she knew a bit of everything. Adding in that she was literate, if she hadn't met with unexpected disaster back then, perhaps she would have been a skilled worker with considerable prospects.

The only unfortunate thing was that, had she been a mortal, she wouldn't have lived to see the day when a woman could enter the Kaiming Department or a factory college without raising eyebrows. She would probably have spent her whole life as a "man," hiding and covering up, shutting out anyone who came to her with proposals of marriage, finally ending up as an old bachelor who was always running off to Rat Alley, getting smeared with stinking gossip.

That way, she wouldn't have met Xi Shiyong.

Jinping City was vast. Living under the same sky, all walks of life were cut off from each other. Even if by chance there had been an opportunity to brush past each other, probably it would only have been like their encounter in the southern mines—in fact, Wei Chengxiang had forgotten about that long ago. It was later, casually chatting with Xi Ping, that she had recalled that such a thing seemed to have taken place. Looking at Xi Ping, as if looking at foreign scenery, she might have said admiringly that he was a handsome young lord, like taking a hurried glance at Cui Ji's restrained and elegant front yard or the expensive fine clothes behind a glazed window; she would have exclaimed, then turned away and forgotten.

In fact, that... wouldn't have been a bad thing.

Now she couldn't become a skilled worker, but she still liked to do a bit of woodwork in her free time, put little things together. She always had some books of lost ancient He arts about her person, and she had a period of infatuation with embroidery.

At New Year during that period, her friends and family all received embroidered works that she had made. Even the Xuanyin Mountains' General Zhi, who had once done her the favor of giving his advice, received one.

The workmanship was rather fine, and there were categorically no bumps and hollows from loose threads. The style was... very “He.”

The young mistress put the lady’s purse that there was really no way to carry under a crystal cover to keep as a bizarre ornament and tactfully said in “praise,” “Rather a lot of ancient Southern He style about it.”

Pang Jian, in the position of an uncle, didn’t feel comfortable making any appraisal, either. All he could say was, “The screen is very lively, the sacred beast likes it there.”

Her other Wan friends for the most part stopped themselves from saying anything like these two did. Only the Turmoilers and Zhi Xiu lavished her with praise.

The Turmoilers went without saying. Anyway, even if Wei-laoban had tried an original approach and embroidered a pair of kissing houseflies, they would still have praised her blindly.

As for Zhi Xiu, he had only two requirements for what he wore: that it be neat and tidy, and that it didn’t constitute a breach of etiquette at important social occasions—for the rest, it didn’t matter.

Knowing that someone was thinking of him, he greatly appreciated the sentiment, and after losing his essence, he in fact wasn’t as resistant to cold as before, so he gladly accepted the young lady’s respectful gift of gloves.

These gloves—per Xi Ping’s description, taking a single glance at them would pollute your consciousness.

Perhaps A-Xiang had thought that there wasn’t enough room on as small a piece of cloth as a glove for her to display her skills. She had covered them with embroidery, not leaving a single stitch blank. The design she had embroidered was “peaches and plums

accompanied by the spring breeze,” representing a teacher’s earnest instruction of his pupils. Not taking into account the fact that these two species didn’t bear fruit in spring, she embroidered them in peach pink and plum purple, full of the joy of a rich harvest. As for the colors of spring, she proudly asserted that in order to convey gradation, she had used eighteen different kinds of green thread; it had been very hard labor.

Xi Ping thought that even if she had found a white banner and used black thread to embroider the Wan characters “Peaches and Plums with the Spring Breeze” and turn it into a mourning banner, she still wouldn’t have attained such a horrifying outcome.

A few days later, there was another heavy snowfall on Flying Jade Peak. It was outrageously cold. So Zhi Xiu asked for those frightening “peaches and plums,” put on the “riotously colorful eighteen shades of green,” and, all snug, went to practice swordsmanship.

Though Zhaoting was willing to be crushed to dust for his sake, it still couldn’t take mistreatment like this. The divine sword refused to be drawn. Zhi Xiu, uncomprehending, pulled harder and nearly got smacked on the chin by Zhaoting’s sheath as it popped up.

“It is indeed easy for your hands to slip while wearing gloves.” Zhi Xiu took off the gloves. He didn’t understand Zhaoting’s fit of temper, so, with a show of earnestness, he elevated this matter to the summit of human life and narrated it to his little disciple Xi Yue next to him. “In the way of the sword, regardless of whether one has a Way of the Heart, one must temper one’s muscles, bones, and skin. A person might take a detour, but he cannot take a shortcut. Do not be like your older brother.”

Xi Yue obediently received this lesson and nodded.

Mentioning Xi Ping, Zhi Xiu frowned and asked, “Right, where is he? Yesterday he was still chasing after the blue luan on the mountain. Did he get ‘busy’ as soon as I mentioned the sword?”

Xi Yue’s throat had been modified by Lin Chi. He could speak slowly. He just wasn’t used to speaking. But in front of shizun, he couldn’t very well flail around gesturing wildly, so he laboriously said, “He’s gone to see Wei-laoban.”

Hearing this, Zhi Xiu’s brow unfurrowed—chasing after a young lady was much better than chasing after a chicken. It sounded more like serious business. “What for?”

Some strange anguish appeared on Xi Yue’s face. He answered, “Maybe he’s gone to offer a humble apology.”

Xi Ping had obtained an exquisite embroidered purse. When he had opened it, he’d taken only one look. Then this scoundrel had given his most sincere reaction.

He had said: “Hahahaha, what the hell is this!”

Wei Chengxiang hadn’t spoken to him for several days.

Wei Chengxiang was just recording something on paper when she heard a creak. Then a familiar aroma surged up.

She raised her head and saw that the study’s little window had been pushed open a crack from the outside, and a hand was reaching inside, furtively stuffing in an oilpaper bag. The oilpaper bag had the stamp of the Phoenix’s Perch Pavilion on it. The stewed duck’s head inside was steaming, fogging the glazed window.

This was the new capital of Southern He, tens of thousands of li away from Jinping. Only one person could bring a stewed duck’s head fresh from the pot in Jinping to her desk.

Wei Chengxiang was expressionless. “Go away.”

“You won’t eat it?” said the person outside. “Fine, then I’ll throw it away.”

Wei Chengxiang said, “... Slow down!”

Wasting food immediately jabbed Wei-laoban in her sore spot.

Though she had a big house in Southern He’s new capital comparable to what Princess Anyang’s manor had been and no longer needed to carry scales and scrape off bits of green ore, she was still as stingy as ever. Perhaps even mountains of gold and silver couldn’t make up for the handful of copper coins she had been short in her youth.

When she opened the window, she saw Xi Ping’s brightly smiling face. This wretch had a face that, as long as he didn’t talk or move, could make a person forgive him even when he had committed the most heinous of crimes.

Wei Chengxiang pulled a long face and took the oilpaper bag. Half her anger had already dissipated. Seeing his smile, she simply wanted to sigh.

The duck’s head was hot and numbing, with a strong aroma. As there had been more and more Cloud Soaring Flood Dragons over the years, Jinping had gradually accepted the heavy flavors from the north and south. It was only that there still weren’t many locals who ate spicy food, and the audience for hot and numbing foods was small. The shops didn’t make them every day—Wei Chengxiang, meanwhile, had been young when she had left Great Wan, and her tastes had been influenced by those of other nations.

She thought: Xi Shiyong would never get wrong what the people around him liked to eat and what they avoided, would never mishear the hidden thought another person revealed between the lines. He was just a purebred scoundrel.

Wei Chengxiang opened the paper bag, took out a duck's head, and bit fiercely into it as if it were Xi Ping's head. "What? Say whatever you have to say."

"Let's talk business, Wei-laoban." Xi Ping, smiling radiantly, leaned against a reincarnation wood tree and said, "Sell me the pattern for the gloves you embroidered for my shizun."

"You can ask General Zhi for them yourself."

"What would I want with those lousy gloves?" Xi Ping waved a hand. "As long as the fire in the Unbound Furnace is burning, I won't freeze to death. How about the Jiuwei buy that pattern from you and use it for the embroidery pattern on a set of formal robes for next spring?"

The Luwu had been short on money in the early years, so they had started many businesses in the various nations. First, this was to arrange identities for themselves, and second, it was to subsidize some of their expenses. The Jiuwei was one of the Luwu's most lucrative businesses. It sold Wan-style fashionable clothes and jewelry. Leaving aside for the moment the quality of the products, as the originators and promoters of the toilet bulletins, the Luwu had been the first to grasp the authority to judge what was beautiful and what was ugly. Now they could turn a small investment into a huge profit based on their reputation.

"The Jiuwei are highbrow, how could bumpkins like me be worthy?" Wei Chengxiang rolled her eyes. "Don't you think they're ugly? Who are you going to sell them to?"

“I’m not planning to sell them. We’ll make a model and put it on display, tell a story about ‘a gift of gratitude from an immortal in the East Sea,’ set the price at five hundred, and if someone with more money than sense wants to buy it, we’ll say it’s sold out. Who says that clothing has to look good?” Xi Ping waved a hand. “Everyone looks at it—wow, that’s ugly! It will certainly make tongues wag, and those toilet bulletins that fill their pages with idle gossip will follow along at once, and the Jiuwei will save on publicity expenses next year—we’ll give you ten percent, buy your execrable design.”

“Get the hell out,” said Wei Chengxiang.

Xi Ping said, “Ten thousand.”

Wei Chengxiang stopped in the middle of smacking his hand with the window.

Xi Ping smiled. “In—Wan—gold.”

Wei Chengxiang immediately wiped her hands clean, straightened her clothes, and opened the door. Her expression also cleared, and her tone became polite. “Senior Tai Sui, please come in and have a seat.”

Xi Ping sauntered in, complacently asked her to pour him tea, ate half a saucer of “rebirth berries”—after Southern He had been plowed by the wildfire vine, this strange mutated berry had grown there. It was sweet, with unusual perfume. It only bore fruit in the twelfth month of the year, and it was just in season now. You couldn’t get it this fresh anywhere else.

When he had tyrannized enough, he explained his strategy for how to “use ten thousand gold to buy a season of scolding and turn it into an opportunity to sell other things.” Hearing it, Wei Chengxiang stared, wondering whether the rich people who scrabbled over the Jiuwei’s products like ducks were idiots.

But when she had heard it out, she still didn't especially understand.
"You..."

Can just take it if you want it. Anyway, I already gave it to you guys.

Xi Ping raised a hand to interrupt her. "The Luwu aren't my private property, I have to keep accounts. I can't just throw money at a foreign fleet, you understand. Let the Jiuwei test the waters this season, and if it works, I can find another reason to work with you later."

Wei Chengxiang was dumbfounded.

In fact, she was short on money currently.

This was a long story—Shu's Miah and Xiuyi clans had made a definitive break. The Miah, having come to a dead end, had asked the South Sea Hidden Realm for help. Li Manlong had come to a prompt decision then. While upgraded immortal tools had yet to become popular everywhere, he had taken the initiative and used upgraded beast-controlling immortal tools to help the Miah hold on to Southern Shu's Three Islands.

After this, Southern Shu split in two. As repayment for the alliance, the South Sea Hidden Realm and the surrounding area of sea was given to the He, to serve as a temporary location for the new nation of He until the Land of Turmoil was repaired.

The spiritual mountains had returned their spiritual energy, but they couldn't heal the wounds to the earth of Southern He. There were a thousand things to be done. And this place rich in skilled craftsmen had been left behind by the era of the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon. The early period after founding the nation was extremely difficult, until the South Sea Hidden Realm made by the past sage with his

life had once again protected the people in their utmost need— nearby, they discovered a large “dragon’s breath resin” mine.

Dragon’s breath resin was a combustible fuel, also called “oil water” or “black gold.” In recent years, as people gradually cast off the first generation Gold Imitation Technique altogether, it had seen more and more use. Relying on the resources of the black gold mine, New He had trekked over the most difficult part of the road, and from then on, the people of He had developed a complex about going out to sea.

There were unpeopled places out there, beyond the spiritual mountains. Cultivators who had grown up at the feet of the spiritual mountains had instinctively rejected it, and mortals, even with access to steamships, had always operated in the coastal waters at most, not penetrating the depths of the ocean.

Apart from dragon’s breath resin, was there something else in the depths of the sea?

Resources that could take mortals up to the sky and down into the earth, unheard of ancient relics, never before seen rare monsters...

Once, through reincarnation wood, Wei Chengxiang and Zhou Ying had looked at the boundary of the South Sea Hidden Realm, one inside and one outside. One had seen a limitless voyage, and one had seen a boundless canopy. Starting then, a long-cherished wish had begun to put down roots and sprout in her heart: she wanted to be like Kuafu seeking the sun in legend, be the first person to seek the horizon.

But this needed not only technology, it also needed financial resources, and the ability to rally fellow travelers in great number.

Wei Chengxiang blurted out, “How did you know I was preparing a fleet?”

“I belong to the lineage of the Dignitary of Fate. I just reckoned on my fingers... Hey, hey, hey, why are you beating up your bankroller?” Xi Ping crossed one leg over the other. A rebirth berry bulged his cheek out. “Wow, these are delicious. There are only pickled ones in the north. Pickling things is a waste. Pack up some baskets for me, I’ll take them back to the Xuanyin Mountains. You said it yourself. You were blowing so much hot air to my brother back in the South Sea Hidden Realm that all the sable sheep in there rose into the sky, right?”

Wei Chengxiang was silent for a while, then put a hand to her forehead and smiled bitterly. Suddenly, she said, “Hey, do you know what it means when a woman gives you an embroidered purse?”

When she spoke these words, the clock on the desk and the wind outside by coincidence quieted for an instant. In the air there was only the mouthwatering aroma of the rebirth berries.

The water in the pot boiled then and turned off with a click. The sound of the boiling water sank in pitch. Xi Ping put down his tea bowl.

“I know,” said Xi Ping. Without any unease, he removed the lid from the bowl and waited to be served like a young master. “I thought that you didn’t know.”

Wei Chengxiang: “...”

Why was this jerk’s angle of approach to being incorrigible always so mysterious?

“After all,” said Xi Ping, “to judge from your work, it seemed like you were trying to send me to my grave.”

Wei Chengxiang took a deep breath and reached out to pick up the pot. In order to avoid having his face scalded by boiling water, Xi Ping greased his steps, making himself scarce before Wei-laoban could murder her bankroller.

On leaving Wei Chengxiang's house, you crossed a street and came to Sages' Square.

Southern He's new capital was a city with no history, with spotless buildings and perfectly dovetailed paving tiles. In the spacious square, each and every statue was lifelike. This was the look of a place that had yet to be toyed with by the elements.

The most striking sage's statue was of a slender, graceful woman in antiquated Chu dress. She was smiling thoughtfully, appraising everyone who came before her, as if she were curious about everyone—when this statue of Hui Xiangjun had come to the new capital, Master Lin, who never went out, had actually left the mountains. The Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon hadn't spread to Southern He yet at the time, so he had had to take it to the Wan-He border, then transfer to car and boat.

This whole arduous journey, undertaken just to take one look at her.

By coincidence, it was just when he walked up in front of the statue that his eight-hundred-year-old Way of the Heart dissolved. The body and heart of the immortal whose emotions were more colorless than paper returned to the mundane world, and all his persistent shackles disappeared, so that he could sob his heart out in the square full of people coming and going, coming back to life vivid and bloody before the statue of his old friend.

Next to Hui Xiangjun was the statue of an ugly Turmoiler, only half her height, his figure stooped, rendered an even more unbearable sight by comparison with the beauty beside him. This was New He's

other sage: Li Manlong, who had long ago passed away and departed.

Li Manlong held the hand of a girl with her hair in two buns; this was one of the founders of New He, whose full name was Li Wenwu. She had been over sixty when she had passed away. It had been her own wish for the appearance of the statue to be taken from her childhood. She had a more romantic nickname—she was called “Hope.”

Further on, there were more people, those who looked like Turmoilers and those who looked like ordinary people. To a greater or lesser extent, Xi Ping had had dealings with them all and seen them all die.

He passed slowly among his old friends and saw a few long lines. These were people waiting to receive porridge. Xi Ping calculated on his fingers and suddenly realized that it was the eighth day of the twelfth month.

The Laba Festival was a particularity of Great Wan, which had four distinct seasons; it was for celebrating a rich harvest at the end of the year, during the slack season for farming. Southern He was warm year-round and had no winter break; naturally it didn't celebrate this festival.

This was a tradition that originated from long ago, when the new capital had first been founded—naturally A-Xiang had brought it here.

Back then, she would spend the day cooking rich, fragrant, sweet porridge for a city full of He people who couldn't eat their fill; anyone could have a bowl. Later, there were no more people in the city who couldn't eat their fill, and people had preserved this outmoded practice. Each year on Laba, the merchants would open their stands

and hand out porridge while they advertised next year's goods, wish their regular customers an early happy new year.

“Young fellow, come over here.” A salesman hawking in the street passed by and stuffed a flyer into his hand. “Our Fire God Porridge is chilled porridge, with stewed lotus seeds and rebirth berries in it!”

In authentic Southern He language, Xi Ping said bitterly, “You're all crazy. It's a waste of the products of nature!”

Oh, yes, Southern He's Laba wasn't called Laba; it was called the “Fire God Festival”; this was a pretext that the glib-tongued Wei-laoban had made up back then.

By the road, an adult leading a child picked the child up and said, humoring, “For a Fire God Festival, there needs to be a Fire God. Do you know the Fire God's name?”

The bald child crisply responded: “Chunying!”

Xi Ping turned his head to look their way and just happened to see an empty space in the long line of sages' statues—this was Wei-laoban's spot. The He people had insisted on making her a statue, and Wei Chengxiang felt ashamed and insisted that they shouldn't. The two sides had spent years going back and forth, and finally they had only left a place; there was no one there yet.

There was no rush. After all, she hadn't yet completed her journey.

“You haven't even set out yet, and you want to fasten yourself to a tree sharing a lifespan with the Law Breaker. You'll be scared of dying.” Xi Ping shook his head at that empty statue space. “If you're scared of dying, how will you come and go freely under the high sky and over the vast sea? Stupid girl.”

Having said this, he turned and went back—two incense sticks had passed, A-Xiang ought to have packed up the rebirth berries for him. He wanted to take them back to the Xuanyin Mountains while they were fresh, then come back and pick a place whose porridge didn't have all kinds of random things stewed into it.

There would be favorable weather in the coming year, all wishes fulfilled.

EXTRA 4 - Western Chu

After the hidden bones disappeared, there was total disorder in Chu. The remnants of the Zhao clan fled as the tree fell. The Luwu masks were naturally of no more use, so Xu Rucheng simply resumed his true identity and represented the Luwu in negotiations with Yu Chang.

The spiritual energy prohibition had come too abruptly. No one, whether shed skin or ascended spirit, could soar into the sky or burrow into the earth anymore. The power of Great Wan's upgraded immortal tools was magnified, and the gap couldn't be filled in a hurry. Worst of all was that the Law Breaker was still operating, and reincarnation wood, able to get in at every crack, could deliver weapons to the four corners of the earth in the space of a breath. All powers black and white had to submit to Tai Sui's tyrannical rule.

On the one hand, Yu Chang was beside himself with delight over having finally obtained the Sanyue Mountains, but on the other hand, he still had to bend his head to that damned Tai Sui. But what sort of man was Yu Chang? Believing firmly that a true man could endure the unendurable, he contributed a performance that was the pinnacle of "honeyed words with a sword in the belly." He was like an assiduous shopkeeper, acting "close as brothers" with Tai Sui while precisely noting down every debt, so when the prohibition on spiritual energy ended and his cultivation was restored, he could

demand repayment from a certain person surnamed Xi for every last item.

Because of this, while Yu Chang had obtained power over Western Chu, he still wouldn't indulge in a single moment of comfort. Sensuous pleasures, whether of sound, sight, taste, or fragrance—he didn't come near any of them; he worked hard to cultivate and lived ascetically, not letting up for a moment. Though he couldn't sense the tiniest bit of spiritual energy, he still persisted in meditating daily in a heap of white spirits, in rain or shine; it was deeply touching.

Six months later, Yu Chang held his nose and accepted all of Xi Ping's unreasonable provisions, including that people couldn't be prohibited from moving freely, that cultivators whether righteous or evil had to be registered, that suppressing toilet bulletins without cause was prohibited, and so on—as well as delimiting Tao County and its surroundings within a three hundred li radius as independent territory, henceforth free of Chu.

When both sides had signed and made their marks, Xu Rucheng heard a tune in his ear. As he took part in the monumentally ostentatious entertainment Yu Chang had arranged, he surreptitiously asked Xi Ping, “What's that noise?”

Xi Ping answered from a reincarnation wood tree a thousand li away: “Looking at Yu Chang's smile, I was suddenly inspired to compose a song based on him.”

Xu Rucheng was curious. “What's it about?”

Xi Ping answered profoundly, “An honest woman with a hard lot in life forced into prostitution, who hides rat poison in her bosom while receiving guests.”

Xu Rucheng: “...”

He suddenly felt that the wine at the feast tasted strange.

With the treaty between Wan and Chu concluded, Xu Rucheng could finally withdraw after winning merit.

The Silver Moon was no longer to be seen above the empty Sanyue Mountains. In Dongheng City, the streets and lanes were hung all over with Yu Chang's banners, which fluttered boldly and arrogantly beside the terrified old colored lanterns.

While entering the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon station, Xu Rucheng heard a boom. Through a thousand-li eye glass, he saw that the statue of the Black Emperor of Sanyue's Principal Peak had been smashed to dust.

The new emperor was reveling atop the remnants of the old regime, not knowing yet that only scraps remained inside those remnants.

Xu Rucheng shook his head and handed over his ticket. "Tao County."

He had two long-cherished wishes: one was to show that imperial grandson his own impressive appearance, so for the rest of his life that bastard would feel ill whenever he heard the words "dragon and phoenix symbolizing good fortune"; the other was to go to Tao County and meet Zhao Qindan, return her name to her.

Sadly, he was unable to realize the first—just as he had been busying himself on Tai Sui's behalf, he had stopped paying attention, and the third-rate imperial grandson had gone off in a flurry to report to the netherworld. It was a great regret.

Xu Rucheng and Zhao Qindan were two half-immortals, one a poor country man with no home or property, one the precious young mistress of a great family; one had nearly given up his life to enter

the Way out of resentment in the midst of upheaval, and one had exceptional natural talents that had let her effortlessly stand out among her peers at the Latent Cultivation Temple.

Supposing that their paths in life had not been so bumpy, supposing that there had been no “Kaiming” or “Luwu,” the only opportunity the two of them would have had to meet would have been if Xu Rucheng, as an “evil cultivator,” had been arrested and soul-searched by the Heaven’s Design Pavilion... and the responsibility of soul-searching him might not even have fallen to Zhao Qindan; after all, it fell into the category of “dirty work.”

Two such people, unexpectedly, had somehow come to exchange lives beneath a Luwu mask.

Zhao Qindan met him in person at the train station in Tao County. The two of them normally each had their own work and had little contact. They only exchanged greetings through the reincarnation wood at the New Year. At first Xu Rucheng was a little reserved, worried that they would be stuck with nothing to say to each other, but instead, as soon as they saw each other, an unspeakable sense of familiarity and closeness arose of itself... especially when he realized that the two of them performed an identical gesture of rubbing the writing brush callus on their middle fingers with their thumbs when nervous.

Living through danger together made people “brothers,” so after the two of them had spent a decade “wearing” each other’s lives, they had probably become twins with no blood relationship.

“Dongheng City was a total mess then. Among the Xiangs, some were with Xuanwu, some were against Xuanwu, and then there were those against the Xiangs, the rebels. You had no idea where to stand. After Xuanwu gained the upper hand, Prince Qing Manor, which had joined the wrong team, fled that very night to your... to the Zhao hidden realm. Before they could stop, they heard that

Xuanwu was dead. The two families thought this was the light at the end of the tunnel and were beside themselves with self-satisfaction. They set out together with great pomp back to Dongheng, unexpectedly running into Yu Chang's invasion." Xu Rucheng sighed. "If not for that, given their prudence, they actually wouldn't have ended up falling so fast."

After she had heard out the fate of the Zhao family, no sorrow was visible on Zhao Qindan's face. She only asked, "What about my mother?"

"Your honored mother died of illness three years ago. She didn't live to see the tumult."

Zhao Qindan went blank, after a long moment gave an *mhm*, and nodded—she had spent a decade in Tao County, written countless articles. She had a profound awareness that human weakness didn't change on account of completed spiritual bones or rising cultivation, so she hadn't probed into Dongheng's Zhao family's situation even once, simply not giving herself the chance to be weak.

Just as well, Zhao Qindan thought, that her delicate and well-born mother hadn't lived to see the tumult. She was so affectionate, so feeble. She had never had an opinion in her life. She could only submit, or cry and submit. It was her luck not to have lived to see this.

Xu Rucheng said, "Do you want to ask about anyone else?"

She shook her head, and Xu Rucheng understood; he said nothing further—the clan leader had also died, and all the Dongheng Zhao family's cultivators had died. That they had died off so cleanly, apart from bad luck, was down to the old clan leader, at the final critical moment, leading a group of established foundations and half-immortals who could no longer use spiritual energy in an attempt to

take advantage of the chaos to break into the Sanyue Mountains and take back Zhao Qindan, who was “trapped in Sanyue.”

With them in such a hurry to die, Yu Chang had naturally taken them up on it, and afterward had even attempted to seize the items in the Zhao hidden realm, and was taught a lesson by the reincarnation wood.

As for how much of this concern had been motivated by worry and familial love and how much by plans for the family’s future, there was no way of knowing now. There was no benefit in considering it; it was just as well not to mention it.

“The things in the hidden realm were transferred into the Law Breaker. Tai Sui says you can come make an inventory and pick them up when you have the time.”

Zhao Qindan waved a hand. “I’m not short on money, and anyway, I haven’t had any connection to them for a long time. You’re the one who’s ‘Zhao Qindan,’ and you ought to be the one to handle it.”

“N-n-n-no, I, I’m not..” Xu Rucheng turned into a stutterer on the spot from fright, afraid lest he be unable to break free of the identity of “Zhao Qindan.”

Zhao Qindan laughed.

Over a pot of Xia River Baijiu, the two of them spoke of the former sweatshops in Yuzhou and the densely forested Latent Cultivation Temple, discussing all the past. Zhao Qindan raised a cup of wine in honor of A-Hua, and Xu Rucheng hoped that he would one day be able to see the South Sea Hidden Realm with his own eyes.

On his departure, Zhao Qindan saw him to the ferry crossing on the Xia River and asked, “What plans do you have for the future, Xu-xiong?”

Xu Rucheng said, “Go back and rest for a while, wait for a new identity.”

“Oh?” said Zhao Qindan.

“While we can’t use spiritual energy, cultivators are after all different from mortals. Tai Sui says that the first couple of years will be all right, but afterward, as time goes on, there will necessarily be new discord between mortals and those who were once cultivators. Perhaps a small number of people will create calamities.” Xu Rucheng clutched at his hair. “It’s so strange to say ‘those who were once cultivators.’ I asked him why, and he just said, ‘You’ll know in a few years,’ all mysterious... Anyway, no matter what, the Luwu will prepare in advance.”

“With your record,” said Zhao Qindan, “you amount to an elder in the Luwu, and with your relationship with Tai Sui on top of that, transferring to the Kaiming Department’s general headquarters in Jinping...”

“To be an official?” Xu Rucheng waved a hand, laughing. “Don’t, I’m not cut out for that. I don’t understand about the big picture or the little one. I’d better stay among the common people quelling calamities.”

Saying so, he aimed a glance at Yuzhou on the opposite bank. The gentle river breeze carried away the steam. Though the spiritual energy prohibition had been in place less than a year, Great Wan had stabilized at an amazing speed. Fishing boats put into port in droves, and from a distance mechanical chug-chugging could be heard.

In all of this, the Kaiming and Luwu’s contributions could not go unnoticed. If A-Hua were still alive, if she told people what he did now, probably they wouldn’t mock her for having “poor eyesight.”

When the third-rate imperial grandson had gone into the West, Xu Rucheng had in fact made time to go, and for a horrifying effect, he'd had a colleague alter his appearance by hand. When he sat down flagrantly by the third-rate imperial grandson's bedside, he had been planning to gather breath in his diaphragm and cry out *Mua-ha-ha, get a load of who I am!*, not expecting to have his sleeve clutched by the bewildered imperial grandson, who was gasping for breath.

The imperial grandson could no longer see, and he didn't recognize anyone. His flesh and bones seemed, like his life force, to have shrunk down to the point where there was nowhere left to shrink. Xu Rucheng felt that if you picked him up and shook him, perhaps there would be nothing left but skin, like a ragged kite.

Somehow, Xu Rucheng didn't play his malicious prank. He brought his ear close and listened to this noble worm's thin panting. As he gasped for breath, he said almost inaudibly, "I'm scared... I'm scared..."

After a dozen intermittent sobs, the imperial grandson choked, like a hiccup. Xu Rucheng bent his head and saw that his unfocused eyes were slightly open, staring at the bed curtains. A crowd of servants knelt outside, silent as cicadas in winter. No one cried, no one paid homage.

Naturally the imperial grandson's surname was "Xiang," but he was called Xiang... what was it now?

Xu Rucheng sat by him for half an incense stick and ultimately didn't remember, so he reached out and closed the third-rate imperial grandson's already cold eyelids.

Even more undignified than death was dying afraid.

Even more miserable than living alone and wretched was not knowing what you were living for.

“I’m going.” Xu Rucheng saluted Zhao Qindan and boarded the ferry to cross the river. “Sister, look after yourself.”

Some years later, when all the cultivators discovered that their cultivation was constantly regressing and their Ways of the Heart were melting away irreversibly, just as Xi Ping had anticipated, the conflict between the frightened cultivators and the mortals climbed to its heights. Groups of cultivators acting surreptitiously began to appear everywhere. They were opposed to technology, killed various toilet bulletin celebrities, kidnapped mortals to try all kinds of evil arts on them—fortunately, the Luwu were ready.

Like a fish entering the water, Xu Rucheng led the Luwu in infiltrating all kinds of filthy corners. He also persisted in sending a New Year’s greeting to Zhao Qindan every year, and sometimes he would even get someone to pass along some little handmade trinkets to her.

This lasted until one year, when Zhao Qindan stayed up all night seeing in the New Year with a crowd of colleagues at the *Tao World Record*, and by daybreak, his New Year’s greeting still hadn’t come. She looked up at the daylight and understood.

A few months later, Xi Ping gave her an old knotted bag shiny from being touched and said that Da Cheng had given it to him to pass on to her. She embedded the knotted bag, along with the dust and old marks on it, in resin and turned it into a piece of amber.

Another hundred years, and Zhao Qindan retired due to old age, stepping back with honors. She left the name of “Sir Xu” to the *Tao World Record* and returned to the little house she had bought long ago. She no longer discussed the great events of the world, national economies, or people’s livelihood. She began to write in the Wan

language a compendium on fine foods to be found around the lower reaches of the Xia River, under the name “Zhao Qindan.”

The main ingredient of the famous dish called the Xia River Ice Fish is actually the red carp from the Tianze River, which in the eleventh month of every year comes south in large numbers from the Tianze River to the Xia River and goes north after the 2nd solar term. When the red carp comes, the New Year is near. Therefore, years back, Wan called the red carp the ‘Beauty Announcing Spring,’ while Chu called it the Yu Fish...¹⁰⁸

This was followed by an annotation that had been inserted at some point. It said: *Suspected of being Yu Chang’s brother.*

The tip of Zhao Qindan’s pen paused. Glaring at that line of flashy cursive, she considered putting up a sign on the study door: *No Admittance to Xi Shiyongs or Dogs.*

Writing a fine foods compendium was interesting enough, but it incurred Xi Shiyong; that jerk had demonstrated great interest. He was always sneaking into the study to steal peeks at her draft, coming more regularly than a rat and often leaving behind samples of his “beautiful handwriting” giving directions on this and that. His views were extremely biased: today he wrote *Excellent!* after the golden flower almond paste, tomorrow it was *Yuck* after the savory and numbing clay jar vegetables, and most wicked of all, one day he left his remarks beside the mixed filling buns, saying, *The filling ingredients are mostly pickled; eating them is like sucking on a corpse’s toes...* and Zhao Qindan had just eaten mixed filling buns for breakfast that day.

She took off her reading glasses and sighed, ready to cross out that nefarious annotation, when the girl who looked after her house ran inside in a panic. “Ancestor, there’s a guest! It’s...it’s...”

Zhao Qindan frowned. Before the girl could finish, a commotion of footsteps and voices came from outside. The uninvited guests were rather rude, intruding without being invited in.

Zhao Qindan was just about to call for a guard when she heard someone say loudly outside the study: “Is Sir Xu here?”

Next, a big crowd of people came in surrounding an old man.

The old man was sitting in a wheelchair, hair and beard white, weighed down with age, seeming about to drown in his robes. He had lost the appearance of his youth, and only a pair of bright red eyes remained to make his identity unmistakable.

It was Yu Chang.

After the spiritual energy prohibition, the Ways of the Heart of the cultivation world’s masters had melted away. But once they reverted to being half-immortals, there wasn’t much connection between their lifespans and their original cultivation level—those whose paths in cultivation had been rather bumpy and who had many internal injuries often aged prematurely.

And when it came to bumps in the road, no one could count more potholes than Yu Chang, who had spent centuries wavering on the edge of losing his mind.

He had passed his whole life living in the present, without view of a future. Now, when Zhao Qindan, who had been a half-immortal all along, had just started having problems with her vision, Yu Chang already had one foot in the grave.

He was still breathing, but he seemed to have turned into a desiccated corpse. He only barely managed to sit upright with the support of two attendants. As if it used up all his strength, Yu Chang saluted Zhao Qindan. As before, he was very polite to her, though

his voice was now so aged it sounded like a chimney that hadn't been cleaned in a decade. "Sir—Xu. An old friend... *ahem*... an old friend has come to call."

Zhao Qindan automatically softened her breathing, afraid that if she breathed too loud, she would blow him to dust.

Originally, Yu Chang had only wanted to become Xuanwu, or even Xiang Rong or the Black Emperor; he'd had no intention of governing any nation. He only wanted to occupy the richly endowed Sanyue Mountains like the Xiang family before him and erect an invincible position on its pinnacle, so that Western Chu, as his appendage, would naturally shape itself after his order.

But the spiritual energy prohibition was like a nightmare he couldn't wake up from. When he opened his eyes, he was still in the belly of the beast; there was no struggling free of it. He couldn't become "Xuanwu"; he was only going to become the "wu."¹⁰⁹

Yu Chang had gone for a stroll outside the spiritual energy prohibition line and upon coming back had gone thoroughly crazy. All the ancient texts and secret scrolls that he could hunt up in the Sanyue Mountains—he tried them out one by one. Spiritual stones, the internal cores of spiritual beasts, all kinds of materials you could think of and ones you couldn't think of—he ate them all in every manner of preparation.

Sautéing, deep frying, boiling, eating cold with dressing, baking—he had even driven needles into his meridians and spiritual bones, injecting the magic materials. Ultimately, not only did he not manage to get his cultivation back, he nearly sent himself off preemptively.

But just when he had completely given up hope and was ready to choose between going crazy and living in a drunken stupor, the

disorder in Chu reached a certain degree, and there finally came a collapse.

Commoners everywhere rose up in rebellion. In less than half a year, seven or eight insurrectionary armies cropped up. Those that didn't want to revolt fled the catastrophe, crossing the river east or simply escaping to the autonomous prefecture of Tao County.

The borders of the Tao County autonomous prefecture were surrounded by a ring of reincarnation wood like a city wall. They didn't block the roads or the waterways; they only kept out the ill-intentioned. Starting with the spiritual energy prohibition, there had been a stream of clever Chu fleeing to Tao County. Transportation was well-developed there, tall buildings stood like trees in a forest; in just a few years, it was more flourishing by far than Dongheng City had once been.

Later, Tao County could no longer contain such a large population. When it could accept no more immigrants, the Chu simply occupied land beside Tao County, found themselves reincarnation wood seeds, and planted reincarnation wood forests themselves.

Anywhere with reincarnation wood amounted to Tai Sui's domain. Therefore, apart from Southern Wan and Tao County, all the nations had signed a treaty with Tai Sui, prohibiting reincarnation wood within their borders.

But while Yu Chang could hold up the international treaty to make Xi Ping behave, he couldn't keep the Chu people from planting the trees themselves. The more strictly they were prohibited, the more seeds people smuggled in, and the means of smuggling were endless in variety and peculiarity. Xi Shiyong not only said nothing, he even regularly used the reincarnation wood trees that made it into Chu's interior to deliver firsthand news to the offices of toilet bulletins of his acquaintance.

The most ruinous incident was when a eunuch betrayed his nation and stuck a reincarnation wood branch into a flower pot in Yu Chang's sleeping quarters. How could Xi Shiyong, who had ascended to godhood in the way of rottenness, pass up such an opportunity? The next day, "Photo of Western Chu's Emperor Yu Drunk and Undressed in his Sleeping Quarters" appeared in the papers, written and illustrated.

Goodness, everyone had only ever seen their own bare-assed spouse at home; who had ever seen a bare-assed emperor? Therefore, they fell over each other to circulate it, nearly using up all the paper in the five nations for printing.

Though the headline of this photo was misleading and the main character in the image was still wearing an inner robe, the collar only open a little wide, Yu Chang still became the first emperor in history to make the papers for his "lithe and graceful bearing." Even the neighboring country's General Zhi, hearing of this farce, couldn't bear to look. He chided "preposterous" several times in a row, snatched Xi Ping back to the Xuanyin Mountains and gave him a thrashing, then grounded him for half a year.

When Yu Chang sobered up, he wanted to wash the imperial palace with blood on the spot. He nearly lost his mind there and then—but this person had been both righteous and evil in his life and had at last come to stand at the pinnacle of the Sanyue Mountains; there was some destiny upon him. It was at that moment that his Way of the Heart melted.

Centuries of seeking were like a dream; suddenly, he lost all sense of time... Yu Chang's heart palpitated, and his straying intellect was cut off in its tracks. During this pause, the female officials at Yu Chang's side stood up.

After seizing control of Western Chu, Yu Chang had conferred a noble title upon his mother and erected her statue on Sanyue's

Principal Peak, in the place where the Black Emperor's statue had once stood. For this reason, apart from Great Wan's Kaiming Department and Tao County, the latter of which represented pioneering and freedom, Western Chu was the earliest to permit women to take the civil service exam and involve themselves in politics.

Yu Chang was an evil cultivator. His methods were vicious. As a ruler, he was severe and mistrustful. He was only somewhat more tolerant towards female officials, mostly lenient in sentencing even when they were convicted of crimes.

Chu was isolated, haughty, and uncivilized. It had always esteemed might. Chu's female officials, who had just gotten their feet under them, knew perfectly well that while Yu Chang was despicable, apart from following him, they could have no other foothold, unless they abandoned everything and betrayed their nation to flee elsewhere.

The female officials put all their efforts into whole-heartedly supporting him. Not minding the trouble, they expostulated with him and rushed about busily and in fact managed to stabilize Yu Chang, who had just reverted to a half-immortal. He spent three days calming down. The flames of his rage calmed, and his hatred of Xi Ping once again rose to new heights, such that even when he recovered his cultivation, he temporarily tossed it to the back of his mind, devoted heart and soul to training troops and strengthening the nation so he could flatten the reincarnation wood in Tao County and Great Wan with artillery fire.

He held that breath for a hundred years.

Western Chu broke free of its instability bit by bit. The "one minister and three officials" emerged—four remarkable women whose names would be remembered throughout the ages; when the old ladies had long since died in their beds of old age, they continued to

live on in the annals. Chu's festering diseases had been eliminated. While he hadn't amassed the national might necessary to attack Jinping, there was stability everywhere, all professions were thriving, and the slightly derisive "Emperor Yu" spoken of among his peers had turned into a true Emperor Yu.

The attendant pushing the wheelchair said to Zhao Qindan, "Might we request that Sir Xu contact Tai Sui? His Majesty hopes to see him."

Yu Chang pulled at his sleeve and interjected with difficulty, like a faulty bellows, "If... if I don't see him now, I won't see him at all..."

Zhao Qindan froze, then quickly ordered her maid to get reincarnation wood. Just then, a familiar voice came from outside. "Here I am."

Xi Ping passed through a reincarnation wood tree by the street outside the house and arrived beside Yu Chang in an instant.

Yu Chang narrowed his dim eyes, staring unblinkingly at Xi Ping, who hadn't changed a bit in all these years. A frightening light appeared in the lifeless red eyes. His mouth moved, but he made no sound.

Zhao Qindan pushed up her reading glasses. To judge from lipreading, this seemed to her to be a colloquial Chu profanity.

Xi Ping, looking at this old acquaintance, his... hard to say whether enemy or friend, felt a tangle of emotions welling up. Involuntarily, he lowered his tone somewhat and asked almost gently, "Yu-xiong, what did you want to say to me?"

Yu Chang's lips moved again, but he seemed to choke on a mouthful of phlegm. He clutched his chest. The people around him

crowded forward, making a loud fuss while patting his chest and feeling his pulse. There was even one who took out a needle—

Yu Chang suddenly waved a hand, sending them all away. He looked fixedly at Xi Ping. Xi Ping understood. He took over the wheelchair and bent down to put his ear next to Yu Chang's mouth. "Go ahead."

"Xi Shiyong, you... you..." Breathless sounds came from Yu Chang's throat.

Xi Ping sighed, bringing his ear closer. "Don't rush."

Yu Chang reached out an emaciated claw and seized his collar. Xi Ping didn't dodge. "I'm here."

"You... you're..."

"Hm?"

"You're an asshole! *Ptui!*"

Yu Chang's last exclamation was suddenly sonorous. He spat at Xi Ping. Even though this sole "celestial being" in the world reacted quickly, he was still caught somewhat unprepared. He managed to dodge himself, but his clothes were sullied.

Yu Chang, looking at his stunned expression, laughed aloud.

He had probably never been so carefree in his life. After three laughs, the sound came to an abrupt halt. The hand clutching Xi Ping's collar fell. Yu Chang's expression was fixed in a look of perfectly contented tranquility.

This mouthful of spit just before parting obliterated centuries of debts of gratitude and vengeance.

Though the Chu had been prepared, they were still greatly grieved. Zhao Qindan had to call over Tao County's troops to help make arrangements for them. The commotion in the little house didn't quiet until it was night.

Xi Ping went on foot to escort Yu Chang to the border between Chu and Tao County, then stood at the border, watching the motorcade until it disappeared.

Zhao Qindan returned to the little house alone. Since getting old, she often had insomnia. After lying in bed for a while, she still couldn't sleep, so she got up and turned on a light, filling in the entry on "Xia River Ice Fish" that she hadn't finished before.

The red carp is large, its flesh sumptuous and fatty, yet with a unique stink that boiling does not avail against, and that heavy seasonings and frying also do not remove. Smelling it causes vomiting. Only during years of famine would starving fishermen catch and eat it.

This continued until the first year of the Kaiming Era, when the sages did battle beside the Xia River and General Zhi froze the river with his sword energy. Tao County was heavily damaged by the incursion of the hidden bones. Seventy percent of the residences were destroyed, leaving many people with no home to go back to. Therefore, people beside the river fished out the red carp that had frozen to death so they could eat their fill and found to their surprise that the flesh of the fish was delicious and fragrant, without any unpleasant stink.

Since then, the unique fine dish known as "Xia River Ice Fish" has passed on to the present. Only travelers who visit Tao County around the New Year can eat it...

EXTRA 5 - Frost and Snow

The Xuanyin Mountains' spiritual energy drained away year by year, and gradually, Flying Jade Peak ceased to be so cold. In recent years, mundane grass and flowers had begun to sprout sparsely around the little cottage in high summer, and on sunny afternoons, you could do without lighting the heater. Listless auspicious animals filled the area near the immortal palace at the mountain's summit—yes, Flying Jade Peak's immortal palace had once again seen the light of day.

Exploiting the perks of his position, Xi Ping had called up a bunch of meticulous Luwu to take a cable car up the mountain, bringing abacuses and ledgers. Only after working around the clock for the better part of half a year did they manage to dig out Flying Jade Peak's immortal palace, which had been sealed for centuries.

But the inhabitants of Flying Jade Peak were too few. Even if they invited all their neighbors to make up the numbers, it still wouldn't be enough to fill the enormous immortal palace. Therefore, teacher and disciples still lived in the little cottage and only used the immortal palace when they needed to keep up appearances.

The cottage had been expanded somewhat. The first floor was where General Zhi usually received visitors. There was a large clock hanging there. A karma beast avatar dwelt year round in the clock.

Perhaps because Zhi Xiu had brought it back to the Xuanyin Mountains, and perhaps because it had seen the shade of its former master in this new master of Xuanyin, the karma beast was a little dependent on him. It was always hanging around Flying Jade Peak. So Zhi Xiu had simply set it to watch the door and announce visitors.

The clock had been made by Lin Chi himself. It had been the first purely mechanical product of Moon Plated Peak after spiritual energy had been prohibited. The clock face was an entire zhang

square, round on the outside and square on the inside, with a night half and a day half. Apart from the twelve shichen and ninety-six ke, there was also a “character hand” as tall as a person. Each shichen contained twenty-four characters, matching the twenty-four solar terms, so when the big clock ticked off a character, a mythical beast representing the solar term would jump out on the clock face and run around the dial. When it had run around twenty-four times, it would have come to the next character.

The karma beast loved it. It was always gamboling after the mythical beasts, full of delight. Outside of Zhi Xiu and Heaven’s Design Pavilion, Lin Chi became the third person it liked.

But now, Zhi Xiu had said that an important guest might come to visit, and having a single karma beast watching the door might not be respectful enough, so he had also set a Xi Ping to watch it.

They waited and waited, and the “important guest” didn’t come. Xi Ping spent two days exchanging hateful looks with the karma beast and got fed up with it. “So who is it? Such airs. If they don’t come soon, I’m not waiting any longer.”

“All right, then stop wasting time here,” Zhi Xiu said, “pick up a sword and come out back with me...”

Before he could finish his sentence, his accomplished disciple sat right back down. “I’m waiting for the guest.”

Zhi Xiu: “...”

“Hey, shifu,” said Xi Ping, “I’m going to your wine cellar to get a jar of wine-steeped plums to eat!”

Other people drank wine that had been cooked with plums; he particularly liked plums that had been steeped in boiling wine. He mixed them with honey to eat them. Decades-old mellow wine, and

he would drink a couple mouthfuls at most and boil the rest away, never mind how wasteful it was.

Zhi Xiu went out holding his sword. “You can’t have it. It’s an insult to the wine.”

Xi Ping was selectively deaf. “Thanks, shifu!”

He got out an old manuscript of Zhang Jue’s, followed its directions to perform a divination, picked out a jar according to the results of the divination, expectantly broke off the sealing clay, sniffed. A failure.

Shizu was no good; his divinations were inaccurate. Shizun was also no good; the wine he made was as bland as water.

“Fortunately, I am filial and not picky.”

Xi Ping returned with the wine jar. First he teased the karma beast until steam was coming out of its ears. Then he idly got out a novel about Chu’s Emperor Yu Chang and read while he cooked plums.

The novel was a little hackneyed. It told a story of Chu’s Emperor Yu Chang remaining completely unmoved among a crowd of beauties (suspected of being impotent), loving only a young palace maid of unremarkable appearance.

He had once bought a book called *Romantic Tales—Chu Emperor Anthology*; all the stories in it were this sort of thing, the unshakeable red-eyed Yu Chang falling head over heels in love with a series of palace maids, eunuchs, female petty officials, carpenters, seamstresses, flower-sellers... and so on—and being summarily rejected.

At first, Xi Ping had read with keen pleasure, a peculiar smile on his face. Later he had read too much of it and memorized all the plot

devices. He thought it ought to have been called *Demeaning Anecdotes—Blindness Anthology*.

As he read, he began to yawn repeatedly from boredom. His head, propped on his hand, began to nod.

The aroma of the plum wine entered his dreams in a daze, enchanting and dissipated. This smell took him back to the old Jinping of his youth.

He dimly heard the sounds of string and woodwind on the shore of the Lingyang River. The tune was very familiar, only distant, fading in and out.

Xi Ping followed the sound, struggling to listen closely and distinguish the old tune. Just as he was satisfied, he heard a bang—a huge monster suddenly turned up in the river in his dream. A hideous human head flew out of the water and opened its mouth to roar: “Zhi Jingzhai, I challenge you!”

Xi Ping’s dream, runny as the water of the Lingyang River, was shaken to bits by this cry. He nearly fell out of his reclining chair. The karma beast running around the big clock also ran headfirst into the character hand.

The startled man and beast, fur bristling, exchanged a brief look of dismay. Xi Ping gave an *ah* and came back to himself. Pained, he rubbed the center of his brow. “Oh, it’s her. I was wondering why I was being made to receive the guest.”

There was no need to receive a frequent guest—for example, their “good neighbor” who came to visit every day; the karma beast could just call for them.

For guests from outside, it was usually Xi Yue receiving them. After all, General Zhi had some care for his reputation, and sometimes he

was worried about outsiders getting a strange impression of Flying Jade Peak.

Only when Wu Lingxiao of Northern Li's Kunlun came would Zhi Xiu half-purposefully make Xi Yue stay away. Right now, he had sent Xi Yue to Jinping's Heaven's Design Pavilion to run errands for a few days.

Wu Lingxiao... She was a difficult person to appraise.

There were some people who had perhaps come out of the womb with a murderous aura.

After the life-and-death battle in the Land of Turmoil, Wu Lingxiao, whether she was compelled by the spiritual energy prohibition situation or had really come around, had accepted spirit-conducting metal... and accepted it a little too much.

At first, just so she could move as a half-puppet, she had made about the same adjustments on Moon Plated Peak as Xi Yue. After getting used to that, ignoring all of Moon Plated Peak's attempts to dissuade her, she had insisted on having upgraded immortal tools attached to her body.

The spiritual energy prohibition had just begun then, everything was in an exploratory phase, and half-puppet techniques were evil arts, strange to an orthodox sect. Lin Chi told her to give him at least a year, and only then would he dare to try out the safest upgraded immortal tool. Until then, he didn't dare to rashly operate on a human body.

Wu Lingxiao found even looking at him to cost an effort. She waved a hand. "Fine, go have your baby, I'll think of a way myself."

Next, an amateur being more dangerous than an expert, this madwoman ready to stake everything on one throw, having a

general grasp of spirit-conducting gold, attached an upgraded immortal tool to herself.

Inevitably, she failed the first time and blew a manmade lake into Moon Plated Peak. Fortunately, though spiritual energy had just been prohibited, she still had her cultivation level; a shed skin body wouldn't die so easily.

This attempt at getting herself killed was too outstanding; even Xi Ping was amazed. He deliberately ran to get Xi Yue and tell him the outcome of altering a puppet on one's own authority. After this, it took Wu Lingxiao half a year and the help of a crowd of spirit-conducting gold experts working themselves into a frenzy to put herself together. Moon Plated Peak breathed a sigh of relief, thinking that she ought to calm down now.

The upshot was that before the venerable old lady could warm up her arms and legs, she went and did it again.

This time, she got very lucky and didn't blow herself into a heap of spare parts. She was fortunate enough to acquire an arm that could hold up a cauldron. Afterward, Lin Chi reviewed the whole process in trepidation and found that she had nearly answered the call of the Sword Ancestor. While putting what he had learned in order, he advised fearfully, "Princess, it was by a pure lucky fluke that you were unharmed this time. In the future, you must not act rashly again!"

"None of your damn business," said Wu Lingxiao.

Before Lin Chi could sort out his ideas, she took Wanshuang and left without saying goodbye, returning alone to Northern Li.

At the time, Northern Li's Kunlun was a headless dragon, and there was fierce internal strife in Yanning—precisely the moment when there was a mountain with no tiger. Just as ambitious people on all

sides were raising armies, itching to act, the god of death descended from above.

She seized the Sect Leader's Seal. Relying on an arm with an upgraded immortal tool attached to it and Wanshuang, she took control of the Kunlun Mountains. Then, without another word, she went straight toward Yanning, shut the city gates, and washed the imperial capital in blood. It was said that that night, Wanshuang's fuller seemed to have rusted. Fire in Ping'an Palace turned the western sky red.

She suppressed the vying warlords with force and eradicated dissent. The situation stabilized somewhat. Then, there was no stopping her once she got started—one after another, she added new upgraded immortal tools to her body. Each time Xi Ping saw her, she was more ferocious than the last time. Among the swords of Northern Li, none was more richly endowed with talent than her, none more willing to sacrifice than her. They had to bow their heads and give her their allegiance.

Though there had been countless cruel and ruthless people in Northern Li's history, Wu Lingxiao still stood out among them.

After seizing sole power, she overturned the policies of shutting the nation to the outside world and forbidding Moon Plated Gold that had held for nearly two hundred years and began to commandeer domestic land almost radically, urging people to construct factories. At first glance, this seemed like a good thing, but ruling a great nation was like boiling a small fish—the reasons that made chronic diseases chronic had complicated history behind them; interests, culture, structure, and even the system of government couldn't keep up with her “instant success” strategy.

And Wu Lingxiao's method of “cutting the knot” was always the same—killing.

She abandoned the Night Revenants, chose the obedient and useful among them, reorganized them into the “Night Criers,” went to great expense to purchase equipment from Wan, then, copying the set-up of the Luwu, spread her “informers” out across whole length and breadth of Northern Li. It was said that Wu Lingxiao had special upgraded immortal tools in her ears, so when the Night Criers thought it necessary, she could directly “see” the scene long-distance.

Like Western Chu, now that Northern Li had become “enlightened,” on the surface it no longer prohibited the publications of toilet bulletins or the movement of people in and out. But before a renowned scholar’s article wantonly decrying the new policies could be published, his whole family died in flames. The Yanning nobles who had received word in advance and were preparing to escape encountered shipwrecks or assassins; no one managed to leave the northern continent of incessant wind and snow alive.

What brought this bloody page to its climax was “Ping’an Palace’s Night of Blood”—in Yanning’s Ping’an Palace, a favored concubine of the puppet emperor, confident of enjoying favor, got drunk and spoke without discretion, saying a few words mocking Wu Lingxiao. The next morning, she was found dead in bed by palace maids, her mouth wide open, her tongue and teeth gone, the bed dyed rust-colored with her blood.

Under the enormous shadow of the Wanshuang Sword, the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon went through the northern continent, factories grew up dense as trees in a forest, and the former Disciple Hall for sword cultivators became a place specially devoted to training new Night Criers. Wu Lingxiao appointed herself Kunlun’s orthodoxy and publicly challenged her former fellow sect members. She killed a dozen master sword cultivators who had studied under the Sect Leader and the Third Elder. Three ascended spirit masters passed away, including Kunlun’s Cheng Yu, the only one Xi Ping knew.

From then on, never mind the full name “Wu Lingxiao,” even “Princess Changji,” “Princess,” “Wanshuang,” and the term “sword-bearing” became taboo words on the northern continent.

The people of the northern continent had the valor and tenacity of those who braved the winds and defied the snow, and they were also the world’s most obedient citizens, most capable of enduring humiliation for a higher cause. “There are ears stuck to the threshold, and a knife to cut your throat in the frosty wind” — from the officials, nobles, and cultivators of the immortal mountain above to the common peddlers, herdsmen, and serfs below, everyone was on edge, not daring to say a single word out of line.

Zhi Xiu with his bone-deep breeding would enumerate a person’s good points even when badmouthing them behind their back. After this, when Wu Lingxiao was mentioned, he simply didn’t discuss her. His attitude was clear.

But the master of Wanshuang still came to the Xuanyin Mountains every few years. It was lonely to stand too high above the rest; apart from Zhi Xiu, there was no one else left on earth who could understand her way of the sword. She couldn’t even find an opponent for a debate.

“I get stuck with all the difficult ones,” Xi Ping muttered. He whistled to the karma beast and bestirred himself to greet her. “Senior, I hope you have been well...”

Before he could finish, a beam of sword light came right toward him. Xi Ping wouldn’t respond to this attack. He turned and sauntered out of a nearly reincarnation wood tree and finished his sentence: “...since we last met.”

Wu Lingxiao was even taller than the last time he had seen her. She had countless things attached to her, like a warship on legs. On

entering another nation's borders, all her offensive weaponry had to be disabled; otherwise, there would also have been a bloody light on her.

At present, the fourth generation of spirit-conducting gold had been developed, and the technique had been disseminated among all the nations. In fact, it had long ago been possible to make a half-puppet seem hardly any different from a human. But she hadn't repaired her countenance. As before, there was a thin layer of human skin over her face, and large expanses of metal were exposed. Her manmade eyeballs glowed red, scanning back and forth. Meeting her gaze could give you half a night's worth of nightmares.

Wu Lingxiao looked askance at him. "What, you don't dare to respond to a single attack?"

Xi Ping, grinning, tucked his hands into his sleeves. "Let's say I respond to one of your attacks, and you give us a ten percent discount on iron ore and furs next year. How about that?"

Wu Lingxiao worked herself into a fury, feeling that he was insulting her sword, but before she could scold him, Xi Ping offered a perfunctory salute. "I have already notified my shizun. He is practicing swordsmanship at the rear of the mountain, and it will take him some time to arrive. Won't you come in and have a seat, senior?"

Having said this, without waiting for the guest to answer, he disappeared where he stood, transporting himself right to the potted reincarnation wood tree inside the cottage.

Wu Lingxiao paused, slowly put Wanshuang away, and swallowed her chiding—Xi Ping refused to walk two steps without using reincarnation wood to transport himself; this was a veiled warning.

The Law Breaker enveloped the northern and southern continents. The spiritual mountains were dead. The position of the master of the Tai Sui Qin and the Eternal Flame was transcendent; he was the only person she needed to have scruples about.

When she went into the little cottage and took a look, had she had eyebrows, perhaps they would have flown to the top of her head. Wu Lingxiao had lived for centuries, and she had never heard of a shifu going out into the cold and snow to practice swordsmanship while his disciple dozed, hugging the heater.

“I’m not normally so idle. I was specifically waiting to welcome our important guest.” Xi Ping removed the wine that couldn’t be used for receiving guests and put an earthenware jar on the stove to boil water for tea instead. He put a civil and insincere smile on his face. “Please have a seat, senior. I was just speaking of this year’s price of iron...”

Wu Lingxiao stiffly interrupted him: “I came to discuss the sword, not to discuss business.”

“Well.” Xi Ping nodded obligingly. When it came to “discussing” the sword, he had nothing to say; he simply didn’t say a word and started a staring contest with their guest; they would see who felt awkward first.

Perhaps Zhi Xiu was crawling back. The water boiled, and he was still nowhere to be seen. Wu Lingxiao really couldn’t take it. She said to Xi Ping, “Whatever else Flying Jade Peak may be, it still has the reputation of the Sword of the South. With an unfilial disciple like you, how has your shifu not broken your legs yet?”

Xi Ping rinsed the bowls and moistened the pot, putting on a great show with the tea set. Hearing these words, he raised his eyebrows and gave an indirect answer to the question: “My shizun likes to eat glutinous rice dumplings, because when he was little, back home in

Jinping, every day when he finished his martial training, they would make him a bowl to eat at home.”

Wu Lingxiao sneered and muttered “southerners” under her breath.

Xi Ping continued to speak unhurriedly: “No matter how old a person gets, he still likes to eat what he was used to eating as a child. If you like it, too, he’ll tell you that it’s best to dip them in osmanthus sugar. If you want to learn, he’ll enthusiastically teach you the best way to blend the ingredients for the sugar. If you’re afraid of getting your false teeth stuck in it and won’t touch the stuff, at most he’ll mock you for missing out on good food. He won’t force you to eat it, and he certainly won’t break your legs if you don’t eat it. Senior, for my shizun, the way of the sword is a bowl of osmanthus sugar dumplings.”

When Wu Lingxiao had heard out this fallacy, she said, “Bullshit.”

Xi Ping, without urgency, asked in turn, “Then, senior, would you instruct me, if the way of the sword isn’t osmanthus sugar dumplings, then what is it?”

Wu Lingxiao said, “My sword is…”

“I know that the sword you wield is Wanshuang, but what is Wanshuang to you?”

Wu Lingxiao froze. When it came to discussing the sword, talking about sword aura, she could go on at great length, talk in a steady stream. She was the true root of Kunlun’s ninefold sword. Kunlun’s ninefold sword was wide-ranging and profound, its sword aura inherited in a direct line from Wanshuang’s Sword Ancestor. It was a sword unwilling to snap amid ice and frost, a sword that roared as it cut through the northern wind.

It shook heaven and earth; it was irresistible.

But a sword like this, what was it to her?

Wu Lingxiao coldly said, “What kind of insulting question is that? Wanshuang is me, and I am Wanshuang.”

“As far as I know, Wanshuang acknowledged you as its master less than three hundred years ago. Was it really because you looked at this sword and felt kinship with it that you transformed yourself into a sword-bearing half-puppet?”

Wu Lingxiao furiously said, “You...”

The reincarnation wood branches in the room swiftly elongated, firmly holding down the table Wu Lingxiao had almost knocked over. The karma beast had returned at some point. Its bright gaze shot out from the clock and fell on Wu Lingxiao.

But she seemed not to feel it. Xi Ping’s gaze came through the dense steam. There was a sly smile in it. Wu Lingxiao almost had an illusion of being sucked in by that gaze, irresistibly recalling the past in response to his words.

Her close kin and her elders had all left her then. She had suddenly lost everything. Under the Kunlun Mountains were hundreds of thousands of hands that wanted to pull her to the bottom of the valley. All she had was one desperate gamble—

Xi Ping’s voice became even softer. “Even if that was the case, before you encountered Wanshuang, what was the way of the sword to you then, senior?”

In Kunlun’s Disciple Hall, newer disciples weren’t separated from older disciples. There was a trial by fire every month, where anything might happen. At each trial by fire, the new disciples who had just joined would be bullied until they were half dead. If you wanted to

endure less hardship, you had to strive desperately to become stronger. The old disciples didn't want to suffer retaliation from wave after wave of shidis who had become stronger, so they didn't dare to slack off for a single breath, either. Each one of them grit their teeth, held blood in their mouth, raised their sword again and again. It was especially hard for a girl, particularly after her brother had been eliminated.

Xi Ping's voice, which had become slightly distant, floated into her ears. "... I heard that it was blood and tears."

Wu Lingxiao's heart and mind shook. "A pack of drivel..."

"Only hatred and fear will give rise to anger. But I'm someone else's disciple. How is it any of your business whether I'm good at the sword? Why do you get angry as soon as you see me? Since you don't hate me or fear me, then what is it that you hate? What is it that you dread?" Xi Ping said softly. "Kunlun? Wanshuang? Or yourself without Wanshuang in your hand—"

After about two incense sticks of time, Zhi Xiu at last trailed in.

He smelled of medicine and was walking very slowly, as if his legs were acting up again. When he walked in, he didn't see Wu Lingxiao, only saw that Xi Ping had put out the fire he had used to boil water and poured the water right out. The smell of wine still lingering in the room covered up a trace of another aroma. Only someone accustomed to smelling the wine would be able to distinguish it.

"Where is Fellow Cultivator Wu?"

Xi Ping, "Got rid of her. You can stop pretending to be lame, shifu."

"Is that any way to talk?" General Zhi's feeble legs did indeed become nimble at once. He took two herbal plasters from his

sleeves and set them aside. “And what’s that smell you have here?”

“I got it from Stut... Stupendous Scholar Wen-shishu.” Under his shifu’s gaze, Xi Ping changed his wording midway and took a medicine bag out from under the earthenware jar. “I know when to stop. This thing only refreshes the mind and improves the memory. It’s undetectable. Don’t worry, she won’t come again... Listen, where did you find such stinking herbal plasters? Are you sure these things are for treating rheumatism? What a shoddy act...”

As expected, Wanshuang did not come south again. Only much later, when there was an occasional mention of the “Sword of the South,” she would say, “Our ways differ.”

She had grown up amid dread and become the dread of countless people. The northern wind couldn’t blow away the enormous shadow she cast.

Thirty-five years later, Wu Lingxiao was betrayed by her subordinates and attacked by assassins willing to die at a critical moment in replacing her puppet parts. The upgraded immortal tools attached to her blew her and a dozen assassins to dust together. The northern continent’s darkest epoch ushered in a sliver of dawn.

In the morning light, the Cloud Soaring Flood Dragon railways were laid down, the system of industry was fixed; under a myriad of souls of the dead, it was the northern continent that broke free of the shackles of the old spiritual mountains fastest of all.

The rights and wrongs of Wu Lingxiao’s life were hard to judge.

She had been born amid wind and snow, and she was scattered amid wind and snow, quietly and without a trace, like a late frost¹¹⁰ dissipating in the rays of the morning sun.

EXTRA 6 - Jinping (1)

“Her Ladyship has already prepared a gift on Your Highness’s behalf. This is a joyous occasion.” The nurse smiled obsequiously, very cautious, speaking almost humbly to the small boy in front of her. “When it is time for the little Viscount’s ‘hundred year celebration,’ the weather will have warmed up, and Your Highness can go in person to the Marquis Manor to have a look..”

The boy ignored her, continuing to scrawl on drawing paper. The nurse accidentally caught a glimpse of the paper, gave a start, and forgot what she was saying.

The third prince Zhou Ying, child of Yuying Palace’s Imperial Consort Xi—everyone said he enjoyed particular favor.

Because he had been born frail and sickly, His Majesty sent someone to ask after him every few days. No matter what was being distributed in the palace, His Third Highness was sure to get the first share; even the crown prince had to get in line. Princes and princesses under ten couldn’t leave the palace at will; he alone had that freedom. He could say a word and have the Yongning Marquis Manor submit a tally and take him to stay in Dangui Lane. Having inadvertently caught a glimpse of him casually scrawling, His Majesty had invited Mr. Tanghua to come the following day, making the famous expert of the day entertain a child.

Zhou Ying learned drawing quickly. He copied still lifes with his teacher and soon had something to show for it. But when no one was watching, he drew and drew, and the clumsy trees and stones became surrounded by savage faces that coldly looked out at people through the drawing, like one vicious ghost after another inhabiting the drawing.

The nurse took fright each time she saw it. She thought that this child had an extremely evil disposition.

The third prince was as quiet as a dead person. He practically never cried, and he didn't laugh, either. He plainly wasn't deaf or mute, and he wasn't simple-minded, but at four or five years of age, he didn't speak. The Office of Imperial Physicians could find nothing wrong with him.

But quiet didn't mean that he was easy to look after. The nurse had never seen such a ruthless and temperamental child. He might be as tranquil as a calm sea one moment, and without anyone bothering him, he would turn nasty the next.

Dropping paperweights and smashing cups and plates was nothing. Setting dogs to bite people, refusing to eat, harming himself—he could do anything until he got what he wanted. That was how he had obtained the tinderboxes he had on him.

This was the worst of it: he also liked playing with fire.

Other children had candies and pastries in their purses. His purse always contained a tinderbox; when he was bored, he would play with fire.

Once, when he woke up in the middle of the night and couldn't get back to sleep, this young master had been inspired with some "marvelous idea" and lit his bed curtain on fire, nearly burning down Yuying Palace.

With such a catastrophe taking place, naturally it wouldn't end well for the palace servants. The eunuch who had been keeping watch that night was going to be dragged out and flogged to death. He wailed, asking His Highness to "consider the many years he had served him," be merciful and speak on his behalf. He kowtowed until his head was bloody. Zhou Ying stood by looking on

indifferently. When he saw this person who had been with him since early childhood dragged away like a dead dog, he smiled.

The nurse knew then that a vicious ghost had reincarnated in this little prince.

He had no heart and no sentimental attachments. He didn't consider consequences and knew no fear. He was like a snake that wouldn't warm when you held it. No matter how you praised him or humored him, it wouldn't win his good opinion. If you dared to be disobedient, you were asking for death.

Most horrifying of all, his expression would sometimes change while looking into empty space, as if communicating with some... invisible thing. Though he didn't speak, his lips moved, and from the movements of his mouth, he clearly wasn't saying anything nice.

The Imperial Consort had a weak temperament and couldn't control him at all. His Majesty must have been bewitched; he didn't think there was anything unusual about his son who seemed to have been possessed by an evil cultivator. If he heard gossip about him, he would have the gossiper beaten to death. Who would dare to be indiscreet?

The Yuying Palace servants could do nothing but carefully keep their eyes fixed on him twelve shichen a day, carefully attending on him with fear and trepidation.

Strange to say, only in front of the Marquis of Yongning could this evil child restrain himself somewhat.

Of course the Marquis couldn't beat or scold a prince, but he never minced words with this precious nephew.

He would pour a cup of sugar water and say, "Would Your Highness please sit? This subject has no choice but to give you some

counsel.” Then, stern-faced, he would deliver a long lecture. Once he started “counseling,” he could go on for at minimum most of half a shichen, and there was no upper limit. It would continue until the old lady or his wife came to the “rescue.”

The nurse, to her amazement, had watched the third prince “sit upright” in a grown-up’s chair, his two short legs dangling in midair, his head drooping, the cup of warm sugar water clasped in his hands, not daring to drink and not daring to put it down. He really did seem somewhat chastened.

But however stern and inflexible the Marquis might be, His Third Highness was always willing to go to the Marquis Manor to be reprimanded. As long as he wasn’t sick in bed and unable to leave the palace, he would spend around ten days out of every month in Dangu Lane.

This continued until it was discovered that the Marquis of Yongning’s wife was pregnant.

After the third prince heard this, he stared blankly for a long time and didn’t go out all winter. He only went to the Marquis Manor when he was invited for the Lantern Festival. He went there and back in a hurry, as if calling roll in the morning; he didn’t stay the night.

That day, when the nurse was lifting him out of the carriage, she trembled when she touched his icy little hands. For some reason, Zhou Ying hadn’t used the heater. His whole body was tense. His pitch-black eyes were focused on emptiness as he met the gaze of some unknown monster.

The nurse didn’t dare to breathe loudly. She carried him back and offered him up as if she were carrying a bomb, thinking that the Marquis Manor’s little Viscount was in danger. If he died in the

womb, it would almost certainly be because this prince had cursed him.

The Imperial Consort had been pregnant last year. As soon as word got out, the people in Yuying Palace had felt insecure. The shrewd people said that while His Majesty loved His Third Highness, this child was peculiar and seemed unlikely to live to adulthood; the future of Yuying Palace would lie with the little one.

Unexpectedly, a dog in the palace, not watched carefully, had peeled off a section of a vibration repelling inscription in a corner while no one was paying attention. That section just happened to be struck by lightning during a stormy night, immediately bringing down half the courtyard wall. That night, the third prince out of nowhere ran a high fever that wouldn't go down, and the Imperial Consort went out in the rain to see him. She was struck head-on by the explosion and spiritual wind from the inscription and lost the child.

Not long after this was the incident of the bed curtain being lit on fire. All the restless "shrewd people" anxious to go elsewhere were sent by this fire to the torture chamber. Their "wishes were granted," and they went to join that little prince or princess.

The bloodless smile on the third prince's face that day gave the nurse nightmares for a month.

The third prince wasn't close to the Imperial Consort. The nurse had seen that he was even a little impatient with her. And even so, he couldn't tolerate another child, so if one arrived in the Yongning Marquis Manor, where he was "close," what would become of him?

The nurse was on edge. She gave secret instructions to the palace servants, telling them to stay alert, not let that demon incinerate Guangyun Palace.

In the third month, with the Southern Sage's blessing, the child in the Marquis Manor wasn't killed by the demon. He was born without a hitch.

Rip. Zhou Ying had torn the drawing paper in his hands.

The nurse watched him tear the scrawl with the ink not yet dried into strip after strip. Then he raised a hand and pointed.

“W-would you like to see... the gift list?”

Zhou Ying took the gift list and glanced over it expressionlessly. He raised the brush he had just used to draw ghastly faces and made some strokes on the list.

The childish handwriting bore a trace of the rough edges of the brush being wielded unsteadily, but the structure of the characters was very correct. The writing said: *One congratulatory drawing.*

Part of the word “congratulatory” was written in a now rare ancient Wan character. It not only didn't seem joyous, it looked a little horrifying.

This was another peculiarity that no one dared to mention. The third prince was literate—he hadn't started his schooling. He could read and write without anyone having taught him, and all he knew was ancient characters.

Born with knowledge—if he wasn't a reincarnated vicious ghost, then what was he?

The nurse shuddered, but Zhou Ying ignored her. He turned and took out a rolled up drawing, already mounted, and put it in a brocade box, indicating that she take it away.

The nurse's lips moved. She wanted to say that this was after all a joyous occasion, so it wouldn't be too appropriate for His Highness to send a ghastly scrawl like a gift to the bereaved, would it? Even if the Marquis didn't make a fuss of it and the child wouldn't understand, wouldn't it cause problems later? She took a look at Zhou Ying's expression and didn't make a sound—it wasn't her business.

Decades later, before handing over the Yongning Marquis Manor to the Kaiming Department, Xi Ping returned home to tidy up old possessions and turned up that old congratulatory drawing, then invited Bai Ling to help him sort out having it removed and mounted, prepared to take it back to the Xuanyin Mountains.

This wasn't a "ghastly scrawl." It was a drawing of the Marquis Manor's courtyard, decked with lanterns and colored streamers. The kindly old lady was seated in the center of the courtyard, the solemn Marquis was welcoming guests for the joyous occasion, and Madam Cui had a baby in her arms. The colors were extremely warm, full of joy.

Xi Ping glanced over this sign from the past and asked in surprise, "Did san-ge draw this when he was little? How old was he?"

Bai Ling said softly, "This was a congratulatory drawing for the occasion of the Viscount's birth."

Xi Ping blurted out, "Oh? Was he a prodigy whose talent came to nothing through lack of education?"

Bai Ling: "..."

Would you dare to ask such a question to his face?

Zhou Ying had been taught by experts. Naturally he was skilled at music, weiqi, drawing, and calligraphy—but only at the not

completely incompetent level societal norms required for noble children; it didn't amount to any particular talent. He had no inclination toward the arts.

The scenery and composition of this congratulatory drawing were very childish. The stones, flowers, trees and other such things drawn as embellishment were very stiff, and showed signs of having been copied; only the people in the drawing were stunning. Naturally people were harder to draw than objects; he might not have learned to do it yet at the time. Each person was drawn vaguely, with a few strokes. But in just those few strokes, which didn't even fully describe their figures, seemed to be an impression of their vital beings. Anyone who was familiar with them would know who they were as soon as they saw the drawing, could even imagine the expressions of the people in the drawing.

Xi Ping considered it briefly. "These people weren't drawn, I think. How did the two of you manage it?"

"You can tell, Viscount?" Bai Ling said, smiling. "Actually, I helped him make an 'impression' for this. I had only a paper body then. I connected to his consciousness and helped him make an impression of the images in his consciousness on my paper body, and then he went back and copied it onto the page."

Xi Ping stared. That really was a method that only a child would think of, circuitous and clumsy.

It was said that a paramount spiritual sense could see through a person's soul at a glance. Indeed, the impression on the paper was of their souls.

But then, Xi Ping noticed that there was something about the old lady in the drawing. To one side of her were lively maids, but to the other, there was nothing. There was clearly a blank part of the drawing.

The joyous page was missing a person.

“He was having a fit of temper.” With his deftness at judging people’s feelings from their words and gestures, Xi Ping understood the meaning behind this drawing at a glance. “My dad said that because of me, he didn’t come visit for over a year? Abominable. I don’t remember any such thing. If I’d known he loathed me so much, I never would have gotten close to him. He disliked me on sight?”

Bai Ling smiled.

“Hey, Lao Bai, have you ever thought that my brother is especially like my dad in this way? He didn’t pick up any of his good qualities, but he learned inflexibility from the old man. He couldn’t accept new things.” The once-rejected “new thing” said, dissatisfied, “Every year he had new clothes made for him that looked just like the last year’s, wouldn’t try anything he hadn’t eaten before... Even when it came to growing flowers, it was the same—over and over it was just a few varieties. What do you say, didn’t he have the slightest curiosity?”

“He did,” Bai Ling answered mildly. “He always wanted to see what it would look like when the sky fell.”

Xi Ping: “...”

Was this human curiosity?

“But I don’t remember him being ‘mute.’”

Not only had he not been mute, he’d had quite a bit to say. Words came to him especially easily when it came to chiding and telling ghost stories.

“Yes, this was before you were born, Viscount,” Bai Ling said. “When he was little, he couldn’t tell the Impassable Sea and Jinping apart. The demon host varied in intellect. Some could only shout, and there were those like the heart demon, who knew all mortal languages. A majority of the rest would go on and on repeatedly in some place’s ancient local dialect. He started hearing that at birth. Though he could understand speech, when the words came to his lips, he mixed them up. After he scared the Imperial Consort to tears once, he simply stopped talking.”

Xi Ping was silent for a while. “My aunt wasn’t crying because she was scared.”

Bai Ling agreed—the two of them knew, but a child wouldn’t know.

Once he knew, he wouldn’t be a child anymore.

“Actually...” Bai Ling took a look at the obtrusive blank space in the drawing. “It might not entirely have been because of a fit of temper.”

“Hm?”

“He had never seen himself, so he couldn’t draw himself.”

There was a kind of person in the world who, despite having all his faculties intact, couldn’t speak his mother tongue and had “never seen” himself.

There was an ice mirror in Guangyun Palace that could reflect a person’s pores, clear as if it had absorbed their soul. Many people didn’t dare to use it. But even standing in front of the ice mirror, Zhou Ying still couldn’t see himself clearly.

In his eyes, countless threads of karma incomprehensible to him were wound around each person, and their surging thoughts were always churning at the centers of their brows. When he was little, he

couldn't distinguish the subtle differences between sadness and anger, malice and fear. He would only roughly and ignorantly separate "good" from "bad," and the vast majority of people were "bad," including himself.

He was wrapped up in billowing blackness, his face blurred. For many years, Zhou Ying hadn't even been able to work out whether he was a person or a skeleton.

When he was little, he had been unable to control his consciousness. When his surroundings constrained him, it was easy for him to skip into the Impassable Sea. A child's memory wasn't so long. When his body and mind fell out of sync, he was likely to be confused when he returned. And by coincidence, just when he was at his most bewildered and helpless, the people around him would become more frightening. They would do their utmost to pretend nothing had happened, not daring to look him in the eye.

In the vastness of Guangyun Palace, even the milky white light of the gas lamps rejected him.

He was immersed in this loneliness, enduring it day after after. Only when he went to the Marquis Manor did he have a chance to relax.

In his grandmother's courtyard was a little room with a blue window screen. It was his. When he opened the window, there was the old lady's garden, with cluster after cluster of tuberose plants at the foot of the wall.

There was an inexhaustible store of legends in his grandmother's belly, and inside the room were new toys that Cui Ji had collected from all over, hunting high and low. If he only went there, she wouldn't do anything else all day, only play with him, cherishing this first grandchild like a pearl, often saying, "If the old man could see A-Ying, he would be so happy."

As if this “vicious ghost reincarnated,” this freak, were some... some great treasure that, if you missed seeing it, you would take that regret to the underworld.

When she occasionally saw his gaze become empty, she was never surprised, only gently patted him on the head, pulling him back from the den of demons, then slowly continuing what she had been saying—and this was also extremely rare. When Zhou Ying came to the Marquis Manor, as if he now had a foothold in the human world, his consciousness would hardly ever be drawn by the Impassable Sea. Apart from the old lady, who was always with him, no one else had seen it happen.

Even when the “wind rose” and his marrow was sucked by the demon host, and the pain came through his spiritual bones to the human world, his youthful consciousness would always be gently led by a pair of warm, dry hands.

The old lady wasn't very learned, but she knew how to do everything. Though the Xi family hadn't wanted for money, they still weren't notably rich, and naturally the appropriate match hadn't been with some grand family's young mistress. She had had to attend to household affairs and do needlework when she was young.

She could make a kite, a big swallow with several long tails behind it, which flew up more steadily than those made in the palace workshop; she could make imposing tiger head hats and all kinds of clever rag dolls; she could also turn the hidden demons in Zhou Ying's drawings into silly faces, stitch them onto little sandbags, and give them to him to play with...

It will end now, Zhou Ying thought when he asked his paperman friend in the Impassable Sea to make an impression for the drawing.

The tuberose and the evening breeze, the sweet soup and the opera highlights, the roomful of rag dolls, the big kite hanging on the wall... These things weren't his to begin with.

That was the Marquis Manor, and his surname wasn't Xi. He had always been an outsider.

Luckily he had already "grown up." He could split his attention to interact with both sides simultaneously, and he had gradually learned to distinguish the human world from the sacrificial altar, could even carefully speak complete sentences in Jinping dialect. He no longer needed to go to that little garden to "take refuge."

For the Marquis Manor's little Viscount's Hundred Day Celebration, he sent a gift but didn't go. In the seventh month of that year, when the old lady's birthday came, Zhou Ying had already started schooling. He only went over with the Imperial Consort's gift to pay his respects. He was gone before his tea was cold. During the Double Ninth Festival, he was sick again, confined to Yuying Palace... Anyway, he could always find an excuse.

It wasn't until the following year's Dragon Boat Festival that the old lady, bringing wrapped up zongzi and an embroidered purse, came in person to see the Imperial Consort and, brooking no argument, took Zhou Ying back with her.

That was the first time he saw Xi Ping.

When Xi Xiaobao was fourteen months old, the swift feet that would easily take him climbing over walls when he grew up already existed in a fledgling stage.

As soon as Zhou Ying walked into the courtyard, before he could find his bearings, a "ball" rolled out and bumped right into him.

The “ball” himself plopped onto the ground and knocked Zhou Ying, whose soul wasn’t at home, into the old lady’s arms.

“Hey, you naughty little thing, go, go, run along.” The old lady, in a “tie him up and lead him away” tone, called over the nurses and directed a group of people in carrying away the kid trying to climb Zhou Ying. “Rude little darling, he can’t take you bumping into him...”

The threads of karma on the child were shallow and faint, and his mind was incomplete. Zhou Ying didn’t see anything extraneous on him, only a plump dumpling with unwiped drool on his face, clucking “gege, gege” like a hen while reaching out his dirty paws trying to throw himself at him.

What was this? Zhou Ying was alarmed. He was frozen in place, unmoving... and then he saw Xi Xiaobao’s eyes.

Xi Ping’s eyes weren’t small after he grew up, and when he was little, he had been all eyes. In the huge black eyes was Zhou Ying’s reflection. He was startled. For the first time in his life, he saw his own face clearly.

Only a child’s eyes could reflect such a limpid view. For those couple of years, Zhou Ying, relying on his eyes, understood what the world must look like in the eyes of others, refined himself until there was no fault to be detected.

Later, Zhou Ying learned that the ball on legs had already ploughed through the Marquis Manor, inside and out, several times; only the little room in the old lady’s courtyard had been locked so he couldn’t get in.

“Because that’s your cousin His Third Highness’s room. When gege comes, you have to ask him for permission to go in.”

The more he wasn't allowed to go in, the more he wanted to, especially since you could see the little swallow kite hanging on the wall of the room from out the window. Xi Xiaobao made a circle outside every day, longing day and night for his cousin to come. As soon as he saw him, he was as ardent as if they had known each other in a past life.

In Xi Xiaobao's childish heart, his cousin was a door god with great power in his hands. In order to win the right to come in and play for a while from the door god, he would sing or roll around, whatever was asked. Zhou Ying's words were more effective even than the Marquis's discipline rod.

Later, san-ge became a symbol for Xi Xiaobao that he "could eat Grandmother's hidden candy," "could get out early from being grounded," "could skip out on a beating," "could not have to study for a day." Without saying a word, their grandmother had turned A-Ying into Xiaobao's holiday, charging him with a heavy responsibility, so he would have to come, couldn't get out of it if he tried.

The moment he escaped the spiritual mountains, Zhou Ying at last saw the true, free and unobstructed heaven and earth—what he had wished for all his life.

And, in the stone that was as reflective as a mirror, he saw his own soul.

Spotless, complete, unencumbered.

Zhou Ying met his own eyes briefly, then traced his own image on the surface of the stone—the drawing he had given many years ago had been missing a person.

He had to make good the omission.

He had used up all his tricks just to see himself again. So when the old woman had let him see himself for the first time, how much painstaking effort had it cost her?

“A-Ying is wonderful.”

“If the old man could see A-Ying, he would be so happy!”

His wish in life had been fulfilled. Looking back the way he had come, every drab and drab of it turned out to have flavor to it.

The journey had not been made in vain.

The drawing was complete and a line of small writing left beside it. The artist's whereabouts were unknown. Presumably he had lost interest and returned.

EXTRA 7 - Jinping (Final)

On the third day of the year, according to precedent, the various nations' ambassadors to Wan finished their rounds of social engagements in Jinping and went together to the Xuanyin Mountains to pay their respects for the new year.

On this day, the Latent Cultivation Temple opened to the public, and all the toilet bulletins came to gather and observe, sending their people who were best at weighing others' words and expressions, hoping that they could discern something from various interactions during the New Year's greetings and make a judgment about the coming year's disposition.

But when it came to General Zhi, all thousand-li eyes and ears to the wind had to lay down arms. In his rebellious disciple's words, all the Xuanyin Mountains' auspicious animals tied together couldn't match up to shifu when it came to presiding over a situation.

He stood beneath a moonlight frost tree, smooth and easy, neither familiar nor distant, even-handed and impartial, treating everyone with the same regulation cordiality, guaranteed not to give any of the toilet bulletins the slightest opening to embellish.

Even with spiritual energy prohibited, Zhi Xiu still satisfied all of people's fancies about celestial beings...

On the surface.

"That's the Xiuyi ambassador to Wan, Li Zhen, courtesy name Gucheng, from Zhaoye, a member of a collateral branch of the Xiuyi's Li family... Shifu, didn't he come just last year? And he publicly composed a verse in praise of your wine. I have goosebumps from it to this day."

"Here you are, Gucheng, come warm yourself up. Winter here isn't as warm as it is in Zhaoye." As if nothing were the matter, Zhi Xiu hid the piece of reincarnation wood he was using to cheat at his fingertips and greeted the Xiuyi ambassador to Wan familiarly; there was absolutely no sign that he actually couldn't remember who the person in front of him was. "You must take another couple of jars of wine back with you."

"Oh! General Zhi, I am overwhelmed by flattery, really overwhelmed..."

Xi Ping lowered his head to hide that he was rolling his eyes.

Since spiritual energy had been prohibited, apart from the old injuries and illnesses that gave life a bit of "flavor," perhaps the greatest inconvenience Zhi Xiu felt was that he couldn't "consult celestial phenomena" anymore.

So General Zhi's masks of "ease and skill" and "steadiness like a mountain" had fallen and shattered to bits in front of his disciple.

After skillfully dealing with the Xiuyi ambassador to Wan, Zhi Xiu quietly squeezed the reincarnation wood in his hand. "Shifu's getting old. These foreign ambassadors come and go like images on a revolving lantern. How could I remember their faces after seeing them once or twice? When they've come a few more times..."

Xi Ping shot a glance at his shizun, elegant as a jade tree facing the wind, and numbly said, "This brother has been stationed in Jinping for six years."

Zhi Xiu: "..."

Xi Ping said, "This is the sixth time you've asked me 'Who is he?'"

There were people who lost the ability to tell left from right as soon as they started to fret, there were people who naturally couldn't tell directions, and there were people who could recognize written characters but not faces—none of that was rare.

But based on Xi Ping's many years' understanding of his shifu, Zhi Xiu didn't have any of the above problems.

He simply didn't pay attention.

The Sword of the South's special skill wasn't the sword, and it certainly wasn't celestial divination, already determined to be a lost art; as Xi Ping saw it, shizun's particular supreme feat was that no one ever noticed when his mind was wandering.

For rather dull occasions like ancestral sacrifices and social engagements, a peevish person like Zhou Ying would send a low-

level paperman to disgust people, and a rude person like Xi Ping would of course simply not go.

But not so Zhi Xiu. He could be present from start to finish, behave so that no one could detect a hint of discourtesy about him, and if you asked him afterward whom he had seen, he would have to ask the stars.

Zhou Ying had always taken exception to General Zhi's style of handling affairs. Mentioning it on occasion, he would snidely say, "Doesn't he get tired?"

...No, he didn't get tired at all.

Everything he wasn't interested in, that wasn't important to him, Zhi Xiu was guaranteed to forget as soon as he saw it. That person or thing certainly wouldn't stay the night in his brain.

The Sword of the South's way of the sword was the same. A sword had only a narrow cutting edge, and a person's mental forces were also limited. It was enough to give one's full attention at the important moment; for the rest, you could muddle through, relax when it was time to relax.

So neither of his disciples had obtained his full teachings: Xi Ping didn't know what it was to "give one's full attention," and Xi Yue didn't know what it was to "relax."

It took a battle of wits and valor to get Xi Ping to practice the sword, and Xi Yue...

The expression Zhi Xiu said most to Xi Yue was *That's enough*.

Especially after the sword heart he had inherited melted.

“What has little Xi Yue gone to do? Why was I the one selling my charms here this year?”

Having concluded an entire day of entertaining guests, neither teacher nor disciple wanted to smile again. They roasted tangerines and ate them with the door shut, expressionless. Even the tangerines became grave.

“Heaven’s Design Pavilion’s examinations are coming up. He’s gone to help Wenchang.” Zhi Xiu tapped the karma beast that had climbed up his sleeve. “Go ask Xiao Yue whether he’ll come back on the fifteenth to eat tangyuan.”

The karma beast rolled over indolently and came to the back of his hand. An image flashed over it as it sent an avatar to Heaven’s Design Pavilion.

“Isn’t there still another month before Heaven’s Design Pavilion’s examinations...?” At first Xi Ping was perplexed. Then he realized something. “What’s wrong with him now?”

“He advanced prematurely and suffered backlash from the sword traces at the back of the mountain. If he had continued to cultivate, he would have lost his mind.” Zhi Xiu frowned. “I told him to leave the mountains to cool off for a while, think about why he wants to practice the sword, and to stop practicing for now if he can’t understand it. This isn’t the way to cultivate one’s body.”

After Ways of the Heart had vanished, only half-immortals remained. Of course there were differences among half-immortals, but at Xi Yue’s level, he was capable of leaving the mountains to handle any situation.

This was the era of upgraded immortal tools. There was truly no need to be so eager for rapid progress.

“What, does he want to usurp Lao Pang’s position?” Xi Ping tossed a tangerine segment into his mouth. “Shifu, what are you glaring at me for?”

Zhi Xiu waved a hand. “You scoundrel... Fine, enough nonsense, go find me the locator, I don’t know where I tossed it again.”

The locator was another product of the next-door Moon Plated Peak, tailor-made for Zhi Xiu by Master Lin. This was a board about half a chi square that automatically recorded the locations of all the items inside the cottage. If you couldn’t find something, you would pick up the board to search, and it would automatically give directions. Special treatment for the scatterbrained—since he could no longer practice divination, apart from Zhaoting, Zhi Xiu could lose anything.

The only problem was, he also frequently couldn’t find the locator.

Teacher and disciple were both young masters. The lazier of the two set the other to the task, and after turning everything over, there was still no trace of the locator. A few days later, Xi Yue returned, travel-weary, to save his sloppy shifu and useless big brother; he found the wretched locator in the wine cellar under the cottage—the temperature in the wine cellar had previously been maintained by a talisman, and after the spiritual energy prohibition had begun, that had been changed to a half-mechanized upgraded immortal tool. There were two pipes of spirit-conducting gold, one to cool and one to heat. To economize on spiritual stones, it wasn’t always running. It only turned on when it detected a variation in temperature.

On Immortal Lady Shen’s birthday, Wen Fei had come over to find someone to drink with. When Zhi Xiu went down to get wine, the temperature stabilizer had just happened to be inactive. He hadn’t taken notice and had made a random grab, carrying back a wine jar and leaving the locator on the heating pipe.

When Xi Yue found it, the locator had been cooking on the heating pipe for over half a month.

Xi Ping craned his neck to look; it was quite well cooked, crispy on the outside and tender on the inside. “Shifu, should I sprinkle on some spiced salt?”

Zhi Xiu: “...”

Xi Yue sighed, rolled up his sleeves, and, working hard without complaint, cleaned up the mess added to the already messy cottage after his older brother had “swept” it, then went to Moon Plated Peak with the medium-well cooked locator.

Xi Yue was taciturn. Outsiders might think that he was cold, but actually he was very easy to get along with.

He was attentive and generous, and never appeared impatient no matter how many of Flying Jade Peak’s trifles were left for him to handle. How could such a person nearly lose his mind over and over out of eagerness to make rapid progress?

A chestnut flew at Xi Ping’s head and bounced off. He snatched it, and before Zhi Xiu could say anything, he sighed. “Yes, shifu, I know.”

Zhi Xiu, hands behind his back, walked over to him. “When he occasionally makes progress, he always unconsciously looks around, but he never knows who he’s looking for.”

That “eliminate the past” had swept away the concerns of the first half of Xi Yue’s life. Now, for the half-puppet, Xi Ping was only a very close older brother who liked to tease him. When he returned, Xi Yue was as happy as shifu and all the auspicious animals on the mountain; when he went abroad with the Luwu, he might be gone for three to five months at a time, and Xi Yue couldn’t be especially

concerned about him—when ordinary brothers grew up, they always had their own things to do; the two of them, moreover, weren't brothers by blood, and the mortal relatives who had maintained their connection had passed away.

But unexpectedly, the “eliminate the past” had left behind dust.

Xi Yue had forgotten the sense of helplessness of his youth that could make him spit blood, but an unease that had no explanation remained. The goal he was pursuing was gone, but his legs were still fruitlessly racing.

Xi Ping squeezed the chestnut open and ate it. “Shifu, I'm taking a trip.”

The medium-well cooked locator was naturally unsalvageable. Lin Chi took it back, the corner of his eye twitching; he would have to remake it. And after that day, Xi Ping once again ran off somewhere unknown. He was nowhere to be found on the Lantern Festival.

Three months later, a message came from Moon Plated Peak. The new locator was done.

The new locator was only palm-sized, so thin it was like a little mirror, much more exquisite. But while exquisite it might be, even the big one had been casually roasted. Wouldn't the little one be even easier for its careless owner to lose?

The instant Xi Yue saw the object, he made to speak, then held back.

“This one won't be so easy to lose,” said the understanding Master Lin. “This version of the locator can enter dreams. If you've touched it within the last twelve shichen, when you're asleep or in meditation, it will link up with your consciousness. If there's anything you've forgotten, it will automatically straighten it out for you, and it

will ‘appear in a dream’ to tell its owner to find it when he wakes up.”

Xi Yue: “...”

Master Lin had really put a lot of thought into this.

Lin Chi said, “I also made it resistant to water and fire. This time there won’t be anything to worry about even if you drop it into a furnace pit. Go ahead and roast it.”

The “good neighbors” who were always coming up with outrageous requests could claim a large share of credit in the fact that Moon Plated Peak could always be first under heaven, making outstanding contributions in the field of upgraded immortal tools.

Xi Yue brought the new locator back home and reported on his task, then relegated this matter to the back of his mind.

Unexpectedly, that very night, he became the first person to receive a visitation in his dreams from the locator.

While meditating, Xi Yue already felt that his mind was a little unsettled. It was considerably harder than usual to remove distracting thoughts. When he finally managed to settle his mind, hardly an incense stick of time passed before his spirit once again shook faintly.

If your spirit shook while you were in meditation, normally it was due to major, insoluble matters appearing in your mind; pushing them down by force was not conducive to cultivation. Xi Yue knew that he had experienced no difficulties lately and figured that this was happening because he had touched the locator during the day, so he relaxed his mind and allowed his thoughts to wander, wanting to see what dream the locator would send him.

Soon, he seemed to be transported beside a long river. An event from the past flashed before his eyes: while he had been a walker in the mortal world with Heaven's Design Pavilion in his youth, he had fulfilled a filial duty on someone's behalf at the Marquis Manor...

Fulfilled a filial duty on someone's behalf? Whose?

Before he could get a clear look at this thought, time continued to flow, and he saw himself following his big brother off the mountain to the Land of Turmoil, beset by terrors and alarms the whole way...

Further back was the Latent Cultivation Temple...

Xi Yue stood beside the river of memory, a little confused: hadn't Master Lin said that the locator would only send a dream to remind you of things you had forgotten?

He hadn't forgotten anything.

The past was long. There really were some trifling details he didn't remember—like who had worn what color, what they had eaten for three meals a day; he wasn't a camera.

But he knew the sequence of events clearly. Could it be that because he didn't like to forget things, the locator would pursue them to perfection, remind him of all the details?

It seemed that this thing had no sense of priority.

Xi Yue wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry. If even he was getting this treatment, wouldn't Shizun be overwhelmingly busy tonight?

Master Lin could also be unreliable sometimes. He would have to pay a visit to Moon Plated Peak tomorrow morning...

Xi Yue had meant to focus and break free, but he tried a few times and couldn't rid himself of the past events before his eyes, so he just had to make the best of it, allow that demented locator to lead him into the past. He felt that his memory was pretty good, so there shouldn't be too many forgotten details. He might as well get it over with quickly so this thing would let him go.

When he saw his big brother lazing in bed on the ship, asking him to do his assignment for him, then immediately being discovered by shifu far away in the Xuanyin Mountains and getting chased around and beaten by sword energy, Xi Yue smiled involuntarily. This really was something he would have done.

He also remembered that after this da-ge had used an immortal tool to drag General Commander Pang next door down with him...

In the memory, the hither seal flashed; the pleasure at another's misfortune had yet to be wiped clean off Pang Jian's dumbfounded face. All the details were recreated, true to life, by the locator. Xi Yue seemed to find himself once again on that ship, surrounded by chaos.

Suddenly, Xi Yue froze, noticing that something was wrong.

He very rarely recalled the past, so he had never realized that the scenes of events that came clearly to mind had absolutely no feeling of authenticity. There was a strange insubstantiality about them, as if he had read about them in a book... or as if someone had "written" them into his mind.

Only now had this memory truly "come to life" in his mind, becoming once again his own experience.

A familiar sense of consternation arose, filling his chest. Every time Xi Yue overdid it when practicing the sword and entered a condition

of forgetting self, he would feel this consternation, forcing him to become a little stronger, a little stronger still, or else...

Or else what?

Or else...

He recalled his childhood, spent starving, in a constant state of anxiety, and all his joints began to ache. He was only a half-puppet who had been born at death's door. Being "useful" was his entire guarantee of safety.

"Useless thing, I'll chop you into firewood one of these days."

This was the first sentence he had understood in his life.

Or else...

He was caught by Heaven's Design Pavilion, a dragon-taming chain put around his neck. He was afraid, angry, dove headfirst among the tantalizing blue jade, and with a bit of the relief of *this is how it ought to be*, he waited in perfect contentment for death.

The sharp knife hadn't cut open his belly. He had found a new cornerstone for his misshapen life.

Or else...

With a rumble, the dams laying across his heart cracked, and love and hate came roaring out like a flood, bursting the calm, waveless river of his emotions.

He remembered being forced to throw the inscription in the Latent Cultivation Temple, the dragon-taming chain shattering in the Resurrection Vortex, the seemingly unending five years of waiting, the wind and intermittent singing blowing past him at the funeral of

the Marquis Manor's old lady. It was as if he were lame, never fast enough. Using all his strength, he could only glimpse a retreating figure.

Or else... what was the point of a half-puppet's life?

During the sudden attack in Jinping, he destroyed his half-puppet core, was taken back to the Xuanyin Mountains by shifu. An icy hand holding spiritual light touched the center of his brow, bit by bit wiping away the marks etched deep into his soul, turning his past into emptiness.

The big clock on the first floor of the cabin ticked off a character. The phoenix representing the "Grain Rain" solar term flew past the karma beast's nose. The karma beast, asleep on its back with its limbs splayed out, slitted open its big eyes and was just about to close them indolently when its eyelids moved. It rolled over and sat up. There was a human figure leaning toward it, seated in the rattan chair by the window.

Xi Ping, who had been gone for several months, had returned at some point. He hadn't turned on the light. His breathing was shallow and urgent. There was a sword in his hands. He was practically collapsed over that sword.

The karma beast sniffed in alarm and sniffed out a faint scent of blood. It strolled over along the wall, jumped onto the side of a flowerpot, and stared at Xi Ping.

Xi Ping, following the karma beast's gaze, looked at himself and realized that a wound on his chest had begun to bleed; it had soaked through the front of his clothes.

This was the only thing he had found inconvenient since shattering the hidden bones; his body didn't heal as quickly.

“Shh...hss.” Xi Ping waved a hand at the karma beast and carefully put down the sword. “Don’t make a sound, or I’ll put a rat into your clock tomorrow.”

Hearing this, the karma beast’s fur stood on end, and it glared: *Asshole.*

“If shifu asks, say A-Xiang needed something and I’ve gone to winter in Southern He.” Xi Ping laughed and put down the sword. He left a note, turned, and ducked into a reincarnation wood tree.

The note said: *For Yue-bao’er: The ancient sword Xiuluo, makes anyone who uses it powerful.*

The famous sword Xiuluo, which had been out of the ordinary since its creation. According to legend, it had been created by the hand of the first Eternal Spring Brocade. After it was damaged, it had been repaired by the second Eternal Spring Brocade.

Hui Xiangjun had preserved the famous sword’s sword aura whole and entire, and used the Unbound Furnace to pare away the remaining violence in the sword, leaving this famous sword without any “airs”; it didn’t have a temper like Zhaoting and Wanshuang. It wasn’t picky about its master. Any living creature with hands could pick it up. Before spiritual energy had been prohibited, anyone who got ahold of it gained a tremendous aid that could spare them a hundred years of struggle. Even the good-for-nothing Xiang Zhao had been recommended for promotion to ascended spirit.

This sword had previously ended up in Qiu Sha’s hands, and had been taken by Xuanwu after Qiu Sha’s death. Out of selfish motives, he hadn’t turned it over to the Sanyue Mountains and had taken it with him when he had fled. Later, it had been forgotten in the no-man’s land of the All-Devouring Marsh on the Chu-Shu border. It had taken Xi Ping several years of scouting with reincarnation wood to find a trace of it.

It was only that there were fierce beasts among the spiritual creatures nearby. He had come in at the wrong angle and disturbed the clutch of lizards guarding the Xiuluo Sword. While being hunted by those big brutes, he had been scratched a few times.

Fortunately, the journey hadn't been made in vain.

Xi Ping concealed his injuries and joyfully went to hide.

As expected, the Xiuluo Sword would let you get twice the result with half the effort. From then on, Xi Yue really didn't have any more inexplicable instances of trying to rush ahead to make quick gains.

And maybe it was a mistaken impression on Xi Ping's part, but Xi Yue seemed closer than before. Previously, apart from asking after an elder's health as a matter of etiquette, Xi Yue had practically never voluntarily spoken to anyone—though when others spoke to him, he would always respond at once. Now, when he encountered something he couldn't wrap his mind around in the mortal world, he would occasionally ask Xi Ping about it, and he had even asked for help once.

After Pang Jian retired from office with honor and entrusted Heaven's Design Pavilion to Xi Yue, he kept the peace in the human world for fifty years.

He had spent his life proving that even though he was "useless," he still deserved to be loved; though he had been born defective and needed to spend twice as long as others slowly growing up, he also had his place at last.

Only when Xi Ping had grown tired of being "Tai Sui" and duplicated the souls of the departed in the Law Breaker's little space did he notice that he only had a score preserved for Xi Yue from his youth.

After obtaining the Xiuluo Sword, for some reason, he hadn't entered the Law Breaker again.

“What secret were you hiding that you were afraid would be revealed by the Law Breaker's music for me to hear?” Xi Ping said to the puppet at his side.

The puppet smiled without answering and refilled his teacup.

After all, half of a half-puppet's body was human. A puppet body could be repaired and have parts replaced without limit, but the human body always had an end. Xi Yue's dying wish had been to have the puppet body he left behind made whole and left to Xi Ping.

“I'll be able to make tea... young master...” He seemed a little confused and whispered the wrong form of address. “Too... bad...”

Too bad that a mechanical puppet can't help you with your assignments.

“You silent type.”

Hundreds of years later, the Law Breaker was realized, and the human world returned to the human world. An old gentleman came along with his puppet and countless forgotten old tunes that had once been popular and began a retro fad. He had a head of white hair like satin. The puppet could always brush it shiny and smooth for him and tie a snow-white peony into it.¹¹¹ His stage name was “Mr. Peony”; he dressed in whatever way was fashionable.

Mr. Peony made a movie. During the public screening, the old fellow shamelessly said that the leading man wasn't as handsome and elegant as him, and spontaneously played the ending theme; for the first time, he accidentally played off-key.

“Hey, I’m losing my skills. I’ve gotten old.” He didn’t feel embarrassed in the least, as if “getting old” was yet another gift in life worth celebrating. Grinning, he put away his qin and turned his head to call to the puppet, “Yue-bao’er, we’re going home.”

There were those who said that he stumbled when he left the theater, and the people who stepped forward to help him into a car were dressed in blue.

There were those who said they had seen him in the vicinity of the Xuanyin Mountains.

The identity of “Mr. Peony” was a topic on which opinions varied wildly for a time, but his popularity quickly passed. He never appeared again.

“According to legend, Tai Sui is an ancient god—”

“No, that’s wrong, I did a search, it said ‘Tai Sui’ means a magic meat fungus.”

“And what’s a magic meat fungus?”

“Maybe it’s a big mushroom that gives you immortality if you eat it...”

—

Novel Ends

REFERENCE

MEASUREMENTS

Units of Length

1 cun (寸) = 1/10 of 1 chi

1 chi (尺)*

1 zhang (丈) = 10 chi

1 li (里) = 1800 chi

*The proportions between these measurements have historically remained more or less constant, but the measurements themselves have changed over time. One historical record has 1 chi equal to around 9 inches or 23 cm, which seems to me a reasonable basis upon which to interpret the measurements as used in this novel.

Units of Mass

For purposes of this novel, only three measurements are necessary: the liang (两), equal to about 1.3 oz or 40 grams; the jin (斤), equal to 16 liang; and the qian (钱), equal 0.176 oz or 5 grams.

Units of Time

Time is measured by shichen (时辰), equivalent to two modern hours, and further divided into ke (刻), roughly fifteen minutes. Names for shichen with equivalent time listed below:

- Zi (子) 11pm-1am
- Chou (丑) 1am-3am
- Yin (寅) 3am-5am
- Mao (卯) 5am-7am
- Chen (辰) 7am-9am

- Si (巳) 9am-11am
- Wu (午) 11am-1pm
- Wei (未) 1pm-3pm
- Shen (申) 3pm-5pm
- You (酉) 5pm-7pm
- Xu (戌) 7pm-9pm
- Hai (亥) 9pm-11pm

At night time is kept by numbered watches: 1st (7:12pm), 2nd (9:36pm), 3rd (12:00am), 4th (2:24am), and 5th (4:48am).

CHARACTER GUIDE

(This guide contains limited spoilers for the plot of the novel; proceed with caution.)

Southern Wan (南宛)

Capital: Jinping (金平); Sect: Xuanyin (玄隱); Imperial Family: Zhou (周)

Xi Ping (奚平), courtesy name Shiyong (士庸)

Viscount Xi, son of the Marquis of Yongning; alias Mr. Yu Gan

Zhou Ying (周楹), title Prince Zhuang (庄王)

Third Prince, Xi Ping's cousin

Wei Chengxiang (魏诚响)

Orphaned girl working in Jinping's southern outskirts

Zhi Xiu (支修), courtesy name Jingzhai (静斋)

Master of Xuanyin's Flying Jade Peak, sword cultivator and war hero

Pang Jian (庞戡), courtesy name Wenchang (文昌)

Assistant Commander of Heaven's Design Pavilion

Xi Yue (奚悦)

Half-puppet taken as servant by Xi Ping

Bai Ling (白令)

Prince Zhuang's secret guard, half-demon born in the Impassable Sea; later in charge of the Luwu

Xi Zhengde (奚正德), title Marquis of Yongning (永宁侯)

Xi Ping's father

Cui Jinjin (崔锦锦), Madam Cui (崔夫人)

Xi Ping's mother, formerly young mistress of Cui Ji, a well-known jewelry business

Old Madam Xi (奚老夫人)

Xi Ping and Zhou Ying's grandmother

Xi Ziyi (奚紫衣), title Imperial Consort (贵妃)

Younger sister of Marquis of Yongning, Xi Ping's aunt

Zhou Xueru (周雪如), title Princess Duanrui (端睿大长公主)

Peak Master of Xuanyin's Green Pool Peak; cultivates the way of clarity

Lin Chi (林炽), courtesy name Zisheng (子晟)

Peak Master of Xuayin's Moon Plated Peak; cultivates the way of toolmaking; known as the Golden Hand and famed for inventing Moon Plated Gold

Wen Fei (闻斐), courtesy name Fenghan (凤函)

Peak Master of Xuanyin's Rosy Cloud Peak; medicine cultivator; uses a fan to communicate

Zhang Jue (章珏)

Dignitary of Fate High Elder of Xuanyin Mountain

Zhao Yin (赵隐)

Dignitary of Rites High Elder of Xuanyin Mountain

Lin Zongyi (林宗仪)

Dignitary of Rule High Elder of Xuanyin Mountain

Li Fengshan (李凤山)

Dignitary of Law High Elder of Xuanyin Mountain; "in seclusion"

Southern Sage (南圣)

Founder of Xuanyin Mountain; has ascended

Liang Chen (梁宸), courtesy name Mianzhi (勉之)

Honorary General Commander of Heaven's Design Pavilion,
formerly Mine Supervisor at the southern mines

"Tai Sui" ("太岁")

Alias of evil cultivator who attempted an attack on Jinping

Jiangli (将离), real name Chen Baishao (陈白勺)

Prostitute working with "Tai Sui"'s followers

Xu Rucheng (徐汝成)

Member of the Luwu

Lao Tian (老田)

Experienced member of the Luwu

A-Hua (阿花)

Young woman from Yuzhou; wanted to marry Xu Rucheng

Snake King (蛇王)

Alias of an evil cultivator from Wan who fled to Chu

Zhou Kun (周坤), regnal name Taiming (太明)
Emperor of Southern Wan

Zhou Qing (周晴), title Princess Anyang (安阳长公主)
Older sister of Emperor Taiming, Mine Governor at the southern mines

Zhou Huan (周桓)
Crown Prince, son of Empress Zhang

Zhou Xi (周樨)
Fourth Prince, Xi Ping's classmate at the Latent Cultivation Temple

Yao Qi (姚启), courtesy name Ziming (子明)
Crown Prince's brother-in-law, Xi Ping's classmate at the Latent Cultivation Temple

Chang Jun (常钧), courtesy name Hongzheng (洪正)
Xi Ping's classmate at the Latent Cultivation Temple

Luo Qingshi (罗青石)
Established foundation instructor at the Latent Cultivation Temple

Su Zhun (苏准), courtesy name Mingyi (明仪)
Former General Commander of Heaven's Design Pavilion, retired to Latent Cultivation Temple

Yang Anli (杨安礼)
Steward at the latent cultivation temple and son of Princess Xincheng, Emperor Taiming's sister

Zhao Qindan (赵檣丹)
Xi Ping's classmate at the Latent Cultivation Temple; from a subsidiary branch of Xuanyin's Zhao family

Shen Bailu (沈白露)

Established foundation medicine cultivator of Xuanyin

Yuan Hui (元洄)

Ancient demonic god, original possessor of the hidden bones of the ungovernable way

Lü Chengyi (吕承意)

Head of the Guard at Southern Wan's spiritual stone mines in the Land of Turmoil

Lin Zhaoli (林昭理)

Mine Supervisor at the southern mines

Zhao Zhenwei (赵振威)

Member of Ning'an Zhao family, commander of shipment escort team at the southern mines

Wei Pengcheng (魏鹏程)

Wei Chengxiang's grandfather

Chunying (春英)

Prostitute in Rat Alley

Zhao Yu (赵誉)

Captain in Heaven's Design Pavilion

Wang Jian (王俭), courtesy name Ziqian (子谦)

Prince Zhuang's assistant

Haozhong (号钟)

Page at Yongning Marquis Manor

Wang Baochang (王保常), courtesy name Sidu (思笃)

First victim in "underworld marriage" plot

Dong Zhang (董璋), courtesy name Zirui (子瑞)
Second victim in "underworld marriage" plot

Western Chu (西楚)

Capital: Dongheng (东衡); Sect: Sanyue (三岳); Imperial Family:
Xiang (项)

Qiu Sha (秋杀)

Ascended spirit evil cultivator

Hui Xiangjun (惠湘君)

Toolmaking cultivator; punished by removal of spiritual bones for her part in creating Moon Plated Gold

Yu Chang (余尝)

Chief offering of Yu Family Bend

Xuanwu (悬无)

High elder of Sanyue's East Peak

Zhuoming (濯明)

Xuanwu's disciple

Xiang Rong (项荣)

Sect leader of Sanyue

Xiang Ning (项宁)

High elder of Sanyue's West Peak

Xiang Wenqing (项问清)

Ascended spirit from Sanyue's West Peak

Xiang Zhao (项肇)

Ascended spirit sword cultivator from Sanyue

Xiang Jing (项竟)

Ascended spirit inscription master from Sanyue

Bu Zhichou (步之愁)

Famous "worm master" from Chu

Southern Shu (南蜀)

Capital: Zhaoye (昭业); Sect: Lingyun (凌云)

Wangge Luobao (王格罗宝)

Ascended spirit evil cultivator of the way of beast-taming, formerly a member of the Lingyun Sect; mixed Xiuyi and Miah blood

Tianbo-zhenren (天波真人)

Founder of Lingyun Mountain and cultivator of the way of beast-taming; has ascended; mixed Xiuyi and Miah blood

Northern Li (北历)

Capital: Yanning (燕宁); Sect: Kunlun (昆仑)

Xie Chu (谢漈), known as the Blind Wolf King (瞎狼王)

Ascended spirit sword cultivator who rebelled against Kunlun and resides in the Beijue Mountains; disciple of Kunlun's Second Elder

Wu Lingxiao (武凌霄), title the Sword Slave (侍剑奴)

Wielder of the Sword Ancestor's Wanshuang Sword; disciple of Kunlun's Second Elder; also holds the title of Princess Changji (昌吉郡主)

Zhu Lanze (祝兰泽)

Kunlun's Second Elder, wielder of the Heart Sword; Xie Chu and Wu Lingxiao's shifu

Wu Guang (武广), courtesy name Boren (博仁)
Kunlun's Sect Leader

Crown Prince Snow Wolf (雪狼太子)
Nominal heir to the Blind Wolf King

Cheng Yu (成玉)
Ascended spirit sword cultivator from Kunlun who took part in the siege against Qiu Sha

Southern He (南阖) (defunct; currently known as the Land of Turmoil)
Capital: unknown; Sect: Lancang (澜沧); Imperial Family: Yang (杨)

Li Manlong (黎满陇), nickname Queru (阙如)
Older Turmoiler, unofficial leader of the Turmoilers in Shu's spiritual beast farm.

Yang Wan (杨婉), title Queen Mother of the West (西王母)
Ascended spirit evil cultivator of the way of medicine making, one of the Three Heroes of Turmoil, former member of the Lancang Sect and member of He's imperial family

Lord Guang'an (广安帝君)
Ascended spirit evil cultivator of the way of the sword, one of the Three Heroes of Turmoil, Yang Wan's partner

Emperor of the East (东皇)
Ascended spirit evil cultivator, one of the Three Heroes of Turmoil, jealous ex-husband of Yang Wan

"White Amaranth" ("千日白")
Established foundation evil cultivator, head of the Exonerators, a Land of Turmoil-based gang trading in snow wine

¹The Seven Mansions of the Blue Dragon (苍龙七宿, also 青龙七宿) are the first seven constellations of the Twenty-Eight Mansions in Chinese astronomy, which reflect the movement of the moon.

²Wei Jie (286-312 CE) lived during the Jin dynasty and was one of ancient China's four legendary male beauties. Xishi (c. 450 BCE) was one of the four legendary female beauties.

³Tai Sui is, generally, a god that controls mortal fate; each year there is a different Tai Sui God, in a sixty-year cycle. There are various ways for one's horoscope to clash with the Tai Sui of the year (犯太岁), resulting in various kinds of bad luck for that year.

⁴Smoke coming from an ancestral tomb is a saying that refers to major good events in a person's life, but can also be used to mock them for drawing attention in other ways.

⁵Ding Chou (丁丑) is the fourteenth year in the 60-year cycle, with years named after the Ten Heavenly Stems and Twelve Earthly Branches.

⁶五蝠捧寿, five bats surrounding the character 寿, longevity, to symbolize the five blessings of wealth, health, long life, love of virtue, and peaceful death; the character 蝠, bat, is homophonous with the character 福, blessing.

⁷To clear up any potential confusion, Zhang Jue's surname is 章, different from the Crown Prince's maternal family, surnamed 张.

⁸Or huochong (火銃), an old type of firearm.

⁹Note on usage here: prince or princess of the second rank (respectively, 郡王 and 公主) are titles for the children of an emperor, while prince or princess of the first rank (respectively 亲王 and 长公主) are titles for the siblings of an emperor. Titles for princes are generally collapsed already (e.g., Zhou Ying is almost always referred to simply as 庄王, Prince Zhuang). I have also by and large collapsed most instances into just “prince” and “princess” except where the distinction is relevant and not apparent from context.

¹⁰The term the original text uses here is 螟蛉 (mínglíng), an insect whose English name is the corn earworm; the ancients observed the parasitic wasp stealing the nests of the corn earworm and believed that they did it to raise the corn earworm's young in their stead; therefore, the name of the insect has the additional meaning of "adopted son." I've shortened the name slightly to make it less cumbersome.

¹¹Magu (麻姑) is a Daoist deity, a beautiful maiden used as symbol of longevity; her image was a popular feature in birthday gifts for women.

¹²See Reference page for a list of hour names and corresponding times; the first ke of chen hour is equivalent to 7am.

¹³The text uses 咫尺 (zhǐchǐ), meaning "very close," composed of characters for two short units of length. I've chosen "proximal" as a relatively unobtrusive English equivalent that suggests nearness in the same way.

¹⁴A demon in Buddhism derived from a supernatural being in Hinduism; it is written 罗刹 (luóchà), which uses the same character as Luo Qingshi's name.

¹⁵鸭头 (duck's head) and 丫头 (girl) have the same pronunciation (yātou).

¹⁶人之初, 性本善 - these are the first two lines of the 三字经 (Sangzi Jing or Three-Character Classic), a traditional primer for children that summarizes Confucian values.

¹⁷A play on the expression "broken in health but firm in spirit" (身残志坚) where the final character is replaced by the near-homophone 贱 (lowly, cheap).

¹⁸A large mole above the mouth, a feature of the traditional appearance of a matchmaker/meipo, which Xi Ping has recreated here.

¹⁹A type of pottery also known as celadon, pale green in color.

²⁰Author's Note: Hemogram is blood type. In this novel, under the influence of magic arts, medicine has already discovered the existence of agglutination and hemolysis.

²¹Author's Note: waist-winding dragon is shingles.

²²The Qiu courtyard is named 丘, "hill"; Gu is 谷, "valley."

²³勉之, the line Zhi Xiu sent him.

²⁴Decorative arch (牌坊) often commemorating certain virtues; this is specifically a reference to the Chastity Paifang, conferred among other honors by the government on widows who remained chaste after the deaths of their husbands.

²⁵The eighth day of the twelfth month (腊八, làbā) is the Laba Festival, celebrated by eating Laba congee, also called eight treasure congee, made with many kinds of rice, beans, nuts, fruits, and so on.

²⁶*Ancients in their carven caves, called their shelters property. / Their homes gave them dignity, but the dogs of the rich live better.* Tang dynasty, Yu Fen, "The Old Villager" (山村叟) Original: 古凿岩居人, 一廛称有产。虽沾巾覆形, 不及贵门犬。

²⁷AKA aluminum.

²⁸说文解字, a Chinese character dictionary from the 2nd century.

²⁹天涯共此时, taken from the second line of the poem 望月怀远 (Gazing at the Moon, Thinking of Afar) by Zhang Jiuling. A translation not taking account of compactness, and including the preceding line for context, would be "(The bright moon rises over the sea,) the same over yonder as here."

³⁰狰, a legendary beast resembling a leopard.

³¹浪里白条 - nickname of Zhang Shun, a character from the classic novel *The Water Margin*; the nickname is a reference to his excellent swimming skills.

³²无常 (wúcháng), lit. "inconstant," also the name of the messenger of death.

³³逍遥游, a section from the work of Zhuangzi (庄子), an early Daoist philosopher whose work had a mystical bent and questioned established norms of thought.

³⁴Earlier incorrectly referred to by Xi Ping as Rose Gold Peak.

³⁵A kind of ornament given to children to ward off evil and disease and promote long life.

³⁶His name is 千日白 (qiānrìbái), the name for globe amaranth (*Gomphrena globosa Alba*), which is different from flowers belonging to the genus *Amaranthus* but belonging to the same family; amaranth on its own is just a nicer name than “globe amaranth.”

³⁷山陵崩 (shānlíng bēng), the name of this arc, is a euphemism for the death of a monarch.

³⁸The original expression is 义商良贾，泽被乡里。 More literally, it's "Good and righteous merchants spread beneficence in their hometowns," but 泽 (zé), which has the literary meaning of "beneficence," also means "pool"; like a large pool of blood, for example. So I've twisted it around a little to make that clear.

³⁹衙门 - administrative office or residence of a bureaucrat on the local level.

⁴⁰An idiom equivalent to “where there’s life, there’s hope.”

⁴¹潘安, birth name Pan Yue (潘岳), a writer of the Western Jin dynasty whose name is used as a byword for handsome men.

⁴²In the legend, dragon’s saliva impregnates a woman, and the child goes on to be the cause of calamity that ends the dynasty. Specifically, this passage refers to Bao Si, concubine of King You of the ancient state of Western Zhou, who deposed his queen for Bao Si’s sake and made her son the crown prince. Bao Si only laughed when the king lit the war beacons unnecessarily, which eventually lost him the trust of his nobles and left him without aid in a time of crisis, leading to the downfall of Western Zhou.

⁴³This references the ten directions (十方) in Buddhism—the eight points of the compass (north, south, east, west, northeast, northwest, southeast and southwest) and the directions of up and down (zenith and nadir).

⁴⁴The Marquis's courtesy name, 正德, means “upright virtue.”

⁴⁵The first character of the regnal name Renzong (仁宗) means “benevolence.”

⁴⁶小宝 - “little treasure” or “little baby.”

⁴⁷The four books are the major Confucian classics: The Great Learning, the Doctrine of the Mean, the Analects of Confucius, and the Mencius.

⁴⁸Respectively, a yellow weasel and a hedgehog, worshipped as deities in some folk traditions.

⁴⁹Tai Sui is indeed one of the names for the Feng (封), a legendary food that grows back as soon as it is eaten, and that in folklore is said to be the earthly manifestation of the god Tai Sui.

⁵⁰A note on both names together: both the 开明兽 (kā míng shòu) and the 陆吾 (lù wú) are divine creatures that appear in the 山海经/*Classic of Mountains and Rivers*. They are both guardians of the gates of the divine mountain Kunlun, described as beasts with human heads and tiger bodies. In addition to being a guardian, the Luwu is also described as the steward of the celestial capital and an enforcer of divine law.

⁵¹秋杀, the second half of the expression 春生秋杀 (chūn shēng qiū shā), which means “what grows in spring withers in autumn.” By analogy, Qiu Sha on its own refers to something being punishing like autumn, which kills living things. The fifteenth day of the eighth month is also the Mid-Autumn Festival, when the moon is believed to be at its largest; part of the traditional celebration is gathering to observe the moon.

⁵²The ‘táo’ in the county name (陶) is pronounced identically to the word for ‘to escape’ (逃).

⁵³魏老板, or “Boss Wei” or “Shopkeeper Wei.” Purely a concession to what sounds nicer on my part.

⁵⁴The characters used here are 望川 (wàngchuān), which sounds the same as the Wangchuan River in the underworld, which souls cross to reincarnate.

⁵⁵There are conversions already on the Reference Page, but going by the most likely conversions, her height is probably around 6’9” or a little over 2 meters.

⁵⁶So what happens here is that the listing uses the character 贱 (cheap, base), which is pronounced the same as 剑 (sword); in my translator’s discretion, I figured this is about the level of the joke.

⁵⁷十面埋伏 - a classical and difficult to execute pipa piece with a rapid tempo that describes a famous battle.

⁵⁸The Magpie Bridge appears every year on Qixi (七夕), precisely the festival that takes places on the seventh day of the seventh month, which marks the once yearly reunion of the lovers the Weaver Girl and the Cowherd over a bridge across the heavens formed by a flock of magpies.

⁵⁹天狗 - literally heavenly dog, a spirit said to devour the sun or moon during an eclipse.

⁶⁰Used as verbs, 肇 (zhào) means “to start,” while 竟 (jìng) means “to finish.”

⁶¹To avoid confusion, this Xuanwu is 悬无 (suspended, without), no relation to the Black Warrior/Black Tortoise of the North.

⁶²A basic type of knot, compact, round, and flower-shaped.

⁶³The term used here is 化外 (huàwài), specifically meaning something beyond the reach of law and civilization. “Unbound” is the nearest interpretation I could find that conveyed the most important parts of the meaning without being unduly cumbersome or technical.

⁶⁴Dragons in legend have a reverse scale (逆鳞) on their necks that, if touched, causes the dragon to fly into a rage; it is used metaphorically to describe a person's sore spot.

⁶⁵香香, meaning "fragrant."

⁶⁶Reference to an event during a military campaign in the Three Kingdoms period, in which Lu Xun, a general of Wu, ordered his soldiers to burn over forty camps belonging to the opposing Shu army.

⁶⁷上善若水 - a quotation from the *Dao De Jing*; the rest of the family precepts do not follow the sense of the passage it is taken from.

⁶⁸鲲鹏 - the kun is a legendary giant fish that transforms into a peng, a likewise legendary giant bird.

⁶⁹女儿红 - a kind of yellow rice wine from the area of Shaoxing city; traditionally, in a wealthy family, a father would bury a number of jars of it upon the birth of a daughter, then dig them up when the daughter was married to give as a gift to the groom's family.

⁷⁰硕鼠 - reference to a poem from the Spring and Autumn Period, in which the speaker tells the rat not to eat their crops and leave them to starve, or they will leave in search of a better place where they can keep what they produce; the "huge rat" represents an exploitative landlord overtaxing farmers on his land.

⁷¹Ancient measurement of volume used for grain, about equivalent to 100 liters or 22 gallons.

⁷²Author's Note: Means glaucoma.

⁷³Taotie and Jiuwei are both, like Luwu, names of mythological beasts, one a vicious monster and one a nine-tailed fox.

⁷⁴Kuafu (夸父) is a legendary giant (or the name of the tribe the giant belonged to), who attempted to catch the sun and died of thirst.

⁷⁵These names denote distance and breadth.

⁷⁶The Yu Changs are numbered with ordinal numbers based on the ten heavenly stems. The third heavenly stem is 丙 (bing). In place of Yu Chang's surname here is written the homophonous 鱼, fish; 丙 is also a homophone for 饼, cake; so in sum Xi Ping may as well be saying that he's planning on making a 鱼饼 (yú bǐng), fish cake.

As a side note, commenters often refer to Yu Chang as 鱼肠, fish guts, because it's a homophone for his name.

⁷⁷胡琴, general name for a two-stringed musical instrument played with a bow, most commonly represented by the erhu (二胡) or spike fiddle.

⁷⁸二嫂 and 二奶奶 are both terms for the wife of a family's second son, the distinction being whether the speaker is of the same generation as the individual addressed or a younger generation.

⁷⁹Riding a crane into the West" (驾鹤西去) is a euphemistic reference to death.

⁸⁰Author's Note: Can be understood as telegrams.

⁸¹羞花 - a description for someone who is so beautiful that flowers would have to bend their heads in shame if their beauty was compared; used with some irony in this case.

⁸²Green is the color associated with a cuckolded husband—i.e., to wear a green hat is to be cuckolded.

⁸³并蒂莲 - two lotuses growing on one stalk, a common symbol for a loving couple.

⁸⁴That's respectively 七 (qī) and 器 (qì).

⁸⁵The character of his given name, 荣, means "glory."

⁸⁶流觴曲水 - a game for learned gatherings; cups of wine are floated down a stream, and the participants must compose a poem before their cup reaches them, then recite it.

⁸⁷This expression literally describes trees growing strong and sturdy, and metaphorically describes a family or a culture proliferating.

⁸⁸牝鸡司晨 - a (still derogatory) idiom referring to a woman who gets involved in politics.

⁸⁹This is a partial quote of the first two lines of Tang dynasty poet Liu Zongyuan's famous poem “江雪” (“River Snow”); the full lines read: *A thousand mountains with no birds in flight, ten thousand paths unmarked by the step of man.*

⁹⁰步琼 - the name is homophonous with 不穷, “not poor.”

⁹¹烛龙 - one of the great mythological dragons; in one version of the legend, it is equivalent to the sun, and can alternate day and night by opening and closing its eyes.

⁹²Author's Note: a telegraph, in other words.

⁹³The name 濯明 means “to cleanse (of sin)” — Zhuoming's implication is that Xuanwu gave him this name out of a desire to be cleansed himself.

⁹⁴口吐莲花 - a Buddhist term to describe a subtle remark, as the lotus is a symbol of Buddhism; commonly used to describe clever speech. Rather ironic use here.

⁹⁵Reference to a Buddhist proverb: “The sea of suffering is boundless and dark; turn your head around and you will see the shore.”

⁹⁶First referenced in Chapter 45; it is written 镜花, “flower in the mirror,” similar to the arc title (镜中花); like the arc title, it suggests something beautiful but illusory, too good to be true.

⁹⁷Two common and versatile melodies to set poetry to.

⁹⁸Author's Note: Readers may add their own ellipses to Peak Master Wen's speeches.

⁹⁹五禽戏, Wu Qin Xi, a set of traditional exercises created during the Han Dynasty, in which one performs movements modeled on the tiger, deer, bear, ape, and bird, meant to stimulate the organs and promote good health.

¹⁰⁰A misinterpretation, deliberate or not, of Zhou Ying's surname, 周, as 粥 (congee/porridge, with the same pronunciation).

¹⁰¹A form of calligraphy between cursive script and regular script.

¹⁰²鸳鸯 - literally a male and female mandarin duck, also refers to anything in pairs, but figuratively applied to affectionate couples; I have chosen this translation based on context.

¹⁰³师祖 - teacher of one's teacher; in this case, Zhang Jue.

¹⁰⁴A suitable moment to mention—put together, the “ping” and “yong” of Xi Ping's names mean “mediocre” (平庸).

¹⁰⁵苦丁, literally “bitter nail tea.”

¹⁰⁶A notable quote from the *Dao De Jing*, original given here: 天地不仁，以万物为刍狗。The “straw dogs” it refers to are materials in sacrificial offerings that are treated with great pomp, then summarily discarded after being used.

¹⁰⁷Explanations of the nicknames: Zhao Yin's Chunsheng (春生) means “born in spring,” Zhang Jue's A-Zhuang (阿壮) means “robust,” and Lin Zongyi's Xiaoman (小满) refers to the eighth solar term, the second of summer, when wheat begins to ripen.

¹⁰⁸Same character as Yu Chang's surname, 余, presumably used in its meaning of “surplus”; 鱼, fish, is pronounced the same way.

¹⁰⁹That part of Xuanwu's name being the character 无, “without.”

¹¹⁰“Late frost” is the literal translation of Wanshuang (晚霜).

¹¹¹Jiangli’s birth name, Baishao (白芍) means “white peony.”

太

Priest

歳

