THE PORTAL OF WONDERLAND

by Wang Yu

The Portal of Wonderland

Xuan Jie Zhi Men

玄界之门

Author : Wang Yu 忘语

The Portal of Wonderland is the third influential work of the writer Wang Yu, following his previous novels A Record of a Mortal's Journey to Immortality and Mo Tian Ji. A Record of a Mortal's Journey to Immortality tells about the world of god and Mo Tian Ji presents the world of demon. This time we recommend the latest The Portal of Wonderland which centers around the world of human.

Synopsis :

Shi Mu, the hero of this book, is born in a fishing village. As a child, his father disappeared and his mother died, so he had to rely on himself thereafter. With indomitable will, he gained the help of Xiang Zhu by coincidence, hence began his journey to be the strongest warrior ever in the world.

Official Description :

A wonder falling down from heaven! A boy possessed by strange blood! Gods tremble! Demons flee! A boy from the land of Dong Zhou. A pink skull as his sworn friend until death. A story of a determined warrior struggling for power. A legend that shakes the galaxy and disturbs the worlds of god, demon and man.

Info :

http://www.novelupdates.com/series/the-portal-of-wonderland/

Raws :

Translator :

http://www.xianxiaworld.net/The-Portal-of-Wonderland/

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Glossary :

Characters

Shi Mu: The hero of this story, born in Yue Zhou, the Qi Heaven Country in Dong Zhou, the East Lands. Growing up in a fishing village, he had heavy features and sun-tanned skin; a persevering, righteous young man who stays clam in face of death and asserts his dignity before the upper class. Some strange blood was inhaled in an accident and consequently caused his body to mutate.

The Devil Witch of Tian Yin: A female scholar of the Unholy Hex Sect sect in The Thousand Viridian Mountains, who saved Shi Mu's life coincidentally. Shi Mu was infatuated with her at first glance thus proposed to her immediately.

Xiang Zhu, the Little Pearl: The clam girl born with a talent for water-conjuring. She was saved by Shi Mu in the beginning chapters, hence she contaminated her Holy Pearl with the strange blood to cure Shi Mu from deadly wounds.

Zhong Xiu: The orphan girl of the Zhong family, entrusted to Shi Mu by her father at his death. She is extremely beautiful but fell short of perfection with a blue birthmark on her forehead. She ranks the third level (the bigger the name, the higher the level) in the bloodline of Phoenix Song.

Ke Er: A conjurer scholar in Miao Yin, the Ethereal Phoenix Sect, her element is wood. She is a particularly skilled healer and is on good terms with Shi Mu.

Set-ups

The Worlds in the Story

* Dong Zhou, or the Eastern Lands

* The wasteland of the barbarous tribes

In the Eastern Lands:

The Heavenly Qi Country (Contains three sects: Tian Yin, the Unholy Hex sect; Miao Yin, the Ethereal Phoenix sect; Xuan Wu, the God of the Northern Sky sect);

Within Feng City there are many smaller “sects”: Black Fox, Luan Shui, and many others. I am going to call these “sects” gangs.

The Yan Fire Country (Contains two sects: Hei Mo, the Dark Demons sect; Feng Huo, the Wind and Fire sect).

* Strange spaces that do not exist in this space where the heroes’ world is in. For example, the Dead Spirits Space.

Two Systems of Skills: Warriors and Conjurers

Warriors

* Levels: Practitioner, Houtian Warrior, Xiantian Saint (Popular titles used among the people are Body Tempering, the Real Warrior and National Guardian). At current chapters it is known that an even higher level has appeared: the Earth Grade, named by the author probably to indicate the highest level as the Heaven Grade. However, the two grades are not specified yet.

=> Practitioner: Students learning the art of Body Tempering (They are divided into thirteen levels, from the beginner to the peak level).

=> Houtian Warrior: Practitioners who have sensed their qi and thus developed to the higher level, where they can practise their real qi (divided into three stages: beginning stage, intermediate stage and accomplished stage).

=> Xiantian Saint: After reaching a certain degree in their real qi practise, the Houtian warrior has developed a qi area in his lower abdomen and consequently arouses an inborn real qi inside his body. This way he becomes a Xiantian Saint able to separate his real qi from his physical body. Usually, he has a life expectancy twice as long as ordinary people and other warriors lower than his level.

The Earth Grade: Not specified yet in the novel, but is mentioned by the author to have four stages: the beginning, the intermediate, the advanced and the consummate.

=> Bloodline Warrior: A specially skilled group of warriors who are born with excellent bloodlines and have awakened the bloodline to master some skills peculiar to them. Hence they far surpass other scholars or warriors at their level

who have no good bloodlines at all.

Bloodlines are classified into five characters (Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, Earth) , three general levels and nine grades in each level.

The Bloodline of the Stone Monkey: Not even eligible to enter the lowest level. Those who have this bloodline literally have no future as a warrior, the only benefit is a strong physical body with huge strength.

The Bloodline of the Phoenix Song: The Highest Level, Grade Three. Fit for practicing the Art of Ethereal Resonances.

Magician

Levels: Scholar, Spirit Magician. Star Magician, Moon Magician

Requisites for being an Magician: Spiritual instincts and sacred knowledge, without which one is unable to sense the indispensable powers of the five elements (Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, Earth).

Types of Magicians: Magicians of the five elements; a small number of Magicians of wind, thunder, ice, darkness, or light; Incantation Magicians skilled at magic charms; Magicians of magic formations; Magicians of alchemy and medicine-making; Magicians of manipulating puppets; Magicians of souls and spirits, who can communicate with creatures from other strange spaces via their own soul power.

The last type of Magician, the soul and spirits Magician, has three requisites to constructing a successful connection with the strange spaces: one, powerful creatures' remains should be in the strange space at that time; two, the general coordinate of the space should be known; third, overpowering sense of space.

Arts

Definition: Art includes two part: cultivation and techniques. The former deals with qi-cultivation and body tempering, while the latter concerns skills, techniques and even tricks in actual combat. The two goes hand in hand and cannot be separated. Many high level arts contain the practice of cultivation and techniques at the same time.

Skills

Skills can be classified into several types according to their usages, for example, the attacking skills, defense skills and body skills. The practise of skills have four stages: beginning, intermediate, advanced, and consummate.

Skills for Practitioners:

The Thirteen Series of Gale Force Blade Art: A Houtian Warrior can throw thirteen cuts in one breath, and making a good use of the wind to quicken his cuts to an irresistible speed. (Rumor has said that it can be scaled to the Xiantian Saint Grade).

The Stone-Breaking Fist: An advanced Practitioner can break stones and boulders. A skill used by external body strength.

The Blade-Throwing Art: The sublimation of the Gale Force Blade Art

The Leaping Fish Steps: One of the secret skills held by the Wang family. A body skill.

The Mysterious Steps: A body movement skill.

Xiao Zhou Tian, or the Sky Piercing Heavenly Sword Art. This art has 306 movements. The most complex art of the Practitioner grade.

Other skills of this level include: Shadow-Separating Sword Art, The Racing Spear Art, The Iron Body, the Deadly Black Palm Art, the Python-Bone Fist Art.

Skills for Houtian Warriors:

The Roaring Eagle: A body skill.

Other skills include: The Blood Palm, The Golden Axe Leg, The Devil Fingers, The Arm-Wielding Fist , *etc.*

Cultivation

=> Cultivation for Houtian Warriors:

The Cultivation of Rock: This cultivation features a steadiness, and it needs no tools or weapons to practice. There are five levels to it, after finishing all of which one's real qi cannot be advanced, but a real qi area can be developed in lower stomach. Therefore one can move on to the higher level of Xiantian. Fit for mediocre Houtian warriors.

The Secret Canon of Three yang : This cultivation belongs to the quality of yang and has three levels. The degree of difficulty in practicing it is average. This cultivation gives a Houtian warrior who practices it an overpowering real qi which can injure his enemy from inside the body. An accomplished level will develop a real qi area in lower stomach and lead up to Xiantian level. Fit for intermediate Houtian warriors with requisite resources.

The Cultivation of Heaven-Stirring Real Qi: This cultivation has a vigorous and simple quality, its difficulty average and no tools or weapons needed. There are seven levels, after finishing which one's real qi can be deepened, helping to a small extent develop one's real qi area and move on to Xiantian level. Fit for warriors less intelligent than average.

The Cultivation of Heaven Elephant: This cultivation features huge strength and it is quite simple to practice it, but the Bones-Tempering Pill is requisite. The accomplishment of each level from altogether the eleven levels gives a warrior who practices it a physical strength of one elephant. But the process of finishing all the levels is a long one which consumes a large investment of expensive pills. Not fit for well-equipped warriors.

Other choices include the Cultivation of Blood Waves, the Sutra of Blue Origin.

Cultivation for Bloodline Warriors:

The Art of Ethereal Resonances: One of the most powerful arts of the Ethereal Phoenix Sect. An accomplished level can lead the warrior to an even higher legendary level of the Earth Grade.

The Sutra of Red Ape: This cultivation belongs to the quality of yang, and was refined by imitating the ancient ape that could fly in the sky and exhaling fire from its mouth. The difficulty of practicing it is average, but a sacred land with the quality of fire is requisite, plus a large amount of yang pills and a bloodline of the apes. This sutra contains a cultivation of real qi with the quality of yang and two corresponding skills. Fit for highly intelligent Houtian warriors.

The Formula of Strong Ape: This cultivation is an inheritance from the ancient strong demon apes, and is a secret secondary art which enforces one's body. It cannot be practiced solely: a corresponding art is requite. But the process of practicing it is very simple. The warrior who practices it must be born with any bloodline of the apes, and a Devil-Killing real qi is needed. There are nine levels to it, each mutating one's bones and vessels to enhance physical strength. But the process is excruciating; the warrior will experience pains like a million knife cutting his skim. Fit for warriors of strong will.

Constitution

The Body of Thick Earth: a constitution well-known for its defensive force.

Pills

Qi Ling Pill: It can help Practitioners to acquire qi-sensing.

Qi-Blood Pill: A secret pill of the Ethereal Phoenix Sect. Can wondrously heal wounds, and is also beneficial to warriors in practicing any arts.

The Bones-Tempering Pill: The requisite pill to practice the Cultivation of Heaven Elephant.

The Blood-Strengthening Pill: A pill for newcomers in Black Demon Sect. Helpful in cultivating one's blood and qi, as well as quickening one's practice

The Spirit-Enhancing Pill: Can replenish a conjurer's power instantly.

The Heaven Heart Pill: Helpful in achieving fast in practicing the Cultivation of Heaven Elephant.

The Fertile Blood-Spirit Pill[A1] : The essence of a Blood Wind Tiger[A2] 's blood is sealed inside the pill. Once a warrior successfully resists the bodily anguish after taking the pill he can grow new bones whenever he has a broken bone. Besides, large amounts of real qi of the quality of fire will also begin to grow inside his body, benefiting his future practice.

Animals

Two levels: Special Animals and Sacred Animals

Special Animals:

The Golden Hamster: or the Medicine-Searching Hamster, a commonly seen variation of the spotted mountain mice. Can inspire an inherent ability of finding some rare herbs after its hair turns golden all over the body.

Sacred Animals

The Holy-Pupiled Hamster: A hamster advanced from a golden hamster.

Magic Charms

The Construction of a Magic Charm: Every charm has a corresponding essay to explain it. A conjurer needs to perceive the essay before he draws the charm on a piece of magic paper (Materials used to draw: magic brush, magic ink, magic paper). Next, he needs to instill his magic power into the charm.

The Usage of a Magic Charm: Save some magic power on the paper before conjuring. The power is easily awakened whenever one needs to use the magic charm.

Types of the Magic Charms: Charms of the Five Element, Charms of Other Qualities (for example, death-restoring charms, charms that can send a person to some place, charms that can make a person fly, etc).

Levels of the Magic Charms: Low, Average, High.

Secret Books

Zhong Gong Mi Dian, the Secret Arts of the Zhong Clan: An heirloom of the Zhong clan, a book divided into two parts. The former part records a great number of methods to make rare weapons and the latter tells the making of some delicate tools and powerful poisons.

The Secret Sutra of Holy Charms: A book that tells about the way of making charms.

The Elementary Book of Magic Formations: A book that teaches the basic of magic formations.

Tools and Weapons

Levels: Magic Tools (a weapon with a magic charm, usually much more powerful than ordinary weapons), Sacred Tools

The Black Ice Ruler: The most powerful weapon of the Tian Yin Sect

The Black Fire Tablet: A tablet used in the Black Demon Sect to obtain a book on a certain art.

The Blade of Moonlight Sea Chestnut: A magic tool successfully made by Shi Mu after overlaying ten magic formations on it. The blade is a bent blade of half chi, rather thin and bent as a new moon with a silver lustra. A secret weapon recorded in the Secret Arts of the Zhong Clan. Made of a special fragile metal that breaks when struck by force, hence emitting a formidable force that equals a Xiantian warrior’s one blow.

Prologue

In the vast expanse of the cosmos, a glittering golden light was traveling at a slow rate in the dark expanse of space. From deep within, a whining sound could be heard occasionally, faintly sounding out from time to time; it was difficult to tell whether it sounded like harrowing weeping or hellish sneering.

After an unknown number of years, an immense blue planet appeared in front of it.

“Boom!” a thunderous sound resounded.

The glittering golden light, drawn by the gravitational force of the immense planet, veered off course and rushed toward the planet at an alarming speed. As it reached the atmospheric layer of the planet, the light began to blaze as friction lit the object up turning into it a blazing shooting star as it descended from the sky to the sea.

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The ninth year of Tian Yuan epoch, in the Da QI Heavenly Kingdom.

An unknown object that appeared like a heavenly star fell into the East Sea from out of the sky was reported to the court by officials of the region. Twenty-three islands were overwhelmed by tsunamis that had peaks as tall as mountains caused by the landing of the unknown object. Consequent waves were reported to have destroy at least ten thousand seaside households in Yue Prefecture, killing an undocumented amount of people and their livestock.

-The Annals of Dong Zhou [1]

Notes:

[1] This is the name of a historical book that records significant events in the district of Dong Zhou. The author of the annals is not specified.

Chapter 1 - Fishing Boy

Our story begins in a remote fishing village in Quan Zhou, Kai Yuan Prefecture during the reign of the Da Qi Heavenly Kingdom.

Outside an old ruined shack of a log cabin stood a richly decorated carriage garnished with gold, silver, and precious embroideries. Several black-robed sword wielding riders stood guard around the carriage. Villagers excitedly swarmed in small groups around the hut to see what had happened.

“Are they really the Jin family, the Jin family of Feng City?”

“I can’t be mistaken, see the golden embroideries in their robes, throughout Kai Yuan Prefecture no other household could have that except the Jin."

“God, incredible! No news was heard from Shi Ting ever since he left ten years ago, leaving his wife and son behind. No one would doubt it if he had died at some strange place. But now! It’s the Jin family, that he has connections with, is here! Moreover Shi Ting is back to take his son Shi Mu. It’s a shame the boy’s mother died , or she could have had a high position and great wealth as long as she lived!”

“Position and wealth? Don’t be too hasty. Haven’t you overheard one of the Jin servants saying that Shi Ting is already the Jin’s son-in-law, he wouldn’t dare to have come here if Shi Mu’s mother had not died!”

“Anyway Shi Mu’s chance has come. Yesterday he was an orphan, today he’s a young master.”

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“My father is sick in bed and I have a blood sister?” Shi Mu fixed his eyes on the elderly blue-robed visitor, asking hesitantly.

Though he was only thirteen, his skin was a light auburn colour due to continuous exposure to sun and wind from the ocean. His features were heavy and stood taller than any of his peers. Even in an old and shabby shirt, his sturdy muscles were visible which added to him a sense of untamable wildness.

“That’s right, master is seriously ill at present, his day of doom may really come this time. That’s why madam asked me to take young master back: to see master at his deathbed”, answered the blue-robed old man, smiling.

“Madam? Now that he’s abandoned my mother for so many years, what’s the use of taking me back now? Please return, I won’t go back with you to the Jins.” The youth answered without hesitation, his face sour.

“Alas! I’m afraid that you, young master Shi have wronged my master. Master has his difficulties so he could not return here and only wishes that you two would be able to meet and all misunderstandings can be lifted,“ the old servant continued after a light cough.

“Humph, that old man abandoned his own wife and son, nothing will change even if you talk your head off. Now scram.” The youth snorted coldly.

Hearing this, the blue-robed old man could not help but knit his brows. He spoke again only after having another close look at the youth, as if a decision was finally made.

“Wasn’t the medicine young master Shi has been buying from the town’s

pharmacists unreasonably cheap? Moreover, has not instructor Li of the town's martial arts school charged you less than other students while he teaching you the exact same skills? Last but not least, are not the fish you, young master Shi, caught from the sea quickly sold every time you come to the town's market? Plus there would even be a few buyers haggling over the price."

"Do you mean, all these were pre-arranged by that man?" The youth could not help but ask directly, his color changing.

"I know not whether it was master's idea or not, but madam did request these arrangements in person." The blue-robed old man answered with a smile.

After hearing those words, the youth began to grow agitated and irresolute.

"By the way, hasn't young master Shi been studying the art of Body Tempering? You must aspire to be a true warrior. Madam told me in particular that as long as young master Shi agreed to see master, she would definitely secure an opportunity for you to take the enrollment test of Kai Yuan Martial Arts School. As to whether you could get enrolled, it will be up to your talents." The blue-robed old man finally played his trump card.

"Kai Yuan Martial Arts School?" Obviously the youth was moved by such a temptation. What youth of thirteen years old would not be moved by the name Kai Yuan Martial Arts School.

"Being a practitioner of martial arts, I'm sure you must know this: this is one of the four famous martial arts schools which only enroll students every five years and candidates must meet two conditions strictly before they are eligible to take the test. First they must finish studying the art of Body Tempering before the age of fifteen. Second, they must have already grasped the essence of qi, which is

indispensable in the further practice of cultivating one's real qi; to be able to circulate it smoothly through their veins. One can never be a real martial arts practitioner before these conditions are fulfilled. However, to sense qi is not easy at all; one has to obtain a Qi Ling pill at an exorbitant price in order to induce his qi into a flexible state. Even our Jin family can only get at most ten pills each time. I worry for your lifetime dream if you want to fend for yourself," the old man said in an unhurried way, full of composure and confidence.

The youth sank into silence, and only spoke again in a cold voice after a long time.

"Return in three days, you will have your answer then."

"Good, it's settled then. I'll come to hear good news in three days." The blue-robed old man did not persist, knowing that the boy had made up his mind. Hence, he bowed slightly and left.

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"Butler Cheng, are we going back without the boy? Why not take him by force, so that we will not have to waste more time?" A sturdy rider could not resist asking once they left the village.

"Nonsense! Though he is not madam's true son, young master Shi is master's son by blood. We are here to take him back safe and sound, and nobody is to cause strife with him, or considering the strong affection madam has for master, we can start looking for a new job now." The blue-robe old man reproached him with a sour face.

“Ahh ahh sorry, I was foolish.” The sturdy rider fell crestfallen.

Just then, a shadow flashed past the road and there rushed out another black-robed rider, who bowed to the old man and then said, “ Butler Cheng, we found Biao warriors dispatched by the fifth master[1], what should we do?”

“Humph, it seems then the fifth master is still sticking to his old plan. The Biao warriors are not some people you guys can handle. Leave them to me. You, show me the way while the rest of you guys wait for me here. I shall end this foolish plan personally.” The old man decided, frowning.

“Yes”

The rider departed immediately, returning on the path he had come on, while the blue-robed old man jumped off his horse and darted after the rider. His body seemed feather-like, disappearing into the nearby woods in a moment. The sturdy rider remained with the others beside the carriage, not daring to move a muscle.

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It was nearly evening. Outside the village on an unnamed hill, Shi Mu was kneeling at a tomb, moonlight shining softly on a grave mound of dirt. A yellow tombstone read clearly “The Tomb of the Shi Family’s Wife, Originally Surnamed Wang”.

“Dear mother, you would have never believed that father was not dead. He has even married into another family out there. But please rest assured, I shall do as promised. Father left you with the false pretext of pursuing martial arts, but I

shall be a real warrior, the strongest warrior ever, so that you can rest in peace!”

The youth stood up before murmuring some other words, before moving his muscles as he started exercising in front of his mother’s tomb.

His moves grew faster as the sounds of his bones creaking and cracking was heard audibly, and his body whipped back and forth like a tiger. After a while it became difficult to make out his profiles in the yellow dust-fog stirred up by his intense movements.

A figure whizzed out of the fog and punched heavily on the thick trunk of a big tree. “Boom!” With a thunderous sound, the tree trembled. Countless leaves fell down and an impressive fist print was left half inch deep in the trunk.

Shi Mu raised his eyebrows, gazing at the fist print.

This series of movement was the only fist skill he learned from the town’s martial arts school, and it was also the most popular skill in the art of Body Tempering in Da QI Heavenly Kingdom. According to the school’s instructor, to leave such a deep print he must be at the seventh level in Body Tempering, and he only needed to reach two more levels before he was able to practice Qi Sensing.

But four whole years had passed since he reached the seventh level!

There was some sense in the saying that martial arts was only for the rich. "To be poor, was to be fated as a bookworm."

Ever since he decided to study martial arts he had saved money for nearly half a year to pay the tuition fee of 30 silvers.This large sum of money was already a reduced fee, much lower than the general requested sum, and was only secured at his repeated, earnest begging.

Moreover, the exorbitant price of the medicine bath needed to temper his body had costed him money, leaving him penniless. Given his situation, Shi Mu still managed to reach a level that astonished the martial arts school, obtaining the instructor's' admiration. They said that with such amazing talents and well-made bones, Shi Mu must be a natural born warrior. After all, though he had asked the school's pharmacist to prepare medicinal baths for him from time to time, with the money he possessed who would actually sell him rare herbs that cost much? Thus he could only bathe with ordinary herbs that only had a minuscule effect on his growth.

Shi Mu let out a sigh, knowing that he was not actually born with sturdy bones. His achievement these few years would be impossible had he not had incredible luck two years ago, which was also the reason why he needed time to ponder whether or not if he should move to live with the Jins.

With such thoughts on his mind, the youth looked up at the moon before rushing down the hill before arriving at the seashore where clumps of rocks stood. He jumped into the sea without any hesitation, moving his arms in tandem and slithering into the deep sea like a giant fish soundlessly. After a while, he swam to the depth of some thirty or forty zhang[2].

Then something astonishing appeared.

The originally pitch dark sea water began to glitter with increasing white light which grew brighter and brighter before illuminating the nearby area.

Shi Mu was not a bit surprised at this scene. While holding his breath, he quickly moved several meters downward before stood on a patch of sandy floor. It was the bottom of the sea here, covered with white fine sands.

There he was able to see clearly that the white glittering at the bottom came from the ten-odd shells each the size of a man’s palm. In the middle of the shells stood an immense rock of seven , or eight zhang high, flickering incessantly.

Notes:

[1] Master’s fifth younger brother.

[2] Zhang, a unit of length (= 31/3 metres).

Chapter 2 - A Pearl Sent by A Clam Girl

Shi Mu showed no interest in the glittering shells as he swam straight to the boulder. He lifted one arm and knocked on it. The boulder release a puff of blood colored fog from the bottom. The fog, as if alive, swirled around the youth swiftly for some time, before it finally seeped into the youth's body soundlessly. Shi Mu's spirits began to be roused violently. After exhaling a long breath into the sea, he shockingly became able to breathe freely like a fish.

Then he quickly turned back to the rock where he dug out a rusty iron awl and chisel that he had hidden in the sand, then begun to cut a hole at the bottom of the rock.

The white glittering light made it possible to see a sea clam the size of a water tank had been trapped beneath the rock! The whole clam was as white as jade, and its surface casted out a color purer than moonlight. But it was crushed by the rock and was unable to move.

A hole had almost been completely chiseled out at one side of the rock's bottom, which was slightly shaking consistent in tempo with the ocean's flow.

An hour passed as Shi Mu painstaking continued to expand the hole. Somewhat exhausted, he held his breath again and stopped his work as he turned and knocked on the rock again three times. This sent a signal to the huge clam, whose silver lustre began to glow brighter at each knock, after which a slit was forced open in the clam! Immediately a puff of blood fog rushed out of the slit to once again enshroud Shi Mu before being absorbed into his body and allowing him to breathe freely once again.

He then grabbed his tools and continued to toil away.

Shi Mu had discovered this huge white clam beneath the immense rock two years ago. It was exactly here at the bottom of the sea that he inhaled a coincidental puff of the blood fog for the first time, he found himself able to breathe freely in water for short amounts of time. Surprised, he knew that this was no ordinary clam, so he fetched a chisel and awl from home to chisel the bottom of the rock, intending to free the clam from confinement.

The clam seemed rather intelligent, as if it was aware of Shi Mu's intention. Every time he felt it was began to be hard to breathe, a puff of blood fog would be ejected to help him breathe freely for another period. But the rock was too immense to conquer in a day. Moreover, even though he had no problem breathing in water, the sea limited the amount of strength he could exert. Coupled with the sheer density, size, and weight of the stone, the formidable task had only neared completion after two whole years.

During this period, Shi Mu gradually found that the blood fog of the clam was unexpectedly mysterious! The more fog he inhaled, the more time he could breathe freely in the sea. At first the effect of one puff only persisted for a short while, but now it had lengthened to a whole hour. Meanwhile, Shi Mu had made another discovery: the blood fog was not only helpful in breathing underwater, but also strengthened his body! He had been stuck at a bottleneck in practicing Body Tempering at the time due to his lack of herbs, but now he had reached level seven all the way up from level four! Furthermore, he slowly was being enlightened in the troubling things that used to puzzle him, which indicated that the fog was beneficial not only to his body but also to his mind. With this encounter, he began to grow even more mature than his peers. Or how could have this teenage boy have faced the blue-robed elder with such composure and to be able to rebuff his demands?

However this time he toiled until late at night, returning to his home in the village with an exhausted body. Usually he would rest for days between his sea

journeys, but now that there was a pressing deadline to meet, he had to quicken his pace.

On the second day he jumped into the sea to continue his task. Then again on the third day, he again went to the deep sea!

Boom! With a shower of small lumps of stone, the boulder began to shake violently as it began to crack under its own weight and tipped over the to side which had been painstakingly chiseled out. The clam that was pressed underneath the boulder began to struggle out as its lustre grew stronger and wider.

“That’s it!!”

Shi Mu was overjoyed at the sight and flailed his body and arms to move to the other side of the rock to avoid the falling rocks.

The creaks and cracks went on uninterruptedly. The boulder had nearly half collapsed as the clam struggled mightily to escape. But just then an undercurrent came from nowhere, rushing toward the direction where the boulder was breaking apart. After letting out loud explosions in rapid succession the boulder stopped collapsing upon itself and resumed its place! The half escaping clam was to be trapped again!

“No!!” Seeing this, Shi Mu shouted and lowered his body into the sand without thinking. His feet sunk half an inch deep as he worked his fist technique and pounded twice in quick succession on the rock. Meanwhile two dull sounds were heard. The youth’s fists had struck rock mightily, stirring the nearby sea water. Consequently, the boulder slowed its movement allowing the clam some more time before it fully crushed. So it seized the moment and escaped with a quick

wiggle and disappeared into the sea in a glitter of white light, before the youth had even enough time to see it clearly.

Shi Mu stepped backward from the spot and felt his fists in great pain, his hands badly mutilated. He fell into shock and spat out a cloud of blood before falling into a coma. Just then the water nearby stirred, and the immense clam reappeared in a shower of white lights, its shell slowly opening, revealing a little girl with a blood pearl in her arms. The little girl looked age six or seven, was only three inches tall, and wore a gauze bellyband. She had fair skin, with eyes that glittered like the stars and a small, delicate face which had an expression of great gratitude after seeing the unconscious youth and his bleeding hands. She moved her beautiful lean arms to lift the blood pearl, whose silver lustre rapidly dispersed in all directions in ripples of light.

The next moment, shrill sounds were heard from the bottom of the sea as shells of all sizes flowed like an unstoppable wave to the youth's body to lift him slowly up and out of the sea to the surface surface. After a while, the water parted and the youth finally was seen. The myriad shells then dispersed in an uproar, plummeting back into the sea.

The immense clam reappeared with a silver light. Its two shells were wide open; the little girl was once again visible. Seeing that the youth was still unconscious, she hesitated, looking at the blood pearl in her hand, then furrowed her brow as she set her mind on some decision before pushing the pearl towards the youth. The pearl swirled above the youth before releasing a big puff of blood fog!

.....

Several days later, the little girl appeared at a sea some ten thousand miles away. Her height had grown into of an ordinary child this time, and was

accompanied by a beautiful middle-aged woman in a blue court robe. The two were standing on a huge turtle the size of a house rushing at lightening speed into the deep sea, their flanks full of stirred waves.

The beautiful woman was holding the girl's hand, her eyes full of tender affection for the girl. She kept saying, "My girl, if you had not run into me first I'm afraid you wouldn't have been so lucky. Alas, you are the Heavenly Girl of the Celestial Clam, a born Water Adept! Even throughout the history of the East Sea this happens only once in ten thousand years. It seems that our East Sea Clan is destined to prosper! By the way, what's your name, little girl? Where's your heavenly pearl? They say that all Heavenly Girls of the Celestial Clam, must carry with them a Heavenly Pearl of Life, which is the best material to make an amulet..."

"ah, ah..."

The girl babbled, her little hand kept making gestures at the woman.

"Oh, your name is Xiang Zhu[1]. You sent the pearl to someone who saved your life? Well, it's good to show your gratitude...Wait, your life-saver is a human? And he is a human male?! Remember my girl the male humans are the least reliable, next time you see them, smite them dead directly. Come, let's take back the pearl...What? The Heavenly Pearl was contaminated by some strange blood long ago at the sea bottom and lost its power? Well, then, leave it to that human boy, he's got a big bargain indeed. But from now on you are forbidden to see that man again....."

The woman's voice grew increasingly inaudible as the two were carried far away by the huge turtle, their figures shrinking smaller and smaller until they were seen no more.

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While unconsciousness, Shi Mu felt an overwhelming fever boiling his blood. His mouth was parched and tongue scorched and. With a sudden shout he sat up abruptly. Only then did he realize he was back at the silent, empty beach. He was stunned for a moment, and after a glance at his hands he was extremely taken aback. The back of his two hands should have been bleeding and mutilated, but now there were no scars at all. Instead they were smooth like a baby's' butt and intact.

Shi Mu turned his hands over to ascertain his situation, there came a strange feeling of the unusual flow in his blood. He could not help but feel as if his body has been changed. After thinking for a while a thought crossed his mind and he began to fumble with his clothes where he found a crystal-clear ball the size of his thumb near his chest.

“What is this?....”

He suspected, but was sure he had never carried such a thing before.

Of course Shi Mu was not aware that the blood fog puffed out of the clam belonged to the strange blood which had been contained within the girl’s Heavenly Pearl. Only one tenth of the blood had had been inhaled by Shi Mu, while the rest was forced out by the girl in order to heal his wounds completely. As to the heavenly pearl, it lost its heavenly power when the girl stopped suppressing the strange blood. Now it could only be considered as a rare luminous pearl, or the girl would not have left it to Shi Mu.

Shi Mu observed the pearl in his hand for a while. Feeling it’s rare softness and

by the size of it, he knew it would be worth at least more than a couple cities could afford, so he hid it well in his clothes. During the rest of the night he jumped into the sea again, fumbling around the collapsed boulder to make sure that the clam had really escaped. Only when he was assured that it was gone did he slowly leave for his home in the village with a disappointed heart.

Three days later, in the morning, the blue-robed old man came back to the fishing village and after a while a black carriage, guarded by the black riders, galloped out of the village in the direction of Feng City.

Notes:

[1] Xiang Zhu: The name means fragrant pearls.

Chapter 3 - Auntie Zhen

Da Qi Heavenly Kingdom's territory was located within a peninsula that projected out from the east land of Dong Zhou[1] and neighbored the Yan Fire Kingdom and the Sun Huang Kingdom. To the east was the Eastern Sea, and to the west lay a wasteland which belonged to many barbarian tribes. Therefore, for hundreds of years the three countries had formed a strong alliance to fight their common foe.

The Da Qi Heavenly Kingdom lay in the center of the peninsula, and was therefore sandwiched by the two other countries. The Da Qi Heavenly Kingdom had the strongest military and claimed that a standing army composed of a million soldiers. The Huang Sun Kingdom was ranked the second strongest while the Yan Fire Kingdom was considered to be the weakest of the three. Apart from its capital area which was directly under the control of its central government, Da Qi Heavenly Kingdom had nine prefectures which were subdivided into thirty-six districts altogether, and each district administering to some ten-odd cities. As for towns and villages, nobody knew the exact number of them.

Feng City was the largest and the capital city in Quan Zhou. Even within the whole Kai Yuan prefecture it could be ranked at least the fifth largest city. The Jin Clan was one of the most influential clans in Quan Zhou, holding large numbers of fields and manors in the city outskirts. Their main export was medicine and ore and was able to influence almost half of the events in Quan Zhou.

All of these information was given to Shi Mu from Jin Cheng, the blue-robed old butler. He was a diplomatic butler of the Jins, and enjoyed a rather high status among servants, or was at least well revered by the Jin's riders.

The trip back to Feng city took them almost a month. After going through two

cities, they finally arrived at Feng. There they directly went through the city gate and head toward the northwestern part of the city.

Shi Mu could not help but stare at both sides of the streets through the window of the carriage. His whole world previous was the small fishing village he was born in. The largest “city” he had ever been to was only the nearby village.

Feng City truly earned its title as the largest city in Quan Zhou. All kinds of buildings could be seen along the roads that were crowded with passing townspeople creating a scene full of hustle and bustle.

Their carriage slowed down and traveled almost another hour to reach their destination --- a rather ordinary-looking manor. Upon getting down from the carriage, Shi Mu saw a white fan[2] hanging at the side of the gate, but his look only slightly changed. He followed the blue-robed old man into the gate while the riders stood beside the carriage.

Shortly afterwards Shi Mu arrived at the hall where a memorial ceremony was being held. The hall was somberly dressed up in white streamers and linen. Standing there was a teenage girl and a woman in the traditional white mourning dress.

The woman looked no older than thirty years old; her appearance was natural and graceful. The moment they met she half reproached Shi Mu with tears in her face, “Too late! You're too late! Your father passed away the day before yesterday. I know not what you think of your father, but you are his true son. Come and see your father, we can talk about the other things later.” The teenage girl seemed sad with swollen eyes, but had an eager and curious face upon seeing her half brother for the first time.

Shi Mu somberly looked at the black coffin lying in the middle of the hall, his mind a whirling mess at the rapid series of events.

The woman slowly ceased her tirade upon seeing this. The blue-robed old butler seized the opportunity to walk up to her and to say something in a low voice before he retired quietly.

After a long period Shi Mu finally moved forward. Walking slowly to the coffin, he said calmly, “Open the lid, I want to say goodbye to my father.”

The woman clapped her hands twice and two burly fellows came forward from the sides of the hall and opened the lid with a push. There in the coffin quietly lay a man, with whom Shi Mu shared rather similar features. He lowered his head and gazed at it, his face pale and somber. Only after a long while did he move, taking out a bronze mirror that did not look special at all. He placed the mirror beside the body without a word.

“This is.....” the woman said with slightly knit eyebrows.

“I’ve no idea as to what reason he abandoned my mother, but her last wish was to have this mirror buried with father.” Shi Mu answered slowly, turned to burn an incense in the burner in front of the coffin. He then made three loud kowtows[3] to his father.

The woman in mourning dress did not quite expect this, but she did nothing to stop Shi Mu and just watching the coffin with a forlorn look absentmindedly. At last she waved and the two burly fellows closed the coffin.

“Follow me, this is no place for us to talk. There is something your father

wanted you to know before he died.” The woman led the girl to a smaller adjacent hall, after saying this.

Shi Mu raised his eyebrows and followed quietly.

Once they arrived at the adjacent hall the woman turned and said, “It seems I have not wasted my time asking Butler Cheng to bring you here. You have kowtowed to your father, so I will not for anything else. I will not ask for your to call me mother, if you will, ‘Auntie Zhen’ is fine. This is your half sister Yu Huan[4]. Come and meet your brother, Yu Huan.”

“Nice to meet you Brother Mu,” greeted Yu Huan obediently in a clear and melodious voice. The girl had rather big eyes and curved eyebrows. Her mouth was delicate and her nose prominent. When she moved her eyeballs she gave a cute sense of being clever and impish. Shi Mu nodded to the girl and broke the stiff his face had become with a forced smile.

“Though your father married into the Jin family, he possessed his own manor at the suburb. He has made the wealth himself. You are his only son, so all of it is yours now. I will only ask to be able to live with Yu Huan in this manor. After all I’m a Jin, and have no need for money. Besides the reason why he died young, is because your father made a big contribution to the Jins. However he has not been rewarded yet for his contribution. So now, you as his successor have two choices." The woman paused for a moment. Shi Mu looked at her in surprise.

“Either I will arrange for you to receive a Qi Ling pill from the Jin clan as a reward, which will allow you to have an opportunity to attempt to pass the Kai Yuan martial arts school's enrollment test.

Or I can arrange for you to receive a title of nobility --- of course the Jin Clan

cannot afford to give you a high nobility one. But with the title you'll be rich all your life; even your sons and grandsons will be able to benefit." The woman said earnestly, looking into the youth's eyes.

"A real noble title?" Shi Mu knit his eyebrows hearing this.

"That's right. There are five levels of title in Da Qi: Gong, Hou, Zi, Nan and Xun, each with its respective status and power. With your father's contribution and the Jin's influence, a title can be obtained easily. Moreover we can make you an official in the court. " The woman explained briefly.

"I don't care for the title, give me Qi Ling pill!" Shi Mu said without hesitation.

"Make your decision after you've considered carefully. If I were you I would take the second choice." Shi Mu's answer surprised her.

Shi Mu paused a moment before he responded, "What do you mean by that?"

"How much do you really know about qi and about being a warrior?" The woman asked pointedly.

"Do you mean... Auntie Zhen are you also a warrior?" Shi Mu thought for a while in surprise and asked slowly. This time the woman did not answer, only her figure flickered momentarily and flashed to a wall in an instant. She lifted her arms and a sword tinged with gold was already in her hand poised to strike.

A loud crash sounded out as the woman moved the sword; it was as though

heaven itself was pierced through. The movement of the sword left numerous illusory images in the air, then with a cold blink and a clear, clean sound the sword merged into the wall, leaving its handle out still shaking slightly.

Shi Mu was absolutely amazed at such a sight.

“Don’t judge me from my appearance. The Jin Clan has three advanced Houtian Warriors[5] and I am counted as one of them. If not, why can I get you a Qi Ling pill from the Jins considering the pill’s invaluable price? Moreover even if one has the money he may not necessarily have the opportunity to do so.

However!

A dead man is quickly forgotten. Some in the family think that your father’s contribution no longer deserves such rare herbs. You will only cause irritation and disdain if you ask for Qi Ling pill. I can help you this time, but not the next.”

“I’m determined to be a warrior whatever it takes.” Shi Mu retorted firmly without a pause.

“...Since your mind is made up I won’t persuade you any more. First tell me the different levels of warriors to the best of your abilities. “Auntie Zhen let out a sigh and said.

“The levels are the Tempered Body, the Real Warrior and the National Guardian! I heard that once one achieves National Guardian he is ranked equally with princes and marquises!” answered Shi Mu.

“You learned this from the village school? not bad! But even the best

instructor in those martial arts schools are nothing compared to real warriors. Do you expect to learn any real division of levels from them?" Auntie Zhen was not surprised at Shi Mu's answer, obviously she had guessed it beforehand.

" Auntie Zhen please teach me!"

"The Tempered Body, the Real Warrior and the National Guardian are all titles used by commoners. The real levels of warrior in Dong Zhou should be separated like this: Instead of The Tempered Body, Real Warrior, and the National Guardian, the true names should be Practitioner, Houtian Warrior, and Xiantian Saint respectively. At the beginning level any Practitioner can study the art of body tempering, but for those not born with fine bones they may never accomplish much in their lives. The Houtian Warriors are those who have perceived Qi and thus can practice real Qi arts. Aided by Real Qi, they can easily match a hundred armed men. These are what you commoners call Real Warriors. As to Xiantian Saints, once their qi quality and control has reached a certain level, they can use their diaphragm to breath deeply and only then, can inborn Real Qi be induced.

These Xiantian Saints are the best of the best! If ten practitioners can kill one Houtian Warrior, then even hundreds of Houtian Warriors could not harm an Xiantian Saint in the least.

This is because Xiantian Saints' Real Qi can manifest outside the body to kill someone from a distance. Generally speaking there's an qualitative difference between an Houtian Warrior and an Xiantian Saint counterpart that is an undeniably impossible wall to cross. But very few will ever be able to reach that bottleneck to realize the difficulty of becoming an Xiantian Saint.

As far as I know, throughout the Da Qi Heavenly Kingdom there are only seven or eight of Xiantian Saints. " Auntie Zhen expounded to the youth.

“Such a small number!?” Shi Mu was astonished indeed.

Notes:

[1] Zhou: an ancient administrative division in China.

[2] Fan: a long and narrow flag hung at funerals, usually white.

[3] Kowtow: a ritual performed in ancient China to show respect and obedience to someone in authority. A loud kowtow indicates sincerity, earnestness, awe, or some other extreme emotions. This ritual is rarely performed at present.

[4] Yu Huan: both a usual female name and jade bracelet.

[5] Advanced HouTian warrior: The Jin Clan has three HouTian warriors who are all at the advanced stage in the level of Houtian. So now that there are generally three levels in martial-art learners in a crude way: practitioners, HouTian warriors, and XianTian warriors, each level higher than the one before. And in each level, there are three stages: elementary state, intermediate state and the advanced state. So there are actually altogether 9 states and 3 levels where a martial-art learner can be. In this context, Antie Zhen has not yet explained to Shi Mu, or to readers, what is a HouTian warrior or a XianTian one, neither has she specified the more detailed stages. But she will do so immediately in the following text.

Chapter 4 - The Manor

"Little? That's a lot! Do you know how much it costs to train an Xiantian Saint!? An inconceivable amount! Moreover, there is no guarantee of success even with such a huge investment. Very few can really reach the Xiantian level at all.” Auntie Zhen let out a sigh with a bitter smile.

The youth sank into an utter silence.

“Well, that’s still a long way ahead. If one day you really reach that level, the whole nation would be at your service; even the emperor of Da Qi would be polite to you to curry favor with you. That’s why the top warriors are called National Guardians. Now let’s talk about the art of body tempering and Qi-sensing first. Which level are you at now?” The woman asked.

“The seventh level.” Shi Mu answered with lifted spirits, for it would suit him best if he could learn some Qi-sensing and get enrolled into Kai Yuan martial arts school considering his current abilities.

“The seventh? That’s only a fair achievement. Kai Yuan Martial Arts School will start its enrollment next year! You must reach level nine within one year. Can you do that?”

“I was not sure before, but now I am… at least to some extent. “ Shi Mu gave a positive answer after some thought.

“Even if you could reach level nine and succeed in sensing your Real Qi, that’s only the basic requirement for everyone. You will still have to compete fiercely

with all the other candidates.” The woman seemed a little strange, but still said so.

Shi Mu listened with his ears wide open.

“As far as I know, there are more than a normal amount of talents among the candidates this year. Some of them have already tempered their body to the ninth or even tenth level. After all, the higher levels help one to sense Qi more successfully. According to previous records, even with the aid of Qi Ling pill, less than one-tenth of your peers would be able to really sense Qi. The majority of Practitioners can only manage this with difficulty in their thirties or even forties, not to mention their repeated use of Qi Ling pills. This is why Kai Yuan requires applicants to be between the ages of ten and fifteen. At that age ten and under, one’s bones are not quite shaped, making one unable to temper his body, while at age fifteen is the point which one loses his potential for accomplishment. If one has not yet tempered their body by then, it is worthless to continue the training. Da Qi boasts many accomplished warriors but only less than a hundred of these warriors have the opportunity or talent to struggle for the upper level. One of our Jin’s ancestors was an advanced Houtian Warrior! His reputation is the one of the main reasons that the Jin clan has become so prominent in Quan Zhou. “ An expression of pride was shown on her face as she ended her words.

The saying that “higher levels make Qi-sensing easier” and the tiny number of “one-tenth” kept resounding at Shi Mu’s ears. He took a deep breath to calm himself down. Though he had expected that not all who took a Qi Ling pill would successfully acquired Qi-sensing, he did not expect that the chances would be that low!

“You can change your mind if you are regretting your decision.” Auntie Zhen smiled, gazing at the youth.

“No! I have made my mind.“ Shi Mu shook his head.

“If so.Take this suburb manor’s title deed. You can live there with Jin Cheng, our butler. If ever you need anything, go to him. The Qi Ling pill the Jin Clan have ordered will be delivered in one year. I shall let you know when it arrives. Mind you, besides body tempering, you should take upon yourself to learn martial arts for real fights as they will be needed in the enrollment test. The Jin Clan owns a unique martial arts manual, but alas, only the Jins can learn them.” After giving a nod Auntie Zhen gave him another piece of advice.

“Many thanks, Auntie Zhen”. This time there contained a real sense of gratitude in Shi Mu’s words.

A quarter of an hour later, Shi Mu left the manor with a wooden case in hand, his expression somewhat puzzled.

The wooden case contained all of his late father’s property: the big manor in the suburb, three thousand liang of silver notes, some three to four hundred mu[1] of fine land near the manor, as well as a well located restaurant in the city. In less than a day, he went from a poor village boy to a rich man.

Shortly after Shi Mu was leaving a middle-aged man, quickly paid a visit to the manor in a violent rage, questioning Auntie Zhen in the hall,

“Seventh Sister, are you really going to send the only Qi Ling pill to some outsider instead of your own nephew?”

“Father had promised this in person, so do you have any objection to father’s decision?”

“I do have objections as to how we deal with the Biao brothers, but that’s not what I came here for. That chap is not a Jin, so why should the pill we Jins obtained after so much trouble be handed over to some outsider? Father will not refuse you if you change your mind. You know your nephew did not make it last time when he tried Qi-sensing, so this year is a very important opportunity he must not miss out on. He has finally reached the bottleneck this year in coincidence exactly the same year of Kai Yuan Martial Arts School’s enrollment! If he misses the enrollment, he will regret this for his whole life!” The middle-aged man’s rather long and narrow face contorted in anger and frustration as he nearly hit the roof, his eyes as if spouting flames.

“Humph, an outsider? He’s the only flesh and blood of my husband thanks to whom half of our Jin’s properties were saved. Are you satisfied with this answer, Brother Wu [3]?” Auntie Zhen snorted bluntly.

“Well, well, if you still wants to favour an outsider, someone of no blood relation with you, then I’m done with you, sister. I won’t beg you anymore, but I shall not hold back in obtaining a Qi Ling pill for your nephew.“ His words finished, the man rushed off in a rage.

“Mother, are you really going to let Uncle Wu just disrespect you and walk away like that?”

Yu Huan appeared from some unknown place once the man left and asked, her eyes blinking.

“No harm done. You know your cousin’s talent as a warrior to be quite lacking, considering how many rare herbs used on him before he finally managed his body tempering. A Qi Ling pill won’t help much in his Qi-sensing. Your uncle was driven to ask for the pill as his last hope.”

“That’s true. Jin Tian does not have as good a talent as Shi Mu Ge [4]; there’s not a fat chance for him to be enrolled even if he manages to sense Qi.” Yu Huan gloated, clapping her hands.

“He-he, you’ve already begun to side with your own step-brother. However I am not sure about Shi Mu’s abilities quite yet. Nevertheless, I have done all could for your brother. Anymore help and I will truly anger the family.”

“Although it’s the first time we met, I have a good impression of him, at least better than those Jin idlers.” Yu Huan grinned.

“Actually it’s mostly for your sake that your grandfather promised to give Shi Mu a Qi Ling pill. After all you sensed Qi at only twelve and meanwhile have reached level ten. Your grandfather has much hope for you little one.” Auntie Zhen gave a sudden smile.

“Dont worry, I definitely will be accomplished with the sword art in one year. And then it’ll be no problem for me to get enrolled into Kai Yuan. I won’t let grandfather down.” The young girl was full of confidence.

Hearing thus the woman nodded, her eyes full of affection for her daughter.

In a manor ten miles away from the Feng city, Shi Mu stood in a square surrounded by houses showing a satisfied expression after looking around.

The manor had a space of at least four to five mu, more than twenty rooms, and the spacious square amazed and overjoyed the boy who came from a small hut in a little fishing village. He turned his eyes to the nearly twenty servants and

tenants waiting in front of him and asked them,

“Who used to look after the manor and fields before I came?”

“Young master Shi, it was me.” A sandy haired middle-aged man with a fairly clean shirt came to answer Shi Mu obediently.

“What’s your name? Are you one of the locals?” Shi Mu asked slowly, feeling that the fellow was quite honest after looking him over.

“Your humble servant is named Zhang Suo, my family have lived here for seven or eight generations.“ The man answered with great respect.

“Good, I’ll leave you to your old job. It’s the same to all of you, so do your usual work and pay the same rent. Also, ask the manager of the restaurant to see me here tomorrow.” Shi Mu thought briefly and sent his orders.

“Yes, young master.” Zhang Suo answered hurriedly, immensely satisfied that his fears that arrangement would be changed were unfounded.

Other servants and tenants also relaxed at the news, bowing one after another to show their appreciation.

When they all had left Shi Mu turned to the blue-robed old man at his side and asked, “Did I make the right decision, Butler Cheng?”

“Well done Young Master Shi, you settled the matters quite nicely. It’s amazing to think that you were born of a fishing family.” The old man answered

with a smile.

“I was quite surprised myself, but it is quite different to ask people do things for you. But I’d like to ask a favour from you. “ Shi Mu said a little diffidently.

“Oh, anything, Shi shao. I’ll do whatever I can.” The request came somewhat unexpectedly, but was still accepted quickly.

“Right, it’s only that I would like to have an expert martial arts instructor who can teach me personally. Do you have anyone in mind, Butler Shi?”

“Oh, speaking of martial arts schools, the four schools in Feng City are all quite famous. “

“Apart from body tempering I’d like to learn a martial art.”

“If so, I recommend instructor Li Cang Hai from the Liu Feng martial arts school. He is quite well known for the rare skills he practices. But what kind of martial arts in particular does shaoye like?” The old man questioned him in reply after giving it some thought.

“Hmm, back in my village, I used to chop quite a lot of wood. So a saber art would best fit me.“

“Then I should say the Feng Chi Club’s Thirteen Series of Gale Force Blade Art, as well as their Stone-Breaking Fist, are quite renowned. But the cost for private instruction is quite expensive.” The old man said slowly only after a moment’s thought.

“That’s alright, as long as it’s really worth the money. “ With three thousand liang of silver notes Shi Mu felt like a rich man.

“I see, then I shall invite Instructor Li immediately here tomorrow.” The blue-robed old man answered with a smile.

Notes

[1] Mu: a unit of area (=0.0667 hectares).

[2] Qi: the number seven in Chinese. “Sister Qi” means one’s seventh younger sister.

[3] Wu: the number five in Chinese. “Brother Wu” means one’s fifth older brother.

[4] Ge: an affectionate tone to address your older brother in Chinese.

Chapter 5 - Li Canghai

Three months later in the suburban manor's square.

Shi Mu was seen practicing with a long blue blade, three chi[1] in length, which left its traces glittering in a circumference of several zhang as he waved it to and fro, under a hot blazing sun.

Unlike three months ago, there were eye catching strawmen strewn around the square. There were even some heavy stone locks and a row of wooden shelves holding some commonly used weapons such as knives and spears.

"Stop!"

A man's voice thundered, sounding rather rude and abrupt.

Shi Mu paused and pulled back his blade held in one hand.

"That's fair enough. You've finally started to get the hang of the Thirteen Series Gale Force Blade Art. But that level is still quite basic and doesn't count much in a real fight. You're still far from being good." The speaking man stood at one side of the square, his arms folded, his eyes rather sharp despite his bony stature. His bronze skin gave off strong sense of being capable and well-experienced.

"It's all due to master Li's personal instruction, or how could I have gone this

far in understanding such an mysterious art in mere three months?" Shi Mu answered with great respect.

This bony man was none other than the well-known instructor Li Canghai in Liu Feng martial arts club, a Intermediate Houtian Warrior. Three months ago, instructor Li Canghai's brief display of a single movement filled Shi Mu with amazement, and he immediately saluted and asked for instruction. Thereafter Shi Mu had been practicing martial arts for four hours every day under Li's instruction.

"This series of blade art seems quite rudimentary, doesn't it? It's mostly used by warriors of the Practitioner level. But don't take it lightly, because some of the higher level techniques can be used in real fights too, even after you become an Houtian Warrior. Its key is to make use wind, making each strike swifter than each preceding strike, a quite simple yet profound art indeed. I once used it to kill two warriors who were of the same level as I, in a fight within the time of a burning incense stick. At your Practitioner level, the most complex art available should be the Lesser Heavenly Sword Art, altogether 306 movements, and very few warriors can truly understand all of them within their lifetime. " Li Canghai explained slowly.

After giving his words some thought Shi Mu asked, "Master once said, there are two components in martial art, techniques and cultivation. Techniques deal with the methods to kill, while cultivation is the art of Qi-sensing and body tempering. The two work in harmony and one cannot be used without the other. But if weighed strictly which one of the two do you think is more important?"

"Hey, you smart little kid are really thinking too much. But this is a frequently asked question even from ancient times that each experienced warrior may have his own understanding. For me if you have only learned techniques then you would limit yourself greatly, it would be like having a head of lead and legs made of jelly, you wouldn't be able to stand at all. On the other hand, if you learn

cultivation only, even a beginner could kill you, no matter how much Real Qi you have, like a having a cow to plow the field but no yoke to harness the power. But a Xiantian Saint can protect his body merely by his Real Qi, even if he just stands there without moving a muscle, ordinary weapons would never be able to damage him at all. Moreover, he can just shake weak guys to death merely by using his Real Qi. Last but not least, ordinary people can live at most a hundred years, but an Xiantian Saint's life expectancy is doubled." Cang Lihai first snickered, then continued to explain.

"So master thinks cultivation is more important, " Shi Mu answered, smiling.

"Many difficult arts contain both cultivation and techniques at the same time. When you reach a certain level, your cultivation will be coordinated by following certain techniques; the two are inseparable as yin and yang. To compare them separately doesn't make any sense. But for you Practitioners the first task should to be to train your cultivation to strengthen your general abilities and your body. If not, even when you have the chance to learn a rare martial art, you won't make never be able to grasp its intricacies without Qi-sensing. Moreover, each arts have a cultivation requirement, especially so for high levels. If you'd like to learn an art surpassing your current level, the consequences would be quite disastrous: either you would damage your own cultivation causing you to never be able to cultivate ever again or you get killed by your own Qi rebounding in your own body. " Li Canghai said disapprovingly.

"I see, but can I see you display your Thirteen Series of Gale Force Blade Art again?" Shi Mu nodded and then asked for the favour.

"It takes a lot of energy to display the movements, and I still want to teach you Stone-Breaking Fist today in the remaining time, so I will only show you once more . " Li Canghai frowned, grudging his agreement after some thought of how Shi Mu was full of obedience.

The next moment, Li Canghai went to the middle of the square, took the blade from Shi Mu and began the swift movements after a shout which was powerful noise that seemed no louder than a whisper. In just a second, multiple slicing sounds were heard one after another another in the square. The movements of his silver blade left an illusionary blur like a long white whip. He started slowly but each movement exceeding the preceding in swiftness until in a blink, everything blurred into a silver light accompanied by the pressure of a slight wind.

Shi Mu watched the scene with the utmost concentration.

After a while, the cold silver light moved slowly to a wooden target on one side of the square. With a loud shout, the light swirled toward the stock, its coldness followed by strong wind. Then, all of a sudden, the wind stopped along with the cold light which melted into the daylight.

Pa! Pa! With several clear thuds the target was seen cut into seven parts right from the middle. The broken parts rolled down to the ground.

The ordinary-looking movement contained six cuts in seemingly one cut!

“Six cuts in one movement without using his Real Qi, master’s practice of this blade art has really attained perfection.” Shi Mu could not help but utter a long sigh of admiration, clapping his hands.

“I could have done nine if I used my Real Qi, and if one is fully accomplished he could do thirteen. It’s a pity I am far from perfection. There’s a rumour about this blade art that it actually belongs to the Xiantian level, only that it was divided into thirteen serieses so it dropped to the level of Practitioners and its

power was reduced immensely. Of course it's only a rumour, if it's really an Xiantian art it wouldn't have been leaked out. Millions would have restored it. " Li Canghai smiled lightly.

"Thirteen cuts in a movement, who can resist before such a high level of technique!" Shi Mu was astonished at such words.

"If you could truly achieve thirteen cuts, you would surely surpass all the Houtian Warriors, and maybe even some Xiantian Saints. Well for now, these things can wait. Now let me show you the key to this Feng Chi blade art one last time, and then we'll move on to the Stone-Breaking Fist. It may seem that this art consists of thirteen parts, but once practised and if actually followed successively by movements, and one will realize to use the power of the wind to quicken each one of your cuts, building on each one, before finally reaching the top speed which nothing can resist."

Li Canghai imparted earnestly, while Shi Mu listened with full concentration, memorizing everything by heart.

"Well, that's all of the Thirteen Series of Gale Force Blade Art. Let's move on to the Stone-Breaking Fist. This fist art is different from Feng Chi blade art in that it is an art simply requiring strength, and its movements are quite easy; you only need to induce power with your fists. As shown by its name, once you fully grasp this technique you can undoubtedly break any stone with your bare fist." Saying thus, Li Canghai went to a stone the size of a basin, took a deep breath and then kicked crazily at the stone.

"Peng!" a thunderous sound sounded out.

Despite his bony stature, his kick sent the huge stone lock into the air!

He let out a shout and then pounded suddenly into the air, his bony body seemed three times as strong now and looked as imposing as a tiger.

A thunderous boom was heard. The falling boulder exploded with a shower of broken stone flying in all directions.

Shi Mu's eyes were glittering wide in amazement.

"Listen, no matter whether you practice the blade or the sword in the future, it's possible that you will run into situations when you have no weapons with you. The only thing you can rely on then is your fists. This fist art, though simple, is sufficient for any Practitioner. If you could really be fully grasp this art, it shall lay a strong foundation for other fist and kicking techniques. Although it is well known for its power, few Practitioners have set their minds to learn it because of the suffering it takes to reinforce your fists. This art relies much on one's strength, so for someone born with great strength, it will yield twice the result for half the effort. Similar to before, I did not use my Real Qi at all in that pound. " Li Canghai said, expressionless.

"I wonder how much strength master has now?" Shi Mu could not help but blurt out the question.

"Me? I can easily lift a stone boulder of five hundred jin, without using Qi."

He went to the second largest stone lock half the size of a man which looked extremely heavy...

Again, with a shout he lowered his body and grasped with both his arms.

Exerting himself, he suddenly lifted the stone over his head.

Shi Mu hurled his praises at his instructor, at which the bony man showed an expression of some pride. Indeed, with pure body strength few Houtian Warriors could have lifted a stone boulder as heavy as instructor Li had lifted, even throughout Feng City...

An hour later Li Canghai left the manor, leaving Shi Mu standing on the square alone, a medicine bottle the size of his thumb and a white book in hand.

This medicine was made by Li Canghai particularly to aid in practising the fist art and the book told the secret of the art. Shi Mu only glanced at the bottle, opened the lid and smelled it, then put it away before sitting directly on the grass and beginning to peruse the book.

Speaking of reading, as Shi Mu was a poor orphan, he would not have known a single character had not an old scholar living near the fishing village taught him the characters for several years for free.

Shi Mu browsed through the whole book and then looked down at the bottle in the other hand, a surprised look on his face.

“The greater strength the better?” The youth murmured, putting away his book and turned to look at the nearby stone locks. He then walked to the largest one which was the size of a table, nearly twice as large as the one Li had lifted. It weighed at least a thousand jin[3].

He lowered his body and moving his right arm, tried to lift the stone with only one hand. Astonishingly a large boom thudded as Shi Mu lifted the huge monster

of a boulder with one hand over his head, as if it weighed no more than a feather.

Notes:

[1] Chi: a unit of length (= 1/3 metre).

[2] Xiu Cai: one who passed the imperial examination at the county level in the Ming and Qing dynasties.

[3] Jin: a unit of weight (=1/2 kilogram).

Chapter 6 - The Mutation

“No, not heavy enough. I can do even more.” Shi Mu thought to himself as he prepared himself for another lift. The stone lock thudded down onto the nearby ground and made the whole square shake slightly.

Shi Mu raised his hand and studied his fingers closely. They were rather sturdily, long and lean, but he observed they did not seem to have the huge strength required to lift a thousand jin.

Shi Mu thought for a moment before he walked to the wooden shelf and took down a long saber. With a thought, a succession of flashing shadows left by the saber’s movement exploded above the square, its overpowering manner able to send sand and stones flying.

Whiz! A white whip appeared rolling, striking a wooden target.

Pa! Pa! After a few clear sounds the target crashed into the ground eight broken parts in a blink.

One movement movement, seven cuts. One movement, seven cuts!! That was exactly what Li Canghai showed to him but not even a night had passed before he had overshadowed his instructor’s record slash by doing seven cuts.

The shadows vanished and Shi Mu remained in the same spot, saber in hand, deep in thought.

Then night came.

A room's heavy wooden door was closed. The room was large quite austere and lacked any decoration. Shi Mu laid on the bed, his eyes closed, his skin reddish and sweating. Curling up, he kept murmuring and twitching in a half-unconscious state. An unknown amount of time passed before his groans died down and he began to slowly stretch his body. His skin gradually returned to its normal colour and his tired eyes opened. He took deep breaths and then got off the bed to try and exercise his body. He grasp the edge of the bed suddenly, flexing his fingers.

Crack! With a clear sound the solid wooden edge was crushed.

"My strength has grown, but not as much as last time. Besides the interval being one month, the effect only lasts for less than a quarter of an hour. It seems I won't make much progress next time. " Shi Mu murmured.

That amazing change began as soon as he moved into the manor, and had had happened more than once, giving him all the strength he displayed earlier in the day and sharpening his practice of the saber art. The first mutation happened in the first month after his moving in, which tormented his body for a whole night. But by the next day he found the pain had left, but also his strength and body elasticity had increased. The second mutation happened two days later at night once again. This pattern continued on for some ten odd times of mutation, each causing intense pain with the reward of its huge benefit. However each following mutation duration was noticeable decreasing, the intervals also lengthened and his strength began to stagnate. This time, the growth was negligible compared with the beginning mutations. But the achievements were still quite outstanding. Shi Mu was able to lift more than a thousand jin and his body responded far more quickly than common people. He was quick to deduce that

the mutation must had something to do with the huge clam he saved from the sea. The whole process of mutations stirred spasms of pain similar to what he felt that day at the beach. He had been healed by the clam girl during his coma, and the feeling of his blood boiling inside awoken inside of him. The one difference was that the pain mutation was ten-fold sharper than the pain he felt on the beach. In the end, Shi Mu was secretly extremely happy at his increase of strength. He had had heard from others and envied the many fortuitous events that befell others But, now such a fortuitous event had befallen himself, and filled him with a confidence and yearning for the fierce competition he was to meet in the enrollment.

Shi Mu also knew from Li Canghai that even if he could acquire Qi-sensing, the competition would still be difficult for him. After all, considering the limited resource a school had, only a small number of candidates could pass the enrollment test out of the innumerable hopefuls.

Shi Mu was quite aware of his mediocrity. Even with the aid of Qi Ling pill he would not have a great chance to sense Qi. But according to Li Canghai, once one surpassed level nine in body tempering, one would have a much better chance in succeeding Qi-sensing; while if one was over level ten, even a Practitioner whose comprehension was low would have a success one out of three times. If he accomplished the whole thirteen levels of body tempering, it would be surprising if he still failed in Qi-sensing. This was why some inferior Practitioners were still able to sense Qi at their thirties or even forties. But such a wonder only happened to the rich because few Practitioners could afford the time and money invested. Furthermore, to not acquire Qi-sensing until middle age would leave little time for their further study. With the prime of a warrior already wasted, the difficulty of becoming an intermediate Houtian warrior would be tripled, let alone becoming an advanced one. But for some aristocrats, they collected rare herbs to help their Qi-sensing, which far surpassed the price of a Qi Ling pill. In his twenties instructor Li Canghai had finally reached the twelfth level in body tempering and had taken a Qi Ling pill twice before he finally managed to be an Houtian warrior. To his immense regret, he was not

able to reach the Houtian stage before age fifteen. For Shi Mu, collecting rare herbs was out of the question; the only way to succeed was through his body tempering.

But for each level over level nine, the time it would take to advance would would increase exponentially. This time far exceeding the amount commoners could afford to spend. To reach level twelve was not possible for common Practitioners at all; only those born with monstrous talent would be able to achieve that stage, and throughout the history of Da Qi those geniuses could be counted on one hand.

However, Shi Mu's fortuitous event had allowed him to reach as high as level nine. By the pain and sweat of each mutation, he was infinitely closing to level ten.

Judging by common knowledge, he could have reached level ten within a year, but level eleven? That was hard to imagine. Besides, Shi Mu was not satisfied with gambling a Qi Ling pill with a only chance of mere one-third. Thus it seemed that he could only resort to an insane approach Li Canghai mentioned to him earlier.

According to Li Canghai, there was a special method of body tempering passed down by a martial expert. It was simple and crude and yielded amazing effects. The only condition was that whole process was full of danger and suffering; it even had a big chance of premature death which was the reason why it had been rarely imparted to other Practitioners. Li hinted that he would like to teach Shi Mu all he knew if a large sum of tuition was paid.

Danger? What danger would scare him back now that he had made such an oath to be the strongest warrior ever in front of his mother's tomb?

But his immediate goal was to master the Stone-Breaking fist art, before he concentrated completely on body tempering. Shi Mu pondered; before long an idea dawned on him.

Seven days later, at the center of the manor's square, there stood a blue tank three chi high, filled densely with soybean.

Ha! Ha! Shi Mu stood before the tank shirtless, wearing a pair of over-sized black trousers and a thick silver glove on each of his hands. He started pounding heavily at the soybean in the tank with both fists.

"Listen, though your body strength is the basis of power for the Stone-Breaking Fist, the key to fully grasping this art is through the toughness of your fists. Otherwise, your great strength would only rebound on the stone causing you to self-mutilate your own fists. You are only a beginner and the toughness of your fist can only deal with wood at most right now. These gloves are made of layers of fish's skin in order to train your sinews, tendons, and flesh while preventing your fists from too much injury. When you can break through the tank with a punch, I'll use stones instead of beans and take away one layer of fish skin from your gloves. When you can do the stones and you will advance to real iron sand. Then, real rock. Left hand! Don't wave it that far! Elbow! Keep it tucked! Good! Good!." Li Canghai explained with a poker face, his arms folded.

"Yes."

Shi Mu answered and kept moving his arms, each punch sinking a half inch deep into the tank. His upper body was sweating profusely, each muscle trembling incessantly, as if he was immersed in a strange fanaticism.

After half a quarter of an hour Shi Mu suddenly shouted loudly and pounded into the tank at least one inch deep and buried nearly half of his arm into the beans.

“Stop! Didn’t I tell you to restrain you strength? Let me check your fists for injury!” Li Canghai’s expression hugely changed at such a sight. He scolded anxiously and produced a medicine bottle from his pocket immediately.

“Master Li, I’m all right. “ Shi Mu grinned, pulling out his half buried arm from the beans.

“Humph! I’ll be the judge of it! Take off the glove.” Li Canghai snorted without thinking.

Shi Mu could only take off the layers of the glove after a swing of his arm obediently, after which he waved his reddish fingers leisurely before Li Canghai.

“Hmm... That’s quite strange. Your hands are actually fine! I’ve been a teacher for years, it wouldn’t surprise me if your fingers were bleeding. How about this. Come over here and pound this wooden target with your fists, this time, go all out.” After studying Shi Mu’s fists closely instructor Li was quite amazed, and after some thought, pointing to a nearby thick stock.

“Yes,” Shi Mu answered and took a deep breath, then walked to the stock, measuring it in circles.

Boom!

After stretching his arms leisurely, Shi Mu’s gaze sharpened and gave a sudden punch which smashed the thick wooden target into two parts. the upper part

whizzing across the square straight toward the outer wall of a house which shivered mightily at the collision.

His fist was, however, safe and sound.

Chapter 7 - Bloodline Warriors

“As a beginner, it’s amazing that you have progressed this far! I’ve never seen anyone like you before. Could it be.. you.. have you inspired your blood!? “ Li Canghai was caught off guard at Shi Mu’s performance, wearing a look of amazement on his face.

“Inspired my blood?” Shi Mu paused at the word.

“Hehe, it’s only a wild guess. Bloodline Warriors are quite rare, you couldn’t have been one. It must be for your inherent strength. But all things considered, It’s like your body was made to practice the Stone-Breaking Fist. “ At first Li Canghai could not find other words but to silently smile, then after a moment he shook his head and said thus.

“Master Li, what are Bloodline Warriors?” Shi Mu asked out of curiosity.

“Well, it’s hard to explain. There are some Houtian Warriors who have managed to stimulate some special blood in their veins. These warriors are called Bloodline Warriors, and this ability is something that comes about naturally. You have to be born with it in order to even have a chance, but only a few warriors could achieve this, barely one in a million. As a Practitioner, it is nigh impossible to stimulate your blood vessels. If you really want to know more about Bloodline Warriors, enter the Kai Yuan martial arts school. Bloodline Warriors are regarded as demons because each can annihilate any other warrior of the same level. Keep this in mind, because they are also hated for their talents. It would be fortuitous for Bloodline Warriors born in powerful families, if not, Bloodline Warriors are usually assassinated at an early age. In fact, I recall that there are some Bloodline Warriors among the candidates this year.“ Li Canghai showed an obvious indifference, waved the topic off after a brief explanation.

Shi Mu nodded and asked no more, only memorizing all information about Bloodline Warriors and his own mutation deep in heart.

“But you do possess outstanding talents in the Stone-Breaking art. Well, I’d better quicken the pace, or the current exercise would be useless for you.” After giving Shi Mu some meaningful looks Li said with a smile.

Then Li Canghai asked servants to put some sharp-looking stones in the tank as he took off another layer from the gloves and ordered Shi Mu to continue practicing.

This time, Shi Mu’s fists began to feel the soreness almost immediately. Some more time passed before both fists began to sting, as if there were myriad of tiny needles hidden in the stones.

Shi Mu turned to see Li Canghai standing near him and saw instructor Li had no intention of having him stop, so Shi Mu continued to hit wildly at the stones, his teeth clenched as he struck at his usual pace.

“Remember, since the method of practising Stone-Breaking fist is so forceful and violent, it’s highly likely your sinews and bones will be injured. Even though you have quite a good aptitude and my secret ointment, you should rest at least four days between each practice. During this period continue your body tempering and allow your hands to fully heal so that you can proceed to practice your Stone-Breaking fist. If you can adhere to this schedule for half a year, it’s possible to reach the intermediate stage of accomplishment in this fist art”, instructed Li Canghai.

“Yes.” Shi Mu answered in a firm voice and threw another heavy punch into

the stones, making the whole tank shivering slightly.

Night fell.

Shi Mu sat on the wooden chair in his room, his arms resting on the table in front of him, his hands bare without the gloves. His ten fingers swelled to twice their size and were as red as an apple. The swelling rendered the skin extremely thin and transparent to unveil the veins underneath. At this miserable state ,Shi Mu smiled bitterly.

According to Li Canghai, only an injury of this extent signified the effectiveness of his daytime practice. But with hands in such a state, even applying the ointment became quite an impossible task.

His face was contorted in agony as he attempted to take the medicine bottle, that instructor Li had given him, out from his shirt . After opening the lid he applied the ointment to his palm generously with swollen causing him to swear in pain as his back and head broke out in cold sweat.

The next morning.

As Shi Mu got up and looked at his hands subconsciously.

He was stunned. The hands that should have been swollen were now healed as if no harm had been done to them. Had it not been for the remaining light red blood stains on the back of his hands, he would consider himself dreaming.

“How? This is impossible!” Shi Mu blurted out as he flexed his hands, his fingers nimble and intact.

Everything was fine, no trace of pain was left as if yesterday's practice were just a dream.

He doubtfully gazed at his hands, blinked his eyes, then grasped the bed edge as he exerted his fingers.

Crack! The chunk of wood was pinched into pieces.

Seeing this Shi Mu astonished, then jumped in excitement before calming down with a thought, "Looks like I'm fine. Can it be that I've aroused some blood vessel inside my body? If so it must be due to that huge clam. Perhaps it's all due to the blood fog. But, according to Li Canghai, to reveal my talent right now is not a clever choice. But since I am able to heal myself so quickly, I can practice the fist art everyday!"

It was high noon.

Shi Mu's hands were packed up tightly with white straps, heavy sand bag tied up around his waist and legs. He was running about the square wildly. In a short time he became drenched in sweat.

Li Canghai watched nearby, his face wearing expressions of satisfaction.

In the afternoon, in a room kept tightly sealed in the manor, faint thuds could be heard. In the center of the large empty room, Shi Mu was hitting wildly into the stones in the tank. The white straps that used to cover his hand had disappeared and the gloves he wore now were rather thin.

He thoroughly ignored the pangs in his fistsl he only kept punching onto the stones, his mouth tightly closed.

In the depth of night.

The youth was sleeping soundly, his face full of tiredness while his arms stretched far to the edges of the bed. His fists had turned extremely red with swelling and were now covered with a thick layer of white ointment. One of his fingers made a sudden twitch while a grain of pain was shown on his face, but the youth was still fast asleep.

“What? You want to try on iron this time?” Li Canghai was quite taken aback. His eyes wide open, he blurted out the question.

“That’s right. I remember that Master Li once said you’ve got an alternative art of body tempering whose practice speed far exceeding other methods. If only I could learn it! I would probably finish level eleven before the enrollment test. Plus with the aid of a Qi Ling pill, there’s a better chance I can attain Qi-sensing.“ Shi Mu’s hands were again covered with thick layers of white straps, but he seemed rather calm while saying this.

“I did say this before. But are you really aware of its danger? Despite its benefits, this method needs a huge investment of resources and is full of danger. You risk death every time you practice.” Li Canghai said with much severity.

“I’ll do anything to reach level eleven within a year. Money? Danger? I don’t care. Master Li, all I ask of you is to teach me.” Shi Mu said determinedly as he bowed with a face of grim determination.

“Well, I’ve already shown you all the possible consequences and if you insist, I have no reason not to teach. But this method requires some outside help during the first couple stages. So you must come to our school, is that a problem?”

“Not at all. To save the trouble of commuting, I will live in the city as continue my training.“ When asked Shi Mu immediately came up with an idea.

“It would be best if you live near the club. Well then, we will continue our lesson tomorrow. Bring a thousand silver note to the club tomorrow, and I will return to the school today to make preparation for you. Hehe, you’ll get your money’s worth. You may guess from its name, but this method of body tempering tempers your body like iron, thus enhancing it forcibly. During this period, you’ll suffer insufferable pains, and bathe in medicine baths everyday as instructed. The baths cannot be skipped off or your body would break down. Once you complete this, I’ll have nothing left to teach you at the Practitioner level.” Li Canghai smiled and nodded in agreement.

Shi Mu obediently listened to the instructions.

For the rest of the day, Li Canghai taught Shi Mu some other skills for using his strength and then left with some parting words.

Shi Mu immediately asked for Zhang Suo who was responsible for the manor’s affairs and requested a clean, vacant house be rented for him in the city as his residence there during his training.

Zhang Suo promised obediently, then hurried out with some silver notes to run his errand.

Chapter 8 - A Corpse Attack in an Old Temple

Half a year later, on a remote, deserted mountain road in the suburb of Feng City.

It had begun to rain heavily. The raindrops pounded hard against the ground. Loud crashes of dull thunder could be heard in the distance from time to time; vivid lightning flashed vividly, lighting up the scenery in a stark white flash.

A man was seen running wildly like a leopard, each of his step were at least five times the length than that of an ordinary person. In an instant, he traversed a small hill, before heading directly toward the thick woods near the hill.

Shortly afterwards, he disappeared and a shadow flashed about. Boom! Fifteen large trees slowly fell down to the ground, a clean cut was seen slashing through the trunk. Just then a sudden lightning bolt flashed, showing the person's visage clearly. He was wearing a straw hat and a straw raincoat. As the darkness retook the scene, the man disappeared.

Two hours later.

The gate to a broken, worn down temple in the mountain was thrown open, followed by heavy footsteps belonging to a man carrying a huge object over his shoulder. Heavy raindrops and gusts of wind swirled into the temple as he opened the door.

There were two travellers sitting around a bonfire at the center of the hall. Disrupted by the noise, they turned around with astonishment.

“Why are you visiting the temple? And is that my firewood?”

The heavy object thudded down to the ground as the straw hatted man shook the raindrops off his raincoat as he question unhurriedly.

The two travellers were a man and a girl. The man, apparently in his forties, looked graceful but rather worn-out from his journey. The latter was a teenage girl who had fair skin and was a high-class beauty, had a perceptible blue birthmark - a blemish on her perfect face.

“Ah, that’s your firewood! I’m sorry, I thought this temple was uninhabited and saw them lying around, so I just used them to make a fire. My daughter and I were completely soaked by the rain. But don’t worry young boy, I will definitely compensate you for the firewood and shelter.” The middle-aged man stood up hurriedly to offer his apology, but his eyes were drawn in fright to the huge thing on the ground.

The object on the ground was a corpse of a brown boar weighed at least a five hundred kilograms! The stark white of its eyes, the still freshly bleeding mouth and two broken huge fangs showed that it had died not too long ago!

“The wood was chopped to be used. So use it.” The straw hatted figure walked up. In the light of the bonfire, a boy with thick brows and two big eyes revealed himself while carrying a long blade-he was none other than Shi Mu.

“Then, I can only thank you for your hospitality. If you need anything, please call for me. I am surnamed Zhong.“ At the offer, the middle-aged man hurriedly answered with profuse smiles, quite relaxed, until he felt satisfied with his repeatedly expressed gratefulness. He then returned to the bonfire to comfort the girl.

The girl in blue dress stole a glance at Shi Mu too, but did it silently, full of gentleness.

By then Shi Mu had taken off the saber as well as his raincoat, underneath which a thick black iron armour was seen unexpectedly. The armour fully covered his torso, leaving only his neck and arms unprotected.

“Is that the famous black armour?” The middle-aged man was stunned at the sight.

“Do you know of this armour?” This time it was Shi Mu’s turn to be surprised.

“Hehe, to tell you the truth, I once saw a blacksmith forge this armour with my own eyes so I was left with a deep impression. How much does your armor weigh? I was told by the blacksmith that this armour was not made for defense in fight because of its brittleness. It was made for the simple purpose of helping warriors train their bodies.“ The man answered with a smile.

“This one I’m wearing right does not weigh that much, or I wouldn’t have been able to move.” Shi Mu waved the question off and then grasped one side of the armour with some strength.

The black armour cracked into two pieces and was thrown onto the ground by Shi Mu with ease. The two pieces fell to the ground with a thud and caused the ground to tremble. The middle-aged man blinked his eyes twice in turn.

Not much?! Who was he kidding, the weight must have been remarkable! The armour must weigh at least two hundred or three hundred kilograms. Only a

huge monster could have supported the armour with just their strength. The boy must be quite strong for his age and his level in body tempering art must be quite high.

As Shi Mu undid the black armour's straps, his whole body began to relax. After that he cut off the two front legs of the boar in a blink of the eye; A golden light appeared around the legs before they were completely skinned in a short time. Then the youth produced a small bottle from his clothes, and from the container some white powder was scattered on the boar's legs before they were taken to the bonfire by the preoccupied youth.

After a while a strong delicious smell began to fill the whole temple. The two around the bonfire that were previously eating their prepared dried food were drawn by the strong smell of the sizzling boar leg, and the girl could not help but feel but drool. She at once found it ungraceful, so she lowered her head with a blushing face.

Seeing this, Shi Mu passed her the half done leg with a quiet smile, quite unexpected by the girl.

"That's too much! We've used your firewood, how could we take the meat now..." Overjoyed at such a generous offer, the middle-aged man took the meat willingly as his mouth shamelessly refused the offer.

"Father....."The girl beside called him in a shameful voice.

"Don't you see there is more than enough meat? The young boy is obviously a strong warrior, he would not care about such a small offer." The man answered his daughter, grinning.

“All right then, but still...Thank you so much, young master.” The girl blushed in meek acceptance of his father’s impoliteness and gave thank to Shi Mu.

“Your welcome. It’s actually no problem, this boar is rather big for me to eat alone. “ Shi Mu had already skinned another leg of the boar by now. He turned back and answered with a smile.

“By the way, young boy, Feng City is not far from here, is it? We came from Ying City to stay with our relatives in Feng City. It’s only when the rain started to pour and darkness fell that we lost our way in the mountains. “ The middle-aged man was all smiles when he tried to rip a piece of meat for his daughter. He then inquired about the way from Shi Mu.

“I see. I was wondering why you two were here in this deserted temple at such a late hour. Uncle Zhong[1], don’t worry, it’s not far to Feng City from here. Walk along the road in front of the temple straight for some ten li you’ll see the west gate of the city. “ Shi Mu understood their reason here until now, then answered him without thinking.

“That’s great! Xiu Er[2], did you hear that? We can reach Feng City tomorrow and you’ll soon get married into the Wu family. “ Hearing this the middle-aged man was overjoyed.

“Father, stop that! Don’t you see our current conditions? Plus I looked so terrible now! It’s highly likely they will cancel the engagement. “ Hearing his father mention her engagement, she could not help but blush with shame.

“Terrible? Nonsense! My daughter is the most intelligent and beautiful girl in the world! Humph, it’s exactly thanks to the Wus we have now fallen into such a

state. Don’t worry Xiu Er, I’ll deal with the Wus about your engagement.” The middle-aged man disapproved of his daughter’s self-abasement.

However that rang a bell in Shi Mu’s head.

The Wu family? Could it be the powerful clan Wu which was second only to the Jin? But judging from the father and his daughter’s stature they didn’t seem strong enough to be warriors.

As the man was talking with his daughter and Shi Mu was cooking, a shrill howl sounded from afar; before long a lasting boom was heard increasingly near. In a blink, a large figure approached the temple, having had covered a great distance.

“What is that? Are there monsters in these mountains?” Greatly scared, the man rose and fumbled for a dagger from his clothes, the sharp weapon glittering with coldness. He stood forward to protect his daughter, though he, himself was full of fright. But due to his trembling legs, he would not have lasted a minute in a fight.

“It is not a monster, or at least any monster from this mountain. I’ve never heard a howl like that before.“ Shi Mu jumped for his saber laying beside the bonfire. His eyes shone as he glared at the gate, which had seemed to darken ominously. Shi Mu expectantly awaited the unknown, after all he had been hunting all kinds of wild animals in this mountain for half a year not for entertainment but for training. On the one hand he continued training body tempering, on the other he acquired experience of actual combat.

Though the mountain was a rather tame one when it came to the animals living inside, the number of wild wolves and boars he had killed was no small amount, it amounted to at least one hundred animals. This had made him rather

experienced at killing animals, far surpassing his peer Practitioners who shied away from blood.

Though not a warrior himself, the middle-aged man was quite perceptive. Shi Mu's composure helped him calm down a little.

Boom! The already half broken gate suddenly bursted open from the outside. In the shower of myriad splinters, a human figure rushed into the hall, his skin black from head to toe.

"This is... a zombie! A real zombie! Heavens! Where did that thing come from? What are the armies in Feng City doing? We are dead!" Recognizing the monster, the man was nearly half dead from fright.

A zombie?

Shi Mu's blood froze at the figure.

The monster was at least three meters tall. Its face was badly mutilated and only two big bloody holes were left where its eyes should have been. Its whole body was covered with a thick layer of black hair, and drops of green fluids dripped from all over its body intermittently, giving off a nauseating smell.

Notes:

[1] Uncle: a respectful title for any man your father's peer. So here Mr. Zhong, though he doesn't have any blood relation with Shi Mu, is called "Uncle Zhong" by him to show respect.

[2] Xiu Er: Xiu is the first name of Zhong Xiu. The Chinese character Xiu means of elegance and excellence, while “Er” is a suffix added to a name to show intimacy and affection.

Chapter 9 - Killing the Corpse

As Shi Mu was stunned by the unexpected appearance of the zombie, it had already pounced on him after a howl, its body giving off a rancid odor of rotten fish. Taking a deep breath while clearing his thoughts, Shi Mu immediately brandished his saber. His wrists moved nimbly as he wielded the saber, creating a strong, cold light that flew forward.

Peng! Shi Mu slashed the monster's chest five times in quick succession. But the cuts were dull as if they fell onto a dead tree and only left a few shallow wounds on the surface. Trickles of green blood seeped out of the wounds, but seemed ineffective. The corpse stretched its arms and pushed Shi Mu down forcibly.

Shi Mu was struck dumb with astonishment; until now he had been fully convinced of his strength gained from his previous exercise of running wildly in the rain with the heavy black armour. Without any previous knowledge of martial arts he was still able to slither out of the monster's thick arms then quickly moved around to its back.

"Hah!" Shi shouted as he once again struck out with his saber cutting five times at the monster's waist before it could react.

The monster howled in anger at the superficial wounds. It wrenched its body backward and surprised the three by turning its upper body 180 degrees around as it pounced viciously on Shi Mu's head.

"Boom!" This attack was completely unanticipated and was impossible to dodge. Shi Mu frantically smashed back with his knife but encountered an

irresistible force that sent his whole body flying. A broken stone column stopped his flight forcefully. As Shi Mu began to rise, he coughed out blood as he found himself quite lightheaded.

The corpse rushed forward showing no signs of letting Shi My off; it rushed forward with second attack that stuck low to the ground. This time Shi Mu did not try to dodge but only let out a shout, striking out with saber in six different cuts; a dull sound rang out at the successive fierce cuts. The youth used so much strength that at the collision the knife flew out, darting upwards before finally inserting itself into a crossbeam; as to Shi Mu himself, he was pressed backward at collision.

The monster let out a shrill shout when forced back by the violent attack, its arms now carrying another four scars and its face a two long ones, sprouting large amounts of green blood.

“Young brother, its head is the weak point!” Upon the middle-aged old man remembering this he shouted to Shi Mu anxiously, but his shout attracted the monster’s attention unexpectedly. It turned about swiftly to vent its anger on the annoying helper by the bonfire, knowing that Shi Mu was not an easy prey.

“No!” The middle-aged man was scared out of his wits, but with his daughter behind him, he bravely stood his ground and casted the dagger at the monster before he turned around and tightly held the girl to his chest to become the girl’s armour.

The monster brushed the dagger away as if sweeping off some dust. It used its other hand to rip open the middle-aged man’s chest, its sharp fingers halfway into his body.

“Ah!” The man shouted in pain as his blood gushed out. His daughter blanched seeing her father in pain and screamed in despair.

Then something strange happened.

The monster open its rottened mouth and was lowering it head, but as soon as it heard the girl’s scream it trembled with a corresponding shout. Taking back its arms, it staggered back from the man, as if suffering from some untold agonies.

Seizing the chance, Shi Mu rushed to the monster’s back, his movement stirring a sudden puff of wind and dust. He jumped to the height of three meters and began to pound mercilessly at the monster’s head. Boom! His two fists were like iron hammers at the forge hitting the monster’s weak point, his superhuman strength enough to stir an exploding sound with each hit. The monster’s head was split open like a melon while countless drops of green blood began to splatter in all directions. Shi Mu pushed himself back as not to get hit by the ominous, green-blood rain.

The corpse fell heavily onto the ground after twitching twice.

Shi Mu steadied his body by clenching his fists as his face paled a little. The mortal wound was done only in an instant, but had not the monster been disturbed by the girl’s sudden scream, he would not have been able to kill it. But undoubtedly the success was due to his superhuman strength too, which was gained by his nearly accomplished Stone-Breaking Fist. If not, the monster’s head - even though it was the weakest point - would not have been injured bare-handed by an ordinary Practitioner.

“Father!” Then came the girl’s grievous call.

Shi Mu turned to see the mortally wounded man, his daughter leaning on his body trying desperately to stop the blood from leaving out of the large holes in his chest, only to be reminded of her hopeless efforts by the continual flow of blood.

“Young boy, young boy...”

The middle-aged man’s face was pale, but he ignored his daughter and only called desperately to Shi Mu.

“Stop talking father. Save your energy while I find you a doctor...” The girl cried.

“It’s too late, Xiu Er, even I know some medical knowledge. My heart has no strength now, and only have a few moments left. I’ve had good times in my life, but only have one regret dying now. The only regret is you.“ The man smiled in response bitterly, casting an anxious look at Shi Mu.

The girl’s heart was broken at such words.

“Uncle Zhong, do you have any last wishes?“ Shi Mu sighed in despair and finally walked up to him, lowering his body. He was not slow to notice some coming trouble, but it was impossible to sweep it off now.

“Little brother, it must be my lot to meet you here, and now that my life’s ending, I can’t bear seeing my Xiu Er all alone in this world, unprotected, so please look after her...” The man began to gasp for breath.

“There’s no need for me to look after your daughter. Is she not engaged to the

Wu family? Although, I can promise to escort her there.“ Shi Mu was surprised at the entreaty.

“The Wu? hehe...he...If only I could live I would find a way to get her married into the family, but now... They definitely will not acknowledge the engagement any more. My daughter will only be.....”

“Then I could take her to your other relatives.” Shi Mu frowned and interrupted.

“We have no relatives ever since our family became poor. Xiu Er, listen, your engagement with the Wus is canceled now. Little brother, it’s obvious you are no average person...I won’t ask you to make my daughter your wife, but please take her at least as a concubine, let her live a life safely, then I can rest in peace. Since you must be a warrior, this family heirloom won’t be useless to you, I’ll give it to you as my daughter’s betrothal gift. If you ever harm her I will become a vengeful spirit to curse you! “ The middle-aged man spoke this quickly in his last moments, then he produced a wooden case from his shirt and thrust it forcibly into Shi Mu’s hands. After a loud cry he was breathless.

“Father!” Hearing her father’s words she was too surprised to cry, but at her father’s death now she could not help but cry her eyes out, leaning on his body.

Shi Mu was speechless with the case in hand, not knowing what to do.

“Young master, my father was quite delirious in his last moments, so don’t take his words seriously. Please escort me to the Wu Clan in Feng City.” The girl stopped crying after some unknown time, her eyes swollen but her back now straight and firm.

“Miss Zhong, I do think it would be too rude of me to do as Uncle Zhong asked. Also, please take back this case.“ The girl’s words made him relax a little. He said so with a sigh and passed the case to her, quite embarrassed.

“I’ve never seen this case myself. But since my father has given it to you in person so I won’t take it back. Besides my life would be forfeit if it were not for you.” The girl shook off the offer.

“All right then, Miss Zhong, but don’t call me young master anymore, just call me by name Shi Mu. Well, the rain has stopped; Let’s bury your father now, or the body may lead animals here.” Hesitating for a moment, Shi Mu said so, taking back the case.

“Then I’ll rely on your help. Brother Shi may call me Zhong Xiu from now on.” The girl, though she looked fragile, grew stronger after crying out.

On the hill behind the temple, a girl knelt beside a tomb and made three loud kowtows to her father with suppressed anguish. Afterwards she left with Shi Mu, turning back to see the tomb.

The two returned to the temple, only to find that the monster’s body had began to rot at an alarming speed and a large amount of green fluids had seeped out, stinking up the hall.

Zhong Xiu was frightened to approach a single step at the sight, while Shi Mu said with a frown,

“It’s unsafe to leave the strange thing here. Miss Zhong, please wait here for a moment while I deal with it.“ The girl nodded her agreement. Shi Mu then

walked out of the hall and turned back after a while, some thick huge leaves in hand. He then walked up to the body with the leaves, and after having covered it briefly, he lifted the corpse out of the hall.

Pa A thing fell from the leaves.

Chapter 10 - The Wu Family

“What?” Shi Mu was surprised. He gazed at the thing and found it to be a black iron piece decorated with delicate patterns. They looked like characters but Shi Mu could not identify a single one of them.

“Miss Zhong, have you seen this thing before?” He was curious as he picked it up and studied it.

"It’s the first time I’ve seen it. It must have belonged to the zombie. That’s not strange, zombies used to be humans, so it’s normal for them to carry some human things." The girl came up and looked at the thing, suppressing her nausea at the smell of the decaying corpse.

Shi Mu nodded and, after some hesitation, stored the iron piece away, then he carried the leaf-covered body out of the hall.

Shortly afterwards they were on their way to the city. Shi Mu could not resist asking Zhong Xiu about her shriek that made the zombie recoil. But Zhong Xiu was baffled too. Seeing this, Shi Mu did not ask any further. Since it was late in the day and the west gate of the city was already closed, Shi Mu took the girl back to his suburban manor.

……

In the evening, Shi Mu was resting in his room, observing the iron piece in his hand. At first glance, the piece seemed to be made of common black iron, but it was heavier than expected and was particularly cold to the touch. Moreover, the

delicate decorations, when examined closely, gave a sense of primitive simplicity, creating a sense of mystery and fascination. By then, Shi Mu could tell that it was not an ordinary item. But, still unclear of its origin after examining it for a long time, he carefully put it away. Then Shi Mu took out the wooden case he got from Zhong Ming before his death.

The Zhongs seemed to be no ordinary family, and, as such, their heirloom should be something special too.

Shi Mu opened the case and found a thick book inside, its pages already yellowed by time, and on its cover, four characters were written:“Zhong Gong Mi Dian” - The Secret Arts of the Zhong Clan. A little surprised, Shi Mu pulled the book out to get a better look.

There were a whole three hundred pages in the book, all printed with tiny black characters, some of them vividly illustrated. After only briefly glancing over the first few pages, Shi Mu’s face was covered with shock. He sucked in a cold breath, sinking into silence at the book’s contents.

The book was divided into two parts, the former telling of a great number of methods to make rare weapons, while the latter describing instructions to produce delicate tools and poisons. Both parts far surpassed Shi Mu’s imagination, considering their obscurity and mystery.

For example, there was a weapon, named “The Blade of Moonlit Sea”, which had an ordinary shape, but the inside of its body was empty, making it possible to infuse the sword with a large amount of poison. When used in combat, the sword would splinter, splattering poison on the enemy.

There was another weapon - a small crossbow named “Bow Bolt” - which was

even more vile in use. It was a hidden weapon that one wears on their back. In order to use it, one had to bow towards the person they intended to kill, then give a slight pull on a strap hidden inside their cuff, which would cause three bolts to shoot out from the crossbow toward the target, killing them before they are even aware he were shot.

As to the kinds of poisons in the book, they ranged from those which could knock people unconsciousness to those whose deadly effects would only mature after a few days. Simply put, there were many kinds of poisons in the book.

“I really wonder what the Zhongs did that required them to develop such vile things. Looking at its worn-out condition, it should have been handed down from their early ancestors.” Shi Mu thought to himself. This book was a real eye-opener. If completely memorized, it would be useful when it came to dealing with people who bore similar skills. Some of the other things recorded also drew his attention. He turned the pages quickly and found the illustration of two weapons, one large and one small, arranged high and low respectively. The larger one was a slightly arched single-edged knife, its handle long enough to be held with both hands. A black string could be seen faintly around the handle. The smaller one was a tiny, yet incredibly sharp looking, dagger. Deep in thought, Shi Mu Gazed at the illustration.

……

The next morning, Shi Mu, alongside a swollen-eyed Zhong Xiu, came to a certain street in Feng City. On one side of the street stood an eye-catchingly huge manor, covering an area of a little over half a square kilometer. After a look at the blue doorway, which had a golden doorplate where a huge “Wu” was engraved, Shi Mu walked up to knock on the door.

“Who’s knocking at this early hour! The sun’s not even up yet!” The door was

finally opened and a man, who looked to be a servant, said this in an impatient voice as he came out, glancing at the two visitors.

“This girl is one of your relatives, would you please report her arrival?” Shi Mu passed a jade plate to the servant while he said this.

“Our relative? Wait a moment.” Half-convinced, the man took the jade plate and closed the door.

It was only a short span of time before the door was opened again. This time, two men emerged from within. The one in front was a long-bearded old man while the one behind him was a youth of Shi Mu’s age, he looked like the old man, however, he was full of prideful arrogance.

“It really is my niece! Perfect! I’ve been waiting for so long since I got your letter. But where is my brother Zhong? And who is this...?” The pale old man was full of smiles seeing Zhong Xiu but seemed rather surprised at Shi Mu’s presence.

When he got a look at Zhong Xiu, a trace of disgust flashed across the eyes of the youth behind the old man as he saw the blue birthmark on the girl’s forehead.

“This is young master Shi. I... I lost my father on the way. It’s all thanks to young master Shi that I could be here now.“ Zhong Xiu greeted the old man in a polite and graceful manner, her eyes shining with tears.

"What? Has some misfortune happened to Brother Wu? Wait. This is not the place to talk about such things. Would you please follow me inside?" Apparently the news astonished him. He quickly comforted her and began to lead her inside.

The girl nodded.

“Oh, I’ve nearly forgotten this little boy, thank you for bringing my niece here. This is a reward for you.“ After another glance the pale old man frowned, passing Shi Mu a silver coin.

“Thank you, but I don’t need it. My task is finished since Xiu Er has safely reached her destination.” Shi Mu shook off the coin and left.

“What a proud bastard! I've seen lots of guys like him, acting like they are too good for our money, but you know they actually want it in their hearts.“ The youth snorted.

“Brother Shi is definitely not one of them.” Zhong Xiu said lightly.

The pale old man only smiled and led the two inside.

……

After leaving Zhong Xiu at the Wu residence, Shi Mu crossed some streets before finally reaching a building with a sign displaying “Liu Feng Martial Arts Club”. He walked through the gate and saw around ten teenage boys doing weapons practice.

“Brother Shi Mu’s here.” At his appearance, two youths immediately walked up to greet him. One of the two looked twenty while the other only looked around sixteen.

“Brother Feng, Brother Gao, you are here too?“ Shi Mu had not expected their presence here but still happily greeted them.

”We came to see the newly obtained medicines for body tempering. We heard they were cheap, so we were wondering if they could be useful to us. But for Brother Shi, there’s definitely no need. You must have finished your body tempering by now.“ The older one said. One might say that he looked elegant.

“I heard instructor Li say that you’d soon reach level ten, is it true?” The younger one asked with some doubt in his eyes. He had a deep knife scar on his left eyebrow.

Shi Mu came to know them only after he had entered the club for the first time. The elder one’s name was Feng Li, the younger one Gao Yuan.

“It’s true I’m near level ten. I did not come here for medicine but to ask instructor Li about some problems I've had." Shi Mu answered with a smile.

“So the rumor is true! Indeed, it seems Brother Shi can acquire Qi-sensing at an early age! Instructor Li’s right, you really are a talent! Hey, in the future, let’s get a drink at your restaurant to celebrate!“ Feng Li expressed his surprise with a sigh. Gao Yuan also showed expressions of admiration.

“That sounds like a great idea.” Shi Mu was in full agreement and left after exchanging some pleasantries. But at his departure Feng Li sent him a meaningful look, which was received by Shi Mu with mute understanding, his expression only changing for a moment.

Shi Mu then came to a yard behind the practice ground, where Li Canghai was lying in a wooden armchair, his eyes slightly closed as if deep in thought. Li showed a smile and rose from the chair upon seeing Shi Mu come in.

“Master Li, are we going to ask those senior Practitioners for help this time?” Shi Mu asked after bowing.

“No need. You are at the crucial moment of reaching the eleventh level, only I can help. You haven’t told others about your real level, have you?” Li Canghai asked in a relaxed manner.

“Of course not. I’ve been following master’s instructions, making people believe I’m only at the intermediate stage of level nine.“ Shi Mu answered with a smile.

“Good. Good. Then you’ll definitely surprise them in the competition in half a month. Our Feng Liu Club will outshine the three other clubs.” Hearing this, Li Canghai’s cracked a pleased smile.

Chapter 11 - The Fight

“I feel quite confident that I will win, Teacher Li. Will you really teach me the art of Throwing Knife after the match?” Shi Mu gave a quick nod and asked.

“This Throwing Knife Art is my crowning achievement after years of meditation, I doubt it would lose to any of the rare skills held by large families. I had planned to keep it as a secret, but if you gain enough fame for our Feng Liu club in this competition, then I shall gift it to you” Li Canghai chuckled.

“Then I shall do my best.” Shi Mu answered with a smile.

“Honestly your progress in Body Tempering is truly amazing, you are already able to practice with iron sand. But don’t take this competition lightly. Although all the participators are below the age of eighteen, the other club’s student should not be much weaker than you. I know of at least a couple contestants who have reached level ten in Body Tempering. If you could reach level eleven, then it will be guaranteed easy win.” Li Canghai said with a serious tone.

“I shall practise ceaselessly.” Shi Mu answered without thinking.

Li Canghai’s eyes glittered with hope. Then he led Shi Mu to a spacious room at the back of the yard. Once they entered it, he bolted the door directly. As for Shi Mu, he took off his shirt and a belt of heavy sand thudded down onto the ground which caused the floor to tremble.

Except for bathing and sleeping, Shi Mu never took off the belt, he was even wearing it when he confronted the zombie in the old temple. Had it not been for

the heavy sand belt, which he had no time to undo when the zombie appeared, he would have been much quicker.

“The belt is not heavy enough for you. From tomorrow on, you shall increase the weight by ten kilograms." Li Canghai took a stout stick from the nearby shelf which was covered with a thick layer of animal skin padding at each end. Shi Mu nodded obediently as he stomped hard on the ground. He lowered his body firmly and took a deep breath, then clenched his fists, holding his breath.

Li Canghai steadily raised his arms before pounding at every acupuncture point on Shi Mu’s body heavily. After a long period of time, Shi Mu came out of the room with his clothes on, his normally nimble feet looking slightly unsteady, his face somewhat contorted in pain.

Meanwhile Li Canghai, who was sweating profusely in the room, smiled to himself bitterly.

“This little boy must have a demon-like body! How else could I, an intermediate warrior, be exhausted by him! But that’s good, if it had not been for this demon-like body, he could not have finished the iron sand practice in half a year! I look forward to the competition this year. Not even considering the iron sand practice, he is still too outstanding in raising two levels within half a year. Incredible! Is he actually a bloodline warrior?” Li Canghai sank into a meditation.

He did not know that Shi Mu had not been taking regular breaks between each iron sand practice. One would normally rest for a few days after using the iron sand method. Instead Shi Mu, relying on his amazing healing power, continued his practice during the intervals by hunting wild animals in the mountain while wearing the heavy black armour. It was this way that allowed him to achieve so much in body tempering.

After leaving the club, Shi Mu crossed a street before reaching a rather beautiful manor. This remote manor was actually one of his residences in the city. A short time after he entered the manor, a certain room was filled the strong smell of medical herbs and steam that wafted out the window.

“Ahhh.” Shi Mu sighed relaxedly as he lay in a big wooden basin, immersed in boiling water and covered by some herbs. His upper body, outside the water, was full of swollen marks, but his face was relaxed. Shortly after he fell asleep in his bath.

When he opened his eyes again, the water had already cooled down, and the sky had turned dark outside the window. Shi Mu rose from the basin and had a good look at his body - the swollen prints were nearly invisible now. The special medicine made by Feng Liu club was truly wondrous. Coupled with his own abnormal healing, he was able to go through the brutal training for half a year. After all, not every warrior could stay safe and sound with the heavy poundings he endured every several days, let alone the arduous running he did every evening with a heavy armour and weighted belt. In this half year, he had grown much taller. Apart from a small bit of childishness, both his stature and in his style of speech were like that of an adult.

After he dried himself with a towel, Shi Mu donned his shirt and sand belt before leaving the room.

One hour later, Shi Mu was at a certain street in the city’s north district. He looked around to make sure no one was watching, then turned and walked into a plain looking house. Inside there was an ordinary-looking room where two men were waiting at a square table. The two were none other than Feng Li and Gao Yuan.

“Brother Shi, you’ve come.” As soon as he saw Shi Mu, Feng Li rose from the chair and greeted him with a warm smile. Gao Yuan also happily rose to greet him.

“I was sure Brother Feng had some business for me when you made the gesture at the dojo.” Shi Mu said with a smile.

“Brother Shi’s right, this time, we need your presence. The opponents are from the Luan Shi [1] gang near Huang Tian. We of the Black Fox sect have asked them to come here and have a competition tonight. The result of this competition will decide who can reign over the five streets near North King Temple. The news I got was that this time, they obtained the help of some experts, so please be careful Brother Shi." Feng Li explained the situation.

“Experts? Do you mean Practitioners?” Shi Mu’s eyes flashed with surprise.

“Don’t worry, small sects like Black Fox and Luan Shi cannot afford the price of Peak Level Practitioner. The experts I mentioned could not be better than some of the Mid Level Practitioners from the clubs. The Luan Shi sect has been desperate since Brother Shi helped us last time. With Brother Shi helping us, our Black Fox sect has grown much stronger.“ Gao Yuan curled his lips.

“That’s true. Though it’s not a set rule, small sects like us have trouble attracting the attention of Peak Level Practitioner. Moreover, even if the Luan Shi guys got to know some Peak Level Practitioner, they surely couldn’t afford the price, it would leave them penniless.“ Feng Li smiled with assurance.

“As long as there are no Peak Level Practitioner involved I can help. As usual, it will cost three hundred silver notes, and nobody should know I’m participating. “ Shi Mu felt assured by them, completing the deal with complete confidence.

“Good, then, it’s settled. We’ve prepared the thing you requested, and we can set out in a moment.“ Feng Li said this and took out a small package from his shirt, passing it to Shi Mu.

Shi Mu walked into a back room with a small table. He set the package down on the table and opened it. Inside, there was a pair of black gloves, a black robe, and a silver mask. He donned them in a quick and efficient manner. When he came out of the room, Feng Li and Gao Yuan were quiet for a moment.

“Each time I see Brother Shi in this suit, it almost feels like Second Brother is still with us.” Gao Yuan’s expression had become nondescript after seeing Shi Mu in this way.

“Oh, We are so fortunate to have Brother Shi helping us. Ever since Second Brother died in that accident, Brother Shi has taken his place in protecting us by playing the role of ‘Fierce Fists’. Otherwise, we Black Foxes could not have grown so powerful so as to keep our territories. Except for us two, nobody knows that the top expert in our sect has changed.” Feng Li echoed with a sad sigh.

“I’m only doing this to make money for my medicine bath. Besides, your Black Fox sect protects those that cannot fight back against crueler sects. If I stand by and let you guys get beaten, ordinary people would suffer too.“ A dull voice came from the mask, completely different from Shi Mu’s original tone.

“Of course it is beneficial to both of us. There’s not much time left, let’s hurry.” Feng Li smiled in agreement, indicating the need to hurry in a polite way.

Shi Mu was not against this either.

The three of them soon left the room, disappearing past the end of the street and melting into the dim night.

……

In a dilapidated, remote street, wearing the distinct colors of their respective sects, two groups of men were furiously fighting each other.

One sect was wearing black and was composed of approximately forty men. Feng, Gao, and Shi stood behind this group with their arms folded, watching them fight. As to the other sect, they apparently outnumbered the first, all of their members wearing blue, they were none other than the notorious Luan Shi sect. Behind them stood five men, carefully watching the fight.

Before long the outnumbered Black Fox sect started to crumble, many of its members sporting serious wounds that made them have to retire from the fight.

“Brother Shi, let’s display your skills now.” Seeing this, Feng Li’s heart grew heavy and he turned to Shi Mu for help.

Shi Mu nodded without objection and rushed forward into the crowd without delay.

Peng! Peng! Two dull sounds were heard, as two of the blue-robed men fell to the ground.

“Run away, it's Fierce Fists!” Many of the blue-robbed Luan Shi members started yelling and running away at the sight of Shi Mu dressed as Fierce Fists. Meanwhile, two burly fellows in blue armed with large staffs, rushed forward

toward Shi Mu’s back, raising their weapons to strike at his back.

Shi Mu turned around and punched at the incoming weapons, breaking their weapons. His opponents were not able to react in time as Shi Mu moved in to attack. In a single punch, one of the men was launched six meters back before dropping to the ground like a brick.

Shi Mu then turned toward the other man and kicked him with enough force to stir up some wind.

Notes:

[1] Luan Shi: “Luan” means disorder and confusion; “Shi” means stone.

Chapter 12 - Invincible Bravery

In the blink of an eye, Shi Mu had already downed seven or eight opponents, like a wolf among a herd of sheep.The Luan Shui sect began to flee down both sides of the road in fear. Taking their chance, Feng Li and Gao Yuan rushed into the mess and began to beat down their enemies with a pair of sticks. Seeing this the men watching from behind the lines had to abandon their watch-and-wait policy in order to reinforce their little army. Led by a middle-aged man who called loudly to Shi Mu who was masquerading as Fierce Fist, three Luan Shui thugs rushed at Shi Mu simultaneously; meanwhile, two other men stood up barring the path of Gao Yuan and Feng Li.

The four iron sticks in Feng Li and Gao Yuan's hands gave a non-stop series of *whacks* as they moved in similar strokes; apparently the two were using the same martial art. Their opponents had different skills though they both wielded flat white weapons that looked like iron rulers; one moved his ruler in a firm, heavy manner while the other seemed to move more randomly with quick and fluid movements. It was hard to tell which side had the advantage.

Meanwhile, Shi Mu was confronting three blue-robed men, who were far stronger than the others, with great composure. Wasting no words on his opponents, he lifted a nearby wooden stick off the ground with his foot and quickly launched it into his hands.

SwishSwish

The leading middle-aged man was carrying sharp-looking bamboo knives in each of his hands; as soon as he approached Shi Mu he wielded the knives in a cross, directly sending them into Shi Mu's chest forcibly and viciously. Even though they were not made of iron, the bamboo knives' sharpness could do

some serious damage if they caught their target. Seeing them, a cold light flashed across Shi Mu's eyes, but he only shook his wrist once before six shadows of his stick danced wildly in front of his enemies.

"Ah!" The middle-aged man could not hold back his astonishment and let out a loud cry. His two bamboo knives were pulled back at a lightning speed to resist the wild dance of the shadows. "*WhackWhack*" There came two clear sounds as the man felt a strong shaking in his hands; his two bamboo knives splintered into pieces and he felt a strong pain crept on his chest, which forced him to step back. He nearly lost his footing in this process and he tried hard not to fall to the ground.

At the sight, the other two men immediately thrust their spears into the air in front of Shi Mu. Another opponent shook his wrist and unleashed a slithering whip that looked like a ferocious python. Faced with the attacks, Shi Mu let out a low shout and waved his arms abruptly, throwing the wooden stick like a javelin. A *boom* resounded as the stick slammed into something. The spearman had no time to resist as the tip of his wooden spear collided with Shi Mu's stick head-on. The collisions sent a wave of energy up the spear toward the man. The spear shattered to pieces and the man fell unconscious from the pain, both of his hands bleeding.

At exactly the same time, Shi Mu's other arm stretched out and instantly grasped the approaching whip with a gloved hand. This was done so quickly that all of his actions were seen as a blur to the others watching the fight.

The whip-man blanched at the sight; being overwhelmed in a panic he lashed wildly with the whip while trying to step back. Shi Mu snorted at his attempt and gave a gentle pull at the whip's tip, at which the man trembled uncontrollably, staggering forward like a drunk. "No!" But it was too late for him to flee: Shi Mu was already at his side, having covered the whole distance in a blink of an eye. The next moment, he was struck hard in his stomach and before he had even

realized it, he had the wind knocked out of him by an overwhelming force. He could only kneel down on the ground, almost fainting.

But Shi Mu would not let him off. With another quick movement, his body flew into the air like a dragon. One of his legs kicked forward, sweeping at his enemy, who cringed as the leg swept toward him. He clearly knew that if he was kicked, he might die, given the strength of his opponent, but he was already made defenseless by the previous attack.

“Stop! We admit our loss.”

Just then a terrified voice pleaded to Shi Mu.

At the entreaty, Shi Mu slowed his kick and let it pass right above the man's head, creating a strong wind which left the man paralyzed in fear.

Shi Mu looked at the pleading man through the holes in his mask after landing on the ground. The voice belonged to the middle-aged man, the leader of Luan Shui gang, who only sighed with relief after confirming the spearman’s safety. He then made a placating gesture with clasped hands [1], smiling to Shi Mu bitterly,

“You really are the Fierce Fist himself! You must rank among the top of all the practitioners in Feng City, so why not leave our gangs alone? We are only fighting for some bread, not for anything serious.”

Shi Mu stood there without moving a step, his eyes cold and his lips firm. Feng Li chose this moment to walk up and say,

“Stop the nonsense! Withdraw from the five streets immediately after today’s

competition!”

“Ok, ok, we’ll withdraw from this place since we are not Fierce Fist’s match. Let’s go!” The leader decided in a resolute manner, leading his men off after a short reply. In less than a minute, there were no more Luan Shui men left to be seen around the nearby streets, which now completely belonged to the Black Foxes! The previously downed men in black now were all jumping up with buoyant spirits. Feng Li and Gao Yuan were also in high spirits and quickly started working on the management of their newly obtained territories. Just then the “Fierce Fist”, played by Shi Mu, disappeared from everyone’s sight, in line with his enigmatic reputation.

……

Several days later, Shi Mu returned to his suburban manor with his new black armor 5 kilograms heavier than the previous one. He was stunned at the sight of the beautiful girl waiting at the center of the square.

“Shaoye, Miss Zhong came back here two days ago. Since I have no way to contact shaoye I could only let her stay here for a few nights.“ Zhang Suo, the manager of the manor, answered the unspoken question in a somewhat terrified voice.

If there was someone fully aware of Shi shaoye’s tricks, despite his young age, it would be none other than this manager himself. This time, he had put up the girl without gaining his master’s consent first, so he was worrying that he had made a terrible mistake.

“It’s all right, you can go now. I’ll talk to Miss Zhong myself.“ Waving off Zhang Suo, Shi Mu had fully prepared himself now; meanwhile the girl stood mute the

entire time, her head lowered.

Shi Mu made an inviting gesture as Zhang Suo left, leading the girl to his bedroom.

“Miss Zhong, why are you here now? Do you have something you wish to tell me?” Shi Mu turned to ask the girl in a rather serious manner.

“Young master Shi, please do not ask any more. Are you shorthanded here? If you are not averse to the idea, would you agree to have me work here as a servant? “ Zhong Xiu finally had built up the courage to look up at Shi Mu, biting her lips nervously.

“A servant girl? Miss Zhong, stop the nonsense. What happened to you at the Wu family, I remember them being quite polite to you that time. I would be very grateful if you could tell me what happened.” Shi Mu knitted his brows and slowly asked his question.

“An ugly girl like me? What do you think happened to me at the Wu’s? They let me in because they thought I had some special abilities, but nobody would accept me once they knew my condition. I’m penniless now, what could I do if I did not leave them as soon as possible? Should I have waited to be asked to leave? Believe me, I had no other place to go in Feng City except here. Or I wouldn’t have had the gall to return.” Zhong Xiu’s eyes shimmered with tears, her voice somewhat choking with sobs. After all, is there another young girl who can still keep cool at her father’s death and being swept out of her fiance’s house?

“I see, your father was right...Well, don’t mention the servant deal again, just stay here as you are. Although I wasn’t born with a lot of money, I can at least

provide you food and a place to sleep. Also, don't call me young master anymore, Brother Shi is fine. If ever you want to leave someday just leave me a note." There was still a last grain of stubbornness left on the girl's face, which reminded him of someone he used to hold dear. Moved by the sight, he decided to sweep the stubbornness away by answering her persuasively.

"Thank you so much, Brother Shi!" Filled with surprise and joy, the girl made a grateful gesture with a gentle pull at her dress [2]. During the following period Shi Mu called Zhang Suo in again to arrange a separate, clean room for Zhong Xiu.

.....

Meanwhile, at the Wu's manor in Feng City, some men, including the pale old man who had met Shi Mu at the gate, were plotting something about Zhong Xiu.

"Second brother, are you sure that guy, Zhong Ming, hadn't told the secret to his daughter? If anything's wrong, we'll suffer a big loss this time." An old man, apparently in his fifties, was speaking. He shared somewhat similar features with the pale man, but had a more imposing manner.

He was none other than the current owner of the house, the leader of the family and the oldest of the three Wu brothers. Furthermore, he was also the only full Houtian Warrior in his family.

"Eldest brother, if you don't believe me, why not believe that tool? It didn't respond to the girl at all, which proves that she has not awakened her blood yet. If so, why should a penniless girl be married into our Wu Family? Besides, although the Zhongs have sent us the tool, they would have died a hundred time if it had not been for our repeated help. So what does it matter, to cancel the

engagement?” The pale man, Wu Feng, answered disapprovingly.

“Exactly, eldest uncle. I shall never marry that ugly girl. The one I’m taking a fancy to is Jin Xiuzhen [3], one of the Jins...” The youth listening at their side interrupted with a grudge.

“Stop it, Hua Er! Do you have the place here to interrupt your elders?” The pale man reprimanded his son with much severity, which shut the rude youth’s mouth though apparently the latter did not like it.

“Hue Er, this is not a thing that can be decided according to your likes and dislikes. That girl, though her blood has not yet awakened, could still bring us blood warrior grandchildren. Even with this slim chance, I do not consider it proper to let her go, second younger brother. “Wu Liang continued in an easy manner.

“If Hua Er dislikes the girl’s looks, our Wu Xun wouldn’t mind taking her, so there’s no need to drive her away. “The third brother Wu Tong, who looked much younger than his two brothers, answered with a smile.

Notes:

[1] The leader of Luan Shui gang is saluting Shi Mu with his hands folded and raised in front of his chest. This is a saluting gesture made between men of the same social status to show respect in ancient China, while a kowtow is a salute to someone superior.

[2] Zhong Xiu’s gesture is a salute generally made by women to show respect to others.

[3] Xiu Zhen: “Xiu” means pretty and “Zhen” means precious in Chinese.

[4] Cross: This is an aggressive stance (though most dagger stances are). You pull back one are, and 'Cross' the other over your chest, allowing one to quickly carry out two attacks then retreat.

Chapter 13 - The Art of the Blazing Spear and the Knives of Sun and Moon

“But Wu Xun was born slow and lame! Though she is ugly, Zhong Xiu is actually quite proud, she would not be willing to marry him.” The pale man answered, shaking his head.

“Unwilling? Do you think she can have her way in our house? I’ll let her know the consequences once we have her in our hands.” Wu Tong sneered with his suggestion.

“Don’t you think I’ve thought of using force? Only that the girl was not alone when she arrived. She came with another guy whom I had investigated, and the result was that the boy had some form of relation with the Jin Family,” the pale man sighed.

“What? He’s a member of the Jin Family? Then we will have to let him off this time, same with the girl. If this matter is revealed and the Jin Family gets involved, we may even lose The Artifact to them. As for the matter of their being a bloodline warrior amongst the Zhong’s ancestors, it may have been fabricated by the Zhongs themselves to try and improve our image of them. Even if they did once have a bloodline warrior in their family, that’s no guarantee for the birth of another. We could just use that secret method, which uses lots of herbs, and test to see if she has a bloodline. However, that could be a waste of materials and the Artifact has more value to us.” Surprised at Shi Mu’s identity, the leader’s attitude soon changed.

Of course, the pale old man made no objection to the final decision. Then others dealt with some other issues before they all left the hall.

“Father, who’s the guy that escorted that ugly girl here? What relation does he

have with the Jin Family?" The youth puffed up and could not resist questioning his father after they came to another room.

"Oh, you mean the fellow named Shi Mu. Actually, he was not directly born into the Jin Family, but is only a remote relative. It's his step-mother that brought him into the family. You'd better dodge her in every way possible."

"His step-mother?" The arrogant youth was quite baffled.

"Yes, her name is Jin Zhen and she is Jin Xiuzhen's aunt. Her level far surpasses all her family, infact, she's as powerful as your eldest uncle. She's usually hidden from people's attention, but controls all the medicine business of the Jin Family, and has enormous power in the Family. Hua Er, why do you care so much about Shi Mu?"

"I heard that the ugly girl turned to Shi Mu after leaving our manor. I have no interest in her at all, but she did have an engagement with me and now she's with another man, which shames me a lot! Father, I'd like to teach that fellow a good lesson!" The arrogant youth, Wu Hua, snorted his resentment.

"Well, well, my darling son, it seems you've forgot what I taught you before. You've gotten to meet many Jin fellows while wooing Jin Yuzhen, haven't you? It's inconvenient for our Wu Family to deal with Shi Mu, but it's a different story for the Jins themselves. It has nothing to do with our Wu Family if the Jins take care of their own affairs." The pale old man affectionately offered his advice after perceiving his son's intentions.

"Thanks, father, I know what to do next." His father's instruction lifted his spirits immensely.

……

“You two idle punks, beaten by a small sect in a flash! “ On a fairly large practice ground, a youth in white coldly said this in a mocking tone, his eyes fixated on the two young men, both of whom were a few years older than him.

The two young men, one with a spear in hand and the other a whip around his waist, though now wearing blue shirts, were exactly the two who were easily beaten by Shi Mu in the previous fight between the Black Fox and Luan Shui gangs. The two experts stood in shock as they faced the youth, sweating profusely.

“Brother Wang, how…. how did you know about the fight?” The spear man stammered.

“Humph, did you plan to hide it from me? If I had not heard of your “feats” from the others in our club, I guess our club’s reputation would have rotted in secrecy then.” The youth in white snorted, questioning with a solemn face.

“Though we were beaten this time, we will get revenge. Our plan is to polish our skills under the instructor's’ guidance before we challenge Fierce Fist again, to save our club’s face.” The whip man answered with his quick wits, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

“So, you really got beaten so quickly? Tell me the details.” Obviously the youth in white was interested in the unknown opponent.

“Yes, Brother Wang, it went like this: we were not the first to fight the Fierce Fist; it was the leader of Luan Shui who...” The two young men hurried retold

their account of what happened that night.

“So I only narrowly made my escape when Leader Yu gave up and pleaded with him, or I would not be standing here if I really received that kick.”

“So this ‘Fierce Fist’ you are speaking of can really crack your spear with a stick, and pull Brother Li to his side with ease? His level in body tempering must have surpassed level ten. If not, he must be born with great strength. No wonder you two were no match for him at all. “

The youth in white, persuaded by the narration, eased off the two.

“That’s definitely true, younger brother. Nobody knows his real looks, and he reached the top seat as soon as he began to fight for the Black Fox. Although he has had many amazing feats, his skills seem to have grown better and better in the past half year. He’s even beaten the well-renowned Feng Jun of the Tian Lu club, breaking seven ribs with his bare fists and leaving him bedridden.” Brother Li echoed the youth’s words in a hurry.

“You mean even Feng Jun was defeated by Fierce Fist? He almost got enrolled into the Kai Yuan martial arts school last year! He certainly must have reached the tenth level in body tempering by now, and he has practiced the Iron Skinned Demon Art. You mean even under such conditions he was still badly beaten to the point of being bedridden? Now I’m even more interested in this mysterious guy!” The youth in white lost his anger; on the contrary, he gave a hearty smile unexpectedly.

“So brother Wang, you mean to...” The two young men were quite stunned at his sudden change of attitude.

“I don’t care whatever methods you use, but get me a face to face with this guy. I’m going to have a good fight with him, to see if he can take my Blazing Spear.” The youth in white answered unhesitatingly.

“But...”

“Sure, we shall definitely get you a face to face with him. “The spearman was still in some doubt, while Brother Li promised readily.

At the answer the youth in white left in satisfaction.

“Are we really going to call Fierce Fist out?” The spearman worriedly asked his companion.

“Don’t you know Brother Wang well? If we didn’t promise him he’d have definitely given us a beating. Take it easy, we only need to deliver a message to one of the Luan Shui guys. As to whether Fierce Fist would come or not is not our business.”

“Ha! I was being a fool! If Fierce Fist refuses to come, Brother Wang will definitely go for him personally, and our loss will be avenged.” The spearman suddenly understood Brother Li’s intentions.

“That’s right, the Art of the Blazing Spear, though it belongs to accomplished level, is one of the few arts that can be mastered by practitioners. Even that Fierce Fist should fall before that skill.” This idea fills the two of them with expectancy, they left the club in elated spirits.

.....

On the other hand, Shi Mu, the current Fierce Fist, was quite unaware of the coming trouble.

But he would not care much even if the news came to him. After all, such events had taken place more than once during the half year's period he had played the role of Fierce Fist. One such event, which was instigated by a gang, was when Feng Jun of Tian Lu club challenged him. Shi Mu smashed Feng Jun's armor in three strikes, using his Stone-Breaking Fist, thus leaving the challenger bedridden for nearly a month.

The reason why he began to play the role of Fierce Fist was a rather simple one. As soon as he joined the Feng Liu club, he was seen practicing his nearly accomplished Stone-Breaking Fist, which amazed Feng Li and Gao Yuan exceedingly, the two took the opportunity to approach him and eventually had their purpose fulfilled when Shi Mu was persuaded into taking the place of the recently deceased Fierce Fist, number one practitioner in Black Fox gang, who had just died of an illness. Shi Mu thus regularly gained large amount of income by protecting Black Fox gang from the threat of other ganga, the money supplying him with herbs for his frequent medicine baths.

At this moment, Shi Mu came into the city again, finding his way to a worn-down street within Luan Shui's territory. The street was no longer than a hundred meters, both sides bare without much business occuring. Even so, Shi Mu paid a visit there, entering a blacksmith's shop. He cast an expectant look on a burly fellow with bronze skin, his upper body unclothed while he looked over an illustrated paper, eyes wide open. Before long his face twisted.

"What? Even Master Ma is unable to make this pair of weapons?" Seeing his knit eyebrows, Shi Mu asked anxiously.

"Its design is so delicate, it needs a lot of energy to make, but given a longer

time I believe I can make it step by step. The key to the whole problem is the requested material, cold iron, which is extremely rare. I only have a small piece of it. Can I use other materials instead?" Hearing Shi Mu's question, the burly fellow had to remove his eyes from the paper and gave Shi Mu an answer after some thought.

"Certainly not, this pair of Sun and Moon knives will be of much use to me. I'm not expecting this weapon to cut through everything, just to not be destroyed by ordinary weapons. All right, I shall give you another five hundred silver notes, with which you should be able to get more cold iron from other blacksmiths? I want the pair made correctly and without flaws. As for the time limit, it will be as long as one full month. "Shi Mu answered decidedly.

Chapter 14 - Wang Tianhao

“No worries, your money is good here, come get your weapon in a month.“ Hearing this, the burly fellow promised, without giving it much thought, full of confidence.

“Then I’ll rely on you, Master Ma.“ As he made the promise, a trace of a smile played across his lips. He took a bulging bag of silver from his waist, and threw it in front of the blacksmith without hesitation.

This Master Ma was no ordinary blacksmith; he was the only person who knew the true identity of ‘Fierce Fist’, aside from Feng Li and Gao Yuan. Besides, rumour had it that he was a remote relative of Gao Yuan and was not only skilled at ironworking but also was more skilled at making weapons than most other blacksmiths in Feng city. The silver mask worn by ‘Fierce Fist’ was made by exactly this pair of professional hands; this was the reason why Shi Mu paid his money in advance without any misgivings - he just believed in the blacksmith’s talent. However, now that he had paid such an exorbitant fee, he was out of money.

Speaking of money, Shi Mu had earned a smaller part of it from his well-located ‘Yuan Xiang Restaurant’ [1], whose business surged after he began to bring animals he hunted from the nearby mountain, which in turn provided him with a pure income of at least a hundred silver notes each month. The other half of his income was gained by playing the role of ‘Fierce Fist’. As for the fields under his control, Shi Mu did not expect much from them, for the managing of the manor would cost at least most of the collected rent.

It seemed now that he could only resort to ‘that thing’, which he had been planning for a while. Thanks to his recently enhanced Gale Force Knife Art, he

could now produce seven cuts with one movement. Now he could manage - though with much difficulty - to shift the plan to an earlier date. To accomplish this was almost impossible for average practitioners: after all, the blood mutation[A] had not happened to his body again in the past half year; only now had he started to perceive the truth that it was almost impossible for any practitioner to do six cuts in a movement! The proof was his limited progress of doing one more cut in a movement. He had spent a few months and yet he had not made any more progress.

But this was already no ordinary progress; it was enough to dwarf all average practitioners. After all, even Li Canghai the instructor could only do nine with the aid of his real qi. Thinking about his plan, Shi Mu left the blacksmith's after some time and spent half a day making purchases at some other shops in the city before he at last returned to his temporary residence.

The moment he walked into the room, his expression changed, and he cast a brief glance at the window in a relaxed manner. The next moment, he strode there, fumbled under the half-opened window and found something which turned out to be a paper ball! Shi Mu seemed rather calm and, unfolding the paper dexterously, he laughed delightedly.

"Seems someone's begging me to take his money."

After thinking out loud, he stuffed the paper ball into his shirt, climbed into his bed and fell fast asleep.

he slept soundly and was refreshed when he woke at dusk. After taking out a big parcel from underneath the bed, he left his residence again.

One hour later, in the backyard of the fairly well-known Tian Wang Temple[2] in Feng City, Black Fox members were lying all over the ground, nearly covering

the whole yard. Every one of them was in agony, moaning and groaning, daring not to take up a single stick or knife from the great many scattered around them. Even Feng Li and Gao Yuan had been downed and were unable to move, one with a bleeding mouth, the other rolling in the dust, both gasping with astonishment at the youth standing before them, spear in hand. Though the two leaders of the Black Fox gang had heard of this opponent's name as well as his talents, his actual strength far exceeded their expectations, to the extent that he could have handled the two leaders - each quite accomplished in his body tempering - as well as the ten odd guards outside the yard, within a quarter of an hour.

"Wang Tianhao [3], we'd scarcely read your challenge note before you came here to fight, that's not fair!" Though he had painful aches all over his body, Gao Yuan still could not resist protesting.

"Humph! You seem to complain a lot! Well, you're good enough at shouting, I'm sorry. I was in a bad mood this afternoon, so I thought, the earlier I come here and meet your 'Fierce Fist' the better, isn't it! What? Do you have a problem?" The youth in white, though he looked rather graceful, answered in a cold, rude manner; lifting his foot he bashed Gao Yuan's head halfway into the ground in an instant. Gao Yuan fearfully struggled to get up from under his foot, but he was too weak and could only swear loudly.

Hearing the swear, the youth in white gave another heavy stomp without hesitation, which tortured Gao Yuan into a quiet anguish. Angered at his deed, though still terrified, Feng Li tried hard to rise and put up a desperate fight. Before he could stand up, a black shadow whizzed toward the youth at lightning speed.

The youth raised his eyebrows and lazily thrust forward with his spear, which was made of refined iron, only to find the black shadow exploding at the spear's handle with a thunderous boom, sending various splinters shooting out in all

directions. The black shadow, which destroyed the refined iron, was only a stone the size of a bowl! The youth's arms trembled, and the force of the blow made him step back. Then he tilted his head to the side, narrowly avoiding getting directly hit by another stone, though it left a cut on the side of his head, which oozed blood.

"It's you, the 'Fierce Fist'!"

The youth in white showed no concern for his wound at all, on the contrary, he fixed his eyes on the new comer - a black-clothed man with a silver mask - his blood racing with excitement.

"So you are the one that sent me the challenge note?" Shi Mu, who got a full view of the yard through the holes on his mask, asked the white-robed youth in slow voice.

"Can't you tell who I am?" The white-robed young man was somewhat surprised at Shi Mu's unawareness.

"Why? Should I know you?" Taking a glance at the challenger's spear, he strode over to the center of the yard. With a single foot he kicked at an iron knife, making it jump up right into his hand.

"Careful, second brother! This man, Tian Wanghao, is said to be the top practitioner in Feng City, and a son of the Wangs who raise bloodline warriors!" Feng Li tried to shout his warning before anything happened.

"Top Practitioner in Feng City! One of the Wang family's bloodline warriors!" Shi Mu's eyes lit up with surprise at the titles.

“Hehe, I did not proclaim to be the top practitioner, it's just that all who object to that title were defeated by me. As to the other title, though I’m one of the Wangs, I have not awakened my blood yet to become a bloodline warrior.“ The youth in white smiled with apparent pride.

Shi Mu’s face grew somewhat solemn at the answer. He could not help but ask, “excuse me, but why do you trifle with such a small gang?”

“Haha, to challenge the strong member, of course. Why else would I do this? Since you’ve come I’ll let these trash off to save my energy. Take my first attack!” Wang Tianhao leapt up, after a loud laugh, and shook his hands while grasping the spear, rushing right at Shi Mu, attempting a sudden stab. Shi Mu only felt his sight blur for a moment before he saw five glaring spear tips right in front of him, moving right towards him.

At the fierce attack Shi My snorted, and, with a simple shake of his arms, his iron knife transformed into five black shadows that struck forward, stirring several *swish* sounds. Once the five spear tips met the knife shadows they were smashed and vanished immediately, but that was not the end: with a glitter of a cold light a sixth spear tip appeared as if from nowhere, slithering forward at Shi Mu’s forehead like a viper. This attack, whether its speed or angle, was so unexpected that it caught Shi Mu unguarded, leaving him no chance to defend with his iron knife at all. So he could only throw away the knife and take a step back with a loud shout. Meanwhile, his two arms shot forward with blurring speed.

There came a dull sound, and Tian Wanghao was shocked.

Shi Mu’s hands, both in black gloves, had gripped the spear tip tightly like two

giant iron anvils; the spear had been stopped half an inch before his chest!

Seeing this, Tian Wanghao gave a sneer. ‘Fierce Fist’ was an idiot if he believed that a single pair of palms could catch his spear. So, before Shi Mu’s next movement, he twisted the tightly held spear abruptly before giving it another forcible pull backward to his side.

There came a loud drone when the youth found his spear handle made of refined iron shaking violently, but the tip was still pressed between Shi Mu’s hands, not moving an inch. From the handle a burning pang crept on, stinging his palm. He sucked in a cold breath, knowing that it was now his own strength which rubbed off his skin.

Just then Shi Mu, at the other end of the spear, extended his fingers to hold the tip even tighter with one hand, while pounding at the handle heavily with the other rapidly, his fist clenched. With a clear sound, the iron spear, its length over one zhang, started to bend in the middle. Meanwhile, another large force rushed along the handle toward Tian Wanghao, welling up from his wrists and rushing onto his arms.

“Shit, this guy is freakishly strong!”

Though he already knew of the Fierce Fist’s great strength, the idea that he could break iron with brute force never occurred to him once. He let out a loud swear, then stomped heavily on the ground with one foot before shooting backward, releasing the spear handle from his hand.

Boom! The handle smashed hard onto the ground at the brute force, creating a mud pit the size of a basin.

The youth steadied himself back on his feet, but seeing such a sight, his face grew extremely embarrassed. “Peng!” Shi Mu threw the already bent iron handle - now looking like a huge bow - on the ground, then strode over to his opponent.

“I give up! Your strength is unfathomable, and I’m without my weapon. Now I finally understand the thing my seniors mentioned, about your ten-fold strength. Now that I’ve seen a muscular guy like you, whom I’m not certain to defeat even with the full power of my Blazing Spear But it’ll be another story in two or three months.” The white-robed youth waved off Shi Mu’s pursuing challenge with an unexpected laugh.

“You started the fight, now you want to stop it! Do you think you can always have the final say?” Shi Mu refused in a cold, low voice; after a shake of his shoulders he was getting ready to teach him a good lesson with his brutal fists.

“I’ll compensate you with money for wasting your time!”

The answer obviously stunned Shi Mu. It was amusing and unexpected, which made Shi Mu begin to question his own hearing.

“I’ll pay you, here’s a small bag of golden beans, more than enough to cover all of their medical expenses. But let’s make it clear, I’m not afraid of you, Fierce Fist! It’s only that I know I don't have the strength to beat you right now. It’s not worthwhile to fight you with all my strength. Being covered with sweat is not befitting of the image of the top warrior in Feng City.“ The youth in white leaned backward, his hand lifted to throw out a cotton bag the size of a palm.

It was the first time Shi Mu had met such a narcissist, so he could only stare in mute amazement. But just then, the youth in white turned around, running at full speed, stomping midway to produce a bolstering force, with which his whole

body directly flew over the wall two zhang high, only leaving his faint voice floating from the other side of the wall,

“Haha, remember, Fierce Fist, I’m Wang Tianhao, the one destined to defeat you in the future.”

Then there was silence.

Notes:

[1] Yuan Xiang Restaurant: “Yuan Xiang” means a faraway fragrance, indicating the restaurant’s high level.

[2] Tian Wang Temple: “Tian Wang” means “the lord of the heaven”.

[3] Wang Tianhao: “Wang” is the family name, while “Tian” means heaven and “Hao” means the vast heaven, the two together making a given name.

[A] This is referring to the enhancement he got from the Pearl Girl in chapter 2. (He thinks it's a mutation from the dark blood)

Chapter 15 - Jin Yuzhen

By the time Feng Li had helped Gao Yuan back to his feet, Shi Mu had already picked up the cotton bag and unclasped it to glance inside. Seeing the contents, he showed an expression of obvious satisfaction.

“Second Brother, it’s all thanks to your timely help, that my brothers didn’t all suffer further at Wang Tianhao’s hands.” Feng Li gave Shi Mu a bitter smile, his face contorted in pain.

“That’s right, we were lucky to have Second Leader in time.”

“That proud bastard Wang Tianhao could not even stand our Second Leader’s two strikes before he begged for mercy.”

“Yeah, our Second Leader should have that title of top practitioner in Feng City.”

All the other Black Fox members, now fully back to their feet, were so anxious to offer their flattery that they ignored their aching bodies. Every one of them was immersed in an atmosphere of celebration as if their spirits were twice heightened. After all, they heard clearly that their mysterious second leader had just defeat the so-called top practitioner in Feng City, which naturally meant that as long as no accomplished warriors were involved their Black Fox gang could rule over all the small gangs.

“Well, I’ve got other things to do, so let’s call it a day then.” Unmoved by the rapturous crowd Shi Mu took his leave with a wave, not forgetting to stuff the

bag into his shirt.

“Hold on, Second Brother, Third Brother and I still want to have a word with you.“ Upset by his sudden leaving, Feng Li called to him in a hurry.

“You have more to talk about? Well, then I’ll stay a little longer.“ Tilting his head and giving it some thought, Shi Mu promised readily.

This made Feng Li quite happy, thus turned to tell his subordinates, “Go and deal with your wounds now.”

The Black Foxes were not dense and realized that their three leaders were about to have an important discussion, so they all retired one after another. Judging from their excited looks, surely the scene where Shi Mu defeat Tian Wanghao was deeply printed on their minds and would soon be circulating among their fellow members.

“You two were really unkind this time, the opponent had such powerful strength, but you didn’t even inform me of that! Or you thought that if I knew I wouldn’t come?” Shi Mu questioned them angrily.

“Brother Shi, please forgive us this time! It’s definitely our fault, we won’t let you go without being compensated.” An embarrassed expression came onto Feng Li’s face at Shi Mu’s bluntness.

“But please do believe us Brother Shi, this time we did have difficulties informing you of the details: on the one hand, we had no idea the challenger was Wang Tianhao and were only guessing that some proud guy of Jin Gang club was asking for trouble; on the other, Wang Tianhao caught us completely

unprepared, leaving us no time to do some investigations on our opponent." Gao Yuan lost no time providing a convincing reason.

"If so, then it is excusable. Otherwise, I would really consider not working with your Black Foxes anymore. Well, what did you two want to tell me?" Hearing the explanation, Shi Mu nodded, the tensions between the two party easing a little.

"Thank you for your understanding! Brother Shi, do we have the chance to have you as our real leader?" Feng Li first signed with relief, then asked with a solemn face.

The question did not come as a surprise to Shi Mu; on the contrary, he asked lightly, "So you want me to take the position of the actual 'Fierce Fist', the second leader of the Black Fox?"

"Not the second, but the first, the real boss! Give me a nod and I'll call all the guys together to hand over the top seat to you. " Feng Li gave a ready answer to Shi Mu.

"Big Brother Feng, that's not what we'd decided!" Gao Yuan was taken aback at such a rash promise.

"Third Brother, haven't you seen that Black Foxes will still exist without the two of us while without Brother Shi's help it will be vanquished within a month by other Feng city gangs. The Black Foxes territory has grown nearly four times its original size, do you still think we have the ability to manage such a big gang?" Feng Li gave a forced smile while telling the truth, which rendered Gao Yuan mute, only able to resist in his heart.

“I’ll only say sorry one time; I’ve got no intentions of getting involved in gangs and I can only promise you my limited cooperation. Brother Feng, you should clearly know about my ambition. I’ve devoted myself to the path of martial arts, other things will only be a waste of time.” Shi Mu refused after thinking about it quietly.

“Brother Shi, are you sure you don’t need more time to ponder over the offer? I know your great ambition, but there will be much more difficulty on the road of a martial artist than you have imagined. However, at this moment, your one nod will bring hundreds of fellows at your service, don’t you think this is a bargain?” Although in despair Feng Li still decided to try his luck a second time, in a more compelling tone.

“That won’t tempt me so you should just drop the idea. Also, the cooperation between us will end as soon as I manage to acquire qi-sensing.“ Shaking his head resolutely, Shi Mu turned and left, leaving Feng Li and Gao Yuan in a dead silence, their hope gone.

On the other hand, Shi Mu did not immediately return home but instead went to Liu Feng Martial Arts club directly after packing up his disguise. He did not leave the club until after he went through another repetition of the devastating exercise - the striking of iron sticks at acupuncture points all over his body - after which he left for his city residence with a contorted face and bruised body, bearing insufferable pains.

As he limped past a certain flashy restaurant, he was quite unaware he was being pointed at by two young girls on the third story.

“Yu Huan, is that one your elder step brother? Why he looks like a wretched cripple! Can it be that he was bullied by some strong guys in a club?” An attractive girl in a yellow blouse made this observation, sitting opposite her, was

a glamorously dressed girl the same age.

“Step-brother? He’s my father’s natural son, so he’s my blood brother!” The glamorously dressed girl was exactly Shi Mu’s younger sister ‘Shi Yu Huan’, whom he had met only once but who now defended him from condemnation. Yu Huan was obviously irritated by her companion’s remarks and retorted with a solemn face after moving her eyes from Shi Mu passing form.

“I’m telling the truth! Apart from Auntie Seven and you, nobody accepts him in our family. See his tattered looks, he hasn’t got the makings of a warrior, has he? If so, it’s a shame to give him our only Qi Ling pill!” The girl in yellow blouse made a reply full of haughtiness.

“Humph, I know there’s some plot or why should you be so nice to invite me here for dinner? Seems someone’s been bought by Uncle Five to be a persuader.” Shi Yu Huan responded with a sardonic snort, perceiving her companion’s purpose.

“Cousin Yu Huan, you are wrong this time. It’s not Uncle Five that asked me here, but his son Jin Tian. Jin Tian was sure that so long as you persuade Shi Mu to give up the pill then your mother wouldn’t say no. Also, Shi Mu will get a lot of compensation for it.“ The girl in yellow blouse laughed at the missed guess pridefully.

“Though I’ve only met Shi Mu once, I can sense that he is not someone to be persuaded, plus my mother feels sorry for his mother, so she won’t let the Jins bully him without taking any action. Go and tell Jin Tian to give up his plotting!” Shi Yu Huan answered bluntly.

“Well, all right, I’m only doing what I was paid to do. I’ll deliver your words to

Jin Tian," the girl in yellow blouse was unexpectedly easy to handle; she waved off the topic and did not mention it again.

"Judging from your temper, you won't do it unless paid a huge sum." Shi Yu Huan curled her lips, apparently losing her interest in the various delicious dishes on the table.

"That's for sure, or who could he turn to except me? I'm the closest to you in our family! By the way, see my new jade hairpin? What do you think of it?" Jin Yuzhen did not care about the aborted persuasion at all; she just turned to the new topic in high spirits, producing an extremely exquisite jade hairpin from her sleeve.

Seeing the jade hairpin, it was Shi Yu Huan's turn to be surprised.

"That's quite strange! If my memory doesn't fail me, you rarely buy jewelry, always proud of the beauty you were born with."

"What's so strange about it? Isn't there a saying, 'A girl will doll herself up for him who loves her'!" Jin Yuzhen replied with a thin smile.

"For him who loves her? You don't mean Wu Hua, do you?" Shi Yu Huan was stunned, her eyes wide open.

"Wu Hua, that good-for-nothing stalker? How is that possible? I mean Wang Tianhao of the Jin Gang club, the son of the Wangs who have bloodline warriors!" Jin Yuzhen answered without thinking.

"Wang Tianhao, the one at level ten in body tempering, and the top

practitioner of Feng city, known for his accomplished art of the Blazing Spear? Is he going to visit our Jin Family?" Shi Yu Huan's eyes were alight with expectancy after hearing the name.

"Mind you, Shi Yu Huan, this Wang Tianhao's my target, don't you think about competing with me!" Seeing her companion's excitement, Jin Yuzhen became somewhat depressed, lacking in self-confidence.

"Nonsense, I only look forward to seeing with my own eyes if the legendary Blazing Spear deserves its reputation! His title only remains because we experts from the big clans do not pick a fight with him, or how could he get that title of top practitioner so easily?" Shi Yu Huan gave her companion a disapproving stare.

"You tomboy! Well, whatever you say, Wang Tianhao is brilliant enough, plus his blood is of the Wang Family. This time, our grandfather invited him to our manor personally, so he must be thinking of a marriage. So please don't compete with me when he visits. By the way, are you sure you want to take your brother's side this time, no matter what happens? I'm afraid Jin Tian won't give up the pill so easily." Speaking of the coming marriage, Jin Yuzhen cracked a hearty smile, her face lit up with happiness.

"Go and send Jin Tian a word, even if Shi Mu sucks in skills he's still my brother by blood. It's all right if Jin Tian tries some upright ways. but if ever he harbours any evil plans I'll break his legs right before the enrollment test to Kai Yuan Martial Arts School." At her company's question, Shi Yu Huan's delicate face turned as cold as ice and frost.

Jin Yuzhen pursed her lips seeing Shi Yu Huan's stern face while defending her brother's honour to such an extent.

Shi Mu was quite unaware that his blood sister view of him had lessoned. Once he returned to his residence, he immediately immersed himself in the boiling water of his medicine bath.

Covering his face with a hot towel and leaning against the basin's edge, Shi Mu closed his eyes tightly, his mind experiencing upheavals while he rehearsed his long-harboured plan thoroughly again.

"The golden hamster."

Breaking the silence, suddenly he murmured to himself.

Chapter 16 - The Golden Hamster

Three days later, early in the morning.

With a huge parcel, half the height of an average man, Shi Mu trotted by himself to the rolling mountains where he had hunted wild animals before. After climbing over seven or eight hilltops without taking a rest, he eventually reached the fringes of a bamboo forest, which was verdant in an unusual way, shining with an emerald green lustre.

It took him a full hour to fully investigate the bamboo forest, whose area amounted to a hundred mu [1]. He found the traces left by his target. Only then did he lay down his huge parcel, fumbling to take out a rather small shovel to dig a pit in the nearby ground.

But strangely enough, his movements seemed excessively cautious, as if he was afraid of attracting attention. In this way, the pit, several zhang in depth [2], was not finished until noon.

This done, Shi Mu then produced some bottles and jars from his parcel, and dropped some unknown powder and fluids into the pit, then covered it fully with twigs. He added many bamboo leaves to the surface before finally finishing his arrangement by scattering some mud onto the pit.

In this way, a delicate trap was finished.

Observing his arrangement from every angle, Shi Mu seemed quite satisfied and content, a trace of a smile flashing across his face.

The arrangement of the trap was learned from Zhong Gong Mi Dian - the secret arts of the Zhong clan - along with the making of the power and the fluids; without them, even if he could produce seven cuts in one movement, his confidence of obtaining his target would definitely be reduced.

After looking up to the sun high up in the sky, he gauged the time and fumbled out a paper ball without hesitation, which, when opened, revealed a golden colored dough. He then poured all the fluids contained in a small bottle onto the mysterious dough. Immediately, an overpowering smell, with an indescribable fragrance, wafted through the air.

“Hopefully this secret bait recipe from the old hunter in the city is useful, or the money I paid for the material, as much as thirty liang [3] of silver, will have been wasted, ” Shi Mu murmured to himself as he shook his wrist, sending the golden dough down into the center of the trap.

All done, he took out a nigh-black wooden knife and an immensely large cloak of emerald green and covered himself and then threw his parcel behind a huge rock. Going back to his trap, he lowered his body to the ground and lay prone beside the trap, being as still as he could be.

Seen from afar, there was complete flat ground where the trap was made, nothing abnormal could be seen.

Lying still on the ground, Shi Mu held his breath, the warm air puffed out of his nostrils so thin as to be invisible. Staring hard at the bamboo wood, he barely blinked his eyes while the information he had obtained flashed through his mind again.

The golden hamster, also known as the medicine-hunting hamster, was a unique animal found only in Quan Zhou, and was a variation of the common piebald mountain mouse which would bite its brood siblings to death as soon as it was born; in its third month, golden fur begins to appear on its back, after which it has the ability to find and take some herbs needed to advance to a higher level [4]. One year later, when the golden hamster reaches its mature age, its talent would be awakened, allowing it to find without difficulty some rare herbs. Hence, possessing a tamed golden hamster equaled living with a born master of herbs who could find rare medicine. However, though worth an enormous sum, the hamster was rarely seen in the market: few would sell their medicine-hunting masters even if they did have one. Shi Mu only found one accidentally when he chased after a wild fox all the way to the verge of the bamboo forest and was overjoyed by finding one of these hugely famous animals in Quan Zhou.

But he was too cautious to take immediate action at that time. Though the golden hamster did not belong to the rank of holy animals, it did deceive many by dashing at a lightning speed to seemingly vanish into thin air, its shadows invisible. Owing to its inherent vigilance, if not caught in one strike, it would be nearly impossible to catch it with a second attempt.

Therefore, during this period, every time Shi Mu came to the hilltop for practice, he would always come out of his way to observe this gold hamster’s routine. Now he had progressed to the point of being able to do seven cuts in one movement with his Thirteen Series of Gale Force Knife Art, plus with the trap learned from Zhong Gong Mi Dian as well as the bait-making method, he finally set his mind to putting his plan into practice today.

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Exactly when Shi Mu had finished his trap to hunt for the golden hamster, inside the hall of Jin Gang martial arts club in Feng City, a sandy-haired elder was angrily reproaching Wang Tianhao who stood in front of him,

“What tricks are you playing this time? I asked you to find a girl to marry of the Jin Family, not to pick a fight with the Juniors of the Jin Family, as well as beat them!”

“Uncle Xu, how could you blame me for beating them? It was exactly the juniors who asked me instruct their arts; it’s only that I somewhat lost control of myself. But speaking of the Jins’ skills, apart from Shi Yu Huan, not a single one of them was able to take my first strike. A pack of good-for-nothing idlers, wasting half of my day!” Wang Tianhao stretched himself with a yawn, displaying an air of complete carelessness.

“You bastard, the Jin Family is our Wang Families ally in Quan Zhou, who told you to strike them instead of looking at the girls? Well, well, now I’ve got to clear up your messy situation myself, by going to their manor to apologize to their head . From now on, you just stay here, practising your Blazing Spear. Before accomplishing the next stance of the Blazing Spear Art, you are confined to the club!” Staring at Wang Tianhao with his eyes wide open, the Elder Xu ordered him, feeling it was rather difficult to handle his nephew.

“I don’t care about being confined at all. After all, the day of competition only half a month away, so I just need time to save my energy. “ Wang Tianhao answered in a cheerful and excited manner.

“Humph, so long as you act inattentive, I have no hope in you at all. “ Uncle Xu snorted.

“Why? You mean there are other powerful people in the other clubs?” Wang Tianhao sensed some overtones from his uncle’s reprimand, his spirits instead immensely elated.

“You crazy kid! Guess you’d lose sleep if I don’t tell you.“ His nephew’s respond made him rather at a loss at whether to cry or laugh.

“Hehe, Uncle Xu knows me so well.“ Wang Tianhao spoke demurely, his looks now compliant and sweet.

“As far as I know, this time the Fei Hong club has asked some genius to help them change their misfortune of always coming in last place. They say that, though the guy is not a blood warrior, he has an inborn body of ‘solid earth’”. Uncle Xu answered, now with a solemn face.

“The body of ‘solid earth’? Is is the legendary body well-known for its defense force, immune to bodily harm?” Now Wang Tianhao was surprised indeed.

“Hehe, as you know, it’s rather difficult to handle. Judging from your current skills, I don’t think you would be able to break his defense with your Blazing Spear. “ Uncle Xu replied with a sneer.

“Maybe I really can’t break the defense of a ‘solid earth’ body, but I know a practitioner in our city who can definitely do that. If he takes part in this competition then that will be something worthwhile to see. ” Wang Tianhao paused for a brief thought, then laughed heartily as something came to his mind.

“Oh? You mean the ‘Fierce Fist’ you mentioned the other day?” Uncle Xu’s eyes now were alight with excitement.

“Exactly, I’ve seen his skills with my own eyes. His strength can reach at least a thousand jin [5], or he wouldn’t have snapped the iron spear with his bare hands.“ Wang Tianhao answered without hesitation.

“Well, it seems true according to what you said. This Fierce Fist could really confront the ‘solid earth’ body to some extent. But it’s a shame competitors are only practitioners under the age of eighteen. If ‘Fierce Fist’ is already the leader of a small gang, he must be over the eighteen then.“ Uncle Xu was quite sure of his reasoning.

“That’s true, but if he’s my age then I’ll definitely fight him with all my strength, if only for the title of the city’s top practitioner.“ Nodding his head, Wang Tianhao said in a proud tone.

Hearing such an ambitious proclamation, Uncle Xu was speechless; he was proud of his nephew in every way, except his arrogance; he always readily showed off.

.....

Whiz! Whiz!

Seven black knife shadows rolled and vanished; after smashing several invisible shadows of light yellow, the knife finally returned to its owner in the shadows.

A little golden animal, the size of a fist, fell from mid air, after letting out some squeaks, right into the huge pit waiting below. The trap was already half revealed.

Seeing his sudden sneak attack hit the target, Shi Mu was too overjoyed to hold his wooden knife. Throwing it into mid air and grabbing it with one hand, a huge silk net was thrown out to cover the surface of the pit.

"Peng!"

As the little golden animal tried to dash out of the pit, it bumped against the silk net and could only drop down into the bottom again. After some ten odd attempts, the golden animal's jump grew powerless, then no sound came out of the pit again.

Only then did Shi Mu approach the pit with great caution, stealing a quick glance into it: the little golden animal, now weak, was no longer able to move it body as it was glued to the colorful fluids at the bottom.

At the sight, Shi Mu finally set his mind at rest. He turned around to a large nearby rock, fumbling in his package for a iron wire cage, and rushed toward the pit with it excitedly. But as he turned, he blanched at what he saw.

Beside the pit, which should be known to no one, was a blue-robed man with a sword over his shoulder, and the little golden animal was already in his hand struggling fiercely, the man, observing it from every angle, rocking his head back and forth: the little one should definitely be the golden hamster previously glued unconscious to the bottom of the pit.

"Elder warrior, I believe the golden hamster should be mine!" Seeing the golden hamster in his hand, Shi Mu's heart leaped to his throat, but he still managed to contain his anxiety with a deep breath, asking politely.

“Well, young boy, do you consider me a thief grabbing your prey?” The blue-robed man turned his body, said in a cold voice.

Shi Mu could make out that, though apparently in his thirties, and a Taoist priest, his eyebrows had grown all the way to his temples, and his eyes were as sharp as a knife, showing a fierce countenance, murderous and brutal.

“I can tell in a glance that senior must be an outstanding warrior, but this golden hamster...it was caught by me with all my effort...” Scarcely had Shi Mu braced himself to persuade when he felt an unusual sense of strange coldness rushing unto his face; immediately he was frozen, as though in ice, his whole body cold and numb.

This enigmatic blue-robed man had resorted to violent treachery in no time.

“Why, the notorious Cold Sword, intending to kill a mere practitioner for his treasure, I wonder who would believe in this story if I made it public...”

Just as Shi Mu was frozen to stillness, nearly falling unconscious, a heavenly, melodious voice came to his ears.

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[1] - this is about ⅔ of a 1/10 of a km (0.066666 km) [not very big, but it takes him an hour because he is thoroughly searching it]

[2] - I’m going to guess this pit is about 10 meters deep (a zhang is ~3.333….

meters)

[3] - this is apparently equivalent to 50 grams. (which doesn't seem like a lot, but we are talking about pure silver... *shrugs*)

[4] - This hamster apparently has the ability to advance to the level of Holy Beast after eating a certain amount of rare herbs…? [I'm not quite clear on this, there is more in the next chapters about this, but not what exactly it has to do with the herbs]

[5] - This is around 500 kg.

Chapter 17 - The Demon Witch of Tian Yin[1]

A rustle came from the bamboo forest, and with the sound, a nymph-like young girl in a white dress wandered out. She looked at most sixteen, but her figure was gracefully slender, her breasts bulging from her blouse, her feet as white as pure snow, her dark black hair tumbling until her waist; as her large bright eyes blinked, beautiful glances of light flashed from her liquid orbs, and a seducingly amorous fragrance could be scented all over her body, which not a single man would be able to resist.

Seeing this barefoot nymph-like girl, the Taoist priest shouted harshly as if he'd seen a hideous snake or scorpion, "The Demon Witch, I'd never thought you'd still be tailing me? Do you really think my cold sword would shrink before your witchcraft?"

"Cold Sword [2], you should be the one most clear of my reason for following you. Dear poor sister Lan Yun[3], she was so into you; how can you be so at ease while she lays under the ground, unable to rest in peace?" The beautiful girl's eyes blinked, clear and shining, as if heavenly streams. She walked steadily but slowly towards the middle-aged Taoist priest.

"You witch, I've told you a hundred times, Yun Er's death has nothing to do with me. She's only died because our appointment venue was leaked out. " The middle-aged Taoist's face twisted with fierceness, he swished out his sword, reflecting cold blue light, and roared at the girl.

"I don't care if you are truthful or not, but you did make the promise to live and die with Yun Er, so I'm only here to help you fulfill your oath. You don't have to thank me", the barefoot girl said this with a light smile, while raising her sleeves, a short ruler, as white as jade, appearing from inside.

The ruler was no longer than a half chi [4], two cun[5] in width, but there were wisps of white fog coiling up around the surface, looking extremely mysterious.

“The...the Legendary Ice Ruler, isn’t it your Tian Yin Sect’s ultimate weapon? You lunatic, stealing such a sacred weapon just for a dead woman? Aren’t you afraid of your sect’s seniors? They’ll render you incapable of martial arts once they find out!” The Taoist priest had prepared to put up a desperate fight, but his face froze at the ruler, only stammering the weak threat.

“Well, that’s not your business then. Let’s waste no more time; I’ll send you to meet Yun Er now.” The barefoot girl only gave him a faint smile while shaking her ruler slightly. Suddenly the nearby air stirred invisibly and white fog appeared, rolling out of thin air; from its swirl, the fog quickly turned into white flowers as big as bowls.

“Kill me? Stop dreaming!”

In a flash. the Taoist priest flung the little animal out of his hand at the girl unexpectedly, while he stomped hard onto the ground and shot himself backward, right into mid air, before finally vanishing like a giant bird into the nearby dark woods.

“Witch, I’ll tell about your theft of the Legendary Ice Ruler, see what your sect will do to you.” The vile oath came from the woods, the last words of the oath already growing faint as he fled deep into forest. Obviously, he had already gone far away.

“Idiot man, that a mere fake should have scared you out your wits! But my Soul-Hunting Incense has got you now, you can never run out of its power

range…. Why, this golden hamster has opened its holy pupils!” The barefoot girl lifted her slender fingers, catching the golden hamster with ease, and was just about to ridicule the Taoist priest when her eyes turned alight with surprise: just as she lowered her head and looked briefly at the little animal in hand, she found something out of her expectation.

“Well, I was wondering why Cold Sword would grab an ordinary golden hamster without scruples. It turned out to be a holy-pupiled hamster, soon to become a holy animal!” Taking back her jade ruler, the barefoot girl held the golden animal at her breast, stroking it tenderly, full of affection.

The mouse-looking golden animal trembled its tiny green eyes the entire time, while it dared not to move its body as it was stroked by the ten slender fingers.

“Oh yes, there’s another little guy. “ After fussing over the golden hamster for a while, the barefoot girl suddenly found Shi Mu as still as ice, standing nearby, his body sporting a thin layer of white frost and only his eyes being able to move, with which he was staring fixedly at the barefoot girl.

She giggled and wandered over to Shi Mu at an unhurried pace.

Shi Mu’s eyes rolled slowly with difficulty as the girl’s figure moved, without turning away once.

“Well that’s funny.” Seeing this, the barefoot girl cracked a smile, a trace interest shown on her face. Suddenly, she deliberately swung her body left and right.

Though unable to move, Shi Mu’s eyeballs began to move left and right to trace the girl, a hilarious sight indeed.

“Haha, that’s so funny!” The barefoot girl halted in front of Shi Mu, with the little animal at her breast, she giggled demurely, her back arched, as if her stomach was aching due to all the laughing.

The girl laughed for a good while before she straightened her back again, her sleeves raised while a puff of white fog rushed out and quickly seeped into Shi Mu’s body .

Then a surprising scene occurred.

The frost on Shi Mu’s body began to melt at such a rapid speed that even the naked eye could see the process clearly.

With a loud thud, Shi Mu fell down heavily into the mud, so hard that he could not manage to raise his back and only slightly raise his head.

Then he suddenly saw a pair of slender feet, like lotus rhizomes[A], her ten toenails painted bright red, as seducing as fresh petals.

“Beautiful?”

The owner of the slender feet asked, leisurely.

Shi Mu’s entire face blushed at the question; suddenly a strength grew inside him, quite strangely, which even made him rise from the ground slowly. He then studied the extremely beautiful face with strange looks unknown to himself before.

“Well little guy, you know, if you were two or three years older and looked at me in this way, I’d have gouged your eyes right away. “ The barefoot girl rolled her beautiful eyes, the little animal in her breast, made a horrified squeak.

“What’s your name?” Finally Shi Mu opened his mouth; his voice, though somewhat husky, was calm enough, to the girl’s surprise.

“Do you think I’ll tell you?” The girl was stunned for a moment, then answered with a grin.

“I can only go to your family and propose to you after knowing your name.“ Shi Mu’s fixed his eyes on the girl; there was a small amount of passion shown on his face.

“What, say that again? I didn’t hear you quite clearly.“ The barefoot girl thought she must heard him wrongly. She opened her beautiful eyes widely and asked in great surprise.

“I’d ask you to be my wife. I shall make you my wife.“ Shi Mu answered without hesitation, his looks determined and unchanged.

“What nonsense...Do you know my age or my identity to speak such a daring thing?” The barefoot girl, though she had always been cruel and merciless and her mind shrewd and deep, was caught off guard by the youth’s words.

“Or are you already engaged? Or in your forties, fifties?“ Shi Mu asked, knitting his eyebrows.

“Of course not, and I’m only in my twenties...Wait, why should I tell you so...You...” The barefoot girl answered subconsciously first, only realizing her bluntness with anger and shame.

“In your twenties, and not yet engaged with anyone, that’s perfect. No matter what you are, I fell in love with you at first sight. I’ll definitely make you my wife.“ Hearing the answer Shi Mu relaxed and said earnestly.

“Haha, you like me so you think you can marry me? Even if you were an Houtian Warrior, I wouldn’t agree, let alone a mere Practitioner...Well, it’s only a waste of time to speak with you. To tell you the truth, I don’t believe at all in a man’s honey-sweet words, and I’ve decided to never marry anyone in my life.“ The girl finally resumed her ordinary state to some extent, then giggled, but meanwhile evaded Shi Mu’s fervent looks.

“My mother used to tell me, if you ever met a girl you really liked, you must let her know as soon as possible, so as not to miss a perfect marriage. Here I, Shi Mu, vow seriously to marry this girl in front of me in my life; if ever I eat my word, I shall be pierced by ten thousand arrows and be cut to death by axes.“ Shi Mu’s eyes never once moved from the girl, his eyes not blinking and his hands raised. The deadly oath was made.

But whether or not it was a coincidence, just as Shi Mu finished his last word, there came booming thunders from the sky gratuitously.

The barefoot girl opened her red lips slightly, her beautiful eyes gazing at Shi Mu, but was unable to speak a word. Only after a long while did she burst into a charming laughter.

“That’s...so...so funny! Me! The Demon Witch of Tian Yin Sect, should be

proposed to one day, and that too, by a teenage boy! Good, good, don't say I left you no chance; if you can become a Xiantian Saint[C] before you reach the age of thirty, then come for me in Wan Long mountains[6], Tian Yin Sect, I'll tell you my real name then. And take this, it's the payment for the holy animal."

Holding her laughter, the girl straightened her back and threw a bottle to Shi Mu, then crumbed something in her sleeves.

"Pu!" A sound was heard.

A strong wind suddenly blew in the nearby air, and white clouds appeared to lift the girl to the height of over ten zhang[B], sending her floating to the faraway sky, as she left Shi Mu with only a faint, melodious last warning,

"I'll tell you another thing, the holy animal was faking unconsciousness that time. If it was not caught by Cold Sword before it fled, you may really have returned empty handed."

From the moment the barefoot girl threw the bottle, to the one when she flew off with the animal, Shi Mu only experienced a split second; she left so soon as if she was fleeing from something...

"She really flew...The Demon Witch of Tian Yin..."

Shi Mu stood dumbstruck, frozen facing the direction of the girl's disappearance, and looked into the distance for a long while. Then he murmured to himself at a loss.

After a long time he finally came to himself. Looking at the bottle and the

previously made trap, he smiled to himself bitterly.

"'Try to steal a chicken, only to end up losing the rice', that's the saying, isn't it? Hundreds of silver and the animal, all gone."

But then he could not help but become curious of the content inside the bottle.

After all, the girl was so enigmatic, the thing she gave him should not be ordinary.

Shi Mu only gave it a brief thought before he opened the bottle, thinking of it as his possession now, and a roundish, white coloured pill rolled out, swirling, as big as his thumb, and silver light seemed to glitter faintly on its surface.

"Qi Ling pill!"

Shi Mu cried out involuntarily after making out the pill's appearance.

Notes:

[1] The Devil With of Tian Yin: The original spelling in Chinese is Tian Yin Cha Nv, which means the beautiful girl of Tian Yin Sect, while "Tian Yin" is the name of the sect. "Tian" means heaven, "Yin" has the multiple meaning of 'negative', 'female', 'shade', 'cloudiness', 'sinister', 'of the ghosts' world', *etc.* So the translator here decides to adopt the title of "the Devil Witch of Tian Yin", since the word 'witch' carries as complex meanings as 'yin', indicating the girl's viciousness and beauty at the same time.

[2] The Cold Sword: it is both the man’s name and his skill’s name.

[3] Lan Yun: a girl’s name. “Lan” means blue, “yun” means a fragrant herb.

[4] chi: a unit of length (=1/3 meter).

[5] cun: a unit of length (=1/3 decimeter).

[6] Wang Long: a fictional mountain’s name, meaning a huge, verdant mountain.

[A] - Just imaging a large pink flower on a lilypad. (How feet can look like this is beyond my imagination.)

[B] - 33&⅓ meters

[C] - Yes, for those of you that are re-reading this, this used to say Houtian Warrior, that was a mistranslation, sorry!

Chapter 18 - Climbing to the Next Level

This was exactly the Qing Ling pill he had seen for a thousand times in collections of martial arts illustrations!

But still, he dared not to believe his own eyes; he gaped at the pill, studied it thoroughly, then smelled it, causing a pungent smell to penetrate his nose immediately.

It was definitely a Qing Ling pill!

It was claimed that the market price of one pill was as high as a million liang of silver, but actually, in some black market trade, someone had offered three million liang but could not find a source to buy from, which proved that the barefoot girl was very generous!

As Shi Mu was overjoyed with the unexpected good result, his curiosity over the girl's identity grew increasingly. It seemed now that his remark of marrying her must have been delirium to the girl - a toad wishing to eat swan meat. Also, the condition that he must reach the level of Houtian Warrior before thirty was so exacting a task, it weighed heavily on his mind.

He knew that it would be impossible for him to become an Houtian Warrior before the age of thirty. But faced with the girl, who made him palpitate with a passion for the first time in his life, as well as considering his unbending will, he would certainly not resign himself to the formidable prospect.

So it seemed that he could only proceed in small steps, abandoning

unnecessary thoughts.

Now, his next goal would be to acquire qi-sensing before managing to reach the level of Houtian Warrior.

Shi Mu let out a sigh, finally purging himself of the disturbing thoughts, and then directed his attention to the pill in his hand, which gave him much confidence in acquiring qi-sensing with the aid of the other pill promised by Auntie Zhen.

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Several days later, in the closed room of Feng Liu Club's backyard, striking sounds roared like torrential rain.

Inside, Shi Mu, who was doing a martial-art squat with his upper body bare, was struck heavily by the stick in Li Canghai's hand. However, the skin that used to become red and swollen was not doing so, this time; instead, the skin looked overly pale, and each strike on it would make a strange droning noise as if the stick had fallen on wood rather than on a human body.

An unknown number of strikes had fallen on Shi Mu's body, but his face, unexpectedly not contorted with pain, showed instead some irresistible excitement; meanwhile his mouth opened, echoing the strikes with low shouts.

Li Canghai had also taken off his jacket, leaving on only a short-sleeved shirt, his hard muscles visible all over his body. Waving his stick continuously, he was dripping with sweat, but would not pause for a brief wipe as his eyes were fixed on Shi Mu with feverish excitement.

Boom!

As a strike fell on a certain acupuncture point on Shi Mu's chest, a thunderous noise exploded, with Shi Mu's face flushing as if the strike had instilled into him a great deal of energy. The next moment, everything returned to normal, but his face soon blushed again. Such a process went on for another ten odd times before crisp sounds, like those of firecrackers, came from inside Shi Mu's body voluntarily; simultaneously, the muscles on his body's surface began to bulge and move like mice.

"Haha! That's it! I'd never thought someone could really go through the half year's torture and reach the eleventh level in body tempering." At the sight Li Canghai threw away his stick and burst into laughter.

"It's all thanks to Instructor Li's painstaking training!" With a deep breath, the cracking sounds inside his body stopped abruptly, and the muscles also returned to normal in an instant. Shi Mu answered, overjoyed at his achievement.

He had finally reached the eleventh level in body tempering.

"No thanks, I'm only doing my paid job. But this only works for you, a very sturdy guy; others would absolutely not able to withstand the punishment." Li Canghai waved off Shi Mu's flattery.

"Anyway, I'm still thankful for your kind instruction, helping me to reach the eleventh stage." Shi Mu answered, smiling. He tried to move his arms and legs and to feel the change inside him.

“Well, if you want to thank me, then win me a championship in the competition in several days.”, Li Canghai said straight forwardly.

“Hehe, that’s easy, I’ll do my best.“ Shi Mu returned his confident smile.

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Seven days later, at the gate of Tian Lu Club, the largest one in Feng City.

The leader of the club, Feng Lengchan, whose stature was as large as that of a black bear, was walking to greet his guests with one of the instructors from his club, acting happy. Among the guests were Li Canghai and some other Feng Liu members. Shi Mu was following Li Canghai and a bulky fellow with reddish face closely along with two other practitioners.

“Haha, Brother Li, Brother Min, you’ve grown more energetic within months.”

“Well, well, it seems that Leader Feng has grown more robust in a short while.”

“Hehe, Brother Li, I guess you mean I’ve put on much weight.”

“How dare I? It’s Brother Feng who’s the actual leader among our four clubs, and the other three leaders like me are only nominal, rarely seen on ordinary occasions. Right, has that fox Tian of Fei Hong Club and Old Wang of Jin Gang Club arrived?”

“Haha, Brother Tian will hit the roof if he hears that. Sure, the two have already arrived and are waiting at the competition venue. These three are your

candidates?” Leng Fengchan was laughing as if the Maitreya Buddha[1] when his eyes met Shi Mu and two other practitioners whom he had seen performing excellently in their club before.

“However skilled they are, they can never compete with Nephew Feng. This time I guess it’s either us or Fei Hong who will come last in the competition.” Li Canghai smiled faintly.

The big fellow with reddish face only smiled briefly in reply, seemingly a taciturn man.

“Brother Li, I’m afraid you are quite mistaken. It’s difficult for Fei Hong to come last even if they want to.” Hearing thus Leng Fengchan wore a bitter smile instead.

“Huh? What do you mean?” Li Canghai was really surprised, so was the reddish man.

“Brother Li, you’d better get some more ways of obtaining more information in the future. Haven’t you heard of the newcomer in Fei Hong Club? He’s got the Body of Thick Earth.” Feng Lengchan changed to a serious face this time.

“The Body of Thick Earth?” The red-face man of Liu Feng Club finally opened his mouth involuntarily, full of surprise.

“It seems that Fei Hong Club is ready for a desperate fight this time and is highly likely to win the tournament. If so, that will be difficult for us.” Li Canghai murmured to himself, estimating in silence the chance of Shi Mu’s Stone-Breaking Fist defeating the Body of Thick Earth.

Meanwhile, Shi Mu was looking up and down the other two practitioners at the gate of Tian Lu Club, full of curiosity. The gate was covered with golden nails, flanked by a giant stone lion at either side, a much more imposing gate than their own club's. After some small talk Leng Fengchan invited them in; Shi Mu also followed them in through the gate.

Right inside the gate there was a huge practice ground where there stood an already arranged ring for the martial tournament in the middle, entirely made of thick round logs. It was over a zhang in height and ten zhang[A] in both length and width.

The whole practice ground was empty except beside the ring where some ten-odd practitioners were standing in three groups. Obviously, they were from the other three clubs.

"You three, go and wait there. Instructor Tian and I'll be with you in a while." Li Canghai said briefly and then followed Feng Lengchan to the wing-room behind the practice ground with the red-face man.

"Shi Mu, Sun Jun, let's go and steal a look at their skills." The eldest young man among the three suggested to the other two with a smile as soon as Li Canghai left, his body quite athletic.

"We're already here for the tournament, it's no use knowing their strengths. But this time, Brother Li and I have already reached the intermediate level in several practitioner skills before the tournament, so it's normal for us to be candidates. But you, a newcomer, even if you have reached the tenth level in body tempering, I've never seen you perform your skills in our club, so how can I be sure you'll perform them well in the tournament? I'm wondering why

Instructor Li had to make up the number by adding you.” The lanky young man of the three obviously had been nursing a grievance, which he vented to Shi Mu now.

“Hehe, I myself didn’t want to take part in this, but could not refuse since Instructor Li asked me to. “Shi Mu was not even a bit angry at the reproach; instead he answered in a manner full of ease, even a little lethargically.

“You...”

“Sun Jun, do you want to make a fool of yourself in front of the guys from other clubs?” The young man, his family name Li, seemed rather displeased and interrupted decisively, stopping the lanky fellow from saying more.

The young Li seemed to hold an authority, thus Sun Jun only snorted at Shi Mu and stopped the attack.

Then the three walked to the ring, measuring the nearby practitioners up and down.

“Well?” After a glance over the groups of candidates there, Shi Mu recognised faces. They belong none other than to the ones he fought when playing ‘Fierce Fist’. But only two young men caught his attention: one was a tall youth surrounded by several Tian Lu practitioners, while the other youth, in white clothes, was sitting with his legs crossed on the ground all by himself, scrubbing a dark black spear.

“Feng Jun, Wang Tianhao!”

Shi Mu could tell in a glance who they were. The former had taken his three fist strikes with incredible endurance while the other quit the fight after showing off his amazing spear skills. Both left him with a lasting impression, but neither would not recognize Shi Mu by his true appearance at the moment. They only cast him a cursory glance as the three walked by.

When the youth Li led Shi Mu near them, a young man with a pockmarked face wearing Fei Hong Club's uniform came to greet them,

"Li Yunfeng, so you Liu Feng fellows have finally arrived. Then it seems the tournament will soon begin, I can't wait to encounter your Python-Bones Fist again!"

"Hehe, Gu Zhong, if we two become opponents in the tournament I'll surely fight with all my strength. But I just heard from some instructors that you have a newcomer claiming to have the Body of Thick Earth, is that true?" The youth Li replied briefly, his eyes involuntarily scanning the other two Fei Hong practitioners. One of them looked to be of similar age to Gu Zhong and had a puffy face, while the other looked to be fourteen or fifteen and seemed thin and weak, his skin dark, his ears sticking out and his chin like an ape's: extremely inconspicuous.

"Hehe, This is younger brother Jia, no need to introduce him since you met him last tournament; as for this younger brother Tie Dong, he did just join us a month ago." Gu Zhong paused at the question for a moment, then hurried his introduction with a smile.

"Brother Li." The puffy-faced young man greeted them with clasped fists. But the youth named Tie Dong only rolled his eyes, completely indifferent to them.

Seeing thus Li Yunfeng’s face became embarrassed.

“Ah, Brother Li, younger brother Tie meant no offense to you. He grew up in an isolated island and became quite a silent boy. Well, the two younger brothers behind you should also be introduced now.” Gu Zhong tried to ease the situation, full of annoying smiles, asking Li while his looks were turned to Shi Mu and Sun Jun standing behind.

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[1] The Maitreya Buddha: The well-known version of the Maitreya Buddha in Chinese culture, usually portrayed as smiling heartily with his breasts bare.

[A] - It is 3&⅓ meters tall and 33 meters long and wide.

Chapter 19 - The Body of Thick Earth

“Shi Mu? I’ve long since heard the name, he’s the one who is claimed to have neared the tenth level in body tempering at the mere age of fifteen. Is this his older brother?” Looking at Shi Mu’s great stature like that of an adult’s, Gu Zhong could not help but show his astonishment. The thing was, though there were not many who could reach the intermediate level in body tempering before they turned twenty, some did struggle to do it at the age of eighteen or even nineteen. But if one could reach the tenth level at merely fifteen, he could undoubtedly be called a genius. Throughout the city, one can count such geniuses on his fingers. This meant that these genius practitioners must have a higher chance of acquiring qi-sensing than others, and would have much more potential if they become Houtian warriors.

Thinking thus to himself, Gu Zhong immediately greeted Shi Mu with clasped fists, beaming with admiration, “Haha, Brother Shi has achieved the tenth level at such an early age; you’ll definitely outshine others in this competition.“

“Thank you for your kind words.” Shi Mu also replied with clasped fists, smiling kindly to the speaker.

“You’ve completed the tenth level?” The dark, thin ape-like guy, Tie Zhong, unexpectedly shouted his question to Shi Mu, his voice harsh and grinding, as if it had not yet changed into a mature one.

“Yes.” Shi Mu answered in a seemingly casual manner.

“Humph, I once fought a practitioner of the eleventh, and it turned out that he was exhausted at last, fainting right at the ring. Until the last moment he was

unable to break my Body of Thick Earth.”

“If so, I may not be your match in any case. But pitifully your opponent may not be me by then.” Shi Mu only threw him a yawn in reply.

“Whoever becomes my opponent will definitely shrink from my Body of Thick Earth.” Tie Dong asserted his forthcoming success clearly and proudly, before he turned and left by himself. As for Sun Jun standing beside Shi Mu, he did not once cast him a glance.

“Is he always so full of himself?” Sun Jun blanched with rage, shouting in a loud voice involuntarily.

“Hehe, it’s...um...” Though Gu Zhong had always been skilled at peacemaking, he was at his wit’s end now.

“Brother Gu, why not stop putting in a good word for the guy? To be frank, even our Feng Hong’s seniors have some grudges against him; it’s only that some instructors hold him to be priceless, so there’s no help for it anyway. After all, though full of himself, the guy’s Body of Thick Earth really deserves its name. At least Brother Li and I cannot harm him a bit.” The puffy-faced ‘younger brother Jia’ was now explaining with a sardonic grin.

“Is it so dreadful, the Body of Thick Earth? Brother Li, if my memory has not failed me, your skilled Water-Splashing Sword Art is the best when it comes to fighting hard outer skills.“ Hearing that, it was Li Yunfeng’s turn to be surprised.

“Oh! You’ll know the power of Body of Thick Earth if you meet the guy in the ring. Words can’t describe it.“ Gu Zhong answered with a bitter smile, reluctant

to continue the conversation.

“Humph, even if the defense of the Body of Thick Earth is so dreadful, I can’t believe Wang Tianhao’s Blazing Spear cannot find a way to conquer it!” After a brief silence Sun Jun sneered his suggestion.

“It’d be difficult to judge then. In the last tournament, young master Wang, with his just-learned Blazing Spear, defeated all the practitioners from four clubs, with barely anyone able to resist. Now that one whole year has passed, Wang Tianhao’s skills must have increased immensely. But it seems Wang Tianhao is the most aggressive of the guys here; I’ve heard that even the senior practitioners of his own club would be beaten mercilessly if any of them were to get in his way.” Gu Zhong shook his head vigorously in disapproval.

At such a remark, Sun Jun, Li Yunfeng and some others directed their eyes to Wang Tianhao; only Shi Mu stood still as if he had heard nothing, gazing at the dark thin youth not far away.

The youth in white who was scrubbing his spear seemed to feel the glances, thus he lifted his head suddenly to meet their eyes. Li Yunfeng and his fellows were caught unguarded at the returning look, evading it one after another with embarrassed smiles.

The youth in white glanced over them with a stony face, then paused his eyes on Shi Mu, and stood up suddenly to stride toward them with his spear thrown backward over his shoulder.

“Wang...young master Wang, you’ve been well since we parted?” Gu Zhong was the first one to make the greeting among the stunned group.

“Who are you? Have we met before?” Wang Tianhao cast him a cold eye, asking bluntly in reply.

Gu Zhong could not be more embarrassed in this situation. Li Yunfeng and his fellows dared not to speak a word then, only standing there and bearing the youth’s glances over them.

“What’s your name? From what club do you come?” Wang Tianhao’s eyes paused again on Shi Mu, sizing him up and down closely, before he drew his iron spear slowly from his back, pointed it at Shi Mu and asked thus in an extremely stony voice.

“Oh? You have some business with me?” Shi Mu frowned before turning to look at this young master Wang, his eyes unusually calm and clear, showing no fluster at all.

“Have I met you before?” Wang Tianhao looked at Shi Mu, narrowing his eyes.

“Absolutely not. It’s the first time I’ve met the honorable young master.“ Shi Mu replied with much assurance, his eyes unblinking even for a moment.

“Never met? But you look so familiar to me!” Wang Tianhao’s spear was still pointed at Shi Mu, a trace of suspicion flashing across his face.

“Young master Wang, have you met younger brother Shi Mu some place in the city?” Li Yunfeng finally opened his mouth with a nervous cough, but in his mind he felt as strange as Wang Tianhao. He did have some knowledge of Shi Mu’s background, but even racking his mind, he could not think of any relations between the two. Gu Zhong and Sun Jun could only be left wondering without a

single clue.

“Hehe, alright, I may be mistaken. So your name’s Shi Mu, right? Good, I hope to have a good fight with you in the ring.” Wang Tianhao glanced several times over Shi Mu’s unmoved face, then narrowed his eyes and burst into laughter. After withdrawing his spear, he went away on his own.

Seeing this, Gu Zhong and Li Yunfeng, as well as other fellows could only gape at each other. No one knew what was behind the top practitioner’s act just then!

“Brother Shi, do you know Wang Tianhao?” Li Yunfeng could not help but blurt out his question.

“Surely not, um...or not quite an acquaintance? “ Shi Mu only gave an ambiguous reply, his hand stroking his chin.

“What? What do you mean, ‘not an acquaintance’?” Li Yunfeng’s eyes were wide open in surprise; he suddenly had a feeling that this Shi Mu right before his eyes was a mysterious figure. So did Gu Zhong and the others. But seeing Shi Mu’s uninterested looks, they felt it improper to pursue the inquiry.

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“Senior Feng, have you seen it? Just then Wang Tianhao went for the Liu Feng and Fei Hong guys; he also pointed his spear, but only returned after some words. What trick is he playing?” As the host for the competition, Tian Lu Club could not only offer three candidates; in fact they had as many as seven or eight candidates. The one at the center was exactly the most famous practitioner

among them, Feng Jun, carrying a scar on his face, his eyes fierce and malicious.

At the moment, Feng Jun was listening to his brothers talk and simultaneously watching Wang Tianhao's moves with a ferocious glare in his eye. As the nephew of Tian Lu Club's leader, he had not only learnt the brutal skill of the Iron-Clothes Body unique to Tian Lu Club, but also had sharpened his Black-Hands skill which high level Practitioner skill. Therefore, though he missed the chance to get enrolled into Kai Yuan Martial Arts School last time, he had never once seen his peers as his match, and had won the championship in the competition among clubs many times.

But all his feats had been disturbed when he lost the match to Wang Tianhao last year, who despite being many years his junior, had beaten him with his spear without difficulty, even stomping on his face in the ring! He - the champion Feng Jun - had never hated someone so bitterly to the extent that he confined himself to the club for months to exercise after the defeat, only wishing to avenging himself!

It's lucky that though he challenged a strong practitioner some time earlier and got his Iron-Clothes Body badly beaten; it turned out to be a blessing in disguise: his Iron-Clothes Body successfully reached the level of accomplishment due to a month's rest. Thus he became quite confident to fight to the last round of the tournament and to stomp on Wang Tianhao's face. But, the moment he saw Wang Tianhao again in Tian Lu Club today, the side of face, which was stomped, felt feverish again, which reduced his confidence slightly.

Thinking this, Feng Jun finally spoke with a sneer, "Are you so sure that only the bastard with Body of Thick Earth deserves attention in this tournament? What about the other candidates from Fei Hong and Liu Feng club?"

"Senior Feng, please rest assured, we've asked around many times. The two

clubs were originally much weaker than us, the only one you need to pay attention to is that Body of Thick Earth guy, which our leader has mentioned too. But even with the body, a bastard from some remote place could not get any high skills. Senior has that Iron-Clothes Body which is never inferior to the Body of Thick Earth, plus, with your tenth level in body tempering, the bastard would be exhausted to death by your skills!" Another Tian Lu practitioner hurriedly offered his flattery.

"As long as that's true! Then I could deal with Wang Tianhao with all my strength!" Feng Jun stroked one side of his face, radiating murderous smiles.

But accidentally, just as he said so, his newly recovered ribs felt a slight trace of uneasiness.

Just then, the door to the auxiliary room behind the practice ground was opened from one side, and amid bursts of laughter, Li Canghai and some other senior men from the four clubs strolled out, each talking cheerfully and humorously with the others, as if having a reunion with their old friends.

"Well, the competition among the four clubs officially begins now!" The leader of Tian Lu club, Feng Lengchan, proclaimed decisively, after a glance over all the practitioners.

Chapter 20 - The Challenge

Hearing this, the practitioners from all four clubs were thrilled. They all stood around the ring, waiting for the signal.

Li Canghai and the other instructors all approached the ring, among them were two strangers. One was wearing a sword and armor and had faint smile on his face. The other was an attractive woman in her thirties. Though she was beautiful, she gave off a cold aura. Both were invited by the four clubs to judge the matches. The man was the field officer of Feng City's military, while the woman was not only an Houtian Warrior, but also the leader of a powerful underground party.

After a moment, Leng Fengchan stood in the ring and began to announce the rules of the match.

"The rules are the same as they were last time. We'll decide the winning club in three rounds. In each round, each club can have one of their candidates issue a challenge to another club, which must provide a candidate to take the challenge. Candidates who have lost previously cannot enter the next round, while the winners can participate in the next round. After three rounds, whichever club has the most remaining candidates will win the match."

As soon as he finished explaining the rules, Leng Fengchan jumped down from the ring, and the military officer walked up in an unhurried manner. He only gave the crowd a greeting of clasped fists, then stood there without saying anything.

Li Yunfeng mouth twitched a little upon hearing the rules.

"Brother Li, do you have any opinions concerning the rules?" Seeing Li's reaction Shi Mu asked out of curiosity.

"Brother Shi, it's the first time you've taken part in the match, so it's natural

that you don't know the problem: this framework of three-round competition is most beneficial to the club which has most powerful candidates. In last match, Tian Wanghao took the challenge on behalf of Jin Gang club, and won all the three rounds by himself because none of the other candidates could resist his attack." Li Yunfeng answered with a forced smile.

"I had been wondering why the rules were so simple. Thank you for enlightening me." After a moment's thought, Shi Mu also perceived the true meaning of the rules, giving Li Yunfeng a knowing smile.

Just then, someone had already jumped into the ring, announcing his challenge in a loud voice,

"I am Wu Ming from Tian Lu club, I'd like to see the techniques of senior brothers' from Liu Feng club."

"Yun Feng, you go and accept his challenge. This fellow lost to you last year, so it shouldn't be a problem for you." Seeing this the large red-faced fellow gave the order, not turning his head.

"Instructor Li, please rest assured, I'll will beat this guy." Li Yunfeng stopped talking with Shi Mu and answered his instructor, standing straight in a stance full of self-confidence. Then he suddenly put his hands behind his waist, and when he took them out again, both his hands were in blue gloves, which, when shaken even slightly, made a crisp 'tingling' sound, like a little bell. There were bronze pieces, each the size of a thumb, inlaid on the surface of the gloves.

Upon jumping into the ring, Li Yunfeng let out a fierce roar, drew two gleaming daggers, and rushed straight at his opponent.

The two met at the center of the ring. Li Yunfeng moved like a snake, as his fists attacked his opponent from all different angles, while the youth named Wu

Ming wielded his two delicate daggers and jabbed continuously toward his opponent, making himself very hard to approach. From time to time their fists scraped into each other, producing sparks. The first round was a decidedly good one.

“No! Wu Ming’s Air-Piercing Dagger had been polished to such a great extent, I’m afraid Yun Feng may be put at a disadvantage.” After watching them for a while, the red-faced man made an prediction, his face slightly changed.

“Indeed, last year Wu Ming’s technique was only at the initial stage, it’s hard to imagine he’d reach such a high level in a single year. On the contrary, Yun Feng’s Python-Bones Fist is still short of perfection, it’s really hard to say if he can win. “ Li Canghai also remarked on the uncertainty of winning.

As if to verify the remark, with a sudden low shout came from the ring, the figures of the two in the ring suddenly separated. Wu Ming stumbled backward for several steps, one of his hands pressed hard on his chest, his face dreadfully pale.

However, at the opposite side, two glaring daggers were inserted halfway into Li Yunfeng’s shoulders. He was obviously unable to fight anymore.

“Winner of the first round, Tian Lu club! “ At the ring, the military officer stepped forward to pronounce the result. Li Yunfeng left the ring reluctantly, after throwing a fierce glance at Wu Ming.

The red-faced man approached Li Yunfend and examined the daggers in each of his shoulders. He then grasped them and gave a quick yank, which pulled the two daggers out in an instant. Two sprays of blood rushed up into the air as high as a chi before the bleeding stopped abruptly.

“Apply some medicine there as soon as possible, bind up the wounds, and you’ll be all right after a few days.” The red-faced man said with a sombre face.

Li Yunfeng could only nodded his thanks in great pain, sweating profusely.

By then the ring was taken by a spear wielding youth of the Jin Gang club, asking to challenge Tian Lu club. The latter offered a candidate, knife in hand; the two then fought when the sounds of metal resounded all over the competition hall.

After some fighting back and forth for a while, the challenger from Jin Gang club lost his weapon as his opponent hit his knife and sent it darting away. The challenger could only admit his defeat and retire. The successive two winnings were a boost to the Tian Lu club’s morale, even Leng Fengchan was radiant with content, stroking his mustache.

There were increasing small talks beneath the ring after two fights.

“What more is there to say? I’ve heard that there is a guy here with the Body of Thick Earth. Could you please stop hiding and come out face me?” Just then a figure leaped up from the crowd, his spear pointing behind him, and stood onto the ring steadily, looking into the direction of the Fei Hong club.

This arrogant fellow was none other than Wang Tianhao.

“This mindless boy, I’ve told him a thousand times to never blindly charge into a battle, and here he is, going and challenging the Fei Hong guys in his first round!” A sandy-haired old man was bemoaning the fact he missed the chance

to stop his nephew, he was close to the point of throwing a fit.

Meanwhile, the sudden challenge created a disturbance among the Fei Hong fellows. The dark, thin guy, Tie Dong, was stirred, his eyes blazed with violence. Just as he was about to stride to the ring, he was stopped by a long-bearded man, who grasped at his sholders and shook his head,

“Dong Er, you don’t need to go at such an early time, it’d be a waste of your energy, which might make it hard to last till the final roun. Gu Zhong, you go and test if Wang Tianhao’s Blazing Spear techniques have progressed much.”

Hearing this, Gu Zhong’s spirits dropped, but he could only brace himself for the coming fight, draw his sword and jumping into the ring.

“I’m asking for that bastard, not you.” Wang Tianhao protested impatiently as he saw the one jumping into the ring.

“Please consider other things after fighting me, honorable young master.” Though always afraid of Wang Tianhao, Gu Zhong was irresistibly angered by his words. After a low shout, he made his sword shake in his hand, causing a strong wind to swirl around it. This was the Air-Piercing Sword he had been practising for years.

“Humph, asking for trouble.” Wang Tianhao’s face grew sullen and he stuck his spear out bluntly. The point of the spear began to vibrate rapidly, causing it to blur, and then it vanished for an instant.

With a loud noise a blazing ball of fire as big as a bowl appeared at the tip of Wang Tianhao’s spear before it transformed into a red light and rushing forward

at an unstoppable speed.

Boom! A deafening noise resounded and Gu Zhong let out a shrill cry as he was pushed down from the ring, his whole body scorched.

The fire ball continued to swirl for a while before it dimmed and was revealed to be the tip of the spear, glaring with cold light, only surrounded by a ball of blazing fire which made it look rather mysterious.

“The Flame of the Blazing Spear!”

The long-bearded man cried out, terrified at the sight. His feet moved involuntarily, then his figure immediately turned into a grey shadow as he floated up into the air and caught the falling Gu Zhong with his arms.

Until the long-bearded man steadied himself on his feet, it was clearly seen that the burnt body in his arms belonged to that of Gu Zhong, whose shirts had all been burnt to ashes, showing the bare skin beneath covered by white blisters. It was a gruesome scene.

“Brother Xu, who would have believed that your nephew had polished his Blazing Spear technique to such an extent! You’ve really caught us unguarded, maybe next time you should tell us beforehand?” With Gu Zhong in his arms, the long-bearded man turned round to question the older man ‘Uncle Xu’ in a stern voice.

“You can’t blame me this time, I had no idea he had reached such a level. As usual, this is absolutely impossible. Only Houtian Warriors can use that powerful technique.” Uncle Xu of the Jin Gang club was apparently amazed, answering

without thinking.

“I won’t forget this.” The long-bearded man stomped in anger, but could only send Gu Zhong to a quiet medical room for treatment.

Meanwhile, instructors of other clubs all cast terrified glances at Wang Tianhao, as if they were looking at a monster with sharp fangs. Their eyes were saying, “this is absolutely impossible.”

“That’s impossible! How could someone accomplish the Flame of the Blazing Spear at the Practitioner level? The only thing we can do now is lose. No one at the Practitioner level can take that attack.” Li Canghai also murmured to himself with a sullen face, obviously at his wits’ end.

“Haha, now that Wang Tianhao had accomplished the flame of the Blazing Spear, it’ll be easy for him to get enrolled into the Kai Yuan Martial Arts School. As far as I see, the championship is sure to be ours, no need to fight any more. Of course, whoever is unconvinced can come up to challenge us, and if ever Tian Hao loses in any challenge, we, the Jin Gang club, would retire from this year’s competition and be happy to come in last.” Uncle Xu declared this with utmost confidence after jumping directly to the ring and nodding at the officer who was completely dumbstruck by this proclamation.

Hearing this, Leng Fengchan and the other instructors of the other three clubs stood gaping at one another in astonishment, when Tie Dong’s voice resounded,

“Humph! To win without first fighting me? Mere wishful thinking!” His words concealed his shock at Wang Tianhao’s Blazing Spear, but still full of confidence and anger. He then stood up, ready to rush into the ring.

“Stop it, Dong Er! I know your Body of Thick Earth is outstanding, but it can not stand up to a single strike of the Blazing Spear. ” The long-bearded man held up a hand and stopped him.

Tie Dong immediately lost much of his confidence upon hearing this. Though he had been wild and intractable, the man who had brought him to Feng City from his remote island held much authority in his eyes.

At the same time, Feng Jun, standing at the other side of the ring, clenched his fists tightly, to the extent that his nails were deep inserted into his palms. But he dared not to speak a word, his face completely pale.

“It’s your turn, Shi Mu. Come! I’ve observed them all, only you have the strength to fight me.” His eyes were glancing over the crowd below, with a trace of indifference, he then found Shi Mu, and gave him a mystifying smile.

Chapter 21 - Six Cuts at One Breath

Wang Tianhao's words started a commotion around the ring. Regardless whether they knew Shi Mu or not, everyone looked in the direction of the Liu Feng club. Wang Tianhao viewed someone as worthy of fighting him?

"Who's this Shi Mu?"

"I faintly remember the name, I think it is the new guy from the Liu Feng club. I heard he reached the tenth level in body tempering at a young age. He is highly likely to become a Houtian Warrior."

"That's strange. With such techniques why would Wang Tianhao challenge anyone? It doesn't matter who his opponent is; he will win."

"What? There's someone able to attract Wang Tianhao's attention in the Liu Feng club?"

"Wang Tianhao knew of Brother Shi?!"

.....

At this moment, everyone there began to try to figure out why Wang Tianhao was challenging this unknown person.

"Shi Mu, have you met Wang Tianhao before?" Li Canghai was also taken aback, turning his head to ask Shi Mu.

“I fought with him once, only that we didn’t fight to the last moment, so don’t know who’s better.” Though surprised at Wang Tianhao’s open challenge, Shi Mu gave the answer calmly.

“So that’s why! However, I’m afraid you don’t have much chance to win. When you fought him previously, you probably had a chance, but now he is too strong. It’s all right if you refuse to take the challenge.” Li Canghai persuaded as he knit his eyebrows.

“Don’t worry teacher, I myself would also like to compare techniques with him, it doesn’t matter who wins.” Looking at Wang Tianhao, Shi Mu smiled unexpectedly.

“Since your mind is set on doing this, I won’t stop you. Just remember, his spear art is at a very high level, so if you want to have even the slightest chances of winning, you need to get close enough that he can’t use his spear. Besides, if you don’t evade his Flame of the Blazing Spear, you’ll lose instantly.” After a pause Li Canghai still let him accept the challenge, smiling encouragingly.

Sun Jun and Li Yunfeng gaped at each other, as they overheard the conversation, unable to close their mouths.

The red-faced Instructor Min also gave the two a curious look.

Shi Mu nodded obediently, then walked up to the ring, then he leaped off the ground and jumped directly into the ring.

Although Uncle Xu was also among the surprised, he could only leave the ring,

making room for the two fighters.

“Are you the ‘Fierce Fist’ himself?” After looking over Shi Mu, Wang Tianhao narrowed his eyes and asked in a accusing voice.

“Never heard of him.” Shi Mu blinked his eyes as he replied.

“Humph, hiding your identity even now! You are such a disappointment to me!” At Shi Mu’s denial, Wang Tianhao seemed to have lost his interest.

“Am I? I’m now become quite curious, how can you be so sure as to my identity?” Shi Mu lazily drew a long knife from his waist, simultaneously asking in reply.

“Humph, everyone knows my memory, I never forget anything I’ve seen. The figure, the eyes, I know them! Even if you were wearing a mask. If I’m wrong, then my eyes must be rotten! No more nonsense! Take my Blazing Spear! I’ll beat you in front of all who are here, letting them know I’m the real top practitioner in the city!” Wang Tianhao seemed impatient, and, after a few words, he began to shake his spear, the upper part of the spear vanishing after a flash.

The next moment, a flame appeared, floating in the air, and after a tremble, it transformed into a ball of red light and darted right toward Shi Mu.

Shi Mu only narrowed his eyes, and turned around to face the light. He only had one knife, but it projected four hard shadows into the air, which all fell on the blaze as Shi Mu rushed out after leaping off the ground.

Boom! A thunderous noise resounded.

The blaze was split into sparks, dashing into all directions in an instant, the falling sparks constituting a huge umbrella as high as two zhang. If Shi Mu had not taken a step back a moment earlier, he would've ended up the same as Gu Zhong.

But even so, the ring became unbearably hot!

Then, before Shi Mu found his feet on the ground again, a glaring spear tip whizzed out of the rain of sparks, right toward Shi Mu's throat as if a viper. Faced with the vicious spear attack, Shi Mu lifted his empty arm, clenched his fist and pounded heavily on the incoming spear tip.

"Peng!" The fist made of bone and blood pounded on the iron spear; simultaneously an immense force went backward along the spear right toward its owner.

Wang Tianhao's colour changed, and he subconsciously clenched the handle to steady himself, but his body was knocked backward by the force, and his originally successive attacks were broken in an instant.

Seizing the chance, Shi Mu sped forward with his long knife, instantly running into his opponent at lightning speed!

Boom! Wang Tianhao resisted with his spear and unexpectedly stopped the lightning knife. But meanwhile he was forced to step back, his feet already pressed against the edge of the ring.

“Excellent! Excellent! That’s exactly what I need to inspire my blood! Exactly my match!” beyond everyone’s expectations Wang Tianhao laughed, and then suddenly grabbed the upper body of the spear single-handed.

Whiz!

The spear, apparently made of black iron, started slithered like a snake, twisting in circles to stab into Shi Mu’ chest.

Shi Mu looked rather serious now. He lifted his arms and gave the spear tip another good punch.

A dull sound was heard when the dazzling tip was beaten back again, but this was exactly what Wang Tianhao had been waiting for: he slid forward like a fish to evade the punch right along the ring’s edge, and, after a mysterious shaking his feet, he had already reached Shi Mu’s back.

“The Leaping Fish Steps?”

“Wow, you have good eyes, this is a body technique of the Practitioner level, also, it is one of our Wang Family’s secret techniques, handed down from our ancestors, rarely seen in ordinary clubs. You should proud that you have forced me to use this technique! I want to defeat you even more now.” The eyes Wang Tianhao cast at Shi Mu grew increasingly excited.

“You want to defeat me? Can you actually do what you wish?” At such a proud proclamation, Shi Mu could not help but roll his eyes in contempt. A single move of his arms sent cold lights rolling toward his opponent. He now used his Thirteen Series of Gale Force Art the best of his ability, each cut giving off cold

light, giving him an aura of invincibility.

Meanwhile, Wang Tianhao roared fiercely, his spear shaking, turning into a viper that dancing around Shi Mu. Coordinated with his Leaping Fish Steps, he roamed the ring and resisted all the shadows of the knife.

“Don’t you have any more tricks? Try them!” Wang Tianhao laughed wildly.

Provoked by his words, Shi Mu shook his knife even more quickly, his eyes sharp, each cut producing five or six shadows and gradually a glaring light shown on each of the blade shadows, completely submerging Wang Tianhao’s figure. Even though Wang tried to use another technique, producing more sparks in his desperate defense, he could only defend, and not attack.

“Six Cuts in One Breath.” The one who blurted out the name of the technique was exactly the red-faced Instructor Min.

“Brother Li, Shi Mu has reached such a high level in your Thirteen Series of Gale Force Blade Art! He’s got such talent, why don’t you tell me of him earlier? I would have used up all our resources to cultivate him.”

“I just found it out myself! The boy has done all this himself. I thought he was only at the initial stage!” Watching what happened at the ring, Li Canghai was stunned too.

The long-bearded man, Uncle Xu, and other instructors all showed expressions of amazement at Shi Mu’s Six Cuts in One Breath.

As for the other practitioners, they all stood completely still, mouths wide

open in astonishment.

Boom! In the ring, a blazing ball of fire exploded, and the sparks were now breaking through the cold blade-shaped lights.

After a bright flash, Wang Tianhao rushed out from the sparks and turned around, sending the body of his spear forward, which trembled and vanished again.

Six puffs of red flame appeared, floating in front of his chest.

“Hehe, excellent, Six Cuts in One Breath! But if you can take the successive attacks of six fire balls then I’ll admit defeat and retire from the match.”

Just as he finished his words, Wang Tianhao let out a loud cry, clenched his spear, and twisted it with all his strength. Then he rushed directly at Shi Mu at a speed so fast he almost left the ground.

The six fire balls, on the other hand, revolved smoothly in the air, moving in an incredibly mystifying manner, then tumbled down onto Shi Mu’s body. Shi Mu was still trying to understand the attack when the fire balls started falling.

Chapter 22 - Crash!

"The Thirteen Series of Gale Force Blade! Seven Cuts in One Breath!"

Shi Mu's body suddenly began to revolve wildly like a gyroscope, and the long knife in his hand created shadows, one after another, stretching and morphing. Each time he moved the knife, seven shadows of it emerged, eventually creating a miniature mountain!

The mountain, however, was not made of stones but of deadly gleaming blades, and shrill sounds came faintly from the mountain now and then.

Then Wang Tianhao's six fireballs disappeared into the mountain, as quick as shooting stars. Immediately six booming noises exploded from the mountain! A violent heavy rain of sparks fell in all directions, heating up the entire room. The entire area was filled with sparks.

Simultaneously, on the floor of the ring, whizzing noises resounded as hundreds of blade marks were cut into the floor, centered around the spot where the blade mountain had exploded. Each mark was three chi both in depth and length, making a huge circle that appeared to be carved by a ruler[A].

"Peng!" A deafening noise.

As though rammed by an invisible burst of energy, Wang Tianhao tipped over in midair and then thudded down onto the floor. Unable to steady himself, he stumbled back as far as seven steps, meanwhile leaving a trail of seven half-inch deep footprints on the floor.

Once he had finally come to a stop, his face had turned ashen, and his hands, barely managing to hold his spear, would not stop trembling. The front end of the spear used to be imposing, but now it had vanished, or had been melted away by the heat.

All the instructors below stared at the lower part of the melting blade mountain, their eyes unblinking.

Practitioners, including Feng Jun, were more shocked than their instructors, some even holding their breaths.

Finally, when the last shadow from his knife faded from the ring, Shi Mu's silhouette suddenly became visible: he was standing straight, holding his knife single-handedly. The only unusually things were that he was blushing from the heat, and his shoulders and hair were slightly burnt. As for his knife, there were many notches on its edge, as if the knife had been struck repeatedly by some unknown hardware.

But as for Shi Mu, it was as clear as day why his knife had all those notches. It went out of control at the fireballs impacts and thus cut directly into the floor which then pocketed the edge. And this was also why he had left numerous knife marks around him.

"Can't believe you took my six fireballs head on!" After observing Shi Mu's body closely and seeing that he was not badly injure, Wang Tianhao could not believe his own eyes.

"It's all because of my advanced blade art, otherwise I wouldn't have been able to take your last strike." Shi Mu did not look triumphant. On the contrary, at this

moment he actually had some reverence for Wang Tianhao.

“Seven Cuts in One Breath! You had gone this far in your Gale Force Blade Art, thus my defeat was certain. But in this match the spear I used was made of ordinary iron, not refined iron, so it definitely couldn’t withstand my overwhelming flame. If I had used a refined one, then you wouldn’t have been able to stay safe and sound. But I won’t break my promise, I’ll retire from the match since you’ve taken my attacks.” Wang Tianhao first let out a sigh, then said this in a grudging tone, before he jumped out of the ring as promised, and went straight to the gate of the hall.

“Hold on a moment, Tianhao! Please excuse me.” Uncle Xu was flustered at the scene, and after a hasty goodbye, he hurriedly chased after his nephew, leaving other Jin Gang members behind.

Seeing this, the remaining instructors and practitioners could only gape at each other.

It was surprising enough for Shi Mu to have accomplished his Seven Cuts in One Breath; but the result of the challenge was even more surprising!

“Wow...Liu Feng club wins! Shi Mu wins! A young hero indeed! But as Uncle Xu said earlier, now little brother Shi is faced with two choices: one, the fight can be deemed as a winning challenge against Jin Gang club, so you can retire now and fight in the next round; the other, you can remain at the ring and wait for the next challenge from other clubs’ practitioners. If no one can defeat you, then Liu Feng club will naturally come first in this year’s competition.” The military officer ascended again to the ring and announced the result, before he measured Shi Mu from head to toe in a most surprised manner.

This result undoubtedly created a commotion below the ring.

Although most of the practitioners were impressed with Shi Mu's earlier performance, they knew well that his energy was reduced after that bitter fight. Furthermore, even if Shi Mu was not badly injured, his strength would not hold much longer in the next fight, plus his weapon had been ruined in his earlier fight. But according to the conventional rule, if Shi Mu decided to take the next challenge without a rest, he would be denied of the chance to have a new weapon.

Hearing this, some instructors, including Feng Lengchan, also grew upset.

"Brother Li, why not ask Shi Mu back and let him rest a bit. As long as he can have a new weapon, we, the Liu Feng club, will definitely win the competition." The red-faced instructor Min finally perceived the difficulty of the choice, and then hurriedly asked for Li Canghai's to call Shi Mu back.

"No need, I know this little guy better than anyone else. At the a moment, even if he is commanded to retire, he won't listen. " Li Canghai smiled bitterly after a deep breath.

Indeed. Right now, in the ring, Shi Mu made his reply without hesitation,

"Since I'm already here, then I won't quit until I'm defeated."

"Well then, the challenge shall proceed." The officer nodded with a look of approval.

The practitioners below began to mutter to each other, and no one dared to

make a challenge, due to his conditions. Winning such a match would earn dark looks from people, and they would say, “you just took advantage of Shi Mu’s state.” Such an embarrassing prospect made most of them flinch. Li Yunfeng and Sun Jun exchanged a look of astonishment, gaping at each other, as if they were in a daydream.

“Hehe, then let me have the honor of seeing Brother Shi’s techniques.”

Just then, Feng Jun went forward through the crowd, with a sneer, and leaped up into the ring. He stretched his arms and then pulled them back to his sides: the fists were now in a pair of black iron gloves! The knuckles were fixed with fine steel so that he could move his fingers freely as he willed.

“Fist art? Good, I’ve been wanting to fight with my fists as well.” Shi Mu narrowed his eyes.

“Such a coincidence! I also practised the Wind-Blowing Fists, and I...”

“Humph, stop talking and start fighting! Take my first punch.” Shi Mu snorted coldly and moved, his arms stretched out in a blur, smashing into his opponent.

Feng Jun was enraged by Shi Mu’s sudden move, so he wielded his arms bluntly, welcoming the coming fists with his two iron gloves. He punched into Shi Mu’s two bare fists.

Crack! Crack! Two crisp sounds.

It was Feng Jun who was screaming in agony, his body forced back instantly at an overwhelming speed. After colliding with Shi Mu’s fists, the black gloves

expanded like a billow! Subsequently the two gloves exploded like confetti, showing his bleeding hands underneath.

“The accomplished level! You should have reached the accomplished level in the Stone-Breaking Fist!” After a shrill, Feng Jun cried out his astonishment, as if having seen a horrible monster.

But at this moment, Shi Mu continued to pursue his prey, lowering his body, he approached Feng Jun and pounded him, with strong winds being stirred up by his fierce movements.

“Iron Body!”

Feng Jun’s hands were already badly mutilated by then, completely defenseless at the coming fists, so he could only squat with a howl. Suddenly, the part of his skin not covered by clothes, all turned to blackish grey in an instant, and he looked as if he was wearing heavy black armour!

“Boom!”

This time Shi Mu pounded heavily on Feng Jun’s stomach, and the blackish grey skin vanished in an blink of the eye, while Feng Jun’s body was sent flying backward for five zhang[B], slamming into the ground and stirring up a large amount of dust.

Then, the hall turned so silent that one could hear a pin drop.

[A] - This is a type of sword-like weapon. Imagine a sword, you have a handle, but at the other side, where there should be a point, it is flat. (it looks like a measuring ruler with a handle [note, these can be any size, but are generally the size of a claymore]) Rulers can have sharp edges, but they don't have to. (so It might be a blunt weapon or it might be a slash weapon, it could also be both)

[B] - This is a little over 16 & ½ meters. Now that's what I call a punch. XD

Chapter 23 - The Top Practitioner

Feng Jun stumbled over the edge of the ring, then managed, with much difficulty, to steady himself. He was about to speak, when blood gushed out from his mouth and his whole body dropped to the ground. “Thud!” A loud noise.

“Jun Er! You guys be quick, and take him to the treatment room in the back!”

A figure immediately dashed to Feng Jun and stuffed a pill into his mouth, and then gave his orders, burning in a frenzy of rage.

This was exactly Leng Fengchan checking Feng Jun’s conditions.

The other Tian Lu practitioners were at quite a loss as to what to do, confused by what had happened right in front of them; It wasn’t until they were given orders, that they came to themselves and hurriedly went to look after Feng Jun. But others were still frozen with fear.

Compared with his Seven Cuts in One Breath - of the Thirteen Series of Gale Force Blade - Shi Mu’s accomplished level Stone-Breaking Fists brought them an even more dreadful shock, that made their hair rise in fear!

After all, reaching the level of Seven Cuts in One Breath in the Thirteen Series of Gale Force Blade could only be counted as a small accomplishment.

It must be noted that there are four levels of accomplishment, or stages, in every technique: beginner, intermediate, advanced, and consummate.

Generally speaking, a person will need two to three months before one can be said to know how to use a skill. Only at this point would one be considered at the beginner stage.

To reach the intermediate stage, one has to become skilled at using the technique. Most people take a year or two, on average, to reach the intermediate stage.

The advanced stage can take much longer to reach, and some have been known to take over a decade to reach the advanced stage.

As for the final stage, the consummation stage of a skill, some, less talented practitioners, may spend entire lives practicing without even coming close to it.

The previously mentioned amount of time, only apply to Practitioner Techniques. For Houtian techniques, even more time and energy will need to be invested. Consequently, some Houtian Warriors can only reach a low level of accomplishment in their Houtian techniques. Li Canghai is a great example of this: he knew he had no hope of reaching the consumate level in his Houtian techniques, so he decided to devote his life to practising the Gale Force Blade and the Stone-Breaking Fist, and only reached the advanced level, far from consummation in either technique, only after ten years of hard training. Even so, his skills had made him rank top among the four clubs' instructors.

Meanwhile, Shi Mu, at such a young age, without inspiring his real qi, had reached the advanced stage in two techniques! Only someone who was ignorant about martial arts could be indifferent at such a scene..

Wouldn't this mean that Shi Mu is a genius among geniuses?

Li Canghai's face went through many emotions, apparently trying hard to control himself. Then he said with a light cough, "Well, I think we may be assuming wrongly. Actually, my student Shi Mu has probably not reached the advanced stage in the Stone-Breaking Fist, it is only that he was born with enormous strength, so it only looks like that he has the power of the advanced stage."

"Exactly! If he had reached the advanced stage in the Stone-Breaking Fists, his hands should have been fair and crystal-clear, and each punch should have made a metallic sound." The red-faced instructor was enlightened suddenly by Li Canghai's explanation.

"Indeed, if he can really reach the advanced stage in the Stone-Breaking Fist before twenty, he would be a genius capable of stirring the whole city."

"But even so, the lad's was born with such brutal strength, and that should not be overlooked. As long as he keeps training it, he'll easily defeat any one of the practitioner level. Besides, he's so young, as long as he can acquire qi-sensing, there's a good chance he can be a top warrior among the acquired warriors."

This conversation between Li Canghai and the red-faced instructor made other instructors see light. Immediately people started to discuss the matter, some still casting admiring glances at Shi Mu, as if he was a legendary figure who only existed in imagination.

"So now that Shi Mu has won again, is there anyone who wants to challenge him? If not, the Liu Feng club will be the champion in this year's competition." The officer once again ascended to the ring and refereed the match. As he pronounced the result, his eyes, looking at Shi Mu, grew increasingly warm and

admiring.

The announcement only brought out a dead silence below the ring.

In the direction of Fei Hong club, a malicious look was thrown to Shi Mu by Zhong Dong, the one with the Body of Thick Earth. Just as he was about to move forward, he was stopped by the long-bearded elder man again, who pressed on his shoulder disapprovingly, which made Zhong Dong's body unable to move an inch. Simultaneously, the elder man muttered to his ear,

"Even if you use all your skills you'll probably be defeated by his advanced stage Stone-Breaking Fists. After all, if it's only for a competition, it's not worthwhile to offend a promising warrior."

The dark, thin youth was had a very reluctant look upon hearing this.

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Half a day later, the news that Liu Feng club had won the first and Shi Mu had became the new top practitioner had spread across the whole city. Big families and some less powerful sects also began to collect information about the competition and Shi Mu.

"So Shi Mu is now the top practitioner?"

In Auntie Zhen's manor, Shi Yuhuan was gaping at the note her family had got, full of suspicion. While Auntie Zhen was deep in thought.

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In the Jin Family's manor.

A middle-aged man was reprimanding a youth. The youth's face looked that that of a horse and similar to the man's.

"Tian Er, I heard that you are now trying to challenge Shi Mu with some of your cousins, stop your attempt right now! This is the order your grandfather gave to me personally, follow it even if you are reluctant! After all, Shi Mu didn't win the match by sleeping away the competition."

The youth named Jin Tian could only relunctantly obey his father, however, he was full of resent.

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In the Wu Family manor, the three Wu brothers also got together to discuss the matter.

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In the manor of Feng City's sheriff, the previous military officer who was referee in that competition was now reporting something to an elder man in glamorous clothes, full of reverence.

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In a secret room of Jin Gang club, a conversation was going on.

“Tian Hao, tell me the truth, have you inspired your blood?” Uncle Xu asked anxiously.

“You’ve asked me the same question a hundred times, uncle, my answer is still the same: I myself am unclear about the matter! Only that I felt my body burning when I used the Blazing Spear that day, so I just naturally contolled the flame.” Looking down at a certain spear art book of blue covers, Wang Tianhao answered, rolling his eyes.

“Haha, that’s it! That’s the reason why you father sent you here to learn the Blazing Spear art. Your spear art is a stimulus to your blood, so much so that it can quicken your progress of growing to be a bloodline warrior.” Uncle Xu was overjoyed at the news.

“So that means that I’m not a genius at all, it’s only thanks to my ancestor’s blood that I am able to use Houtian techniques when I’m still a practitioner.” Hearing this Wang Tianhao face dropped.

“My foolish nephew, that you are able to inspire your blood already proves that you are a real genius. You know, even though the Wang Family is famous for its bloodline warriors, throughout the clan, down from your ancestors, among hundreds of your people, only three or four has inspired their blood! And you are the first in your generation. Can’t you see the genius in that? From tomorrow on, I’ll teach you the most difficult parts of the Blazing Spear art to you, personally, so that you can defeat all in the enrollment test to Kai Yuan Martial Arts School.” Uncle Xu answered, grinning from ear to ear.

“So, I can defeat Shi Mu as long as I learn the more difficult part?” Wang Tianhao was still a little unconvinced.

“Haha, unless Shi Mu is also a bloodline warrior, you can definitely beat him.” Uncle Xu replied with a hearty smile.

“With such a brutal strength, how can you tell that he is not a bloodline warrior?” Wang Tianhao blinked his eyes and proposed the abrupt question.

“Well...” Uncle Xu’s laughter stopped.

“I’m also curious to know this very thing.”

Just then, a third voice was heard in the secret room.

Chapter 24 - The Messenger

“Who is it?”

Uncle Xu turned around, terrified, his arms crossed in front of his chest, looking in the direction of the voice.

Now, in the corner of the room, an inconspicuous dumpy older man was seen standing in the shade. He wore a grey robe and was looking at Uncle Xu and his nephew with a poker face.

Wang Tianhao was more astonished at the sudden appearance of the old man than his uncle, for he had been the one that faced the direction of the shade; but he did not see the grey-robed man until the latter made his voice heard. Could it be that the elder man knew how to make himself invisible?

“The secret art of Hiding in the Shade? May I know of whom I have the honor to see here? Can I help you with something?” Uncle Xu asked, pronouncing each word slowly and clearly, while staring fixedly at the elder man.

“No need to be flustered, I am Han Wu from Kai Yuan Martial Arts School.” The dumpy old man laughed in a low voice, and then lifted his hand quickly. Consequently, a silver light dashed at Uncle Xu who caught it with a simple movement of his arm, acting almost automatically. The light turned out to be an identity card made of silver, as big as a palm and it was shaped like a triangle. On one side of the card there carved two characters “Kai Yuan”, and on the other, only one, “Wu”[1].

“The identity card of Kai Yuan, so you really do come from Kai Yuan Martial Arts School. But I’m wondering, what brings you to my home?” After a careful observation, Uncle Xu let out a sigh of relief.

“As an Houtian Warrior, I’m guessing Brother Xu knows about the tide of blood?” Lifting one of his arms, the dumpy elder man said slowly.

Suddenly a puffing sound was heard.

The part of his arm that was bare began to exude some green patterns, each moving like a living thing. Then grasses began to sprout on his skin to the height of a cun! What a scary sight!

“Grass grown from flesh, and the wild tide of blood? I understand now, you are a messenger from the school.” Seeing this, Uncle Xu first blurted out his findings, and then showed an expression of sudden enlightenment.

However, Wang Tianhao was still completely in the dark.

“Hehe, it seems that there’s no need for me to explain why your nephew can inspire his ancestor’s blood without difficulty. I’m here to deliver a message from the alliance of the five martial arts schools’ elders: now it is certain that the tide of the wild blood has come, so all martial arts school will open their Blood Halls, and send messengers to seek every possible blood warrior from all practitioners. Once a practitioner is identified as a real promising blood warrior, he can get enrolled into one of the schools without taking the enrollment test. Also, he will be provided with many more resources than ordinary practitioners.” The look of the stumpy elder man grew serious as he pronounced his message.

“So the Blood Halls have really been opened! Then the three big sects[2] will also open their gates, I guess?” Uncle Xu murmured. It was difficult to gauge his mood now.

“Why, you want to send your good nephew to the sects? Don’t forget who gave the Wang Family their title of the Clan of Blood Warriors, and who have been providing them with money and food for the past three hundred years?” Hearing this Han Wu reproached with a stern face.

“Certainly not! We of the Wang clan have been protected by the court, so whenever there is a blood warrior in our family we shall send him to the Blood Hall as soon as possible.” Uncle Xu reacted in no time and offered his flattery.

“As long as you remember that! Now let’s test and see if young master Wang has really inspired his blood of Blaze, and how pure his blood is.” Hearing the respectful promise Han Wu eased up on his stern look and produced an emerald green wooden bowl in his hand by just turning his palm up.

“Can I ask one thing, as a bloodline warrior, which one can offer me the best chance to make progress, the three sects or the Blood Hall?” Finally Wang Tianhao perceived their conversation, and then calmly asked his question.

“Though the three sects do all they can to make themselves a mystery to those of us not in a sect and so are their actual strengths are unknown, they treat bloodline warriors casually, paying less attention to them than our martial arts schools. After all, there are not only warriors in the sects, but also magicians who cost more resources, so only a small part of the resources can be saved to supply the bloodline warriors. However, we martial arts schools have done much research on some famous bloodline warriors, and have created many peculiar martial arts that can add power to one’s blood. So, what do we do? We just add wings to a tiger to make it stronger. You’ll never regret it once you come to our

Blood Halls.” To Wang Tianhao, Han Wu explained with much patience and amiable manners.

“If so I’ll enter the Hall.” Wang Tianhao gave a casual nod after hearing this.

Uncle Xu only twitched his mouth but still was unable to utter any disapproving words.

“Haha, that’s quite sensible, young master Wang! Now please drip one drop of your blood into the bowl.” The stumpy old man laughed delightedly and passed his green bowl to Wang Tianhao, who immediately bit his finger and made it bleed, then one drop of his blood fell into the bowl.

The drop disappeared into the bottom after a flash, then one puff of red fog rushed out of the bowl, and rose to the height of a half chi and turned into blazes after a swirl. The blazes did not seem to be dispersing.

“You are indeed a promising bloodline warrior of the fire, and the purity of your blood belongs to the intermediate level. As for the details, I’m afraid they can only be made clear at the Blood Hall after some professional tests. But still, congratulations, with an average level you are entitled to get enrolled and be provided with top grade resources from the school.” Han Wu said this after a shock, but he soon became overjoyed with his find. Although the previous scene of his awakening his blood seemed quite enigmatic, be he actually only ranked at the eighth grade of the elementary level[3]. Otherwise he wouldn’t have been a mere messenger. But if he could really bring a bloodline warrior of the intermediate level back to his school he must be offered a high reward.

“Of the intermediate level? That’s fair enough.” Wang Tianhao’s seemingly calm face concealed a grain of excitement. After all, there was only one blood

warrior among his ancestors, who made his family famous with an intermediate level, the sixth grade.

“Well, if you can only rank among the intermediate blood warriors, I wonder which rank does your defeater belongs.” Han Wu then became deep in thought.

“What? You mean there are other messengers in the city?” Han Wu’s remark made Uncle Xu quite confused.

“Yes, indeed, I have one fellow companion in the city. He should have been on an errand to another city, but he offered to come here as soon as he heard about Shi Mu’s enormous strength. We two both think that Shi Mu is likely to be a bloodline warrior too, considering his amazing fights in this tide of wild blood.” The stumpy elder man answered with a smile.

Hearing this Wang Tianhao and Uncle Xu were both astonished, gaping at each other.

.....

At the backyard of Liu Feng dojo.

Shi Mu was staring at a wooden stick that was cut into pieces, as well as an ordinary long knife half of which was inserted fully into the ground. For a while he was unable to close his mouth.

“So this is the Blade-Throwing Art?”

“Exactly. Though it’s not much to look at, you just saw my ten years of experience in it. The key is to grasp the right moment to apply the art, as well as the way you throw it. It is quite tricky. You may lose your weapon if the thrown knife misses its target. But ever since I accomplished the art, I have used it three times and not once let my enemy escape.” Li Canghai said in a proud tone.

“That’s brilliant! It really does catch an opponent off guard. Please, impart the basics to me.” Shi Mu finally came to himself and resumed his normal color, asking with a bow.

Actually the sharpness of the art far surpassed what he expected now.

“Hehe, since you’ve already won the championship for our Liu Feng dojo, then I won’t hold anything from you, now listen, I’ll tell you its essence...”

It took Li Canghai a good hour to explain the key points, meanwhile he kept picking up his long knife and performing the movements personally for Shi Mu, repeating each movement until Shi Mu began to get the hang of it.

Just as Shi Mu was about to practise more by himself, suddenly a practitioner of their dojo came into the yard and hurriedly told Li Canghai, “Master, there’s someone claiming to be the blood messenger out at the gate. He asked for Shi Mu.”

“The blood messenger?” Li Canghai was astonished at the title.

“Instructor Li, do you know what a blood messenger is?” Shi Mu was somewhat surprised.

“I’ll tell you later, now you go and see the man, maybe your chance has come.” Li Canghai’s look changed for several times successively, and only said this after a long sigh.

“My chance?” Shi Mu was now suspicious, blinking his eyes.

“Exactly. I can only tell you that the messenger comes from one of the five martial arts schools. If he thinks you are promising, you can get enrolled into the martial art school immediately, and also be offered resources inaccessible to ordinary practitioners.” Li Canghai’s voice contained much authoritativeness now.

“Since master has said so I’ll see him.” The news came so unexpected. After giving it some thought Shi Mu answered his instructor decidedly.

The two then left the yard for the gate of the dojo directly.

As soon as Shi Mu entered the hall behind the gate, he saw two men in a conversation; one is the red-faced instructor Min, while the other was a red-robed man, most of whose face was covered by a straw hat.

“Brother Li, Shi Mu, so you have come. This is Messenger Zhao from the Blood Hall.” Seeing the two coming in, instructor Min greeted them and made the introduction cheerfully.

“Since the messenger from the Blood Hall has come personally, it seems that ‘the event’ has taken place?” Li Canghai walked forward a few steps, greeted the messenger and asked him seriously.

“Instructor Li is really no ordinary warrior, then I’ll waste no more time exchanging pleasantries. I want to test this practitioner to see if he will really be a bloodline warrior in future. If so, I’ll bring him back to the Hall and make him a powerful warrior.” The man in straw hat lifted his head slightly; an exceedingly cold square face was beneath it. He made the announcement straightforwardly.

“Alright, if the boy’s chance has come I won’t bar the way. Shi Mu, just do as Messenger Zhao asks.” Li Canghai nodded his agreement.

Giving the straw hat man a brief look, Shi Mu also nodded silently.

It seemed that the straw hat man did not care a bit about their response. He took out an emerald green bowl from his sleeves and demanded, “Little boy, drop one drop of your blood into it, and we’ll see if you are a bloodline warrior.”

After taking a deep breath Shi Mu drew his long knife from his waist, and cut swiftly at his finger. A wound of a cun’s length appeared suddenly, and a drop of blood instantly fell into the bowl.

Notes:

[1] Wu: The character has the meaning of being powerful and able to practise martial arts in Chinese.

[2] The three big sects: The author does not explain further which sects they are in this chapter, but will do so in further chapters.

[3] The eighth grade: The smaller the number of the grade in each level, the more powerful one’s blood will be. The author does not specify how many grades altogether are there in each level, but probably ten.

Chapter 25 - The Waste Blood of the Stone Monkey

The blood drop disappeared after a flash.

A moment later, the wooden bowl trembled briefly, and a “whooshing” sound was heard when a small puff of white fog rushed out of the bottom. After swirling for a bit, the white fog became quite dense and eventually turned into a mini monkey, whose body was curled up and whose eyes were tightly closed, as vivid as though it was living. But there were white lines faintly visible on the surface of its body: a bad sign.

“Why, it’s not even on the list, only the blood of the stone monkey. The most worthless one even among other waste bloods. I truely wasted my time coming here! I’ll go now. Please excuse me.” The straw hat man observed the mini white monkey and the lines on its surface closely, then declared his disappointment with a stern face.

He then waved one arm to disperse the white fog. Taking back his wooden bowl, he nodded goodbye to the two instructors and left the hall. From start to finish, he didn’t even look at Shi Mu once.

Seeing this, the two instructors’ faces fell, and Shi Mu also sensed something undesirable from their looks.

“One more word, if I were you, I’d stop dreaming about the enrollment test to Kai Yuan Martial Arts School. With your waste blood, you’ll only be a fruitless seed.”

The straw heat man’s stony voice came over from the gate. Then, nothing

more was heard from him.

“The waste blood of the stone monkey? Master Li, what does he mean by this? Is it that I haven’t inspired my blood or the already inspired blood was useless?” Shi Mu’s eyes blinked as he turned his head to seek an answer from Li Canghai.

“Well, Let me think how to explain this...” Li Canghai murmured subconsciously, his face sullen.

“I’ll tell you the truth. Shi Mu, it’s only that you don’t have good luck. You have inspired your blood, but the blood was a waste blood of the stone monkey. Better to not have inspired it! You know, there are surely some blood warriors who can make amazing progress with inspired blood, at a speed far higher than ordinary warriors. But there are also some who inspired a useless, or, let’s say, a counterproductive blood, that will be an obstacle, creating more difficulty in the future. So this is called a waste blood. And the one you inspired is the most widely known one, it can make one’s skin rather thick and one’s strength enormous at the practitioner level, but once he acquires qi-sensing, the blood will obstruct the passages through which his energy circulates, so the gathering speed of his real qi will not even equal an ordinary man’s . Now that I’ve explained fully to you, it’s up to you to decide your future path.”

In a little while, there were only Shi Mu and Li Canghai at the hall.

Shi Mu’s heart sank after hearing instructor Min’s words.

“Master Li.....”

“Shi Mu, you can quit the enrollment test now. As far as I know, all those who

have been known to have waste blood are not enrolled in any martial arts school. After all, schools want practitioners who are able to become Houtian Warriors or, even better, Xiantian Saints. A practitioner who is unable to reach the next level means nothing to the schools." Li Canghai knew from Shi Mu's looks that his student still held a gleam of hope, and so he tried to break his hope and told him to face the reality.

"To tell you the truth, I am disappointed myself. I had thought that I could have cultivated a powerful warrior myself but never once had I expected this result. I should have known this much earlier, for only those with the blood of the stone monkey have such brutal force to accomplish the Stone-Breaking Fists in a few months."

There were apparently some regrets in his last words.

"Could it be said that it is impossible for me to be a powerful warrior in any way?" Repressing the coldness and depression in his heart firmly, Shi Mu gritted his teeth and asked the question, knowing that it was the last time he would get an answer to this question.

"When you start to learn a certain technique of the Houtian level, you'll find the gathering speed of your real qi will be much lower than others, not even nearing half of the average speed. Then you'll taste real despair. As your 'former' instructor, I'll send you my last piece of advice. Just take it as a dream, the thing about being a powerful warrior. Go back home and lead the life of an ordinary person. Yes, don't come to Liu Feng dojo anymore. Although we teach when we are paid, but for someone of waste blood, we won't teach even when paid. Otherwise, we'll only be a laughingstock to other dojos." Li Canghai finished his remark, his face expressionless, his voice stony. After a pat on Shi Mu's shoulder, he also turned and left the hall.

Shi Mu stood frozen to the ground. After a while, he walked slowly to the nearest chair and sat on it. His face was a completely dumbstruck one.

“Haha.....Ha.....Yesterday I was the top practitioner in the city, and today I became the waste blood of the stone monkey, that’s so funny.....Haha.....”

There came Shi Mu’s wild laughter from the hall, breaking the silence.

Li Canghai was still not far from the hall. Hearing the laughter behind him, his looks changed only slightly, and then he went on without hesitation.

After some time, Shi Mu left Feng Liu dojo for his suburban manor directly with a seemingly cool face.

Several days later.

The news that the blood tide had begun, that the blood messengers were seen in Feng City and found three blood practitioners soon circulated through the city, making a stir among the city’s clans and gangs.

Meanwhile, the news that a messenger had visited Liu Feng dojo and found Shi Mu to be of the waste blood was also spread out. This astonished many, but also overjoyed some.

.....

In the manor of the Jin Family, at a small hall.

Auntie Zhen was questioning a man who seemed to be in his fifties and extremely austere.

“Big Brother, I just heard that you have given out all the ten newly obtained Qi Ling pills, and the one which should have been Shi Mu’s was given to Jin Tian?”

“Yes, I did give Shi Mu’s pill to my nephew. Sister Seven, I was just looking for you. Listen, here is a note of a million liang of silver offered by Brother Five. Give the money to Shi Mu.” The austere man was none other than the current leader of the Jin Clan, who answered Auntie Zhen’s query unhurriedly, and then passed her a silver note.

“With just one note he dared to buy a Qi Ling pill? Big brother, are you really regarding Shi Mu as a fool?” Auntie Zhen swept away the note with a hand, raged even into laughter.

“Hehe, even if he’s not a fool before, now he is one indeed. We Jin Family don’t buy Qi Ling pills as easily as blowing off dust, why should we waste it on a worthless fool?” The austere man did not care the least about Auntie Zhen’s protest, answering coldly, but his hand now taken back.

“Even if he is a worthless fool, I have promised ‘that fool’, so I’ll never eat my word. I’ll see father and let him judge.” Auntie Zhen retorted without the least intention of giving up.

“Calling for our father? Sister Seven, let me tell you the truth. It was father who ordered this.” The leader of the Jin Clan said causally.

“What? Father ordered this?” Auntie Zhen’s look changed.

“Remember, You are a Jin, not a Shi, and your husband was married into our family. One pill doesn’t matter that much, but your deeds will make us a laughingstock to other clans. Sister Seven, please be more mindful of your own daughter, Yu Huan. Since the blood tide has begun, messengers from the three sects will definitely show themselves, and I’m trying every way to contact them, this may be an excellent thing to Yu Huan.” Speaking of the talented girl, the leader of the Jin Clan finally eased up a little.

“Humph, since it’s father’s idea, then I won’t disobey. As for Yu Huan, Big brother please rest assured and mind your own business.” Auntie Zhen’s look changed for several times, and eventually, she stomped and turned to leave.

“Hold on, take the note with you.” The leader shouted out.

“This little sum of money? I can pay it myself, just take it back to Brother Five.” Auntie Zhen went out of the hall in an instant, not even turning her head once.

At the door of the hall, Yu Huan was waiting for her mother. As soon as she saw her, she came up and asked, “Mother, what’s the result? How’s the conversation going between you and Big Uncle? Can we have that pill back for my brother?”

“I’m afraid not, the order was made by your paternal grandfather. There’s nothing more I can do. But I’ll tell Butler Cheng to send Shi Mu three million liang of silver.” Auntie Zhen answered with a sigh.

“Mother, grandfather was so unfair!” Yu Huan was very displeased at the result.

“It’s hard to say whether your grandfather and Big Uncle are right or wrong this time. To give a Qi Ling pill to a hopeless practitioner will definitely bring shame to the Jin Clan. It’s my fault this time, it’s me that failed to meet my promise.” Auntie Zhen was full of regret but had no alternative.

.....

At the backyard of Tian Wang Temple, Feng Li and Gao Yuan stood gaping at each other listening to a well-informed person relate the news that had stirred the city. The man apparently made money by selling information.

After a while, Feng Li waved him off.

“That’s quite unexpected! That Shi Mu should have the stone monkey blood! That explains a lot - why he could have beat other practitioners of his level. Do you remember when we asked him to be our gang’s leader? He didn’t even deserve that!” Gao Yuan said with a grin, somewhat gloating over Shi Mu’s fate.

“Exactly! I never thought Brother Shi could have useless blood, that’s a shame. Otherwise even for an ordinary man, that strength must be of use in practicing martial arts. Now that we have to find a new protector.” Unlike Gao Yuan, Feng Li lamented over the loss of a powerful guardian.

.....

“This Shi Mu should be a trash! I had thought of challenging him at that time! “

In Fei Hong dojo, Zhong Dong twitched his mouth after reading a note; he then tore the note to pieces and continued to exercise his newly learned fist art.

He could have challenged Shi Mu's Stone-Breaking Fists if he had accomplished this fist art.

.....

At the secret room in the Wu manor, wild laughter roared.

"The inspired blood should be the waste blood of the stone monkey! Awesome! Now the Jin Family won't even look at the bastard, father, I'd like to have someone make him a cripple." Wu Hua laughed wildly at the pale man with him.

"No problem. A worthless bastard deserves no scruples of our Wus. And your Big Uncle and I have just found that to exploit the gadget's power, we must have the ugly girl's blood. Just wait for a bit longer, your third uncle will go personally and take the girl back so that you can avenge yourself by the way." The pale man looked at Wu Hua, full of fondness, answering without thinking.

"Awesome! I'll go with third uncle and see with my own eyes the scene when Shi Mu's legs are broken." The proud youth laughed with glee.

Chapter 26 - Acquire Qi-Sensing

In a bedroom of Shi Mu's suburban manor.

Sitting in a chair, Shi Mu was staring at a small bottle on his desk, giving it a thoughtful look.

At this moment someone knocked the door several times.

"Come in." Shi Mu said briefly, without even raising his head.

The door was pushed open, and a pretty girl came in with a wooden tray. She then put a bowl of hot meat porridge on the desk, apparently very proficient at doing this job.

"Miss Zhong, why are you here again? I've told you many times, just leave the work to the servants." Until then, Shi Mu looked up and shook his head at the girl. The girl was Zhong Xiu.

Ever since she came to live in the manor, she had been trying to show her gratitude to Shi Mu for taking her in, so to bring tea and food to Shi Mu's room became her way of showing it.

"Brother Shi, you haven't eaten anything today, please take a short rest and eat something. I stewed the porridge especially for you." Zhong Xiu said in a compassionate tone. Her bearing was gentle and soft despite the startling blue birthmark on her forehead.

“I haven’t eaten anything for a day? I didn’t even realize that so much time had passed! Then let me taste the porridge.” Shi Mu was surprised at first, then answered with a bitter smile. He took the bowl, filled with meat porridge, and ate up the contents like a wolf, letting out a sigh of contentedness.

“Miss Zhong, the porridge is so delicious! I never thought you would be so good at cooking! Your future husband’s so lucky.”

“Now you are making fun of me. Who would set his eyes on me after seeing my ugly face? ….. But if you really enjoy the food I’ll cook more for you later on.” Hearing Shi Mu’s praise, Zhong Xiu’s face blushed, the fair skin growing pink. She answered with a sense of pleasure.

“If you really will, I.....”

Shi Mu smiled faintly at the girl, and was about to say something when fast footsteps were heard from outside, and then Zhang Suo burst into the room and said,

“Young master Shi, Butler Cheng of the Jin family is here and he asks to see you.”

“Old Cheng? Well, lets not make our guests wait.” Hearing this Shi Mu narrowed his eyes, and answered without hesitation, then he put the little bottle on the desk into his sleeves and then strode out of the room. Zhang Suo following behind him.

Zhong Xiu paused for a moment, hesitating, before she decided to follow

them.

After a moment, Shi Mu was already at the gate of his manor, looking at the silver note passed by Jin Cheng in contempt, wearing on his face a sullen look.

“So, I’m not getting my Qi Ling pill and am now offered three million liang of silver[A] instead. Excellent. One pill costs at most a million in the mark, so I’ll still earn much.”

“Well, young master Shi, madam has done all she can, she even went to the Jin Family’s manor personally, making a scene there just for your pill. But it was the patriarch, madam’s father, who made the order, so madam had no more ways of refuting it. Even the three million liang is offered by madam herself. Also, she asked me to tell you that though she could not get you another Qi Ling pill, but the first choice she offered to you last time, at your father’s funeral, is still within her power.” The blue-robed old man explained to Shi Mu, coughing slightly.

By the way, the butler had always considered Shi Mu a nice young fellow, and also felt sad for him when he found out that the youth’s inspired blood was worthless.

“Ah, so it was the patriarch’s order, good to know... I’m sorry I brought trouble to Auntie Zhen.” The news came as quite a shock to Shi Mu, and he only took the notes after sitting there for a moment.

“As long as young master Shi understands! Also, madam has predicted that some of the younger Jin Family members may do something to embarrass you in the following period, so you’d better stay here and not go to the city.” After some thought, Jin Cheng gave Shi Mu a warning warning.

“Alright, I understand. Please send my best regards to Auntie Zhen.” Shi Mu gave a brief nod.

“Then I’ll retire. Oh, by the way, if young master Shi still wants to pursue his dream of being a warrior, I have an idea for you. “ Seeing Shi Mu’s unchanged calmness, the blue-robed old man cracked a pleased smile, and then unexpectedly took out a paper note from his sleeve, handing it over to Shi Mu, then he left the manor with graceful steps. Meanwhile, Shi Mu remained at the gate and gazed at the old man’s figure until it disappeared, still holding the three silver notes and the paper in his hand.

From start to finish, Zhong Xiu and Zhang Suo stood beside them, listening to the conversation, Zhong Xiu had a worried look came to her face. While, Zhang Suo stood there with a concerned yet serious face.

.....

That night, Shi Mu sat on his bed studying the little bottle in his hand, his legs crossed and his eyes gleeming.

“The waste blood of the stone monkey?”

“HAA, I refuse to believe that my blood is waste blood!”

“... Mother, please don’t worry, since I’ve already decided to be the most powerful warrior in the world, I won’t quit midway. What does a waste blood count as? I’m not a cripple!”

After shouting into the air, Shi Mu opened the lid of the bottle without

hesitation. A white pill rolled out and he immediately put it in his mouth.

The pill had seemed to be as hard as iron, but once taken in, it immediately became soft and sweet, as though it were sugar. After taking a few breaths, the pill turned into a fluid that was easily swallowed. Suddenly, burning energy began to circulate in the area in and beneath his stomach.

“Boom!”

After hearing a thunderous noise in his head, Shi Mu felt his physical senses become much more acute than before; simultaneously, he felt his body itch all over unbearably.

He instantly sat cross-legged on his bed, closed his eyes, and relaxed his face.

.....

At the same time, in a secret room in the Jin Family manor.

A middle-aged man was shouting abuse at a youth looking quite similar to himself.

“You hopeless wretch! You wastrel! You say Shi Mu is a fool? In my eyes you are even worse than a fool! You are a good-for-nothing! This is the second time you’ve taken a Qi Ling pill. Didn’t you say you were fully confident of acquiring qi-sensing before? And now what happened? Are you even my son? If I had known of this earlier, I wouldn’t have paid so much to get the pill from my sister! Better to leave it for that bastard Shi Mu! Then I could at least have saved my money!”

The middle-aged man grew increasingly angry. He slapped the youth on his face and rushed out of the room, furious.

“Shi Mu!”

Stroking his swollen face, Jin Tian gritted his teeth and shouted out Shi Mu’s name.

.....

Half a day later, Shi Mu pressed one of his hands to his stomach, feeling the warm qi faintly beneath his hand.

So this is qi-sensing!

If it were not for the help of Qi Ling pill, he would not have sensed his qi at all.

But now, as long as he could obtain a book on Houtian Arts, he could move on and begin to train his real qi that belonged to Houtian Warriors and above!

To some extent, only at this moment could he begin to be called a real warrior.

After a while, Shi Mu directed his attention to the paper note sent by Jin Cheng. He took it out from his sleeve, unfolded it, and began to read the words.

“In the three districts of the frontier fortress. The Hall of Jun Wu[1], a military

school for warriors.”

Notes:

[1] The Hall of Jun Wu: “Jun” means soldiers and military affairs in Chinese, while “Wu” has been explained in the last chapter, meaning martial arts, force, strength, *etc.*

[A] - I would like to point out that 3,000,000 liang of silver is a REDICULOUS amount of silver. It is equal to 165.3 tons(US) of silver (at 2,000 pounds per ton(US) that is 330,700 pounds of silver) and this butler just handed Shi Mu a note for 165.3 tons(US) tons of silver.....

Chapter 27 - The Ape in the Dream

One month quickly passed.

The Kai Yuan Martial Arts School finally announced the date of the enrollment test, and the venue was Guang Ling Valley in the eastern suburb of the city.

As soon as the news was made public, all the practitioners in the Kai Yuan Prefecture were excited, and a constant stream of practitioners could be seen flowing into the city.

Meanwhile, the sheriff of Feng City issued an exceedingly strict martial law which stipulated that all practitioners should behave themselves and not create disturbances in the city. The law was to be in effect from three months before till three months after the enrollment test. Offenders would be punished according to their misconducts: lighter offences should be punished by forcing the offender to wear heavy armor for the rest of the period and offenders of heavy crimes would be executed right on the spot.

Groups of rather imposing armoured soldiers began to appear at various streets of the city, all armed with a spear and a bow.

In response to this, gangs and clans also began to manage their members strictly, forbidding them to trifle with practitioners from other districts.

On the other side of the city, Shi Mu did not leave his suburban manor during the past month, practicing blade and fist arts during the day, and sleeping soundly through the night. He appeared as though he had really thrown away all

thoughts of taking part in the enrollment test.

.....

A young white ape was having a good time with some other ten grey apes on a mountain, jumping and chasing each other over the hilltops.

At dusk, when the sun began to set, the grey apes all went to a huge stone cave to sleep, while the white one was still quite energetic: he remained outside the cave, and climbed up a large tree on a certain hilltop without any difficulty. Once he reached the top he sat down on a small branch and looked up to watch the silver moon in the sky, sitting completely motionless.

Then a shocking scene took place.

The white ape had just barely sat on the branch for a moment, when glittering white lights began to appear faintly in the night sky, flickering like glowworms.

The white ape blinked his eyes, which turned his originally black and white eyes into golden eyes!

“Puff!”

At this time, though there was no wind, the dense dots of white light began to move by themselves, flooding toward the ape’s golden eyes like a never ending ocean of light.

An inexplicable sense of comfort penetrated the ape’s body, making it grin

broadly and dance on the branch with excitement.

“Peng!” A loud noise was heard.

Shi Mu woke up in his bed, sweating so much his shirt was soaked. His face was ghastly pale, as though he had been exercising fiercely.

“The seventh time! What is this dream trying to tell me? I’ve had the same dream for seven days in a row, I know somethings up now!”

Shi Mu wiped the sweat on his forehead, and his eyes gave off a lackluster appearence while he murmured to himself.

The strange dream had been occurring every night for the past seven days. In the dream, he would always turn into a white ape, jumping in the woods and chasing after his companions, as if he was the leader of the whole pack.

But the previous six dreams had always snapped when he - then the white ape - had gone to rest with his companions in the cave; but this time was different, this time he was left outside the cave and subsequently climbed to a branch. That was when the strange scene occurred.

“What is this about? Could it be that the blood of the stone monkey is causing trouble inside my body? It’s possible, because I am dreaming of an ape. It never happened before I got Qi-Sensing….. Is it possible that my break-through is the cause of this?”

Shi Mu sank into a thoughtful mood.

Just then, he looked up and was shocked to find that the paper windows, which should have been sealed, had been blown open by the wind, at some unknown time, and moonlight was coming through, almost covering his entire bed.

Instantly, Shi Mu thought of the moon he had seen in his dream. His color changed as he made the association.

The next moment, he got out of his bed and walked to the door. He pushed it open and walked outside.

The yard outside his room was illuminated with moonlight. Raising his head, he looked up and saw a half moon in the sky. Tonight the moon was different than normal. He felt that it was more majestic and serene than normal. He stared at the half moon for a long time until, then he lowered his head and again glanced over the yard.

There was an old half-dead tree in one corner of the yard, it looked to be a little over seventeen meters tall, but few leaves remained on it. The tree was obviously dying.

Shi Mu narrowed his eyes and closely observed the half-dead tree for a while before an idea dawned on him, which drove him to walk up to the tree.

The thick truck was easy for Shi Mu to climb. With no difficulty he reached the top of the tree, and then rest his feet on a thick branch and knelt down on it. Raising his head, he realized that the posture he was taking now was exactly the same as that of the white ape’s posture in his dream!

Shi Mu could not believe his own eyes!

But from this angle, the moon seemed somewhat bigger and brighter. Shi Mu waited for something to take place.

But as time flowed on, nothing happened.

The youth smiled bitterly to himself, mocking his own foolishness. Who would wake up during the night and climb to a tree, imitating a beast instead of sleeping? If he was seen by the servants, they would think he was a lunatic.

With this thought on his mind, he prepared to jumped down from the branch.

But just as he was to move, a deafening sound boomed in his head, and his whole body froze, as if glued to the branch. His eyes were unwillingly locked on the moon.

Now, even Shi Mu had begun to question his own sanity!

Passing into a strange, dreamlike state, he turned into the white ape, from his dream, again, his eyes wide open to receive the falling glittering lights from the sky. At this moment, he felt intense burning and refreshing cooling in his eyes, both happening at once.

Unlike the previous dream, though his body was that of an ape, his mind was perfectly lucid, and he was cognizant of the fact that he was in a dream.

What frightened him was that, no matter how hard he tried, his body was unable to be moved an inch, as if his consciousness was now confined inside the ape's body. However terrified, Shi Mu could only stay like this on the branch.

After an unknown amount of time, the ape finally moved, after which he resumed his control of his own body.

Shi Mu was overjoyed by the fact he had control of his body again, but before he had time to try to move the ape's body, a loud booming sound made him subconsciously close his eyes.

The next moment, when he reopened his eyes, he was dumbstruck to find himself still on the branch, looking up at the sky. Only now he was in his human form and his shirt was wet with morning dew. The sky was now turning bright, the originally high moon only faintly visible.

Chapter 28 - Eyesight Mutation

Shi Mu was so shocked that he just sat there on the branch for a while. When he finally woke from his shock and looked down, what he saw below him was almost as crazy as the dream like event he just went through.

The originally half-dead tree was now covered with verdant leaves, its branches stretching out vigorously as though awakened from a long slumber.

Shi Mu gaped at the sight. Then he looked at the tree more closely. Only once he had assured himself that there was nothing obviously strange going on with the tree, other than it starting to revive, did he jump down.

“Peng!”

Shi Mu’s landed on the ground with a thud, stirring up a ring of dust. After letting out a long sigh, he looked up at the sky again, still full of wonder at the crazy events of the night.

At last he accepted the fact that he had actually stayed on the branch for most of a night. He still remembered how it felt to be unable to control his body, and he had a chill upon remembering that frightening scene.

A daydream!

This was the first time he had ever had a daydream.

Although technically speaking it was not a “daydream”, but only this word could describe the weirdness: his mind staying absolutely sober while his body was paralyzed. Also, when recalling the scene of when the ape’s eyes absorbed the glittering lights in the sky, Shi Mu touched his eyes involuntarily and rubbed them, feeling a vague sense of unease. But it seemed that, apart from some aches, there was nothing wrong with his body.

Pondering over the event, Shi Mu cast another glance around the yard.

“What...What’s this?”

He was struck dumb with amazement yet again.

Not until this moment, did he understand what had happened to his eyes. With just a small glance, he could clearly see an ant over twenty meters away from him on the grass. Directing his eyes to a corner of the yard, he saw a spider as big as a bean weaving its cobweb in the morning silence.

Shi Mu sucked in a cold breath, and then raised his head to look at a certain leaf on the big tree. The sight was astonishing: the light-coloured veins in the leaf were as clearly visible as the veins on his hand.

Shi Mu was dumbstruck.

After an unknown amount of time, he suddenly burst into wild laughter, shaking the manor as well as the servants sleeping in it. Awakening from their dreams, naturally the servants were very irritated, but as soon as they identified the source of the laughter, they could only go back to their sleep with muffled curses.

Shi Mu returned to his bedroom after laughing for a while. He closed the door and walked to his bed, and grabbed an iron knife sitting beside his bead. After a brief thought, he directed his eyes to a flickering candle - much of its body already burned - and gazed at it.

He shook his wrist lightly before a shadow of the knife blurred past the tip of the candle, which immediately went out.

Shi Mu gave the candle another cut, backhanded.

Piercing sounds whizzed through the air, while cold lights rolled over the desk like a tiny tornado. But the candle remained in its original spot on the desk.

Shi Mu smiled and pressed the edge of his knife into the desk.

“Peng!”

After trembling slightly, the candle split into 8 symmetrical pieces, each looking as if precisely cut with a ruler.

“Eight Cuts in One Breath! It is exactly as I suspected, but, if I could cut more precisely, the speed could also be raised. No worries, I’m still getting used to my newly acquired eyesight. Once I get adjusted to my enhanced eyesight, I might even be able to do Nine Cuts in One Breath.” Looking at the pieces of the candle, Shi Mu murmured to himself, his face taking on an impassioned glow.

Immediately after uttering the last word, he slashed his iron knife through the

air again. Each slash produced seven or eight knife shadows, that could be faintly seen in the air. Meanwhile, Shi Mu's eyes grew increasingly bright, and he took no breaks, practicing his techniques ceaselessly.

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Several days later, in the evening.

The windows of Shi Mu's bedroom were open, and faint moonlight scattered in front of the bed. Shi Mu was tossing about in his bed, unable to fall asleep.

After a sigh, he got up from his bed. Pushing open the door, he walked out of the room to bathe himself in the moonlight, as if trying to sense something.

After a moment, he scrambled up the verdant tree in the yard. Finding his posture, he squatted proficiently and began to look up at the sky.

After a short span of time, he trembled slightly, and his whole body was glued to the tree, unable to be moved.

The next moment, he turned into the white ape of his dream again, still squatting at the branch and absorbing the lights falling from the sky. He was well aware that he had no control of his own body now that he was the ape, but still he could not resist glancing over the surroundings at the edge of his vision.

"There should have been a green worm three chi away, but now it's not there. One, two, three...seventeen, there were nineteen leaves on the branch at my left hand yesterday in the dream, and twenty the day before yesterday. It seems then I'm not repeating the same dream. The dream also has its days and nights.

So time definitely flows in the dream.”

Thinking this, Shi Mu became increasingly confused. Ever since he acquired superhuman sight after seven successive dreams, he had not had the same weird dream again. But if there was moonlight during the latter half of the night, he could again return to the dream as the ape, if he climbed to the tree and squated on the branch. It was as though he was dragged into the dream, and forced to absorb the moonlight with the body of the white ape.

These days, whenever he woke up from the dream, his eyesight had grown better than before he dreamed. However, the gain was not as much as the first time. Even so, his current eyesight enabled him to clearly see the legs of a flying mosquito over thirty-three meters away with ease. If he stood on a tree and looked to the distance, he could even spot a worm’s hole in a big tree over a hundred and seventy-five meters away.

But he was not able to get into the dream during those days that the moon did not show herself. So he had a rough feeling that the white lights absorbed by the ape in the dream should be some type of essence from the moonlight, which was able to enhance one’s eyesight. Also, he calculated that if he continued to dream the dream which was beneficial to his eyes day by day, he could still enhance his eyesight greatly.

Shi Mu had another thought: if all of this went as smoothly as he thought, and his eyesight increased even more, maybe he should try to learn more kinds of martial arts.

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Three days later, in the hall of his manor, Shi Mu received two acquaintances.

“Brother Shi, this is the thing you ordered from Master Ma. He’s finished it and we’ve brought it for you. We also got you something special.”

The older one of the two passed two heavy packs to Shi Mu, smiling. He was none other than Feng Li of the Black Fox gang!

Chapter 29 - The Bow of Purple Steel

“Thanks, Brother Feng. This should pay for the rest of the cost of my order. Please take this an make sure it is the correct amount.” Shi Mu nodded, taking two silver notes out from his sleeve and passing them to Feng Li.

“Haha, should I doubt Brother Shi? By the way, are you really quitting the enrollment test?” Feng Li laughed and took the notes without even looking at them. He looked at Shi Mu inquisitively and asked him a question. The question also interested Gao Yuan a lot, who gve Shi Mu his undivided attention as he waited for the reply.

“Has the date been set?” Shi Mu asked another question in reply.

“Seven days from now, from eleven a.m. to one p.m., in the Valley of Guang Ling. It’s said that not only the leaders of the big clans of the city, but also officers including the sheriff will be present.“ Feng Li answered without thinking.

“If so, I’ll probably quit the test. Considering that I’m judged by the blood messenger from the school as a waste person, my presence at the test will only make me a laughingstock. Also, the Qi Ling pill promised by the Jin clan has already been given to someone else, so I’m left with no chance of sensing my real qi. There is simply no reason for me to take the test.” Shi Mu answered in a calm voice.

“That’s a shame. If the messenger had not found you, with your power, and the pill, you could have passed the test.” Feng Li answered pitifully.

“It’s alright, even if I can’t become a Houtian Warrior I can still practise martial arts at home. Considering my current state, even if I can’t make much money in the future, I can still have a comfortable life.” Shi Mu tried hard to make light of his condition.

“If you really think this way, then it is probably for the best! We won’t disturb you any longer.” Feng Li nodded and immediately rose to leave.

Half an hour later, the two leaders of the Black Fox gang were on the road several miles away from the manor.

“Brother Feng, that guy is already useless, why should we help him so much, even bringing his stuff personally to his manor?” Gao Yuan did not say much in the manor, so he finally could not hold his thoughts in any longer.

“Third Brother, I don’t know why, but I was quite curious of his current situation when he asked us to get that thing for him. That’s why I came here, even asking you to come with me.” Feng Li answered unhurriedly.

“Heh, then do you have any conclusions now?” Gao Yuan grinned and asked.

“If I’m not wrong, I think Shi Mu hasn’t really given up his pursuit of martial arts. If so, we don’t want to offend him in any way. After all, remember that the famous general Yue Tai - everyone in Da Qi knows his name - was also good-for-nothing in his earlier years. But what happened later? He had quite a few strange experiences and then became a powerful innate warrior. Furthermore, during the invasion of the barbarous tribes, he used a huge blade that weighed a thousand ji, and killed thirteen Totem Fighters. That’s why he was conferred the title of National Guardian, though his family name was different that of the emperor’s. Since then, he’s been guarding the three prefectures at the frontier

fortress.” Feng Li said in a serious tone.

“Big Bother, to compare Shi Mu the bastard with National Guardian Yue? He’s not worthy of such words! Besides, Yue daren[1] was only feeble and sick in his early years, it’s not the same with Shi Mu whose blood is useless! Besides, we didn’t need to send him that bow of purple steel. You know, only a lieutenant or his superior can use that invaluable weapon. To get it we bribed the retiring officer with costly presents! Only then he was willing to help us and disguised the bow as wastes from the armoury.” Gao Yuan twitched his mouth, very displeased.

“Third Brother, however invaluable the bow is, if we can’t use it then it’s worthless to us. We can’t even pull it open, what’s the use in holding it? Since Shi Mu wants a nice bow[A], why not send him one useless to us? You know, it’s common to send gifts to thus who are respected, but definitely not gift someone having hard times. He’ll remember our generosity and repay us in the future.” Feng Li explained slowly.

“I’ll follow you if your really see hope in him. After all, he did help us greatly in the past. Let the bow be a friendly gift then.” Though still somewhat unconvinced, Gao Yuan could only say so since Feng Li’s mind was set.

Hearing this, Feng Li said no more, only smiling in reply.

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After they left, Shi Mu returned to his bedroom with the two big packs. He then set one on the table and opened it; a square wooden case was revealed immediately, it was a few feet long.

He quickly opened the case and found two gleaming daggers inside, one long and one short. The longer one was a little over three feet long, and was a slightly bent long knife whose handle was unusually long, even taking up one third of the whole dagger's length. However, the shorter one was only a little over an inch long, and was abnormally thin all over its body, looking like a strange narrow dagger. But it seemed exceedingly sharp, and had a small iron ring at the end of its handle.

Shi Mu studied the two daggers closely, then he thumped the table with one hand.

"Peng!"

The abnormally thin dagger jumped immediately from the table and was caught in Shi Mu's hand.

Two piercing sounds were heard.

After a tremble, the dagger turned a ball of cold light, rolling in his hand. In a moment the room was filled with cold lights, making one's hair stand on end.

Shi Mu's arm shook and then the dagger reappeared in his hand, darting to one of the table's edges immediately.

Dead silence!

The table was cut as though it were made of tofu.

Shi Mu was very pleased with this result. He was now sure that the blacksmith had not bragged. He definitely made the daggers with a large amount of cold iron, otherwise they would not be so sharp.

Shi Mu lifted his other hand, and grabbed the longer knife. After holding it in the air with one hand, he nodded approvingly. Then, he inserted the shorter dagger in his other hand into the handle of the longer one, and twisted it a bit.

Crack! A crisp sound.

The whole body of the small dagger was now immersed seamlessly into the longer one's handle, no trace of the small dagger could be seen.

This was the real appearance of the Sun and Moon Dagger.

Shi Mu put them back to the case after playing with them for a bit. With his interest still intense, he opened the other pack, and saw a light purple bow inside, its length half the height of an adult. His expression changed slightly at the sight of this long bow. Taking it in hand, he gauged that it should weigh at least 25 to 30 kilograms.

The surface of the bow felt slightly cold and was decorated with an intricate yet delicate pattern, like the scales of a fish. The pattern seemed to be made of a certain metal, and the bowstring was crystal-clear, its color milky white, glittering with silver lights which seemed to have come from some silver wires that had been mixed into the material.

"What's this..."

Shi Mu suddenly thought of something. He held the bow with one hand while pulled the string with the other.

“Pff!”

The long purple bow was only half opened!

“A bow of purple steel!”

Shi Mu blurted out the name, surprised.

He released his fingers and the string rebounded, penetrating the air. Shaking, it let out a clear sound like a dragon’s singing, making the whole room resound with a droning sound.

Notes:

[A] - Nope, Shi Mu has never asked for a bow. But, hey! Why not give him an amazing weapon to help him in the future? :P

Chapter 30 - The Intended Departure

“Feng Li really sent me a good present this time.”

Shi Mu muttered to himself, stroking the purple bow, a happy look on his face.

After looking around a bit more, he found a leather bag inside the pack, which he had not seen before. A bundle of light yellow arrows were in the bag. The arrowheads were made of black iron, and black feathers were neatly aligned on the back of the arrows.

Shi Mu pulled one out of the bag, nocked the bow, and stood in front of the window. He could not wait any long: with the bow and the bag full of arrows he strode out of his room.

The remaining of the day saw him practise the purple steel bow. He learned archery when he trained at the club, so it did not take him much time to get used to using the purple steel bow. By the end of the day, he was able to hit a target fifty steps away around 70% of the time, and the bow was only half open. As the passing servants saw this, they couldn’t believe their eyes.

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In the evening, in the hall of Shi Mu’s manor.

“Brother Shi, are you really going to the frontier fortress to join the Jun Wu Hall?” Zhong Xiu asked in surprise, her eyes wide open.

“Yes, and I’m setting off in a few days.” Shi Mu answered calmly.

“So what about me? And the manor?” The young girl was confused.

“I asked Zhang Suo to sell the fields and the restaurant the other day, and as for Miss Zhong, you have two choices: one, I’ll take you to Auntie Zhen’s place, even though the Wu Family is plotting something against you, they won’t take the risk of offending the Jin Family. The other choice is, you can go with me. I remember you once said that, although you don’t have many relatives willing to accept you, you still have an aunt, though distantly related, in the city of Qing Shui[1], in Lu Long[2] Prefecture. That city is quite near to the frontier fortress, so I can take you to your aunt.” Shi Mu answered, obviously he had been considering this for a while.

“Brother Shi, can’t I just stay with you? If you are going to a new place, you will need a maid to cook for you.” Hearing Shi Mu’s offer, Zhong Xiu lowered her head slightly, and braced herself to speak. Her voice was almost inaudible.

“Miss Zhong, you know, the frontier fortress is adjacent to the plains of the barbarian tribes. Wars happen there frequently. Although I did not consent to Uncle Zhong’s last request, it’s the least I can do to make sure you are safe. How can I take you to that dangerous places? Also, I’m going there for the single purpose of joining in the Jun Wu Hall, you know it’s a place for military training, right? So probably they will offer me food and a room, and won’t let me go out. It’s highly likely that I can’t live as freely, as I have been, out of the Hall.” Shi Mu turned her down, shaking his head. He did not see that the girl was in love with him.

The girl’s face went pale at the answer. After a long while, she lifted her head

up again, and answered, biting her lips,

“If Brother Shi really can’t take me in, then I’d better go and live with my aunt.”

“Good. Since you’ve decided, then let’s make some preparations during the next few days, so that we can set off together.” The girl’s decision satisfied Shi Mu.

But, just as Shi Mu was gearing up to leave for Feng City, an unexpected event happened the next morning, disrupting his plan completely.

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“What? You mean some guys are riding horses on our fields and trampling our crops? Who would dare to do such a thing?” Shi Mu frowned as Zhang Suo reported to him.

“I can’t identify the others, but I know the leader. He’s definitely young master Tian, the son of the fifth master of the Jin Family. I’ve met him before, so I know I am not mistaken. young master Shi, what do we do now? We’ve sold the fields but we have not officially handed them over to the buyers, so if the fields are ravaged the buyers won’t take them!” Zhang Suo asked, burning in a frenzy of rage.

“Young master Tia? You mean Jin Tian? Well, I’ll go have a look then.” After only a brief thought, Shi Mu understood perfectly who should this “young master Tian” was. His eyes grew cold and fierce.

If the fifth master had not persuaded the eldest leader of the Jin Family to take Shi Mu's Qi Ling pill and give it to Jin Tian, Shi Mu would not, necessarily, have to leave the city right now.

Although he had always been calm, the moment he heard Jin Tian's name he became angry. So he went directly out of the manor, and made his way to the large fields nearby.

He soon reached the edge of the fields. In the middle, several glamorously dressed youths were chasing a fox on their big horses. The fox was rather small, and jumping nimbly among the crops. Due to this, although there are many of them, the youths still could not catch it.

Seeing the crops that had been torn up by the horses chasing the fox, Shi Mu's face became furious.

"Young master Shi, that man is Jin Tian." Zhang Suo had finally caught up with Shi Mu. He told Shi Mu while gasping for breath, pointing to a blue-robed young man with a flat nose.

Hearing this Shi Mu cast a cold glance at the youth, and walked over to him. Just then, the fox turned about abruptly with the several youths following it at a high speed. Their leader was the blue-robed young man, who payed no attention to Shi Mu's presence while his fellows all slowed down their horses as soon as they saw Shi Mu approach. Jin Tian gave his horse some heavy whips and rushed at Shi Mu fiercely.

"Stop it, Jin Tian."

“Do you know what are you doing?”

Astonished, his acquaintances all shouted out warnings, trying to get him to stop, while Jin Tian himself rushed on, as though he had heard nothing.

Seeing this, Shi Mu narrowed his eyes and lifted one leg, kicking the fox away. He then moved his shoulders to evade the oncoming horse, turned around, and hit the horse with great strength.

“Boom!”

The blue-robed young man was sent flying over ten meters with his horse, then fell onto the ground, hard.

“Ah!”

His acquaintances shouted at the sight, and hurried to Jin Tian’s side.

“You bastard, asking for death!”

Just then, the blue-robed young man got out from under the horse’s body and jumped up to his feet, he seemed uninjured, his shirt was torn open at his chest and one could see something gold under his shirt.

“How strong! And yet Jin Tian is unharmed?”

“This is Seventh Aunt’s step son? He’s has such amazing strength!”

“I heard that he used to be the top practitioner of our city, but he seems rather ordinary.”

“Oh, Jin Tian is wearing the Golden Armour!”

“What? Fifth Uncle cherishes that armor almost as much as he cherishes himself! We can’t even touch it.”

These whispering young men, who sighed a sigh of relief after making sure of Jin Tian’s safety, were apparently all apart of the Jin Family. One after another, they stopped their horses and stood watching.

“You bastard! You dare to challenge me? I’ll kill you!”

Ignoring his companions’ reactions, Jin Tian tore his shirt off. A glittering golden armour could be seen underneath. At the same time, he drew his sword from his waist.

Hearing the curse and seeing the reflected cold light of the sword, Shi Mu narrowed his eyes.

Chapter 31 - The Tube of Wind and Fire

“What? Jin Tian really is not joking! “

“He’s wearing the Golden Armour! Unless he faces a Houtian warrior, he definitely will win!”

“Hehe, haven’t you seen his real intention? He brought us here for hunting, and deliberately drove that fox here, to this filed!”

“Haha of course I’ve seen it already. I am just giving him face by not revealing it. See, he’s so angry with Shi Mu.”

These young men were still whispering and gloating over the explosive situation, not caring a bit if the two would fight.

Then an sharp noise pierced the air.

Jin Tian rushed directly at Shi Mu’s direction. He brandished his sword, throwing two successive cuts at Shi Mu’s head but mid flight, the two sword shadows separated in half. The separation was so abrupt that very few could see the shadows.

“Wow! Jin Tian’s Shadow-Separating Sword has reached this level!” One young man remarked when seeing this technique, and the other onlookers also showed expressions of amazement.

“Peng!”

Shi Mu showed no intention of dodging and only moved one arm, his face expressionless. Shi Mu ignored the cut coming from the right, but punched directly the one coming from the left. It turned out to be the left shadow was a real sword and the right shadow was a fake. Peng! The sword was hit out of Jin Tian's hand, sent flying up into the air before it fell into a nearby field.

Jin Tian was shocked into a loud cry, and was forced to stumble back a step. The part of his hand between the thumb and the index finger was mutilated from to hold onto his sword.

Shi Mu left no time for his opponent to rest and in a flash, he shot his body out like an arrow and rushed towards the youth. Swinging his big hands he slapped his opponent's face twice, fiercely and mercilessly. With his current cultivation, even if he had not used all his strength, the slaps were powerful enough to beat Jin Tian into a spin. Jin Tian stumbled and revolved twice before he heavily fell on the ground.

His face had swelled up, his eyes vacant, obviously still in the dark as to what had happened in so short a time.

However, Shi Mu had already returned to his earlier spot in a flash, looking at his beaten opponent with cold eyes, his arms folded.

The Jin henchmen, who had been laughing merrily and discussing the situation, fell into a silent, flustered shock.

"No way, how could he break the Shadow-Separating Sword?"

“Maybe it was just a lucky guess!”

Jin Tian finally came to himself. He looked up and saw what had caused to fall prone on the ground. His eyes were immediately filled with a frenzy of rage, red with burning blood. He climbed out of the ground suddenly, and nearly flew to his sword. Pulling it out from the earth, he let out a high shriek, he rushed at Shi Mu, wielding his sword wildly. However, he totally forgot his sword art, only wielding randomly like a lunatic.

Seeing this Shi Mu snorted, and confronted the sword empty-handed. His figure flashed to evade the sword without any difficulty and grasped the sword with only one hand at a lightning speed, taking it directly from its owner’s hand.

Jin Tian was more than startled. His bravado receded immediately, and his body shot back subconsciously. However Shi Mu did not move an inch, his two hands held the sword’s handle and front edge respectively exerted a large force.

Crack!

The glaring sword was now broken into two pieces.

Shi Mu shook his wrist and the two pieces flew out like two glaring lights. Jin Tian felt a coldness whisk by both of his ears as the two pieces passed by rubbing his cheeks. As they fell onto the ground upright, two narrow wounds began to trickle out blood on Jin Tian’s face.

The onlooking Jin henchmen were flabbergasted by this sudden development. However, the blue-robed young man bursted into wild laughter after realizing what had happened: he wiped the blood trickling down his deathly pale face, and

lowered his head to look at his injuries. Laughing, he questioned Shi Mu proudly, “Do you really dare to kill me? You are merely bluffing! What could you do that would make me fear you?!” After saying so, Jin Tian fumbled in his shirt and took out a tube as big as his palm. It glittered a bright golden colour, on the side of the tube was a black hole the size of a thumb at the front tip of the tube.

“Jin Tian, have you lost your mind? Stealing the Tube of Wind and Fire from the manor!”

“How should you dare to do such a thing! That’s against our clan’s rule, don’t you dare involve us in this matter.”

“If the Patriach ever finds out about this, you will end up with broken legs. Or perhaps a punishment even more serious than that!”

The Jin henchmen were all frightened and paled once they saw the tube. They shouted warning after warning to persuade Jin Tian, while others all whipped their horse backs to flee. It seemed as though the tube in Jin Tian’s hand was more terrifying than monsters and vipers.

“Humph! If I can avenge myself, I don’t care a bit about the punishment! Place me in confinement for three years or even five years! I just don’t care!” Jin Tian gritted his teeth and cursed viciously; his cheeks had now swelled up, and were also bleeding all this time.

Just as he finished his swear, he pointed the tube right at the Shi Mu.

Though unclear of the power of this tube, Shi Mu gauged it to be dangerous to some extent based on the Jin followers’ twisted faces and prepared himself. He

had no intentions of confronting its attack with empty hands, and rolled on the ground behind the big horse to dodge it.

"You bastard! Go to hell!" Jin Tian cried in a crazy voice, and then pushed a certain button at the end of the tube.

Something puffed out of the tube and a blackish bullet rushed towards Shi Mu's direction at lightning speed.

"Goodness!"

"He did it!"

"Get off the horse!"

Seeing this the Jin fellows were frightened out of their wits, and jumped down from their horses rapidly to lie prone on the ground. Each pressed their bodies closely to the ground, daring not to move a bit.

"Hmph!"

Just then Shi Mu did not flee at all; on the contrary, he let out a shout loudly and grasped the two forelegs of the horse. With another exertion of his strength, he threw the huge creature out in the direction of the black bullet. At the same time he stomped hard onto the ground causing a small pit to be formed.

Boom! A thunderous noise resounded, almost shaking the heaven and earth.

The black bullet hit the horse at a distance of six meters, and the horse immediately turned into a exploding blaze of fire, while masses of clouds rolled wildly in every direction pushed by a scorching air covering the surrounding area of about ten meters. The clouds did not lift for a good two minutes.

Thud!

The body of the horse thudded down onto the ground; half of it already burnt, and the other half had become a blackish coal like thing.

Chapter 32 - Manslaughter

“Bastard, rot in hell!” Jin Tian glanced at the spot where Shi Mu had been. Seeing that not a soul was there Jin Tian burst into wild laughter triumphantly.

But just at this moment, a black shadow whizzed out of the pit where Shi Mu had sunk into, and only after a flash the figure was already close to the blue-robed man.

“Ah!”

Jin Tian was startled, but it was too late for him to flee. The figure let out a low shout, and pounded heavily on Jin Tian’s stomach. Although wearing the Golden Armour which could reduce the attack’s power to some extent, Jin Tian still felt a horrible force transmit through his armour. After uttering a terrified cry, he knelt down to the ground with his hands pressing his stomach tightly.

The shadow was no doubt Shi Mu, who had just had a narrowly escaped death. When the bullet exploded, he huddled himself up in the pit which was formed when he stomped hard onto the ground to throw the horse away. If he had not reacted so quickly he would have shared the same fate as the horse. Shi Mu was in a fright after his lucky escape which quickly turned into anger as he thought about that close brush with death. He strode to Jin Tian’s side and lifted his body with only a hand. With the other hand Shi Mu slapped the blue-robed young man’s face mercilessly.

Pa!Pa! In a moment Jin Tian’s head swelled to the size of a pig’s, and his eyes were pressed into two narrow slots, hardly able to be opened any wider.

“Stop it!”

“Do you mean to kill him, Shi Mu?”

.....

The other Jin men who had been lying on the ground did not come about till now. They shouted loudly to ask Shi Mu to stop, and two of them even walked up to him directly, attempting to stop Shi Mu from beating Jin Tian any further.

Hearing this Shi Mu’s face grew sullen. He though of Auntie Zhen and Shi Yu Huan, and then snorted and released his hand that had been holding Jian Tian’s shirt.

But just as Shi Mu decided to let him off, a trace of maliciousness flashed across Jin Tian’s eyes. Immediately Jin Tian lifted his arm and one silver arrow was shot unexpected from his sleeve, rushing directly at Shi Mu’s heart. At such a distance, it was impossible for Shi Mu to evade the attack however quickly he moved. Shi Mu could only twisted his body, as he broke out in sweat, in order to prevent the arrow from hitting his heart.

“Peng!” A loud noise was heard.

The silver arrow hit Shi Mu’s chest, but unexpectedly rebounded after knocking against something metal and making a clanging sound. This surprised both Shi Mu and Jin Tian, but the former still managed to calm himself as he made the next move. Shi Mu lifted his leg and kicked heavily at Jin Tian. This time, stimulated by a seething, blind rage, he used all his strength. Even though

the Golden Armour could reduce some of the force, Jin Tian was still thrown away, and fell down as a ball of blood was puffed out from his mouth.

"I must kill him, I must kill him, by all means!" The blue-robed young man thought to himself, while he was kicked into midair and aching all over his body. His swollen face was twisted in anguish. But just as he was to thud down onto the ground, he heard his companions crying,

"No!!!"

"Don't you dare try to escape from there!"

The blue-robed young man could see his companions' frightened expressions, and the two who had had made their way to him was now striding to approach him, as if trying to catch him in the air.

"That's strange. Since when have I had so many friends that cared about me so much?"

But that was too late, before he could come up with an answer his body had already hit the ground, and a coldness penetrated his neck. A half of a sword had now run through his throat, making his eyes open wide. He tried to make some groans as blood frothed at his mouth, and his body twitched wildly for several times before he lost consciousness forever.

The two rushing youths halted at the sight. Watching the mud-covered body be pierced by the half piece of sword through Jin Tian's neck, their faces were full of fear.

Shi Mu himself was also at a loss seeing Jin Tian's end. It turned out that the half piece of the sword was inserted askew into the ground when Shi Mu broke the original sword, and it was just at the spot where Jin Tian fell down to, so Jin Tian's death was doomed. It could only be his bad luck: if he had met the half piece by any other part of his body, however seriously injured he would not be dead now.

"You just killed Jin Tian!"

"Fifth Uncle and our Jin Clan will never let you off!"

"We are no match for that brutal bastard! Return to the manor and report it to our people!"

The Jin henchmen who had been watching were now frightened out of their wits, their feet frozen to the ground. Gaping at each other, they only came to themselves when one of them shouted out. Then some instantly drew their weapons, while some got on their horses, rushing away immediately in the direction of Feng City. Seeing the fleeing companions, those who had attempted a revenge now fully understood that they were no match for Shi Mu who was standing in front of them with murderous eyes. To challenge Shi Mu with their bodies that had been spoiled by long comfortable life was no different than a sheep bringing itself to a wolf. So they immediately abandoned the attempt, hurried onto their horses and fled to their city.

Shi Mu was now aware of what he had done too. Seeing the fleeing Jin, his face suddenly grew somber, as he did not want to chase. He was quite clear that even though Jin Tian was not killed by him directly, the leaders of the Jin Clan would disagree, especially for the Fifth Uncle, who probably would avenge his son's death by taking Shi Mu's life. By then however hard Auntie Zhen pleaded for him, it would be a sealed case.

Shi Mu's eyes hardened. He would never be willing to die this way, letting others decide his fate.

Thinking further, Shi Mu felt quite uneasy. It seemed that now he had to leave Feng City, or even Quan Zhou for his own safety as soon as possible. Casting a glance at Zhang Suo who had been frightened out of his wits, Shi Mu left for the manor with no word.

He was clear that from now on he had became an escapee.

But an idea dawned on him just as he turned to leave, so he went back abruptly for Jin Tian's body.

.....

Half a day later.

"What? Are you serious, Big Brother? My Tian Er is dead, killed by Shi Mu? Absolutely impossible!" In the main hall of the Jin manor, the fifth master was now gaping at his brother, not believing a single word of what he had said.

By then, apart from eight Jin leaders, the other five Jins who had witnessed Jin Tian's death were also gathered at the hall. But now clustering around the Jin leaders, all of them were holding their breaths with pale faces.

"Bring Tian Er's body." The big leader sighed and waved to the servants at his side.

Instantly, a body covered by white cloth was carried to the hall by two servants who set the body at the middle of the hall.

At the sight the fifth master began to tremble uncontrollably, daring not to lift the cloth.

Chapter 33 - Desperado

“Is...is this really my beloved son?” The Fifth Master turned about abruptly, asking the head of the family in a shaking voice.

“Brother... would I joke with you about such a thing? These men here witnessed Tian Er’s death.” The big leader said slowly.

Hearing the answer, the Fifth Master was finally convinced as his face turned ghastly pale. He turned back around and looked down at the body.

The cloth was thrown off in a gust of wind, revealing Jin Tian’s twisted body which looked like a ferocious ghost beneath the cloth. Strangely, the Golden Armour, that Jin Tian was supposed to be wearing, was gone now.

“Tian Er!”

The Fifth Master cried out as saw Jin Tian’s highly swollen face and pierced throat. He let out a painful mourning cry, clenching his fists.

“Brother Five, I know you are devastated. I’ve heard everything from the boys. Jin Wu, tell your uncle what happened.” The head could only let out a sigh and told the oldest of the boys to speak of what happened.

“Yes, Big Uncle. Fifth Uncle, it went like this: Brother Tian asked us to go hunting in the suburbs this morning...” The young man was still in shock when asked to relate the event to his bereft uncle, but facing the freezing eyes of the Fifth Master and the big leader, he could only recount the story again.

During the whole process the Fifth Master was expressionless, his eyes vacant and only changing slightly when he heard that Jin Tian had stolen the Golden Armour from his manor, and even the Tube of Wind and Fire.

“Brother, now I’ve heard the entire story. How do you plan on dealing with the death of my son?” After taking a deep breath, the Fifth Master asked, his voice, seemingly, completely composed.

“That’s quite difficult to decide. You know, it’s Tian Er who provoked the thing, moreover, he even stole the tube...” The big leader knit his eyebrows and said slowly.

“I don’t care what Tian Er did before he was killed, I only know that I’ve lost my only son, your nephew by blood! I shall cut that Shi Mu bastard to pieces so that my poor child can rest in peace. Should you not help me take revenge, I won’t recognise you as my big brother anymore!” The Fifth Master shouted at the head, desperate and harsh. “Brother Five, have you lost your mind? You must be respectful when speaking to Big Brother!”

“Brother Five, we all know you are in grief, but we are the Jin Clan, we can’t afford to lose our manners, no matter how crazy the situation is.”

.....

All the other Jin leaders all tried to dissuade the Fifth Master, seeing that he was losing himself in grief.

“Humph! You’re all so good at talking, ‘cause it’s not your son that was killed! I

know you have issues, ‘cause that Shi Mu bastard is Sister Seven’s step son, but I don’t care who the murderer is, if you guys don’t help, I’ll do it myself.” The Fifth Master stared defiantly at them, completely ready to risk everything.

Seeing the Fifth Master’s malicious look, the head’s face fell. But just as he opened his mouth and was to say something, an authoritative, old voice resounded in the hall,

“Well, son, if I stop you, are you going to disown your father?”

“Father!”

“Grandfather!”

“Eldest Leader!”

The Jin Clan members in the hall all became filled with respectful awe, upon hearing the voice, which belonged to the guardian of the Jin Clan, an Advanced Houtian Warrior[A].

The Fifth Master had now changed to an awe-stricken face, hurriedly answering, “Father, how could I have such a rebellious thought? It’s only that Tian Er had such a miserable death, as his father, how could I save my face before our family if I don’t take revenge for my own son’s murder? What’s more, the other big clans in the city will also laugh at our weakness.”

“Humph! It’s none other than you who has caused Tian Er’s death! If you had not spoiled him to such an extent, how could he have dared to provoke the fight which cost him his life?” The elder man snorted disapprovingly, in a voice full of

authority.

“Father, I know I’m in the wrong, but please, could you allow me to fulfill my wish, and take my revenge? After that, I won’t say a word, no matter how hard you punish me.” The Fifth Master knelt to the ground, and bowed to his father, banging his head on the ground and pleading with a husky voice, his forehead becoming swollen.

“Eh, as long as you truely repent for your folly. But, just as you’ve said, however, wrong he was, Jin Tian is still a child of the Jin Family if we just let the killer off, how will the other clans view us later? Eldest Son, send some men to go with Fifth Son and don’t let Shi Mu see tomorrow’s sun. As for his stepmother, my Seventh Daughter, I’ll deal with her and confine her to the manor for the next few days.” After pondering in silence, the eldest master finally made up his mind.

“Yes, father.”

The head promised obediently.

Then the eldest master said no more.

Seeing this, the others only dared to stand up now, one after another.

“Since it’s father’s order, Fifth Brother, name whoever you want.” The big leader thought briefly before he told the Fifth Master to ask for whoever he wanted.

“Big Brother, I don’t need any other forces except the Blood Hunters and the

Blue Eagles, that are good at tracking.” The Fifth Master answered without needing to think about anything.

“That is, indeed, proper, for a mere practitioner, we don’t need any Houtian warriors. Then I’ll lend you the hunters and the eagles.” The head nodded and promised without hesitation.

“Great! I’m guessing that the bastard has, at most, half a day’s lead on us. I’ll set off right now and shall take his life within the next few days.” Quite pleased at the answer, the Fifth Master swore, his face twisted in malice.

.....

At the same time, ten miles away from the city, on a large road, Shi Mu was driving two black horses and a grey carriage, making them go as quick as he could, leaving heavy dust along their trails. The Dagger of the Sun and Moon was at his waist, and the purple steel bow, as well as the pack of arrows, was on his shoulder. A trace of anxiety could be detected on his face.

“Brother Shi, you don’t need to take me with you. You’ll have a greater chance if you flee by yourself.” A melodious voice came from the carriage before the curtain was drawn open, revealing Zhong Xiu’s upset face.

“Don’t you even think about that, if I leave you alone in the city, even if the Wu Clan doesn’t harm you, the Jin Clan[B] will vent their anger on you.” Not turning his head, Shi Mu answered in a firm voice.

“Even so, you can still drop me off midway. I can probably manage to hide somewhere.” After thinking for a while Zhong Xiu offered her suggestion.

“Don’t underestimate the Jin Clan. As long as you’re within the region of Quan Zhou, you’ll never find a safe place. If I really decide to drop you off somewhere, it should be at some place outside Quan Zhou.” Shi Mu answered with a bitter smile.

“That’s true. But do you have any ideas now? If we continue running on this official road we’ll be discovered by the Jin Clan sooner or later.” Zhong Xiu said with a soft sigh.

Notes:

[A] - There are 3 tiers to the Houtian grade: Beginner, Intermediate, and Advanced (yes, I know, very unique and poetic names. [If you have a suggestion, for a better naming scheme, leave a comment below!])

Chapter 34 - The Horse of Blue Wind

“If we follow this road west for another two hundred miles, we’ll reach the well-known YunXia[1] mountains. That mountain range stretches for over a thousand miles, traversing the two prefectures of Quan Zhou and Yun Zhou. That’s why, once we enter the mountains, we’ll be much safer.” Shi Mu answered readily, obviously having already made the plan beforehand.

“The YunXia mountains? I have no doubt that it’s a good hiding place. But we still have a long way before we get there, can we make it? Will the Jin Clan catch us on the way? After all, I’ve heard the big clans all have special tracking horses. They’ll definitely beat our ordinary ones.” Zhong Xiu was enlightened by Shi Mu’s idea, and answered, blinking her eyes.

“That’s beyond our power. But we left immediately, upon Jin Tian dying, so we should have outstripped them for, say, at least, half a day’s journey. But whether we can make it or not, I’m not quite so sure myself, we can only try our best. Miss Zhong, be careful, I’m gonna quicken the horses now, hopefully, they can run to the last moment of the hundred miles’ journey.” Shi Mu said in a serious tone.

Hearing this, however, worried she might be, Zhong Xiu could only draw the curtains shut and sit back in the carriage. Shi Mu did not waste any time whipping the two heavy horses fiercely, at which the two black horses galloped on at an even higher speed after letting out a sharp neigh. It wasn’t long before the grey carriage finally became a black spot, disappearing into the distance.

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At the same time, a carriage, covered entirely by a black cloth, was coming from downtown toward the west gate of Feng City. The three horses carrying the carriage looked rather strange, their bodies totally red with hair that looked like a blaze of fire. They are the well-known tracking horses, called the Tracking Blaze Horse, which could serve, both as a riding horse - covering a thousand mile a day - and a fighter, who would spout fires from its mouth when incited.

The cart driver was a blue-robed man sitting at the front of the carriage, wielding a shiny black whip. Three riders, on the same strange type of horses, were following behind the carriage, and one of them was none other than the Fifth Master of the Jin Clan. He had a short beard and was wearing a grief-stricken look on his long face. One of the other two riders was wearing a yellow cotton robe and sitting on the horse like a giant monkey, his ears sticking out and his cheek like an ape. The last one had unusually large stature. Wearing a long silver robe, his eyes were bright and piercing. The three riders, and the carriage, all went at a gallop, as if in a great hurry, passing through the west gate at full speed.

But now and then, the monkey man would jump down and try to identify some fresh trails on the road, before he mounted the horse and galloped forward again.

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“The Fifth Master of the Jin Clan has set off with their hunters and eagles! Good, then we shall depart immediately from the north gate. We’ll take a detour and catch up with Shi Mu earlier than them. Although they are good at tracking, how can they beat our Qian Li Xiang[2]? We’ve already scattered some of the tracking incense in Shi Mu’s cart.” Near the north gate, a group of ten riders was already prepared, and the leader of these men, in an embroidered dress, laughed as he heard the report from a servant.

“Third Uncle, if we can really catch Shi Mu before the Jins, do let me break his legs myself.” A proud youth in the group said ambitiously, ready to break Shi Mu’s legs.

This group was made up of the Wu Clan’s men. The leader was the Third Master of their family, Wu Tong; the proud youth was Wu Hua, who was previously engaged to Zhong Xiu.

It was quite a coincidence: The Wu Clan had been planning to kidnap Zhong Xiu after the enrollment test, so they had been keeping watch on Shi Mu’s manor, and naturally, got the first news that Jin Tian was killed by Shi Mu in an accident. Therefore, the Wu Clan was now quite relieved. They had had been holding some fear that Shi Mu was remotely related to the Jin Clan. Now all they had to do was reach Zhong Xiu before the Jin Clan did.

Wu Hua’s participation was, of course, of his own will. The Wu Clan riders were all riding peculiar horses, each with blue shiny hair as if covered faintly by a layer of shimmering blue light, and this type of horse was another famous tracking type, the Horse of Blue Wind. It was said that this peculiar type of horse had some blood relation with the Fox of Wind, so they could produce gusts of wind once they’d reach a certain high speed. So they were, no doubt, one of the fastest horses around. And that was why the Wu Clan had so much confidence in beating the Jin Clan in finding Shi Mu first.

After a short time, the Wu Clan riders also poured out from the north gate and took a detour, which allowed them to get in front of the Jin Clan trackers.

At this time, other big clans and gangs had also got the news of the accidental murder of Jin Tian by Shi Mu, which, though surprising many, was soon

forgotten among the ceaseless discussions about the enrollment test.

.....

Half a day later.

The day had grown dark, but the grey carriage was still galloping on the road, only at a lower speed.

Small hilltops began to appear along the road, but they seemed rather indistinct in the dusk, quiet in an unusual way.

Shi Mu was whipping the horses the entire time, his face sullen. But the two horses were at their limits: they only snorted hot air while their speed was slowing down.

“Brother Shi, don’t do this, it won’t work anyway. The horses must be extremely tired after running continuously for so long. They must stop and rest.” Zhong Xiu’s voice came from the carriage.

“Of course I know, but every moment we delay may allow our pursuers to catch us.” Shi Mu answered with a bitter smile.

“But it won’t help if you whip them to death. Let’s take a rest and go on after feeding them something.” Zhong Xiu urged on.

“That sounds fair enough. Let’s rest for a few minutes and have something to eat.” Giving the two sweating horses a quick glance, Shi Mu had to nod his

agreement.

Then he pulled at the rein and let the two horses turn their heads. They rushed off the road and into the nearby woods.

But obviously, they both had underestimated the speed of the peculiar horse of the Wu Clan.

As they neared the woods, Shi Mu unleashed the rein and helped Zhong Xiu get off the carriage. But suddenly, they heard galloping sounds coming from the road, like torrential rain, as well as some faint wild laughter.

“Haha! The Fragrance-Sensing beetles are reacting! Then they must be quite near!”

“Quiet you, wait for me to capture Shi Mu. I’ll do it by myself.”

This group of pursuers came at such a great speed that scarcely had they finished their talk before Shi Mu saw them.

“Run, they’ve come!” Hearing the voice, Shi Mu knew what happened immediately. He shouted at Zhong Xiu and grabbed her at the waist, running into the woods at his top speed.

The pursuers were none other than the Wu Clan. They caught up with Shi Mu in merely half a day with their Horses of Blue Wind, which were a level higher than the Jin Clan’s Tracking Blaze Horses, along with the fragrance of Qian Li Xiang and the Fragrance-Sensing Worm.

Notes:

[1] YunXia: It is a beautiful name for the mountains. “Yun” means clouds and “Xia” means morning or evening glow.

[2] Qian Li Xiang: The author does not specify here, but it is highly likely to be a kind of powder with a strong fragrance that can be detected by a special beetle named Fragrance-Sensing Beetle. So the powder is immensely useful in tracking, which will be mentioned later in this chapter. “Qian Li” means a thousand mile, indicating the strong fragrance that can be smelled even from a thousand mile’s distance, “Xiang” means fragrance.

Chapter 35 - Hunt in the Woods

It did not take the Wu riders long to rush into the woods. A middle-aged man, with triangular eyes, taking the lead. In his hand was a wooden case, which contained a pink beetle that looked like a longicorn. It was flapping its wings incessantly while buzzing weakly.

“Just as we expected, they fled here.” A man, who looked to be around forty years old, in glamorous clothes stepped forward and snorted sardonically after glancing at the deserted carriage and the two black horse.

This was none other than the third master of the Wu Clan, Wu Tong.

“Then why are we waiting here? Go! Hunt them! We can’t let them off!” The proud youth at the third master’s back was overjoyed to find Shi Mu’s trace.

“Ha, no worries. They were in the cart so long that the fragrance of Qian Li Xiang must have soaked into their clothes. It will take an entire night for the fragrance to fade. What, do you think we can’t catch a mere Practitioner in a night? You two, stay watch the horses and guard Hua Er, the rest of you come with me.” Wu Tong grinned complacently, and ordered his men. Hearing this, two Practitioners bowed obediently before they stepped back to the horses, while the others all drew their weapons and followed the man into the woods. Although they were only Practitioners, all had remarkable skill and moved agilely in the darkness. Wu Tong only wandered into the woods after speaking a few more words of warning to the proud youth.

.....

An hour later, deep in the woods.

Shi Mu was still running rapidly with the girl in his arms. His shirt had long been torn by branches, which even left numerous bleeding wounds on his arms and legs. But Shi Mu was not worried about this at all. On the contrary, he was still pushing forward, as if he felt no pain. Each time he had run some distance he would turn abruptly to another direction, making his routes as complex as possible.

Meanwhile, the girl curled up in Shi Mu's arms with her arms around his neck, silent and faintly blushing. The dim starlight and a hazy mist together produced a strange, irresistible sensation. Along with the girl's soft body and the stirring faint fragrance of it, a strong temptation floated in the air.

But Shi Mu was left with no time to savor the beauty in his arms. Pursued by enemies, he could only rely on his superhuman eyesight to look for some good places to hide in, as his body moved like a leopard through the trees.

Suddenly, he darted to a big tree and hid behind it, trying to hear something after taking a deep breath, titling his head. Zhong Xiu lifted her beautiful face, her eyes gleaming with affection. For some time she seemed to have lost herself, only fixing her eyes upon Shi Mu's grave face.

Unfortunately, a short while later, noisy footsteps were heard from behind, mixed with some low curses. Shi Mu's color changed and, without a word, he turned about abruptly and once again ran at his top speed with the girl in his arms.

"Just as I thought, they must have some peculiar ways to track us, otherwise, how could they still find us after we've changed our routes so many times?

Brother Shi, please put me down and flee by yourself. I'm only a burden to you, without me you'll have a better chance of escaping." Hearing the approaching footsteps Zhong Xiu eventually came to herself, and made a suggestion in a low voice.

"Miss Zhong, drop the topic from now on. I'm no hero, but I'll never place a woman or a child in the path of dangerous foes. Also, Uncle Zhong asked me to take care of you when he breathed his last words. " Shi Mu answered without hesitation.

"But..."

"What's all the "buts"? With my strength and stamina you are no burden at all, I can run for the entire night and still have some energy to spare. I'm just wondering if our pursuers have as much endurance as I do." Shi Mu said in a rather calm voice.

"I see, I won't bring up the topic again. At worst I'll die with Brother Shi." Hearing Shi Mu's heroic proclamation, the girl's beautiful eyes glittered. She answered in the softest voice, and the arms ,around Shi Mu's neck, gripped him a little tighter.

But Shi Mu could not afford to abandon himself in her gentle words. He only kept running, and stopped suddenly when he noticed something: the trees grew thinner ahead, and large patches of open fields could be seen vaguely. It turned out that they've come to the end of the forest after running for so long.

"It's too late to take another route now." Seeing this desperate situation, Zhong Xiu was surprisingly calm, and not a bit of fear was in her heart.

“It seems I still have to fight them. Miss Zhong, please hold onto me as tightly as you can.” Shi Mu told the girl with a somber face.

“Yes.” The girl answered with an excited sound.

Shi Mu then darted to a big tree and moved his arms like an agile ape. In a moment he was already on a branch about fourteen meters off the ground. Dropping the girl on the branch, he told her to hold on to it, and then said in earnest, “Wait me here. I’ll come for you if I can kill the enemies.”

Just as he finished the words, he whizzed down from the tree and turned, running back into the thick forest.

Zhong Xiu could only stare in the direction where Shi Mu had just disappeared, leaning against the branch. Her anxious face was now quite pale, making the blue birthmark on her forehead indistinct, producing a gentleness that was beyond description.

.....

After he had put some distance between Zhong Xiu and himself, Shi Mu narrowed his eyes and abruptly knelt down, hiding himself behind a thick bush. Raising his arm, he grasped the purple steel bow over his shoulder, while some ten black silhouettes were running toward his spot from over a thousand meters away.

The Wu Clan members would never believe that Shi Mu was waiting for them. Who wold believe that, on such a dark night, someone could have seen them clearly from a kilometer away. Unaware, the riders were running blindly forward.

But still, after chasing their target for over an hour, most of them were as tattered as Shi Mu, their clothes torn, and some of them even beginning to grasp for breath.

Seeing this, Shi Mu could not help but lament that he would have outstripped them after running for a longer distance, but he ran out of forest to hide in. With the thought on his mind, he still acted quickly. Taking a long arrow from the pack over his shoulder at a lightning speed, he nocked the arrow in the most proficient manner.

“The Fragrance-Sensing Beetles are again reacting fiercely! They must be quite near now!” After a moment, someone shouted out in surprise, which made all the Wu Clan members pause. One of them protested, “Reacting again? The younger brother, is there something wrong with the beetles? Every time you have said ‘we’re near them’ we could not find a soul around us. How could this guy keep running like this for a whole night? “

“Humph, even if we are all mistaken, the beetles won’t be. We just missed him because he’s so crafty, and we’re too slow! But seeing the beetles reacting now, I suppose he won’t escape again this time. He’s exhausted. You guys just go and catch him, better finish the task before master Tong comes. Otherwise master Tong will definitely be upset, after all this running.” The man with triangular eyes replied bluntly, holding the case in his hand.

Chapter 36 - A Strong Bow Equals Ten Warriors

Saying so, the man with triangular eyes convinced his fellow men who split into pairs. Moving cautiously, they started searching for Shi Mu.

The distance between them made their dialogue inaudible to Shi Mu, but judging from the way the triangle-eyed man dressed, the wooden case in his hand which seemed rather important, and from his manners when speaking, Shi Mu gauged that he must be some sort of a leader. Hence, Shi Mu decided to make this man his primary target, his eyes alight with a murderous glint. Besides, Shi Mu could also tell that the pursuers were all also Practitioners; there were no Houtian Warriors among them, which made him more confident of his chances.

Thinking this, Shi Mu grasped at the arrows in his pack, and pulled out a handful of them out, inserting each into the ground in front of him. After taking a deep breath, a fit of cracking burst forth from his body. In an instant, both his arms grew twice as strong! He gave a sudden pull at the purple steel bow, and the bow was instantly pulled to full draw, aiming straight for the men.

Meanwhile, it was natural for the cracking sounds in his body to travel far in the quiet of the deep forest.

“What’s that?”

“Who’s out there?”

“Idiot! That’s definitely Shi Mu! Move, don’t let the bastard flee this time.”

.....

After a shock, the Wu riders were all delighted to realize that Shi Mu must be quite near, so they all began to rush to the direction of the sounds except the triangle-eyed man. A trace of a crafty smile crept upon his face. He was sure that, since Shi Mu had exposed his whereabouts, only the gods could help him this time.

But just as he was to close the lid of the wooden case, an ear-deafening noise exploded in the distance, bringing about a gust of strong wind which blew dust around him. The next moment, his throat feeling cold, the triangularly eyed man was pushed back by the gust, as if he collided with a massive object.

BOOM He bumped against a tree heavily, which caused its large leaves to fall like torrential rain. That was when the triangle-eyed man was shocked to find himself dangling in midair with a long arrow penetrating his throat, only the fletched tail of the arrow could be seen sticking out his throat.

So now the triangle-eyed man was nailed to the big tree by the arrow through his throat!

“Ah...” After some groans and vain struggling of his legs, he was completely out of strength in a short time. And, just before he took the last breath of his life, he vaguely saw his fellow companions shot one after another with roaring sounds, their bodies darting backward.

“That’s fine, I’m not going alone to the other world...”

The wooden case thudded down to the ground and the lid was thrown open.

Immediately, the beetles flapped their wings, and out they flew, disappearing into the grass.

.....

“Hide! The arrows are so fast that we can’t escape! Stone Zhao and the Big Kong were shot dead!”

“No way, they’re just too fast, we can’t escape! The trees! Back to the trees! Ah...”

“Shit! He’s using the strong bow with a draw strength of at least forty pounds, which can even penetrate stones and trees! There’s no use hiding behind the trees! Dog Sun and Wild Li just died there! What should we do?”

“You fool! Just lie on the ground!”

The Wu riders that were rushing vehemently at Shi Mu when the thunderous noises exploded, and now are being overwhelmed by panic, all lying prone on the ground and not daring to move a finger. But Shi Mu was quite at ease. Picking up the next arrow, he aimed at a spot over three-hundred meters away and pulled the bow wide open again, his eyes narrowed. Could there be another youth who was able to retain his cool in such a life-and-death situation like Shi Mu?

“The younger Hu was shot dead too! Who saw the direction that the last arrow came from? We can’t hide until we know where he is.” Another surviving Wu rider asked in fright, at the verge of breaking down.

“Brother Li, the arrows are so fast, I only caught a slim shadow coming from

straight ahead.” Answered another lucky survivor.

“Good, I can save us as long as I know the location.” The, so-called, Brother Li fumbled at his back, and as the wind came again, he produced a thick round leather shield in his hand. After a roll on the ground, his entire body had now crouched down into a size that could be hid by the shield perfectly. Letting out a fierce shout he arched his back and charged at Shi Mu’s spot like a bull.

“Thank heavens, I just forgot Brother Li’s best skill was the art of shield. We can be saved now!”

“Prepare yourselves, we’ll charge too once Brother Li has approached Shi Mu. We must kill the bastard as soon as possible.” The survivors all rejoiced at the promising prospect.

thud A dull sound came to their ears, breaking their blissful moment. The rushing Brother Li’s body was blown away twenty meters with another loud noise before he crashed onto the ground. No sound was heard from him.

“Goodness! It’s not a bow of forty pounds, but has a draw strength of at least a hundred pounds! The leather shield won’t work! Only a black iron shield can resist the arrows...Ah!” A Wu rider was just raising his head to look at Brother Li’s body with a terrified shout, when he himself was penetrated by an arrow from his forehead, his body rolling for a while at the brutal force. This ghastly scene frightened the others out of their wits, after which they all pressed their bodies as close to the ground as possible, no thoughts in their minds of fighting back. They could only wonder, in their minds, how could someone see through the dark forest, at such a distance? And not missing one shot? Could it be that he was some superhuman archer, rarely born in this world?

As they lay still on the ground with trembling hearts, Shi Mu did nothing, which made the Wu riders even more frightened. Finally, one of them could not hold his fear anymore, and shouted out, “You bastard, don’t be so proud! You think with a fine bow and some shallow skills you can flee successfully? See what happens to you when Master Tong comes here! He’ll skin you alive to avenge my companions!”

“Master Tong? So you are not the Jin Clan’s men?”

Shi Mu only spoke up when hearing the name.

“Humph! The Jin Clan has also come, led by their Fifth Master personally. But we have the Horses of Blue Wind, so we were faster and reached you earlier. You are dead meat this time, even if you can save your dirty little life from us, you can never escape from the Jin Clan’s tracking group.” The Wu rider cursed Shi Mu loundly.

Hearing such a spirit-lifting curse, the other riders also grew more daring. They thought to themselves, “That’s right, even though we can’t hurt him, that will be a different story once Master Tong comes. He’s a real Houtian warrior, not someone you can handle.”

“By Master Tong I believe you mean Wu Tong. Well, I’ll deal with him late, after I finish sending you guys to the other world.” Just as his voice fell, Shi Mu rushed out from a grove, with a loud footstep. He moved with blurring speed toward the men.

New editor here! We will be making some changes later to a lot of names so that it will be easier for you as a reader to the names of different nations and the different power levels. I will also be editing the chapters from the beginning to everything flow well together but my priority will be new releases. Enjoy!

Please note that knife has been changed to saber since a chinese “dao” generally translates into any type of a single-edged blade of any length. But in our case most of the “knives” in the story are over two feet in length and generally resembles a saber more than a knife.

Chapter 37 - Farewell My Enemies!

"Get up! The bastard's not using the bow now, he's running here unarmed!"

Shi Mu's footsteps thundered out as he galloped to his enemies, as he was seen clearly that he was without a weapon. Such a good news caused the few survivors' faces to light up with delight. The two at the front immediately rose without thinking and dashed towards Shi Mu like valiant conquerors, one wielded a spear and the other bore a saber. The other three warriors followed their two valiant companions, pushing themselves to the limit. Their feet thrummed against the ground , as though the ground was on fire, in an anxious hurry. Just a moment earlier, they were pressed against the ground like overpopulated vermin, but now they had all became imposing warriors with threatening weapons and ferocious features, upon seeing that Shi Mu had abandoned his bow and had come to offer his life to them.

As someone who had been practicing racing over the hilltops , Shi Mu now felt as free as a running leopard on an open plain. In a blink of an eye, before they could even make out Shi Mu's silhouette in the darkness, he had already pounced on the two pioneers. The two were truly ranked among the best in Wu riders to be able to dodge Shi Mu's first attack. They began flanking him in perfect coordination, one swirling his long spear which produced myriad of afterimages, while the other wielding his saber in a pose that reflected beams of light.

Upon seeing their formation, Shi Mu gave a snort. How could mere spear afterimages ever faze him? Shi Mu casually glanced at the man before punching out casually at one of the afterimages. A booming noise resounded as the punch collided with the spear causing the Wu rider to drop his spear due to the great force. As the spear flew away, he felt a burning sensation in each of his fingers and was forcefully pushed back three steps with a face full of astonishment. He

had long heard of Shi Mu's superhuman force, but it baffled him how had Shi Mu identified the real spear among countless shadows!

Without a moment of delay Shi Mu drew his Sun and Moon Daggers from his waist and stomped hard on the ground as he immersed his concentration into the sweeping cold light of his knives.

In an instant, six knife shadows blurred into one streak of cold light, then with another shake of his daggers Shi Mu threw out a unimaginably swift seventh knife shadow as he quickly sidestepped to the back of the Wu rider wielding the saber.

In a flash, a gaping, bleeding wound emerged distinctly on the rider's neck before his head slowly fell to the ground, rolling over and over. The headless body only fell down after spasming like a headless chicken for a moment. Shi Mu did not even stop for a moment but instead increased his speed and momentum after dispatching the spear wielder; he bent low against the ground like a spring before springing out toward the spear man.

"No!"

The spear man had just barely managed to steady himself from Shi Mu's previous punch before he raised his head and saw Shi Mu darting at him. Who would not be struck dumb? Even with his spear he could not bear Shi Mu's one punch, now that he'd been denuded of his only weapon, how could he win? In addition, he had just recover from the first punch while Shi Mu had already decapitated his fellow warrior. The man reactively turned about in terror to flee. But just as he had made his second step, a howling gale rolled past him and a piercing coldness struck his waist. He helplessly looked down as he saw the confusing sight of a pair of legs flopping around on the ground. Then realization hit him that he was cut into two halves at his waist, as his warm blood gushed

out wildly from the split cuts.

After putting the two riders down, Shi Mu turned, daggers in hand, and stared at the last three Wu riders with stony eyes.

The three survivors were frightened out of their wits after seeing what happened to their two companions. Not far from Shi Mu, they all had stopped charging unconsciously and looked at each other. The man a knife scar at his eye corner suggested in a low, harsh voice, “Running is useless! He’s so damn fast and we could only be finished one by one if we run. Let’s make a trap and wait till Master Tong arrives. “

The two fellows quickly embraced the idea, and gathered around the scar man quickly in a strange formation before pointing their blue swords at Shi Mu simultaneously.

“The Triangle Formation Trap?”

Shi Mu murmured to himself when seeing this. Though a little unprepared, he still strode towards their trap with his Sun and Moon daggers.

With each step the three riders grew increasingly nervous as Shi Mu neared them. In terror, they shouted together before Shi Mu had even reached the prime position for attack and activated their trap. The three riders quickly rotated between the three points of the triangle while wielding their swords, producing layers upon layers of sword that radiated outwards.

“I was expecting more from this useless trick!” Shi Mu laughed at his enemies’ last desperate attempt scornfully. His arm shot out in a blur and the daggers’ six

successive knife shadows flew as one towards their formation.

Peng! Peng! The attack was repelled by the sword shadow screen but as a result the density was visibly reduced by a large amount. The three riders trembled and begun to sweat in fear when they realized how much difficulty it took to repel Shi Mu's first attack. The three frantically began to reconstruct the shadow screen again to shield themselves.

"Formidable!" Shi Mu was quite surprised, because not only had he produced six cuts at one breath, but he had also instilled immense strength with each cut which should crushed the three of them. However the three riders were quite wrong if they thought that strike was Shi Mu's only attack. Shi Mu took a deep breath and rotated his body, striking with his longer dagger in all directions fiercely, each attack caused five or six shadows, which began to consolidate into a silver glittering spear rushing like a shark toward the three riders.

The clanging of swords resounded like a rainstorm throughout the night!

The three Wu riders gave out shrill cries as two of them stumbled away, their hands had sprouted blood from the place where they held their swords and their chests blossomed with deep wounds. Judging from their falling bodies the two had begun their journey into the next world already. The current sole survivor was the man with a scar who was bleeding from his face, and although he had no wounds on his chest, the arm that he used to hold his sword was no longer there. Only the blood gushing from his shoulder was an indicator he was not born with just one arm.

Without even checking his wounds, he turned around and fled with all his strength. Shi Mu had now stopped rotating and gave a glance at his surrounding. Seeing the man he only gave a cold smile before he grasped a long arrow from his pack. He effortlessly pulled his bow back and a faint hum of death was

released. The arrow shot out from bow piercing through the scar man's body who had fled hundreds of meters away after only a second of flight, causing the man to flop face-down to the ground.

Shi Mu strode over leisurely and with a flash of his dagger, separating the man's head from the body cleanly.

Shi Mu began to walk over to the other two riders who were struggling in a blood pool to crawl away. But just as he meant to end their lives Shi Mu's expression changed. A single footprint accompanied by a deep thrum was left as Shi Mu shot his body off to the side to dodge an incoming cold light. The light passed him and buried itself into the spot where Shi Mu stood, revealing itself to be a three cun long knife

"So you are the so-called Master Tong. Took you long enough to get here. Now let us dance with death."

Shi Mu turned around and stared at a nearby tree as he said so, with his expression sharpening in preparation to fight this mortal enemy.

Chapter 38 - The Roaring Eagle

TLer Notes:

Knife/Saber will now be translated into Blade

“Nhmmm? What a clever child to be able to detect me from such a distance.” A cold mocking voice rang out from behind a tree before a figure flashed in the darkness where emerged a man in a decorated uniform. He was none other than the sole HouTian warrior in the Wu hunting group and carried a weapon in his hand.

A cursory glance at the weapon made Shi Mu’s expression darken in fury. In Wu Tong’s hand was his purple steel bow which he had left earlier! So it turned out that this HouTian warrior had actually been here since the beginning, even bypassing the fight quietly to steal the bow! The reason why he had not attacked yet was because one, the bow required a force of at least a thousand jin and two, Shi Mu had taken all the remaining arrows with him in his backpack, leaving Wu Tong unable to make a single shot even if he could manage to open the bow using his real qi.

“Your gracious Excellency, for a bow you cannot even open, you would sacrifice all of your men’s lives?” Shi Mu tightened his grip of the Sun and Moon Daggers in his hand as he asked in a cold sarcastic voice.

“Hmph. Their deaths are just a reminder that we, the Wu family can buy and use trash servants as we wish! Truly, the last thing I expected was that you would manage to obtain purple steel bow! And to use it with skill! Even I, Wu Tong, began to feel threatened by your dirty tricks. In hindsight, those servants’

lives cannot compare to this wondrous bow. So now, make your choice: offer your life in servitude to me, or die here like a dog." Wu Tong said in the world's most indifferent, magnanimous tone.

"I have always heard that a practitioner, in front of a HouTian warrior's might, would have no other choice but to bow their head or to break their back trying to resist the indomitable difference in power. But! I have yet to see it myself!" Staring fixedly at Wu Tong, Shi Mu answered with a fierce tone.

"Haha! So I am so surprised to hear of a mere practitioner who dares to challenge the heavens! I'm starting to wonder if I should call you a brave fool or an ignorant frog. Come! Let me teach you a lesson how you, a fledgling practitioner, should behave in front of a true HouTian warrior!" Wu Tong was at originally dumbstruck by Shi Mu's challenge, but soon bursted out laughing, as he threw the bow away to grasp his sword.

"Peng!" The huge bow sunk into a large tree's trunk like a knife gutting a pig, one end swallowed by the tree by several chi lengths, while the other end shook and thrummed with a low humming noise. The uniformed Wu Tong's hand flashed as his soft sword became straight and solid as it left his scabbard and his body leaned forward to narrow the distance between him and Shi Mu.

Other than the slight narrowing of his eyes, Shi Mu did not show any sign of being flustered at all. As Wu Tong quickly approached, Shi Mu suddenly tightened his grasp and seven blade shadows were thrown out.

"Seven cuts!! So it's true then, your Wind-Blowing Blade Art is truly exquisite! But today is your unlucky day, for there is someone even faster than you." Wu Tong uttered a low shout and shook his sword. In an instant seven shadows were also produced by him, dispelling Shi Mu's blade shadows before they had a chance to gather and become one. As the sword and blade shadows clashed

together, an eighth shadow broke through, dispelling the chaotic energy as it flew towards its target, Shi Mu's heart!

"Eight cuts in one breath!" Shi Mu swallowed his astonishment before focusing his concentration on his blade art to shatter the incoming eighth shadow. A thunderous noise resounded as the two clashed, while an brutal energy rippled out at lightning speeds from Wu Tong's sword to Shi Mu's hand. Shi Mu felt his shoulders trembled uncontrollably, his body forced back a half step and his hands turn numb due to the strike.

On the other side of the collision, Wu Tong did not escape unharmed by the huge force rebounding from his sword. A trace of surprise flashed across his eyes, but quickly disappeared as he resumed his attack by moving his wrist in a unique pattern. Instantly the upper end of the sword became as flexible and agile as a viper, slithering to bypass Shi Mu's blade before darting directly to Shi Mu's throat. This attack was so fast that most warriors would only see a streak of cold light flashing from Wu Tong's sword.

However, how could Shi Mu's ability ever be compared with most warriors. Was there any other warrior with a better eyesight? Undoubtedly no. But still, his heart beat vehemently at the sudden attack and his back break out in cold sweat, as all he could do was to turn his neck abruptly to his side. The streak of cold light was successfully barely dodged, caressing Shi Mu's face leaving a shallow wound behind.

Shi Mu was enraged. He rotated his body and struck out with his arms quickly, throwing out continuous shadow blades towards his enemy.

Wu Tong snorted with contempt at Shi Mu's movements before releasing a terrifying force from his body. He held his sword with both hands as he dashed toward Shi Mu's blades.

“Mountain-Crushing Triple Strike!”

Three loud noises resounded as three strong sword shadows that were visibly much stronger than the previous ones, swept away Shi Mu’s blade shadows in an instant. Shi Mu stumbled as his rhythm was disrupted and his body forced backward three steps. The hand that had been holding the blades were now badly injured, and blood was gushing out wildly like a spring.

In the past, he had always been the one oppressing other practitioners with his superhuman physical strength; but now, what had happened? He was crushed the same way he used to crush others. So it was the most reasonable reaction when he trembled with irresistible rage and terror. He thought to himself that the energy swirling through Wu Tan’s sword must have been real qi. That qi was the supernatural force that overwhelming outclassed Shi Mu’s bizarre physical strength. If so, it was indeed miraculous! If he had not possessed that incredible physical strength, he would have been just a bloody smear on the ground by now.

When Wu Tong saw that the three strikes had not overwhelmed Shi Mu, he was quite taken aback. While he did not suffer as much as Shi Mu, his hands that held the sword were now sore and numb rendering him unable to perform the same technique again.

“The Stone Monkey Bloodline was always considered the most useless bloodline in the HouTian level, but it can impressively reinforce a practitioner to withstand a force of a thousand jin. Judging from our fight so far, it seems to be true. But if you think your bloodline can help you fight a HouTian warrior, you are quite wrong.” Wu Tong tried to suppress Shi Mu’s momentum by his suddenly leaping up and pouncing towards Shi Mu like a huge eagle as he stretched his arms and rotated it once while in the air.

Shi Mu was momentarily caught unguarded by this eagle-like movement, but soon recovered by causing his longer blade to stir up a large streak of cold light to disrupt the attack.

"Peng!" Wu Tong's sword collided heavily with the edged blade, which sent him springing upward again before he made a second pounce. Like the first time, Shi Mu forcefully took the attack again with his edged blade. This time, the two fighters struck against each other seven or eight times in a dazzling display of deadly martial force, one spun in midair like a smith's forging hammer while the other on the ground unyielding like a tree in a storm. Each strike would send Wu Tong's body upward again, like a weightless flower following the wind's whimsies. While Shi Mu compressed tighter and tighter after each strike, the enemy's sword growing heavier and heavier with each rotation. His hand experienced more and more pain, and his feet had sunk half chi into the earth from the pressure.

"Haha, bastard, what do you think of my Roaring Eagle Art? How many more strikes can you take? You'll have no regrets dying at this HouTian technique!"

Wu Tong's wild laughter came from the air, when his silhouette rotated again before he struck out with his sword sending shadows down to Shi Mu like a tumbling waterfall.

Chapter 39 - To Kill a HouTian Warrior You Need to be Crafty

This time, Shi Mu did not attempt to parry the incoming sword again. On the contrary, he crouched his body to the ground before leaping up again, one of his hand now in a black glove, with which he punched his enemy in midair.

“Hahaha you fool! You are courting death!”

Wu Tong mocked with loud laughter, as he sent his tumbling sword shadows in a maneuver that parted to avoid the incoming fist, before they once again united into one streak of cold light flashing towards Shi Mu’s shoulder.

A shrill sound was heard as the sword pierced Shi Mu’s clothes but failed to penetrate his shoulder. Something blocked the sword! The sword tore his clothes at the shoulder, cutting a slit of several cun long, revealing a glaring golden armor beneath.

“The Golden Armour!”

Wu Tong could not help but blurt out in astonishment upon seeing the armor, and without a counter force that could send him back into the air, he was unable to spring up this time. Shi Mu had been waiting exactly for this moment: he grasped at the extremely sharp sword causing the the glove to be cut open instantly, and his fingers to bleed profusely. But Shi Mu had actually ignored the pain and was quite excited, “Finally I caught you! Let's see where you can flee this time!”

His weapon now caught in Shi Mu’s bleeding hand, Wu Tong’s eyes flashed with coldness. Without a word, he shook his wrist in the same peculiar way he

had done before to cause the sword to turn soft intending to escape Shi Mu's grasp and simultaneously cutting fingers off. Shi Mu, with an earth-shaking shout, wielded his blade in his other hand and instantly threw out nine blade shadows that rolled one after another to Wu Tong at a lightning speed, far surpassing any of his previous attacks.

"Nine cuts in one breath! You are actually have reached advanced stage!"

Wu Tong screamed as he was caught unguarded. Wu Tong released his sword quickly before he rolled backward as far as three zhang where he flopped heavily on the ground. Wu Tong gauged that three zhang should have been out of the scope of Shi Mu's attacks temporarily, or at least safe enough for him to steady himself and prepare a counter blow. But that was mere wishful thinking: before he could find his feet back on the ground, a silvery streak of cold light flashed in his eyesight, followed almost simultaneously by nine dagger shadows that chased him like hyenas thirsty for his blood.

"No!!!" Wu Tong absolutely did not expect this, and was left no time to dodge. He steadied himself to take a deep breath and suddenly, a layer of blue shimmer appeared between his arms. As soon as the layer of qi formed, Wu Tong struck continuously at the incoming dagger shadows causing the shadows to dissipate! Wu Tong had dispelled most of the shadows with his bare hands! But he missed one deadly shadow, whose cold light turned out to be the real Sun and Moon daggers, slicing his shoulder. Although his arm was not cut off, the blue layer of qi was dissipated and a cut appeared several cun deep.

Flexing his arm, Wu Tong sighed contentedly at the successful block. But just was he was to step back, a crisp sound came from the handles of the Sun and Moon Daggers. Before he could realize the daggers had already sprung up from his flesh and swept across his neck with a flash of blade light.

Instantly, a bleeding wound emerged on his neck; Wu Tong stared hard at the sharp daggers that had thrust into the earth near his feet after flying through his neck. It was then he found a thin black chain cunningly attached at the back of the handles, which had blended itself totally into the darkness before it showed revealing itself after the fatal attack.

"If I had known before that I would have died, I would have gone all out...Had it not been for the Golden Armour...Had it not been for the goddamn chain...Or your crafty tricks...and the blade art..."

Wu Tong tried with all effort to press his wound where a blood river was gushing out wildly, and murmured with deep regret, causing red froth to bubble out from him mouth and neck. Finally, his head tilted, and flopped down, rolling over the ground.

The big head, now tainted by dirt, was eyes wide open staring vacantly, forever unable to close those hatred-eaten eyes.

The thin chain did not pause to lament for Wu Tong at all; it shook with a jerk and brought back the blade back to Shi Mu's hand, safe and sound. The youth had killed his enemy from a distance of several zhang! Only until now he threw himself unto the ground in a relief, grasping for breath.

Actually, the fight was not a long one, while to describe the actions took time, the fight started and ended in as fast as twenty breaths. But the pressure! The pressure to face this HouTian warrior at his level, still far exceeded his expectation, taking him much more energy than that when he fought with the previous Wu riders. If he had not come up with the plan to forcefully take cut by Wu Tong's sword deliberately with the Golden Armour, there was no way he could have forced an opportunity to strike. Along with the chain on the daggers he had just escaped narrowly from the crushing strength of his enemy.

But after a moment of shocked reflection he bursted into wild, uncontrolled laughter. “Who would believe, I, a mere practitioner, could have killed a HouTian warrior! Others may say Wu Tong was only an early level HouTian warrior, and I only won by crafty tricks. But still I killed him, a HouTian warrior! Wonder if the messenger from Kai Yuan Martial Arts School would change his mind once knowing this. “ He knew he still in a state of adrenaline from the fear from the fight, but he knew he was actually mocking his own weakness by saying such seemingly triumphant words.

After the nearly delirious self talk, he fumbled in his clothes and took out a small bottle. From it he rubbed ointment on the wounds in his hand and face. The ointment’s cooling effect on his wounds caused him to lift his head up again in joy as he stood up and walked towards Wu Tong’s body.

A moment later, there was a jade case and a craftily designed belt in his hands. The belt was no doubt the sword Wu Tong had used earlier, and the jade case contained a thick wad of silver notes, amounting to at least some seven or eight million silvers. Without hesitation Shi Mu kept all these to himself. With a last glance over the messy bodies on the ground, he sighed and turned to leave.

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After a while he reached once again the end of the woods.

“Brother Shi, I’m so happy to see you unharmed!”

Zhong Xiu cuddled Shi Mu’s body closely, her delicate body pressed against his hard muscled body without reserve. No longer able to constrain herself after tearfully watching the scene, she burst into tears. Such a close bodily contact

made Shi Mu's muscles grow stiff; moreover, the faint flowery fragrance from the Zhong Xiu's body caused his mind to blank out.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I just lost my manners. Brother Shi, what should we do next?" The girl came to herself quickly, unlocking her arms that had been pressing her body into Shi Mu with all her delicate strength. She stepped backwards and asked with a blushing face.

"Simple, we'll return to the original route." Shi Mu offered the answer without hesitation.

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At the other end of the woods, Wu Hua was now leaning against the cart, his mind roaming. And the other two Wu riders who stayed to watch the horse were doing their job dutifully on alert. Near them some ten-odd Blue Gale Horses were grazing leisurely as if in a care-free world rather than this blood soaked woods.

All of a sudden, two loud sounds exploded. Before anyone could realize it the two rides were shot by two feathered arrows, their bodies forcefully thrown back as the arrows penetrated their heads. The next moment they fell to the ground, no trace of movement or life left in them.

"No!!!"

The youth leaning against the cart reacted quickly, he shouted out and darted towards the horses. But hardly had he made it a couple steps before a third arrow pierced his back and nailed him on the ground.

Wu Hua uttered a heartrending cry and tried desperately to grasp at his back, attempting to pull out the arrow in his back. But it was already nailed hard into the ground, as if something had grown from the earth, immovable as the mountains, leaving Wu Hua to flail helplessly like a baby bird failing to fly after being pushed out of the tree.

Just then footsteps came from the woods, and Shi Mu appeared with the purple steel bow in hand, followed closely by Zhong Xiu.

“It’s you! No way! How could you have escaped from my third Uncle! Don’t kill me, please! I can be the perfect hostage, Uncle will let you go in return for my safety!” Wu Hua managed to turn his head to look at the two coming out of the woods. As soon as he caught sight of the two people he hated most in the world, he mournfully cried out in despair.

Chapter 40 - Hunters and Eagles

“There’s no need! I’ll send you to see Wu Tong immediately!” Shi Mu answered with a stony face while he moved his arms and drew his blades instantly from the waist. With a cold flash of light, Wu Hua’s head separated from his body, his face contorted pathetically.

This was a horrendous sight to Zong Xiu; her face went pale and her dreamy eyes widened in terror. However, nothing stirred the calmness in Shi Mu’s heart, as he went for the horses - the only living creatures that shared his calmness now - to pick the two heaviest from them, and then hooked the nearby cart to the two of them.

After a while the grey cart was driven by the two horses galloping on the highway with Shi Mu and Zhong Xiu in it, resuming their journey to the mountains. Shi Mu whipped the horses incessantly, constantly on alert to the Jin pursuers after them. He had prepared himself for any potential dangers and dare not to slacken in his vigil after dispatching Wu Tong the Houtian warrior. Judging from what a HouTian warrior in his beginning stage could do, Shi Mu was more than clear of the might of an intermediate HouTian enemy and he had heard of how the fifth master of the Jins far surpassed warriors like Wu Tong.

About thirty miles behind Shi Mu’s cart, the Jins were also galloping at their top speed, while three snow white eagles with emerald green heads were flying several miles ahead of the Jins high up in the sky. Their wings were majestic, stretching long and pumping with a smooth, peaceful vigor.

As the night began to recede and the day to reveal its light, the grey cart finally came to the verge of a vast rolling mountains. So vast that the youth and the girl could not see their end. There, Shi Mu unhesitatingly abandoned the cart and

horses, rushing into the verdant mountains with Zhong Xiu, approaching their unknown fate without turning back their heads once.

Four hours later the Jins also reached the mountains. The fifth master was riding on a red horse, and after a brief glance at the deserted grey cart and two horse, he commanded the two servants near him in a harsh voice,

“Have the eagles prepare to engage and send out all the hunters! Catch the bastard!”

The servant in control of the eagles nodded his head obediently and fumbled in his shirt for a silver whistle and blew into it loudly. A long shrill whistle and three short harsh notes sounded out as the eagles all dived sharply with stretched wings, wheeling above their heads. Then the other servant, much smaller in stature, went to the black cart after jumping down from the horse, and pulled open the cart doors. Out scuttled four bull-like dogs that were all waist high, with protruding green eyes, and were covered by thick blood-red hair. From their fierce mouths sharp teeth could be seen vaguely every time they panted. The next moment the hunter servant threw down a grey shirt to let the dogs scent it. As one, as if getting a signal, the hunting dogs howled fiercely before they scampered into the mountains like a whirlwind.

“Hurry up and follow them, while the hunters still have the remaining smell of the shirt’s owner.” The hunter servant face lit up upon seeing the scene.

“Good! Hopefully they won’t waste my time by leading us to the bastard’s laundry bin. Move!” The fifth master said with a sinister grin, his face twisted with malice. Just as he finished the words he jumped off the horse and followed the hunters into the mountains, and the two servants followed behind meekly. In an blink of an eye, the only man left was the man who had never underwent martial training, forced to stay with the cart.

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Deep in the mountains, Shi Mu plodded on wearily, carrying the exhausted Zhong Xiu on his back. All of a sudden, a clear cry sounded out above. Shi Mu eye's widened as he looked up and saw a snow white eagle, whose looks were rarely seen, swirling above the groves around them, crying all the time. At first, Shi Mu was surprised but quickly regained his footing as he advanced undisturbed; a little longer, he was flustered to find that the strange eagle was following them! Meanwhile the cries grew increasingly loud and numerous.

"There's something fishy about this eagle. Miss Zhong, please get down first." Shi Mu's heart leaped with vigilance as he noticed the strange behavior of the animal.

"Yes Brother Shi, be careful." The girl had been rather tired and dozy on Shi Mu's back, but the new situation sobered her up immediately.

Shi Mu nodded and slowly let the girl down. With a lift of his arm the purple steel bow he had been carrying over his shoulder was already unslung and readied to shoot. The next minute, an arrow whizzed into the air, and with an eerie pained cry the eagle was shot through its heart before it fell heavily down like a shooting star.

"Finished. Let's move on." Shi Mu sighed with relief, put away his bow, then urged the girl with a hearty smile.

But this time he judged wrongly. Just as his words fell another cry came from the distant sky; in a minute, two other white eagles had found their way and began to cry out. But this time they remained in the nearby sky without

approaching on, swirling with stretched wings.

Shi Mu's expression changed profoundly, and without a word he carried the girl in his arms, dashing to an adjacent hilltop.

"Brother Shi, what's wrong? Could it be that the eagles were sent by someone?" Curling up in Shi Mu's arms Zhong Xiu asked in confusion.

"I think so. Butler Cheng once mentioned to me that the Jins kept a kind of tracking eagles, they have green heads and could travel as far as a thousand miles per day. But these eagles were always paired with a certain type of tracking beast." Shi Mu's face fell; he answered as he kept on racing at his top speed, making the air howling around his ears. At this speed, he was no slower than a race horse.

"Tracking best? Do you mean the Blood Hunter?"

Just as Zhong Xiu was pondering a fierce fit of dogs growling resounded behind their backs. Before they could make out the source a group of several huge red hunting dogs emerged out of the grove a three hundred meters behind, rushing toward Shi Mu.

"Haha here you are bastard! Took me such a long time to find you! You damn scoundrel killed my only son! I'll skin you alive, eat you alive, and I will go far and wide to research ways to torture you!" A middle-aged bearded man also emerged from the grove, two golden sticks in his hands. Following closely behind him were two servants, one wielding a saber and the other a sword. They were none other than the fifth master and his two servants controlling the eagles and hunting dogs.

Although Shi Mu had set off four hours earlier than them, carrying Zhong Xiu had slowed down his speed, plus the Jins had the assistance of the eagles and hunting dogs to help them find a path that led directly to their target. Faced with the deadly enemies on all sides, Shi Mu had to abandon his running plan and resort to the final method: Kill! Kill those who would take his life! And this had been the way he led this harsh life all these years, and never once did he complain, only striving forward, through fire and water to forge himself stronger and stronger.

He quickly released Zhong Xiu and said, “Be quick, go away yourself. Find somewhere to live happily. Let me deal with them.”

“No way. I’ll stay with you, and if need be, die with you.” Zhong Xiu insisted with the most tranquil face.

How could Shi Mu not be moved by the girl’s affection and declaration. After some thought and a deep look into her eyes, he was the one that yielded. Slowly, he answered, “Well, if that is what you wish for. You can stay, but please hide yourself well so that I can concentrate on the enemies.”

The decision overjoyed the girl even when faced by deadly foes. “Then I’ll hide behind that huge boulder. Brother Shi, promise me you’ll be careful!” After a quick nod Zhong Xiu turned and ran away. Watching the beautiful girl’s figure sway back and forth as she ran, Shi Mu took a deep breath and grasped for the purple steel bow again. This time, he knew what he was facing: grave danger. A mid level Houtian warrior!

Meanwhile the hunting dogs rushed forward, leaving no time for a sweet farewell; in a few minutes they were now only one hundred fifty meters away.

Chapter 41 - I’m Gonna Save You With My Life

A powerful sound exploded.

The one of the large hunting wolves that was just ready to leap up was shot by an arrow. With a plaintive cry it flew back by the imposing arrow, and was eventually nailed to a nearby tree. Before the other four dogs realized what had happened to their companion, another two of them were skewered by cold uncaring arrows sent by Shi Mu, not even allowing them the time to let out a last howl.

“The Blood Steel Bow! Quick! Have the wolves retreat!” The fifth master shouted out in terror; a glance at Shi Mu’s huge purple bow frightened him. Even with the Jin’s wealth, to train these Blood Hunting Wolves was no easy job. The hunter servant, seeing his dear “pets” killed in an instant, felt an excruciating pain in his chest. Therefore, once hearing his master’s command, he quickly made a hurried retreat signal with four piercing notes. The rest of the hunting wolves obediently turned about immediately with a whimper, one running wildly to a nearby grove, the other jumping to a big tree’s back.

But how could Shi Mu not take opportunity of fleeing enemies? One wolf had barely reached the grove before it was sent flying by an arrow penetrating its throat and nailing it to the ground; the other howled in anguish before it was nailed to its spot; the arrow had even traveled through a tree before reaching its destination. The five blood wolves were still, silenced forever by Shi Mu’s mighty bow.

This desolate sight made the hunter servant cry out with rage, his eyes reddened from the pain of loss. He shouted loudly as he moved like a furious mother bear pouncing on the one who dared to hurt her cubs. It was most

reasonable for him to act thus; after all, the five blood wolves were raised by him and he alone raised them from their infancy, like he would if they were his own blood sons. Now that seeing his sons killed mercilessly one after another by Shi Mu, his sanity broke; all he could think of was revenge: tear him apart, piece by piece, and to cause Shi Mu the pain his heart was experiencing by threefold.

"You! Come back, now!" The fifth master knew the consequence of this thoughtless rush, though he himself sympathized with the servant because now, the two of them had shared a common thought to take revenge for their sons.

But the warning never registered in the anguished servant's ears. He crawled on the ground like a frenzied animal with an alarming speed, zig zagging in effort to throw off Shi Mu's aim. Pitifully, this posed no threat to Shi Mu, who knocked three arrows as his face scrunched in severe concentration. He moved his fingers just once, quick and resolute as if playing a guitar.

Three thunderous sounds exploded out as the arrows were shot with an overwhelming power, leaving afterimages of a black line. The running hunter servant leaped up instantly causing the first arrow flew beneath his body; he followed up with a twist of his waist, to turn his torso as he escaped the second shot that whisked by but the third shot was unavoidable. There was no way he could evade death as the third one came. It pierced his left eyes before continuing its journey of death, leaving behind a man's body which had crumpled lifelessly on the ground.

The fifth master's face had now turned livid with rage. Just then another explosion resounded as three fierce arrows were shot out with incredible speed. This time the target was the eagle servant beside his master.

The servant was already half dead with shock from seeing what had happened to the wolves and their master; seeing that the arrows were now coming for him he froze in terror and called out in plea to his master desperately.

The fifth master snorted in contempt as he wielded the golden tonfas in his hands.

“Peng, Peng Peng!” The three arrows fell lifelessly on the ground, cleanly cut into six pieces.

“You cowardly piece of trash, just lie here and see how I deal with that bastard.” The fifth master cursed the servant in a harsh voice, then moved his body agilely, taking off like a giant bird. Each jump was 15 to 20 meters in length. In an blink of an eye he was now sixty meters away from the eagle servant.

Shi Mu snatched three arrows again, and shot them simultaneously. “Bang, Bang, Bang!” Shi Mu astonishedly stared as he watched the fifth master brush the arrows away like sweeping some dust from his coat. He sucked in a deep breath as he realized the difference between the early stage and the middle stage Houtian warrior. Shi Mu once more grasped for more arrows from the pack but was struck with helpless fear as he realized he had ran out of arrows with his enemy only thirty meters away.

Gritting his teeth, he threw away the huge bow which now seemed like a burden, and drew his Sun and Moon daggers without delay from his waist. After stomping on the ground with a sudden force he rushed forward, shook his wrist and hurled nine blade shadows like a whirlwind.

“Nine cuts in one breath! Hmph you may have fully accomplished the skill but today will be the day you will die!” The voice of the fifth master sounded as cold as ice. The next moment, a deafening sound like that of a gong resounded out suddenly, and golden images of tonfas danced wildly in the air dazzling Shi Mu’s eyes smashing the nine shadows causing them to be dispelled. Immediately he felt his hands burning with an immeasurable energy coming from the lashback energy from tonfas, that was twice as strong as that from Wu Tong’s sword. This

caused Shi Mu's hand to bleed terribly again, from his recently healed wounds, and the daggers whizzed out of his hand into the air.

Just as he lost his weapons, he felt a fierce wind pressure pushing against him almost knocking him down, and a golden tonfa emerged unexpectedly in front of him, rushing at his forehead, leaving him no time to evade. Shi Mu eyes widened and punched out as he shouted.

Boom! The punch made the tonfa veer off its course and fell on Shi Mu's shoulder. Shi Mu felt as if a mountain had smashed into his shoulder and stepped back several steps, an insufferable pain penetrating his body.

The fifth master was not disappointed as much as he was shocked to find Shi Mu's bones intact. But another glance told him the reason. "Humph, why, I was wondering. You are wearing the Golden Armour stolen from my son! That's why you were able to resist my strike. Well, today I will show you the Blood Palm skill I've been practicing all these years!"

As his words fell he dropped the tonfas immediately and flew forward as one of his hands swelled with blood causing it to increase its size by two times. A stench arose from the palm which caused Shi Mu's nose crinkle in nausea. But he only stood still in shock for a moment as his eyes leaked a trace of suspicion of this eerie skill. Shi Mu let out a shout and wildly shook his arms, causing a fine chain that had been wound around his wrist to clang. Consequently, the daggers which had fallen somewhere jumped up and sliced forward. As the daggers flew, they began to rotate swiftly, turning into a malicious silver wheel. Shi Mu gritted his teeth as he prepared the suicidal attack. "I will not die alone!" Shi Mu gritted his teeth as he decided to destroy the fifth master at the price of his own life.

Chapter 42 - Between Life and Death

What Houtian Warrior would allow a Wu Scholar to freely injure them? Even though the fifth master wished nothing but to rush forward and erase Shi Mu, in hopes of appeasing the great anguish he felt in his heart, he twisted his body and retreated. His body flickered like a willow leaf floating in the wind, agilely dodging each attack. After returning to the ground he lost no time using one leg to lift up a golden tonfa lying at his foot.

Boom! A ball of golden light flashed toward the rotating daggers and directly collided. The daggers, made from cold iron, were reputed as unbreakable, but facing the golden tonfa, the Sun and Moon daggers cracked with a thunderous noise. Shi Mu could not help but wonder at the stick's material as he found his daggers only half complete. Dejectedly, Shi Mu shook his wrist causing the fine chains attached to the daggers to be pulled back.

Upon seeing the cracked daggers, the fifth master laughed at the imminent victory. He lifted another tonfa from the ground and shot it toward Shi Mu at a startling speed before he rose into the air and followed closely behind.

This swift attack left Shi Mu no time to think of a plan. Wielding his incomplete daggers he produced nine shadows and sent them darting forward.

A deafening clang resounded!

The golden ball of light trembled as it was slowed down, bouncing back into the form of a stick. Shi Mu let out a muffled shout and retreated several steps. The daggers were now completely shattered, along with their owner's arm drooping like a tree after a storm, as though broken by the blow.

Just then the fifth master had already reached Shi Mu. His sleeves flashed before a blood red palm smashed towards Shi Mu's head with an irresistible momentum. Shi Mu was enraged; he moved his uninjured arm to strike forcibly at the dashing palm.

"Are you tired of living?" The fifth master laughed wildly at Shi Mu's desperate move; the laughter was accompanied by a fluctuation of qi which made the scarlet palm even more red, to the extent that a visible layer of red fog emerged floating above his palm.

But just as Shi Mu's fist was about to hit the red palm, his fingers moved and a sharp dagger appeared in his hand mercilessly stabbing into the palm. A piercing pain radiated out from every blood vessels as the fifth master uttered a heartrending cry, but he could not stop his palm which now had reached Shi Mu's arm. Shi Mu also gave out a cry as he was sent flying backward at an unstoppable speed, knocking down two saplings before stopping against a mountain boulder. Shi Mu coughed and spat blood as he slid down the rock like a dead animal, unable to stand up for a while.

The fifth master's face was strange. He looked down at his hands which was rapidly losing its blood red color. A sharp dagger protruded from his palm, crimson blood leaked from the wound, causing his palm to rapidly change from that crimson color to a pale white. Looking at the sharp dagger that had penetrated his palm, he felt an overwhelming fear mixed with rage. His expression rapidly changed as his fears were confirmed, his voice shook as he screamed. "Bastard! You have ruined my Blood Palm! You...YOU MONGREL! I will crush you and grind all your bones into dust!"

Before he even finished his curse, the fifth master extracted the dagger from his palm and hit at several acupoints in his hand to stop the bleeding. He strode to Shi Mu, his face twisting with rage.

Shi Mu suppressed the gnawing pain in his arms and looked up at the fifth master. The muscles on his face twitched, a mocking smile flashing across his lips.

So this was a real intermediate Houtian Warrior! An invincible enemy for a Wu Scholar! It took so much to just resist one blow: he utilized the exploding of his Sun and Moon daggers to conceal another dagger inside his sleeve. Only then could he mutilate the fifth master's palm without being noticed. But even such a painstaking plan was no use in front of the overpowering Blood Palm. He had thought of causing a mortal wound to his opponent after stabbing his palm, taking the chance to end the fight. But this was merely wishful thinking: he was now brought to the harsh reality by the crushing power of the palm. Now, lying helplessly on the ground, half dead, with arms broken into several pieces, he could not even stand up, much less fight. He was thrown into the gloom of despair, his eyes stripped of the slightest glimmering of hope. The fifth master approached Shi Mu and kicked him.

"Peng!" A strange noise sounded out.

The fifth master felt his foot knocked against something solid. As for Shi Mu, he was knocked ten meters away and his face ghastly pale from the pain but surprisingly unharmed.

"Hmm? What are you hiding?"

The fifth master snorted in contempt and walked up.

"Leave him alone! Kill me if you wish!"

Just then, a slender figure rushed out from behind a mountain boulder and shielded the half dead Shi Mu with her arms. This was none other than Zhong Xiu who had been watching Shi Mu all this time with. She could no longer keep her promise to Shi Mu - to hide unnoticed behind the rock - and dashed toward the enemy, protecting Shi Mu without a trace of fear.

The fifth master glanced at Zhong Xiu before snorting “You ugly toad, well, I shall grant you your wish to die here along with that dog“ He replied with a ferocious face, ready to strike the girl’s face with his palm. An “ugly” girl stirred no sympathy in the fifth master’s heart at all. As a Houtian Warrior, there was no need for him to use his real qi to crush the girl’s head in an instant.

“Stop!” Seeing this Shi Mu’s expression changed. He shouted at the top of his lungs and tried with every effort to raise himself up. But even before he had managed to raise half of his body, he again fell flat onto his face.

The fifth master could not be any more delighted at such a failed attempt. Encouraged, he bent slightly his fingers to add some real qi into the palm. Although Zhong Xiu had long prepared to sacrifice her life for Shi Mu, seeing the frightful palm diving at her like a mountain, she could not help but blanch in fear. Which teenage girl could stay calm in front of such a deadly attack? She closed her eyes, trembled in fear, and let out an involuntary cry.

An invisible energy flew out with her cry, slamming into the enemy and sending him flying.

The fifth master raised his head in pain, spitting blood and staring at the girl in fear. “The power of a bloodline! So you are a bloodline warrior too!” With his experience, he could tell at a glance that the girl was not only a bloodline

warrior, but her bloodline was definitely a rare one as well. This realization made him flinch. But the sight of his dead son and the pain in his mutilated palm made the fire of hatred burn in his chest. He began to regain the fierceness in his eyes. Without a word, he floated to the girl again, aiming to kill her this time.

Zhong Xiu, however, was in the dark as to what had happened. She opened her eyes at a loss, not knowing what to do next.

Suddenly, the cold voice of a young woman resounded, “You want to kill a bloodline warrior of Grade Three, seen only once in a thousand years? Well, then, I can only send you to the other world first.”

The delicate figure of a woman in a white straw hat flashed in front of Zhong Xui, gracefully waving her arm toward the fifth master.

Woosh!

A puff of cold, white fog rolled out, turning the fifth master into an ice crystal in an instant.

Chapter 43 - Ye Hong Yao, the Red Herb

Zhong Xiu and Shi Mu gasped in shock! The fifth master, an intermediate Houtian Warrior, had been turned into an ice crystal in the blink of an eye. Their savior sighed before turning and removing her hat, revealing herself to be a beautiful woman. Although she looked around forty years old, her aura gave her a graceful bearing that made her as beautiful as any youthful girl. Raising her eyebrows, she seemed as cold as ice. However, her eyes, gazing at Zhong Xiu, were alight with excitement.

“Who would believe, that on an easy errand for old Sun I would come across such a talent! Young miss, may I ask your name? And where are you from?” The woman first muttered something to herself, then turned her face to Zhong Xiu, asking in the most affectionate voice. As for Shi Mu, she did not even cast a cursory glance at him.

“Senior, my name is Xiu Er, I lived with big brother Shi in Feng City until several days ago. We are on the run because we have offended the Jin family" Hearing the woman’s sweet words, Zhong Xiu relaxed and offered the fact.

“The Jin family? Humph, an insignificant clan in an insignificant city. Answer me, would like you to join our Tian Yin Sect, the Ethereal Phoenix Sect? We are one of the three strongest Sects in the Qi Heaven Country, with countless followers. We also have many Secret Arts. Have you ever heard of the Art of Ethereal Resonances? It is the strongest art and the namesake of our clan. Once you reach the Consummate Stage in this art you will be able to reach the Earth Grade, that legendary grade that only elites can reach.” Her voice growing more sincere, the woman spoke persuasively, looking deep into Zhong Xiu’s eyes.

“One of the three strongest sects...The Ethereal Phoenix Sect.....May I have a

second to think about this? Ah senior! Could you please take look at my big brother Shi's wounds?" The dazzling names and titles mentioned by the woman confused the girl, and she only gave a vague answer. But she soon remembered Shi Mu's wounds. Her eyes became focused and immediately began to earnestly plea.

"That boy has a strong body, besides none of his wounds are too serious, just a pair of broken arms. His strength will recover in time. Wait. The wounds caused by that palm attack are actually not that easy to heal... Hmmm. You really are lucky this time. Here, take this Blood-Qi Pill." Zhong Xiu's entreaty made the woman pause for a moment. Having a brief look at Shi Mu she gently waved her arm and a small white bottle flew out of her sleeve and landed in Shi Mu's hands. Though she gave him medicine, the young man's wounds were the last thing on her mind at the moment.

However Shi Mu was overjoyed. He tried to lift the bottle but the exertion made him blanch in pain, beads of sweat oozing from his forehead. The pain was not difficult to imagine: who could lift an item, even a small one, with two broken arms without quivering in agonizing pain? The sight hurt Zhong Xiu's heart. She walked over to Shi Mu and opened the bottle for him, pouring out a fragrant red pill which she handed to Shi Mu as carefully as possible.

Shi Mu opened his mouth and swallowed the pill. Instantly a warm qi streamed within his body, travelling at an amazing speed throughout his body, taking away the numbness and pain of his wounded arms. His spirits were lifted, and Shi Mu directed his eyes in wonder to Wu Tong encased in ice. He could only guess which stage the woman was in. At the same time, Zhong Xiu was still gazing at Shi Mu with a concerned look, which attracted the straw-hatted woman's attention. She faintly sensed something from the girl's anxious eyes. She glanced at Shi Mu and Zhong Xiu and an idea flashed across her mind. She hastily concealed her excitement to speak in an unhurried manner,

“That Blood-Qi pill is a secret medicine of our sect. It has wondrous healing powers and will help you make great progress in the future.”

“Thank you so much, senior!” Seeing that Shi Mu’s face was regaining a more healthy colour, Zhong Xiu cried out in happiness.

“In return, Xiu Er, let me test your bloodline. It’s highly likely that your bloodline is quite special, but let us test it with official instruments, just in case. “ The straw-hatted woman saw a chance and took it.

“Sure, I will do whatever tests you need, senior.” Another look at Shi Mu and her mind was resolved.

“Good. It is quite fortunate that I’m carrying a Blood Ruyi [1] with me. With one just one drop of blood, I can accurately determine your blood line! It is by far one of the most sensitive instrument.” Zhong Xiu’s approval delighted the straw-hatted woman greatly. Without delay, she took a white-coloured ruyi out from her sleeve.

Zhong Xiu walked up, biting one of her fingers until it bled, and dripped one drop of blood on the instrument. Immediately, a faint layer of shimmering golden light emerged, floating above the Ruyi. A pleasant melodious sound, like the singing of a phoenix, came from the light. Moreover, some strange unknown white characters began to rise from the surface of the Ruyi.

After reading the white characters briefly, the straw-hatted woman excitedly claimed, “I knew I was right! Your bloodline is exactly the same as the founder of our sect! Only this bloodline can fully display the full potential of the Art of Ethereal Resonances!“

“I have the Grade Three, First Level bloodline, the Bloodline of Phoenix Song?” Zhong Xiu was stunned and slightly confused with the unexpected result. However, the straw-hatted woman could not contain her excitement anymore. She once more pressured Zhong Xiu to join her sect with a serious face and severe tone, “Xiu Er, to tell you the truth, I am Ye HongYao, also known as The Red Herb, and the current leader of The Misty Pavilion in The Ethereal Phoenix Sect. Now, on behalf of my teacher, the leader of the whole sect, I am asking you officially, will you or will you not join The Ethereal Phoenix Sect? If you answer yes, you will enjoy the same status as I do as soon as you enter our sect, which means you will have the highest place among all the young scholars in our sect.”

Zhong Xiu blushed, somewhat tempted by the prospect. She could not help but ask, “If I become a student of your teacher, could I be as strong as you in the future?”

“If you could practice the Art of Ethereal Resonances, even if you only halfway finish it, you’ll be strong enough to defeat any Xiantian warrior, and by then, how could I compare with you?” the Red Herb answered without hesitation.

“This sounds... I really don't have a better place to go to... What do you think big brother Shi?” The girl was apparently moved by the offer, but, after some contemplation, still she deemed it sensible to seek Shi Mu’s advice.

“Are you a Xiantian Sant, senior?” After a brief thought, Shi Mu finally expressed the doubt in his heart.

“You are quite perceptive! I am indeed a Xiantian Saint.” Though she was surprised at Shi Mu’s correct guess, she still answered in an unyielding, proud voice.

“But I’ve heard that there are not even ten Xiantian Saints throughout the Qi Heaven Country?” Now it was Shi Mu’s turn to be surprised.

“For common people, that’s true. The well-known Xiantian Saints are all so-called National Guardians whose title is conferred by the Qi court. But those of us in the Sects are not included, which means we don’t have those official titles. We don’t have business to do with the court, and only send some help when the country is faced with mortal enemies. Actually, you might not believe this, but the Qi court was originally established by our three Sects to achieve a balance among us. If the court dares to offend us, any one sect can annihilate them.” the Red Herb answered with much contempt, the title of National Guardian raising nothing but disdain from her voice.

“So, I take it that all the strong warriors are in Sects!” Shi Mu could not help but blurt out this shocking news.

“Certainly. That is also true with the other two Sects. Considering Xiu Er’s talent, if she enters our sect, becoming a Xiantian Saintis only a matter of time.” Red Herb answered without thinking.

“If so, The Ethereal Phoenix Sect is the best place for you. Miss Zhong, you should go with Senior Ye.” After exhaling a long breath, Shi Mu said this to the girl in a very serious tone of voice.

Note:

[1] ruyi: an S-shaped ornamental object, usually made of jade, formerly a symbol of good luck.

Chapter 44 - A Pair of Tokens

Shi Mu's encouragement was music to Red Herb's ears. However, her face changed as Zhong Xiu spoke.

"I will enter your sect senior, but please let Brother Shi come along." Zhong Xiu remarked.

Shi Mu's heart leaped upon hearing such caring words. To be accepted into the Ethereal Phoenix Sect, whose power surpassed even the authority of the Qi court, was beyond his wildest dreams.

Red Herb felt she was put in an awkward situation by this request. After a moment of consideration, she shook her head, frowning.

"I can grant you anything, except this. Our sect only has a few male disciples. In our sect, from the acolytes to the elders, you can count male members with your fingers. Only a male with a bloodline or rare talent fit for practicing our arts would be accepted. Even though I am the Pavilion leader I still have to abide by the rule."

"Bloodline warrior? Brother Shi is a bloodline warrior!" Zhong Xiu seized the chance, hurriedly revealing Shi Mu's identity.

"What!? You are a bloodline warrior too? Which bloodline? Let's test it right now!" Red Herb did not expect this at all; she paused for a moment and asked, half convinced.

“No need, senior. I know that I have the useless Bloodline of the Stone Ape.” Shi Mu gave a bitter smile, knowing exactly what would happen if she did test his blood.

This news relieved Red Herb greatly. She relaxed and said in a condescending tone, “The Stone Ape Bloodline? If so then there’s no hope at all for you to enter our sect.”

“Hmph! Then I won’t enter either! I will stay with Brother Shi. I owe him my life, there’s no way I will go to some unknown place without him.” Zhong Xiu immediately made up her mind. At Zhong Xiu’s words, Shi Mu was moved, his heart warmed by the girl’s innocent affections. “Miss Zhong, you don’t have to do this. Just go with senior Red Herb.” However, the girl was quite determined; she shook her head, continuing to plead in silence, her gentle eyes full of resolution and sincerity.

Red Herb had to admit that this was one of the most difficult moments of her life. But after a moment’s thought, she came up with a solution to appease the kind beautiful girl, she asked Shi Mu, “Right, I just remembered. Which one of you is holding the Black Tortoise Sect token? They had a pair and one of you should be holding the smaller one right now.”

“The Black Tortoise Sect? Token?” Shi Mu and Zhong Xiu each looked at the other in confusion, wondering what Red Herb was talking about.

“Ah, it seems neither of you know what I am talking about. No problem, I have a method to find the token.” Red Herb said upon seeing their confusion. She smiled and opened one of her hands, revealing a light yellow paper charm which suddenly burst into flames. In response to the charm, a strange noise, like someone weeping, came from Shi Mu’s chest. The item making the noise was shaking so much that you could see it moving inside inside his shirt. “What’s

this?” Looking down at his shirt Shi Mu was stunned before recalling a certain scene. “Miss Zhong, hurry and take it out of my shirt. I think I know what is it.”

The girl nodded and then fumbled in Shi Mu’s shirt. Soon she brought out a black metal piece with delicate patterns that looked ancient and enigmatic. The sight of this so-called token soon rang a bell in Zhong Xiu’s mind, casting her into the gloom of sad memories. Shi Mu also became somber upon seeing Zhong Xiu’s change of expression. This metal token was the thing left behind by the zombie that killed Zhong Xiu’s father. In spite of that, Shi Mu felt like it was a good luck charm. It had saved his life on two occasions. The first time was when Jin Tian tried to stab him in the field near Shi Mu’s manor. The dagger was stopped by the metal token. The second happened just now, when the fifth master’s kick was weakened by it when he tried to break Shi Mu’s ribs. Could this be the same token Red Herb was looking for? Shi Mu stared at the metal piece before handing it to Red Herb for examination.

Just a quick glance by Red Herb confirmed her suspicions. She nodded before asking, “This is the token that was owned by a disciple of Old Sun. How did you come by it?”

Shi Mu told the story - how he killed the zombie and found the token unexpectedly - with Zhong Xiu adding some minute details to support him. Red Herb soon understood their story before explaining with a smile, “That’s true as far as I’m concerned. According to Old Sun, this disciple had been practicing the notorious Zombie Art till he died. A while ago, this disciple reached a bottleneck in his training and decided to leave the sect to temper himself out in the world. Shortly after he left, the Spirit Lamp he left in the Black Tortoise Sect went out, alerting the elders to his unfortunate demise. Several days ago one of the tokens stirred suddenly and after divination, the sect realized the token had reached this area controlled by the Ethereal Phoenix Sect. So they gave me this charm and asked for my help in finding it. However, it seems that scholar has failed in his breakthrough. But this is good news to your Brother Shi, Xiu Er.”

The last sentence hinted at something, but Zhong Xiu did not understand, “What do you mean by good news, senior?”

A trace of hope also flashed across Shi Mu’s eyes.

“Simple. We, the Heavenly Songs Sect, have a rule against male candidates, but the Black Tortoise Sect doesn’t. Moreover, the sect is well-known for its secret arts that reinforce one’s body. This one may have a ‘useless’ Stone Ape Bloodline, but that same bloodline grants him superhuman strength. Plus he is the one who found the token! If he returns it to Old Sun along with my written recommendation, I bet the Black Tortoise will be willing to accept him as a disciple.” Red Herb answered with a smile.

But Zhong Xiu’s face full of excitement slowly turned into disappointment. She murmured, despondent, “So I can’t stay with Brother Shi.....”

This prospect of parting did not disturb Shi Mu at all. Resolved, he answered in a manner that denied any further discussion, “Excellent! I shall head to the Black Tortoise Sect.”

“Very wise. I shall write you a letter of recommendation. Here take this paper charm. When you reach the riverside near Kai Yang City, burn it. Someone will come to take you to the Black Tortoise Sect.” Red Herb said hurriedly, with a triumphant smile, leaving Zhong Xiu no opportunity to make a protest. Without delay, Red Herb turned her hand up again and, this time, produced a jade charm which she rubbed her forehead against while she muttered something for a while. This ritual finished, she took another yellow paper charm from her sleeve and handed it to Shi Mu with the token.

Shi Mu thanked Red Herb then his face suddenly filled with embarrassment, instead of gratitude. His body remained motionless, or rather, he was unable to move.

“Oh, I’m sorry! I forgot about your broken arms. Well then, let me do something about that.” Red Herb hesitated for a moment before taking out two blue paper charms and placing them gently on Shi Mu’s arms.

The two charms began to glow with a blue light, the patterns on them squirming like worms. Meanwhile, Shi Mu felt an unusual heat permeating his broken arms, starting from the fractures, and finally turning into an irresistible itch all over his body.

Shi Mu tried to move his fingers. To his amazement, they could move as freely as before. “Incredible...” He gaped in awe.

“These two Healing Charms cost me quite a sum of sacred stones. Come, Xiu Er, I have to attend to some errands and we don’t have all day.” Giving the order, Red Herb would not spare another minute for the girl to linger beside her sweetheart.

Chapter 45 - The Vessel

Two months later, at a small port on the Dragon River in the suburbs of Kai Yang City, Zhao Zhou district just south of the Heavenly Qi Country.

It was early in the morning, and the sun just barely rose above the horizon, the first glimmering of light slowly revealing the river was covered in a thin layer of white fog. People did not normally come here but today, small groups of people were constantly streaming in, among them were elegantly dressed travelers who walked on foot, as well as tired riders in ordinary clothes who had covered a long distance before arriving at the port. But regardless of what they looked like, there were teenage boys or girls in each group, the older ones had worried expressions while the younger ones were filled with excitement. Within a short period of time, as many as forty people had arrived at the port, with teenagers accounting for nearly one-third of them. Though so many were gathered in one place, all of them were relatively quiet. A thick fog started rolling in, obscuring vision and making the scene ever stranger.

The influx of people gradually stymied, with each new arrivals staying just as quiet as those who came before them. Around half an hour later, anxiety started to build up in the crowd, but just then a booming sound came from the river, as if a huge creature was rushing out. The sight boosted the travelers' spirits, and they all started staring into the fog, as if trying to catch a glimpse of something.

The fog was pushed aside as a huge ship, over eighteen meters tall and a hundred meters long, emerged and moved steadily into the port. The crowd stirred with excitement as the ship approached. Finally, it stopped in the deepwater area around twenty-five meters from the port. Then someone from the ship rose into the air and moved swiftly toward the port.

As soon as the man steadied himself on the ground he was immediately surrounded by the crowd.

Someone loudly asked, “Are you are the Black Tortoise Sect Elder?”

Another person, with a nasally voice, asked, “What is your name, honorable Elder? One of my ancestors used to be a scholar in your honored sect.”

A third one asked, “Are you carrying the sect’s token with you?”

“All of you shut up! A token? Do I really need a token to prove myself to you? You should be thankful I wasted my time to come here, and you can consider yourselves lucky that you even got the opportunity to join our sect! Just be quiet and board the vessel. Feel free to stay here if you think I’m lying.” The blue-robed man who was shouting had a large build and looked to be in his thirties.

The crowd was completely silent after the man roared at them.

“That’s about it, if you made it this far you must have been through the test of our representatives who are responsible for discovering warriors with potential all over the country. So just shut up and follow me, but remember this, whether or not you can acquire a good place in our sect depends on your performance in the enrollment test. Right, all the candidates, come here with your tokens and don’t waste your time trying to flatter me. Hurry up! I still have other places to go after I finish picking you candidates up.“ The blue-robed man said seriously.

The crowd was overwhelmed by the man’s brash manner. Many of the people gathered here had left their homes for the first time to change their destiny. Now they were faced with hundreds of questions and zero answers. They

nervously shifted around looking at each other before, finally, a thin boy gathered up his courage and walked up followed by a few others.

The large man pulled an old palm-sized bronze mirror out of his robe, checking each of the approaching teenagers with it. A white light flickered each time one of the candidates walked past, the intensity of the light was different for each of the candidates, but he did not seem to care about it at all. After a short period of time, all fifteen candidates had finished the check and found themselves standing behind the blue-robed man.

“So I guess that’s all at this stop...” The man glanced over the other travelers who had accompanied the candidates here and was about to say something when faint footsteps were heard. Shortly afterward a figure approached the port along a path. The entire crowd turned to look at the figure in surprise.

The newcomer was a teenage boy in a blue shirt, his skin slightly tanned, and he was taller than the average teen, looking nearly as mature as an adult. He was carrying a huge pack over his shoulder which contained a bow and arrows, while a blade was dangling from his waist.

Seeing the crowd, the tall youth was taken aback. Before he knew it the blue-robed man had flashed the bronze mirror in front of him, and a ball of white light also flickered in response.

“Why are you so late? You are the last one and we’re all waiting for you.” The man snorted in discontent, waving at the youth, signaling him to aboard the ship.

The youth stared at his peers behind the burly fellow and tentatively asked, Are you a senior from the Black Tortoise Sect?”

“What else I be? “ The man was irritated by the innocent question. He suddenly appeared at the youth’s side and grabbed him without a word. The youth started reaching for his sword, then stopped when he realized he wasn’t being attacked.

“Peng!” The man grabbed the youth's shoulders, and rose into the air, heading toward the ship. Midway, he caught a teenage girl, and with great force, he flung the youth and the girl in the direction of the ship.

“Ah!!!” The girl was shocked into a cry. But the youth was still with his usual cool face. A second later, they thudded onto the vessel’s deck, steady and uninjured. The girl’s face was now as white with fear, her legs trembling, but the youth only sucked in a cold breath. The way the large man effortlessly flung the two of them made him awestruck. It seemed that his entering the Black Tortoise Sect was, indeed, the best choice for him.

The youth in the blue shirt was undoubtedly Shi Mu, coming in a hurry from Quan Zhou.

Half a month ago, immediately after Red Herb of the Ethereal Phoenix Sect gave him the reference letter and a paper charm, she smashed the ice crystal, of the fifth master, into pieces in a single strike and left with Zhong Xiu not saying any other words. Shi Mu did not stay there any longer either. He left the mountains and found a quiet place to recuperate for half a month before he made his way here. But meeting the crowd and the blue-robed elder, before he had a chance to burn the paper charm, made him suspicious. Before he had a chance to figure out what had happened, he was thrown into the vessel by the large man impatiently. He was caught so unprepared that for a while he just stood there, speechless, watching the large man throwing all the candidates to the deck. Finally, the elder turned his body and returned to the vessel himself.

“Go!” He demanded.

The vessel slowing left the port and sailed into the mist.

“Good. Now report your names and where you used to live. I’ll record them on this sect register.” The elder ordered the candidates as he took a thick roll from his sleeve.

Chapter 46 - The Wrong Place

One by one, the candidates came forward to record their information into the register.

“My name is Han XiangXiu[1], the third daughter of the Han family in Chuan Zhou, I was led here by Senior Kong Yue[2].”

“Zhang DaLi[3], a villager of Zhang Village in Feng City, Zhang Zhou district. Led here by Senior Zhao Huo[4].”

.....

Soon it was Shi Mu’s turn. He hesitated for a second before deciding to tell the truth, “Shi Mu, from Feng City. Senior Red Herb of the Ethereal Phoenix Sect wrote me a letter of recommendation.”

The blue-robed man was concentrated in taking notes when Shi Mu’s words startled him. “What? You mean Ye Hong Yao the Red Herb? Liar! You think I’d fall for such an obvious lie?” He looked up from the register, full of malicious suspicion.

“Senior, please excuse me for causing you disbelief. Here is the recommendation letter addressed to Elder Sun from Elder Red Herb. And here is the Black Tortoise token.” To prove himself, Shi Mu took out the letter and token, passing them to the large man respectfully.

As the man looked over the two items, his face softened a little. Half

convinced, he continued to inquire, “Which Elder Sun? Master Sun the Heavenly Dragon, leader of the Upper House, or Old Sun of the Dark Heaven Hall, the Interior House?”

To this question Shi Mu was clueless. He only knew to deliver the letter and token to an Elder Sun. So he answered frankly.

“So, you are not a candidate, but a disciple of the Ethereal Phoenix Sect?” The man did not take the token or reference letter, instead he asked more questions, a visible trace of surprise on his face.

“Not really. I am here for the test to the Black Tortoise Sect. The letter from Red Herb to Senior Sun is only a recommendation.” The answer draw many curious stares from the other candidates. However, the burly man only pondered it for a minute, before a hostile look flashed across his eyes as he harshly waved his arm, knocking the token and letter out of Shi Mu’s hands. He snarled ferociously, “Humph! Recommendation letter? What nonsense! I could care less who wrote it! Now move it, all of you to the lowest floor! No one is allowed on the deck. Anyone found on deck will be disciplined!”

The young candidates were all frightened by the maliciousness of the man, nodding their heads meekly like little lambs.

Just then, servants emerged - all dressed in grey shirts, their faces lined with strange scars. Without a word, they led the candidates down below deck, the process was oddly silent. Doubt began to grow in Shi Mu’s heart, but without a word of protest he picked up his letter and token from the ground and followed the crowd down below deck.

The large blue-robed man had been coldly observing Shi Mu, whose silent

obedience surprised him.

“Well, well, not bad, that boy seems to have noticed something.” A second voice resounded behind the large man’s shoulders. Simultaneously, a roll of black mist swirled onto the deck; from within appeared a black-robed man, his face covered by a tigermask.

The blue-robed man was somewhat irritated, arguing, “Tiger-Bone, you are not supposed to show yourself yet. Remember that the sect master set me in charge of this mission!”

“Be at peace. I won’t get in your way, I only wanted to ask a question: why not just throw that lad off the ship. After all we have already offended the Black Tortoise Sect, do you want to quarrel with the Ethereal Phoenix Sect as well? “ The tigermasked man answered with his own question.

“Humph! Does Red Herb equate to the entirety of the Ethereal Phoenix Sect? Heavenly Qi’s three sects are always fighting with our Yan Fire Nation’s two sects. We are already at odds with the Phoenix Sect! What more can we fear? Besides, who knows if Red Herb only wanted to get rid of him by sending him to this pick-up port? I was going to teach him a lesson if he had any complaints, but surprisingly, he’s behaving well so I had to let him off.” The blue-robed man sneered.

“Alright, I’ll keep my mouth shut then. I’ll help if the Black Tortoise guys come. “ The tigermasked man shrugged in discontent.

The blue-robed man felt assured, “All the Black Tortoise disciples responsible for pick-up have been badly injured by us. Even if they have asked for reinforcement from their sect, a XianTian Saint would have to take a whole day

to catch up with us. By then, with this Speed-Bursting charm, we will have reached the our nation's side of the river. What do we have to fear?"

"Alright then, let's use the charm now." The tiger masked man nodded, fumbled in his shirt and took out a patch of light yellow animal skin cut into a neat square, with profound silver characters and patterns on the surface vaguely visible.

"This Speed-Bursting charm is made from high quality tiger hide, but it's a pity there is only one more charge left. The spirit power in it is almost out." The blue-robed man's eyes ooked at the hide with a trace of regret. However, Tiger-Bone was not bothered. He replied in a stony voice, "Our sect has sent us right into the heart of the Heavenly Qi country for revenge. So of course there will be a cost to complete the mission. " His words finished, Tiger-Bone began to mutter some incantations to himself with a serious face, and then he threw the square hide high to the sky.

Woosh!

The hide swirled in the air a couple of times before patterned blue lines appeared around it like a ring of light, interweaving to form a blue screen of light. Immediately, after a flash the screen sank into the main sail of the vessel, bringing about a gust of wind that imbued a tremendous power into vessel's sail to push the entire vessel forward like a freed bird.

The blue-robed man bursted out laughing upon feeling the acceleration, whereas the tiger masked man gave a sneer before he vanished into thin air again.

.....

Meantime, in the lowest part of the boat, approximately one hundred young boys and girls were being distributed into eight different rooms. Shi Mu was herded into one room with some other candidates. The formerly silent teens were now starting to talk, feeling kinship towards those who had also been thrown into this strange situation. Some began to talk about their families, some about the matters of the Black Tortoise Sect, and soon most of them had become friends. But there was one youth sitting by himself in a corner, silent, with his head bent. A girl around thirteen - who had been thrown to the deck along with Shi Mu earlier - stole a few glances at Shi Mu, before she grinned at him and asked in a gentle voice, “Big brother, I just heard that you were recommended here by a senior of the Ethereal Phoenix Sect, is it true? If so, why not just join the Phoenix instead of traveling this far to the Tortoise? “

The youth was none other than Shi Mu, who looked up at the girl as she spoke to him. The girl has a childlike face, but had a rather mature figure for her age. She had a slender waist, yet the beginning of mature curves were starting to show, and the shape of her breasts could be seen on her robes. She would definitely be a stunning beauty in the future.

“I would have….if the Phoenix Sect ever took male scholars. It would have saved me a long journey.” Shi Mu answered slowly with a deep sigh.

Notes:

[1]Han XiangXiu: Han is a family name. Xiang is the name of a famous river in China, and Xiu means beauty.

[2]Kong Yue: Kong is a family name. Yue means the action of jumping.

[3]Zhang DaLi: Zhang is a family name. Da Li means great strength.

[4]Zhao Huo: Zhao is a family name. Huo means fire. (These four names are all

random.)

Chapter 47 - Disguise Seen Through

“That’s true, they rarely take in male candidates. But you’ll probably pass with a reference letter from a Xiantian Saint.” The girl blinked her eyes, making a suggestion.

“I doubt it. That Phoenix Sect senior thought that the Black Tortoise Sect fit me better... But you seem rather well informed of the sects matter.” Shi Mu asked in a cool voice, concealing the little surprise in his heart.

“Not that well informed. One of my ancestors used to be a Black Tortoise disciple before he retired to the secular world to build our family. In fact, everyone here has in one form or another a connection to the sect. By the way, if I recall correctly, your name is Shi Mu, right? Mine is Han Xiang Xiu.” The girl broke into a bright smile after saying so. Despite her young age, her little breasts were already round and shapely, as ample as could be, tantalizing as fragrant fruits on a tree within reach. Her body had been curved enough to draw the avaricious eyes of men of all ages. The sight of Han Xiang Xiu talking pleasantly with Shi Mu had definitely angered some of the male candidates, who were casting hostile, jealous gazes on this lucky young man. If it was not for Shi Mu’s stature and his tough appearance, some may have already ventured to teach him a lesson on how one is supposed to treat a beautiful girl.

Shi Mu, however, did not show any interest in this female beauty. He only gave a few cursory answers before closing his eyes to save energy.

Time went by slowly. The feeling of camaraderie had wanned after the young candidates had ran out of things to talk about. Gradually they grew bored and listless, they were mere teenagers after all. It was not before long when many started to imitate Shi Mu, quietly resting with their eyes closed. Eventually, some

grey-robed men appeared with warm, delicious-looking food which was quickly eaten up by starving young boys and girls. Only Shi Mu remained at his spot, taking out two rock-hard steamed buns and eating unhurriedly by himself without a word, which drew more unfriendly looks from the other candidates. Seeing that Shi Mu did not care the least about others' opinions, Han XiangXiu grew even more curious of him, inquiring frequently about all kinds of things, from questions about the sects to questions of personal matters. Shi Mu was not ready to waste his time thinking out answers to all her questions, so he politely gave the most minimal answers possible.

After the meal, all the candidates felt drowsy, and soon the whole room was fast asleep. Then the grey-robed men again entered the rooms to clear up the dishes and left silently, not forgetting to lock each door with a heavy iron lock.

In Shi Mu's room, someone who had been lying on the ground slowly started to sit up. After a glance at the tightly locked door, he turned to look around and questioned with a serious face,

"I am Ma Fei Yun, to anyone who is awake, please get up, you don't need to fake sleep anymore."

"I'm awake. I didn't actually touch the food."

"I also didn't eat the food. I knew there was something wrong at first glance. Everything seemed different from what my parents told me."

"Humph, I ate some, but how could such weak sleep powder affect me?"

The ground, which should have been covered with the sleeping teenagers was

now stirred by two boys and one girl who had sat up. And the girl was none other than Han Xiang Xiu. As for Shi Mu, who had been leaning against the wall the entire time, he was also awake. Opening his eyes, he did not utter a word, and simply sat there, waiting. The first speaker was a young man with refined features. His keen eyes looked over the candidates who were awake. It was obvious he was annoyed that Shi Mu was one of the ones was stayed awake. In a solemn voice he made a speech,

"I assume we all can agree that these men are not the Black Tortoise disciples that should have picked us up at the port? This knowledge makes it easier for us to plan our next steps. If we stay here we will probably end up being killed and buried where no one can find us. Now that they think they've put all of us into sleep, they must have grown slack, so this should be our best chance to flee. I'm ready to leave now, are any of you coming with me?"

"I couldn't agree more. If they are not Black Tortoise disciples, then they must be one of the Black Tortoise Sect's enemies. I'm all in for getting out of here as soon as possible." Han Xiang Xiu was the first to nod her approval.

The other two male candidates, one with big mouth and the other long hair, both nodded seriously.

"Brother Shi, why not come with us?" Han Xiang Xiu asked Shi Mu.

"No need. I feel quite comfortable right here. Oh, a small bit of advice, you'd better stay here for a little while longer." Shi Mu's eyes flashed as he answered with a stony face.

"What makes you say that?" Hearing this Han Xiang Xiu was startled. She hurriedly asked, her face somewhat pale. The other two candidates also showed

expression of hesitation.

However, Shi Mu only shook his head and would not explain any further.

“Humph! You coward! Stay if you like! Sister Han, let’s go together.” Ma Yun Fei snorted in contempt and encouraged Han Xiang Xiu in a coaxing voice.

“Brother Ma, I also think we should wait a little longer and see what happens.” Han Xiang Xiu gave Shi mu’s recommendation some thought before she answered with a forced smile.

Ma Yun Fei’s face changed, disappointed that she was not as timid as he thought she was. Turning his head to look at the other two candidates, all he could find was silence and lowered heads. After stomping with anger he said, “Well, then I shall leave first. Sister, hopefully your confidence returns soon.” As soon as he finished the good-bye, he took out a silver-handled dagger, with sharp edges, and stabbed into the floor with all his strength. “Peng!” To his surprise, a loud noise, like that of metal clanging, resounded as the dagger collided with the floor. Ma Yun Fei quickly scraped the floor, and was even more surprised to find some dark metal glowing beneath the surface.

“This is Iron Wood, found exclusively in the Iron Thistles Island in the Eastern Sea, moreover, it is at least a hundred years old!”

Ma Fei Yun sucked in a cold breath, his expression complex. Before he knew it, he found himself scraping the floor wildly in the room, and all the places he tried to cut resounded with metallic clangs.

Just then a cold voice came from the door. “Stop wasting your strength. This

entire vessel is built from one hundred year old Iron Wood. You wouldn't find a single crevice even if you scraped every patch of the floor."

The candidates were all astonished to find the large blue-robed man standing with his arms crossed at the door, and nobody had heard the door open. He was looking at Ma Fei Yun like one looks at a dead animal.

"Senior, no, I'm not....." Ma Yun Fei was frightened out of his wits, his face blanching in fear. Just as he tried to hide the dagger behind his back, the large man lifted his hand and struck at him with his palm.

"Thud!" The hapless boy let out a heart-rending cry as he was sent flying through the air from the strength of the blow. He body thudded to the ground, his mouth and nose bleeding, his chest struck sunken into his body. Obviously he was beyond the power of medicine now.

"Haven't I warned you? Anyone who dares to challenge me will be given a lesson! Servants, come throw this boy's body into water! The fishes will have a good meal tonight." The large man lowered his arm and made the order in a brutal voice.

Instantly two grey-robed servants came and carried the still breathing Ma Fei Yun out of the room.

The large man swept the room with fierce eyes once more. Then he sneered and left the room.

The door was once again locked.

Chapter 48 - My Fair Lady!

Half a day later.

While most of the candidates were still sleeping, Shi Mu and the other three were wide awake, not daring to move a muscle, out of fear of being killed like Ma Yun Fei. Han Xiang Xiu, distressed by Ma Yun Fei's death, had a ghastly pale face as she leaned against Shi Mu, extremely frightened. Shi Mu, though in shock, still tried to calm himself by closing his eyes and resting his mind.

No one knew how much time had past when they heard a thunderous roar outside the room, perhaps on the deck, and then an old voice trembling with anger,

"Ning Ping, you scoundrel! How dare you have entered Heavenly Qi's territory and injured our sect's messengers! Don't you even think about leaving without paying the cost!"

Another loud noise resounded as the voice fell, which caused the ship to tremble again.

"Wow, I have been wondering who would come this time! I never thought it would be you, Senior Zhao. By the way, since you know I'm not alone in this task, you must have brought helpers too. Why not have them show themselves?" The blue-robed man's shouted, his voice rather calm and steady.

Suddenly a third voice - clear and cold - sounded out, "Good, since you've asked, let's not waste time on meaningless introductions."

“Yu Qian Ji[1], it’s you?” Seeing the new enemy the blue-robbed man lost his calm at once, crying out involuntarily, his voice somewhat husky due to panic.

“Hehe, Ning Ping, it must be a surprise to you! Brother Yu was quite near when he got my signal, so he arrived quickly. Just call Tiger-Bone out, we know he’s with you.” The old man burst into triumphant laughter.

“Well, since Brother Yu, a star-grade magician, has made his presence known, the least I can do is come out and pay my respects.” A fourth, hellish voice broke forth, full of threat, as well as poorly concealed fear of Yu Qian Ji.

Right after he finished speaking, air-piercing noises resounded outside the room, along with occasional explosions, which made the vessel wobble helplessly, like a thin leaf in the air.

Hearing this, the big-mouthed youth and the long-haired youth exchanged words of excitement. “It’s the Black Tortoise Sect! Thank goodness! We will be saved then!” Han Xiang Xiu was also elated, as was Shi Mu. After the gloomy prospect of being kidnapped by the queer blue-robbed man, being saved by the Black Tortoise sect was like sunshine after a season of storms.

Loud shouts and strong vibrations shook the ship. From the shouts and screams the fight on the deck seemed to be a landslide Black Tortoise victory. After a short while the blue-robed man cursed exasperatedly in a frenzy of rage, “Yu Qian Ji! You dare to look down on us! Understand death as you watch your precious candidates die! Behold! My Ocean-Awakening Charm!”

Barely a second after his voice had died away, an ear-deafening noise, as if massive billows were swallowing the sky, resounded, followed immediately by

massive waves surging at one side of the vessel. The vessel began to tilt over, violently shaking.

“No! The ship is capsizing!” Shi Mu and his fellow companions were shocked to find themselves sliding down the floor. Without delay, they all stumbled to their feet and leaned closely against the wall. As for the other candidates, who were still in a coma, they were now rolling over on the floor, some hapless sleepers even wounded after knocking against tables or chairs. Surprisingly, such bruises and wounds could not rouse the sleeping candidates. Shi Mu sucked in a cold breath in astonishment as he thought about the potent sleeping medicine, which must have far surpassed the ones recorded in the Secret Arts of the Zhong Clan.

Just as the entire vessel was about to turn completely over, the old voice rang out suddenly, “You dare kill them under my watch? Your efforts are in vain!

‘Black Tortoise Shakes the Heavens!’”

Instantly, the vessel shook twice, immediately it stopped capsizing and regained its steadiness.

Seeing this, the blue-robed man let out an irritated cry, swearing, “You old demon, I never thought you could have reached such a high level! I’ll teach you a good lesson next time we meet. Tiger-Bone, let’s go!” Then an air-piercing noise echoed as the blue-robbed man fled with his companion.

Such an abrupt development made Shi Mu and the other three candidates wild with joy. Before long, their room was opened by force and a young man in his twenties strode in triumphantly, his robe glaring in gold color, his face extremely delicate.

“Wow, so many still sober. Good! You’ve done well enough. Now, all of you, to the deck! We need to count the number of recruits. Here, give these pills to those who are asleep.” The sight of four still sober faces apparently surprised the handsome youth, his voice full of shock. This was none other than the, so-called, star-grade conjurer, Yu Tian Ji.

Just as his voice fell, he threw a small bottle to the big-mouthed candidate, who took the bottle obediently and distributed the pills inside to his companions.

Just as Yu Qian Ji was about to turn around and leave the room, Han Xiang Xiu rushed to him and hurriedly spoke, “Senior Yu, I just found the Black Demon’s trick! They seemed to have installed a God-Fire Mine, of the Wind and Fire Sect, somewhere under the deck.”

“What? A God-Fire Mine! Where are they exactly? How do you know?” The weapon’s name itself was like a bomb to Yu Qian Ji, whose expression changed immediately as he turned to ask.

“Senior, there’s not enough time left. Let me show you the spot of the mines.” Han Xiang Xiu stood several steps from Yu Qian Ji, answering with a frightened face.

“Alright, let’s meet Senior Zhao first.” The youth knit his eyebrows and said resolutely. Then he moved his body quickly, catching the girl’s wrist, ready to rush out of the room. The next sight astonished all the sober candidates. The youth howled in anger, shook his wrist, and threw the girl to the nearby door as heavily as he could as if throwing a fish on the ground to end its life. But just as the girl was about to collide with the door get crushed into mush, she giggled unexpectedly. Her body flashed and the next instant she was already dangling from the ceiling. The youth stared fixedly at the girl, whose sleeve shook once

before something thudded on the ground: a small black snake, around a foot in length, was now on the floor, stiff as if dead.

“The Black Demon Snake! Such a sinister trick! So you are Jin Xiao Chai[2] of the Black Demon Sect!” A quick glance at the snake made Yu Qian Ji realize who he was dealing with.

“Wow, you really deserve your name, the genius conjurer of the Heavenly Qi country, most promising to reach the moon-grade! You can tell my identity at a glance! But you should have been more careful with my baby snake! How does its bite taste? One bite, and in three to four years you won’t be able to sleep soundly[A]!” Han Xiang Xiu laughed grimly. Simultaneously, a booming sound came from the deck, mixed with Senior Zhao’s desperate curses. Yu Qian Ji swore, “So it’s all your crafty trick! Tiger-Bone and Ning Ping never really left!”

Notes:

[1] Yu Qian Ji: Yu is a family name. QianJi means resourceful and crafty.

[2] Jin Xiao Chai: Jin is a family name. Xiao means small, little. Chai means a hairpin in ancient Chinese, also indicating a rare beauty.

[A] - apparently the venom slowly dehibilitates a body.

Chapter 49 - The Thirteen Black Demon Mountains

“It’s such an honor for me to have Lady Jin herself receive me! A bite of the Black Demon Snake is such a special treat. In return, let me part wisdom to you. ‘Goodness shall be repaid, wickedness shall be retributed “ To Jin Xiaochai’s surprise, Yu Qianji’s eyes calmed down, and after these words, he swung his long sleeves, raising a wild wind in the room which made everyone shut their eyes. Without delay, he overturned his hand to bring out a round plate-like object, and after his body trembled a little, he disappeared into the wind.

Subsequently, the clear crack of a whip resounded as the wild wind in the room stopped abruptly. No one knew when Jin Xiaochai had moved back to the ground, holding a black shining whip whose surface was covered with green thorns. More surprisingly, the spot where Yu Qianji had stood was now scraped by a clear whip imprint.

This horrendous sight made Shi Mu suck in a deep breath of fear. Earlier, the floor, which was made of iron wood, was not harmed in the least by Ma Funfei’s sharp dagger, which made the sight even more scary since Jin Xiaochai made such a clear imprint on it with just one crack of her whip.

“That’s why I hate wind magicians so much. They are only skilled at running away in the middle of a fight! Boring!” Jin Xiaochai pouted her lips, the black whip disappearing in her hand as she overturned her wrist. After turning around, she broke a jade ornament in her sleeve into pieces, and immediately black mists emerged circling her body, in which she transformed into a girl with an extremely sexy figure! The face was just the same as Han Xiangxiu’s, only more attractive, but her figure was now fully developed with large, attractive breasts able to make any man’s mouth dry.

“You three must be surprised how beautiful I am, huh? Hehe, I remember you two kept stealing glances at me just now.” Jin Xiaochai stared at Shi Mu and the other two, asking with a light smile.

The two youths had been staring at the young woman blankly, overwhelmed by the petite, curvaceous figure before they heard the words, which made them blush with lowered heads. Shi Mu was also speechless, his mouth shut.

Seeing this Jin Xiaochai could not help but collapse into giggles.

Meantime, the fight outside also came to an end, and before long, the blue-robed man strode into the room along with the black-robed Tiger-Bone, who was still wearing the tiger mask.

“Sister Jin, we owe you a lot this time! Without you, we would have had a hard time with Yu Qianji, the star-grade conjurer.” The blue-robed burly man wore a humble look as he saw Jin Xiaochai. The black-robed man did not utter a word as he stared at the sexy woman, desire for her burning in his eyes.

“I was just obeying master’s order to help you. Yu Qianji had been bitten by my black demon snake so even if he doesn’t die, a severe illness will set very soon.”

“I heard that it took Yu Qianji around thirty years to reach the star-grade. A genius throughout the three kingdoms indeed! Sister, even if you didn’t kill him, you have rendered outstanding service for our sect by delaying his advancement for at least half a year.” The blue-robed man praised her ceaselessly.

“Hope so. Brother Tiger-Bone, why have you been staring at me all this time? Are you dying to have me? If so, why don’t you just ask the master if you can

have my hand in marriage?” Jin Xiaochai turned her eyes to the black-robed man, puckering her face in a smile.

“Are you joking sister Jin? I have always regarded you as my own sister and never thought about that.” With a mask on his face, Tiger-Bone turned his sight swiftly after hearing Jin Xiaochai’s words, explaining in a flurry.

“Coward! Well, since we are still in the Heavenly Qi’s territory, it’s wise to stay alert. I’d say we set off now! The victory feast can wait.” Jin Xiaochai curled her lips and commanded. The other two agreed and after a few more words they left the room and locked the door again. Through the whole process, they didn’t glance at Shi Mu or the others even once.

Seeing that they had finally left, Shi Mu sighed in relief and the other two young men also relaxed. Gradually, those who had been unconscious began to murmur as they woke up: the pills Yu Qianji gave them seemed to have worked.

“Brother Shi, can you explain this matter to the others? It seems that we are going to join the Black Demon Sect instead of the Black Tortoise Sect.” The long-haired young man smiled wryly at Shi Mu.

“No problem, but tell me more about the Black Demon Sect. It seems that you have no problem joining the Black Demons.” Shi Mu thought awhile and asked slowly.

The two young men glanced at each other, nodded and answered. ”It’s no secret. The Black Demon Sect is as big as the Wind and Fire Sect in the Yan Fire Country, and its strength is equal to the Black Tortoise Sect. The act of robbing candidates from each other is not an uncommon act.”

……

One and a half months later.

In the north Yan Fire Kingdom, in a marsh home to various kinds of poisonous air.

A dozen of giant buffalo-like creatures were trudging through the mud, each carrying two large bamboo baskets hung on either side of their body. In the baskets were none other than Shi Mu and the other young candidates. The buffalo-like creatures, though substantial in size, walked gracefully, like a bird flitting across the swamp, with their hoofs glowing yellow.

The blue-robed man and Tiger-Bone were taking the lead, each on a huge lizard, However, Jin XiaoChai was not there.

The file advanced in a silence, everyone mute, except for the sound of hooves treading through the mud, making a noise like the crunching of snow.

Suddenly, a multi-colored mist appeared in front of them, dazzling to the eye, which made the blue-robed man relax. He raised one hand and the buffalo-like creatures all stopped at the gesture. Whereas Tiger-Bone, on the other side, drew a purple bamboo piece from his shirt, muttering incantations, and then waved it in front of the mist. Instantly a streak of white light burst out from the bamboo piece and divided the mist, revealing a passageway that looked like a solid road.

The blue-robed man urged his lizard on and they began to walk on the path, followed by the buffalo-like creatures. Tiger-Bone was the last to join them to cover their retreat.

A day passed.

In a forest of strangely-shaped trees, Shi Mu and the long-haired young man were carried by a large black-robed old man jumping ceaselessly from one tree to another like a leaf through the wind. In the old man's arms, Shi Mu looked awkwardly out into the distance. In his view, there were thirteen immense black mountains standing at the end of the forest.

"Hehe, you little guys mind your manners! Those mountains mark the entrance to our sect, they are the Thirteen Black Demon Mountains. Once you arrive,, you will become disciples of our Black Demon Sect and the Black Tortoise Sect will have lost the right to take you back." The black-robed old man burst into hollow laughter which made their flesh crawl. Following the old man closely were another dozen black-robed men jumping among the trees, each of them was holding a candidate.

Chapter 50 - Welcome Party!

Shi Mu and the others were carried by the black-robed men through the forest. Eventually, they reached a valley at the foot of a mountain. From where they were standing, the mountain looked like a massive sheer cliff, shooting straight up from the ground.

They were given an open view of various types of buildings, in the valley, causing the candidates to feel amazed. Among the buildings magnificent towers, over ten meters high, as well as simple stone bunkhouses that were not more than a few meters tall. But to whichever type they belonged, all stood in perfect order, with the taller ones nearer to the mountain. Among them, people in all sorts of clothes were coming and going, giving the place the feel of a prosperous town.

The black-robed men set Shi Mu and the others on a square of blue stone in the middle of the valley before they left without saying anything. The young candidates were left standing there helplessly, gazing at each other in confusion. What was embarrassing was that a cluster of onlookers, both young and old, kept motioning at them and talking about them as well as casting unfriendly glances now and then, as though they were gazing at some goods to be appraised.

“All of you, leave! Just mind your own business. Haven’t you seen new candidates before?” A casual voice came from the back of the onlookers. Immediately the people began to make way for a giant bear-like man, who was wearing nothing on his upper body, whose body looked tough like steel. He strode over with a large silver mace in hand, every step making a crunching noise on the floor as if he may crush it at any time.

The surrounding onlookers soon divided into groups as the giant man came, immediately greeting him with the utmost respect.

“Ah,it’s elder brother Zhou! We are honored that you took this task!”

“Brother Zhou, please leave some talented candidates to us, the Li Fire Association!”

“We won’t let you Li Fire Association guys bully us so much again! Last time you took two bloodline warriors from the young candidates! We, the Iron-Stone Gang, won’t give you the chance this time!”

“Ha, whatever you two think, we, the Senior Spirit Sect, will take candidates talented in conjuring. Or, would you like to try and take them from us?”

Hearing their words, the giant man changed to a cold smile and replied. “You’d better abandon these ideas. I have received messages from my sect that the candidates are not natives of the Yan Fire Kingdom but are from the Heavenly Qi Country, and were brought back by Uncle Zhao.”

“What? They are from the Heavenly Qi Country? So that’s why their faces are so strange!”

“So it’s Uncle Zhao who did this, they must have been candidates of the Black Tortoise Sect. Our sect must have grabbed them for revenge. The tortoise guys grabbed our candidates last time!”

“If so, better save the reception and move on directly to teaching them the rules of our sect. We are not wimps like those tortoises!”

After hearing the news, the onlookers started walking away, deep in discussion with one another. Without coming to a consensus, the groups of people soon left the square.

Shi mu knit his brows as he saw this.

The giant man's eyes looked over the candidates before he began to speak in a cold voice. "Well, now that all the annoyances are gone, let me welcome you to our Sect. First of all, no matter if you are from the Country of Heavenly Qi or from the Yan Fire Country, willing or forced, you are now disciples of the Black Demon Sect the moment you arrived at this Black Demon Mountain.

Because the seven great sects of the three kingdoms have barbarian tribes as our common foe, we have all signed a series of agreements. These little clashes won't cause real hostilities. Therefore, throughout all these years, from the highest ranked elder to the newest acolyte, we have many different members from many different countries.

Well, that's the main point, but here's a little tip for you: No matter what connections you have with other sects, you are now irrevocably disciples of the Black Demon Sect. Be good boys and girls, and don't ever try to betray or do harm to our sect, or you will either have your martial base disabled or be condemned to death, not to mention doing the same to your entire family." After saying so, the bear-like man threw his mace on the ground, and, with a loud crashing noise, several blue bricks were broken instantly.

"Most honorable senior, are you responsible for us candidates ?" At last, someone could not help but ask out.

“Don’t be stupid, there isn’t any housekeeper for you. I’m Wild Zhou, an ordinary disciple who is only here to guide newcomers. I took this task from the Temple of Merits and Virtues in our sect. From here on out,unless I give you permission to speak, no more questions. Next time I will crush the nose of any who speaks on their own before I decide to answer or not.

From now on just listen to me. If any of you has a grudge with me, just stand out. In our sect only the strong can be respected, strength means leadership.“ The giant man smiled grimly.

His words startled most of the candidates, but Shi Mu only narrowed his eyes. He had heard about the jungle rule of the Black Demon Sect, only, he had underestimated its cruelty.

Now, even though some of the young candidates found it hard to accept the burly man’s words, no one dared to stand out.

Seeing that his words were effective, Wild Zhou showed a delighted look and went on with his threat.

“Good to see you guys behave well. Now, I will tell you about the dos and don’ts of our sect. Be grateful, children, I’m much sweeter than most guys in our sect.

You’ll pay much to hear this instruction if you were not having me today! Listen carefully! Our sect is a branch of the Heavenly Demon Sect which occupies a central place on the continent,and we worship the Black Fire Demon of the Three Great Demons.

And we are different from other sects in that we don’t divide disciples into the more favored and the less favored ones, according to their talents. We disciples just have one path to learning higher arts or gaining higher position - defeat others with your strength, perform more brilliantly and contribute more than others. In other words,our sect encourages competition between disciples, overtly and covertly.

The masters won’t mind as long as you don’t overdo it. Well, if you can gain the protection of Xiantian masters, who would like to teach you personally, that would be a different story entirely. But even these disciples will also compete with their peers to gain more resources and support. Furthermore, there is a match every season and a competition every year in our sect.

The outstanding ones will move up in rank as well as be rewarded with rare pills or arts. But the losers will be punished heavily: either downgraded or deprived of resources, some will even have to do manual work like cleaning and cooking. All in all, if you are strong enough, it’s possible for you to challenge the Thirteen Mountain Hosts directly one day.”

Chapter 51 - Class Begins!

The giant man's threatening words created a turmoil in the young candidate's minds. Some found themselves filled with hope mixed with expectancy and dreams of grandeur, and some were apparently filled with great shock. As for Shi Mu, he undoubtedly belonged to the first group.

"One thing to remember, you've still got to obey some rules, despite the encouragement of competition. You'll get a handbook of our sect's rule later, and I would encourage you to read it.. Better yet, memorize every word of it, and you'll probably thank me later. Besides, as a rule, newcomers don't compete with senior disciples, so everyone will have a year free from challenges. It means that, for this one year, you can avoid any competition in our sect and no one can challenge you for any reason. If anyone really forces you to do something, just go to the Law Enforcement Agency and ask for help. But if you are willing to compete or make an appeal without any proof, that will be a different story." The last few words Wild Zhou spoke were full of strange overtones, and he gave the group a meaningful look. Which one of the chosen candidates for the Black Tortoise sect was not intelligent enough to detect his subtle glances? Again, the candidates were filled with terror.

"Disciples in our sect are roughly divided into three grades: primary, junior and senior, each grade with its own ranks. The resource distribution largely depends on your grade and rank. You can only challenge disciples in the same grade with you in every season's match, but in the annual competitions you can challenge anyone you want. Every new disciple is in primary grade, don't get lazy, cause we have countless laborers, who were once disciples, and every year, after the competition, our leaders will choose the thirty strongest men from the laborers to replace the thirty lowest ranked disciples in primary grade. Hehe, maybe one of you will lose his position and be forced to do manual work." Wild Zhou grinned broadly with a malicious look.

Shi Mu realized what was up immediately, and he was shocked by the unexpected cruelty of the rules. Which disciple, even the most unambitious one, would slack under such merciless rules? The only way out was to practice desperately to improve one's strengths.

More people had nervous looks on their faces after being given the kind “advice”.

“Well, I have given you my best advice. You can read the handbook yourself to learn about the matches and competitions as well as ranks and challenges. As usual, I will answer three questions from you. Now let’s begin.” The giant man stroked his jaw and declared.

“Three questions? Then I want to know which level brother Zhou is at and what his grade and rank is?”A young man in the group loudly asked the first question.

Shi Mu immediately focused his attention on this smart question, which should give one a rough idea of the sect’s general strength.

“Hehe, a tricky question. I don’t mind. I am at the intermediate stage of Houtian level, and I rank 49th in the junior grade.”Wild Zhou burst into laughter and unexpectedly told them his number.

"How many disciples does our sect have and how many are there in each grade?” A clear voice came, and it was from a young shy-looking girl.

“Different grades differ greatly in numbers. The senior grade has only ten disciples, and they have a position equal to that of the Favored Disciples in other sects. The junior grade has 108 disciples, and as for the primary grade, I don’t have all day to count them, but probably around a thousand, and in recent years we have had more and more candidates, so the number may increase to two thousand in the next few years.” The giant man answered casually, with his hand on his jaw.

After the two answers, there was a disturbance in the candidates, who were doing their best to figure out their place in this sect.

”Brother Zhou, I want to know if our sect has a preference for bloodline warriors? After all, they are usually more talented than ordinary warriors.” Shi Mu suddenly threw out a third question, which drew close attention from several young candidates, all fixing their eyes on Wild Zhou without a blink.

“Preference? Do you know how many bloodline warriors are there among the thirteen mountain hosts, eight elders and two vice bosses in our sect? Only three. And the eldest master, who has the greatest strength in our sect, and has almost neared the Earth Grade, is not a bloodline warrior at all. He was not extraordinarily gifted and worked his way up from an ordinary disciple. Well, that’s not to say the talented ones are ignored in our sect. The Xiantian masters will make their appearance in the annual competitions, to find some talented disciples to teach personally, and there have been some bloodline warriors who jumped in rank due to this. Besides, there is a Bloodline Sutras House, built for bloodline warriors, where we store books of special arts for bloodline warriors. And the amount of Black Fire tokens you must pay to exchange for those arts is just half the cost required for ordinary arts.” The giant man swung his hand and answered lightly.

"Thank you for the information, brother Zhou.”Shi Mu nodded and then shut his mouth. The other rapt listeners also stored the name Bloodline Sutras House

in their minds.

“Now that I have answered three questions, let’s move on. Have you seen the stone house over there? It contains the residences for new disciples, most of which are empty. You can choose one to live in, just as you like, afterwards. Now, follow me to receive your uniforms and one year’s ration of resources.”

Wild Zhou pointed to the small houses squatting farthest from the mountains, then grabbed his mace and turned around and lead them away from the square.

After a few minutes of walking they reached a small building. Wild Zhou stood in front of the young candidates - each holding a package in their hands. Coldly he said his last words,

“One last piece of advice as a farewell gift. The Black Fire Token, which is rationed to you only once a month, is the most important resource for every disciple, no matter what grade you are in. You can exchange for the arts you want with the tokens. Without them, people will walk all over you” This said, the giant man threw his mace over his shoulder before he left without any hesitation.

When he left, the young candidates helpless for a moment, like infants deserted by their father. However, Shi Mu did not linger on the fatherly “care” of Wild Zhou. He felt for the stick-like thing in his bag, suddenly understanding something, and walked over to the stone houses, which Wild Zhou pointed at earlier. At this moment, the other candidates also came to themselves and followed Shi Mu like a frenzy, some hot-tempered young men even ran to overtake him.

Chapter 52 Lion in the Way

As Shi Mu approached the stone houses, he found several older disciples in black uniforms blocking the only way in.

Some of the young candidates, who had arrived earlier, were confronting them.

“What? One Black Fire Token to pass?” An extremely angry voice shouted.

Shi Mu frowned as he heard these words and he got a little closer to see what was happening there.

“Yes, but it is a fair deal to pay us a Black Fire Token. We were the ones who had to clean the houses you are moving into, a black token as payment only seems fair.” The older disciples were just eighteen years old or so, except for a man who looked to be around twenty. He stood in the front, holding a sword with a white scabbard in his arms as he spoke expressionlessly. He seemed to be the gang’s leader.

“Don’t try to trick us, we have already heard about the importance of the Black Fire Token from brother Zhou. No cleaning can cost one token; plus, we don’t need it at all! Don’t you fear that if we call the Law Enforcement Agency for help, you will get in trouble? It was made clear to us that you older disciples are forbidden to do anything to us for a year.” A handsome young man amid the candidates spoke without any fear.

“Call the Law Enforcement Agency for help? The senior brothers in the agency

won’t care at all about this trivial matter. After all, we haven’t done anything to you yet. We are merely practicing our arts in this fine place. It’s your own fault that you ran into us while we were practicing. I gave you a chance to pass easily but now you have to take my punch if you don’t want to give us your token.” The young man holding a sword with both arms burst into cunning laughter.

“Just one punch?”Hearing his words, the handsome young man seemed eager to try.

“Oh, you wanna have a try?” The man holding a sword said coldly.

“Humph, we newcomers haven’t awakened our real qi, and that gives you the confidence to beat us all. But I don’t believe I could not take even one punch from you. I, Fang Tianxu will have a try!” The handsome young man thought for a while and said with his teeth gritted.

“Come on brother Fang!”

“Brother Fang, you don’t have to take the punch directly. Just do something to decrease its strength!”

The other young candidates behind him all encouraged him heartily.

At the same time, more candidates had arrived and, after figuring out what was going on, they all cheered on Brother Fang, filled with a sense of unfairness at the actions of the senior gang...

Shi Mu’s eye shined as he saw the sword man had his hands swaddled by thick gray straps.

“Brother Shi, do you think that Fang guy can really resist a punch?”

As footsteps came from behind, Shi Mu heard a voice he was familiar with.

“Oh, you know that guy?”Shi Mu changed his look and turned back.

Now standing behind him was the long-haired young man and his big-mouthed companion who had been in the same room with him on the vessel earlier.

“My name is Stone Bai, this is my good friend Xiao Ming. We both come from the same place as Brother Fang, but we are not really all that familiar with him. But we know he has practiced the Blood-Pile Art, and this must be why he dared to come out first.” The long-haired young man smiled.

“Is that so? I don’t know about this Blood-Pile art, but our opponents must be skilled enough to have such confidence to bully us in front of so many people. And from the look of his hands, it’s easy to guess he must have practiced some arts that can strengthen his arms. It is hard to say if Brother Fang can really take his punch.” Shi Mu nodded and said slowly.

“So you have the same thought with us brother Shi.”Stone Bai smiled again.

At the same time, the young disciple blocking the way was sticking his sword casually into the ground.

“Pu”! As the sound rang out the white scabbard was already several inches deep in the brick covering the ground, standing there perfectly straight.

Every candidates present was shocked at the scene, which proved the sword man's great strength. Fang Tianxu also changed his look but he still took a deep breath and moved his muscles, his face turning blood-red.Then he went several steps forward.

"Oh ,so you had activated your bloodline - that's why you were so confident. But, can a small trick beat real strength?" The swordman was a little surprised at first but then he laughed coldly and strode forward to give Fang a punch.

Fang shouted and crossed his two arms, which were also blood-red, in front of his body.

Crack! Two clear sounds echoed as the sword man's fist, covered with straps, hit on Fang's crossed arms. Fang Tianxu's eyes rolled back and he was knocked flying backward for six meters before he uttered a groan. The next second he fell heavily on the ground, unconscious, and his arms drooped in a strange way beside his chest, apparently having been broken into pieces.

Young candidates, who had been shouting for him, became quiet immediately, a bit of fear coursing through their veins.

"Who's next?"The swordman asked, slowly pulling his fist back.

For a moment, there was silence.

"If no one has the guts to come out, just give me your Black Fire Tokens, I don't want to waste any more time on weaklings!"

“It is as he said! None of you new candidates have a chance of resisting Brother Qu’s punch!”

“Yeah, stop dreaming! Brother Qu’s Jade-Breaking Fist can easily smash an iron shield. Stop wasting our time!”

The other older disciples eagerly echoed their leader, their faces radiant with loyalty and confidence.

“Can I take on your punch with a weapon?”After a while one of the candidates spoke up.

“Well, you can if you wish, but you need to resist one blow of my sword instead. That should be fair.”Brother Qu smiled amiably.

The brave candidate who asked the question blushed and never said a word again.

“Let me try Brother Qu’s punch.” At that time, a clear voice rang out and a small figure emerged from the candidates.

Shi Mu watched in surprise as he saw a girl around thirteen, her hair was braided and she was wearing many small silver bells all over her body.

“Don’t expect me to go easy even though you are a girl.”The young man stared at the her and said coldly.

“Do your worst.”The girl strode towards the young man with her bells ringing

unceasingly.

“Your courting death!” Seeing her action he punched at the girl with a fierce light in his eye.

Woosh!

The girl spun a little and floated several inches away like a cloud, then ducked the punch easily with her bells ringing.

A trace of suspicion flashed across the young man’s face, and he didn’t take back his arm until a moment later. A moment later, he asked, ”Are you a bloodline warrior?”

“Yes. Do you admit that I have I resisted your punch?”The girl answered with an easy manner, asking in reply.

“You’ve dodged my fist, so you passed. But little sister, do you have any interest in joining our Blood Dragon Group? We have many Bloodline warriors, and you can learn a lot from them.” The young man seemingly changed into different person and invited the girl with a smiling face.

Chapter 53 - Jade vs. Stone

“The Blood Dragon Group? I’ll consider it, but not before I find a decent place to rest. I’m exhausted after our arduous ‘adventure’.” The girl giggled as she reply.

“No problem. Any time you want to join us, just find me, Qu Kun.” The youth Qu did not persist, and, in a joyful manner, he made a gesture for his companions to make way for her.

“Thank you.” The girl giggled again, the bells ringing as though in a gleeful mood and she disappeared into the stone houses.

The girl’s easy pass kindled false hope in the other candidates, and two young men took the chance to rush for the way that was made for the girl earlier. “Bang! Bang!” Two loud sounds resounded as they found themselves flying through the air. Qu Kun moved his body agilely and struck the two, knocking them back a few feet, before they fell on the ground unable to move for a while.

Seeing this, one of the candidates questioned indignantly, “Why did you do that? Didn’t that girl just pass your test?”

“When did I say that ‘all’ of you could pass if anyone could take my fist?That girl is the one who has taken my fist, not you. Anyone who wants to pass has to meet me personally.” Qu Kun sneered.

The youngsters could only gape at each other in shock.

“Brother Shi, Brother Xiao, it’s no use waiting like this. Why not go and challenge him together?” The long-haired youth asked.

This suggestion apparently did not appeal to the big-mouthed youth. Shaking his head, he answered, “My Mysterious Steps Art is only half achieved. I probably can’t dodge his punch. For me to go and challenge him would just be asking for trouble.”

“I’ll go after you.” Shi Mu, however, said this with an air of confidence.

“Good! I never thought Brother Shi was so confident. Then I’ll go give it a try first.” Stone Bai was first startled by Shi Mu’s answer, but soon recovered and strode over to Qu Kun to take his challenge. Obviously, he did not know that Shi Mu had once killed a Houtian warrior! Therefore, however fierce Qu Kun appeared, he was not able to cause Shi Mu to feel any fear.

A dull sound resounded as Stone Bai stumbled back. His arms strong looking earlier, but now they were flat like broken balloons, and his face was twisted in pain.

He had taken Qu Kun’s fist with the same posture Fang Tianxu adopted!

“That was the All-Arms Fist Art, and you’ve reached the intermediate level. No wonder you could take my punch. Well, I’ll count that as you passing. “ Qu Kun nodded and waved for the others to make the way.

“Thank you, Brother Qu.” Stone Bai soothed his arms and smiled contentedly, then made his way into the stone houses.

The success of Stone Bai made some of the remaining candidates anxious to try their chances. But Qu Kun would not let their enthusiasm burn for long. He snorted and spoke to dampen their spirits, “You do have some strong guys among you, apparently I have mistaken your strengths and only used part of my real qi. Well, since you are not as bad as I thought, let’s meet each other with all of our strength, from now on.” He had not finished the remark when he stomped heavily on the ground with both feet. Two dull sounds echoed in turn as two stone bricks were smashed into pieces.

This sight made most of the candidates feel that all hope was gone. Xiao Ming’s lips trembled in fear as he shook his head in an almost twitchy manner, “Brother Shi, as far as I can see, we’d better admit defeat. If he really uses all his real qi, Stone Bai could not pass, even if he was lucky.” Obviously Xiao Ming had abandoned all hope of making it by force.

“Let me have a try. It’s no big deal getting some wounds.” Shi Mu smiled faintly and walked up. In such a circumstance, his move naturally caught people’s attention, and some whispered to each other with a surprised look.

Qu Kun’s eyes dilated with anger as he saw Shi Mu walking up, and he asked in a sullen voice, “Are you deaf or are you sick of life? Well, I can’t really kill you, according to the rules, but people won’t mind if I crush your legs and arms and make you bedridden for a whole year.” After finishing his words, Qu Kun squatted and then shot forward like an arrow from a bow, and with a lift of his arm, the grey straps, that were originally wound around his arm, burst open with a crack. Before the crowd could make out what happened, a huge grey fist had approached Shi Mu’s head.

Shi Mu was not frightened at all, and, with a low shout, a massive flow of strength gushed through his body. He shook his shoulders and punched at the incoming blow.

Boom! As the two fists clashed, unceasingly explosions resounded, and the two men were standing there in the middle of it.

After the explosions died down, Shi Mu and Qu Kun were knocked back as bricks on the nearby ground exploded. The two groaned involuntarily, then simultaneously stepped back to steady themselves.

They had attacked each other and come out in a draw.

The crowd was too shocked to make a sound, some of the newcomers were staring at Shi Mu with eyes wide open. The senior disciples with Qu Kun were also astonished. There was no one who knew Qu Kun's strength better than they did!

"That's impossible! You don't have real qi, so how could you take my Jade-Breaking Fist? Which art did you use?" Qu Kun glowered at Shi Mu, shouting harshly, unable to accept the result.

"Stone-Breaking Fist, not much to brag about." Shi Mu took back his fist and answered calmly.

"Stone-Breaking Fist? An ordinary Practitioner art? How could that resist my Jade-Breaking Fist of several years hard training? Oh...I get it...You are a bloodline warrior, and that bloodline enforced your body at the Practitioner's level!" The youth was suspicious at first, but he soon thought of something and was enlightened immediately.

"You are free to think what you wish. I wonder if I can pass now?" Shi Mu

answered in the same flat voice.

“Humph, you’ve taken my fist with your bloodline power. So you pass. But don’t be proud, little brother, that bloodline’s of no use at the higher levels, and it’s the lowest type of all bloodlines.” Qu Kun compromised, his face extremely sullen, but still he had to make way for Shi Mu.

“Thanks.” Shi Mu saluted him with clasped fists before he passed Qu Kun and his gang with his head up, as if he had not heard Qu Kun’s sour words at all, leaving the other newcomers frozen in place with great astonishment at what had happened.

Qu Kun snorted coldly and again blocked the way. Now the glances he cast to the remaining candidates were even fiercer, as if he was seeking revenge.

Chapter 54 - The Parrot

Shi Wu went into a remote house in the residence area and walked through the front door, which was made of stone. The interior surprised him a little: a stone bed, two stone stools and an oil lamp. Besides these basic amenities there was nothing else in the room. The bareness made him knit his eyebrows. After carefully closing the door, he threw his package on the bed and soon fell into a deep sleep.

The next morning he woke up, a little hungry. Sitting up in the hard stone bed, he fumbled in his package and took out two rock-hard steamed buns and downed them without any water.

Next, he decided to check out the contents of the package. It was mostly filled with clean black robes. They felt silky to the touch but, when tugged on, didn't behave as though they were fragile. In fact, the cloth was extremely tough, despite its thinness. Three white bottles and twelve red tokens the size of a finger sitting on the stack of robes, along with a thick book, as big as a palm. Shi Mu held the bottles in hand, and opened each lid to sniff the contents. According to Wild Zhou, the pills in the bottles were Blood-Strengthening Pills, which could nourish one's blood and real qi - the most desirous pill for a beginner - one pill was able to accelerate training greatly. This was also the most basic resource for primary disciples, rationed to each beginner three pills a month totally for free. But Shi Mu had not started to practice arts concerning real qi yet, so he would not use the pills yet. After memorizing the scent, he put the bottle away carefully, then he took up the tokens to have a closer look.

This red token was the most important resource, according to Wild Zhou: the Black Fire Token. It was the only thing that could be used to exchange for arts in the Black Demon Sect, and he would probably be unable to obtain more any time soon. Some black patterns, shaped like clouds, were engraved on its

surface, and when he held it in his hand, it felt rather warm, which indicated that it was made of some special material; hence, there was next to no way of making imitations of the token.

After playing with them for a while, Shi Mu put them away and picked up the thick book. A brief skimming of it took him around an hour, in which time he had gleaned an understanding of the contents and made a map of the Black Fire Sect in his mind. The rules recorded in the book were numerous, but, after reading a little more deeply, Shi Mu came to the conclusion that, all in all, the rules were made to encourage competitions among disciples, letting them kill each other to find the most promising ones, like sifting wheat from the chaff. Once screened, these elite disciples would be provided with the best resources, over three times the amount of a junior disciple, whose monthly ration was also three times more than a primary disciple. Moreover, disciples who ranked high in the annual matches and competitions would also receive a huge award: Black Fire Tokens. This was the only way to obtain large amounts of the tokens.

Shi Mu let out a sigh. He did not put down the book until he had read it once more to memorize some tricky rules. All done, he changed into a black uniform, and found an embroidery of a ball of red fire on both sleeves. At the center of the fire there was a word “primary” written with silver threads. Seeing this, Shi Mu shook his head and left his room.

On his way, he encountered several primary disciples walking past him, and they were all beaten black and blue. Shi Mu could not help but ask one of them what had happened to them. Then he was informed that Qu Kun, the one who blocked the way to the stone houses the day before, “went nuts” - according to the disciple - after Shi Mu resisted his punch. “He knocked five of us down, and then those junior guys jumped on us and beat us until we could barely rise from the ground. He wouldn’t even let us go get our wounds treated if we refused to give them the token.” Shi Mu finally understood why he had met only a few beginners. Those who could rise from bed and walk around were not beaten as

badly as the rest. Even Shi Mu, the usually stone-face cool youth, felt a little indignant.

As he went down the road, the looming black mountains stood there like a temptation. He looked back at them and sank into contemplation. According to the map, the nearest mountain was numbered the thirteenth and it was the residence for beginners - primary disciples - along with mountains 11 and 12. Mountains 8, 9, and 10 were for junior disciples only. As for senior disciples, though there were only ten of them, they had mountains 5, 6, and 7 all to themselves. As the number became smaller, the residents grew more significant in position: mountains 2, 3, and 4 were saved for sect heads and elders. Mountain No.1 is a forbidden area in the sect. Without the permission of an elders, no disciples were allowed to approach the forbidden mountain. Shi Mu only gave it a small glance before his eyes were drawn to a small blue building situated in the depths of the valley: it was the General Sutras House for primary and junior disciples! Shi Mu had acquired his qi-sensing, so naturally he wanted to exchange for arts that used real qi with his Black Fire Tokens. With those arts he would be able to become a real Houtian warrior! The thought made his heart burn with desire. He quickly worked his way down the mountains and deep into the valley.

.....

“Why, Brother Shi! You are so late! Brother Xiao and I have already picked our arts, and I finally understood why Brother Zhou out so much emphasis on the token. It was definitely worth meeting Qu Kun’s strike yesterday.” Just as Shi Mu entered the sutra house he was met by the long-haired youth, Stone Bai, who greeted him in an exhilarated mood. Meanwhile, the big-mouthed Xiao Ming, beside him, seemed rather despondent.

“Oh, did Brother Xiao lose a token yesterday?” Shi Mu asked in surprise.

“Yes, and I am regretting it bitterly now. I should have risked being made to be bedridden for a month to save my token!” Xiao Ming snorted, crestfallen.

“Why’s that? I know the tokens are not easy to get, but certainly they are not that valuable!” Shi Mu was now quite confused.

“Brother Shi, see for yourself.” Stone Bai prevented Xiao Ming from telling Shi Mu anything, and gave a vague answer, with an enigmatic expression on his face, which made Shi Mu even more curious. Shi Mu quickly gave the two a few parting words and hurried up the nearby stairs.

A cold voice came to his ears as he entered the building,. “Cultivation in the middle; techniques on the left; magic arts to the right!”

Shi Mu looked at the owner of the voice, and was astonished by what he saw. Three long shelves, each over twelve meters long, were lined with all kinds of books on them; among the books, bundles of ordinary paper rolls and bamboo slips, as well as broken slates and large patches of hides. But the most surprising sight was not the books or the shelves. In front of the three shelves, a square desk stood near the stairs with a large golden cage on it. In the cage, a huge parrot, with flamboyant feathers, was cocking its head, looking coldly at Shi Mu.

Chapter 55 - The Art of Heaven Elephants

“Stop looking at me like that! Haven’t you seen a bird speak before? Oh, just leave me alone! It’s rude of you to disturb my sleep in the morning. The old fellow doesn’t want to guard the entrance so he locked me up here instead. It’s soooo boring. I will eat that old fellow one day!” The large parrot flapped its wings and combed them with its beak, then slowly said these words which shocked Shi Mu a lot.

“Well, Cai Er, I thought you wanted to stay in the cage? If not, I could just clean you up and put you in a pot and make some bird stew...” A mountain of flesh appeared behind the table.

Shi Mu was scared but he managed to calm down and look at the massive figure, which turned out to be a fat man who was more like an ocean than a mountain. His fat jiggled like waves as he walked.

“Master, please don’t put me into the pot, I won’t say that again, please!” The large parrot threw itself on the bottom of the cag, as it saw the fat man, and covered its eyes with both wings, trembling and crying.

“Master…?”Shi Mu was stunned.

“No need to make a fuss. This is my pet, summoned from another world. When I found it, I saw that it could speak, so I had thought it was a treasure. Then I brought it back and found it was totally useless. What’s more, it cost me a lot of spirit power! If I hadn’t wasted almost all my money to summon it, I would have killed it and made a pot of stew.” The fat man cursed.

As the fat man vented his anger, Shi Mu saw the parrot move its wings stealthily. It even stole a glance at the fat man, the way a human would, making a hilarious sight which brought Shi Mu great mirth. He suppressed the urge to laugh and greeted the fat man, “Senior, I am a new disciple and have come here to exchange my tokens for arts.”

“Aaah. You young disciples, all coming here one after the other today, and disrupting my nap. Well, it is just as you heard from the bird, so help yourself to the books. All the books here, no matter whether they are on martial arts or magic arts, cost six Black Fire Tokens. You new disciples have twelve tokens, so you can have a book on cultivation and another on techniques. Oh, one more word, the books here are all excerpts. Just a brief introduction for you to preview t art. If you ever have made your choice, just come to me and I will copy the complete book onto jade slips for you. Also, my family name is Ju, so just call me Uncle Ju.” The fat man said, with a focused look.

Shi Mu finally understood Stone Bai’s previous remark after the fat man’s explanation. It was obvious that Xiao Ming who had lost one Black Fire Token and could only choose a single art because his remaining five tokens would not be enough for him to exchange for another. He was obviously quite upset over this. After all, he had lost his chance to strengthen himself while the others hadn’t.

“This one thanks Uncle Ju.”

Shi Mu bowed to the fat man and walked over to the shelves behind the table. “The Cultivation of Rock”, “The Cultivation of Blood Waves”, “The Secret Canon of Three yang”, “The Cultivation of Heaven-Stirring Real Qi”, “The Sutra of Blue Origin”. So many cultivation techniques for Houtian Warriors! Shi Mu began to read through the techniques.

The Cultivation of Rock: This cultivation focuses on steadiness. There are five levels to it, which means that, after finishing all of them, one's real qi cannot be advanced, but at this point, one can begin to develop a real qi area, which means one can move on to the next level, the Xiantian Saint.

[Fit for mediocre Houtian warriors. No tools or weapons required. Difficulty - Average]

The Secret Canon of Three yang[1]: This cultivation belongs to the quality of yang and has three levels.

This cultivation gives a Houtian warrior, who practices it, an overpowering real qi which can injure one's enemy from inside their body. Reaching the advanced level in this technique will allow one to develop a real qi area and, eventually, advance to the Xiantian level.

[Fit for intermediate Houtian warriors with requisite resources. Difficulty - Average]

The Cultivation of Heaven-Stirring Real Qi: This cultivation has a vigorous and simple quality about it. There are seven levels, which, after progressing through all of them, helps them to develop a real qi area and, eventually move on to Xiantian level.

[Fit for warriors less intelligent than average. No tools or weapons required. Difficulty - Average]

As Shi Mu fingered through the books, he found the introductions to be quite detailed, with lists of each art's characteristics and difficulties, even providing some advice to disciples. Gradually, he brewed over his own plan for choosing arts. For him, a Practitioner with the bloodline of the stone monkey, which posed a great difficulty to practicing real qi, avoiding difficult arts would be a wise choice. Now that he had enforced his physical body, to the extent that he could fight with a beginner level Houtian Warrior, he might as well choose an art that could further strengthen his physical body. Only this way could he gain

more resources in competitions and quickly advance his cultivation.

As he pondered over this, he browsed all the dozens of books about cultivation on the long bookshelf. Then he stopped in front of a big bamboo slip, to have a closer look at it. The slip read,

The Cultivation of Heaven Elephant: This cultivation features huge strength and it is quite simple to practice.

Advancing through all the levels, there are a total of eleven, gives the warrior, who practices it, immense physical strength, like that of a Heavenly Elephant. But the process of finishing all the levels is a long one which requires the consumption of a large amount of expensive pills.

[Not fit for under-equipped warriors. Bones-Tempering Pill are required. Difficulty - Easy]

Without any doubt, the nature of the real qi needed in this art, and its overall difficulty, was very good fit for Shi Mu. But the requirement of a large amount of pills made him hesitate. Of course, he planned to gain resources in order to accelerate his practice, by winning competitions, but he didn't have the pills right now to practice this cultivation. And from the name, Bone Tempering Pill, it sounded like it wasn't cheap. What if the cultivation was not as powerful as he expected and could not help him in the competition? In that case, he would only be hurting himself if he took this art.

Shi Mu remained in front of the slip, hesitating for about a quarter of an hour, before something dawned on him, making him put the bamboo slip down and turn around toward the fat man.

"You have made your choice?" The fat man was killing his time by poking the parrot with a stick, making it let out eerie cries. The game amused him so much

that he spoke, without even turning his head, when he heard footsteps behind him.

“Uncle Ju, I heard there is a Bloodline Sutras House, providing arts specially for Bloodline Warriors, but I haven’t seen it on the map, can Uncle tell me where I can find it.” Shi Mu stood behind the fat uncle, and asked him a question.

“Oh, are you are a Bloodline Warrior? That’s not exactly surprising, because the time of the Blood-wave has come and there are many Bloodline Warriors emerging like angry bees from a hive.” The fat man turned around, with a small trace of surprise on his face, which quickly vanished as he spoke.

“I am a Bloodline Warrior.”Shi Mu replied without any hesitation. But in his heart he quietly added to himself, that, even though it was considered to be a waste bloodline, the Bloodline of the Stone Monkey was also a bloodline - and nothing to be ashamed of.

Notes:

[1] yang: the masculine or positive principle in nature, opposed to yin (the same yin found in the name of the Tian Yin sect)

Chapter 56 - Pick Your Arts!

“Unfortunately, words don’t have no place here, I’ve gotta check if you’ve awakened your blood. Otherwise, no entry. Don’t be nervous boy, I’ve no interest in knowing which bloodline you have. One advantage of staying in our sect is that nobody’s gonna pry about your bloodline, especially if you ain’t eager to tell about it.” The fat guy said, lethargically.[A]

With his worries eased, Shi Mu continued to ask questions in an easy manner, “so the Bloodline Sutras House is within the General House?”

“We have three General Sutras Houses, for primary, junior and senior disciples respectively, but only one Bloodline Sutras House. I can get you there from any one of the general houses. This stuff can wait, let’s examine your blood first.” The fat man shook his head and brought the conversation to an end. He turned one of his hands palm up and a bronze mirror appeared in his palm. After muttering some strange incantations to himself, he shook the mirror in front of Shi Mu.

A pillar of light, the size of a finger, rushed out of the mirror, right into Shi Mu’s body, where it disappeared. Shi Mu felt a strong vibration in his body, which stirred his blood and made it burn in his veins. Simultaneously, a buzz came from the surface of the mirror, where some dark red rays were gathering.

“So you are a bloodline warrior. Come with me.“ The fat man put away his mirror and turned toward a small gate at the back of the room. Shi Mu did not ask any questions and followed him closely.

After a short amount of time, he arrived, with the fat man, in a small room,

whose floor was thickly engraved with silver ring-like patterns and some enigmatic characters. Together, the patterns and strange characters formed a huge circle. The fat man led Shi Mu to the center of the circle, then he moved one of his fingers and muttered some incantations before waving his arm in the air. A yellow paper charm appeared in his hand, and he dropped it, letting it float to the floor. As soon as it touched the floor, it turned into a ball of blazing fire, and merged into the circle on the floor.

The circle enlarged, and tiny rays of light rolled up from the floor, causing Shi Mu's body to shimmer, and then disappear.

Seeing that his incantation was successful, the fat man murmured in satisfaction, "who knows how many more bloodline disciples are comin'. Better ask for more charms." Hands at his back, the fat man strolled off leisurely.

Shi Mu, on the other hand, felt incredibly dizzy, because the world seemed to be spinning around him. Finally, the swirling ceased, and he found himself in an empty hall that he had never seen before. Not a soul was with him. Shi Mu started to observe the surroundings, and found that the hall was made of a certain white jade, and it was spacious enough to hold hundreds of people. A translucent light cube was slowly rotating the the air. Inside the cube, hundreds of different sized balls of light were floating around.

Just as he was staring at the screen, a cold female voice resounded.

"My name is Auntie Dream, keeper of the Bloodline Sutras House. The balls of light you are looking at are samples of all the bloodlines that have ever appeared in our sect throughout its entire history. But you're not going to get to choose anyone you wish. You've got to have the particular bloodline required for each art. You may end up finding that no arts fit, if your bloodline is some rare type. Now, throw one drop of your blood up into the air, and balls of light, fit for your

bloodline, will drop down for you to choose from.” The voice snapped, its source untraceable.

Though feeling weird, Shi Mu bit his finger and swung it up into the air. A drop of blood was flung into, and then seemingly absorbed into the air by an unknown force and just floated there, swirling in a circle. After a while, the cube rippled and projected a silver streak of light at the blood drop, which gradually disappeared as red characters began to emerge on the cube. One character after another, soon the cube was covered with characters. Meanwhile, the numerous balls of light, that had been floating slowly above the screen, all paused and began to flicker. Soon, two balls of light, one big and black, the other small and red, whizzed down our of the cube and into Shi Mu’s hands.

Shi Mu grabbed them tightly in his hands, and found them to be a piece of black bone and a patch of hide of some unknown animal that had glowing red fur.

“Hehe, good for you, boy. You’d got two pieces! Put them against your forehead and you’ll get introductions to these two arts.” The female voice came again, as cold as before.

Shi Mu nodded and first put the smaller hide against his forehead. Suddenly his heart itched, and vivid pictures began to spring out in his mind. The first picture was of a mini monkey born in a ball of fire; the second one of a bigger red monkey, bathing in magma near a volcano; the third one showed the red monkey spouting fire from its mouth, turning a monster of black smog into rolling waves of fire. In the last picture a pair of fire wings grew out of the red monkey’s back while it overlooked a gang of monsters, standing on a high hilltop.

After these pictures fleeted across his mind, some words began to appear in his mind.

The Sutra of Red Ape: This cultivation belongs to the quality of yang, and was refined by imitating the ancient ape that could fly in the sky and exhale fire from its mouth.

[Fit for highly intelligent Houtain warriors. Requires a sacred land with a lot of high-quality fire and a large amount of yang pills. Dificulty - Average]

{50 Black Fire Tokens}

Shi Mu's spirits fell after reading this. Without second thought he removed the hide and tried the black bone piece. 50 Black Fire tokens was a large number he could never manage to gather in a short time.

The bone piece felt slightly cool as it touched his skin. Simultaneously, he felt his brain exploding with a loud boom, and picture sprang to his mind: a black huge ape was beating its chest. But the picture flashed past and was replaced by a paragraph of words:

The Art of Strong Ape: This cultivation is an inheritance from the ancient strong demon ape. There are nine levels to it, each mutating one's bones and vessels to enhance physical strength. But the process is excruciating; the warrior will experience pains like a million knife cutting into his skin.

[Fit for warriors with a strong will. Requires corresponding art. Requires Devil-Killing Real Qi Difficulty - Easy]

{6 Black Fire Tokens}

Shi Mu thought for a short while after reading through the introduction. Unhesitatingly, he removed the bone piece and shouted excitedly to the air, "Auntie Dream, I shall choose this art!"

“Oh, are you sure? Don’t say I didn’t warn you later. The number of Black Fire tokens needed for this art is small, as you can see, so there must be a defect to it. As far as I’m concerned, though it does not need much to begin, the further you go the greater the pains become, as your bones and vessels are mutated. Ever since our sect included this art, there have been three disciples who took it. The two of them quit halfway, unable to bear the great pain. The third one had real guts, but let me tell you, he ended up committing suicide at the fifth level by exploding his body with real qi. All because of the pain. Besides, the art only needs an ordinary bloodline of any ape type at the beginning stage, but the demand for purer blood increases as the level goes higher. Generally speaking, from the fifth level up, a bloodline of a holy ape is needed to continue the training. So the current price for the art can only cover the first three levels. If you are good enough to reach level four, the sect may reward a prize to you.” Untie Dream’s voice resounded again.

Shi Mu’s heart grew cold after hearing such a warning. But, after giving it some thought, he still insisted on the art, “Thank you for your instruction, Antie Dream. I’ll do my best. If I’m not pure enough I’ll just practice the first three levels.”

“If you are so sure, then good! Throw the bone piece and six tokens into the air, I’ll give you a copy of the art.” Untie Dream replied in a stony voice, not trying to dissuade Shi Mu anymore.

Shi Mu answered and threw the required things high into the air with all his strength. The bone piece flashed once and disappeared into the cube, whereas the six Black Fire tokens vanished into nowhere as soon as they left Shi Mu’s hand.

Shi Mu did not have to wait for long. A pink jade slip fell from the air and Shi Mu reached out and grabbed it.

“Remember, boy, the jade slip will destroy itself in three days. Memorize the contents, no telling them to any other disciples. Otherwise you’ll be either be have your cultivation destroyed or be executed.” Antie Dream’s voice rang out once again.

NOTES:

[A] - Please tell me I am not the only one who imagines this guy is speaking with a Cajun accent?

Chapter 57 - Soul Magician

“I will keep it in mind.” Shi Mu dared not say anything more and replied politely when he heard Auntie Dream’s words. Then, cautiously, he tucked the jade slip of light red into his pocket.

“Well, you can leave now.” Untie Dream seemed quite pleased with his reply and reminded him to leave in a mild voice. After speaking, her voice died away and a hush fell over the room.

Shi Mu was starting to wonder if he should ask how to leave when the translucent cube rippled again and white beams of light fell toward Shi Mu and showered on his body. A bright light blinded his eyes, and when he could finally see again, he found himself back in the small room of the General Sutras House. He took a minute to calm down before he started to look around for Uncle Ju. Not finding him, he did not hurry to leave the room, but started to examine the silver patterns and mysterious characters on the ground. He moved carefully so as not to make a sound.

Though he could understand none of them, because of what happened before, he guessed these patterns and characters must be related to his entering the Bloodline Sutras House, and the way could only be opened by Uncle Ju’s yellow paper charm. Thinking of this, he took out the yellow charm which was given by Ye Hongyao, the Red Herb of the Ethereal Phoenix Sect, earlier to help him find the Black Tortoise messenger. He had spent some time studying the charm after he left the Red Herb. The paper charm, though seeming to only a long piece of paper, covered with some strange figures and characters that formed an odd pattern, it had some amazing effects, beyond his understanding. For instance,

the Red Herb had healed his broken arms in a blink of an eye with two health-restoring charms, and Uncle Ju had used a charm to send him to the Bloodline Sutras House. Shi Mu wanted to know more about these amazing charms! So, almost unconsciously, Shi Mu memorized the patterns and characters on the Red Herb's and Uncle Ju's charms, though they had only in front of his eyes for a split second. Now, comparing them in his mind, he found that the charm Uncle Ju used to transmit him to the Bloodline Sutras House was somewhat more complex than the messenger charm held in his hand; but neither beat the health-restoring charms in sheer delicateness. However, the charms did share some similarity in their patterns and characters. This discovery delighted Shi Mu considerably.

After considering this for a while, he tucked his charm into his shirt and left the chamber, walking towards the room containing books on techniques.

Once he had arrived in the room, the voice of Uncle Ju resounded. "Young lad, you must have some good results staying there for so long?"

The mountain of flesh was resting behind the table, his hands at his back. The parrot turned its head and tried to say something to Shi Mu, but it hesitated for a while, not say anything. Apparently the presence of the fat man created an inconvenience.

"Thank you for your concern, Uncle Ju, I did find something: the Art of the Strong Ape" .Shi Mu walked towards him as he replied, not concealing his result.

"Well, that's fine… Wait, why have you chosen this art? Didn't Auntie Dream

warn you?" The fat man was pleased with Shi Mu honesty, at first, but soon he registered what Shi Mu had said and gave him an astonished look, his voice raising in pitch.

"Yes, Auntie Dream did tell me all that should be known about this art." Shi Mu the told the fat man what Auntie Dream had said..

"I never woulda thought you are such a tough little guy, but I wonder how far you can go. Heh, so you have six Black Fire Tokens left, so you can go and choose a technique." The fat man gave Shi Mu an encouraging look and then waved his hand before he directed his attention to the huge parrot, as if forgetting Shi Mu's presence.

Shi Mu made a brief reply and rose his head, then looked at the left bookcase. After hesitating for a moment, he finally went to the shelf in the middle row.

A moment later, Shi Mu returned to the fat man with a thick bundle of bamboo slips.

"You sure about choosing this Art of the Heavenly Elephant? I must remind you that, despite it's low difficulty, this art requires a lot of pills. It's OK to practice two arts of cultivation together, and you do have some predecessors in our sect who practiced two cultivation arts simultaneously, but I'm sure you know sometimes things don't go as you wish. You can't digest too much food in a meal. After all, cultivation is important, but techniques will save your life in a real fight." The fat man stared at the slips and then at Shi Mu, thinking that the lad must have gone out of his mind.

“Thanks to Uncle Ju’s remind ,but my mind is set.” Shi Mu bowed to the fat man and passed the last six Black Fire Tokens to him.

The fat man said no more. He took out a white jade slip and put it and the bamboo slips on his forehead, murmuring an incantation.

In a moment, the work was done. He gave the jade slip to Shi Mu and, with some more words of warning, indicated Shi Mu to leave.

“Is Uncle Ju a magician?” Shi Mu took the white jade slip and asked casually.

“Heh, I never thought you had such good eyesight. Of course, I’m a magician of the Spirit Grade, a rare Soul Magician, otherwise how could I have summoned this rubbish bird from the other world!” The fat man was quite proud, at first, but then he glared angrily at his parrot, which was stealing glances at him, and decided to poke it with a stick to vent his anger.

“Master, please don’t. Ouch!”The giant parrot cried and begged his pardon.

Seeing the fat man’s angry face, Shi Mu knew he should stop asking questions. With Uncle Ju’s warnings in mind, Shi Mu bid him goodbye and went downstairs.

When he left the General Sutras House it was already noon, so he hastened his steps and hurried to his stone house. As soon as he returned to his room, he ate something quickly, then sat on his bed with crossed legs. The he took out the two jade slips, in his pocket, and started reading them. He planned to memorize then in three days. With his time dwindling, he would not waste a minute.

Chapter 58 - Real Qi

Shi Mu picked up the rose-colored jade slip, on which the Art of the Strong Ape was recorded,closed his eyes, and put the slip against his forehead.

Time passed, as he studied the ar,t and after more than an hour, Shi Mu suddenly frowned and opened his eyes, his face pale and his brows knitted.

He had scanned the introduction of this art when he was in the Bloodline Sutras House, but as he studied the nine stages of the art., he found it to be less complex than he had thought before. Actually, it was surprisingly easy to understand. However, he was still missing something he needed in order to practice it. the Art of the Strong Ape requires its practitioners to have the bloodline of a monkey or ape, along with some Real Qi of a Demon which, as described in the jade slip, originates in some dark and evil places, though the Qi itself is relatively safe for humans. It is obviously different from Heavenly Spirit Power.

The art made use of this Demon Qi to temper one’s body and strengthen their nerves and bones. As a result, the art would cause unbearable pain to its users. In fact, it was impossible for Practitioners, like Shi Mu, who had not learned any Houtian arts and thus lacked Real Qi to protect their nerves. Therefore, the impact of the Demon Qi on his body would be devastating. A casual mistake would, at the minimum, wreck his nerves and disable his body. He might even die from exploding his Real Qi. Though the introduction did not specify it, it was obvious you could only practice the art after awakening and strengthening your Real Qi. Otherwise, it would be an act of suicide.

Shi Mu fell into deep thought after he had read the slip. Now, since he could not practice the Art of Strong Ape at his current stage, he would not have to

practice two arts together. He might as well focus on practicing the Art of the Heavenly Elephant before practicing the other. Thinking this, he put down the red jade slip and picked up the white one in front of him.

Shi Mu put the white slip against his forehead and sat down quietly with his legs crossed. This time, he spent more than two hours in that position before he opened his eyes. There was a look of guarded excitement on his face, as he put down the slip.

He had memorized all eleven stages of the Art of the Heavenly Elephant, and the art was as easy as the introduction described.

He took a deep breath and got to his feet to stretch his limbs. Then he sat down on his bed again. He repeated the mnemonic rhymes of the art in his mind, with his arms on his knees as he set himself in a posture which was called “Five Hearts Towards Heaven”.

Houtian arts differed from the Practitioner arts in that one had to sense the spirit power in his environment and absorb the power into their body to transform it into Real Qi which could be controlled. The talent of the cultivator, the art they was learning, and the environment they stayed in, were all relevant elements in this process. The more talented someone was, the more easily they could obtain Qi Sensing, likewise, the more powerful the art they were learning, the more easily one could absorb the spirit power in their environment. Last, but not least, environments differed in the amount of spirit power they contained. Good selection of a practicing environment also very important.

Shi Mu sat quietly, trying, with all effort, to control his mind, leading it to the right channel. All prepared, he started to direct his thoughts as the art requested. After a while, a bitter smile emerged at the corner of his mouth. He had long since sensed his Real Qi, and had felt the spirit power in his

environment as the art said, but his nerves and blood would not cooperate. They were flowing sluggishly, refusing to take in the spirit power from outside his body. In the same way, Shi Mu refused to give up. He struggled to tame his agitated mind again and again, before he finally got a clearer sense of the environment's spirit power: a holy Qi he had never sensed before. However, every time he tried to lead it into his nerves and vessels, there was some mysterious force pushing the holy Qi away. He suddenly recalled what Li Canghai had said, that the Bloodline of Stone Monkey would block nerves and vessels so that the gathering speed of Real Qi would be quite a bit lower than average. Shi Mu sighed to himself, but he did not get discouraged. He knew that the Bloodline of the Stone Monkey had not totally blocked his way to becoming a Houtian Warrior. Despite his slower speed in gathering Real Qi, he could make up by hard work. As long as he was strong enough, it would be no problem for him to get more resources in a sect like the Black Demon Sect, thus his accomplishment might not be smaller than others' in the future. Eventually, when it was totally dark outside and Shi Mu had failed numerous times, he successfully caught one tiny wisp of the holy Qi. He carefully, oh so carefully, led it into his vessels.

The next moment, it began to circulate, slowly. Shi Mu dared not to slack for even a minute, but his eyes betrayed him, because they were radiating with excitement. Now he realized that he had finally got a foothold on the path to pursuing martial arts.

As time went on, day came and light flooded into his room and then night came again and the world descended into darkness. However, all this time, Shi Mu kept sitting with his legs crossed, motionless.

Suddenly, his body quivered before he opened his eyes. He put his hands on the bed and turned to jump on the ground. He didn't even feel tired after having practiced for a whole day; on the contrary, he found himself full of spirit and inexhaustible strength.

Shi Mu raised his arms and punched twice, breaking the air and making sounds like the explosion of two firecrackers. He looked down at his hands in excitement. He had not gained more strength, but his punch was now, undoubtedly, more powerful. Besides, he could feel a slight fluctuation of Qi flowing slowly in his veins and vessels, and, as he concentrated on it, the Qi moved even faster and melded together in his lower abdomen, forming a slim wisp of Real Qi.

It was the achievement of a whole, long, hard day of work - he had finally gathered his first wisp of Real Qi. Though his Qi was as slim as a piece of silk, Shi Mu could now be counted as a real Houtian Warrior. The reason his punches were stronger was his Real Qi.

Shi Mu could not resist his excitement any more, so, after thinking for a second, he tried to focus his Qi on his left hand. Immediately, his hand suddenly grew hot and swelled a little, with a white light shimmering around the rim of it, just like the Blood Palm of the fifth master of the Jin Family.

To test this new discovery, he walked out to the yard and looked around. Then he saw a large blue stone in a corner.

Shi Mu shouted and pounced forward, like a cheetah, swinging his Qi strengthened hand and slapping the stone with great force.

After one strike of his palm, he moved back to where he originally stood. The whole process took place in a single breath. The pounce and the hit were so fast and abrupt that people without sharp eyesight could not make out the movements.

Crack!

There was a clear palm print on the stone along with numerous cracks in the stone face around it, extending in all directions.

In a few seconds, the stone broke into pieces and scattered all over the ground.

Chapter 59 - The Elder in the Dream

Shi Mu's chest rose and fell and his face was somewhat pale, due to exertion. He checked his body and found no harm done at all, except that his palms had some minor bruises and red spots. He walked up to the broken stone, and grasped a handful of chunks. His eyes shone and a faint smile flashed across his lips.

It surprised him that the combination of Real Qi and his immense strength could produce such an overwhelming power! Before sensing Real Qi, he could also break a huge stone with one punch, but the difference lied in the fact he used Qi - he was now a Houtian warrior! Recalling the fight with the Jin Family's fifth master, he now felt some regret. If he had this power back then, he would not have been defeated by the fifth master. In the face of his current strength, the fifth master's Blood Palm was something he could stand up to. It would have been an nearly equal contest of strength with the fifth master.

Exhaling a breath in deep regret, he closed his eyes for a minute, releasing the chunks of the blue stone from his hand. He knew that his attack on that stone had cost him almost all of his Real Qi. To re-gather his Real Qi, he now needed to sit in a meditative manner for a while. Moreover, if he really wanted to confront an intermediate Houtian Warrior, he must carry on his training for a long time, to gather as much Real Qi as possible.

Shi Mu returned to his rock-hard stone bed, sat cross-legged, and sank deep into thought. Now that he was a Houtian Warrior, he must make plans concerning his training. The urgent issue was to continue practicing the Art of the Heavenly Elephant so as to reach the basic level required for learning the Art of the Strong Ape. As for techniques, he was temporarily short of Black Fire tokens, so it would be wise to work on his Wind-Blowing Blade Art and Stone-Breaking Fist Art, raising the two techniques to a higher degree of proficiency.

He had reached the advanced stage, only one stage lower than consummation, in both of the techniques, enough to deal with the current situation now that he had the assistance of his Real Qi.

This in mind, he picked up the red jade slip and put it against his forehead to memorize the art of the Strong Ape. Though he was not able to practice it yet, he had to memorize the contents before the three day deadline.

At noon on the third day, two successive cracks startled Shi Mu awake from a nap. Opening his eyes, he saw two small piles of fine sands, one white and one red. His eyes twitched involuntarily at the sight. So Auntie Dream's words were right: once time was up the jade slips, copies of special techniques, would destroy themselves. Fortunately he had followed Auntie Dream's warning carefully and memorized all the contents.

Just then, footsteps were heard from outside his yard. Soon someone was knocking on the door.

Shii Mu raised his eyebrows, rose to his feet and opened the door, only to find Stone Bai and Xiao Ming standing outside.

"Brother Shi, we haven't seen you for three days! Are you hibernating? Or practicing? There is no reason to rush your practice. Come, let us walk around the mountains and get to know our sect better. Are you coming with us?" Stone Bai invited Shi Mu to join them, with a bright smile.

Shi Mu's mind worked quickly to weigh the idea. After some thought, he smiled and replied, "Sure, I'm feeling really bored these days. Let's go for a walk." Deep in his mind, he knew clearly that, under the brutal rules of the Black Demon Sect, disciples had formed small groups to compete with each other,

which they had seen on the first day's confrontation with Qu Kun's gang. Now the newcomers must be looking for their comrades too, especially after fighting Qu Kun, and groups would probably be formed around the strongest of the candidates. Bai Shi and Xiao Ming must have sensed Shi Mu's power and hence made their invitation. Shi Mu considered it a good chance to learn about the sect, including where he could buy pills. He still did not know where he could acquire the Bone-Tempering Pills needed for practicing the Art of the Heavenly Elephant.

Hearing Shi Mu's quick response, Stone Bai and Xiao Ming exchanged a pleased look, "Haha, wonderful! Let's move, quickly!" Stone Bai urged.

"Well, why not inviting some other disciples to join us?" Xiao Ming suggested in a seemingly random tone.

"Hmm, I thought the girl with all the bells was pretty strong, and she happens to live over there..." Stone Bai nodded his approval immediately and pointed to a stone house.

So the three walked over to the girl's house, chatting casually.

.....

Night descended. Shi Mu lied in his bed, breathing in and out, soft and slow. His bed was against the window where bright moonlight flowed, like a small clear stream, pouring onto his chest.

.....

A steep mountain with towering cliffs rose into the sky, it had a dark blueish tone, and was bald, barely covered by trees. Though surrounded by endless mountains, it was clearly the tallest. Standing out lonely as the moon, it overlooked the thousands of hilltops that clustered around it.

At the top of the lonely mountain was a clearing, wide and plain. Verdant grasses grew rampant on the earth. Now various wild animals - tigers, leopards, lions, bears, birds, foxes, hares, *etc.* - were swarming in the grassland. They either crouched, stood, or laid prone; tigers lay close to rabbits while bears held foxes in their arms. It was a strangely peaceful scene. The birds and beasts that should be hunting each other were now meek, clustering around a white jade stone, on which an elderly man with white lengthy beard was sitting cross-legged. His white eyebrows grew downward to his waist. The man was holding a wooden ruler, his eyes, looking at the animals, were gentle and caring, his lips moved, speaking something like instructions to the animals. The chill night wind swept by, sending clear ripples through the tall grass, which slowly flowed to the edges of the plain. But the animals were not disturbed at all. Fixing their eyes on the elderly man, they listened to him with rapt attention, not moving a muscle. The huge mountain was altogether quiet, all that was resounding in the night air was the man’s faint voice.

Meanwhile, a white ape was also among the animals, but his face was full of anxiety, his fingers scratching his cheeks restlessly. The elder’s voice rang out by his ears, but however hard he listened, the words did not make any sense to him. Seeing the animals around him in concentration, he grew even more agitated, and finally could not help but depressed sound.

The noise attracted the man’s attention. His eyebrows swaying slightly, he rose to his feet and slowly walked to the white ape.

The animals around the ape stood up, one by one, to make way for the elderly man, and the looks they cast at the white ape grew increasingly unfriendly.

The white ape bent his head before the elder, his eyes imploring. Scratching his cheek, he groaned softly at the elder, who smiled amiably and shook the wooden ruler in his hand, patting the white ape's head three times. The white ape's body trembled violently at the strikes, as if three loud crashes of thunder exploded in his head.

Next, the ape's eyes immediately turned clear, something flashing across his mind. Suddenly he saw everything with an unprecedented clarity, and the words the the elder said previously suddenly grew meaningful to him: He perceived everything in a second.

The white ape again scratched his cheeks, but in great elation this time. Among the hostile and envious looks of the other animals, he knelt before the elder, then made a bow with hands folded in front of him.

Chapter 60 - The Bone-Tempering Pill

Shi Mu woke up in his bed, his heart beating fiercely while he sweated so profusely that his clothes were soaked in sweat. Though his face was somewhat pale, due to the sweat, his eyes were filled with an irresistible excitement.

After his eyesight was strengthened, he climbed to a high place every night when there was moonlight to enter the ape's dream again, where he would transform into the white ape to absorb moonlight and further strengthen his eyesight.

However, as he carried on the absorption, the degree, by which his eyesight grew, decreased, even if there was illuminating moonlight during the nights. Gradually, he reached a point where his eyesight no longer increased.

.

But tonight, the scene in the dream changed and the white ape he transformed into didn't climb onto a tree to absorb the spirit of moonlight; instead it was listening to an elder imparting something to a group of animals, whom he was among. Although Shi Mu did not understand the dream, he vaguely felt that it was not a bad thing.

But soon he smiled wryly to himself as he found he was unable to recall a single word of the elder's teachings. Shi Mu did not feel tired anymore, and he jumped to his feet, walking in circles about his room, scratching his head. The very movement was amazingly similar to that of the white ape when he had scratched his cheeks in the dream.

Shi Mu sensed that what the elder had told him in the dream was of great importance. He did everything he could, trying to remember the words the elder

spoke, but nothing came to mind. Giving up, he sighed and returned to his bed.

The next day, Shi Mu woke up and ate a few of the rock-hard buns and then left his house to go look for some pills. After his hard work, he had reached the beginning stage of the Art of the Heavenly Elephant and acquired real qi sensing in his body, which proved that he had finally become a real Houtian Warrior. Therefore, right now, he needed more Bone Tempering Pills to carry on his practice.

His one million silver notes would earn him respect as a rich young master in the secular world, and the note could be used as currency in all the three countries, but in the Black Demon Sect, they might not count for much: the pills could be really exorbitant in price, so he must find out the price of the Bone Tempering Pill.

The entire valley was now covered in the morning mist, peaceful and quiet. Shi Mu stepped out of residence area and found himself in the midst of others outside. Some disciples, apparently newcomers, were moving with excited and cheerful looks on their faces. They must have chosen proper arts for themselves and were looking forward to growing more with them.

As he passed through a crossing, Shi Mu went straight on into the heart of the valley to find the green-stone square that Stone Bai and Xiao Ming had told him about.

It took him nearly an hour to reach the avenue lined with shops, adjacent to the square, where a strong aroma of medicine told him he was at the right place. The scent uplifted his spirits. He quickened his steps and entered into a three-storey building which was beautifully built and filled with people.

In the main hall, there was a golden board three meters long engraved with elegant handwriting: “Sweet Pills Market”.

When he entered, Shi Mu could not help but marvel at the size of the house. The hall, wide and bright, was, at least, three meters in height, and large enough to hold more than a hundred people.

There were counters around him, in the hall, all of which were made out of Purple Heart wood, which is quite precious. Behind them were rows of shelves, made up of the same wood. Many shelves were full of herbal medicine; some others held small and exquisite china bottles, which possibly contained various pills.

There were dozens of primary disciples in the hall, most of whom were chatting with men in the same black uniforms behind the counters. Many other black-robed men were by the shelves, picking herbs and bottles from them.

The disciples were wearing uniforms that looked the same as the uniforms the black-robed men behind the counters were wearing, only that the black-robed men’s clothes did not have silver embroideries on their sleeves to show their grades. Also, those black-robed men looked older than most primary disciples.

Shi Mu gave it some thought and realized that the black-robed men were probably the laborers mentioned by Wild Zhou. Though they were not official disciples of the Black Demon Sect, they were all martial art practitioners, the weakest were at the sixth level of body tempering, the best were at the eleventh level.

They must have joined the Black Demon Sect willingly as laborers to struggle for the yearly thirty rations to be upgraded to primary disciples. After all, not

everyone could acquire qi-sensing before the age of fifteen; and the power of the famous sects must be much greater than national schools like Kai Yuan Martial Arts school. As long as they could upgrade, many more chances would come to them as primary disciples.

“What can I do for you, brother? Perhaps I can help you find some medicine.” As Shi Mu came in, a laborer, who looked to be around eighteen years old, came to offer his services, bowing and smiling as he greeted Shi Mu.

“Thanks, I’ll help myself.” Shi Mu smiled and shook his head.

The laborer smiled and bowed again, stepped back and left him alone.

Shi Mu glanced around and stepped straight to the middle counter, staring at the shelves carefully.

“Tiger Blood Pill”,”Purple Cloud Herb”,”Liquid of Five Snakes”,”Primordial Qi Pill”....

The varied kinds of pills and herbal medicines amazed Shi Mu. For a while, he just stood in front of the shelf and stared.

Though the pills on the first floor were mainly sold to disciples of the lowest level, the cheapest pill cost twenty silver, and the majority of the pills cost hundreds of silver, and these were the prices for a single pill. “For heaven’s sake, only a rich man could shop here!” Shi Mu thought to himself.

“Oh, the Blood-Strengthening Pill!” Shi Mu finally found a pill he was familiar with, blurting out its name out loud with his eyes shining.

He looked down and found the number “85” on the red price tag on the shelf.

It far surpassed his belief that the price of the pills distributed to new disciples, for free, could be so high. Each primary disciple could receive three Blood-Strengthening pills every month for free , which would cost almost three hundred. According to Wild Zhou’s words, there were more than two thousand primary disciples in the sect, and disciples of higher levels would receive even more resources than primary disciples, despite being fewer in number, so the cost of pills in the sect would be at least one million silver every month!

Shi Mu took a deep breath when he realized this. Now he was even more convinced of the Black Demon Sect’s wealth and strength.

“Hello brother, how can I help you? We have got every kind of pill and herb here.” A handsome laborer appeared behind the counter, greeting Shi Mu with a radiating smile.

“I am looking for the Bone-Tempering Pill!” This time, Shi Mu didn’t refuse the servant’s help anymore for he had lost patience to find the pill by himself among a sea of unknown pills.

“One thousand silver.” The handsome laborer searched in his mind for the price and answered with a smile.

“So expensive!” Shi Mu changed his look as he heard the price.

“Brother, you must know, it takes a certain kind of precious herb to make the pill, so naturally the price won’t be low.” The laborer smiled again while he explained to Shi Mu.

“Well...I’d like to buy three pills.” Shi Mu thought for a while and took out three thousand silver notes.

He had planned to buy many more pills but he knew it would be safer not to show his wealth openly, after all, he could just come here whenever he needed more.

Chapter 61 - Magicians

“Give me a second to collect your pills and you will be good to go!”

The handsome young laborer smiled and made a gesture to another laborer behind him, who gave a quick and neat nod and worked his way to one of the shelves. After taking three blue bottles from the shelf, he quickly returned and handed them to his handsome colleague.

Shi Mu took the three bottles, now in his hands, and open the lid of one to sniff the contents. A pungent scent made him frown. He gave a swift glance at the pill inside, a bean-size, bright red pill lay quietly down at the bottom of the bottle - exactly as described by the Art of the Heavenly Elephant. The sight of the pill overjoyed Shi Mu. He paid the money readily and stored the bottles in his shirt. Then, a vigorous male voice resounded from his back, “Brother Bai, I see your friend has chosen the Art of the Heavenly Elephant!”

Shi Mu was surprised by the voice. He slowly turned around to see the voice’s owner, and found two young men standing behind him. One was rather stout, his face craggy, with deep-set eyes and bushy brows, whereas the other was the long-haired Stone Bai.

“Brother Shi, this is my senior brother Huo Mao. We only met recently, but I found out that we actually grew up in the same place. Isn’t that crazy?” Seeing that Shi Mu was carefully looking over his companion, Stone Bai flashed him a disarming smile and hurried his introduction.

Shi Mu was now growing suspicious of this Stone Bai, who had claimed that Xiao Ming, Fang Tianxu and this guy were all coming from his home country.

What are the chances of this actually happening? He began to wonder which place had bred so many talented martial arts scholars.

“Nice to meet you, Brother Huo. My name is Shi Mu. I would like to ask, how did you know which art I decided to practice?” Shi Mu first greeted the craggy-faced youth with clasped hands then asked with a puzzled face.

“Haha, it’s no big secret. It’s all pure coincidence. I, myself, almost picked this same art too, but later abandoned the idea because the Bone-Tempering Pill is so damn expensive.” Huo Mao grinned. “Brother Shi, I’m not sure if you know this but the Bone-Tempering Pills have the marrow of some holy animal in them, so it’s too expensive for ordinary disciples to afford them. Moreover, the Art of the Heavenly Elephant seems simple but actually it’s not, plus, its strength is not that great. That’s why so few have chosen this art.” Huo Mao explained to Shi Mu, wondering if he even knew this. And if he did, why had he still chosen this unfavorable art?

A hint of bitter smile flashed across Shi Mu’s face. How could he make them believe the strange events that had happened to his body, making him fit for the Art of the Heavenly Elephant?

“Brother Shi, I’ve invited Brother Huo to have a drink, why not come along?” Seeing that the two had spoken, Stone Bai invited Shi Mu to join them.

Shi Mu hesitated for a while. Since all newcomers had a year free of challenge, and now, with the newly acquired Bone-Tempering Pills, he did not want to lose a minute increasing his strength. Just as he was about to decline the offer, Stone Bai said something that dispelled his idea, “Brother Shi, we’ve just entered our sect, but brother Huo has been here for a while. He’s kindly agreed to answer any question we have about our techniques and arts.”

Shi Mu was delighted. He immediately replied, “Why not? I’ve got no plans for today, so let’s have a blast!” Shi Mu nodded to Huo Mao, smiling cheerfully,

The craggy-faced young man’s eyes shone with excitement, “Sure, when it comes to drinks, the more the merrier!” He had not even finished speaking when he started leading them out of the hall and to a tavern. Shi Mu did not quite get what was happening, but Stone Bai gave him a meaningful look and he realized that they were going to buy their senior brother drinks for information.

The three of them left the Sweet Pills Market and laughed all the way to a two-storey building called Fragrant River Tavern. Stone Bai reported his name to the servant and they were soon led to an independent room on the second floor.

Just as he entered the room Shi Mu saw the big-mouthed Xiao Ming sitting by a table full of delicious cuisines, and a jar of fragrant wine was giving off a strong scent which made Huo Mao’s eyes fill with excitement. Huo Mao could not wait any longer; without any words of pleasantry he chose a seat and poured himself a bowl of wine, downed it within a breath.

“Good wine!” The wine streaming down his throat and he felt a burst of hot air surging in his stomach which made him exclaim happily.

Stone Bai sensibly poured another bowl of wine for Huo Mao and then for himself, the two beginning to drink together. Shi Mu quickly picked up how to behave in this situation and began to down the wine with them, asking Huo Mao questions every now and then.

Soon three rounds were finished, and most of the dishes had been eaten. The three were now acquainted enough to broach the topic of arts and sects. Stone

Bai and Xiao Ming seized the chance to seek answers to their long-harbored questions, and Huo Mao was forthright and spoke without reserve.

Seeing that Stone Bai and Xiao Ming had most of their questions answered, Shi Mu suddenly thought of Uncle Ju, at the General Sutras House, and his strange parrot. Now a rare chance had come his way and he would not let it slip through his fingers. He decided to ask Huo Mao about magicians.

“Magicians? You mean Uncle Ju of the General Sutras House?” Huo Mao looked up at Shi Mu and spoke with a suspicious smile.

Magicians were rare in the Black Demon Sect, and for newcomers, the only magician they could get to know was Uncle Ju. So it was quite normal for them to get curious.

Shi Mu nodded to Huo Mao. Every time he recalled the obscure charms, queer patterns, and enigmatic characters, a strong urge to learn of them would seize him. Now he found that he was not alone. Stone Bai and Xiao Ming were also waiting for the answer, their faces full of interest.

“Well, I will tell you if you wish to know, but let me ask, do you know how many magicians we have, among the thousands of disciples in our sect? Heh, the answer is a few hundred. And, most of them are mere Scholars. In our sect, magicians of the Spirit Grade, like Uncle Ju, number less than eight, and as for the higher level, magicians of Star Grade, there are even fewer. As their titles suggest, magicians cannot be considered magicians until they’ve reached Spirit Grade. Scholars are not counted as magicians That means, as one of the seven powerful sects in Three Kingdoms, we, the Black Demon Sect only have some ten-odd real magicians!” When he said this, Huo Mao, deliberately and looked at the three newcomers gaping speechlessly. Only when he was contented, did he look up and say in a proud voice, as if he himself were a magician,

“Do you know why magicians are so important to our sect? The weapons, pills, charms and even the making of magic formulas all depend on them! So, to some extent, you can say that they are the real strength of a sect. But to be a magician is not that easy. You have to be born with magical talent, and then learn enough holy knowledge to sense the power of five basic elements: Gold, Wood, Water, Fire, Earth. But those born with magic talent are much rarer than practitioners able to sense qi!” Saying this, Huo Mao seemed somewhat envious of magicians.

Shi Mu was full of envy too. But he suddenly thought of something and asked, “I heard that Uncle Ju is a spirit master. What does that mean?”

“Hehe! I never thought you knew this much. Now, you’re asking the right person, others probably wouldn’t know this. So, magicians are divided into several different types, according to their talents and areas of research. Most commonly seen are magicians of the five elements: Gold, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth, with a small number of magicians using wind, thunder, ice, darkness, or light. There are also Incantation magicians skilled at magic charms, magicians of magic formations, magicians of alchemy and medicine-making, and magicians of manipulating puppets. As for magicians of souls and spirits, they can communicate with creatures from other strange spaces via their own soul power, and they are even rarer than puppet-controlling magicians.” Huo Mu threw Shi Mu a complacent smile, explaining while making pompous gestures. His words finished, Huo Mu downed another bowl of wine. Stone Bai hurriedly filled his bowl again.

Shi Mu sat there, musing over what Huo Mu had said, and making sure to remember all of it. He decided to gather more information on this area of practice.

“Brother Shi, I’ve heard people say that you fought Qu Kun to a draw and thus brought him humiliation. Mind you, this Qu Kun is no easy person to get along with. Be careful of who you get into fights with.” Huo Mu brought up a new

topic, looking at Shi Mu meaningfully.

This new information made Shi Mu's bones chill. He hurriedly thanked Huo Mao, clasping his hands, "Many thanks to brother Huo for his reminder!"

Then the four enjoyed themselves, talking about this and that until they, eventually, drank up three full jars of wine. At dusk they bid each other goodbye and went their separate ways.

Chapter 62-The Moon-Swallowing Art

Shi Mu returned to the avenue of medicine shops after he left the tavern to make a few more purchases. After buying a few more pills, he decided to call it a day. When he finally returned to his little stone house, the sun had already set and the night sky was covered with stars.

Today he had acquired information on magicians from Huo Mao, which opened the gate to a whole new world for him, far surpassing what he had previously imagined.

As he recalled, Yu Qianji, who appeared on his way to the Black Demon Sect, was exactly a magician, and guessing from the dialogue between him and his opponents at the time, Yu Qianji seemed to be a Star-grade magician. His strength left a strong impression with Shi Mu.

Among the over two thousand disciples in the Black Demon Sect, there were, at least, a hundred Scholar level magicians, which might be his competition in future matches. Thinking this, Shi Mu decided to do everything he could to obtain more resources in these contests, as the resources would help him in his practice of the Art of the Heavenly Elephant.

This thought in mind, Shi Mu pulled out the pill bottles he had gotten from the Sweet Pill Market. He had some Bone-Tempering Pills and some Blood-Strengthening Pills.

Shi Mu sat on his stone bed, with his legs crossed, for a while and picked up a white bottle, pouring out a Blood-Strengthening Pill and swallowing it with his eyes closed.

He had been practicing the Art of the Heavenly Elephant and, as the pill worked its way inside his body, he clearly felt that his speed of absorbing qi from the environment had increased considerably. This was a cheerful sensation to him. But he dared not pause to celebrate. He unceasingly absorbed the Heavenly Qi[A] and spirit power from the earth and heaven, transforming them into the Real Qi of Heavenly Elephant, which flowed through his vessels and veins to finally join together in his dantian[B].

As time flew by, Shi Mu suddenly opened his eyes, picked up a blue bottle and poured out a Bone-Tempering Pill. The pill turned into fluids as soon as swallowed, getting hotter as it entered his stomach, sending a hot gush of energy through his body and into his extremities.

Shi Mu's skin started to change to a dark red color, his muscles bulging here and there, making his skin seem to roll.

At the same time, his bones kept making a cracking sound, his body becoming overwhelmingly hot, especially his bones, which burned as if they were being licked by roaring flames. He now got the reason why the pill was named Bone-Tempering Pill.

He took a deep breath and started to practice the Art of the Heavenly Elephant, which made his Qi flow and slowly strengthen under the effect of the Bone-Tempering Pill.

After nearly two hours, the color of Shi Mu's skin returned to normal and the cracking sound subsided.

He had been drenched in sweat, his clothes soaking wet. There was a strange

black color mixed in his with his sweat, which gave off a nauseating odor. He quickly took off his clothes and washed his entire body with clean water. This done, he felt quite refreshed, as if his spirits had been purified. He tried to exercise his muscles, and the smoothness, with which his body moved, pleased him tremendously. Apparently, his Qi of the Heavenly Elephant had been purified and strengthened after this tempering session, and, more excitingly, his physical strength was largely intensified, too.

In the next few days, Shi Mu completely immersed himself in practicing the Art of the Heavenly Elephant. If the mood took him, he would practice his Gale Force Blade Art in his spare time. After all, he knew that the Gale Force Blade Art was more powerful than the Stone-breaking Fist in actual combat. Hence, as his Qi kept increasing in his body, he also made progress in the Thirteen Series of Gale Force Blade, reaching the level of Ten Cuts in one Breath.

However, there was still one thing unsolved in his mind. Under the white moonlight, Shi Mu sat on the edge of his bed, deep in thought.

In recent days, as long as the sky was clear, he would have the dream in which he, as the white ape, would listen to the elder talking. But he still couldn’t figure out what the elder is telling him in his dream.

Shi Mu thought for a while before he stood to his feet and walked several steps in the room. After a while, he suddenly made a decision. The next minute, he pushed open the door and left the room.

It was the middle of the night when he went outside. People must have been asleep for a long time as there was only silence in the valley, except for the occasion singing of insects and frogs.

Shi Mu swept the surroundings with his eyes and walked quietly to a certain place in the valley.

He finally arrived at a clearing in woods after a quarter of an hour. It was a remote place just outside the thirteenth mountain, away from roads and paths in the valley and hence less visited by the others in the sect.

Shi Mu looked around carefully and only relaxed when he made sure no one else was present.

Taking a deep breath, he glanced at trees around him and finally chose a tall one, climbing to the top very easily. He squatted down on the highest branch and lifted his head to stare at the moon.

He had been fully engaged in his practice ever since he entered the Black Demon Sect, and for fear that people might catch sight of his strange behavior, plus his unfamiliarity with the environment of the valley, he had not tried to come into the ape's dream these days.

Shi Mu kept the posture of staring at the moon for about an hour, but his spirit kept resisting the effort and would not recede into the deep recess of his unconsciousness for the ape's mind to take over.

"What's happening?"

Shi Mu's expression changed, murmuring in bewilderment.

He had been able to enter the dream if he acted like this with enough moonlight and it would cost him, at most, maybe a few minutes. But today he

unexpectedly failed.

"Maybe the strange ability to come into the dream, of my own accord, has been lost?" This thought depressed him. But, come to think of it, it was weird being brought into the dream in the first place, so it was not impossible that one day he might lose this ability. It was that the loss of the further increasing of his eyesight - however little it may be - that severely depressed him. Shi Mu would not come to terms with the gloomy prospect so he kept on squatting on the tree for another hour. Eventually, he ended up admitting his failure and feeling even more depressed.

He sighed and was just about to return to his house when he saw a patch of grass in the woods, where moonlight had left its silver luster, rendering a scene just like when the white ape listened to the elder's lesson.

Shi Mu immediately had an epiphany.

In recent days, he had not seen the white ape climbing up high to stare at the moon, but sitting on the ground and listening to an elder speak, with his legs crossed. Could it be that……

Shi Mu got extraordinarily excited as he sat down on the grass with his legs crossed, looking forward like the white ape did in the dream.

Immediately after he took this pose, a loud *BOOM* resounded in his head, and he felt his muscles stiffen.

Shi Mu fell into the ape's dream again, himself transformed into a white ape. But this time, he found himself sitting on the grass on the top of a mountain,

with the white-browed elder standing in front of him, raised his wooden ruler to slowly pat him on the head.

One, two, three.....

There was another thunderous *BOOM* in Shi Mu's mind, with many silver lights flickering in front of his eyes before they formed into some small word.

The first three words were shining brightly: Moon Swallowing Art.

Notes:

[A] - You might have seen this, previously, as Holy Qi. I have changed this to Heavenly Qi (Holy and Demon are opposites in Western Culture, but their actual relation, in context, is just two different types of Qi.)

[B] - Sorry, I have been saying 'lower abdomen' or 'lower stomach' lately because our translators translated Dantian into English… from here on out I know better, sorry guys.

Chapter 63 - Dreamland Revisited

The white ape felt an overwhelming excitement and it could not help but jump up and down. Then it made a weird posture and turning his hands up, grimacing. The pose seemed to have some extra meaning: immediately after he had made it, a boom resounded in Shi Mu's mind, and suddenly his consciousness took control of his body again. The view had changed, and he was already back to the clearing in the woods.

Looking up at the sky, he found that it was nearing daybreak, the eastern sky covered with white clouds. Shi Mu struggled to his feet and felt the numbness in his knees due to a long time of sitting cross-legged. He had still not recovered from the shock brought by the dream. He did not even feel the wet morning dew all over his shirt. It was incredible that the dream seemed to have only lasted around twenty minutes while in reality a whole night had gone by.

Shi Mu shook his head to drive away the grogginess of just waking up. His closed his eyes and tried to recall the details of the Moon Swallowing Art he saw in his dream. However, to his disappointment, nothing came to his mind except a blank in his memory. Only the name of the art was deeply imprinted on his mind. More bewildering, he was convinced that, in his dream, he had managed to get the hang of this new art. Such contradictory feelings baffled him, making him unable to distinguish dream from reality. [A]

Shaking his head, he tried hard to calm himself down. By now, daylight had begun to fill the awakening woods, and, after a brief thought, Shi Mu set off to his stone house. The last thing that he wanted to happen was to be found after having stayed out all night.

Two days later, on a cloudless night. The full moon looked like a jade plate

hung in the sky. Soft and serene moonlight illuminated the entire valley, scattering silver light on trees and grass.

Right at this moment, Shi Mu was sitting still on his stone bed. For a long time, he remained there, motionless.

All of a sudden, he opened his eyes and a trace of excitement flashed across them. This was exactly the chance he had been waiting for - a night with bright moonlight!

After quietly pushing open his door, Shi Mu observed his surroundings with utmost discretion, not forgetting to listen for any suspicious noises and being as carefully as possible. After he was sure all was fine, he swiftly moved through the quiet sect.

The night was very still and not a figure could be seen under the moon. By hiding himself in shadows of some buildings, he moved quickly and quietly, and in a short order, he had found his way out of the residential area and made his way to the clearing where he had the Ape-Dream [B] before. He checked the environment and made sure that nobody was around and then he relaxed and sat on the grass in the same posture as last time, basking in the gentle moonlight, slowly adjusting his breath before attempting to enter the dream-like state.

After an hour, his body stiffened, then, slowly, every muscle relaxed, and he sat there like an old monk in meditation.

The next moment he entered into the dream.

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A soft breeze rustled the blades of grass around him, bringing a coolness that swept Shi Mu's drowsiness away. He found himself, once again, in the form of the white ape, and was standing on a strangely shaped boulder with both hands up, grimacing.

The Moon Swallowing Art!

He tried to raise his head, but it would not move an inch, exactly as in his previous dreams. But he did not care about this. Looking up, he saw the night sky thickly dotted with white lights, but what was different from previous experiences was that the white dots, which had previously been infinitesimally small, had now expanded, each light as big as a grain of rice. In Shi Mu's eyes, they had grown from light dots to light balls.

These light balls, as if drawn by a mysterious force, had barely made their presence in the sky when they started plummeting down into the white ape's golden pupils. Then new light balls would appear in the sky before they followed the previous ones to fall into the ape's eyes. This repeated for a long time, and if anyone had overlooked the scene from a high spot, he would have seen a river of white light flowing to the white ape, who was standing in a strange posture, with its hands turned up and body twisted.

But this time, these white light balls did not disperse upon entering the ape's body, as before. Instead, all of the lights were gathering in its brain, turning into white streaks of fog. These streaks of fog were, at first, disorderly, floating here and there in the ape's mind, some thicker and some thinner. But before long, a strange force made them gather together in the center of his mind, the fogs diminishing in size but gradually thickening to form a cloud of milky white, that almost looked like a liquid. Soon, the cloud began to contract while swirling.

New streaks of fog were unceasingly pulled into the swirling cloud and it became increasingly thick. At the same time, Shi Mu felt his brain swelling, as if something had made its way there, but soon, an indescribable sense of comfort began to well up from the depths of his mind, as though it was steeped in some miraculous medicine. Vaguely, he sensed some inexplicable changes taking place in his brain, though he did not know how long it was going to last. While waiting, he started to look around in interest and realized that the boulder under him was situated on a tremendously tall mountain, below which a sea of clouds was surging. Further down the mountain, old and massive pine trees were in great abundance.

Besides the pines, there were also all sorts of strange plants growing all over the mountain. In the distance, a heavenly spring made an ethereal trickling sound, mixed with the roar of tigers and dragons. The mountain was quite steep, rising from the earth like a green sword of extraordinary length, and the point of the sword would be the cliff where the white ape was now.

There were layers upon layers of mountains around this sword-like mountain, some majestic, some beautiful, and some with rolling hills, but none could compete with this one in its height. Looking up at the night sky, from the silver boulder on the mountain’s top, it seemed as if the moon and stars were within reach.

One thing Shi Mu was sure of was that this place had never emerged in his dreams before, and the white ape had chosen this mountain to practice the new art for its short distance from the moon.

The observation took a longer time than it seemed. An unknown amount of time had passed when a white crystal capsule finally formed at the bottom of the swirling cloud. And as the cloud continued to rotate, white threads continuously

twined round the capsule to make it grow. Gradually, the crystal capsule had grown to the size of a rice grain.

At the same time, a thunderous *boom* exploded in Shi Mu's mind, followed by an overwhelming sense of dizziness.

Shi Mu cried out, and his body fell off onto the ground. The crash woke him up. Shi Mu found himself sweating profusely, his black shirt soaking wet. His face was now ghastly pale, his eyes were bloodshot, and the muscles on his face were twitching slightly. The boom in his dream seemed to have exploded in the depths of his mind so powerfully that it transformed his soul. But the lucky thing was that this was a remote place and it was late at night, so no one would ever find his abnormal state.

Notes:

[A] - It's Inception. Xianxia edition XD. back

[B] - If any of you have suggestions for what we should call this, I am very welcome to hear it. Ape-Dream seems to fit, but if you have some awesome epiphany, let me know XD. back

Chapter 64 - Stone Bai vs. Blue Phoenix

After taking several breaths, Shi Mu finally calmed himself down. He was excited when he found that he was not tired at all, instead, his mind was cool and clear.

Though he could open his head and examine what had happened inside, he was convinced that his brain must have gone through some fantastic changes.

Involuntarily, he thought about the Art of Heavenly Elephant, that he had practiced in the daytime, and it shocked him that something in the art he could not understand before had now become clearer after a few thoughts.

This amazing discovery shocked him so much that he froze, not moving, and he only came to himself after several minutes, filled with a wild joy. He had not expected that this weird Moon Swallowing Art would be so enormously helpful in his martial art training. If things went on like this, along with the Bone-Tempering and Blood-Strengthening Pills, it would be much easier for him to get the hang of the Art of Heavenly Elephant. At least, Stage One would be no problem.

He could not wait any longer. Turning his body, he jumped to his feet and glanced around to confirm that he was alone, then he quickly and quietly returned to his little stone house.

Once he had returned, he sat on the stone bed with legs crossed and tried to recall the details of the first stage of elephant art. When he was sure he know what he was doing, he downed a Blood-Strengthen Pill and kept his body in the posture of “Five-hearts to the Sky”. He adjusted his breath and tried, with all his ability, to sense the heavenly energy in his environment.

Gradually, his breath became faint until it seemed to almost disappear. He felt he was in his best condition so he took one of the Bone-tempering Pills without hesitation, working up his real qi as the first stage of the art required.

Heavenly energy began to flow into and gather within his body, little by little, and eventually, as if led by an invisible force, the energy was all channeled into his veins before it started to flow slowly according to some pre-determined pattern.

An unknown amount of time had passed when flows of Qi in his veins grew in force from as thin as a hair, to as thick as a needle, before they eventually separated in a junction of several veins. Among them, a thin flow of Qi, not even as large as a strand of hair, wound its way into a new vein.

Shi Mu was glad to see the progress that the new way he practiced his art yielded. He had to change a little but the results were great, changing his former slow speed into a new speed. This whole day's practice proved to be more fruitful than expected: he had finally got his Qi to flow in this particular vein, with which he could absorb more energy from the environment at a higher speed.

So as Shi Mu found his own way to absorb more energy, he kept on practicing the Art of Heavenly Elephant, day and night, except for some spare time he devoted to polishing the Thirteen Series of Gale Force Blade and Stone-Breaking Fist. He was like a machine that could not be turned off once started.

On moonlit nights, he would sneak out of his stone house to the clearing in the woods, in order to enter the ape's dream and absorb moonlight, which he would condense in his brain by practicing the Moon Swallowing Art.

In two months, the crystal capsule in Shi Mu's brain eventually had grown from the size of a rice grain to that of a bean. Though he hadn't found the actual use of the crystal capsule, he had already benefited from it a lot, as it had made him even more quick-witted.

And in two months, Shi Mu had finally climbed to the first stage of the Heavenly Elephant Art with the help of Blood-Strengthening Pills and Bone-Tempering Pills.

The Art of Heavenly Elephant earned its name as an art that could strengthen one's body. His strength had by now increased by nearly a third, and, with the assistance of Qi, he had twice his original strength. His skin had also been toughened. Given more practice, he could probably ignore attacks from normal weapons. With the aid of Qi, he could strike three Stone-Breaking Fists or two cuts of the Thirteen Series of Gale Force Blade at one time. Moreover, this Qi had also inspired his Thirteen Series of Gale Force Blade Art, which was now nearing the consummate stage. By now, Shi Mu could easily do Thirteen Cuts in One Breath. And the power of Stone-breaking Fist had increased as well. He gave it a try the other day and was elated to find himself able to smash a rather sizable stone with just one punch. With his current strength, he was confident he could confront intermediate Houtian warriors, like the Jin Clan's Fifth Master, head-on without fear.

However, there were only a few Bone-Tempering and Blood-Strengthening Pills left so he needed to buy more. Shi Mu fumbled in a bag for several silver notes that amounted to less than thirty thousand silver - his last possession. It could only sustain for another half a month according to his current expenses.[A]

It was really beyond ordinary people's ability to bear the cost of this Heavenly Elephant Art. If it was not for his savings and the aid of the Moon-Swallowing Art, he could not have even succeeded to reach the first stage!

Shi Mu smiled bitterly, knowing that there was no other choice for him so that he could only try to find some way to make money in the Black Demon Sect.

He tugged the silver notes in his sleeves and went out.

Somewhere near the thirteenth mountain, new disciples were coming and going, making the residential area more lively than before. The new disciples, injured by Qu Kun's gang, had now fully recovered. By now two months had elapsed and most of them had become quite familiar with their sect.

The new disciples were, no doubt, very curious about a large sect like the Black Demon Sect, and most of them would remain outside their houses when they were not practicing, wandering in the valley and the square to get a feel for the ambiance of a great sect. However, Shi Mu was different. He was practicing all the time in his small stone house. As he only seldom went out, he was only familiar with a few disciples.

Now he was walking along a street towards the blue-stone square when he heard some shouting and yelling from a crossing nearby. Judging from the loud noise, there must be a large crowd convening for some special event.

Shi Mu frowned as he realized that there was an arena built at the foot of the thirteenth mountain in the Black Demon Sect. He had been there once before, with Stone Bai. Therefore, whoever was now using the arena must be fighting someone else, and had an audience cheering loudly. Moreover, this arena was exclusively for primary disciples, so it would not surprise him if he went there and saw his "travel companions" fighting each other. Without delay, he made his way towards the arena.

The ring was a platform made of green stone, and was about twenty meters in length and width, with black metal bars around it.

When he got there, he saw dozens of disciples, most of whom were newcomers and, by now, had roughly formed two groups, staring at each other with hostility. Right at this moment, two disciples were fighting fiercely in the ring. The slim young man was none other than Stone Bai, and the other was the girl with small bells all over her clothes.

“Oh, it’s her.” Shi Mu was puzzled.

On the day when they were fighting Qu Kun, to get into their living area, the girl showed quite a weird bloodline when avoiding Qu Kun’s fist, leaving a deep impression on all the new disciples. Afterward, Shi Mu had also seen her on several occasions with Stone Bai, and he knew her name was Lan Feng, the “Blue Phoenix”.

But the sight of Stone Bai challenging Blue Phoenix really bewildered him. Why would two elite disciples fight each other? Shi Mu murmured to himself.

Notes:

[A] - As the editor, I would like to know…. WTF happened to all his money!?!?!?!?!?

(1/2 month = 30,000 silver So 2 months = 120,000 Silver)

We know he had 3 million silver (at least) When he left Feng City. He, somehow, lost 2 million of that before he ‘entered’ the Black Demon Sect. He had 1 million when he entered the Sweet Pills Market. By my math, he spent 120,000 on pills for the first 2 months and yet he only has 30,000 left. What

happened to the other 850,000?!?!?

(and that makes 2,850,000 silver that we don’t know where it went…!?!?!?)

Chapter 65 - Who Wins?

The interval of two months had transformed both competitors. Stone Bai was now standing firmly at the center of the ring, his feet spread apart. His two arms were larger in size with obvious blood veins protruding. Each punch created a gust of whistling wind, which brought with it a stream of hot air, making the temperature of the arena rise a little.

On the other hand, the small body of Blue Phoenix seemed even more fragile under the attack of Stone Bai's fierce punches. But she agilely avoided each strike, her waist as flexible as a snake. Her body shifted in the wind like a willow leaf, her bright eyes fixed on Stone Bai's movements. This attack-and-dodge process lasted for several minutes, and throughout this period, Blue Phoenix did not attempt a counter-blow even once, as if intending to work down her opponent's energy.

For a time, the two just remained in the deadlock.

Shi Mu knew immediately, from their brilliant arts, that the two must have become Houtian Warriors and started training in their respective arts. The fist art Stone Bai was performing was called the Fire Fist, whereas Blue Phoenix's erratic shifting seemed similar to some shadow arts Shi Mu had come across in the General Sutras House.

Judging from their movements, apparently both had reached the primary state of their respective arts. Moreover, the way they could easily perform the art meant that they had gathered much more real qi in their body than Shi Mu did.

Shi Mu sighed. The waste bloodline of the stone monkey had truly been an

obstacle in his progress, otherwise, with two months' time and large amounts of pills, he should have reached the second grade of his Heaven Elephant Art.

"Brother Shi, what has brought you here? I haven't seen you for ages." Just then, a hearty smile came over his face before Shi Mu saw the big-mouthed Xiao Ming nudging through the crowd.

Xiao Ming's loud greeting drew the attention of some disciples, who obviously recognized Shi Mu and began whispering to each other.

"Brother Xiao, nice to meet you." Shi Mu gently smiled to Xiao Ming. The two exchanged some pleasantries and then stood next to each other, watching the match.

"Brother Bai is an absolute genius. I would never have believed his Qi had reached this level, if not for seeing it in front of my eyes!" Shi Mu commented, smiling.

"Acute eyes. Yes, brother Bai has just reached the third grade in his All-Yang Art." Xiao Ming nodded.

Shi Mu was shocked to hear that. Though he knew little of this All-yang Art, it should be of the same level as that of his Heavenly Elephant Art. Reaching the third grade, within two months, was astounding. Stone Bai's talent must be far above Shi Mu's!

"But why is brother Bai challenging Miss Blue Phoenix? What happened?" Shi Mu suppressed his astonishment and managed to ask a question in an easy manner.

Xiao Ming's look changed, a trace of embarrassment crossing his face.

"You'll definitely laugh at me about this. Actually, brother Bai is doing this for me. You know, the day we entered the sect, I was forced to give up one of my Black Fire tokens to brother Qu. So..." Xiao Ming forced a smile.

Shi Mu frowned. He knew of this matter.

"Brother Shi has always been practicing in his own house, so it's natural you don't know this. Our newcomers are very proud and ambitious, now that they have learned some strong Houtian arts, they just can't resist the temptation of trying each other's strength. The winner shall have a token from the loser. Miss Blue won one from a disciple yesterday, and brother Shi asked her for a challenge as soon as he got the news, intending to win that token for me..." Xiao Ming continued.

Shi Mu nodded as he understood what was happening. He silently commended Stone Bai's loyalty to his friend, but to beat Blue Phoenix was not an easy task. Judging from the current situation, it seemed that Stone Bai had the advantage, but that was because Blue Phoenix had not used her bloodline power at all. Therefore, the result of this match was, in fact, quite unpredictable.

Far from the ring, six disciples were watching the match. Their uniforms told that they were all junior disciples, and Qu Kun, who had robbed the new disciples of their tokens, was among them. He had his two fellow disciples standing behind him. The other three formed another group that seemed hostile to Qu Kun's, led by a youth with golden hair and blue eyes, and one of his two followers was none other than Huo Mao. The leader youth seemed to have foreign blood.

All of a sudden Qu Kun opened his mouth, “Brother Jin, who do you think will win?” He sneered while looking at the youth with golden hair.

“I heard that brother Qu has tried their strength the day they entered our sect. And your fist was dodged by that bell girl in a strange way. So I guess brother Qu thinks she’ll win?” The golden-haired youth did not answer the question directly but asked in reply, a mocking smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

Qu Kun raised his eyebrows and curled his lip, “Bloodline warriors are born with better chances. That Stone Bai is a good warrior, but only among ordinary ones...how could he manage to beat a bloodline warrior? I assume brother Jin knows this better than anyone. Plus, though he might progress really fast at Houtian level, that does not mean he would have any luck at Xiantian level...”

The golden-haired youths snorted, his face falling. “Brother Qu, say what you like, this Stone Bai is ours, as for that Blue Phoenix, we, the Holy Spirit Association, won’t take her, so do what you like. Are we happy with this decision?” He said coldly.

“Perfect! That’s a deal!” Qu Kun nodded instantly.

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On the ring, the two had been in the deadlock for a long time, both exhausted and filled with impatience. That was when Stone Bai let out a low shout, stamped hard on the ground, leaned forward with his body, and then punched at his opponent.

Immediately, a hot air welled from his fist, forming an air wave several meters

long. As he shouted again, his arm sweeping through the air. The scorching hot wave blasted toward Blue Phoenix, almost sweeping half the ring. However, though Blue Phoenix ducked, she felt her strength dwindling, unable to dodge this fierce strike. In a minute, she was pushed to one corner of the ring by the air wave.

Stone Bai's face turned somewhat pale due to this exertion, but seeing this development, he was delighted and did not hesitate to stomp on the ground to shoot himself forward. His fingers bent, his palms looking like a pair of claws, shining cold light faintly.

"Dragon Claw!"

Stone Bai shouted again, his palms moving in from an angle that was almost impossible for his opponent to evade. He grasped at Blue Phoenix's throat.

The bells rang, and in the next moment, Blue Phoenix had passed Stone Bai. Her figure retreated quickly like a faint shadow in the wind. As she steadied herself again, her beautiful face ghastly pale. Her clothes were torn with a long slit at her left shoulder, a part of her white arm was bare with five red scratches where blood was gushing out, dying her arm red.

Her eyes glared with fury, and, after she gently touched the ground with her tiptoes, she turned around to dash at Stone Bai. A white light flashed as she took out a dagger from her sleeve.

Blue Phoenix also shouted, but in a delicate tone. The dagger reflected a cold light as it was flung at Stone Bai's Shoulder.

But she did not aim to kill him. However furious she was.

At the same time, Stone Bai was looking in front of him with a tired appearance, his eyes lacking strength, his body remaining in the same posture as it was in earlier. Reading his face, it seemed that he did not know or care about the incoming dagger.

Chapter 66 - The Holy Spirit vs. The Blood Dragon

“Dangerous!”

“Brother Bai, get out of there!”

Around the ring, Stone Bai’s acquaintances all shouted in panic. However, Shi Mu did not move his observant eyes from Blue Phoenix. The instant she passed Stone Bai, no one except Shi Mu detected something unusual: why did Stone Bai stand still, without the least intention to move? Did this have something to do with the bells hung all over Blue Phoenix’s body?

The next second, Stone Bai finally came to himself and moved his body to dodge the incoming dagger, but the short period, during which he lost his consciousness, had made it difficult for him to stay clear of the danger. The dagger had already neared him, less than 30 centimeters from his chest.

Stone Bai lost his cool, thinking that the girl’s attack had lethal intent behind it. Tilting his body, he decided to attempt a counter blow instead of retreating, his left shoulder turned to face the dagger. At the same time, his right hand began to emit shockwaves, cold light emerging between his fingers. Without hesitation, he thrust forward his right hand, cutting at the Blue Phoenix’s waist, intending mutual destruction.

This was out of Blue Phoenix’s expectations, sending jolts of terror through her spine. But there was no way she could reverse her momentum now.

Just as their attacks were about to collide, an orange light whizzed through the air, which turned out to be a fireball the size of a human head. The fireball

reached the floor of the ring at a blazing fast speed, then exploded abruptly, creating an ear-deafening boom.

A huge shock wave surged out, separating Stone Bai and Blue Phoenix. Both were pushed back several meters. This sudden turn of events shocked the audience. After being stupefied for a few seconds, they all turned their heads in the direction from whence[A] the fireball had come.

It turned out that Shi Mu and Xiao Ming were standing there.

At this moment, Xiao Ming's face was slightly pale, his right arm was held out in the posture of pointing forward, a residual of orange light fading from his palm.

"Brother Xiao, what have you done...?" Shi Mu was as stunned as the rest of the crowd.

Xiao Ming took a close look at those astonished faces around him, exhaled a long breath, and put down his arm.

"A magician!" Someone at the edge of the ring shouted, making the crowd explode with excitement. The audience began to discuss, among their respective groups, Xiao Ming's identity, all wearing surprised looks. However, Stone Bai was not surprised at all. Checking Blue Phoenix's condition with a cursory glance, he turned his eyes to Xiao Ming.

"Brother Bai, how could I let you put your life in danger for a Black Fire Token?" Xiao Ming gave a forced smile to Stone Bai, who frowned with resignation. Nodding briefly, he turned to Blue Phoenix, hands clasped, "Miss

Blue's bloodline is quite exceptional but, since our challenge was interrupted, let's call it a day."

"You were not doing bad either, recovering your consciousness so fast! " Blue Phoenix gave a perfunctory reply and turned to walk down from the ring.

Qu Kun and the golden-haired youth, who had been standing in the distance watching the match, were rather excited. "I never thought there were such talented guys among these new disciples! That one, he not only has learned some magician arts, but he also has a good control in using fire!" Qu Kun exclaimed.

Just as he finished his words, the golden-haired youth had overtaken him, striding over to the ring, followed by his two men. Seeing that he had been surpassed, Qu Kun hurriedly brought his men to follow them to the ring. The disciples around the ring made way for the groups as they moved toward the ring.

At this moment, Stone Bai had gotten down from the ring and was in an intimate conversation with Xiao Ming. The approaching footsteps conveyed an unyielding determination, an irresistible momentum, and it compelled the three of them, Shi Mu, Stone Bai, and Xiao Ming, to turn and looks at the coming gangs. Shi Mu felt his heart palpitate when he saw Qu Kun and Huo Mao among them but managed to conceal his emotions.

"Brother Bai, I just saw you challenging that girl. You surprise me with your great progress." The golden-haired youth seemed to be an acquaintance of Stone Bai's, greeting him with smiles.

"That's praise I don't deserve." Stone Bai clasped his hands and then nodded

quickly at Huo Mao behind the speaking youth.

“This brother seemed not very familiar to me, is this your friend?” The golden-haired youth looked at Xiao Ming tenderly, throwing out the question in a seemingly casual way.

Hearing this Stone Bai cast Xiao Ming a cursory glance. The latter was still pale but gave a slight nod after some thoughts.

“This is my friend, Xiao Ming.” Stone Bai made the introduction with a smile.

“So you are brother Xiao! I met you the day you entered our sect, do you remember? You left a great impression on me, with your graceful manners. Really a talented disciple. And you surprised me more with your previous performance. You must be a born magician! Plus you have a good sense of using fire. I bet you will enjoy a great position in our sect once your performance has been reported to our elders.” Qu Kun finally managed to insert himself into the conversation, with ingratiating smiles.

The golden-haired youth frowned, and his face fell. Again, before he could open his mouth, Qu Kun offered a delicate white bottle to Xiao Ming, persuading with a crooked smile, “After using your ability so freely, brother Xiao must have been exhausted, and your energy quite weakened. Take this Spirit-Strengthening Pill, I happen to be carrying with me, it can supply you with spirit power. It’s not that great of a gift, but just take it.” Before Xiao Ming could reply, Qu Kun’s hands had already reached him, offering the jade bottle.

The golden-haired youth’s expression changed. The Spirit-Strengthening Pill cost, at least, a million silver, so Qu Kun was really determined to get Xiao Ming into his gang. On the other hand, Xiao Ming was quite taken aback. He did not

take the pill but was wavering. He gave Stone Bai a puzzled look, seeking help from him.

“Hehe, you Blood Dragons are really loaded with money! But I heard that when brother Xiao entered our sect, brother Qu somehow managed to get a Black Fire token from him. Is this true, brother Xiao?” The golden-haired youth sneered, hitting on an obvious sore spot.

Hearing this, the disciples near him all recalled their bitter experiences on the first day. Though not courageous enough to challenge Qu Kun, they now wore indignant looks on their face, cursing Qu Kun secretly in their hearts.

Xiao Ming’s look became hesitant, too. Seeing this, Qu Kun felt the situation growing rather difficult. His brows tightly knit, he slowly took back his arm.

“Brother Xiao, let’s be frank, my name is Jin Huan[1], and I am a member of the Holy[B] Spirit Association. We have several talented magicians like yourself, so do you want to join us and share experiences with them? Though I’m not a magician myself, we have many people who could help you in our association.” The golden-haired youth said earnestly, showing his mastery of persuasion. He paused and turned to Stone Bai, “Of course, a brilliant warrior like brother Bai is also most welcome in our group,” he added.

Shi Mu stood silently beside them, listening to the conversation from the beginning. For these past two months, the name of the Holy Spirit Association had reached his ears several times. He now knew that it was a rather powerful group in the Black Demon Sect, with many strong Houtian Warriors, and that they were also looking for magicians to join them. Last but not least, the Holy Spirit Association and the Blood Dragons were antagonistic to each other, usually having quarrels for prospective members.

Notes:

[1] Jin Huan: Jin is the family name, meaning gold. Huan means “bright” in Chinese.

[A] - If you have a problem with my word uses feel free to say it to MY FACE. Well… I mean my internet face… If you come up to me in person and talk to me about my word choices, I will look at you quite strangely. (Note: Whence == from what place or source.)[C]

[B] - Note, I am leaving this as is, even though it probably should be heavenly.

[C] - All comments with a letter are made by EliteCreature. :P

{D} - Unlisted note: I am thinking about changing the name ‘magician’ to ‘adept’. What do you guys think?

Chapter 67 - Refused

“Brother Xiao, we, the Blood Dragons, also have two adepts [A], whom you can work with to increase your skills! Plus, any Adept in our group gets a free monthly ration of pills, and this Spirit-Strengthening Pill is one of them.” Seeing that Xiao Ming was somehow moved by Jin Huan’s persuasion, Qu Kun hurriedly threw in a more tantalizing bonus.

[tl: [A] - I am changing magician to Adept. (Yes, capitalized. That way it stands out more.) Magician is TOO western sounding to me. I will go back and change all the previous chapters soon.]

“Brother Xiao, this monthly ration of free pills is nothing, I didn’t mention it because I consider it a trifling gift. It would be shameful to go around talking about it! Who would do such a thing to a really talented brother? We have a better offer: a manuscript by a Spirit-Grade Adept from many years ago, telling us about his practice and skills. It is sure to be more helpful than a few pills. As long as you join us then you can, at any time, just come and read the script. You wouldn’t believe the progress you can make after reading it just once!” Jin Huan continued to speak with eloquence, his eyes radiating with pride.

The sight of two major associations fighting over Xiao Ming made the other disciples jealous. However, Stone Bai stood beside his friend with a genuine smile. He truly felt happy for his talented friend, forgetting that he had been the hero of this match.

“A manuscript by a Spirit-Grade Adept!” Xiao Ming was elated, turning his head, he sought support from his friend Stone Bai, who silently gave him an encouraging smile.

This exasperated Qu Kun, but before he could say anything, Xiao Ming's spoke with an unwavering voice, "Since senior Jin has invited me so earnestly, I shall not turn down his goodwill. Would senior Jin receive me as a member of his honorable Holy Spirit Association?"

The golden-haired youth was overjoyed to hear so, "A most sensible decision! You won't regret it! May I ask if brother Bai would also think of joining us?" Jin Huan laughed delightedly, trying his luck if he could get one more promising guy into his gang today.

"Since my good friend brother Xiao has joined your respectful group, I shall follow him gladly." Stone Bai replied with a bright smile.

The golden-haired youth thought he had got the first prize today.

Qu Kun was now in a most awkward situation, losing face in front of so many junior disciples, most of whom had been bullied by him. He would have trembled with fury had it not been for the large crowd watching. The last thing that he wanted was to be laughed at. Suppressing his anger, he caught a glimpse of Blue Phoenix talking with another girl, and his eyes brightened a bit. He did not believe that he would fail twice in one day. Raising his eyebrows, he managed to put on a face filled with interest as he walked up to Blue Phoenix, "Miss Blue, I haven't seen you in ages! How did you manage that breath-taking performance? I must say I am really quite impressed with your excellent bloodline."

"Your flatter me, senior Qu," Blue Phoenix turned her head and smiled charmingly.

"Miss Blue is a real elite, and must rank at the top of the new disciples. By the way, have you considered my offer? Would you like to join our Blood Dragon?"

Qu Kun pursued his topic.

“Well,that...” Blue Phoenix rolled her eyeballs, giving a vague answer as if she still had not made up her mind.

“Miss Blue, I’ve got a piece of advice for you. The new disciples won’t differ much in strength, so if you got help from someone more experienced, you would progress much faster. Practicing all by yourself won’t get you far.” Qu Kun said in a serious tone.

Blue Phoenix’s beautiful eyes blinked. Casting a sidelong glance at Stone Bai and Xiao Ming, she sank deep into thought. Finally, after several minutes, she nodded her head gently and said, “Since senior Qu has invited me twice, turning down such a genuine offer would be disrespectful.”

“Awesome! Sister Blue, it must be a really lucky day. The leader of our Blood Dragon happens to be in the valley today, let’s go meet him. Our leader is a heroic and generous one, he would be delighted to have you, a talented bloodline warrior, join our group!” Qu Kun made the invitation in a joyful manner.

Blue Phoenix did not hesitate this time, and, after a few words with the girl she had been talking with, she turned to follow Qu Kun into the valley.

Seeing Qu Kun’s figure moving in the distance, Jin Huan snorted with contempt, then turned to continue his conversation with Stone Bai and Xiao Ming.

As there was not much left to see, the other disciples around the ring felt

bored and left with despondent hearts, bemoaning their lost chance. Shi Mu also intended to leave and he bid goodbye to Stone Bai and Xiao Ming. But something crossed Stone Bai's mind, and his eyes shone with excitement at the thought. "Wait a sec, brother Shi!" He stopped Shi Mu and turned to whisper something into the golden-haired youth's ears. Then the golden-haired youth heard the information and his eyes glimmered.

"So I believe this is brother Shi Mu? I heard from brother Bai that you are also a very promising warrior, moreover, one with a bloodline. Did you counter a punch from that Qu Kun guy? Well done! You are also welcome to join our Holy Spirit Association," the golden-haired youth said generously. [B]

[tl: [B] - There was a line here like "The golden haired youth's hair caught the sunlight and glimmered" and I was like. "WTF, This isn't Twilight!" DELETED.]

Shi Mu was not expecting this. In an instant, many thoughts flashed through his mind as he tried to make a decision. At last, he smiled gently, clasped his hands and said, "I am undeserving of this compliment by senior Jin! I was only born with great physical strength and have learned a physical art that made my skin rather tough. That's why I managed to take senior Qu's fist. But actually I've got no talent at all and I don't want to shame your honorable association with my poor strength." This said he gave Jin Huan an apologetic smile.

A trace of suspicion flashed across Jin Huan's face, but he did not get angry at Shi Mu's refusal. Unexpectedly, he nodded approvingly and said, "It is fine that you have your own pursuits. There is nothing wrong with that." The reason he did not persist was self-evident: a low-grade bloodline warrior was not worth his time.

Stone Bai was somehow disappointed, knowing that Shi Mu would not join them, but he was not in the position to refuse. To hide his embarrassment, he

averted his face, taking up a conversation with Jin Huan. Shi Mu was left standing alone, and the sight of the three in a heated conversation pained him, reminding him what a lonely road he had chosen. With a heavy heart, he turned himself around and walked away.

After a few steps, a familiar voice reached him from behind, “Hold on, brother Shi, it’s me.”

Shi Mu turned and saw the craggy-faced Huo Mao approaching him.

“Senior Huo, I never thought you were a part of the Holy Spirit Association.” Shi Mu smiled as he greeted Huo Mao. He was easy to get along with.

“Nothing to brag about, I don’t do much in the group, just a bit of running around.” Huo Mao waved the topic off.

Shi Mu was surprised, but before he made any comment, Huo Mao sighed and continued to speak. He looked around and then spoke in a hushed tone, “Actually, I think you made a wise decision. You just entered so it’s natural you don’t know this, but both the Holy Spirit Association and Blood Dragon are really powerful groups in our sect, without real strength you wouldn’t get anything from them! They’ll just use you as a servant, some may even bully you or push you out. Better to stay clear of the groups and practice by yourself, you will have more freedom to grow that way!“

“Really? You made me feel much better about my choice.” Shi Mu nodded and sighed with relief. Huo Mao had just confirmed his estimation: the reason he refused Jin Huan’s invitation was that, on one hand, his sense of self-respect would not let him accept this condescending help. On the other, it was exactly for fear of being used as a servant in a group full of strong guys. After all,

affected by his waste bloodline, his speed of practicing was severely limited. He could not afford to waste time and energy in groups' struggles, which would only hinder his progress.

"Senior Huo, please excuse me, I've got other errands to run today. We should meet in the future and get something to drink." Having a quick look in the direction of the square, he said with an apologetic tone.

"Hey, aren't you going to buy pills? I was thinking of buying some myself! Plus I've got to do other things in that area. Why not go together?" Huo Mao laughed heartily.

So the two walked to the square, chatting along the way.

"Brother Shi, I haven't asked you where you come from? The price of pills used for practicing the Heavenly Elephant Art are quite expensive! Could it be that brother Shi is from a wealthy family?" Huo Mao finally asked the question that had long made him curious.

Chapter 68 - The Hall of Wealth (with a note from the translator)

Shi Mu could only smile bitterly at this question. He wished he had come from a wealthy family - although he did, to some extent - so that he could have had an inexhaustible supply of all kinds of rare herbs, medicines, and pills. But the harsh reality was that he was now almost out of money and was barely a Houtian Warrior. Thinking of Stone Bai and Blue Phoenix's progress, he felt a considerable pressure bearing on him, making him unable to breathe freely. Plus, it only made the situation worse that the money he got from Auntie Zhen and the Fifth Master was now almost gone [1]. As of right now, more pills were needed to proceed with the Heavenly Elephant Art.

[tl: [1] = facepalm]

Moreover, he had also asked around about the Demon-killing Qi, required for practicing the Strong Ape Art [2]. This Demon-killing Qi could also be bought from the sect's market, but at a price far surpassing that of the Bone-Tempering Pill.

[tl: [2] =This is the literal word-for-word TL of the art from chinese.]

Thinking of this, Shi Mu answered Huo Mao with a forced smile, "How could I have come from some big family? I'm just an average guy, only having entered this sect by pure chance. By the way, I'm running out of money, is there any way disciples can earn it in our sect? Not including the matches and competitions, those are a given." Shi Mu added a practical question eagerly.

Huo Mao threw Shi Mu a surprised look, it was incredible that a Practitioner without a strong financial background, like Shi Mu, would go out of his way to practice a really expensive art! If he had not known Shi Mu beforehand he would

have thought he was a lunatic.

Now that Shi Mu had asked for help, Huo Mao decided to enlighten him. “Well, there is a way. Go to the Hall of Wealth, between the twelfth and the thirteenth mountain, and you will see all kinds of jobs available for both ordinary disciples and laborers. Some of the tasks are too much for a laborer, so that’s where you’d outshine them with your great strength. Go and try some.” Huo Mao encouraged generously.

“Really? I never thought there could be such a good place in our sect!” Shi Mu seemed to have heard the sound of silver coins happily rolling on the ground.

“Brother Shi must have been training himself too hard. You should hang out with some of the others, everyone in our sect knows of this place.” Huo Mao gave a sudden bellow of laughter.

“I think I should. Information is very important.” Shi Mu regretted in his heart and made a decision to try to become friends with other alert and informative guys.

The two enjoyed an easy trip to the blue-stone square and then went their separate ways.

Shi Mu used up all his remaining silver to buy the Bone-Tempering and Blood-Strengthening Pills before he left the valley and went straight to the twelfth mountain. He arrived at a magnificent two-story hall between the two mountains. It was high noon and the sun was baking the land with its harsh light, which made the hall glow with a faint luster. The immense gate was wide open, and black-robed disciples were coming and going.

A name was written in bold, vigorous strokes on the board hung above the gate, and said, The Hall of Wealth.

Shi Mu narrowed his eyes, catching a glimpse of the auspicious board, then strode into the hall. As soon as he passed the gate, a cool breeze caressed his face, and in front of him was a passageway, which was lined with torches positioned every three meters. The wavering torch fire illuminated the passageway, and some noise could be heard faintly from the other end.

After about a hundred meters there was a turn in the passageway. Shi Mu followed it and suddenly his eyes were almost blinded by strong lights.

He had made it to a huge, spacious hall, over a hundred meters in length and two hundred meters in width. The same torches dotted the walls, flooding the hall with light. Some ten-odd boards were set up in the middle of the hall, around which over a hundred disciples were scattered. The faint noise he had heard earlier were their exclamations, murmurs, footsteps, and discussions.

There were lines of blue and black characters written on the boards, with the black ones prevailing in number, the blues one being quite rare. Now and then, several black-robed laborers would walk up from the rear part of the hall, writing on the screens with either a blue or black brush.

Apart from this, some other laborers would have an uncolored brush in their hands, sweeping softly on some of the characters, which would disappear immediately.

Shi Mu chose a remote corner and started to observe the scene with amusement.

Right this moment, a black-robed laborer had just cleared a line of characters on a board and covered the spot with a new line of black characters. As soon as this was done, the laborer was surrounded by four primary disciples, one of them even reading the line out and shaking his head. Then, before the servant boy put away his brush, a primary disciple, whose left cheek had a birth mark on it, approached him with an eager look. The two were soon engaged in a conversation, and, after a few words, the laborer nodded his head, took out a nigh-black token from his shirt, and passed it to the birthmark guy, who excitedly tugged the token into his sleeve and left immediately. After he left, the servant boy took out a red brush and swept it across the previous black characters. A bright red mark instantly emerged above the black characters.

By now, Shi Mu had discovered that it was mostly black characters that had red marks, and the blue characters were barely marked. Besides, a line of characters would only be marked once; the exceptional case was rare.

Shi Mu believed he had managed to understand how the system worked. With a trace of confidence in his eyes, he moved his feet resolutely to the nearest board, where the first line of black characters immediately drew his eyes. It said, “Three Holy-wind Grass leaves wanted. Reward: three thousand silver. Time limit: three months.”

Though Shi Mu knew not what did a Holy-wind grass looked like, the high reward made his eyes shine hungrily. Moving to the next line, he found it was also a task for some herb beyond his knowledge, but the reward was only five hundred silver, with an infinite amount of time.

Soon he finished reading the entire board and started on the next.

A quarter of an hour later, he had read all the lines on all the boards. Letting out a relieved sigh, he slowly calmed down himself: he was just too shocked.

Most of the tasks were meant for pill-making or charm-making Adepts, for whom the reward was richer. Even one of the most common Adepts could take a task, like making a field of holy plants mature, and he would be paid several thousand silver. As for some more complex tasks for higher level Adepts, the reward was paid by holy stones most of the time! Even a holy stone of the lowest level could easily exchange for two to three million silver, and some holy stones were so rare that you wouldn't come across them in the market. Although holy stones cannot help a warrior's training, they are priceless to Adepts. They can absorb heavenly energy in them, and some stones are indispensable for making a magic formula.

Shi Mu had now grown extremely envious of Adepts. If he were an Adept, then he would not be standing here with a headache, worrying about making money so he could buy the requisite pills.

The thought that Xiao Ming was an Adept struck him. His heart pounded excitedly: What if he could be an Adept?! After all, who knows, you could have the talent to be an Adept and not even know it.

Chapter 69 - Shi Mu as a Blacksmith

Shi Mu allowed himself to wallow in delusions of grandeur of being a rich Adept, then cleared his mind of that wishful thinking. The talent needed for one to become an Adept is so rare that his chances are slim to none. At the moment, he needed to focus on finding a relatively easy task to complete. Also, the reward should be paid as soon as possible.

Missions for warriors were usually concerned with collecting rare herbs or minerals, or asking some disciples who had practiced some special arts for help, and some were even seeking help from the secular world to help solve some problems. Shi Mu marveled at the variety of missions. There were many strange tasks that he never had thought of before. The rewards ranged from several hundred silver to several thousand silver.

It was disappointing that the gap between an Adept's wage and a warrior's wage was so large. Shi Mu could not help but feel discouraged. A few missions, written in blue characters, did have good pay, sometimes even rewarding Black Fire Tokens, which were hard to obtain - but the tasks were more difficult, always requiring a group to complete.

So Shi Mu jumped to the conclusion that, currently, he could barely make a profit from doing the tasks.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw some black characters on another screen that seemed perfect for him, "A physically strong Houtian warrior needed to forge two hundred lumps of refined iron, each rewarding ninety silver!"

Even before Shi Mu had become a Houtian Warrior, he was able to lift over

500kg. Now that he had made it to the first grade of the Heavenly Elephant Art, his strength had increased by thirty percent, and he could push it even further by using his Qi of the Heavenly Elephant. So this mission was an easy case with an acceptable reward.

Despite several red marks on this line, showing that someone had already taken the mission before Shi Mu, he was not discouraged, after all, the mission didn't specify a limit of mission-takers.

Shi Mu waved resolutely towards the counter in the hall and a black-robed servant boy emerged and hurried over.

A short time later, Shi Mu was staring fondly at a black colored iron token in his hand. A fireball was imprinted on its back and it had the number thirty-three on the front. Smiling, he walked out of the hall.

The sun was at its zenith and was bathing the valley in intense light, roasting its residents, including three muscular young men in the smithy of the Zhao Clan. The fire of stove was raging, making the smithy so hot that the three burly youths had to cool themselves off outside the room.

"Brother Lin, I'm sure we can forge a hundred pieces today!" The largest of the three spoke with a big smile.

"Yeah, we can forge fifty more this afternoon and get nine thousand silver, so we each will have about three thousand silver!" A young man, with a big mole near his lip, spoke, looking over his shoulder at the forged pieces they had worked on earlier and smiled contentedly.

Three thousand silver is a humble sum compared with the many thousands offered by those difficult missions, but think of the time and energy those missions would take! Maybe more than one day, maybe even half a month! So the three were very satisfied with three thousand a day - quite an amazing number.

“It is not an easy mission for ordinary people, and if we were not so talented or having practiced with pills from childhood, we wouldn’t have the strength to do this.” A young man with dark skin kneaded his sore arms and said proudly.

“But it’s so exhausting, and we have to rest a few days after all the two hundred pieces.”

The young man, with dark skin, got nods of agreement from his comrades. They were aching all over, having suffered a lot to forge this refined iron. Each piece needed nearly three hundred strikes of a hammer weighing more than 100kg. Their sweat came off their bodies like rain, and they had to rest every now and then before they could go on and complete another piece.

The three young men were all new disciples of the Black Demon Sect, and were practicing arts concerning body-strengthening, so they had been quite familiar with each other before they took the mission together this morning and hurried here.

“Hey, we have a competitor now!” suddenly the young man with dark skin frowned and said in a hushed tone. The others’ eyes looked in the direction indicated by him. As he had said, the boss of the smithy, Zhao Ping, was leading a strong and tall disciple here, a smile on his face.

“Humph! He will soon find it is too hard for him and quit, and even if he is able

to forge, how can he compete with the three of us? Let's forge more quickly!" The mole guy snorted.

After these words, he got up to his feet and walked in to continue his work, followed by his companions. Their feelings of camaraderie had increased. Soon the sounds of forging resounded through the smithy again.

Meanwhile, the boss, who had a slightly fat figure, stopped in front of the door and said to the tall young man behind him: "Brother Shi, when you are done, put the refined iron chunks, that you have forged, in the tray behind you, and I will check them. Each qualifying piece is worth ninety silver, which I will give you right after I finish checking the pieces. Then I shall take care of your mission token, sending it back to the Hall of Wealth."

The strong and tall disciple was Shi Mu.

"Thank You senior Zhao!" Shi Mu nodded and replied respectfully. Without delay, he strode into the smithy.

As Shi Me came in, he felt hot air blowing out from an extremely tall stove, and five shirtless men were working around it.

There was an iron platform near the stove, six meters long, three meters wide, and half a meter thick. At the moment, the three burly youth were clustered around it, their sweat running down like streams as they hammered down on the red iron with huge hammers.

Though busy with their work, the three shirtless youth still managed to quickly glower at Shi Mu. However, their looks did nothing. Shi Mu was not the type that

would be troubled by enmity from a competitor. It was the fifty pieces of refined iron behind the three angry men that interested him more. He secretly marveled at his competitor's working speed. He hadn't thought that a quarter of the two hundred pieces ,required by the mission, had already been completed in half a day.

He glanced around and found two hammers, exactly like the ones the glaring young men were using, and, without taking his shirt off, he picked one up. The way he waved it made the hammer seem as light as a twig.

Shi Mu smiled happily to himself.

Senior Zhao, the boss of the smithy, had a small smile on his face. He felt quite pleased. The more strong guys he had, working on the iron, the faster it would be forged. With the previous three guys, the task wouldn't be done until tomorrow but, now that Shi Mu had joined, the task might even be finished today.

The hammer weighed 100kg, which meant one had to have 250kg of strength to lift it! But Shi Mu didn't even use his real Qi and lifted it with ease.

At the same time, one of the shirtless men, near the stove, grabbed a piece of refined iron, with a pair of large tongs, and put it on the iron platform. Shi Mu snatched the chance to step forward, then fiercely slammed the hammer down with all his strength.

A deafening sound rang out as he hammered down, and sparks showered all over the place, with the iron piece visibly bending under his power.

The three youth, on the other side, all wore looks of shock at the sight, forgetting their own work.

“That guy is incredible!”

It would have taken them three strikes to bend the same piece!

The boss, senior Zhao, was very excited. The strength of Shi Mu was a very good thing, as the mission had a very short deadline. Before with only the three men to help him, the task would not have been finished until tomorrow, but now Shi Mu presence meant that the mission would be finished much faster.

Chapter 70 - An Invitation from the Li Fire Group

Ignoring the murderous looks cast from those angry young men, Shi Mu began to wield his large hammer with ease, forging an iron piece, which was now bright red, under his repetitive strikes. Each strike would produce an ear-deafening noise that would make the angry group's eyes more and more murderous. But Shi Mu's eyes were so focused on the iron that he didn't even notice the angry looks. His hammer fell on the iron lump like heavy raindrops pounding the ground.

The angry young men stood watching this hammer demon, equally marveling and cursing at his demonic strength that made a 100kg hammer look like a feather in his hand. Even more astounding was that blue veins were protruded from his arms, which meant that he was hammering purely by his physical strength. He was not using any of his real Qi.

Finally, after over one hundred strikes, the iron piece was now refined, with the impure matter burned out. The piece had shrunk by ten percent. The red color had faded from its surface, revealing a dark black sheen.

Seeing this, the large shirtless man, standing nearby, swallowed his saliva and stepped up to the working table, awe-stricken. He was a helper at the blacksmith, and after this iron piece was done, he removed it from the working table with a pair of tongs, putting it behind him.

Shi Mu gestured to another large shirtless man and, after hesitating for a second, the man grabbed another piece of iron, with a pair of tongs, and set it in front of him. Shi Mu carried on with his forging.

Seeing that Shi Mu had forged one piece in so short a time, the angry group

could only gape at each other with restless expression. However, the boss, Zhao, could not be more satisfied. He watched Shi Mu's movements with a full smile on his face.

When Shi Mu had forged four pieces and went on to the fifth, without any traces of fatigue in his bearing, the angry young men were already tired and sweating like raindrops. They had each finished a piece, and their bodies were crying for rest, but they ignored their muscles, only glowering at Shi Mu and gritting their teeth to continue the work, with the help of their real Qi.

When the three could not hold on any longer, and thus went to rest, Shi Mu was still forging. Now he was on his twelfth piece. He grinned to himself, happy that he had earned nearly one thousand silver in less than an hour. But the three competitors, having turned pale and started to gasp for breath, were now staring at Shi Mu, who was still forging like a tireless machine. The three finally lost their confidence in this hopeless competition. But the large shirtless men - Boss Zhao's employees - were excited to have such a strong person as their helper, and were even gambling on how many more pieces Shi Mu could forge before he took a rest. Someone guessed ten pieces, someone fifteen, and the boldest one even guessed thirty.

Sometime in the past, Boss Zhao had moved several meters closer to the forging platform, staring at Shi Mu's movements with a serious look.

But Shi Mu had not noticed what was happening around, only focusing his attention on the red iron in front of him. Forging iron was no easy work, and it also required skills. Only by focusing one's attention and keep a proper pace could one carry on the work with efficiency.

When his 102nd piece was finished, Shi Mu found the smithy had already been closed, all the required pieces had been completed.

Shi Mu raised his head, only to find the three youths sitting paralyzed in a corner, staring at him blankly. And the large shirtless men of the blacksmith were also staring at him, in the way one would stare at a monster.

He did not know why they were looking at him like that, but he was glad to see the boss of the blacksmith around, who was now wearing a terribly excited look. Immediately he stepped towards Shi Mu with the world's happiest smile. Shi Mu felt awkward at the attention, stroking his head, "Brother Zhao, it seems the mission has been completed, so what is about the pay...."

"Oh, Brother Shi, you have really helped a lot today! This is your nine-thousand two-hundred silver notes." Boss Zhao quickly took out nine notes of one thousand silver and two notes of one hundred silver which he had already prepared beforehand.

Shi Mu hurriedly fumbled in his pocket for the change, and boss Zhao eagerly gestured to make him stop, "Forget about the change, you keep it!"

"This one thanks Brother Zhao!" Shi Mu was a little amazed and his eyes blinked, then he received the silver notes without further declining words.

"Though it's the first time we've met, I feel quite at ease with you. I have seen that you forged more than one hundred pieces of refined iron without using your real Qi, which is much more than what ordinary disciples can do. Maybe you are quite talented and strong in blood and body! May I invite you to join our Li Fire Group? There are many people in our group practicing body-strengthening arts, and many free pills are provided every month. Besides, we share several arts of

Houtian level, which will definitely help you achieve great fame in next year's competition." Seeing that Shi Mu was leaving, boss Zhao spoke a lot in a short time to draw him back.

"So brother Zhao is a member of the Li Fire group?" Shi Mu was slightly surprised.

"That's right. And we Li Fire Group was quite strict with prospective members compared with the Holy Spirit and the Blood Dragon guys. Plus, we provide more resources. Would Brother Shi please think about it. You know, one can not progress quickly on his own in our sect. It is almost impossible." Boss Zhao spoke to Shi Mu fervently, using all of his ability to try to persuade him to join the Li Fire group.

The three youth's eyes were almost burning with envy, and their bodies were itching with desire when they heard such words. As they saw Shi Mu stand there, with an indifferent face, they almost wished to make the decision for Shi Mu.

The Li Fire Group was the like sacred ground of disciples, like themselves, who aspired for body-strengthening arts as well as the support of a powerful group. They had been here with the aim of earning money, as well as getting close to Zhao Ping when they knew that the blacksmith belonged to him, intending to try and get the chance to join the Li Fire Group.

Shi Mu, however, did not take up the offer as they had believed he would. Unexpectedly, he sank deep into thought. The offer was something he was actually interested in as the body-strengthening arts of the Houtian level would increase his chances of winning in next year's competition.

As he had chosen two arts for cultivation, Shi Mu was desperately looking for

some techniques of Houtian level, to strengthen himself. And the desire for techniques had been burning in him after seeing the match between Stone Bai and Blue Phoenix. The competition, that would occur in one year, was very significant in deciding if he would gain a foothold in this sect. He could not afford to lose it.

"Brother Zhao you flatter me! All I have is a strong body and I practice arts that strengthen my body, so it seems that I am stronger than others. But, actually, I'm really a nobody, and I don't deserve your earnest invitation. I'm afraid I have to let you down, brother Zhao." Shi Mu kept silent for a while before he finally smiled apologetically and declined the offer gently.

Though Shi Mu was really tempted by Zhao Ping's invitation, he knew, clearly, that there was no such thing as a free lunch, and the advice of Huo Mao had also warned him of the dangers of joining groups in the sect, so he finally refused after some internal struggles.

The three youth could not believe their ears, all looking at him with eyes wide open, wondering if Shi Mu was sane. But, at least, their anger was appeased now.

Zhao Ping intended to speak more, but he dropped the idea as he saw the firm look on Shi Mu's face. Shaking his head, with sadness, he said no more.

Though Shi Mu regretted refusing Zhao Ping, he did not hesitate to walk out of the smithy. For now, the only thing he wanted to do was to hurry back to his small stone house and take a bath. Sweat had made his shirt plaster to his skin, which was quite uncomfortable. So he bid goodbye to Zhao Ping and went on his way, with a pocket full of money.

Chapter 71 - The Hall of Magic

The sun was disappearing over the horizon and, with twenty thousand silver in his pocket, Shi Mu stepped out of the smithy and began to head back to his house. It was a rather successful day, earning such a large sum of money by doing such an easy job. He began to wonder if he would come across such a good opportunity again.

As he was walking around a cliff, a large building entered his sight, it had a spire reaching into the sky and it was covered with grey tiles. The valley was home to a large number of various buildings, so he had not seen it when he went to the blacksmith's forge. Now, given his slower pace and open mind, he saw it looming at one corner of the valley, with a huge board hung above its gate, saying "The Hall of Magic". A few dozen disciples were standing in front of the gate, looking eagerly into the hall, but no one really entered it. This aroused Shi Mu's curiosity, making him slow down his pace.

Right at this moment, a gust of wind rolled out of the hall and blowing sand blurred the vision of those there. The force of the gale pushed the crowd back several steps.

A black figure flashed past the crowd, flung against the gate by the forcible wind, making a dull thud as it fell onto the ground.

Shi Mu was out of the gale's range when he neared the building, so he was lucky to not have been involved. He stared hard at the black figure, which turned out to be a young man with dark skin, looking close to Shi Mu's age, but he was tightly tied up by blueish-green branches like a zongzi [1]. Only his head and feet sticking out.

[tl: [1] = (It's like a rice ball wrapped in leaves) I don't really know how to put this into other words (without changing this entirely, so instead I give you an internet link! https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zongzi]

Having been flung out of the hall, he was, apparently, badly injured. Rolling over on the ground, he groaned, his face twisted in pain, unable to rise from the ground.

"Brother Yue!"

Two young men, who seemed to be the hapless youth's acquaintances, rushed out of the crowd, but stopped short of his body, remaining some distance from the hall with their eyes looking timidly in.

"How dare you waste my time with your lack of talent!" An old, irritated voice came out of the door. The speaker seemed rather annoyed.

The dark youth struggled several times to get back to his feet but failed. Finally, with his two acquaintance's help, he rid himself of the branches. With a flushed face, he looked into the gate and protested, "That's not true! I've asked some specialists to check to see if I have what it takes, and they said that I had the talent to be an Adept. Moreover, I've already begun learning the basics!" The youth's face was blushing, he objected over his wounded pride.

"Humph! Some 'specialists'? Don't you dare compare them to me! Everyone knows the cost to train an Adept is ten times that to cultivate a Warrior to the same level. Do you think I'd waste countless resources on you, an Adept that can only sense one basic element? The weakest of those that I train can make the crystal shine with a Grade Three brightness!" The voice grew even more impatient.

The youth with dark skin was deeply humiliated by such a remark. With an embarrassed face, he quickly walked away with his two companions.

“Whoever wants to test their talent better come with a sober mind! If you waste my time I won’t go easy on you! I’ve got better ways to wake you up. “ The voice resounded again, this time with a tinge of viscousness, followed by a dead silence in the hall.

The crowd sank into a quiet shock. After some time, they began to whisper to each other solemnly. Shi Mu finally understood, by overhearing some snatches of different conversations, that this ‘Hall of Magic’ was the place to test if you were born with the talent to become an Adept, therefore increasing your position in the sect. But this was no free service. Anyone dreaming of becoming an Adept needed to pay the test fee of three thousand silver. Moreover, the examiner was an old, queer guy, who would humiliate anyone who had no talent.

The discussion, outside of the hall, continued for a while. Though some of the braver guys were eager to test themselves, thinking of the misfortune befalling the previous disciple, they left with discouraged hearts. From then on, no one dared to enter the eerie hall.

Shi Mu had a moment’s hesitation too. But the status of an Adept beckoned him, reminding him of the missions exclusive to Adepts, which had excellent pay. With a touch of his pocket, bulging with silver notes, he steeled his heart and entered the gate.

The crowd was astonished, seeing someone entering the hall after what had happened. Filled with curiosity, they began to talk about Shi Mu’s identity,

putting their heads together and whispering quietly, as if sharing some top secret information.

Shi Mu continued his steady steps into the hall, disregarding the droning noise of people talking about him. A broad corridor, over ten meters in length, led to a spacious, sombre hall, devoid of any decorations. On the left side was laid a vast desk, made of red sandalwood, behind which sat an old man in a grey robe, completely focused on reading a yellow scroll. On the right stood a round stone platform, half a meter high, its surface covered with strange characters. Crystal columns, around a ⅓ of a meter in diameter, surrounded the platform, and though each one had was colored differently, each crystal column was painted with nine check patterns, looking extremely enigmatic.

After having a clear look at the platform and the columns, Shi Mu wore an expression of surprise. The old man behind the vast desk looked up from the scroll after hearing Shi Mu's footsteps. The man was rather small in stature, with sandy hair and triangular eyes. His mouth stuck out and his chin looked like an ape's - an appearance dominated by an unkind expression.

The elder rolled his triangular eyes, scroll in hand, and glanced contemptuously at Shi Mu, without even rising from his seat.

"Another dreamer? ...Name and level." The grey-robed elder snorted coldly, going through the motions as he asked for Shi Mu's basic information.

"My name is Shi Mu, a new disciple. I just entered our sect two months ago", Shi Mu answered with clasped hands.

The grey-robed elder sized up Shi Mu with an insulting look, then snorted, "Haven't you seen what happened earlier? Do you think you have amazing luck

or were you just born with a stupid amount of courage?”

Shi Mu’s color changed, but he took the humiliation without responding.

“I’ve seen enough of you guys, so many that you make me sick. The Hall of Magic is the place where we sift real Adepts out of you useless idlers, not a scenic spot for you to come and explore after buying a ticket. Better save your money and leave with your body still intact.” The elder started at Shi Mu and spoke with hatred.

“Senior, since your humble junior has entered, he must have had made up his mind. Here are three thousand silver notes, please spare some of your valuable time to test him.” Shi Mu took out three silver notes from his pocket and put them, respectfully, on the desk. On his face was a look of firmness and persistence.

This surprised the grey-robed old man. He spent some time observing this strange youth with his old eyes narrowed, but, no matter how hard he examined Shi Mu with his eyes, Shi Mu would still stand their firm and unperturbed.

“Humph, you’ve got guts.” The grey-robed man’s eyes became more focused. A spark of doubt flashed across them. He gave another snort and slowly rose from his chair.

“Come over here and stand on that stone platform.” The elder was now standing near the platform, a jade ruler in his hand. There were colorful characters printed on the ruler, looking somewhat similar to the patterns on the stone platform.

Seeing that his chance had come, Shi Mu cheerfully strode to the platform, as told. Then the grey-robed man began to mutter something to himself. Soon his body began to glow with green light, which was slowly absorbed into the jade ruler in his hand. The characters lit up, and they were flashing too. The grey-robed man waved his arm, soon a colorful light shot from the ruler, which then flew to the stone platform.

A droning noise echoed in the hall, while the patterns, on the round platform, began to glow in various colors. Meanwhile, the air seemed to start shaking with the loud noise.

Shi Mu had no idea what was happening. He was now shrouded by colorful lights. As this was happening, a warmness welled out from the floor beneath his feet, streaming into his body and traveling throughout it, before it returned to the stone platform.

The patterns on the platform now seemed rather dim, but the crystal columns were showing some changes.

One blue column, one red column, and one black column lit up simultaneously. The light seemed to have penetrated the columns from the bottom and begun to fill them. Among them, the blue crystal column was lit with only one check pattern, the red column two, and the black one was shining brightly, with all five check patterns filled!

The grey-robed old man could not be more astounded at the sight.

Chapter 72 - Register for a Adept

As Shi Mu stepped down from the stone platform, the grey-robed old man regained his equanimity. However, Shi Mu did not forget the trace of excitement that had crossed the old man's face earlier. Therefore, he asked in a tentative voice, "Senior, have I passed? I think the test showed that I ranked at, at least, grade three in a sensing ability of some type."

"Well...you may be right." The grey-robed old man gave Shi Mu a measured look with his funny triangular eyes, and his expression again became inscrutable.

"Senior, was there something wrong with my test?" The old man's answer was exhilarating, but his face was ominous. Shi Mu could not help but start to feel queasy.

"Adepts are different from warriors. One's element-sensing ability practically decides his potential. We, of the Big Sects, have this common view that Adepts whose element-sensing ability falls below Grade Three have little hope of entering the Star Grade. So it would be a waste of resources to train them. The threshold is Grade Three. If you pass it, we will see if we want to train you. If one of your elements-sensation ranks higher than Level Five - which means, five checks on the column are lit - you'll have a small chance of entering Moon Grade in your Adept practice. That's theoretically speaking, of course." The old man stopped sizing Shi Mu up, and made the explanation, after some thought.

Hearing this long story, Shi Mu involuntarily cast a hopeful look at the black column he had lit, his heart leaping up.

The old man noticed Shi Mu's excitement. Nodding his head, he seemed to be

both feeling sorry for and marveling at Shi Mu's potential. Speaking slowly, he went on with his explanation, "I wish you had made one more column light up with five checks, apart from the black and white ones. If so, our sect would treasure you tremendously. I have to admit that the black crystal column you have lit stands for a spatial sensing, which is exceedingly rare amongst all the sects, next to the temporal sensing. Throughout the history of our sect, no one has ever inspired spatial sensing, so we barely have any arts for this element. It is most closely related to the arts of spirit Adepts and formula Adepts. But, of course, an unfitting art won't get you far. It's almost impossible for you to be an Adept of high level. Have I made myself clear?"

The old man's words made Shi Mu bitterly disappointed. But, after thinking for a second, he cleared his mind of misgivings. After all, Shi Mu had entered the hall without much hope, therefore, even if he could only become an Adept of the lowest level, it was still a big gain. If memory did not fail him, many tasks, with good offers at the Hall of Wealth, were available to Scholars [1]. Thinking this, Shi Mu became too excited to wait.

[tl: [1] = Adept rankings: Scholar (not considered a full-fledged Adept yet), Spirit Adept, Star Adept, Moon Adept]

"Could I ask if I am eligible to become a Scholar? " Shi Mu asked worriedly, seeing that the blue column and the red column both failed to shine with more than three checks.

"Absolutely!" The grey-robed old man answered without hesitation.

"So can I choose to become a formula Adept?" The positive answer from the old man made Shi Mu incredibly excited. He could not keep himself from asking the question that concerned him most.

“You don’t have any other choices but to become a formula Adept or spirit Adept?” The old man rolled his eyes impatiently.

His words, though somewhat harsh, were music to Shi Mu’s ears. Now all he could think of was the lucrative tasks at the Hall of Wealth.

“This is not the real Spirit Hall, where one registers to become an Adept. Come with me!” The old man had seen too many who would forget how to walk on their feet the moment they heard they could be an Adept. Leaving Shi Mu in his daydream, the old man walked further into the room and gently touched an ordinary looking wall. Then a faint sound came from the wall, as a panel receded, leaving a doorway the size of an adult man.

Shi Mu hurriedly follow the old man, marveling at the intricacy of the hidden door mechanism as he went.

The passageway, inside the secret gate, was not a long one. Soon the two of them reached a small room. There was not much in the way of decoration in the room, except for a huge round design printed on the center of the floor, surrounded by silver patterns and strange characters.

“Come on in, what’s holding you up?” The old man was already standing at the center of the circular design on the floor, and seeing that Shi Mu was still looking around with mouth wide open, he spoke impatiently.

Shi Mu woke from his reverie and quickly walked in. Then the old man took out a yellow paper charm and flicked his wrist. The charm caught on fire quickly and left the old man’s hand, turning into a yellow ball of light that was enveloped by a strange energy. The light ball quickly moved to the floor and merged into the

intrinsic design.

The air was filled with a droning noise, as energy vibrated invisibly. The silver patterns and characters seemed to come alive began to light up and swirl. White smoke rose up from the floor and rolled into the air. Shi Mu and the old man disappeared from the room.

Shi Mu felt a familiar dizziness. Before he knew it, he found himself in an underground hall, which was made of some blue wood he had never seen before. The floor space of it was small but, due to the emptiness of the hall, it seemed rather spacious and grand. The ceiling was decorated with several luminous pearls, the size of a fist, illuminating the whole space. A wall of magnificent blue jade stood at the center of the hall, and a huge bronze incense burner, shaped like some animal's head, was in front of it. A thick purple candle was inside the burner, it was not burning now but, obviously, had been used before.

After a quick survey of the hall, Shi Mu's eyes were finally fixed on the huge jade wall. Over a hundred marks were printed on the wall: The top two were light red star-shaped marks. The next eight marks were green and shaped like clouds. The rest of the marks were white dots. All the marks were glowing mysteriously, reminding him of what he had learned from Huo Mao the day they drank at the Fragrant River Tavern. Huo Mao mentioned that there were, altogether, ten official Adepts in the Black Demon Sect, and some hundred unofficial Adeps at the Scholar level. This seemed to be an explanation to the marks.

"Keep your mouth shut and don't look all around!" The grey-robed old man suddenly reproached with a solemn face.

Shi Mu was startled, and thus meekly stood behind him, not daring to make a sound. The atmosphere grew rather strained in the hall, which seemed to satisfy

the old man tremendously. He nodded and walked up to the burner, waving his hand gently above it.

The candle caught fire immediately, a visible wisp of smoke curling up from it.

The old man quickly bowed to the air in the most respectful manner.

After some time, a red light came out from the first red star mark on the wall, and something faintly visible swirled above the burner for a while before fully revealing itself. Shi Mu stared hard at the vague silhouette, which turned out to be a middle-aged man with a long black beard.

“Master Xie!” The grey-robed old man bowed to the silhouette, his head bent humbly.

Chapter 73 - An Adept Practitioner

“Have you found some talented disciples in our sect again?” The middle-aged man called “Master Xie” threw Shi Mu a cold look and asked coldly. He had a graceful air about him, like a Confucian scholar. Shi Mu stood behind the grey-robed old man respectfully, not daring to raise his head.

The grey-robed old man did not dare to neglect the question and immediately told him that Shi Mu had passed the test of element-sensing by proving to have five marks in spatial-sensing, as well as two marks in fire-sensing and one mark in water-sensing.

“Oh, five marks in spatial-sensing?” The ‘Confucian scholar’ stroked his long beard, his eyes tightened as he pondered this. With some excitement, he looked at Shi Mu again, this time, more carefully.

Shi Mu got tense and lowered his head to avoid looking into the man’s eyes. But long-bearded man’s gaze seemed to be able to penetrate his body.

“What is your name?” After a while, the long-bearded man spoke again.

“My name is Shi Mu, Master Xie.” Shi Mu replied reverently.

“A sensing ability rated at five marks is quite rare, but it is a pity that we have never had an Adept with five marks in spatial-sensing in our sect. It may be a bit difficult to teach you... “ The man with long beard nodded slightly and fell into deep thought.

Shi Mu felt somewhat apprehensive as he heard such words.

“Well, I can give you two choices. One, you can get one more ration of resources as an ordinary Adept disciple, according to our sect’s regulation. Apart from this, you will get no preferential treatment.” After pondering for a while the long-bearded man said.

Shi Mu expression shifted, but he kept quiet and waited for the second choice.

“The other is, you must sign a magic contract, promising to stay forever in the Black Demon Sect, which means you will never live freely. Meanwhile, I will instruct you as your personal tutor. And our sect will supply you with several times more resources than ordinary Adepts. If you are talented enough in magic, I will consider making you my successor in the future.” The long-bearded man went on to say so.

The grey-robed old man was dumbstruck after hearing such a generous offer. He looked fervently at Shi Mu, waiting for his answer.

“I would like to choose the first one if the second one forbids me to leave our sect.” Shi Mu rapidly answered after a moment’s thought.

No matter how tempting the second offer seemed, Mu would not willingly choose to sacrifice his freedom and be bonded to the Black Demon Sect for the rest of his life. What is the use of having great power but lacking the freedom with which to employ it?

The long-beard man only blinked his eyes, not even changing his look. Nodding briefly, he lifted his hand towards the stone wall and a cloud of white gas

emerged from the wall and formed into a round jade ornament as big as a hand flying towards Shi Mu.

“Drip one drop of your blood on it.” The long-beard man said.

Shi Mu hesitated for a moment when he heard his words, but he soon cut one of his fingers to drip one drop of blood on the jade ornament obediently. This done, the long-beard man pointed to the ornament and a beam of white light was shot from his finger immediately into it.

The jade ornament glared with white light, among which some faint blood could be seen flowing into it. Simultaneously some obscure characters moved up and down in the light.

The next moment, a beam of red light leaped from the center of the jade ornament and merged into the green stone wall.

On the bottom of the wall, there were more than a hundred light dots twinkling when a new one appeared.

After the span of a few breaths, the white light in the jade ornament faded and a light dot appeared on the surface of it, shining correspondingly with the new light dot on the wall. Presently two red characters emerged on the surface saying ”Shi Mu”.

On the other side of the jade ornament, there was a pattern of blood, combined with several magic words which looked like a lotus flower in blossom.

“This is the proof of your identity as an Adept of our sect. Keep it safe. For now

you, an Adept Scholar, are formally accepted in our sect.” The long-bearded man took back his hand, turned to Shi Mu and said so.

“Yes, I will.” Shi Mu took hold of the jade ornament and answered respectfully.

The long-beard man nodded and then turned to the grey-robed old man. “Well, I’ll leave the rest to you. Take care of him.” After a few more words, he was ready to leave, a little exhausted. His entire body soon glowed with red light, and, after a moment, similar to the way he had first arrived, his figure disappeared into the star-shaped mark on the green stone wall.

The grey-robed old man hurried to answer him and did not stand to his feet until the middle-aged man had completely disappeared.

“Follow me.” He then looked at Shi Mu coldly and stepped towards a corner of the hall.

Shi Mu stopped studying the round jade ornament in his hand and walked quickly to follow him.

When the old man came to the front of a black wall in the hall, he patted the wall twice and gestured to unleash a beam of white light, which then fell onto the wall.

There was some dark light emerging from the wall and, after some clicking sounds, a door as tall as a person appeared on the black wall. However, there was some green light shining over the doorway, making a shield that blocked their path.

“Your jade ornament is your key to this door. Follow me but you should not touch anything without my permission after you have come in. If you dare to do something secretively, hehe, I’ll let you know the consequences later.” The grey-robed old man laughed grimly. He shook his body once and immediately he disappeared into the green light.

Shi Mu frowned and stepped up to the door, glancing at the jade ornament in his hand, he put it up against the green light shield, which responded by flickering once and separating to two sides.

Shi Mu hurried through the door and found a black path behind it. The grey-robed old man was already standing on the path, waving his hand to Shi Mu and then turned to move further down the path.

After ten minutes they arrived at a stone room of ordinary size. It looked rather plain. There were seven or eight wooden racks, all lined with equipment. Each shelf had several shelves holding many jade slips of different colors and sizes.

Each jade slip was enveloped in a small light shield, glowing with different colors.

“Here is where we store all the Adept arts in our sect, and now that you are a formal Adept Scholar, you can choose one art for free, according to our sect’s rules.” The grey-robed old man said condescendingly.

Shi Mu was quite excited to hear these words and kept nodding, looking over the shelves carefully. But he suddenly remembered the old man’s warning, so he did not dare to act without permission.

“Master, may I ask your name now?” Shi Mu suddenly thought of something

and turned back to ask the old man.

“My name is Sun An, just call me Uncle Sun.” The grey-robed old man answered, this time with a more much amiable air. His voice was now a little more friendly than before. Perhaps it was because Shi Mu had been formally accepted as an Adept Scholar in the sect.

Chapter 74 - The Art of Accumulating Spirit Power

“...Uncle Sun, I’ve got a question I would like to ask you.” Shi Mu hesitated for a moment before he spoke humbly with clasped hands.

“Speak!” Uncle Sun rolled his eyes impatiently.

“I have seen that there are many Adept arts at the General Sutra House. In fact, there are even more there than we have here. I was wondering if there was any difference between them?“ Even though Uncle Sun had a poor temper, Shi Mu still voiced his question.

The grey-robed old man gave Shi Mu a dark look, snorted in contempt, and slowly said, “What a silly question! The Adept arts at the General Sutra House are just ordinary ones that even those good-for-nothing disciples can exchange for with Black Fire tokens. All the big sects have copies of them. But the arts held here actually worthwhile! That’s why they are rare. Only registered Adepts can have access to them. So treasure your opportunity.”

Shi Mu nodded his head earnestly, to show that he had gotten the point.

“Enough of the superfluous words! I’ll release the seal on these arts, choose one of them.” The grey-robed old man urged grumpily, muttering some incantations and then briefly waved one of his arms. Soon the room was illuminated by glaring light, and the jade slips on the shelves also flickered a bit before the gleam finally died down.

This done, the old man retired to a corner of the room, his hands at the back. Looking up at the ceiling, he seemed to be in a trance.

Shi Mu survey the jade slips with his eyes excitedly, his breaths growing quick. Being able to choose an art totally for free was absolutely beyond his expectation. Such a preferential treatment is way better than a warrior's ration! Generally speaking, each art at the General Sutra House costs at least six Black Fire tokens, and according to Uncle Sun's words, the Adept arts held by the Hall of Spirit must be far more valuable than that of the General House's.

Shi Mu took a deep breath to calm down and walked to the nearest shelf to begin hunting for a suitable art.

An hour later, Shi Mu had voraciously browsed through all two hundred of the Adept arts, but his mood was not good: it turned out that most of these arts were just auxiliary skills to help Adepts enhance their power. For example, the skill, that was written in the slip he was holding, bore the grand name of "The Art of True Fire and Magic", but actually, it was a skill to aid in the production of pills and medicines consisting of the element of fire, thus enhancing the medicine's effect. Other slips recorded the method of cultivating some rare herbs, or the concrete details of making a paper charm or formula. He even came across some slips speaking of the way to make magic weapons. But disappointingly, he found almost no arts for Scholars. His meticulous search only ended up with around ten arts for Adepts of the five elements. Only two arts told about the training of the wind, thunder and ice Adepts. As for arts designed for spirit or formula Adept, there was only one called "The Art of Accumulating Spirit Power". Actually, this art was not particularly for these two kinds of Adepts, it was only that it had no special requirement for element sensing. Adepts of all types could choose to practice it.

Shi Mu was unable to get rid of the dispirited look in his eyes. After searching the shelves for some time, he could no longer resist asking the question, "Uncle Sun, among all of these arts, why are there only a few which focus on training magic systematically? Most are just tips and tricks for enhancing one's power."

“What is it with you and the dumb questions? Adept arts are much rarer than warrior arts, and the ones we have here can lead you straight to Star Grade! What more do you want? The training arts kept at the General House are either fragmentary or of an exceedingly low level!” The grey-robed old man was now even more exasperated.

“If so, I can only choose this ‘Art of Accumulating Spirit Power’.“ Picking up a grey slip from the shelf in front of him, Shi Mu spoke in a resigned tone.

“Humph. Don’t you ever look down on this art! Though it’s less powerful than other arts, and its training progress is relatively longer, it’s actually one of the three Adept arts, in our sect, that can lead you to the Moon Grade! If you can’t find other suitable arts, you won’t regret taking it.” The old man gave Shi Mu another scornful look as he spoke.

At first, Shi Mu was surprised, his eyes alight with expectancy, but, upon hearing of its long training process, he became hesitant. The old man narrowed his eyes, seeing Shi Mu’s worry and added, “Though you won’t have a fast training speed,there is an upside to this art. It is quite a stable one, rarely have I heard of Adepts who practiced it and lost their minds or were injured. Therefore, it’s a safe art. You just progress steadily and slowly. After all, your condition is rather special. You’ve got an amazing ability for spatial-sensing, but there is no art that is a good fit for you, except this one. Accept it or leave with empty hands.”

Shi Mu was forced to accept his situation. He reconciled himself to accepting this art with a deep sigh. After all, he would not choose arts focused on the elements of water and fire. He did not excel in these two elements. Thinking this, he handed the grey slip of the Art of Accumulating Spirit Power to Uncle Sun and said, “Senior is right. I’ll choose this art.”

The old man took the grey slip from Shi Mu and then took out a white slip from his other sleeve. Putting the two against his forehead, one after the other, he muttered something to himself. Soon, Uncle Sun had finished copying the content to the white slip, passing it to Shi Mu with an expressionless face, “Here are details of the first five levels, enough for you to reach the level of Spirit Adept. Take it, then go to the Holy Spirit Pavilion to get your rations as a Scholar of our sect.”

Shi Mu was somewhat disappointed that he could only get the first five levels of the art. But after thinking about it for a bit, he realized that was ok. After all, he was barely a beginning Scholar right now! It was too ambitious for him to wish for the entire contents of the art, that led to Moon Grade. “It seems that it will cost a lot of Black Fire tokens to exchange for the latter half of this art.” Shi Mu thought to himself, taking the copy from Uncle Sun with great respect, then he tucked it into his shirt with great care.

The next few minutes were spent listening to Uncle Sun’s words of advice, then he was told to leave. Shi Mu bowed obediently to Uncle Sun and left the Spirit Hall with a heavy heart.

Chapter 75 - Spirit power

As Shi Mu walked out of the Hall of Magic, he was surprised that the crowd, from earlier, was no longer here. He looked around, his eyes stinging from the intense sunlight, and then he left for the Holy Spirit Pavilion, as Uncle Sun had told him to.

It took him only a quarter of an hour to reach the pavilion, a building made from some kind of yellow wood that made it stand out amongst the verdant trees. A board hung above the gate, told him that he had come to the right place.

The door to the pavilion was wide open. No one was around to disturb the tranquility that pervaded the area. There were faint sounds of conversation, coming from further inside. This only adding to the ethereal atmosphere of the building. After looking over the board, again, Shi Mu sighed assuredly, containing his excitement, then stepped into the main hall.

The next moment, a figure flashed past the gate and almost knocked Shi Mu down. After steadying himself, Shi Mu was shocked to find a lanky young man, with extremely long legs, towering in front of him. His sunken cheeks and bamboo-like limbs were no way able to conceal the great strength and awe-inspiring spirit hidden inside. Shi Mu's color changed, knowing that this man was also probably an Adept, given his presence here. But, judging from his uniform, this man seemed to be a primary disciple as well, only that his weathered face suggested his long years of experience. Shi Mu stepped aside, making way for him to pass. The lanky youth threw Shi Mu a stony look then walked out of the hall, with an expressionless face. Shi Mu did not move until the lanky youth's figure completely receded from view. Calming himself, he walked inside.

The interior decor of the pavilion was as simple as could be, barely looking like a proper place for disciples to receive their rations. A long desk stood, by itself, at the center of the hall. Behind it, a middle-aged man's wooden[A] face made the air even more stifling.

"A new Adept scholar?" A muffled voice came from behind the desk, accompanied by an unfocused look.

"Yes, senior. I'm here to receive my ration of resources as a newly registered Adept." Shi Mu took out a white jade ornament from his pocket and handed it to the middle-aged man as he replied.

The man received the jade ornament, then took out a green ruler to scratch slightly on the jade ornament.

Immediately the jade responded by shooting a beam of white light into the green ruler, which then shed a glow in return. Slowly Shi Mu's name emerged floating on the surface of the ruler. At this sight, the middle-aged man nodded almost imperceptibly and returned the jade ornament back to its owner.

An hour later, Shi Mu was already back at his small stone house. The door tightly shut, his face lit up as he took a small blue bag from his shirt. He opened the bag with excitement and emptied the contents onto his bed. There were twelve Black Fire Tokens, a green bottle, and three crystals: one blue and two red. The twelve black tokens immediately drew his eyes. Now he was convinced that the Black Demon Sect treated Adepts with a generosity of resources far surpassing what distributed to warriors. Even the extra twelve Black Demon Tokens would incur public jealousy of many ordinary disciples. Moreover, such a preferential treat was exclusive to the Adepts whose names were imprinted on the jade wall in the Hall of Magic. Resources had always been for the elite of the elite.

Sighing, Shi Mu picked up the green bottle and uncovered it, the contents soon tinged the air with a delicate fragrance. Inside were three green pills, the size of a thumb.

A surprised smile flickered across his face.

He had seen the pill once before, by chance. Its name leaving a clear impression on his mind: Spirit-Strengthening Pill. The effect is just as told by its name - a quick supply of spirit power, so, undoubtedly, Adepts must treasure these as life-savers in actual combat, which explains its exorbitant price. These three pills in his hand now must be worth more than one hundred thousand silver.

Shi Mu put away the bottle of pills, with the utmost care, then took out one of the crystals, to have a better look. The crystal was about the size of a pigeon egg and was glowing with smooth red light. There was something vaguely visible flowing around inside it.

This is one of the holy stones of the Adept world, quite precious, due to its limited existence. The flows inside are pure magic power, and, judging from the stone’s blood red quality, it must be the Holy Stone of Fire, one of the five elemental stones. Though all the three holy stones he had got now were some commonly seen stones of the lowest level, their value had already equaled that of the Spirit-Strengthening Pill. This was the first time that Shi Mu had seen a holy stone, so he did not put them away until having played with them for a while.

These must have been all the resources that every Adept scholar could receive annually, a great fortune for a disciple like Shi Mu. He took a long, deep breath

to soothe his excitement, reminding himself that all these precious resources were not earned with his strength but with his potential. The most important thing he could do now was to ceaselessly train himself to strengthen his power.

With such thoughts in mind, he took out the jade slip for the Art of Accumulating Spirit Power and put it against his forehead.

Soon, lines of small characters began to appear in his mind, and, within a quarter of an hour, he finished skimming through the contents of the jade slip.

The method of practicing the Art of Accumulating Spirit Power was quite different from, and more challenging than, that of the Art of the Heavenly Elephant and the Art of the Strong Ape.

The nature of this Adept art was that of absorbing heavenly energy into one's body. Then the energy is then transformed into spirit power, which is more refined than the real Qi that a warrior would gain from their arts. Meantime, the training requires heavenly knowledge as well as element-sensing power, thus elevating the difficulty to ten times that of practicing a Houtian art.

Just as the jade slip said, each stage of the Art of Accumulating Spirit Power will double the Adept's spirit power, and, after accomplishing five stages, he could try to upgrade into Spirit Grade. Generally speaking, even the most talented Adepts would spend more than one year on the first stage, and ordinary ones may spend three to four years, depending on their intelligence.

Reaching the second stage should take twice the time that it took to reach the first stage. This repeats with each of the following stages, each taking a twofold practicing time over what the previous stage required. Shi Mu sucked back a cold breath when he saw this. A brief calculation told him that even a talented Adept

would not accomplish all the stages before he had immersed himself in the art for at least thirty years. This realization made him smile bitterly to himself, and at the same time finally understood the reason for the small number of Spirit Grade Adepts in his sect, and why even scholars were treated generously, even though they weren't full Adepts.

However, even though the Art of Accumulating Spirit Power was hard to practice, he would acquire a skill called "Qi Bursting" at the third stage and another called "Qi Binding" at the fifth stage. Both of these skills were very alluring to him.

After more than two hours, Shi Mu finally removed the jade slip off his forehead. A complex look on his face.

Now he had realized that, though the prospect of an Adept was more than promising, it could not be obtained without a painstaking training, which far exceeded his expectations. But, having made it here, he would never quit midway.

He put away the jade slips and shut up his eyes, adjusting his breath, and slowly focused his mind to its best state.

He had, by now, memorized all the contents of the five stages, and, after assuring himself by closely recalling every detail, he began to work up his spirit power, step-by-step.

As time went by, Shi Mu's mind was completely immersed in his training. His spirit power expanded outside his body, and he mirrored the scene around him in his mind, despite that his eyes were shut.

Shi Mu focus started at sensing the physical objects in the room. He focused even more and the physical objects slowly faded from his mind, surrounding his with nothingness. Eventually, numerous light dots started emerging from this nothingness and, little by little they started coming into his body.

These light dots, once they entered his body, turned into pieces of refined spirit power, flowing rapidly through his veins and vessels. This energy was so refined, and unobtrusive, that it did not the slightest conflict with the real Qi in his body.

Shi Mu was exhilarated, believing that he had learned the method of practicing the Art of Accumulating Spirit Power .

However, time slid by, as he trained himself. Shi Mu had been sitting motionless for half a day, without consciousness. The accumulated spirit power finally met in his lower abdomen, and it turned into a thicker stream, which he willed into circling around his body. However, there was something he had not thought about: when the flow of spirit power came into the vessel near his head an unexpected mutation took place.

Notes:

[A] - My TL loves using this expression, so I am just going to leave it in there from now on. This means an unchanging, uncaring, possibly contempt-filled face. Consider it a “resting bitch face”. (Seriously Google it. It’s actually being considered a real thing O.O)

Chapter 76 - Dreamland Revisited (II)

As the spirit power in his body wound its way to a vessel in his head, Shi Mu felt an irresistible force begin to form in his mind. This was followed by the vibration of the crystal capsule he had condensed earlier when practicing the Moon-Swallowing Art. Suddenly, the capsule gave a tangible shake, emitting a slight attractive force that absorbed a wisp of spirit power, from the stream, into the capsule. The absorption brought about a thunderous boom, and, in the next moment, the capsule was split into pieces by the spirit power. Then it reformed into the shape of a tiny, white crescent.

The crescent soon began to enhance, growing in brightness with a layer of silver light gliding on its surface. The next phase saw one tip of the crescent dissipate into a wisp of spirit power with supreme purity, which then joined the earlier thick stream of spirit power that had been circulating in Shi Mu’s veins.

An indescribable sensation made Shi Mu sweat with discomfort. His veins seemed to swell, as if they had been filled with some great force. Meanwhile, the crescent kept dissipating into refined spirit power, which split off and joined the main stream. The circulating stream went wild, forming into a rampant flood, outside of Shi Mu’s control. This unexpected turn of events caught Shi Mu unguarded and his face paled. Still, suppressing his great discomfort, Shi Mu hurriedly worked up the Art of Accumulating Spirit Power, attempting to direct this current into the right channel.

Fortunately, though turbulent, this current of spirit power was still tameable, under the guidance of this art. With its aid, the flow of the current was gradually corrected, flowing into his dantian, where energy should be stored.

After a while, Shi Mu felt a soft crack in his mind, as the last part of the

crescent was turned into pure spirit power. He soon led it to his dantian, to join the energy he had collected. Where the capsule had been was now empty.

After a short while, Shi Mu slowly opened his eyes and exhaled a long breath. His face was now filled with excitement. For some unknown reason, it surprised him that he had by now finished the training required to reach the first stage of the Art of Accumulating Spirit Power [A], moreover, the storage of spirit power, in his dantian, was large enough to continue. Some minutes later, he discovered that even his eyesight and ability to concentrate had been greatly enhanced, an inexpressible sense of comfort and clarity pervaded his mind.

“What happened? Why did that crystal capsule disappear? “ His initial excitement receding, Shi Mu knit his eyebrows and began pondering over this puzzle. After a long time, something crossed his mind that made him decide to proceed his practice of the ASP art.

However, his next few minutes’ training proved to be unexpectedly disappointing. He had not foreseen that, without the white crescent that came from the crystal capsule, he could only absorb heavenly energy from his environment through the fixed process taught by the ASP art. The accumulation speed of spirit power became way too slow.

“So the capsule...is from the Moon-Swallowing Art!” Shi Mu’s eyes flickered with enlightenment. If he was right, this art must be a remarkable auxiliary skill that helped with the practicing of magical arts! But he still needed solid evidence to convince himself.

Several days later, the sky was clear and the moon was full, filling the world with its effulgent light.

Shi Mu followed his familiar path to the grassland in the valley, and, after a close survey of his surroundings, he lost no time getting into the posture, that he had adopted many times before, to enter his peculiar dream.

Soon, he turned to the white ape again, appearing on the silver boulder at the top of the towering mountain. He fixed his eyes on the bright round moon high up in the sky, and, instantly, thousands of white dots gathered in the sky, flooding toward the ape's golden pupils as if drawn by a mysterious gravitational force.

The nameless sense of clarity came again, refreshing his spirits, followed by the white vortex of energy swirling in his mind. All had been repeated so many times that Shi Mu did not notice one difference today. For some time, he was lost in a dream about how this Moon-Swallowing Art would lead him to the top.

Finally, he came out of his reverie with a start, finding that the white vortex had grown largely in size! For a moment, his mind was a total blank. But he soon recovered his poise by discovering that the speed of moonlight flowing into his eyes had been raised, though not so obviously so that it eluded him at first.

When he finally woke up from his dream, the sky was as dark as when he had come, but dawn would soon sweep the darkness away. He concentrated and checked his storage of spirit power again, but the result was bitterly disappointing: the accumulated spirit power was no longer there! All had been consumed! He threw himself into the grass, lost in deep thought.

During the following month, Shi Mu visited the Hall of Wealth twice, taking some tasks to earn the money he needed for some more pills. The rest of his time was mainly spent in practicing the Art of Heavenly Elephant and the Wind-Blowing Blade Art. Whenever there was moonlight he would enter the dream to carry on his practice of the Moon-Swallowing Art. When the month drew near its

end, his assiduous training and perseverance finally paid off: a crystal capsule, much bigger than the former one, was formed in his brain.

And when he exercised the Art of Accumulating Spirit Power again, the capsule dissolved into much more spirit power than expected, refilling his storage to a great extent. Now he was not far from reaching the second stage!

With the aid of this Moon-Swallowing Art, his learning speed for ASP had been enormously increased, which made Shi Mu both happy and scared at the same time. Would there be something dangerous lurking due to this alarmingly quick training? Shi Mu spent a whole day practicing ASP from the very beginning, searching for any problems. But the fact he found nothing, confounded him even more, making him toss in bed with worry.

Then, all of a sudden, he lept from his bed, grabbed the blade lying beside his table, and began to practice from the first movement the Thirteen Series of Gale Force Blade. Bit by bit, the tumult in his mind began to subside as he abandoned himself in the world of the blade, merging his mind with the blade in his hand, which now seemed to come into life. The blade caught light, emitting a succession of reflections that looked like a lotus flower in constant blossom. The sword light filled the entire room, not leaving a single shadow.

Gradually the movements of the blade became increasingly fast, yet not lacking in accuracy. Shi Mu was amazed to find that his sensing ability had enhanced the extent to which he was able to use the art. Plus, his speed of thrusting his blade had neared its maximum.

“Ha!” He shouted loudly and, with another flick of his wrist, sent the blade up into the air, producing a glaring shield of blade shadows that formed a huge umbrella, covering all the spaces it could reach.

He had just done twelve cuts in one breath.

A trace of joy flashed across his face as he realized he had just upgraded in his Thirteen Series of Gale Force Blade. Now he was only one level short of the consummation stage.

When Shi Mu stopped his movements and put away his blade, he noticed he had sweated profusely, but all he could feel was a restoring energy circulating through his body. He did some stretching to relax his muscles, and, after his Qi and blood had calmed, sat by his bed and, again, sank into deep thought.

He should have been practicing the Art of Heavenly Elephant at this time, but he had run out of the Blood-Strengthening pills and Bone-Tempering pills, which made him unable to proceed. Fumbling in his pocket, the emptiness was disheartening. He needed money. So it was high time that he took some more tasks from the Hall of Wealth. But, considering his conditions, ordinary tasks for warriors were unworthy of his time, with their unsatisfying pay. Now that he had reached the second state in the Art of Accumulating Spirit Power, he dared to consider himself an official Adept scholar, who could further educate himself on an art of a formula Adept, which he could get in the General Sutra House, by exchanging the Black Fire tokens he had just received.

As he had made up his mind, he immediately left for the General Sutra House with all of his Black Fire tokens.

Notes:

[A] - From here on out, if you see the acronym, ASP, it is the (Art of) Accumulating Spirit Power.

Chapter 77 - Matches Begin!

Shi Mu made his way to the General Sutras House. As he reached the top of the stairs to the second floor, a sonorous voice filled his ears. “That guy...he’s here again!” The huge parrot, kept by Uncle Ju, flapped its wings in excitement. Shi Mu’s presence made it keep moving up and down in the cage, muttering and grumbling all the time.

The sudden noise annoyed the huge mountain of flesh, sitting behind the desk, who then harshly poked the parrot with a wooden stick, making thuds that sent chills to Shi Mu’s back. He, involuntarily, felt sorry for the flamboyantly-feathered announcer, that had just thrown him a warm welcome.

“Oh, little one, it’s you! It hasn’t even been a year since you last visited. What has brought you here today? Could it be that you just got some more Black Fire tokens?” After satisfying himself with educating his pet, the fat man turned to look at Shi Mu with a surprised face.

“Your humble disciple answers that he has passed a test which proved him to have talents in magic arts. Now he is a registered Adept, and has come to exchange for books on formula arts and martial-arts techniques.” Shi Mu answered respectfully.

“You? A registered Adept!” The fat man was taken by surprise, rubbing his eyes vigorously, looking over Shi Mu from head to toe. It was most astonishing news that Shi Mu could be a registered Adept, like himself!

“Little one, what elements are fit to practice?” After a close inspection, Uncle Ju regained his calmness and asked, full of interest.

Shi Mu did not withhold anything from him, relating, in detail, his experience in the Hall of Magic.

“You’ve got a knack for spatial-sensing? My, my. So I guess you’re aiming at learning some formula arts, right?” Uncle Ju knocked on the desk with his right index finger, out of habit. His back straightened as he asked in a serious tone.

“That is correct. Your humble disciple did not have any other choices.” Shi Mu answered in a resigned tone.

“If so, I’d suggest you not waste any tokens on martial techniques.”

Shi Mu was taken aback. “Senior... could I ask why?”

Uncle Ju sighed, “I mean apart from a formula art, you’d better take another art on charm magic! Don’t you know that formula and charm magics go hand in hand? The two share many common skills and, when practiced together, will strengthen your abilities quite fast! Actually, charm magic is a branch of formula magic. You’d find it much easier to learn the two simultaneously, rather than troubling yourself learning one at a time! “ The fat man pursed his lips as if offended by Shi Mu’s distrust.

“So could I really learn charm magic at the same time?” Uncle Ju’s words made him unable to close his mouth, frozen to his spot with joy. He had seen the magical power of various paper charms, but it never once crossed his mind that he could really be eligible to learn this magic!

Uncle Ju was really wounded, this time, his repeated questions meant that this

little one had not put faith in his words. He snorted discontentedly and said proudly, “I am a Spirit Adept! So I know more about magical arts than you, a beginner! Plus, my years in the General Sutra House should also count for something. Believe my words or not, it’s your business, not mine.”

“Thank you very much, Uncle Ju! I’ll think about it!” Shi Mu finally read Uncle Ju’s wounded expression, bowed to him reverently, and hurried his apologetic thanks.

“Go!” The fat Uncle Ju dismissed Shi Mu with a curt nod and a wave of his plump hand.

Shi Mu then spent some time looking over the shelves of magic arts, searching each row meticulously, and did not end his voyage until coming back with fruitful results: two secret records of magical arts, one telling about the way of making charms, with the name “The Great Sutra of Magical Charms”, the other being an elementary book on formulas with the name of “All You Need to Know About Elementary Formula Arts”. He passed the slips to Uncle Ju, who silently took them, along with the pay of twelve tokens, before rapidly copying the contents to two jade slips.

Shi Mu bowed to Uncle Ju gratefully and left the General Sutra House in a focused mood, ready to study the slips meticulously after returning to his residence. However, on his way home, something unusual dragged him out of his own little world where he was reveling in his future plans. A commotion could be faintly heard from deeper in the valley, primary disciples were hurriedly moving in the same direction, which suggested a special occasion. Meanwhile, some primary disciples, wearing weapons, ran past, their faces burning with eagerness for a challenge or something similar. Some came in twos and threes, secretly discussing something in low voices.

Surrounded by so many passing disciples, Shi Mu felt loneliness creeping up to his heart, for the first time since he entered the sect. He frowned, smiling bitterly to himself. He had no reason to complain, after all, he had been shutting himself in his room for a whole month, immersed in training. Therefore, it turned out that he had barely any friends in the sect, nor was he well informed of the happenings out there.

Judging from the current circumstances, something significant must have taken place.

“Brother Shi!” Just as Shi Mu decided to ask somebody for a bit information, a familiar voice sounded out before a sturdy arm patted his shoulder gently. Shi Mu turned his head and saw Huo Mao standing aside. He was dressed in a black suit, with two double-edged heavy axes over his shoulder, adding to his big stature an imposing air.

“Brother Huo!” Shi Mu was overjoyed at the sight of an acquaintance, and one of the few whom he did not dislike in the sect. He felt like he was marooned on a remote island, and Huo Mao had suddenly come to aid him in a boat.

“Haha, it’s so rare to see you out. Why, after all these days of hard training, brother Shi wants to show his power now in the upcoming matches?” Huo Mao was all smiles.

“The matches?” Shi Mu raised his eyebrows, enlightened by this information. It had been written, on the brochures distributed to newcomers, that there would be matches every three months. A quick count convinced him that it must be time for the first set of matches since he entered the sect. Almost three months had passed during his training. He realized that he almost forgot the flow of time, lost completely in his practice.

“Wow! Don’t tell me you forgot about the matches?” Seeing Shi Mu’s reaction, Huo Mao could not help but laugh heartily.

Shi Mu clasped his hands and said honestly, “That’s true, brother Huo. I have been careless.”

Huo Mao replied with a soothing smile, not in the least mocking him, “That’s normal. It only proves that brother Shi works really hard. I heard from Stone Bai that you’ve got really amazing strength, and your fist art and blade art are both brilliant. These days you must have cultivated your real Qi, right? With such good strength, you should enter this match and fight for a good rank. Remember, even matches - which are more casual than annual competitions - have REALLY good awards.”

Shi Mu was absolutely moved by such an earnest suggestion. He nodded his head, recalling the awards written on the brochure. For new disciples like himself, it would truly be a great bonus to win some of the awards.

“Why not come with me to the match venue? By the way, Stone Bai and other brothers have gone there too. Brother Bai has progressed greatly, since joining the Holy Spirit Group. I bet he’d have remarkable scores very soon.” Huo Mao’s tone became rather suggestive at the end.

Shi Mu gave it a brief thought and answered, “If brother Huo is not in a hurry, could you please wait a minute, I’ll fetch my weapon real quick.”

“Sure, sure, take your time.” Huo Mao answered.

Shi Mu nodded and strode towards his residence. His figure disappeared in the distance. Huo Mao watched his receding figure with a mysterious look in his eye.

Suddenly, another figure approached from nowhere and joined Huo Mao, and it turned out to be the golden-haired Bright Jin, of the Holy Spirit Group.

“Brother Jin.” Seeing his face, Huo Mao hurriedly saluted him.

“I saw you with Shi Mu. You did the right thing. This Shi Mu has always been free and alone, barely having any contact with anyone. But I saw he was really at ease with you.” Bright Jin cast a glance in Shi Mu’s distance, suggesting something to Huo Mao in a meaningful tone.

Chapter 78 - Competitions Begin!

“Brother Jin, why are you suddenly interested in Shi Mu? Sure, he’s a hard worker, but I don’t think he is good enough to attract your attention?” Hearing Bright Jin’s comment, Huo Mao gave him a confused smile.

“Then you are wrong. That guy seemed to be a mere nobody, but I’ve heard that he secretly took the talent test in the Hall of Magic a month ago, and you know what? Turns out that he’s a registered Adept now! And one with a lot of potential!” Bright Jin’s eyes shone with shrewdness.

“An Adept?!” It was the last thing Huo Mao would ever have pictured Shi Mu to be.

“Not many people know this yet, and other groups are still uninformed. We, of the Holy Spirit Association, are aiming to get him.” Bright Jin said, in a hushed voice, full of authority.

Huo Mao hurriedly gave Bright Jin a conspiratorial smile.

“One good thing is that all of Shi Mu’s acquaintances are somewhat connected with us. Anyway, I’m tasking you with becoming friends with him, making sure other groups won’t get him even if we can’t. “ Bright Jin changed to a more commanding tone after some thought.

“I’ll see to it, senior Jin.” Hao Mao answered seriously, nodding his head.

Bright Jin was quite satisfied with this response. After a few other words, he

hastily left.

Bright Jin's withdrawal was of great relief to Huo Mao, who sighed wearily as he gazed at the receding figure. Just then, Shi Mu also emerged from the valley, carrying a steel blade in a casual manner. Huo Mao hurriedly gave him a welcoming smile, striding in Shi Mu's direction to meet him.

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A short while later, the two of them came to the valley between the eleventh and twelfth mountains. A huge circular plaza peered through lines of flourishing trees. They approached the plaza and saw ten rings were scattered around.

At this time, approximately one thousand disciples in black had swarmed into the plaza, their shouts of excitement surging and undulating like waves.

With his supernatural eyesight, Shi Mu caught sight of disciples competing on all the ten rings before he had even stepped into the plaza. On each ring there was a disciple in black standing at the side, the word "Junior" was embroidered on one of his sleeves. Those junior disciples were, apparently, the judges of the matches.

Wild shouts, from the crowd, echoed through the plaza, filling the air with a fervent atmosphere. This contagious enthusiasm affected Shi Mu too, an eagerness to take part starting welling up in his heart.

"The matches are held every season, especially for our primary disciples, those of higher ranks will not participate. The matches are held chiefly to rank the primary disciples, giving us a chance know our peer's strength. It is a warm-up before the annual competition." Huo Mao said as he pointed in a direction.

Following the direction Huo Mao gestured in, Shi Mu saw a huge black stone monument standing on the other side of the square,its height nearly one hundred meters and its surface was dotted thickly with small silver characters. Focusing his spirit power on his eyes, Shi Mu was able to see clearly, despite hundreds of meters' distance, that the silver characters were all disciples' names. His interest was instantly aroused: it was the first time he had seen the rank of primary disciples since he had entered the sect several months ago. The names were flickering with silver light and the first was "Duan Qianli" - Duan the Thousand Miles, followed by many more, whose numbers were below him.

"Brother Shi, can you read the names, on the monument, from here?" Seeing that Shi Mu was reading the stone monument, Huo Mao asked with surprise.

"I have had better eyesight than ordinary people since childhood, so, if I try hard, I can see the names on the monument with some difficulty, but I'd rather we move nearer to it." Shi Mu smiled as if apologizing while explaining to him.

As they were chatting, they had already walked to the middle of the square. With Huo Mao leading the way, they nudged their way through the crowd to a place near the stone monument. There were a few hundred people clustered around the monument, among them were many new disciples, who had come together with Shi Mu.

Shi Mu raised his eyebrows alertly as he saw Blue Phoenix, circled by a dozen disciples and was wearing a more confident look than ever. Probably she had progressed a lot in the Blood Dragon Group. Blue Phoenix had already been very famous among new disciples, standing in the crowd like a gorgeous female star. Disciples cast her meaningful glances now and then, some also whispering to each other about some titbit of hers, sharing furtive giggles. Shi Mu only took a quick look at her, then returned his eyes to the rank on the stone monument.

“Brother Huo, who is this Thousand Mile Duan that is ranked first on the monument?” Shi Mu narrowed his eyes as he looked at the stone monument and asked.

“Brother Duan? He is quite mysterious and seldom shows himself in public, so I have only seen him a few times. I heard that he had reached the middle stage of Houtian level, and it is said that he is also an Adept Scholar of Wind.” Huo Mao searched his memory and replied after a moment.

“Practicing Martial arts and magic together!” Shi Mu was quite excited that his own situation was quite similar to that of the No.1 among the primary disciples. It seemed that if the art of warriors and adepts were matched properly, one’s strength could be amplified several times.

“Our sect will arrange a master of Xian Tian and several disciples of junior rank to judge every match, but the master is not here right now.” Huo Mao glanced at the high platform near the stone monument, finding a purple chair empty by now.

“Brother Huo, I am still a freshman in our sect and not familiar with the rules of the matches, could you please help me?” Shi Mu thought and asked.

“Hehe, no problem. You know there are many primary disciples in our sect, but the old ones, who entered before you guys, have known each other well during the past year, so they won’t challenge each other without very strong confidence, so the rank may change little. And the rules are quite simple. The first day is for new disciples, *i.e.* your peers, to compete, and the second day is for new disciples to challenge the elder ones, and the third day is for elder disciples themselves to challenge each other. Remember, in the matches there is

no limit of arts and weapons you use, but the bottom line is not to kill your opponent. All in all, the strongest one will win!" Huo Mao explained to Shi Mu about the rules of the match.

"I see!" Shi Mu nodded his head.

"It's nothing, don't be so thankful brother Shi. Well, as far as I know, our sect has enrolled four groups of disciples, including your peers, which amounts to approximately four hundred, so you have lots of opponents to fight today!" Huo Mao waved off Shi Mu's thanks and went on to say as he had recalled something.

Shi Mu looked at the root of the stone monument. Several hundred names were in red, separated from the silver names above. His name was just among the last one hundred, which seemed to be made up of new disciples, like himself.

"Brother Shi, though in the matches of the second day, whoever defeat elder disciples can upgrade as well as gain a handsome award, I suggest you not try to challenge the elder ones. After all, you new disciples have barely any chance of winning against them. I have heard that Brother Shi is very strong, but you must be very cautious in fighting. If you want to gain some advantages from the matches, just fight for a good rank amongst your own peers. Our sect will reward the top 10 new disciples." Huo Mao offered his earnest advice to Shi Mu.

"Thanks for brother Huo's advice!" Shi Mu nodded with clasped hands as he pondered over Huo Mao's words.

"Haha, not at all. This is just my humble experience." Huo Mao replied with a delighted laugh.

Chapter 79 - The First Day

After finding out a little more about the matches, Shi Mu parted with Huo Mao, making his way to the rings. After seeing Shi Mu off, Huo Mao turned and left, letting out a soft sigh.

As time went on, the fighting on the ten rings grew increasingly fierce. Though the new disciples were all given a year free of challenge, many still chose to try their skills in these matches. After all, newborn calves have no fear of tigers. They had all, more or less, made some progress, and the curiosity to know how others had been doing was burning in their chests.

Shi Mu was cool-headed, as usual, so he did not make a challenge rashly, but just wandered about the rings and observed a lot of fights. Except for the few disciples that had come with him, Shi Mu knew practically nothing about the three to four hundred other newcomers.

On the fifth ring, there was a bulky young man fighting with a young man with green hair, both were at the primary stage of the Houtian level, and both were using swords. The sword art of the bulky young man was simple but quite fierce, and the Qi, in his sword his movements, stirred up piercing winds, spreading a coldness that even chilled people dozens of meters away.

However, the young man with green hair seemed to be unaffected, his body moving like a willow leaf, floating in the air, dodging each attack with clean and nimble movements. When he did strike, he struck in a strange way that seemed overly straightforward - simply stabbing directly at his opponent - but at a speed beyond dodging, each attack leaving a black trace of shadows in the air, aiming at stabbing home. The bulky youth was barely able to hold against these blindingly fast strikes. Moreover, as the stalemate continued, the green-haired

youth still retained his easy manner, thrusting his sword in a way one would dance gracefully, but his bulky opponent had begun to gasp for breath, his sword heavy as a lump of iron in his hand. The green-haired youth noticed this and, after pushing aside his opponent's sword, his eyes glared with excitement. All of a sudden his body shot into the sky, then swooped down on his prey with his long, sharp sword, swinging straight at the bulky man's head. The sword caught sunlight as it moved and made the bulky guy squint his eyes.

As the sword approached, a faint golden light appeared around the sword's edge, and it exploded into a dozen of golden sword shadows with a thunderous noise. No matter how quick the bulky youth reacted, he could only swing his sword in vain, as a huge invisible force lifted him off the ground, like a giant picking up a tiny stone. Before he realized it, he had already been thrown out of the ring. The next second, his back hit the ground with a thud.

The bulky youth struggled several times but still failed to stand on his feet, blood gushing out of his wounds. Who knows how many times he got stabbed? Although his wounds were not life-threatening, his condition would render him bedridden for at least a month.

Several servant disciples soon scuttled toward the burly youth, who was groaning and rolling over on the ground, in extreme pain, and carried him away for treatment. At the same time, the junior judge on the ring announced the green-haired youth as the winner with an expressionless face.

The crowd, around the ring, burst into an uproar. Soon discussions about the green-haired youth's sword art echoed all over the place. Shi Mu stood among the excited audience, mute and unmoved, concentrating on the green-haired youth, who was now stepping triumphantly down the ring. He stood there for a while, thinking, then turned and looked at the next ring.

On the seventh ring, a young man and a young girl were fighting, bare-handed.

The young man seemed to have acquired some mysterious art, which shielded both of his hands with a layer of white light. Looking from afar, the youth's hands seemed to be made from jade. He clasped them into fists and attempting to pummel the girl.

The girl, on the other hand, was not dressed in the sect's uniform but was in a tight-fitting suit that allowed her full mobility. Under her opponent's torrent of fists, she seemed small and fragile, but, on the contrary, the art she was performing - The Fist of the Heavenly Eagle - was well-known for its fierceness. At the moment, she bent her fingers, shaping them like an Eagle reaching out for its prey, taking the youth's fists head-on. The collision of their attacks reverberated through the plaza. The fight grew more and more intense every second.

After some time, the two seemed to have reached a stalemate, both staggering backward, exhausted. They took a quick rest as they both prepared for their last attack. A murderous look flashed across the youth's eyes as he stomped hard on the floor, his upper body stiff. Then he shot from the floor, like a bullet, with his two "jade hands" clasped together, moving toward the girl's chest. His fists shone brightly, and a great pressure made the youth's sleeves burst, revealing his swelling muscles. The attack stirred up a cold wind, as it moved, which chilled the girl's cheeks. She squinted and let out a shout. Suddenly, a faint red light began to emerge between her nails, her fingers red and sharp as thorns.

The girl moved her hands, ready to meet the attack. An air-piercing noise sounded out as her hands met his, like two dragons rushing out of their lair, aiming to kill.

This time, the two figures crashed together, and then were thrown back by the

clash.

The youth staggered, unable to steadying himself for a moment, his face ghastly pale. Five holes appeared, out of nowhere, on each of his shoulders, blood gushing out from them. His arms drooped, apparently devoid of any strength. On the other hand, the girl also looked somewhat pale, but her body was intact, her chest heaving for breaths.

Everyone now knew who had won.

The corner of Shi Mu's eye twitched. He could not help but look more closely at the girl, imagining how he would deal with her attacks if they ever met in the ring. [A]

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On the first ring, two figures were involved in a serious fight. One of them held a long sword in his hand while the other fought with their bare hands. Both moved with incredible speed, assisted by real Qi, the air swirling around them seemed to be full of energy, ready to explode any minute.

The audience all held their breaths and watched with utmost concentration. Every now and then, some clicked their tongues in admiration. Shi Mu stood amid the awe-struck audience for some time before he left, shaking his head disapprovingly. Their match was a show, not a fight. They just aim to show off, and the lightning speed of their moves are absolutely unreasonable. What's the use of quick moves but low efficiency and accuracy? He thought to himself. Well, maybe they'll have a result after using up their strength. Shi Mu prayed.

After having watched several matches, Shi Mu had gained a general impression of the newcomer's average strength. Besides, by overhearing the audience's discussions, he remembered quite a few names worthy of his attention. As for his acquaintances, Stone Bai, Xiao Ming, and Blue Phoenix, they had successfully stood out amongst all, winning successively. Especially for Stone Bai, who Shi Mu had just watched. He crushed his opponent mere seconds after his fight began, which proved his significant progress after joining the Holy Spirit Association.

Shi Mu took a deep breath and headed towards the next ring, where a match had just ended and a junior disciple was arranging the next challenge. Shi Mu quickened his steps.

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The black monument, set up on the square, was not just a piece of dead stone. As matches went on, the ranks of newcomers fluctuated all the time, and it was clearly shown on the monument, as names and numbers flickered all the time - a pretty mysterious sight.

The matches had lasted for half a day, during which time many strong disciples had outshone others. Stone Bai, OuYang Ming, Blue Phoenix...Such names had climbed to the top.

Beside the monument, some elder disciples of the Black Demon Sect gathered in a heated conversation. They were all old disciples of the primary level. Although today was not for them to compete, many still came to watch the matches. After all, tomorrow they would be challenged by the newcomers.

"Of all these newcomers, I discovered some really promising guys. That guy named Stone Bai, he's really good. I just watched some of his matches. He

practiced the All-yang Art, a fire type art. Judging from his performance, he has progressed quite far.” A black-robed youth pointed out, with a sullen voice.

Notes:

[A] - SURE. That’s exactly what I would do when taking a closer look at a girl in a skintight suit…

Chapter 80 - A Bride Needs to Hide Herself in her Boudoir Before Wedding

“Oh, do you mean this Stone Bai is a threat to us?” A chubby youth, standing beside his sullen companion, raised his eyebrows, his eyes as cold as glass. He had a strange look on his face, it was somewhat like a smile and a smirk.

“How’s that possible!” The sullen youth sneered, exclaiming in a proud voice.

“By the way, I heard that there might be some Adepts among these newcomers, is that true?” The puffy youth suddenly thought of this problematic situation, his beady eyes glittering in suspicion.

“I believe so. Among them, there is said to be an Adept scholar who has decent fire sensing. He’s already been roped in by the Holy Spirit guys.” The sullen youth nodded.

The confirmation of this Adept scholar made the puffy youth frown. The art he was practicing was a rather aggressive one, but would lose some of its power when met by magics. It may be a problem if this guy with fire sensing challenges me tomorrow, he thought to himself.

“Wow, a new name!” The sullen youth cried out in surprise, his eyes dilating. Following his sight, the puffy youth woke from his reverie and looked towards the monument. A red name had risen rapidly from the bottom to the top thirty. The puffy youth clearly knew that today was for the newcomers to challenge other newcomers, and the weak ones would be eliminated through competition. Those ranked behind under 100 could challenge anyone of a higher rank than themselves, as long as the rank gap between them was no more than fifty. Once in the top 100, the challenging scope would be smaller. The challenged, whether defeated or denying the challenge request, would be considered failed, and thus

lose the opportunity in further matches. If a primary disciple could enter the first thirties, he should definitely attract the attention of elder primary disciples like the sullen youth and his puffy companion.

“Shi Mu...never heard of this name...Have you?” The puffy young man knit his brows as if searching in his memory for Shi Mu’s name.

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On one of the rings, Shi Mu vehemently shook his steel knife, throwing out nine blade shadows that pounced toward his opponent, who was trying to resist the shadows with a pair of swords. The attacks forced the youth to forget about attacking, or even thinking of tactics. He was doing everything he could just to block the attacks. He tried to weave a shield by rapidly waving his swords, and as the clashing of their weapons resounded, he found his arms struck numb by the huge force that traveled through Shi Mu’s knife. Though he managed to resist the nine blade shadows, his arms were now barely able to hold the handles of his swords.

Shi Mu gave the youth no time to recover. He rushed his opponent and, before the youth had realized it, punched the youth’s chest with his empty hand. The movement was too fast to capture, add in his exhaustion and the youth would have to be superhuman if he wanted to dodge the fist.

Without a doubt the fist hit home. The youth was knocked straight out of the ring by the brutal force, rolling over the ground, vomiting blood.

“Winner, Shi Mu!”

A whiskered junior disciple announced immediately, gaping at Shi Mu, the way one would gape at a monster.

Shi Mu silently sheathed his steel knife, his face completely devoid of emotion. He was only at the first stage of the Heavenly Elephant Art, but the combination of his inborn superhuman strength, his real Qi, and his advanced Wind-Blowing Blade Art and Stone-Breaking Fist, he could defeat the majority of his peers. Moreover, he did not choose his opponents blindly but chose those who were all skilled at speed. Under Shi Mu's unreasonably keen eyes, their speed meant nothing.

Shi Mu turned his head to have a look at the monument. It was saying that the disciple he had just defeated was called White Su, a real powerful fellow among his peers, ranked No.17. Naturally, now he had lost his rank to Shi Mu.

A commotion filled the audience, who were casting astonished looks at Shi Mu. Some, who had never heard of his name, were anxiously trying to find out more about him, exchanging information with their companions. The audience was not to blame, after all, Shi Mu had barely presented himself in public since he entered the sect, except the first day, when he fought with Qu Kun in front of the stone houses. For the past three months, he closed himself in his little room, practicing his own arts the way a bride would hide shyly in her boudoir to concentrate on the sole job of making herself more beautiful before the wedding. Therefore, few still remembered Shi Mu. When he suddenly appeared within the top twenties, disciples began wracking their brains for this strange name.

"See? These kids are barely able to close their mouths. Seems that this Shi Mu guy has been hiding his strength, otherwise they wouldn't have been so surprised." Not far from the ring, some elder disciples had been watching the match, and one of them remarked coldly, after glancing at the audience.

“That’s no news. Such guys emerge every time we hold one of these competitions as if waiting for this chance to make themselves superstars. But this guy is a real winner. Did you see his blade art? It’s not much to brag about, as it’s only a practitioner’s low-level art, but this guy uses it at a high level. What’s more, I bet this is not all he’s got.” Another elder disciple echoed, his eyes alight with interest.

As they were talking, Shi Mu walked off the ring and headed toward another.

On the fifth ring, a challenger fell on the ground, thoroughly crestfallen. His shirt was torn and tainted by blood. On the ring a lanky youth stood, silently watching him, with a face full of equanimity, as though the sea of his emotions was not in the least disturbed by his match. He was holding a black whip, and, after some time of enjoying his feat in silence, he flickered his wrist and the whip immediately slithered back to his waist like a living thing.

Shi Mu observed the lanky youth’s action closely from the side of the ring. He had heard that this fellow’s name was Ruan Che[1], feared by many as a powerful opponent. Judging from his clean movement, his skills at soft weapons must be quite good. No wonder he was ranked ninth among all the new disciples, having defeated seven or eight challengers with efficiency. However, it was not a difficult decision for Shi Mu if ever he should try to challenge this Ruan Che. His eyes were luminous and calm when he leaped to the ring without any hesitation.

“This is Shi Mu, and, with all due respect, I would like to challenge you.” Shi Mu issued his challenge in a flat, steady voice.

Again the audience burst into an uproar. Now that most of them had refurbished their memories of Shi Mu, who would not get excited about the prospect of seeing two “high ranked” guys fighting each other?

The judge for this ring was a junior disciple with sunken cheeks and glazed eyes. But Shi Mu's sudden appearance made his eyes dilate with cold light, though only for an instant.

Ruan Che seemed to know Shi Mu, too. After measuring Shi Mu from head to toe, he said with a serious tone, "Well, I'd like to see if your knife could win my whip!" This said, he narrowed his eyes, which now had become serious and focused. He was ready to tear his opponent to pieces.

"Begin!"

As soon as the judge's voice fell, Shi Mu shot towards Ruan Che. The next moment, a flash of his steel knife threw nine shadows at Ruan Che's face. Ruan Che was caught unprepared. He had never thought of Shi Mu as a quick attacker. But he did not win all of his previous matches by sleeping through them. He reacted quickly, letting out a low shout, then his real Qi wound its way through the whip, which traced a beautiful arc in the air before it transformed into nine whip shadows that stopped the nine knife shadows on their way. The clash made an explosion in the air, sending air waves rippling to all directions.

Just then, the whip whizzed out, like a viper seeking its prey, penetrating through the air with an unstoppable momentum. It slid toward Shi Mu's chest from an awkward angle, nigh unblockable angle!

Note:

[1]: Ruan is a family name chosen randomly by the author, whereas "Che"

means as quick as the wind.

p.S.: Eli, this chapter's name is made by me presumptuously. The original is just "Challenge". Sort of uninteresting. Plus, the bride thing is also added by me, aiming to make fun of Shi Mu. Alright, he is a good boy, haha. You can cut this part if you don't like brides. (I love brides, anyway. Would like one for myself).

[A] - I get a kick out of how Humbert Jin doesn’t like Shi Mu. :P

Chapter 81 - The Second Day

The incoming whip did not catch Shi Mu unprepared, as Re Che had thought. To his surprise, the whip missed its target, who ducked aside, as if he had foreseen his opponent's movements. Shi Mu made a counterblow, producing ten cuts in one breath, sending ten blade shadows roaring toward Ruan Che's left shoulder. The lanky youth's countenance changed, but only for a short moment, before he rapidly flicked his whip to call it back. The wriggling black snake soon answered to its owner, coming back to form a black net in front of Ruan Che's chest, shielding his body behind it.

Shi Mu responded to the 'loyal snake servant' with a sneer, not slowing his knife one bit. The next moment, an ear-deafening boom echoed throughout the plaza, and the audience saw the ten blade shadows crash against the whip net before they disappeared. Shi Mu's eyes glared, his hands shook the knife, instilling real Qi into his weapon, which, in turn, droned faintly while trembling and emitting white light.

"Ha!" Shi Mu let out a loud shout, wielding his knife with both hands, and launched a powerful thrust. The steel knife caught light and glared, then, before one could make out its trace, eleven blade shadows plummeted toward Ruan Che.

The junior judge, with sunk cheeks on the ring, felt his blood chill, his eyes seeking Ruan Che's anxiously. "Eleven cuts in one breath! This bastard is really hiding his actual strength! No wonder brother Su was defeated by him!" He cursed silently.

Simultaneously, Ruan Che turned pale with fright, overwhelmed by Shi Mu's successive attacks and the ever increasing momentum. He could only wield his

black whip desperately, trying to resist the blows, but, with Shi Mu's attacks being flawless, he could find no weak points to strike back. This realization filled him with fear.

The black net was finally broken, with the whip snapping into small pieces, its handle left in Ruan Che's hand, like a dead fish unable to flop anymore. Before Ruan Che was able to recover from the shock, his was dazzled by another blow of eleven blade shadows, cascading down to his head, his body was in imminent danger of being cut into halves.

Right then, a tall figure flashed to Ruan Che's aid, forestalling the tragic end that was to take place in the very next moment. He was none other than the junior judge with sunk cheeks, who had been watching the match closely the entire time. He waved his sleeve casually, and a silver short spear appeared, from nowhere, in his hand, clashing with Shi Mu's knife. The spear shook violently as it met the knife, accompanied by an invisible air wave, charged with enormous energy. In an instant the eleven knife shadows were all mercilessly crushed.

Shi Mu's face drained of color as he received great shock from being crushed so easily. A terrible force crept onto his hand through his own knife, almost knocking him over. He felt his stomach upturned, his muscles screeching in pain. But he did not allow himself another minute to panic over this sudden attack. He supported his body with full strength, steadying it after it was pushed back half a step.

"You proud thing, if you ever overlook our sect's rules and try to kill, my spear will bring you to justice!" The judge took back his spear with a turn of his palm, and though he spat the bold words, which made him feel quite proud of himself, his eyes showed a trace of uneasiness, incongruous with his previous bluster. As a matter of fact, he had harbored a secret grudge against Shi Mu ever since the latter defeated his friend White Su, who should have entered the top ten rank. Now that a chance was in his hand to vent the anger, he did not hesitate to

strike with full force. But the result was contrary to his expectation. Shi Mu took the blow without getting wounded in the process. This was very humiliating to an Advanced Houtian Warrior, like himself!

“Your humble servant has overdone this match, and he begs for senior’s forgiveness.” Shi Mu changed countenance and hurriedly took back his steel knife, apologizing with clasped hands.

Luo Yunji threw Shi Mu a cold glance, and, without a word, walked to the other side of the ring. Under the watchful eyes of the audience, this was as far as he could go. Ruan Che took a meaningful look at Shi Mu, flung his whip handle on the ground, and walked off the ring with a stern face.

“Winner, Shi Mu!”

As the judge’s reluctant voice resounded, the audience broke into hails. They had been astounded by Shi Mu’s imposing manner in the fight, his clean cuts, devoid of any wasted movements. His overpowering air seemed to bring Death to the very air they breathed in, reducing the environment to a dead silence that lingered even after the fight. For the following time, nobody dared to challenge Shi Mu. Before him, the new disciples kept silent, like cicadas in cold weather. Finally, Shi Mu succeeded in sensing the strange tension in the air, and kindly decided to stop pressing the kids any more with his frightening killing intent, that might lead him to kill by accident. After all, the award for top ten winners differs little, and too much attention is never a good thing.

Near the end of the day’s matches, he accepted another two challenges from two of the more courageous primary disciples, who were both made to recognize their naivety after losing their matches to Shi Mu. So Shi Mu secured his No.9 rank without a doubt. As for his acquaintances, Blue Phoenix was ranked No.5, Stone Bai No.7. Xiao Ming also displayed his fair gifts as a future

Adept, which successfully raised him to the place of No.27 (magic is always the antidote to many warrior arts).

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The second day, as dawn broke over the valley, Shi Mu traveled along the familiar road to the circular plaza, holding his steel knife all the way there, which frightened some of the passing disciples without catching Shi Mu's notice. But he was surprised to find Stone Bai and Blue Phoenix already at the venue, both surrounded by their supporters.

Right now Stone Bai was discussing something with Xiao Ming. The former had made himself a famous star by playing a loyal friend, a strong warrior, and especially after his first day's electrifying performance in the matches his reputation had been greatly boosted.

"Brother Shi, so you've come! You really surprised us yesterday, amazing the world with your brilliant feat!" As soon as he spotted the knife-holding Shi Mu, Stone Bai was all smiles, greeting him like a host of the plaza, his enthusiasm even arousing Huo Mao and Xiao Ming standing aside.

"Brother Bai, you flattered me. All I have is some stupid strength, how can I compare with you?" Shi Mu waved off Stone Bai's dramatic praises, smiling. Then he noticed that Huo Mao was dressed differently today, in a suit that best showed his muscular shape.

"Brother Huo, are you also participating in the matches today?" Stone Bai directed his eyes to Huo Mao, who was eagerly toying with his double-edged axe.

“Yes! And if you guys want to challenge me, don’t blame me for taking it seriously, haha!” Huo Mao threw them a broad, sunny smile, waving his axe vigorously. The three were taken aback for an span, but Stone Bai soon came to himself and brushed away the tension by bringing up the topic of yesterday’s matches. They talked a bit about the top five that were really good, and that, except for Blue Phoenix, the other four winners were all older primary disciples that had entered the sect a little earlier than themselves.

As the three had chatted, the plaza had already been filled with many more disciples than the day before. In fact, basically all the elder primary disciples had gathered here.

After a day of intense fighting, the new disciples that were present numbered less than two hundred, the others had already been eliminated. Among the ones who were present, only the top thirty were eligible to challenge the elder disciples. They are also the only ones with a chance to win. After all, the elder ones had practiced Houtian arts a year longer than them, what else would a new disciple, behind No.30, want from them, except humiliation? According to Huo Mao, the previous matches showed that even the top ten new disciples had only a slim chance of winning. Anyway, though the second day was for “kids” to challenge “teenagers”, the fighting would not be as exciting as the other two days’, considering that the results were almost foreseeable.

Before long, it was nine o’clock in the morning. Some clear clatters of gongs and drums announced the official start of second day’s challenges. The crowd on the plaza fell silent for a moment before they broke into an uproar of anticipation.

Chapter 82 - Crushing Defeats

For a quarter of an hour, no one dared to issue a challenge, despite that the plaza was teeming with eligible challengers. Gradually, the originally clamorous crowd sank into a total silence.

Shi Mu was also affected by this heavy atmosphere. He had seen many new disciples itching to have a go, the desire for triumph burning in their eyes. But now they must be all waiting for the boldest among them to launch the first challenge, so that they could, at least, come to the ring with some lessons learned.

When he turned to look around, Shi Mu found that Stone Bai and Xiao Ming were, unexpectedly, a little nervous, but just as he tried to say something to ease the tension an exasperated voice resounded, ” Listen carefully, you new disciples! I shall call it a day if no one makes a challenge in the next hour!”

The origin of the voice led Shi Mu’s eyes to a platform near the black stone monument, which recorded the rank of primary disciples. An elderly man, with white hair, was sitting lazily on a wisteria wood chair with a wine canteen in his hand.

His voice was, in fact, not a sonorous one, but spread out over the plaza like an explosion that took people’s breath away. Right after he had finished speaking, the crowd began to boil with excitement. There were discussions between new disciples, but more noises came from the sneering of old disciples at the freshmen’s “lack of guts”.

“I will be the first!”

There came out a loud shout from a ring not far from Shi Mu.

A figure appeared in the crowd, with his arms spreading like a big bird flying into the air. He jumped and landed in the center of the ring steadily.

“This is Kang Yong, who wants to challenge senior Jing Han, who ranks No.1342.” The man clasped his hands to the junior disciple judge and said. This No. 1342 was one of the lowest ranked of the old primary disciples. The crowd, again, broke into a heated uproar of discussion.

Shi Mu fixed his eyes upon the challenger, who had bright and clean eyes. Judging from his strong build and fighting spirit, he was definitely a nobody.

“Kang Yong? The name rang a bell.” Shi Mu thought to himself.

He soon recalled that this Kang Yong ranked twelfth in yesterday’s competition, with his Art of Nine Postures of the Windy Cannon. His fist was as fast as the wind and had great explosive force.

“Is Jing Han on the plaza? Come to accept the challenge! You have three seconds to come out, or you give up your rank by default!” The judge first looked Kong Yong up and down then shouted to the crowd.

Just after his announcement a young man with a fierce look jumped out of the crowd, flipping through the air before he, to0, landed in the ring steadily. A head shorter than Kang Yong, he was not short of a vicious air in the slightest.

“I ask for senior to give me some pointers!” Kang Yong had seemed extremely strong and bold when he came to the ring earlier, but now he seemed to be dwarfed by a man much shorter than himself. The man’s malicious look sent chills down his spine. But still, he steeled himself, straightened his back and answered as politely as he could.

“Don’t talk rubbish, come on!” The fierce young man glared at him and spoke poisonously.

Hearing these words, blood rushed to Kang Yong’s face. His feet trampling on the ground, he twisted his waist and soon darted to Jing Han’s back. His fist was glowing with green light as he punched his opponent mercilessly.

The scornful look on Jing Han’s face evaporated. He turned his body and approached his opponent, rather than evading him. As the two clashed, a green and a red ray clashed too, glaring for a second before dying out.

A muffled noise resounded, and Kang Yong was knocked into the air, like a falling kite, falling out of the ring. When he hit the ground he was already unconscious. Obviously, Kang Yong was badly injured.

The vicious-looking man patted his hands and stepped down the ring as if nothing had happened.

All the new disciples, around the ring, were thrown into a panic. Actually, the fight ended so fast that few clearly saw what happened when the two had clashed. But they did witness the tragic end. Now even those who had been harboring a secret illusion of winning had to face the harsh reality.

Shi Mu's face also fell.

Though he was not near to the ring, he had seen every bit of the process, with utmost clarity.

Kang Yong was really quite fast and his fist was traveling accurately when it had almost hit on Jing Han's body. But Jing Han had stronger Qi, so Kang Yong was struck into the air by his fierce fist of the fire element, like a scorched bird.

The old disciple's vicious air still lingered over after he left. The first challenge ended up with such a fearful result that, for some time, no one dared to make another challenge.

Just as Shi Mu was recalling the details of the last match, Stone Bai leaped onto the ring with a long laugh from close by. He chose to challenge a disciple called Gongchun Peng, ranked 1341st.

Soon, an ordinary-looking young man, with a dark complexion, appeared in front of Stone Bai, and the match began after they had saluted to each other.

Stone Bai started with a violent attack. The muscles on his arms protruding from his skin and his fists bombarded the other like torrential rain. His fists brought the wind with them and loud explosions resounded. Hot air waves spread around the ring, the heat even reached many disciples near the ring.

Shi Mu concentrated on Stone Bai's movements.

Stone Bai had, undoubtedly, strengthened his real Qi to a great extent, after joining the Holy Spirit Group. He must have reached a higher stage of the All-

Yang Art, and the faint red glow above his fist proved his substantial progress in martial arts too.

However, the black-robed young man did not show the slightest traces of concern. He stood still, without moving his body, and lifted his red hand gently, producing, out of nowhere, a vast screen of faint blue, which looked like a phantom. The power of this phantom was substantial and Stone Bai's attack was instantly dispelled.

Stone Bai was shocked for a brief moment, but his arms continued to grow even stronger, with every muscle swelling to twofold its original size. Simultaneously, the blue screen also expanded greatly, shrouding the black-robed young man like a shield of boiling air. Just then, the black-robed young man finally moved his body!

He rotated once on the ground, after which an unusual blue cyclone emerged swirling from nowhere, breaking the fist shadow around him; at the same time, his figure swayed into three black shadows dashing toward Stone Bai.

The sight dazzled Stone Bai, and he only saw something flashing before his eyes before he found that the black-robed young man had already approached him. Under great shock, he took back his arms to cover his chest, but a great blue palm as hard as steel had followed closely, leaving him no time to defend.

"Peng" A loud sound echoed.

Stone Bai only felt a brute force pressing upon him like a giant mountain, making him unable to breathe. His arms were numb and his chest was exposed.

But before he could grasp for a breath, the black figure had flashed to his side, the opponent's right leg stomping Stone Bai's chest like a spear thrust. Stone Bai wanted to vomit all the contents in his stomach, but his body trembled so terribly that he could not even lower his upper body to vomit. The next moment, he was hit by his opponent and flung out of the ring, like a useless broken sack, thrown away by its owner without the least sympathy.

Under the ring, Xiao Ming got a terrible shock seeing what had happened, but he soon darted out and caught Stone Bai in midair. The strong force took him three steps to steady himself.

Though the process seemed quite complex, it actually finished only in an instant. Most of the new disciples under the ring only saw Stone Bai dashing amid numerous phantoms of fists, that the figure of the black-robed young man flashed for an instant, and that Stone Bai was down the next second. Astounded, they tried to talk away the shock and fright with their equally shocked companions.

Under Xiao Ming's help, Stone Bai slowly sat down, legs crossed. He rested with his eyes shut for a long while before redness gradually returned to his cheeks.

"Are you all right Brother Bai?" Shi Mu came with a concerned face, asking seriously as he saw the footprint on Stone Bai's chest.

Stone Bai opened his eyes and threw Shi Mu a bitter smile that explained everything.

Meanwhile, Shi Mu caught a glimpse of a figure he was familiar with. Stone Bai and Xiao Ming also seemed to have spotted it too. The three cast their eager

glances in the same direction and found Blue Phoenix standing proudly on a ring, dozens of meters away. She had already chosen her competitor, who was a beautiful girl in a pink skirt, now standing opposite of Blue Phoenix.

Chapter 83 - An Aborted Challenge

The girl in the pink skirt was more of a dancer than a warrior. She moved about the ring like a dancer on a stage. She jumped and slid in a graceful manner, the way a swallow would flit across a spring lake, leaving a trace of pink afterimages in the air. Thus, Blue Phoenix's quick moves, which she herself had always been proud of, were outshone in every sense.

At the very moment when everyone felt that Blue Phoenix was to lose, the crisp clatters of her bells reverberated through the plaza. Subsequently, the girl in pink skirt suddenly slowed her pace, her countenance changed. Shi Mu and Stone Bai exchanged a knowing look: Blue Phoenix had resorted to her Bloodline power again.

However, the pink skirted girl soon recovered from this brief shock. She snorted and flicked one hand, then a blood red paper charm emerged, from nowhere, in her hand. A gentle wave of the charm enveloped the girl's body in a glowing layer of red before her figure diminished into a blur, and finally into a streak of pink light, that whizzed past Blue Phoenix. The next moment, the audience found Blue Phoenix unconscious on the ground.

This result made Shi Mu realize the strength gap between a new disciple and an old one, even though they were all of the primary level. Also, he was now fully made aware of the Black Demon Sect's general power, and the calculation of all the seven big sects' power was clearer. He shook his head his eyes filled with a dull look.

The present juncture also enlightened the new disciples that this second day's competition was a mere pretext, that actually their sect's true purpose of holding the games was to take the edge off the newborn calves' spirits, showing

them the huge gap between them and the real tigers. The sect encourages competition based on actual strength rather than mere bravado. Despite their poor rank, these old disciples' strength still far exceeded the newcomers'. Shi Mu knew clearly that even with his nigh consummate Thirteen Series of Gale Force Blade Art and his brute force, he still only had a slim chance of winning. With such sobering thoughts in his mind, Shi Mu decided to wait and see.

As he mused about the possibilities of winning, three new disciples launched their challenges, one after another. Though the results were almost the same, one of the challengers came near to a draw with the elder disciple he fought. This turn of event rekindled the severely discouraged new disciples' hope, to the extent that more came to the ring for a try. At the competition's peak, four challenges were going on simultaneously on the plaza.

At this time, Xiao Ming was no longer able to resist his eagerness to exhibit his magical talent. After throwing Shi Mu and Stone Bai a quick meaningful glance, he strode, impatiently to the nearest empty ring. When approaching it, he scuttled a few steps, stood on his toes and then dashed skyward before he dropped on the ring at last. He seemed well prepared when he named the old disciple whom he wanted to challenge, the 1300th ranked primary disciple. Immediately a plump fellow answered, and moved slowly to the ring.

Seeing this Shi Mu's eyes slightly widened. He turned his head and asked Stone Bai, "Brother Bai, is brother Xiao a registered Adept of our sect?"

"That's correct. He took the test at the Hall of Magic, and was found to have a high aptitude for Fire-Sensing." Stone Bai answered without thinking.

Shi Mu nodded as he had already expected this answer.

Xiao Ming's opponent seemed not a nimble walker at all due to his weight. Plus, Xiao Ming practiced an art that utilized the flexibility of one's body and demanded soft body shape, so it would not be completely impossible for him to defeat this fat guy. Xiao Ming himself had long come out with a tactic since Bright Jin had leaked the information to him before the matches.

After making sure each other's name and rank, the two began their fighting. Xiao Ming stared unblinkingly at the fat youth's every move while muttering incantations to activate his magic. The surging waves of his spirit power began to work up inside his body, and soon a hot air billow spread out in front of him.

"An Adept!" Someone shouted under the ring, and the crowd was stirred by this news. The fat youth also paused for a short moment, an exasperated look in his eyes. Soon as if having made a new decision, he stomped with full strength, making the floor of the ring even tremble slightly. The great force made him bounce up in the air, swooping down on Xiao Ming, like a shooting star, his fists thrust forward, like two boulders rolling down a huge mountain, stirring two blasts of wind that even blew dust around Xiao Ming. Xiao Ming lost his poise before such a vehement attack, somewhat forgetting how to even use his Mysterious Steps.

A discovery the next second shocked him even more: he found the small sum of real Qi, he had accumulated by taking great pains, was diminishing under the threat of the fat youth's fists, and the steps he had practiced a hundred times were now full of flaws. The urgent situation pressed him to resort to his trump card. Gritting his teeth, he pointed his right index finger forward, shooting a fire ball the size of a human head flying toward the fat youth at a speed one-third faster than Shi Mu had last seen. At this moment, the fat man was still up in the air, and seeing that there was no way he could dodge the fire ball, he decided to crush it with his fists, which then fell down like thick raindrops onto the ball of blaze.

The ball exploded in mid-air, with fire shooting to all directions. The powerful air billow pushed the fat youth backward for some distance, but he soon leaped up again, dashing toward Xiao Ming with a twisted face. The two were quite near at the moment, so Xiao Ming had to stop his incantations and fully concentrate on his steps. This time, his Mysterious Steps worked, and he floated backward like a fallen leaf, dodging successfully the fat youth's blow. But his opponent would not let him go, hunting him all over the ring. Xiao Ming had no choice but resign himself to his doomed defeat, knowing that he would never win the fat man head-on, and he could find no more chances of performing his magic. After playing the hunter-and-prey game for half an hour, he finally fell over the ring and admitted defeat.

Seeing this Shi Mu let out a soft sigh and left the ring without any regret.

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Several days later.

As Shi Mu was practicing the Art of the Heavenly Elephant in his room, someone knocked on the door. After some time, a strange young man's voice came from the other side, "Could I ask if senior Shi Mu is in? This humble servant has come to deliver his award."

The words made Shi Mu's eyes light up with excitement. He answered and opened the door, seeing a servant disciple in black uniform waiting at his door respectfully, with a parcel in his hand.

"I am Shi Mu." Shi Mu said, with an expressionless face.

The servant disciple had done his job making sure this was indeed Shi Mu's residence, so he passed the parcel to him and left without a word, after making a

deep bow.

She Mu returned to his room in haste and opened the parcel to check the contents, which delighted him greatly: two white bottles and five million silver notes. He opened the lids, with trembling hands, and was overjoyed to find two Blood-Strengthening Pills in the bottles. What excited him more was the five million silver, more than sufficient to buy enough pills for the next stage's training.

The thought made him unable to wait any longer. After storing the pills in a safe place, he immediately set out for the shops and did not return until having satisfied himself with buying a lot of pills. For the next month, he could happily stay closed in his room to practice his arts.

Chapter 84 - Magic Charms

Shi Mu was now sitting on his stone bed, meditating in silence.

He had gained five million silver[A] - a real fortune - from the competition, and he, undeniably, needed the money. But, on the other hand, the cost of his training had always been prohibitive, with the expenditure exponentially increasing as he progressed. Therefore, it would not be wrong to say that this reward was as inadequate a cup of water before a burning bale of hay. With this in mind, it seemed to be high time for Shi Mu to make good use of the arts that he received from the General Sutra House.

Having made this decision, Shi Mu took out some jade slips, containing the art of charms, and put them against his forehead. Numerous characters filled his mind. He read through them, word by word, and did not finish until an hour later. Letting out a long breath, he put down the slips and rubbed his sore eyes. This was a great deal of information, which made his head heavy. After a short break, he went onto the other silver slips, the copy of The Elementary Formula Art.

After over half a day, Shi Mu finally finished browsing through the two records, and then he was fully convinced that Uncle Ju was right: the formula art and charm art were closely related, and a comprehensive study of the two would bring a much more complete mastery of the magic arts. It would be safe to say that charm magic was a simplified version of the formula art, with the former more practical whereas the latter more theoretical. It is generally accepted that a simplified version is less difficult to learn, though less powerful than the full version. Paper charms, once made beforehand, are convenient to carry about, and the spirit power instilled in them can easily be unleashed. But this is easier said than done. The process of making a powerful paper charm requires a scholar to practice that charm hundreds of times before he can truly make the

charm. In other words, the making of a paper charm is an exacting art.

Discovering the two's intimate relation seemed to melt a block in Shi Mu's mind, sending him deep into thought.

Indeed, the formula art shares a lot of common knowledge with the charm art, but the latter is relatively easier. Therefore, the formula art can wait until he himself has achieved some degree of proficiency in the charm art. Then the training of the formula art will be less taxing.

Having decided this, his initial confusion, in front of so many arts, was cleared. Shi Mu put away the slips of the formula art and turned to thoroughly study the Great Sutra of Magical Charms. According to this ancient book, every magic character is charged with the energy of heaven and earth, which is then transformed into spirit power, by an Adept. From simple patterns to convoluted magic seals, magic characters pervade as the very basic foundation of all charm arts. Therefore, in order to make a paper charm, a comprehension of the most commonly used magic characters is needed. These characters share the same origin - the characters of the five elements, which serve as the basic building blocks to construct different styles of charms, based on all kinds of designs. This would seem to be a vivid and straightforward process for Shi Mu, but, strangely, the comprehension of magic characters has proved to be extremely difficult, if not insurmountable. Otherwise, there would not have been so many scholars whose dream of being a charm Adept fell to pieces after spending several fruitless years learning the magic characters. Among these failed scholars, some failed to even draw a single character of the five elements.

This did not seem to be a cheerful prospect for Shi Mu. He sank into a gloomy mood, thinking about this less visited path he had chosen. But to quit midway was never his way of doing things. A sparkle of stubbornness appeared in his eyes. He re-crossed his legs, sat on his rock-hard bed, and began to slowly adjust his breathing. His mind emptied, his breath slowed down, he felt a coolness

winding its way into his head, and the stress, stirred by his earlier apprehension, gradually faded. He carefully lifted the slips again to his eyes, his face solemn, and began to study the first character of the five elements.

There are a few hundred of basic characters recorded in the Great Sutra of Magical Charms. As a beginner, Shi Mu choose the simplest one, with the least strokes, a character of the fire element.

Three days slid by, as he immersed himself in the deep ocean of magic characters. One would be startled to find Shi Mu in the same posture he made three days ago: legs crossed, upper body straightened, totally motionless. His eyes were tightly shut as if he would fail if he opened them even slightly. Deep in his mind, some red beams were condensing into a blurred ball, then began a constant, random metamorphosis, stretching out. Bit by bit, the upper part of the blur gradually took the shape of a weird-looking sign while the lower part was still in the process of stretching and changing constantly as if it was having trouble.

Right this moment, without warning, the red blur exploded, with a thunderous crack. Shi Mu let out a muffled groan and simultaneously opened his eyes. His forehead was drenched with sweat, sliding down his pale cheeks, his chest was heaving as he took deep breaths. Suddenly, some strange sensation made him feel his nose. It was blood. Blood was trickling from his nostrils.

Shi Mu paused, surprised for a moment before he released a long sigh and looked for a piece of cloth to wipe the blood. After he finished, he moved to the window, through which the night sky peered, with the dark color taking on an enigmatic quality which took his breath away. For some time, he just stood by the windowsill, staring blankly at the stars.

The sutra did not underwrite the difficulty of understanding the magic

characters indeed. For three days, he could not even absorb the meaning of the simplest character of the fire element. Is it because there's not the slightest talent for magic in me? She Mu muttered to himself, almost giving up. For he had learned from the ancient book that mastering the magic characters was only the first step of making a valid paper charm. Two more steps still await ahead to challenge him and mock his weakness. After comprehending each character successfully, he needed to draw the characters on a magic paper to accomplish a certain magic charm. Every magic art of the five elements has its corresponding formula, even for the simplest fireball. The number of magic characters involved in a paper charm ranges from five or six, on the easier side, to dozens or even hundreds, when the formula is more elaborate. Moreover, a good memory of all the characters is no guarantee for drawing a powerful paper charm. The drawing requires the utmost precision. Even the relative positions of different characters should be paid close attention to. Therefore, behind a degree of natural talent, is years of conscientious practice and a heart of perseverance.

Now that the second step was done, he would have to confront the, relatively, easier third step: the instilling of spirit power into the paper charm, which means to store the spirit power of the Adept in the paper charm. Whenever needed, the paper charm can unleash the power, the way a battery works. But even this simple-looking step has some tricks to it. Generally speaking, most charm Adepts have the ability to sense, at most, two or three elements, which means, when instilling spirit power into the paper charms, he cannot go beyond the elements he is able to sense. If ever the charm were to involve other elements he couldn't arouse, he could only resort to heavenly stones, which are usually sold at exorbitant prices. Hence, countless scholars have stopped at a dead end, their path obstructed.

"I've just started, it's too early to have nightmares about things in the future." Shi Mu thought to himself, quelling his fears and doubts. He shook his head vigorously, trying to sway the gloomy thoughts out of his head. One hour had passed, unnoticed, during his trance. Before he realized it, a new moon had risen from the western sky, as chaste as a newborn baby, its silver rays generously

embracing the world with a gentle coolness. Shi Mu suddenly thought of his deals with the moon, though totally disregarding her female beauty. These days, large clouds had snatched the beautiful “girl” from him, so he was on the verge of complaining about this issue when the moon finally showed herself tonight.[B]

Calming his mind, he decided to forget all about the charms and stuff, straightened up his room, then quietly walked out of his room. After a quarter of an hour, he, once more, arrived at a clearing in the woods. There, he sat down, legs crossed, his mind purified by the gentle moonlight, and soon he entered his usual dreamland. Turning into the white ape again, he made the posture of the Moon-Swallowing Art, and soon myriad light dots appeared in the night sky, falling toward the ape’s pupils. Shi Mu was quite delighted when he found the accumulating speed of the light dots was undoubtedly increased, which suggested that, with his spirit power was developing, the speed of his absorbing the moonlight’s essence also escalated.

As his mind began to teem with light dots, that soon got absorbed by his mind, a faint, but growing, feeling of coolness began to grow into a trickle, that washed away all the previous anxiety and depression, brought by the magic charms. The thick dots, once they entered his mind, transformed into white fogs that gathered and condensed into the usual white cloud. At this time, he saw something that shocked him! The white cloud in his mind seemed to be extremely similar to the red blur that he created in his mind, earlier when he tried to fathom the first magic character!

Notes:

[A] - Some of you are going to be, like, “Check your math” and “Are you sure he meant 5,000,000?” So I am going to say this now. I was raging about the mysterious disappearing money long before you guys were, and the issue lies not with us, but the author. So please don’t fill the comment area (and our Reddit

pages) with comments/concerns/complaints about this issue. As of RIGHT NOW, I am going to presume that Shi Mu has spent some money on pills/mats, so it is safe to assume that he should have X money, with 4.5m < X < 5m.

(For those who don't know what I am talking about: Shi Mu got a LOT of money from several sources. His aunt gave him 3m silver because she promised him the Qi Ling Pill and she couldn't give him one after the city found out he had 'waste blood'. Then, when being chased by the Wu and Jin families, he killed the Houtian Warrior of the Wu family and took his money [which was said to amount to 7 or 8 million silver]. Thus, he should have had 10-11m silver. This is a ridiculous amount of money, and we know he spent very little before arriving at the sect. [it would be surprising if he had to spend over 1k silver to arrive at the boat dock/port, where he was kidnapped]

So, we are at the end of month 2, since entering the sect(Chapter 64), Shi Mu only has 30k silver and states that it is enough for ½ a month of pills. [Which implies that he has spent ~120k on pills since he arrived at the sect.] Knowing that Shi Mu has not had to spend money on food or housing ('cause the sect provides 'sustenance'), the only other expenditure Shi Mu has had [besides pills] is the cost of paying for a 'party' for Huo Mao at the tavern. [and he split the cost of that with Stone Bai and Xiao Ming, who probably don't have that much money]

Anyway, presuming that Shi Mu spent ~150-160k silver, we are missing 9.8-10.8m silver.

^This is the issue)

[B] - Funny Chinese idiom XD

Chapter 85 - Characters and Dreams

Recognizing the character, he began to concentrate on the white cloud, doing everything he could to see if he could condense the cloud into a magic character. While he did not hope for much, the moment he started focusing, the white cloud began to rapidly rotate, gradually forming a magic character - the one he had been trying to comprehend earlier.

But one thing was different. The character should have been red since it was of the fire element, but this one was white. He paused, which made the character immediately lose its form, collapsing into a shapeless white cloud, with no sign of re-coalescing.

Mildly shocked, Shi Mu comforted himself in the fact that characters formed in his dreams would not really count. He quickly resumed his former poise and calmness, proceeding with his Moon-Swallowing Art. Soon the night passed and daylight began to take hold, the moon receding into darkness. Shi Mu woke up with a start, feeling wonderfully refreshed. He let out a long breath, straightened his shirt, and stood up. He began an internal check, working his way from his dantian to his mind, and that was when he got received a large shock.

Right now, in his mind, a blood red character was floating quietly, deep in his sea of consciousness, glowing softly, like a dying firefly. This was the character of the fire element, which he had failed to understand after three day's musing.

"Why now...?" Shi Mu was dumbstruck, unable to believe what he saw in his brain. The next moment, he started to laugh. He did not regain his usual calmness until god-knows-how-many minutes later, the spontaneously happy expression fading from his face. So it seems that the ape's dream was more powerful than he had thought! Shi Mu shook the morning dew off his shirt and

walked to his house.

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Several days later, Shi Mu came to the valley plaza in excellent spirits. He stopped before a three-storey building with red tile roof, down the path from where he used to buy pills. A glamorous board, above its gate, said “Five Elements House”. Shi Mu had noticed this place long ago, when he visited the medicine shop for the first time, and bore it in mind in case he, one day, might need to go there.

To his disappointment, no one greeted him when he entered the first floor. A huge, wooden counter filled his view, and he saw a skinny middle-aged man with a goatee busily leafing through a thick wad of hides. Two black-robed servants were also deeply engaged in bookkeeping.

Finally, the skinny man noticed someone had entered. He stopped, looked up, and smiled, “Can I help you, little brother? Buying or selling?”

“Oh, you resell things?” Shi Mu was secretly moved, but did not let his excitement show on his face.

“That’s right, we resell anything concerning magic. Do you have something you would like to sell to us?” The skinny man’s eyes sparkled.

“Not really, I’m here for some materials to draw paper charms. Could you please recommend some good materials for me?” Shi Mu replied, with a faint smile.

“Drawing paper charms? Then you’ll need a magic brush, ink, and some paper. If you would take a look over here you will see the best magic paper we have. Made from Purple Magic Trees, at least a hundred years old. Excellent at absorbing magic ink, and able to enhance the power of the charm being made.“ The skinny man began his introduction enthusiastically, fetching a wad of magic paper from the shelf behind his back. The scent, given off by the paper, soon filled the air.

“How much does this wad cost?” Shi Mu asked tentatively.

“Not much. Only thirty thousand silver.” The skinny man extended three fingers.

Though he prepared himself, Shi Mu was still shocked by the exorbitant price. Thirty thousand silver for a hundred pages of magic paper! That means a piece of magic paper costs as much as three hundred silver!

Shi Mu frowned as he steeled himself to ask the embarrassing question, “er...what’s the price for your cheapest paper?”

This question made the smile fade from the skinny man’s face. He slowly put down the precious paper and answered in a cold voice, “one thousand five hundred silver!”

“Then what about your cheapest ink and brush?” Shi Mu calculated in his heart and asked again.

“Each costs three thousand.”

“Well. I’ll have a set.” Shi Mu made the decision, handing the man seven thousand five hundred silver notes.

With an expressionless face, the skinny man took the notes and, with a quick, uninterested glance, waved to a servant disciple and whispered to him. Again he began to leaf through the hides as if forgetting Shi Mu’s presence. But if he believed that this abrupt change of attitude would lead Shi Mu into regret and self-criticism for his stinginess, he would be utterly wrong. Shi Mu was not in the least upset with being cheap, though he might feel sore from spending more than he had originally intended.

A short while later, a servant disciple approached him, passing him a parcel containing the stuff he had ordered. The brush was made from some unknown animal’s hair, the ink looked quite common, and the wad of yellow paper contained a hundred pages. After checking the stuff, Shi Mu nodded, satisfied, and asked the servant to wrap them.

After leaving the Five Elements House, he returned to his room and shut the door. He did not pick up the parcel, but instead sat down and closed his eyes, waiting until he was as calm as possible to continue. Then he scattered the contents of the parcel on his desk, examining them one by one. Choosing a single page from the wad, he spread it on the desk and opened the lid of the ink. Immediately an unpleasant smell of blood came out of the bottle, but this did not disturb him. Shi Mu picked up the magic brush, concentrated his thoughts, and slowly closed his eyes, his face solemn. The red magic character emerged in his mind, rotating unceasingly.

After studying the character for a long time, he opened his eyes and let out a long breath. While recalling the strokes of the character, he dipped the brush in the ink, and, with the lowest speed he could manage, Shi Mu wrote the character bit by bit, as if painting a complex picture.

It took him, altogether, two complete hours to finish writing the magic character.

Having finished, he found himself to be covered in sweat. He then picked up the paper with the utmost caution, studied it with narrowed eyes, made sure there was not the slightest mistake, and only then was able to calm himself down.

Next, without delay, he touched the paper with the tip of his right index finger, and his spirit power gushed out from his lower abdomen. Then, closely following the instructions written in The Great Sutra of Magical Charms, he guided his spirit power into the paper charm.

As power was instilled bit by bit into the charm, dots of light emerged on the paper, which soon joined together, and, when the last bit of his spirit power was instilled, the whole magic character began to shine and wriggle like a living animal.

As things were going smoothly, Shi Mu put down the brush and gestured at the paper, which soon flew to his hand, as if a tamed bird. He gave it a gentle shake, then threw it into the air, and, with a crack, the paper charm caught light, turning into a spark the size of a bean, before it spread to out, burning the paper. The spirit power which had just been instilled into the paper was now unleashed.

Shi Mu's face lit up at the sight, but he soon realized that this was only a trivial success. The magic character was a basic fire element character, which did not count for much when fighting, and, at best, could be used as a lighter. More disappointingly, apart from some basic characters, the Great Sutra of Magical

Charms only recorded some elementary formulas of the five elements. All of the powerful formulas were sold at the Holy Spirit Pavilion at prices much higher than he could afford right now.

Shi Mu shook his head and quietly put the stuff away. He sat on his bed and crossed his legs, contemplating. If only he could become a real charm Adept! Then large amounts of well-paid tasks would come to him, as well as all the best resources. After nourishing his discouraged heart with the tempting mental image, he once again took the charm art out and began studying the next character.

Chapter 86 - Fighting for Charms

Editor Note: I was going to try to explain our slower releases, that we have been experiencing lately, but the TL makes a large post about it in chapter 87, so I'll just let him talk there XD.

Half a year later. In front of Shi Mu's residence.

The yard was filled with an oppressive silence. The air had a sharp edge to it, enough to make anyone feel awkward. Eight black-robed young men stood motionlessly in front of the door, their expressions cold and firm.

Judging by their uniforms, these young men were all primary disciples of the Black Demon Sect. The leader was a golden-haired youth with keen, blue eyes - Bright Jin of the Holy Spirit Association. Apart from his gang, around 10 newer disciples had gathered near Shi Mu's house, whispering to each other. It seemed they had gotten wind of an event worth witnessing.

"Brother Jin, it seems that brother Shi has gone out and probably won't be back for a while. I'll stay and watch. You should be free to go about your day." Huo Mao had been standing beside Bright Jin when he eagerly offered his suggestion. All signs showed that Shi Mu was out for some business: his stone door tightly shut and locked and his windows were closed. But Bright Jin shook off the kind offer and answered in an unhurried tone, "No need. I've got nothing important to do today, and it wouldn't hurt to wait a little longer. After all, these charms are too important, so we can't afford to lose this chance. I must see brother Shi, himself, and ask him in person."

Hearing this, Huo Mao nodded and said no more.

Stone Bai and Xiao Ming were also standing beside Huo Mao, only it was difficult to read their faces. Both harbored their respective emotions behind poker-faces. Stone Bai first broke the embarrassing silence by blurting out something that had been simmering in his heart, “Back then, I knew that brother Shi was no ordinary warrior, but who would have thought he would, not only, have a great gift for magic but also be a genius at making charms! Here he is, less than half a year later, making elementary charms as if he was drinking water from a straw! Can you imagine that?” As he finished speaking, Stone Bai could not help but reveal a trace of admiration, and a little bit of jealousy.

Hearing this, Bright Jin and Huo Mao nodded their agreement, smiling, but the former’s smile was a little forced.

The thing is, just half a year ago, without warning, Shi Mu suddenly showed his talent in charm-making, which not only amazed his peers but also astonished many older disciples. The reason was clear and simple: there are not that many registered Adepts in the Black Demon Sect, and those who can make charms are even rarer - the number could be counted on one hand. Therefore, although Shi Mu was still at the first stage, where he could only make some basic charms of the five elements, this rare and difficult skill had already made the older disciples flinch from offending Shi Mu in any way. Moreover, among all the charm Adepts in the sect, Shi Mu’s chance of making a charm successfully was, undoubtedly, the highest, far surpassing his other fellow Adepts.

More and more disciples had been coming to Shi Mu, requesting that he make charms for them. So many of them, in fact, that Shi Mu had to decline some, and that is why Bright Jin had personally come all the way to Shi Mu’s door.

Indeed, Bright Jin could not help but feel remorseful and angry. Shi Mu’s sudden jump to fame was the last thing he could have predicted. If he had

predicted it, he would have pulled him into their group, no matter what the cost. They would have bathed him with compliments and given him whatever resources he wanted. But now that Shi Mu's reputation had traveled so far that it even reached the sect elders' ears, how could it be simple to make him a part of his group? The gloomy prospect made him sigh.

Xiao Ming was also in a somber mood. He had been in the Holy Spirit Association for over half a year, but all his charm making efforts had proved fruitless. Worse, he was still at the beginning stage of studying the magic characters, of which he had only managed to master two.

Just then, a commotion outside interrupted Xiao Ming's introspection. He turned around and looked toward the source of the noise. At the gate, people were hurriedly making way for another group of older disciples, who marched into the yard with an arrogant air. Bright Jin raised his eyes and looked at the incoming gang, which was none other than the Blood Dragons, led by Qu Kun.

At the sight of Bright Jin and his men, waiting at Shi Mu's door, crestfallen, Qu Kun arrogantly sneer. He loudly hailed Bright Jin, "Brother Jin, I never thought that a famous leader, like you, would wait at a primary disciple's door? That's news to me! Hehe!"

"Aren't you here with the same purpose? Aren't you a famous leader too, brother Qu?" Bright Jin adopted his usual sarcastic tone.

"Brother Shi has skills, which I would like to see with my own eyes. So I'm here." Qu Kun ignored Bright Jin's sardonic questions, faking an innocent smile.

"Stop the rubbish! Half a month ago, you Blood Dragons deliberately offered to pay him more then asked Shi Mu to make dozens of charms! Did we, of the

Holy Spirit Association, interfere? So now it's our turn, please step aside and show us the same respect!" Bright Jin reasoned in a cold voice.

"Higher price, better service. That's always been the rule! Or are you brother Shi's manager, helping him decide his clientele? How much does brother Shi pay you?" After dealing this vigorous counter-blow, Qu Kun could not be more proud of himself. In this battle of words, he had made Bright Jin lose. Bitterly insulted, for a moment all Bright Jin could feel was rage, and could only glower at Qu Kun. The air filled with the fury of war. Sensing death in the air, the onlookers all stepped back, so as not to get caught up in the coming conflict. But everyone had looks of irresistible excitement on their faces, looking forward to the upcoming fighting.

Bright Jin's face grew increasingly fierce, his eyes as cold as ice. He snapped sharp looks at Qu Kun, and, somehow, his shirt began to sway, though there was not a trace of wind.

"Wow, does brother Jin want to teach me a lesson here?" Qu Kun thumped his massive chest and asked in a proud voice.

"I heard that brother Qu had just acquired a sword art. Wolf and Moon, is that the name? Could you please show me how this mean wolf crawls under the bright moon? Let's say that the loser must leave brother Shi alone." Bright Jin again used his rhetoric eloquence to attack his opponent, meanwhile, he silently admired his own intelligence.

"Haha, brother Jin, forget about the wolf and the moon. They've got nothing to do with our business today. We both have come here to ask brother Shi to do something for us, so why all these speeches? If you really want to make speeches, the annual competition is just around the corner, and you'll have plenty of matches in which to display your brilliant abilities." Qu Kun continued

to dodge Bright Jin's verbal attack.

"Is brother Qu afraid of fighting me? If so, I'll let you go intact. But only under the condition that you Blood Dragons leave brother Shi's place as soon as possible!" Bright Jin snorted, but inwardly he had begun to feel that he was at his wits' end. Their group had failed a task, previously, which led them to severe financial loss, so, temporarily, it would be impossible for them to beat the Blood Dragons. Therefore, to entrap Qu Kun in a challenge, which he himself was quite confident he could win, would be his last chance to protect his group.

Just as Bright Jin finished his words, his men began to smile, throwing disdainful looks at the Blood Dragons.

"Humph! I never thought brother Jin would be so fearless! Good, it's been a long time since my sword tasted blood." Qu Kan scanned his surroundings and replied with a vicious smile, simultaneously tightening his grip on the sword's handle. He was clear that the challenge would be to his disadvantage since Bright Jin ranked a little higher than himself among the primary disciples. But under the eyes of so many, he could not just refuse and walk away. That would ruin his group's reputation. So he had no choice but to try his luck. Besides, he had been progressing steadily these past few months, and, even though he could not defeat Bright Jin, a draw would not be impossible.

Bright Jin smirked, knowing that his trap had worked. He gestured his men to back off. Qu Kun's men also stepped back to make an open area for their leader.

Without delay, Qu Kun's sword whistled out of its sheath with a piercing sound. The sword was half an inch longer than ordinary ones, and the edge glowed faintly with red light. It had probably tasted too much human blood, since it kept giving off a nauseating smell. On the other side, Bright Jin's arms sat at rest alongside his body, their owner not intending to use weapons at all.

This was definitely another humiliation to Qu Kun. He shouted loudly, his voice quivering a little, due to anger, then he twisted his sword once before thrusting it toward Bright Jin, with the momentum of a mighty river. The sword pierced the air, emitting a sickening sound like ghosts whining.

Bright Jin's eyes were as clear and firm as before. He stomped abruptly on the ground, and a boom resounded as a powerful energy rushed out of his body. The next moment his figure flashed once before he disappeared.

Consequently, Qu Kun's sword missed its target. Immediately Qu Kun sensed something ominous. Before he knew it, the air surrounding him exploded, and a streak of golden light struck out at him, as if the whole milky way had plummeted. Qu Kun's countenance changed, and, by reflex, he wielded his sword wildly, producing red shadows to protect himself from the attack. The shadows faintly formed a shape of a giant wolf.

Chapter 87 - The Art of Air Explosion

For a period of time, Shi Mu's small yard rang with the clashes of metal on metal. Of course, the sounds did not reach Shi Mu's ears. Bright Jin floated in mid-air, both feet wrapped in a thin layer of golden fog formed by his Qi. By their looks, his feet seemed to be made of refined iron, solid and impenetrable, bumping against Qu Kun's sword without getting wounded. The two collided for at least a dozen times in as short as three breaths, but both were moving really fast that the details eluded everyone's eyes.

Just then, Bright Jin shouted, like an exasperated animal aiming for its final blow, his feet simultaneously stood on the sword. The next moment, he bounced skyward, flipped in midair, then swooped down in Qu Kun's direction, one finger pointed toward Qu Kun's heart.

This was a rather weird movement - pointing out a finger, like an Adept would do when performing some dark magic - though not performed with a fast speed, the action made gave his attack an eerie feeling. Qu Kun was reminded of the Powerful Leg Art that Jin Huan had displayed before, but, before he had more time to think about this mysterious skill, the finger had broken through his shield of sword shadows, all the way to Qu Kun's cheek. Before he knew it, blood was gushing out from a wound on his face. Profoundly shocked, he stumbled back several steps.

Meanwhile, Jin Huan had landed steadily and lightly like a bird alighting on a twig.

"Well done, brother Qu!" Bright Jin regained his nonchalant air, his face curved in a sarcastic smile.

Qu Kun, on the other hand, was filled with anger and humiliation. He slipped his sword into its sheath. “Humph!” He snorted, turning his back and walking away. The other Blood Dragon members followed their leader.

The surrounding disciples burst into a fit of passion, that had been suppressed the entire time, and showered Bright Jin with praises. The fight fascinated the audience, who had not been exposed to such a thrilling scene in a long time. Stone Bai smiled as he walked up to Bright Jin, “Senior Jin has really reached the Consummate stage in his Forceful Leg Art and Mysterious Finger Art!”

“Eh, not yet, I’ve only reached the Advanced stage, not the Consummate. I still have a lot to practice.” Bright Jin shook his head, for someone who was being showered with eager praises and great reverence, he did not seem to be in good spirits. Actually, his two arts, especially his Mysterious Finger Art, are the fruit of several painful years of training. He had planned to give the two dazzling skills a much more official debut in the annual competition, but now that the “bride” had come out of her room before her “wedding”, the effects would be much less surprising. Will the ‘bride’ still able to mesmerize her ‘groom’? Stone Bai sensed the strange despondency in Bright Jin, so he did not pursue the question.

The four of them waited for another hour before a figure, of large stature, finally made its presence, walking along the mountain road in their direction. The newcomer was none other than Shi Mu. The excited crowd seemed to have caught him unprepared. With knit brows he threw them questioning looks that said, why are you here? Am I important enough to have a guard of honor welcoming me home?

Bright Jin immediately walked up and gave him a broad smile, which deepened his doubt even more, “Brother Shi, we’ve been waiting for you for a long time...”

“Sorry to have kept you waiting! I had some errands I had to run.” Shi Mu

smiled, quite embarrassed.

“Haha, don’t worry about it. An able man is always busy, unlike us. I had nothing important to do today, so spending some wonderful time in your cozy yard is quite an enjoyable matter.” Bright Jin replied, his tone clear and honeyed. Shi Mu nodded briefly to Stone Bai, Xiao Ming, and Huo Mao.

After exchanging some pleasantries, Shi Mu finally figured out their purpose of visiting. “Has senior Jin come to ask for some charms?” He asked.

“That’s correct, brother Shi. I am in urgent need of a few dozen charms, and no one I know can finish this exacting task, except you? As for the pay, we won’t let you down, brother Shi.” Bright Jin’s tone became more serious.

“What charms? And how many?” Shi Mu gave it some thought and asked.

Bright Jin was much relaxed hearing Shi Mu’s question. He knew he would accept the job. Quickly he whispered some words into Shi Mu’s ear.

Shi Mu paused to give the offer some thought, then answered briskly, “No problem. Come for the charms five days later.”

“Wonderful! I’ll rely on brother Shi then!” Overjoyed, Bright Jin waved to a fellow disciple who immediately offered Shi Mu a parcel bulging with silver notes. After a brief check, Shi Mu nodded and, without further words, directed the conversation to another subject. After exchanging small talk, they parted and Shi Mu went into his room, alone.

Bright Jin spent some time gazing at Shi Mu’s tightly shut door as if this were

the door to a treasure room. Releasing a sigh, he left with a heavy heart. Aware that there would not be anything worth seeing, the onlookers all dispersed, like birds returning to their nests at dusk. Soon the yard regained its usual quietness.

Inside his room, Shi Mu set the heavy parcel down on his desk for a short rest. Collecting his thoughts, he once again convinced himself that he had taken a good offer. Large though the number of the requested charms was, the charms themselves were just some basic ones that would not take him much time, three days at most. After some thought, he took out a brown bottle and opened its lid. Soon a weird smell exuded, and inside lay a bright yellow pill emitting mild gleam. He had gone out today especially for this pill. For the past half year, though he had steeped himself in magician arts, he did not slack in martial arts either. Making paper charms for other disciples had made enough money for him to buy pills, with which he had accomplished the seconds stage of the Heavenly Elephant Art. Moreover, the third stage would only be a stretch away now that he had got this Heavenly Spirit Pill. But now he should prioritize the making of the charms.

Having decided his tight schedule, Shi Mu let out a soft sigh, calmed himself down, and carefully stored the bottle in a safe place. Taking out a piece of magic paper and laying it on the desk, Shi Mu began his work.

Several days later.

In his stone flat, Shi Mu sat, cross-legged, on the floor, his upper body bare, his eyes closed. Steam rose from his scalp and his sweat poured down, washing his skin, which seemed to have numerous mice squirming beneath. Some unknown amount of time passed and red flush, with increasing intensity, crept over his face. Without warning, he opened his eyes widely and let out a loud shout.

A thunderous noise reverberated through his room, a giant force came from

his body and rippled out in all directions. The stone stool near him slammed into the wall as if flung by an invisible giant hand. Soon, Shi Mu's skin had recovered, the "mice" had disappeared. Shi Mu adjusted his breath, then slowly rose to his full height, his eyes brimming with delight. He had broken through to the third stage of the Heavenly Elephant Art!

Shi Mu felt a restless force inside his body, eager for action. Cocking his head slightly, he caught sight of the steel knife hung on the wall. He stretched out an arm and grabbed the knife, then stretched two fingers of his other hand to pinch the edge of the knife. By working up his real qi and increasing his strength of the pinch, a dent was created on the surface of the knife, leaving an imprint of his fingertips! Shi Mu raised his eyebrows in a triumphant mood. Soon a second idea hit him, bringing him to a halt. He thought for a short while, then held up one of his fingers, flicked his wrist, and muttered an incantation he had not tried before. The spirit power inside his body soon began to circulate, and, when he felt he was ready, Shi Mu suddenly cracked opened his mouth, shooting out a ball of white vapor onto the stone stool! Boom! The heavy stone stool was hit by the vapor ball, and immediately exploded, splinters of stones flying to every corner of the room. Some found their way to fly directly into Shi Mu's face, but he just lifted his hand and waved the small bits and pieces off, with an expressionless face.

Such an astounding power! Outshining Xiao Ming's fireball in every way! This was the Art of Air-Explosion, recorded in the Art of Accumulating Spirit Power, of which Shi Mu had already reached the third stage. But Shi Mu was careful not to reveal any of his magician arts. So naturally, in the half a year that had passed, people all assumed that Shi Mu was still a beginner in the area of magic, only doing better in making paper charms. Now that, with the newly acquired Air-Explosion Art, Shi Mu had a new trump card. Though it took some time to release the air ball in a real fight, it would still be able to catch an opponent off guard.

Chapter 88 - Eyesight Mutation II

Shi Mu threw on some clothing and sat down by his desk. He felt for the holy stone that had been carefully stored in his shirt and took it out give it a closer look. The stone had been warmed to his body temperature, making it subtly glow. Fascinated by the mellow luster, Shi Mu bent his head and just stared at it for a few minutes.

After a while, he forced himself to put away the stone and refocused his attention on his practice of the Great Sutra of Magical Charms. With the slips against his forehead, a complex formula immediately emerged in his mind, made up of twelve magic characters. He gave the formula some thought, then, redirecting his eyes to the stone, muttered to himself, “Magic and Martial arts! One has to choose between the two or specialize in one while taking the other as a secondary major. In other cases, a warrior may turn to magic if he is stuck in a bottleneck in his martial art progress or vice versa. But I’m different from most disciples. I’ve got the Moon-Swallowing Art to help me absorb heavenly energy! Therefore, I can enhance my strength and practice martial arts at the same time. Compared with those aggressive magician arts, formula arts suit me better! Now, to successfully create a Body-Lifting Charm!”

Actually, this blue holy stone in his hand was a rare wind element stone, and the formula Shi Mu had just learned was one of the same element, so the two would be a good match. The stone was given to him, as a reward for his conscientious work, by an older disciple, who had asked him to make dozens of paper charms. But considering the relative scarcity of wind stones, Shi Mu had to exchange one of his water stones for this wind stone. Thinking about his mild loss, he felt a pain in his heart. It’s all right, I can’t sense the wind element, so I’ve got to borrow a power from this little stone, he comforted himself. He then took out a small bottle of ink and a pad of magic paper from his shirt (TL: what an “all-embracing” shirt!). The ink was dark red, giving off an unpleasant smell,

similar to rotten fish, but it's beautiful twinkle somewhat mitigated the disagreeable odor. The paper was deep blue, more exquisitely made than ordinary magic paper, and definitely of a higher quality. This set of paper and ink had cost Shi Mu a large sum of silver, but he had to get it. Naturally, the more complex and powerful a formula is the higher quality of base materials it needs. It is said that formulas of high grade need a kind of ink extracted from very rare animals' blood. Correspondingly, the magic paper is also made from such animals' hides, and must undergo some special processes before one is able to put it to use. But formulas of high grade were far beyond Shi Mu's current ability, so the deep blue magic paper would suffice for a long time to come.

Shi Mu laid the stuff neatly on his desk, took some deep breaths, then picked up the brush. He steeped the brush in the ink and shut his eyes. After spending a few minutes recalling the formula, he opened his eyes.

A shocking scene took place!

Shi Mu's pupils were now dilated to twice its original size. More surprisingly, they had turned to a golden color! At this moment, in his eyes the piece of paper, which was, in fact, the size of his palm, was magnified to the size of an entire desk, and the fine texture of the paper, which eluded naked eyes, was now was as clear as day to him, with the finest grains as enlarged as earthworms!

This eyesight mutation began from his practice of the Art of Accumulating Spirit Power, which he started half a year ago when his eyesight was enhanced greatly. He did not pay much attention to it at first, but when he reached the second stage, he found his eyesight had elevated to an even higher level, with his pupils turning to a golden color as long as he instilled spirit power into them. This mutation had not only boosted his eyesight, but also conferred him an unusual ability: he could turn his eyes into a pair of magnifiers whenever he wanted to, and could magnify the particular article he chose to observe closely.

When he first found it, he was surprised and worried, but once he made use of this ability, to draw paper charms, he felt just like a fish which had gotten into the water again. The reason why is, basically speaking, the success of a paper charm is determined, mainly, by the accuracy of the drawing: whether the magic characters have been written correctly, whether they are put in the right positions, and whether the magic patterns have been drawn strictly according to the authoritative book. Imagine the paper charm is a vast sea, then each character is not a 'lonely island', but should be connected to other characters - 'islands', and their relative position should be as accurate as two islands already specified on a map. The smallest deviation could lead a ship onto a reef. Crash! A voyage ends tragically. But with Shi Mu's superhuman eyesight, each character, each position, and each pattern, can be drawn with utmost accuracy, far surpassing ordinary Adepts' works. (Of course, each Adept has a different area where he specializes in, and different elements-sensation, so their comprehension of various formulas will also be tinged with their own character.) This way, Shi Mu can copy an unlimited number of any charms he wants to, and, though the advanced and high-level formulas were still challenging to him, charms of low levels could be mass-produced with an almost 100% possibility of success! Compared with other Adepts, who can only make a successful paper charm one out of ten times or even dozens of times, Shi Mu is like a charm making machine! This is also why he has made a great fortune during the past half year.

Shi Mu continued to draw his charm. He fixed his eyes on the paper, took a long breath, then, with one hand grasping the holy stone and the other holding the brush, he began to write with the blood red ink at an incredibly slow speed, some twenty or even thirty times slower than normal writing speed. It was as if he was embroidering the pattern and characters, with his extraordinary eyes inspecting every stroke on the paper.

Eventually, he finished the first character, which had taken him an hour! His forehead was now covered with a sheen of sweat, but he did not notice. By the

same token, he finished the second, the third....The magic characters of this Body-Lifting Charm soon filled the paper at a well-controlled speed, while Shi Mu had been sweating profusely, his shirt plastered to his back.

Another fifteen minutes passed, as he was fully concentrated on the ninth character. All of a sudden, without warning, the character sparkled! He intuitively sensed something ominous, but, before he could do something, the ninth character turned into a ball of blue light! The next moment, the whole half finished charm was burned into ashes amid glaring light!

Shi Mu frowned, putting the brush down with an expressionless face.

This experience was not new to him. For the past six months, the same thing had happened countless times - especially for charms he drew for the first time.

He paused on the spot, standing, and slightly closed his eyes, trying to recall every detail of the process, but still could not find the point where things went wrong. Despondently, he returned to his bed and began to contemplate.

After a short while, as he reopened his eyes, a trace of enlightenment could be seen, and his face showed that he had discovered the reason.

He eagerly sprang from his bed, strode to the desk, and grabbed another piece of magic paper. After some brief thought, he began to draw for a second time. This time, he slightly raised his speed, and the strokes that had made him pause previously were now drawn fluently. The islands seemed to communicate, the overall view of the sea pictured clearly. A mysterious formula was formed.

Chapter 89 - Thirteen Cuts in One Breath

After finishing his second attempt, Shi Mu compared it with the sample from The Great Sutra of Magical Charms, and the result satisfied him. He put down the brush and began to mutter the incantation, after which he gave the charm a quick shake.

Nothing happened. No magic auras or symbols appeared. The charm stood motionless between his fingers, like a piece of scrap paper. Again he shook it, with more strength, but the result did not change. With a resigned sigh, he tossed the charm aside, and, again, fell into deep contemplation.

An hour passed before he reopened his eyes, which sparkled keenly. For a third time, he put his brush on the paper. After spending another hour drawing the same charm, he tried to instill his spirit power, but this time, the paper ended up burning into ashes once more.

Time slid by like this, the same pattern repeated again and again. Soon half a day had passed, but Shi Mu was nailed to his desk, pupils golden, brush in hand.

He was now on his seventh attempt. The previous trials had failed, either on a certain character or in the last step of instilling spirit power. His nose had been inundated of the burnt smell. Meanwhile, the stone lost its luster, bit by bit, obviously running out of its heavenly energy. This was because Shi Mu had been borrowing its energy the entire time. Each stroke was like a channel, and would be filled with a small amount of energy after he finished drawing the entire charm. This way, he could save lots of time, and would only need to instill his own spirit power into the charm as a whole after completion. All along, he had been suppressing his frustration with his usual coolness, but even this coolness lost its ground when the seventh charm, again, turned out to be a failure.

Shi Mu took a deep, deep breath, then exhaled, then inhaled, and repeated this until his tired mind regained its equanimity. He decided to consult the Great Sutra of Magical Charms once more. Holding the slips against his forehead, his right hand kept rehearsing the strokes in the air.

An incredibly long time passed. Shi Mu's eyes shone excitedly once again as he slowly put down the white jade slip. He finally found the point where he had been making mistakes. To make sure of this, he, once again, recalled the details, and adjusted his state of mind, sitting on the stone bed. Once his spirits recovered, he returned to the desk and picked up the brush, thinking to himself, "Ok, it's composed of twelve magic characters, and even if it cannot constitute a middle-level charm, it's on of the most difficult charm among all low-level charms! The ones I previously drew had, at most, five or six characters. Also, without the wind stone, there would be no source of holy energy needed in this charm. Other Adept scholars will only do worse. After all, there's no way they have eyes like mine!"

Just as he finished his words, his eyes dilated, turning golden again,! Obviously, he had made the most of his eyesight mutation. This time, the blue paper seemed even larger than before, and its texture seemed even finer. Shi Mu held his breath and slowly bent his head, preparing to try for the eighth time. As he concentrated his efforts, he felt strange feeling, which he had never experienced before. The brushed weighed like a heavy lump of iron, but it moved as freely and smoothly, like an agile animal. It took twice the amount of time he had spent on previous trials to finish this one. Upon its accomplishment, a puff of wind came from it with the patterns glowing mildly. The wind traveled around the room like a baby curious about the world, then returned to the charm and began to swirl above it.

"I made it!" Shi Mu was overjoyed seeing that it worked, thus returned his eyes back to its normal state. Then everything before his eyes recovered their

normal looks, too. He picked up the fulfilled Body-Lifting Charm which was glittering with blue light to have a close look. On the blue paper, mysterious red lines were weaved together in an odd way, constituting a delicate pattern expressive of a sacred power beyond language. Shi Mu was so fond of it that he could hardly let it out of his hands! His eyes lit up with excitement. He could not wait any longer to try its power.

Holding the charm between his fingers, he worked up his real Qi and in response, the blue paper charm caught fire in the air, a ball of energy emerged amid the flames. Seeing it, Shi Mu unhesitatingly stuck the burning charm onto his skin. Pu! A small noise was heard, and he felt shrouded by an invisible layer of energy which was gentle and warm. Next, it was as if he had lost half of his weight, a gust of wind blew in from the window and almost swept him into the air. More surprisingly, Shi Mu felt he could take off and fly as long as he wanted. He checked his body from head to toe, and was saw that nothing looked different, but he was positive that his arms and legs were much lighter than before, able to be moved effortlessly. It was such a wonderful and free feeling!

He suddenly had a desire to try his Thirteen Series of Gale-Force Blade Art with his newly acquired body. Without thinking, he made a grab for the blade laying by his bed, and the weapon flew to his hand, catching light midway. He concentrated his efforts on the blade, working the Art of the Heavenly Elephant and instilling his real Qi into it. Soon the blade was coated with a thin layer of white light, quivering like an agitated animal yearning to be unleashed, making a sound like the cries of dragons and tigers.

“Ha!” Shi Mu shouted, his eyes glaring. He made a violent cut in the air, and the blade trembled vehemently, throwing out thirteen shadows onto the wall rolling like billows that tinged the air in the room with the force of a landslide and the power of a tidal wave.

“Thirteen cuts!” After the shadows dispersed and faded away, Shi Mu saw

thirteen distinct dents on the wall. The result was so overpowering that he was shocked himself. Who could have believed that with the assistance of Body-Lifting Charm, Shi Mu was able to reach the Consummate stage of the Thirteen Series of Gale-Force Blade Art!

The thrill still with him, Shi Mu wielded his blade successively in the air, and the glint and flash of cold steel blossomed around him, like the noble Snowdrop flowers. Bit by bit, his silhouette was submerged in a sea of flowers.

After exercising the Thirteen Series of Gale-Force Blade Art for some time, with the effect of the charm finally dying away, along with the blade shadows that had filled the air, Shi Mu stopped his movements and paused to recall the whole event. The strikes had been successive and unstoppable, the real Qi of the Heavenly Elephant flowing fluently through his body, and a burning energy was simmering in his veins, accumulating momentum. But, somehow, it seemed that the energy was still blocked somewhere, the exact place he could not name. Strangely, even after he had reached the consummate stage in the blade art, a sour aftertaste was left. He suddenly remembered what his former instructor, Li Canghai, had mentioned that the Thirteen Series of Gale-Force Blade Art was actually a Xiantian level art before it was divided into thirteen series. Now Shi Mu had an ambiguous feeling that Li Canghai may have been right.

But he did not ponder on this for long. His current priority was to make more Body-Lifting charms before the holy energy in the wind stone was completely used up. After all, it was the charms that mattered most, given that they greatly increased his strength!

Chapter 90 - It is Necessary to Have Effective Tools to Do Good Work

Having successfully made another copy of the Body-Lifting Charm, Shi Mu was overjoyed. He paused, to celebrate the moment in his heart, then refocused his mind on making charms. Spreading another piece of magic paper on the desk, he felt more confident of his chances of success, since the characters, patterns, and every minute detail of a stroke had been etched into his memory. With the previous copy as an example, he only needed to reproduce the picture, and naturally, he could go much faster.

As night approached, he had finished three more copies, but, pitifully, not a single one succeeded. The heavenly stone was now just an ordinary pebble.

Shi Mu gazed at the two successful copies, lost deep in thought. So it turned out that, with the difficulty of charms increasing, even his phenomenal eyesight would not help that much. But he was already quite satisfied with his current achievement, after all, average Scholars were just blind men, groping in the dark before such a challenging charm.

Now that he had reached the third stage in both the Art of Accumulating Spirit Power and the Art of the Heavenly Elephant and this Body-Lifting Charm, getting a good rank in the annual competition would not be as demanding of a task. After all, the awards for this full-scale, yearly contest were far more tempting than those from small matches. But before marching onto the ring like a thrilled child, Shi Mu's knew that he should equip himself with a powerful weapon, one tailored to him, like a tight-fitting suit. When he exercised the Thirteen Series of Gale-Force Blade Art just then, he felt that he needed a better blade, for his old one had been groaning under the might of his Heavenly Elephant Qi, and nearly shattered when he threw out his Thirteen Cuts in One Breath.

After making up his mind to ditch his old blade and get a new one, Shi Mu returned to his bed, crossed his legs, and began to practice the Art of the Heavenly Elephant.

...

Shi Mu left his place the first thing in the next morning, following the, now familiar, path back to the blacksmith that belonged to the Li Fire Group.

“Haha, brother Shi, what has brought you, the rising star of both fighting and charm making, here to my humble abode? Are you in need of a new weapon?” Spotting Shi Mu from a distance, Zhao Ping immediately came and greeted him in a cheerful manner.

“Haha, you flatter me senior Zhao! It’s only that the competition is around the corner, I’d like to have a good weapon to save me from coming the last.” Shi Mu managed an embarrassed smile. Anyway, he disliked the thought of displaying his ability to the full extent in front others, except in matches, of course.

For the past six months, he had formed a habit of visiting Zhao Ping whenever he went pill-shopping. If there was a reason for his frequent visits, apart from a budding friendship between the two, that would definitely be Shi Mu’s secret wish to get updated on the latest weapons, and even immersing himself in the aura emitted by all kinds of sharp-edged weapons made Shi Mu feel content. Also, he never once forgot the tools and gadgets recorded in the Secret Arts of the Zhong Clan, for which he had been saving money to ask Zhao Ping to make copies for him. This past half a year had seen his wealth growing at an alarming speed, so he had treated himself to some of the tricks and tools in the ancient book, and requested for Zhao Ping to make them for him, and Zhao Ping had successfully fulfilled the tasks. That’s why the two had grown close.

“Oh, I see. Please come in brother Shi,” Zhao Ping laughed boisterously and invited Shi Mu in. There were barely any clients in, not even the servant disciples who helped out in the blacksmith. The roomed seemed quite lonely in the morning sunlight. All the deadly weapons displayed on shelves in the front yard made the atmosphere cold and heavy, but not to Shi Mu’s eyes. He was now totally lost in the world of weapons. There were even some queer members of the weapon family in the shop, like the Heaven and Earth Ring (TL: ? I don’t know what’s this either, haha, seems like a dangerous hula hoop), and the Yuan Yang[1] axes. Though he had seen them many times, his love for them did not abate, it was only that he did not consider them suitable for his own usage.

“I’m wondering what kind of weapon brother Shi wants? The ones out there are just my average pieces. The reeeeeally good ones are inside. Follow me.” Zhao Ping threw him a mysterious smile and quickly lead him inside. There was a compartment behind the hall, half the size of the yard, and inside there were around thirty weapons. Without a doubt, these pieces were way more expensive than those displayed outside.

“I’m comfortable with most knives and blades. I will believe in whatever brother Zhao recommends,” Shi Mu gave the room a quick scan and spoke.

Zhao Ping nodded knowingly and grabbed hold of a silver blade, two feet long. Passing it to Shi Mu, he introduced proudly, “This blade is made of the Cold Crystal Iron, collected from the sea floor. It’s not only hard, it’s really sharp - believe me, line up a strand of hair with the blade, and you will have two halves of a hair - Also, it feels as cold as ice. Try it.”

Shi Mu took the blade and weighed it in his hand. He frowned, disappointed to feel the long blade weighed nothing to him. “It’s a good blade, by all means, but I’d like a heavier one if that’s possible.” Shi Mu returned the “feather” to Zhao

Ping, who was surprised to hear such a comment. This material, the Cold Crystal Iron, weighed at least 25 kilograms, strong enough to support and hold Qi, and could definitely suffice for any ordinary Houtian warrior. But he soon recalled the superhuman force Shi Mu displayed when forging iron for him when they first met, so he accepted the fact with some reluctance.

After some thought, he stooped and lifted another long bronze blade for Shi Mu to try out, this time with more strength. “Try this one, it’s made of Red Bronze Stone. It weighs almost 70 kilograms.”

Shi Mu gripped the handle and flicked his wrist. Piecing sounds resounded through the room, with a series of blade shadows flashing before their eyes, exuding an aura of chill and threat. Zhao Ping was slightly astonished this time, when he found himself, an intermediate Houtian warrior, confounded by the way Shi Mu threw the cuts. The shadows lifted, and, with Shi Mu shaking his head, Zhao Ping knew he was not satisfied, and wanted a heavier one.

A heavier one? This blade already had an enormous weight...Zhao Ping gave a wry smile, and said gloomily, “the heaviest one in my shop is the one in your hand now...As for an even heavier piece...” He paused as he followed his train of thought here.

“What?” Shi Mu detected Zhao Ping’s changed countenance, asking with an interested tone.

“I do have a heavier piece, a real treasure. But it has a story behind it...” Zhao Ping’s voice revealed some hesitance.

“A story? I’d like to hear about it.” Shi Mu’s face lit up, his interest fully aroused now.

“Let me get it first. Wait a sec.” Zhao Ping soon disappeared into a back room and did not come back for some ten minutes, a narrow, old wooden case in his arms. Judging from his veins protruding from his muscles and the strenuous steps he took, this case must be extremely heavy.

Zhao Ping dropped the case onto the desk, a dull thud reverberating through the room. Shi Mu could not wait and opened the lid immediately, and as his eyes met the content, they sparkled with life. A thin, long blade was lying silently in the case, like a forgotten soul. It was not much to look at, its body a dull black. But Shi Mu knew, intuitively, that this was not your average blade. It looked like a thing that did not belong to this world. Seen closely, the surface glowed with a rich blackness.

Shi Mu had never been so thrilled. He snatched the handle and lift the blade without much effort. Even so his color changed. The ordinary-looking blade was exceedingly heavy, at least 250 kilograms. The material of it was not to his knowledge so far.

“Marvelous.” Shi Mu murmured. His finger slowly stroked the weapon’s body, and, as he touched its hilt he felt a yearning to kill. He lifted his arm, and a black shadow flashed past, the black piece cutting across a stone used for testing weapons.

Crack! The stone, made of refined iron, was cut into halves, the cut clean and smooth.

Shi Mu gazed at the black blade in amazement: He did not feel any resistance when cutting the stone? It reminded him of cutting a piece of tofu.

“Brother Shi was really born with great strength! The blade was made from a piece of foreign stone that fell on the earth. I discovered it and god knows how I spent all my energies forging it. Three complete months. Sharper than anything I’ve ever seen. I’d say I have never made a better weapon in my life.” Zhao Ping was spellbound by Shi Mu’s clean movement, the heavy thing like a tamed beast in his hand. He held up his thumb in approval, not forgetting to introduce it with much pride.

Shi Mu returned the blade to its case after looking at it more closely, nodding with rapture, “I knew it! I’ll...”

“Wait, wait. Brother Shi, you’d better give this some thought. I’ve not told you the whole story yet.” Zhao Ping interrupted Shi Mu’s announcement, waving his hand anxiously. The story shall be told.

Chapter 91 - The Odd Meteoric Iron

“Go on, brother Zhao, I’m all ears.” Shi Mu frowned with concentration.

“So we are clear that this blade is impeccable in its sharpness and material, but I bet you are wondering why it weighs this much? I’m sure ordinary warriors, even though born with some strength, could never wield it without breaking an arm.” Zhao Ping said in a subdued tone, inducing Shi Mu to follow his train of thought.

Shi Mu settled his eyes on the black blade, deep in thought. Indeed, what Zhao Ping just said was definitely true. Blades were not famous for being light or flexible, but they do require the user to be able to move. If a blade is extremely heavy it is, unquestionably, a disadvantage to the user, and will likely make the blade no more than a heavy metal club, for all the user will be able to wield it. Furthermore, a mighty warrior, like himself, is not commonly seen, and he could enhance his strength even further with charm arts.

“Years ago, when I discovered this piece of meteoric iron years ago, I felt like I was on top of the world. So only god knows how much effort I’ve put into it. But there’s something strange about it, not in a bad way, probably. I’m sure you won’t believe this, but when it was finished it weighed only 50 kilograms at most.” Zhao Ming went on to relate the story with an air of mystery.

“Less than 50 kilos?” Shi Mu was taken by surprise.

“You know, I planned to sell it at first. But several days after its completion, something happened! The blade seemed to be growing, just like a human infant! Its weight doubled after a month, and by the end of the second month, it’d

grown by another 50 kilo.” Zhao Ping let out a soft sigh, unable to explain the oddity.

“Really? So strange!” Shi Mu could only gape at Zhao Ping’s face, trying to extract some clues to the riddle. But it was obvious Zhao Ping was puzzled too.

“It does sound unreal, I know, but believe me, it’s real, a hundred percent solid fact! And it’s been growing heavier ever since, though at a slower rate. Even so, it already weighs 250 kilograms, and who knows when will stop growing? That’s why it’s not been the most popular item in my shop.” Zhao Ping poured out his grievances, forcing a smile.

“Indeed, it’s inexplicable, but, all in all, it must be the material, the meteoric iron.” Shi Mu spoke slowly, carefully choosing his words. Judging from Zhao Ping’s expression, this unprecedented news should not be a lie.

Zhao Ping agreed, releasing a heartfelt sigh, “I’m sure it is. So I asked around but nobody recognized the material. It may keep growing in weight. If this does not bother brother Shi, I’d really like you to have it, of course the price would not be low.”

“Who’d waste such a good chance? I want it even more now. May I ask the price?” Shi Mu answered without hesitation, assured by the prospect that, with his progress in the Heavenly Elephant Art, his physical strength would grow, too. So the blade befits him greatly. Zhao Ping showed a hint of indecisiveness in giving the price, and only raised five fingers after some thought.

“Fifty thousand silver?” Shi Mu asked tentatively.

“Five hundred thousand silver.” Zhao Ping answered seriously, and then went on to explain. “Brother Shi, I’m not demanding an unreasonable price. You know how much supplementary material it took me to forge this weapon, including some really precious stones and stuff used only for magic weapons. Five hundred thousand can barely cover the cost.” Zhao Ping’s tone was tinged with great earnestness, sounding really compelling. But Shi Mu’s knit brows did not relax in any way. All he had in his pocket was, at most, four hundred thousand silver, and the shortage of one hundred thousand was out of the question. Though the blade gratified him in every way, it would still be impracticable to spend his entire fortune on a weapon he just needed for the incoming competition.

However, Zhao Ping would not let go this optimum owner for the blade. An idea dawned upon him, and he suggested it with sparkling eyes, “Why not make a deal? Brother Shi can just pay sixty percent and the rest will be balanced if you agree to make some magic charms for me.”

“Good idea. But I’d like to know what kind of charms is brother Zhao asking for?” Shi Mu’s face lit up upon hearing the offer.

“Wait just a second.” Zhao Ping answered gladly, hurriedly going back into the inner room, he back with a piece of white paper. Shi Mu only had a cursory glance before he readily agreed. Things had turned out better than he had expected. Zhao Ping broke into a grin and said, “Perfect! I shall have the material for the charms sent to your place soon.”

Shi Mu nodded and took thee hundred thousand silver notes from his shirt, passing them to Zhao Ping. Suddenly, doubt was raised in his mind, “by the way, brother Zhao just mentioned that you used some magic material in forging the blade. So I was wondering if I could imprint some magic characters on it to make it a real magic weapon?” He seemed to halt when asking the question, since Shi Mu himself had never owned or made a magic weapon before, though he had gained a few inklings by reading a chapter in the Great Sutra of Magical Charms.

The so-called magic weapons are those which have magic characters stamped on them, thus bestowing them with magic power. For example, by imprinting magic characters of fire element on a sword, it can spit out roaring flames, like a vicious dragon. How can an ordinary sword compare with it? However, not every sword can spit flames after being imprinted with magic characters: the weapon itself must be tough enough to withstand that instilled might. Therein lies the issue. However, it is said that there are heavenly weapons that beat all their kin, belonging to the realm of godly power. The weapons themselves even have a mind of their own, just like magical animals.

"Not a thought I've not considered. I do know some ways of making magic weapons, but, alas, the blade is too dense to be smelt by simple, not to mention imprinting patterns on it." Zhao Ping shook his head at the idea, throwing Shi Mu a resigned smile.

This was not good news to Shi Mu. He did not buy this lump of black iron to see it untamed by magic. Zhao Ping discerned the gloom in his buyer's eyes, and hurriedly tried to console him by saying, "It's not completely impossible. I heard, from a senior disciple in the Li Fire Group, that Uncle Ju, of the General Sutra House, has a Gold-Eroding lizard beckoned from another space. The lizard's venom can erode nearly every kind of metal, by which I mean I've not heard of a metal it can't devour."

"Really?!" Shi Mu was too excited to believe.

"One hundred percent true. I've seen the sight with my own eyes. The senior disciple got a bit of its venom to imprint characters on a sword which has nearly impossible to dent. The venom dissolved the surface in a second. So I bet it can do the same to this black blade." Zhao Ping answered with an utmost confidence in the lizard, as if he himself was its owner, or maybe he was the lizard itself.

“Thanks for brother Zhao’s instruction! Seems I’m going to have to pay Uncle Ju a visit.” Shi Mu clasped his hands reverently and replaced the blade into its case, then he slipped the case under his arm. After bidding goodbye to Zhao Ping, he ran to the General Sutra House.

Some forty minutes later, he arrived at the second floor of his destination.

“Why, it’s you again! What’s your business this time?” A shrill cry welcomed Shi Mu’s ears as soon as he entered the reception room.

In the huge golden cage, the parrot, Vibrant[A], was beating its wings against the sides, its head cocked to give Shi Mu a sidelong look.

[A] About the parrot’s name: The original Chinese is transliterated as “Cai Er”, meaning “colorful, flamboyant”, *etc.* It both described the parrot’s feathers and its funny character. So I chose “Vibrant” to cover both sides, not without the secret wish to ascent the parrot’s hilarious manners.

Chapter 92 - Another Space

"Is Uncle Ju in?" Shi Mu asked, sneaking a peek into an interior room where he usually saw the mountain of a man.

"You are looking in the wrong direction! Haha! Master is practicing in another room, wait here if you want to see him. " Vibrant answered impatiently, and got back to pruning and trimming its opulent plumage with its beak.

Shi Mu nodded and seated himself in a nearby chair. During the last few months, he had frequented the General Sutra House, and, as a result, had grown quite close to Uncle Ju. Especially after Shi Mu got the hang of making magic charms, the latter began to think of Shi Mu as a promising charm Adept, so, without either of them noticing it, the attitude adopted by uncle Ju towards Shi Mu became much more amiable than that was to other disciples. Shi Mu reciprocated this kindness with every effort by trying to pick up as much knowledge and experience as he could from Uncle Ju, including magician arts, charms, formulas, *etc.* Both felt this instructor-student relationship was exceedingly fulfilling.

"Hump, you old chap, what are you asking master for this time?" Vibrant felt quite bored after waiting for a moment in vain for Shi Mu to speak up. It decided to speak first.

Hearing the bird’s question, Shi Mu ignored it, choosing to ask another question in reply. He cast Vibrant a curious look, "Vib, you've been with Uncle Ju for a long a time, I bet you won't be unaware of a lizard your master has beckoned from another space?"

"Of course I know that fucking lizard! It is a rude, ugly worm that actually dared to bite me! Sooner or later I'll definitely swallow it alive!" Vibrant was infuriated even by relating its harrowing memory, and could not help but vent its anger to Shi Mu.

However, it had made an insensible decision in choosing a listener, who, instead of offering his most heartfelt condolences, opened his eyes wide and took on an air of excitement.

"Well, why did you mention that lizard?" After recovering from its sad reminiscence, Vibrant thought of something which it asked Shi Mu bluntly, throwing him suspicious looks from the corner of its eye.

After a short hesitation, Shi Mu resolved that it was safe to reveal his plan to the bird. So he told Vibrant all about the venom and meteoric iron stuff.

To his surprise, this time it was the parrot who decided not to answer Shi Mu. It only flapped its wings several times, its eyes glassy, its beak tightly shut.

"Vib, do you know something? Tell me, please." Shi Mu's heart was beating fast.

The parrot shot him a glance, but its beak would not budge. In an exaggerated manner, it stretched its wings and pat its feeding plate ostentatiously. Shi Mu quickly got the hint and cracked a hearty smile. He rummaged in his shirt and took out several black nuts, each the size of a fist, then threw them into the plate. Vibrant let out a thrilled cry, picked up one nut with it beak, then gulped it down, holus-bolus. Gratified, its beady eyes glittered contentedly, which was too hilarious that even Shi Mu was tickled. Though always wagging its tongue, Vibrant was actually a precious source of information, so every time Shi Mu

came here, he made sure that he take some nuts and kernels with him.

“Vib, can you tell me now?” Shi Mu asked, unable to suppress a smile.

“Hmm, just ask for what you want when you see master later....hmm...it’s delicious...master is doing an experiment, so he’s running out of money...if you can support him financially, I guess it’s no problem...hmm...delicious...”Vibrant muttered while enjoying itself with the rest of the nuts.

Shi Mu slowly nodded, absorbed in thought. Anyway, it’s a good sign if Uncle Ju wants something. Otherwise even bribery would not work.

“By the way...hmm...ask for as much as possible...don’t let off that stupid greasy worm lightly...hmm...” Vibrant let out a fit of sinister laughter, before it became conscious of its inappropriate manners. Instantly it changed to a solemn face and resumed devouring the nuts. The ludicrous sight amused Shi Mu, and he looked at Vibrant’s expression with great interest, thinking that it must have suffered a lot from that lizard, hence its ambitious claim to avenge itself.

“Asking for what as much as possible? Vibrant, it seems you’ve got too many feathers, let me help you get rid of those colorful ones on your splendid tail!” Just then the flesh mountain showed itself in front of the cage suddenly. This was none other than uncle Ju, who was scowling at the parrot, his tone tinged with irritation.

“Please don’t master! Not the tail feathers! The two you plucked last time have just begun to grow!” The parrot was frightened out of its wits; the half nut dangling in its beak also dropped in the great haste of pleading for forgiveness. Feathers covering its head, Vibrant tried to hide its tail with every effort, its voice quivering in panic.

“Humph! I’ll deal with you later.” Uncle Ju snorted and ignored the garrulous parrot while directing his eyes to Shi Mu who had already risen from his chair, greeting uncle Ju with clasped hands. The fat man did not speak a word, looking Shi Mu up and down with troubled expression.

”Uncle, your humble disciple has come to ask for...”

“No need to repeat! I’m not old enough to turn deaf yet! What a fretting noise you just made with that big-mouthed parrot! Are you trying to raise the dead?” Uncle Ju cut Shi Mu short before he could say more. Hearing its name the parrot revealed one eye from its feathers and stole a furtive look at the two. Afraid of being found out, it whisked its head back into its feathers.

Shi Mu steeled himself to make the request, asking, “May uncle Ju spare me a bottle of the lizard’s venom, I’ll thank you with all I’ve got.”

“Spare the poor amount of money in your pocket! Since when have I cared for money? I can give you one bottle for free, but you need to return me a favor.” Uncle Ju waved his hand scornfully and then creased into a smile.

Shi Mu was quite taken aback. What favor can he do for an elder in his sect, an elder with extraordinary skills?

“Could you please enlighten me, uncle Ju? What can I do for you?” Shi Mu broke the silence after some thought.

“Just as the stupid bird has said, I’m doing an experiment on soul arts and got

stuck when trying to communicate with another realm. You've got five degrees in space-sensing, so you can definitely help." Uncle Ju explained, gazing at Shi Mu's face.

"Communicating with a strange space? Wouldn't that be dangerous? I'm just a Scholar." Shi Mu replied with a bitter smile.

"Can't say it's perfectly safe. But no need to worry either, just follow my instructions and there won't be any big problems. I've got experience in communicating with living things in other spaces. Don't you trust me?" The fat man cast the parrot a withering look while answering Shi Mu in a proud voice.

"I see." Shi Mu nodded, getting the point.

"The space I'm sending signals to is called the Death Space. It has been visited by spirit Adepts many times before. As long as you leave those mighty spirit monsters alone, you'll return safe and sound," the fat man tried to ease Shi Mu's tension, but he did not succeed. Shi Mu's expression was still quite cautious, and he answered, with all politeness he could summon, "Still, this is no ordinary task. Could Uncle Ju give me some time to consider?"

"Sure, accept it or not, you must give me the answer in five days. I'm still going to go ahead and do the experiment, with or without you. The communication ritual begins soon." The fat man managed an indifferent tone.

"I will. Then please excuse me." Shi Mu bowed deeply, if not apologetically.

"Go!" The fat man waved his hands with an expressionless face.

Chapter 93 - The Eye of the Formula

A short while later, Shi Mu found himself meditating in his bed, his eyes gazing at the black blade he had just invested copious amounts of money in. Knitting his brows, his face was showing his inner turmoil. He was racking his brains trying to weigh the risks that may be brought by Uncle Ju's offer. So much had been paid to procure this blade of meteoric iron. It would be a waste if he did not make it into a magic weapon. Furthermore, though it was risky to have implicit trust in Uncle Ju's skills, Shi Mu was mesmerized by the thought of visiting another realm, one that should be quite different from his own. He had an even bigger interest in strange animals, like the gold-eroding lizard, and would very much like to find one for himself. It would not be completely impossible for him to get an animal from another realm if he agreed to Uncle Ju's offer. After all, Uncle Ju had the experience, as he had beckoned two animals from other realms - Vibrant and his foe, the lizard, so he could be counted a veteran. Therefore, danger to his life should be out of the question. From all the time when the two had dealt with each other, Shi Mu knew Uncle Ju to be a person of extreme prudence, though with a horrible lack of modesty. Thinking this way, Uncle Ju would be the last person to act without full confidence. But even with the good chances of success, Shi Mu did not feel at ease with the slightest possibility of bad results until after several days of deep contemplation.

Four days later, Shi Mu paid another visit to the General Sutra House to bring Uncle Ju the good news of his agreement to their co-operation, which made the fat man's face crease into a smile. The two to begin the ceremony noon three days later, and the place would be Uncle Ju's abode, whose address was then imprinted on a white jade slip tossed to Shi Mu by the fat Adept. Shi Mu carefully slipped it into his sleeve, then seized the chance to ask some more questions about the communication ceremony and the space they would soon be visiting. All done, Shi Mu left with an expectant heart.

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Three days later, noon.

Shi Mu had found his way to the foot of a black mountain, the scorching sun making sweat flow down his face. He looked up to the top and was somewhat disappointed by the barrenness of this mountain. It was jagged, rocky, and a dead silent, due to a lack of vegetation and frolicking animals. A few sickly bushes and some miscellaneous grasses were all that the mountain had to offer a traveler. Of course, Shi Mu was the only traveler now and was probably the only one it had seen in a long time. Apart from some stone buildings scattered over the mountain, there were no other traces of humans. Infertility, bleakness, and remoteness - these are all that Shi Mu can think of in relation to this mountain, the thirteenth mountain of the Black Demon Sect. Thought he had been living in the valley adjacent to it, Shi Mu had not really visited it before.

There was only one path that lead from the foot of the mountain all the way up to the top, narrow branches grew now and then, leading to some scattered stone houses that shared the same crudeness. Some detached two or three-storey houses stood out, also built of stone. According to the jade slip, uncle Ju lives in a remote stone house near the top, not easily found by those not previously aware of its location. It took Shi Mu almost two hours - a tortuous journey indeed - to find the stone house, which opened before Shi Mu had the chance to knock.

“Come on in! What took you so long?” The fat man’s voice came from the inner room, bringing with it the impatience that had obviously been simmering for a while.

“My apology Uncle Ju! I was practicing when I had a sudden insight, which made me forget the time!” Shi Mu saw the flesh mountain waiting in the hall

with an expressionless face as soon as he entered the room, and hurriedly apologized.

“Huh, an insight, very important… Alright, I’ll forgive you this time...All is set, come in so we can begin.” The fat man’s brows relaxed, knowing that it is quite common to forget about the time when one gets a flash of insight.

It took a while for Shi Mu’s eyes to get adjusted to the dimness of the room, and when they did he discovered an odd-looking lizard that was almost three meters long. The monster has only one head, but three pairs of legs, its entire body covered by blackish green shells. Its eyes are long and narrow, stripped by green and yellow colors, and they were staring at Shi Mu viciously. But from the way it was frozen to the floor, Uncle Ju seemed to have sealed its movements.

“Is there any chance that this is the legendary lizard?” Shi Mu’s eyes glistened as he pointed to the animal and asked.

“That’s right. It’s poisonous, but you can count on it to melt gold.” Uncle Ju nodded. He hurriedly to moved to a wall at the end of the aisle. He stretched out his plump hand and pressed on the wall gently.

Boom! It thundered and the wall separated to two sides and formed a door that opened to the inside! A dark passageway showed itself on the other side of the door.

“The ceremony is to be held in the secret room below. Come with me.” The fat man tilted his head and asked Shi Mu to follow up. Without delay, he walked to the passageway.

The two of them, after walking for some time down on the spiral stairs, finally arrived in a room the length of it about 15 meters, and the width 10 meters. Encircled by touches of oxen fat, the two found themselves in a brightly illuminated space. The room was made of stone, just like the house, and, except for a huge circular formula that almost covered the entire floor, there were no more decorations to be found.

There was some resemblance between this formula and the one Shi Mu once saw in the General Sutra House. The biggest difference is that there are fixed indentations, the size of an egg, distributed evenly around the circle, and one as big as a human head situated right in the center, where heavenly patterns and magical characters convene.

Shi Mu's countenance changed when he saw this delicate formula. He recalled, from slips he had read, that when huge formulas, like this one, activated, they demanded a considerable consumption of heavenly power, which must be offered continuously by heavenly stones. Some even bigger formulas would need several batches of stones to fully activate. Undoubtedly, those five smaller indentations should be where the heavenly stones are placed, the bigger one in the center would be "the eye of the formula".

However, the hint of excitement in Shi Mu's eyes soon got lost when he realized what an infant he was before such a vast sea of knowledge. The slips he had at hand, at best, spoke of the basics and did not mention more complex formulas. Now that he got the chance of seeing one with his own eyes, he wished he could sear the whole formula into his memory, and replay every detail as slowly as possible once he returned to his own place. With a faked casual air, Shi Mu stole a glance of uncle Ju to find him fully engaged in the work of checking the formula for the last time, having no chance to pay attention to Shi Mu at all. Thus assured, Shi Mu dilated his pupils to turn his eyes into a pair of magnifiers, under which each magical character was enlarged tenfold, able to escape Shi Mu's eyes. He found with some relief that some of the seemingly

convoluted characters were actually the combination of several simple characters of the five elements, linked by some heavenly patterns that he did not recognize.

While he was lost in reading the characters, Uncle Ju had finished his check. Seeing that he had risen to his full height, Shi Mu made his eyes return to normal.

“This formula’s name is The Soaring Star, one of the spatial formulas. We have to use it to perform the ceremony. But it’s far too difficult for you at present. I’d suggest you not try to bite off more than you can chew.“ Detecting Shi Mu’s great interest in the formula on the floor, the fat man cautioned him.

Chapter 94 - The Art of Capturing Spirits

“Many thanks for Uncle Ju’s instructions!” Shi Mu hurriedly expressed his gratitude.

“Almost forgot to ask, do you know the conditions for communicating with another space?” The fat man’s gaze had been roaming over Shi Mu when he suddenly changed the subject of their conversation.

To this question, Shi Mu shook his head, at a loss on how to do so.

“Remember! There are three conditions for establishing a communication: first, some mighty animal’s remains must be the linking point. Second, you’ve got to know the space’s exact position. Third, you need a strong spatial sensing ability.” Uncle Ju held three fingers while making the explanation to his pupil, who pondered over the three details with all that his mental faculties allowed him.

“Now we are going to enter the space of the dead spirits. We’ve met the first two conditions, but my space sensing ability is not powerful enough to find the location. That’s why I’ve failed three times...and, that’s why you’re here.” Uncle Ju finally revealed the real intention of having asked Shi Mu for help, with no small amount of embarrassment. The youth - who had been overwhelmed by this unexpected favor - gazed at the floor for a long while, and suddenly got the idea. He now knew what he could do to reciprocate his patron’s appreciation of his abilities, and his confident expression assured the fat man much, who nodded, satisfied. For the rest time to follow, the fat uncle expounded some further theories concerning the ceremony to his endearing pupil, just in case, and this endearing pupil spared no effort to memorize every minute detail, and was very much enlightened as to how an Adept could trap an animal from

another space as his pet, or servant, if he so wished: first, you've got to arrive at that space safe and sound, then you sharpen your eyes to find the most lovable creature your eyes can meet, (which are usually weak in power since mighty creatures would not be tamed so easily); third, if not stealthily, you plant your spirit power into that chosen animal, i.e., leave your unique smell on it, then after returning to your own world, you can perform some corresponding magic arts to beckon the poor creature from its own world, and by making a mark on it, this creature will be permanently yours.

After rehearsing this capture process in mind, Shi Mu felt he could wait no more, his heart pounding madly at the thought of uncle Ju's Gold-Eroding lizard, or more precisely, its marvelous ability. Tentatively, he asked, "Uncle, could I find an animal for myself in the world of Dead Spirits?"

The fat uncle frowned, confronted by his pupil's over-ambitiousness. After giving the question some thought, he answered, his tone tinged with some reluctance, "Huh...in theory, yes, no problem at all, but considering that you are not an official spirit Adept yet, I worry for you if you can learn this demanding skill of planting your spirit power into a creature of another world. But, against the rules, I can impart to you a basic art of this kind, easier to get the hang of as long as you have strong spirit power."

"Thanks for uncle's generosity!" Knowing that he could learn another art for free, Shi Mu was thrilled, but not forgetting to bow deeply to uncle Ju.

"Spare your thanks. Learn it or not, decide after hearing what I'm gonna say. This art of capturing spirits is easy to remember, hence its downsides. Simple art, simple creatures, got it? You can at best capture a creature tenfold weaker than your spirit power, not to mention that the spatial transgression will counteract the effect of this art to some extent. So, given your scholar level, you'd at best beckon some worms, insects, *etc.* from another world. Otherwise, there's no way you can plant your sign on a stronger animal."

“Only the insects!” Shi Mu knit his eyebrows, unsatisfied with this prospective result.

“What else can you do? Even a spirit Adept can only stay in a different world for a very limited amount of time, and according to my experience, with my spirit power, I can only stay for less than one hour. And for you, I dare say, only some ten-odd breaths’ time, almost a momentary stay! Find a lovely creature pleasant to the eye, then leave your trace on it? Stop dreaming, my child.” The fat man shook his head disapprovingly.

Faced with such a cruel reality, Shi Mu’s spirits were irreparably dampened.

“Even if you accomplish a happy journey in the world of Dead Spirits, never imagine the beckoning ceremony to be an effortless one! A huge amount of resources are required, as well as luck! It cost me almost every silver I owned to beckon that fucking parrot, and what now? A stupid machine used for mass-producing unbearable noises! Wouldn’t that tear your heart if you stood in my shoes? Well, now that I’ve told you every bit of my misfortune, will you still want to have a try?” His sad memory evoked with vivid sensation, the caring uncle cast a scathing look at Vibrant.

Shi Mu descended into a brooding silence. After some thought he answered resolutely, “Uncle, your humble disciple still wants to try his luck, please help him, uncle!”

“All right, since you’ve made your mind. I’ll spare you one hour to practice this art. If you run into any problems, just ask me.” The generous uncle did not argue. He turned his right hand up, and, without warning, a grey slip emerged from his palm. He gently attached it to his forehead and began the copy of the Art of Capturing Spirits.

One hour later, he flicked his right hand and the grey slip appeared in Shi Mu's hand. Without a word, he sat cross-legged in a corner and closed his eyes. Apparently he had sunk into a deep meditation instantly.

Shi Mu did not disrupt him by expressing his thanks again. He found a quiet corner for himself and started learning the contents. The formula of the art was quite a small one, so it did not take him much time to bear it in his mind. Uncle Ju was right, this art was quite easy to get the hang of, so he lost no time practicing it with eyes tightly shut. For the entire time as he rehearsed the process of capturing a creature, magic charms kept emerging and vanishing in his mind, and his lips quivered now and then, his fingers tracing circles in the air. Only once he asked uncle Ju for help, who readily offered the instruction that removed obstruction to his pupil's understanding. After another hour, Shi Mu's eyes opened with sudden enlightenment, and a strange gleam flashed across his pupils. Without delay, his fingers flicked, tracing different shapes and his lips slighted moved as if speaking in hushed tones. The next moment, a milky white magic character flashed from his palm into the air before it vanished instantly into nowhere.

"You really do have some talent for this stuff! You're almost there!" A voice rang in his ears. Looking up he found uncle Ju had already come back from his mind-travel, standing before him.

"It's all thanks to uncle's instruction!" Shi Mu pressed his palms on the floor and sprang up. Smiling heartily, he thanked uncle Ju again.

Uncle said nothing, waving his hand. Then after rummaging in his shirt from a good time, he fished out some stuff including a shining silver paper charm, a dark bone piece the size of a palm, a silver bowl with two one-legged birds imprinted on its surface, and last, five heavenly stones two folder bigger than a low-level

heavenly stone, their colors red, yellow, green, blue, and gold respectively.

It was the five heavenly stones that first attracted Shi Mu's eyes and made his heart thump. Judging from their size and the overflowing spirit power emitted from them, they were none other than middle-level heavenly stones!

As for the dark bone piece, its shape resembling some animal's skull, it was hard to tell what its biological owner was, for all the broken details and fissures.

Puzzled by the bone piece, Shi Mu directed his gaze to the silver bowl. Its surface had many tiny characters on it, following some pattern that he did not understand. Thus, the picture of the pair of one-legged birds stood out from the swarm of characters. At least, to his eyes they did.

Chapter 95 - Chaos

The preparation took less time than Shi Mu had expected. Before he could make out the patterns on the bowl, Uncle Ju had placed it at the center of the formula, along with the five middle-level heavenly stones, which were already set in their respective indentations around the circle. All done, uncle Ju passed Shi Mu the black bone pieces and the silver paper charm, warning him seriously, “This formula has recorded the spacial coordinate of the Space of Death, and as soon as I get it started, stick the paper charm to the bone piece and activate it. This way, our ceremony will begin.”

Shi Mu took the peice of bone and the charm with the utmost caution, then he entered the big circle on the floor, the charm in his right hand, and the piece of bone in the other. Facing the silver bowl he sat down on the floor, legs crossed. Uncle Ju also seated himself, at the opposite of Shi Mu. Without delay he began and let loose a flood of incantations which overwhelmed Shi Mu’s ears, bewildering him with their obscurity and complexity. Uncle Ju’s fingers flicked so quickly that the movements eluded Shi Mu’s eyes. He could only see the effect as several streaks of white light flashed from uncle Ju’s palm, flying to the bowl where they subsequently disappeared.

As if lit by the white light, the tiny characters on the bowl’s surface began to shine, with increasing brightness, until the light became so glaringly bright that it stung Shi Mu’s eyes. At the same time, the air was filled with a strange feeling, as though it was undulating, transmitting some great power. The formula of the Roaring Stars echoed, emitting dazzling lights of the same brightness, the air above it circulating so quickly that one could hear a low hum. Some places in the space even looked warped and hazy.

After a few minutes, the lights went out, along with all the torches, and the room was enveloped in darkness. Before Shi Mu could adjust his eyes, an eerie

scene took place: the formula came into life! It wriggled on the floor, releasing a multicolored glow that wrapped around Shi Mu and Uncle Ju. Looking from afar, the two seemed to be dressed in cloaks made of rainbows. Next, the glittering bowl ejected a wild gush of silver fog that rose while rotating with increasing speed, as well as growing in size. Amid the fog, many silver light dots kept twinkling, illuminating the room, which now resembled a small world under a broad starlit sky. The splendid sight mesmerized Shi Mu, lulling him into a half-conscious state, until Uncle Ju's voice thundered, "What are you doing? The charm!"

Uncle Ju's loud voice dragged him out of his trance, and Shi Mu quickly activated the charm in his hand. A loud sound was heard when the paper charm was slapped onto the black bone piece with a vivid flash of silver light that sliced through the air before it vanished into the bone without a trace.

"Stay close to me as we enter the Space of Chaos!" Uncle Ju threw Shi Mu a warning glance and said loudly.

"I will!" Shi Mu hurriedly answered, suppressing his astonishment.

The fat uncle Ju did not waste time saying any more. He flicked his hand another time. The magic characters imprinted on the silver bowl responded by flashing, then, without warning, the two one-legged birds came into life! They flew from the pattern, and flashed toward Shi Mu and uncle Ju's forehead respectively. A drowsiness came over Shi Mu, an,d before he knew it, his spirit had left his physical body and got attached to one of the silver birds, flying into the bowl again.

The next moment, he found himself wandering in a strange place, where all the colors of the rainbow flooded his eyes, everything tangled in a chaotic mass. The space seemed boundless, like a vast sea with all kinds of unknown things floating

on the surface. Some of the objects where alive with light, others seemed dead and dark. From the indescribable deepness of this chaotic space, Shi Mu vaguely felt an anonymous force that kept drawing him to its side.

“Well, how are you feeling? Have you felt the spatial gravitational force emitted by the Death World?” Just then Uncle Ju’s voice reverberated in Shi Mu’s mind, catching him unprepared. He then found himself to have turned a white dot, accompanied by a bigger light dot, which was Uncle Ju’s incarnation.

“Yes, I can just barely feel it.” Shi Mu answered subconsciously.

“Good! Let’s move to this force, and be sure not to approach those fuzzy objects. I’ll cover you.” The fat uncle released a long sigh, but his voice was full of excitement.

Shi Mu answered and instantly adjusted his direction to follow the force. He floated onward, and the dot incarnated by uncle Ju came after him immediately.

This chaotic space gave a rather odd feeling, by intuition Shi Mu felt a deep emptiness worming its way into his bones - abstruse, vague, and insubstantial. But those weird objects had aroused his interest. According to uncle Ju, each of them was actually a different, independent space.

For the following period, the two advanced in the same direction, and, as time slid by, the unknown force grew increasingly strong and clear. After what seemed an eternity, when Shi Mu was bored by the humdrum views, he suddenly found himself with far less spirit power than before.

“Uncle Ju, does it waste our energy traveling through this Space of Chaos like

this?” Shi Mu asked anxiously.

“Of course! Not only this chaotic space, every other space sucks your spirit power! Once you use them up, you’d be forcefully dragged back to your original space.” Uncle Ju dismissed Shi Mu’s naive question with a cursory answer, which gave Shi Mu a jolt of shock. Then he saw that their two light dots were shrouded in a thin layer of multicolored cloud, which, according to what Uncle Ju had said, was their guarantee of getting back home.

“Don’t worry, you’ve got stronger spirit power than I’d expected. We should arrive at the Space of Death safe and sound.” Uncle Ju’s voice resounded again. This came as quite a relief to Shi Mu. But just as Uncle Ju finished speaking, a dazzling light drew near with incredible speed! Shi Mu was shocked to find out that in the short time of the previous dialogue, a shining object, shaped like a dagger, had closed in on them! It sent forth a light so bright that Shi Mu could see nothing but that light.

“Watch out! Stay away from that! Never give yourself to it!” Uncle Ju yelled to warn Shi Mu away from the light, slowing down his speed.

For a moment, Shi Mu was terror-stricken, unable to move. Uncle Ju’s thunderous voice started him out of his paralysis, and he soon drew close to Uncle Ju. But just as he was about to enter uncle Ju’s reach, an irresistible force dragged him away, inch by inch, towards the shining object, and the gravitational force of the Space of Death immediately weakened. Shi Mu exerted the utmost of his strength to fight this horrible force, his heart racing. He also felt Uncle Ju trying to pull him away from the bright object. Though Uncle Ju’s power was not negligible, to counteracting the force of the object was still a seemingly impossible task. Bit by bit, Shi Mu was pulled toward the bright object.

Overcome with fear, Shi Mu braced himself for whatever might happen to him.

Chapter 96 - The Death World

Shi Mu had almost given up hope when he felt himself seized by an iron grip, which lessened the gravitational force of the approaching object. Instantly, his body felt so light that he was pulled to Uncle Ju's side without any difficulty. The two lost no time accelerating, leaving the dagger object behind as quickly as possible. Until the distance between them grew large enough for Shi Mu to get rid of the last bit of the object's attractive force, he dared to release a long sigh of relief. At the same time, the pull given by the Death World grew much stronger, resuming its original might.

"You got lucky this time, but don't expect me to save you a second time! I don't have enough spirit power that I can just share with you anytime I want!" Uncle Ju was, apparently, irritated by this unexpected accident, as his voice was filled with annoyance.

"Thank you for saving me!" Shi Mu answered, quite embarrassed. Uncle Ju's white dot twinkled in reply, but his anger was not abated. For some time, Uncle Ju remained silent, and if he had not been in the shape of a light dot, he would have had a sullen look on his face. However Shi Mu did not sense this mute exasperation and, after a few minutes, he suddenly broke the silence, pushing Uncle Ju's ill temper to its limit by asking another question, "Uncle, what would happen if I got absorbed into that shining object a moment ago?" Shi Mu's voice overflowed with irresistible curiosity.

"Humph!! Too young! Too naive! Exploring an unknown space? Act your age, not your shoe size! Many spaces can take the magic power away from your spirit, and what can you do then? Use up your spirit power, stuck in an alien space, unable to return to your body, so you'd cry like a baby while waiting for my rescue? No way I shall risk my life saving you again! Now stop acting so stupid and move!" Uncle Ju almost yelled to Shi Mu, venting his anger that had been

muffled by then. Shi Mu was struck dumb, losing words for a moment. But deep in his heart, he felt a warmness instead. Uncle Ju must have consumed much of his spirit power to save him at the last minute. This event proved uncle Ju's genuine kindness which was, more often than not, concealed by his surliness.

As they traveled, they encountered a few more shining objects, but they were able to avoid them, and, eventually, they finally saw a fuzzy object emitting dark light. By now, their spirit power was not far from exhaustion. Shi Mu had an extra clear feeling that the previous gravitational force that had led them all the way here undoubtedly came from this light ball.

"Finally!" Uncle Ju's voice resounded by Shi Mu's ear. As joy is often contagious, Shi Mu felt his spirits uplifted too. Their two white dots went directly into the hazy dark ball.

An ear-deafening noise resounded, as if something had slammed against a wall of iron. Shi Mu felt himself enveloped by a soft, black cotton ball, his body overwhelmed by an odd-feeling power. Their spirit dots jostled into the Death World, and soon got separated. Uncle Ju disappeared from Shi Mu's sight, without a trace.

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Shi Mu did not know how much time had passed when he reopened his eyes, probably a moment, and equally possibly an eternity. A somber, oppressive world showed itself before his eyes, and he found himself to be a vague, black shadow that floated in midair, like an aimless cloud.

Shi Mu stretched his sight and saw a bottomless, endless grey. The sky did not change a hue for all the time he had stared at it, always turbid and dark. Grey

clouds kept tumbling, like surges of the sea. Maybe it was fog?. The only light in the sky came from twelve blood red “moons” that looked like dead eyes that were staring at the earth. The moons did not add any lively color to the world, only rendering everything more hopeless and murky.

Chilly, black gusts cut at Shi Mu’s face like a knife, and the grey ground was teeming with swamps, whose black mud would spit a bubble now and then, stirring the countless piles of skeletons left by unknown creatures all the time. The skeletons discharged a stinking smell, the bones stinging Shi Mu’s eyes with their glaring whiteness. An overpowering oppression came over him, and he was painfully made aware that this was precisely the Space of Death.

As Uncle Ju was nowhere to be found, Shi Mu did his best to get used to this suffocating heaviness. He surveyed his surroundings, and realized he could hear the noises of people, or something similar, fighting, and, judging by the volume of the noise, there seemed to be a great number of these creatures. But a hill blocked his view. He decided to go have a look, and his shadow form shot up and over the hill, flying towards the source of the noise.

The sight was sensational! On the other side of the hill lay a vast wilderness, where two armies of skeletons were engaging in a fierce fight. The numerous skeletons dazzled Shi Mu’s eyes, by his crude calculation there must be fifty to sixty thousand of them. Among the skeleton soldiers, a few had faintly glowing eye sockets, some were wielding giant knives made of bones, while some were fighting without any weapons. Some skeletons were even broken and incomplete, losing some parts of their bones. But all were killing each other ruthlessly.

Among the fighting skeletons, some soldiers stood out with their peculiar equipment. Some were riding skeleton horses in black armours, having wounds that were festering. Even so, their movements were still stiff and slow. The skeletons of tigers, snakes were also harnessed for riding. But Shi Mu’s attention

was not on these fighting skeletons. He was deeply attracted by the two giant creatures flying above the armies. The two monsters were both the size of mountains and were in a furious battle to kill each other. The slap of their huge wings brought about roaring sinister winds that pierced the air with their shrill cries.

One monster was an enormous skeleton of a hound, its feet as long as a hundred meters, pieces of carrion hung everywhere on its bones, and maggots were having a feast there. The sight was excruciatingly disgusting, but the shocking momentum with which the monster roared into the air was not reduced. Three disparate heads were hung around the monster's neck: the left one was a skull, the middle one a rotting head, while the right one was alive with dense black hair, not the slightest bit of carrion could be seen on it. But the three hound heads were all drooling, emitting the stench of rotting eggs. They kept howling to threaten their enemy, which was an equally giant monster, the skeleton of a black bird, with a scattering of half-rot black feathers hanging all over its body. Large patches of bone beneath the feathers reflected a ghastly and bloodcurdling whiteness. Its wings stirred up gusts of icy wind that cut right through the huge hound. The bird also had a lengthy tail which kept wagging agilely, producing ear-deafening noises. The two monsters were so terrifying that their might surpassed any strong warrior Shi Mu had seen before. Each breath of theirs would destroy hundreds of skeleton soldiers below, grinding them into pieces.

The three-headed hound seized the moment to pounce on its enemy, and its speed was alarmingly fast given its colossal size. It's left head, without warning, gripped one of the bird's wings with its teeth. This happened so fast the bird was left with no time to dodge. It let out a furious cry and thrust its sword-like break into the hound's neck. At the same time, its talons scratched mercilessly at the hound's abdomen, creating several deep wounds. However, the hound seemed to have felt no pain, its two other heads preceding to attack by biting the bird's wing, and its two strong forelegs corresponded by grappling the bird's body. Then the moment came. The three heads exerted their utmost strength to tear

the bird’s wing off with a clear snap!

The giant bird lost one of its wings, and with the wing its sense of balance. But its beak and talons would not budge, so the two titanic creatures thudded onto the ground from mid-air, tossing and tumbling on the earth. As a consequence, thousands of skeleton soldiers were crushed into pieces in a moment, and this horrifying scene sent the rest of the armies into a panic, each skeleton running for its life desperately. The two monsters did not pay any attention to the escaping skeletons, which, in their eyes, were no more than mole crickets and ants. Without a moment of respite, they continued to fight on the dark earth.

By now Shi Mu had been watching, astounded with open mouth. He did not even notice that his spirit power had been dying away bit by bit. At length, when the dark shadow of his spirit began to drift feebly, his heart was startled. He cursed himself silently that he should have wasted so much of his spirit power watching a fight that did not concern himself at all. Now he must hurry to find himself a prospective animal servant.

Chapter 97 - Planting Spirit Signal

His dwindling spirit power allowed Shi Mu no more time to dawdle in front of the battle. He quickly scanned the surroundings, and was disappointed to find nothing, except for some some wiggling fat worms and the scattered bones of skeletons. These worms were the size of a tree branch and as thick as the mouth of a bowl. They seemed to have found their way out from the earth, in search of food - the remains of other creatures.

“Do I really have to pick a worm?” Shi Mu thought to himself, despondent about his luck. Just as he was anxiously looking for some other animals, the two giant monsters, that had been entangled in their fight, suddenly got separated, and the three-headed hound was blown away. The black bird struggled to its feet. It turned its head to have a look at the wing that had been torn off, and instantly anger burned in its eyes. It cried, mournful and irate, then opened its beak widely to spout a yellow whirlwind that madly rolled toward the hound.

The fierce whirlwind slammed into the paralyzed hound, blowing its colossal body into the air again. The neighboring skeleton army was also affected. Amid the flying sand and rolling pebbles, numerous skeletons were thrown in all directions, and some ten of them thudded onto the earth not far from Shi Mu. Most of them got crushed to pieces on the spot while one escaped the misfortune by only breaking one of its arms. Slowly, it staggered to its feet, most of its bones still intact.

Shi Mu was delighted with his unexpected good fortune. Without the slightest hesitation, he rushed to the skeleton and worked the Art of Capturing Spirits. A moment later, a white paper charm was stuck onto the skeleton’s skull, and the magic worked its way into the poor survivor’s spirit. It had just experienced a terrible fall, so it practically had no strength to resist. Furthermore, the last flicker of its eyes seemed to have also died out. Therefore, without any difficulty,

Shi Mu successfully planted his spirit signal onto the skeleton.

Upon his completion of the task, Shi Mu sank into unconsciousness, and his spirit left the white dot, turning into an almost transparent light ball that left the Death Space at an incredibly fast speed.

The one-armed skeleton's eyes flickered. All of a sudden, the brutal, murderous smell, that had been around it, left its body and vanished into thin air. It stood there, motionless, like a newborn baby, looking blankly at the fighting armies. After some time, it seemed to have made a decision to leave the battlefield. Turning its body, the skeleton walked away, step-by-step, towards its new "life".

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In Uncle Ju's secret room.

With a sudden jolt, Shi Mu opened his eyes and found his spirit back in his physical body. He let out a long sigh, adjusting his state of mind. Due to a large consumption of spirit power, his face was pale and weary, but his eyes were sparkling with excitement. For the first time, he had traveled to another space and planted his spirit signal on a creature not of this world. Though it was only a skeleton, it certainly was much stronger than a worm, which far surpassed his expectation. Shi Mu quietly practiced the Art of Accumulating Spirit Power to recover from the fatigue.

After a brief moment, the plump body of Uncle Ju's also perked up with consciousness. His ruddy face was quite animated, which suggested that his journey was probably a fruitful one.

“It seems Uncle Ju had a successful trip!” Shi Mu stood up and smiled.

“Hehe, not bad! It seems that you are in a good mood too. Could it be that you, in such a short time, also had some success?” Uncle Ju gave one of his rare smiles.

“I planted my signal onto a skeleton.” Shi Mu answered frankly.

“Good, little one! Seems you’ve really got the talent to be a spirit Adept! Though skeletons are only the lowest creatures in the Space of Death, I’ll admit that, for a Scholar, you’ve really done well!” Stroking his jaw, Uncle Ju offered his genuine praise.

“It’s all by luck.” Shi Mu returned a smile.

Uncle Ju did not pursue his questions and ended the conversation with a knowing smile. He began to pick up the magic gadgets on the floor and stored them carefully. The middle-level stones in the indentations had lost much of their luster, indicating that the spirit power in them had been consumed considerably. Shi Mu watched Uncle Ju’s movement quietly, surprised at this large demand of spirit power. Middle-level stones were much more refined than low-level ones, even so, Uncle Ju’s one experiment had depleted almost all of their power. Now he finally understood why it was widely accepted that Adept is a job that costs large sums of money.

“Judging from your face, I guess you’re wanting to beckon that skeleton?” Uncle Ju asked Shi Mu suddenly, a knowing smile on his face

“Yes, I’d never hide things from uncle. Could you please teach me the Art of

Beckoning?” Shi Mu was quite embarrassed to be seen through by Uncle Ju.

The fat uncle nodded and led Shi Mu from the secret room to the entrance hall. He then asked Shi Mu to wait for a few minutes and went into an inner room. After some time, he came out with a thin brochure and a translucent bottle, which contained some yellow fluids that were spitting bubbles. A faint sour smell oozed from the lid.

Uncle Ju now wore a serious face. He handed Shi Mu the brochure and the bottle, warning, “The Art of Beckoning is recorded here, and the liquid is the lizard’s poison. Keep it in mind, never touch the poison, or it will eat through your skin and bones in an instant!”

“Thank you for your instruction.” Shi Mu carefully stored the bottle and began leafing through the brochure, where a beckoning formula was recorded. It did not seem to be too complex and Shi Mu could manage to understand every detail. The only issue was that the formula required many materials of high price. At the end of the brochure, there was an incantation called “The Art of Binding Spirits” whose purpose was to establish contracts with creatures from the other world.

Shi Mu intuitively sensed that this incantation was of peculiar significance. He asked, “Uncle Ju, may I know more about this incantation for binding spirits?”

“The formula recorded in the brochure tells how to beckon creatures to our space, but if you want to keep it as a servant, you have to make a contract with it. And that’s when you’ll need this incantation and contract. The signal you planted onto the skeleton has a time limit, after which your spirit power will vanish from its body, and you can never beckon it again. If you make a contract before you beckon it, you can skip the formula part, and can drag this creature to our world directly by the power of this contract. But to keep it by your side

will consume your own spirit power. As to how much, that differs from creature to creature. If one day you manage to become a Spirit Grade Adept, you should be able to easily beckon and contract some weaker creatures to be your servants.” Uncle Ju explained to him briefly.

“I see...” Shi Mu was enlightened.

“Mind you, creatures from other spaces are usually hard to tame. It’s not that easy at all to make a contract with them. All right, leave if you are satisfied. I’ve got other errands to do.” Uncle Ju offered his last piece of advice and urged Shi Mu to leave. Without a word, he turned and walked into his inner room.

Shi Mu bowed respectfully, thanked him, and then left with the valuable brochure.

Chapter 98 - The Crafty Skeleton

The Space of Death.

Murky clouds hovered over the land, obscuring the moons above. Biting wind swept across the wilderness like hungry beasts giving menacing howls. Looking up through the clouds, the sky were a stifling grey color. Down on the earth, near a deserted hillock, a human skeleton was inching its way through the mud. Due to its crippled left arm, its movement somehow lacked balance. Moreover, many of its bones were missing, and with a few serious fissures on its ribs, it could hardly keep its body from falling apart. Each step seemed to take great effort, and its remaining bones creaked in pain all the time, which was quite an ominous sign of its imminent doom.

Despite all its missing bones, the quality of perseverance was not missing in this physically challenged skeleton. It never stopped its advance. It would only pause to look up to the twelve blood-red moons every now and then, and the dark holes of its eye would glitter, as if paying homage to the moons.

Time seemed to have lost its existence in this world. Nobody knows how long it took the skeleton to arrive at another black hillock. It looked around and chose a new direction to continue its trudge. Just as it was to leave the hill, the ground near its feet suddenly opened a slit, from where leaped a white shadow which turned out to be one of the white worms Shi Mu had seen at the battlefield some time before. This attacking worm, as thick as an arm, opened its mouth like a viper to bite into the one-armed skeleton’s ankle. The skeleton gave no response, the green gleams in its eye-holes swaying indifferently. The worm wriggled wildly, trying to rip the ankle and bite the bone in two with its teeth which were making a grating noise.

However, without warning, the one-armed skeleton began its vigorous counter-blow. It swayed its only arm, leaving a shadow in the air, and snatched the white worm's latter half body with an incredible speed! The worm was left absolutely no time to react, and before it could relax its teeth it had been torn into halves, with its head still dangling in the skeleton's ankle. Such a series of movements were conducted so skillfully like a flash of lightning that few would believe their eyes. The skeleton had appeared literally to be falling apart! In hindsight, its nonchalance at being attacked by the worm was actually a well-designed trap!

The skeleton opened its mouth and had a suck at the worm's body. Instantly a bean-size green light ball flew from the worm, and the skeleton swallowed it with enjoyment. It's green gleams twinkled, and was now stronger than before. Then a layer of dark fog emerged around its body, and the fissures on its ribs began to heal. As the fissures grew smaller, the dark fog faded gradually until it totally disappeared. The skeleton's eyes twinkled again, and at the same slow pace as before, it moved forward, leaving the hill behind as if nothing had happened.

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Shi Mu left Uncle Ju's residence and returned to his stone house. After closing the door, he sat by the desk, the previous excitement still in his eyes. He had gained much from this experiment with Uncle Ju and also had a taste of a Spirit Adept's wonderful life. What's more, judging from his performance in this experiment, he had a good chance of becoming a Spirit Adept himself. But this occupation was as challenging in its demand of money as in skills, and given his current financial state, as well as his income, this was still quite an exacting task.

Shi Mu sank into a brief silence before he fished out the thin brochure to peruse it once more. After a thorough reading, he began to calculate the cost of the formula on a piece of paper. Even the crude result was astonishing to his eyes! To finish this beckoning formula, he needs at least forty thousand silver,

not to mention the extra money needed whenever he would make a mistake during the process. Shi Mu grinned bitterly to himself, putting away the brochure. He had just finished a batch of paper charms made for the Holy Spirit Group, so he should soon meet a due reward, but even so his overall property amounted to no more than thirty thousand silver, which was still ten thousand silver short of the demanded sum. Furthermore, he still needed money in practicing the Art of Heavenly Elephant, there was no way for this part of his budget to be diverted to the beckoning ceremony's purpose. Releasing a resigned sigh, Shi Mu totally abandoned the thought of beckoning that skeleton. [A]

He meditated in silence for a moment and finally made up his mind. One hope having come to nothing, he would not discard the other too. Fishing out the bottle containing the lizard's poison from his shirt, he studied it, thought for a while, and then decided that he should prioritize the work about the meteoric blade. With the poison's assistance, to upgrade the blade to a magical weapon was not impossible. But there was another person's help that he must seek to accomplish this mission. And this person was none other than Zhao Ping, the owner of the smithy. Shi Mu had assurance that, considering his identity as a Charm Adept, Zhao Ping would probably nod his agreement. The main issue was about which formula he should choose to be imprinted on the blade. He sat, deep in thought, with the jade slips recording the Great Sutra of Magical Charms in hand. Carefully he studied the various formulas in the book.

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Three days later, at Zhao Ping's smithy.

"Haha, I knew it! I knew you'd get the lizard's poison successful, but would have believed that you get so much in a few days! You know, the lizard is uncle Ju's treasure, and what an effort it was for my group, the famous Li Fire Group, to get a tiny drop! But you got such a big bottle of it! I've gotta hand it to you,

that's amazing!" His eyes fully attracted by the bottle in Shi Mu's hand, Zhao Ping could not help but exclaim with wonder.

"I just did uncle Ju a small favor, and it was so generous of him to have given me so much of the poison. Can we upgrade the blade to a magical weapon now? I must reply on brother Zhao's help." Shi Mu held up a teacup and took a sip of the content. He smiled sheepishly, a smile that he usually gave whenever he asked someone for help.

"Sure, no problem. I made the blade, so it must be me who makes it a magical weapon." Zhao Ping nodded without the slightest trace of hesitance.

Shi Mu felt so much relieved that the smile finally became a natural one. He quickly handed Zhao Ping the large wad of paper charms he had asked for. The thick wad proved again Shi Mu's capability as a charm Adept. Such a demanding job would never have been accomplished by any other Adept in a mere month, but Shi Mu did it without difficulty, and in a few days' time! Gazing at the charms, Zhao Ping could not help but feel surprised again, and the thought to draw Shi Mu over to his side grew ever stronger.

"Since you've come, why not begin it now? Follow me, brother Shi." Zhao Ping stood up and walked to an inner room.

The two soon arrived at a large stone room, which was precisely the forging room of the smithy. The spacious room had over ten stoves laid in perfect order, each spouting raging flames that made the room unbearably hot. Several burly men were working at the stoves, bare to the waist, and the boisterous noise of striking kept ringing. Seeing Zhao Ping and Shi Mu entering the room, the burly men all greeted them by nodding their heads. But the latter ignored them, leading Shi Mu directly to another sealed stone room through the forging area.

“This is a forging room I keep for myself. A little better than the bigger one you’ve seen.” Zhao Ping introduced, pushing the door open. Shi Mu followed without a word, and immediately had he entered the space he was wrapped in by the scorching heat. Zhao Ping shut the door, and leading Shi Mu to a burning stove, which was made from some black stone Shi Mu had never seen. Though smaller than the outside stoves, this black one had a pure white luster, and its heat was much more intense, even sending the air above it rippling. Aside from the stove and a forging table, there was no other equipment in the room.

NOTES:

[A] - This is actually the first time Shi Mu’s lack of money makes sense! (He spent most of it buying the sword, a few chapters back.) Though I still think he could, very easily and very quickly, make 30k silver.

Chapter 99 - The Birth of a Magical Weapon

Shi Mu's eyes fell on the stove, where magical characters had formed a red, shining circle that was the source of heat ripples in the air.

Detecting Shi Mu's amazement, Zhao Ping explained proudly, "This is a formula I specially asked an Adept to make for me. It's called the All-yang formula,and it is able to increase the stove's heat."

Shi Mu nodded with satisfaction. His chances for success were even higher now.

"To be honest, I've been thinking about improving this blade ever since I made it, and have even come up with a plan. The reasons I didn't do it were simple. First, given its weight, who could possibly use it even if I could make it? Second, I didn't have the lizard's poison at that time. Now that the two problems have been solved - you can use the blade and we have the poison - we can begin our task. I'm sure brother Shi knows as much as I do about weapons, so we can discuss the details together. I look forward to learning from brother Shi. " Zhao Ping fished a brochure out of his shirt and passed it to Shi Mu.

There was an embarrassed flash in Shi Mu's eyes. He took the brochure and smiled, "You flatter me, brother Zhao. I knew nothing about making weapons, so I've been consulting books and ancient records these days. I'd like to hear your advice." Then, without delay, he opened the brochure to have a close reading, and would seek Zhao Ping's opinions whenever an idea dawned on him. Though Shi Mu was not an expert on making weapons, he did have a much better understanding of magical characters. The two did not arrive at a final plan until an hour later.

Suddenly Zhao Ping thought of the key issue in this project. He asked curiously, “I almost forgot to ask, what formula does brother Shi want to imprint on the blade?”

Shi Mu answered without hesitation, “The Great Fire Formula.”

“The Great Fire? As far as I know that’s the most difficult and powerful one among all the basic formulas! It consists of twelve characters!” Zhao Ping gaped in astonishment at the answer, marveling at and suspicious of Shi Mu’s current ability.

“That’s correct.“ Shi Mu only returned a faint smile. He had been giving it deliberate thought, so this was a decision seriously made. This was his highest achievement to date - mastering the powerful Great Fire Formula. In his mind, he had rehearsed the formula’s characters a hundred times, on paper tens of times, and in practice, today would be his first and last chance. Considering the black blade’s material - the exceedingly heavy meteoric iron - it would definitely have a most formidable attack value once the Great Fire Formula was successfully planted on it.

“Since brother Shi has made up his mind, I believe he has confidence in his ability. Then let’s begin.” Zhao Ping nodded, seeing that Shi Mu’s face was quite determined. Without further ado, he turned up the stove. Shi Mu fished out the black blade and passed it to Zhao Ping without the slightest indecisiveness. He stood there watching Zhao Ping’s every move, waiting for him to do the preparation work before he took over to draw the formula.

The fire grew fiercer under Zhao Ping’s control, and so did the room’s heat. When the flames burnt so brightly that they seemed to be spouted from a dragon’s mouth, Zhao Ping gripped the black blade with a pair of tongs and placed it in the roaring flames which soon licked the meteoric iron, crackling

energetically. Zhao Ping fished out two red crystal stones of brilliant luster, which were none other than two low-level heavenly stones of the fire element that Zhao Ping had bought for an exorbitant price, and placed them, not without a bit of heartache, in the two indentations on the stove.

The magical characters in the All-yang formula instantly responded by giving off glaring light that made Shi Mu narrow his eyes. The flames reduced in size but grew doubly stronger in heat. The flames looked more refined now, and the room could barely stand the increased heat, seeming to want to melt into a fluid. Zhao Ping's shirt was plastered against his back, his entire body dripping with sweat, but he just focused on the black blade lying firm in the flames, rapt in his work, his eyes brimming with radiating vigor, and his hands busy stirring the fire.

An hour had passed amid the burning heat. The black luster of the blade gradually came to be a dull red. Shi Mu wiped the sweat beading down his cheeks and flashed Zhao Ping a knowing smile. He did not expect that the All-yang formula could make the stove heat up the black iron to the point of changing in color. Zhao Ping did not relax, however, his eyes fixed on the blade, not letting go of any minute change. A while later, his body tensed, and his hand gripped the red-hot iron blade with the tongs, removing it from the stove to the forging table.

"Pass me the lizard poison!" He demanded, stretching out his hand.

Shi Mu hurriedly passed him the bottle containing the asked liquid.

Zhao Ping took the bottle and shouted again. A faint layer of red light emerged around his body, and his hands seemed to be enveloped by two red balls. An unknown flash of energy began to spread all over the room, swirling around him like a whirlwind. Shi Mu was filled with amazement at the sight. Judging from Zhao Ping's air, the art he was practicing - which also belonged to the element of

fire - could definitely overpower All-yang Art.

Zhao Ping carefully opened the lid and slightly slant the bottleneck. Thick yellow liquid streamed down, falling on the red-hot blade. Zhao Ping let out a muffled sound, and a ball of red light suddenly rose before their eyes, and before Shi Mu knew it, the light engulfed the blade like a flame.

The “light-flame” crackled, and the yellow fluid at the hands of Zhao Ping soon developed into a thin film that completely enveloped the blade. At this time, Zhao Ping’s face paled, which was likely due to the exertion, and the red light also dispersed in a flash. He stepped back, fatigued, and shouted anxiously, “Quick! The surface of the blade has been softened by the heat and the poison! It will recover its hardness once the heat fades. Brother Shi, seize the moment, draw the formula!”

Shi Mu had been long waiting for the moment. Holding his breath, with the red magical brush in his hand, he began to imprint the characters on the blade’s surface. The brush was specially made for writing on weapons, its hair unusually hard. Shi Mu took a deep breath, and, with each character vividly present in his mind, his wrist moved steadily and nimbly, the brush dancing briskly on the blade. If Zhao Ping had been able to see Shi Mu’s face, he would have seen that Shi Mu’s eyes were now gleaming gold. Zhao Ping could only see Shi Mu’s wrist move in a way that exhibited both prudence and proficiency.

Meanwhile, Shi Mu kept his breath slow and shallow, while the characters emerged on the blade one after another. After some thirty or forty minutes, twelve magical characters had all found their way to their appropriate positions, and an effective Great Fire Formula was completed. At the last stroke, the entire formula gleamed red, sending out a power ripple peculiar to the fire element.

“You made it!” Zhao Ping cried in a great elation, his voice quavering as he

gained a vicarious pleasure from Shi Mu's success. But the next view dazzled his eyes: Shi Mu showed no sign of stop. His wrist flicked, and the red brush flew to the place where the first character was drawn like a tireless bee - most incredibly, Shi Mu began to repeat the whole process.

"Brother Shi… certainly you don't mean to overlay the formula with a second one?!" Zhao Ping's voice seemed to have lost its substance, floating in the air feebly, while its owner stood astounded. Shi Mu remained fully concentrated on his job as if Zhao Ping's words did not reach his ears. Zhao Ping took a deep breath to calm his nerves, a light of awe coming into his eyes. To overlay formulas is undoubtedly the best way to empower a magical weapon, but it is definitely not an easy job. The formulas must be overlaid strictly, and the tiniest difference will destroy all the formulas, including the weapon itself! To imprint formula on a weapon is already beyond average Adepts' reach, not to mention overlay a second formula on the previous one! Even a practiced Adept will usually choose to abandon the thought. After all, who can be sure to draw two identical formulas! The difficulty is almost insurmountable, considering the catastrophic consequences.

However, the gold light in Shi Mu's eyes glowed unflinchingly. Without any hesitation, he continued the drawing and finished the second formula in a short while.

The blade shone. The red luster flowed through the blade, as though just having just been nourished by a feast. The formulas were much brighter than before.

Zhao Ping released a long sigh of relief; he felt like a survivor after a terrible hurricane. But just as he was to utter something, what he saw made him freeze.

Chapter 100 - The Completion of the Magical Weapon

Shi Mu shook his wrist to ease the pain from the exertion of drawing continuously. After a momentary pause, he picked up the brush again, ready to draw for a third time! The sight left Zhao Ping speechless for some time. Eventually, he came to himself and asked diffidently,“Brother Shi, you don’t plan to overlay a third formula, do you?” His voice quavering, his shock was profound.

However, a heavy silence was the only reply he got from Shi Mu, who was absorbed completely in drawing the characters and patterns, his hands moving stably as well as fluently at a speed even faster than before. This third formula only took half of the time he spent in drawing the previous two copies. Shi Mu seemed somewhat exhausted, nevertheless, he kept moving his brush and started on a fourth copy!

The heat of the black blade faded bit by bit, and the hot red color gradually darkened. Eventually, Shi Mu’s wrist was forced to a stop after adding his last stroke hard on the blade’s surface, which had hardened greatly, making the etching an even more strenuous task. The blade lay still on the forging table, its hardness resuming its control. After a few seconds, the Great Fire Formula, with four identical copies overlaid, gleamed red against the naked dark surface of the blade! For some time, the gleam lit up the stifling room, before it dimmed and disappeared. So the fifth etching had been completed before the hardness of the material denied any more strokes.

But it was not time for Shi Mu to unwind himself yet. There was another delicate task for him. On the blade’s surface, a red line stretched from the Great Fire Formulas right to the handle. Shi Mu took the bottle and dripped a few drops of the lizard’s poison at the end of the red line. The poison ate at the handle, giving off a hissing sound like a silkworm nibbling greedily. In two seconds, a small pit was formed. Shi Mu quickly fished up a fire stone and placed

it in the pit. With neat moves, he finished etching some patterns around the stone on the blade's handle. Immediately, the stone gave a buzzing noise, shining glaringly, and the red line linking the formulas and the stone seemed to become a vein through which heavenly energy flowed endlessly into the overlaid twelve magical characters. The blade was as though awakened, emitting a dull red, but soon the ray faded and the formulas once again fell into a deep slumber.

Shi Mu's face finally relaxed. Assured that his effort had yielded a good result, his hand that had been holding the brush eased up, and the thought of officially owning a magical weapon made his heart beat fast. The fire stone he embedded in the sword's handle was the source of heavenly energies that would enhance the Great Fire Formulas; though with his current skills he could manage to activate the five overlaid formulas, the heavenly stone would assist him greatly.

As a matter fact, magical weapons were not used by many Houtian warriors, because they lacked the strength to activate the formula on such a weapon. Their real qi was like an ant before an elephant. That's why they needed to borrow energy from heavenly stones, which were not the cheap. Hence, few would have the money to enter a shop and waltz out with a bag bulging with all kinds of heavenly stones. Only those who were born with great wealth or high social positions could manage that. For those who were of a less fortunate birth, they could only wait till they made it to the level of Xiantian Saint, where their real qi would be largely enhanced and thus enable them to activate a formula on a magical weapon by turning their real qi into magical power.

Now, what about Zhao Ping? He was utterly astounded at what he had seen, that Shi Mu finished drawing five formulas on the blade without a break! Even recalling the whole event sent chills through his spine. His eyes stared the formulas on the blade, who seemed to be waiting quietly to be aroused into a bloody fight, unable to look away. Only after a long while did he finally come to himself, cheering at the top of his voice, "You made it! Who would believe it? Five formulas! I've long heard that brother Shi is skilled in formulas, but had

never seen it with my own eyes before! What perfection!”

Shi Mu turned to face Zhao Ping with a polite smile, his eyes had returned to normal, “you flatter me, brother Zhao. It’s really no big deal.”

“As far as I know, among all the Adepts, including some majoring in making magical weapons, only a small number of them can etch the same formula twice on a weapon, if luck is with them. Few have ever made it three. I’ve never seen one like you, accomplishing five copies in one sitting!” Zhao Ping’s tone was tinged with an affected sweetness; apparently he was trying to fawn on Shi Mu. Meanwhile, his eyes kept being drawn back to the black blade, which was still cooling down.

Shi Mu returned Zhao Ping a shy smile, trying to dissemble his embarrassment. How could he tell him that his achievement was dependent on his supernatural eyesight mutation? Would Zhao Ping believe him or would he call him a monster? His eyesight was the key to his success, and if given more time, he had the assurance of overlaying a few more copies on the previous ones to make his weapon stronger. Since a magical weapon’s might was directly influenced by the formula(s) etched on it, and the Great Fire Formula, though challenging enough, was only a low-level one. Even with five formulas the blade would lose to an average blade etched with a single high-level formula. Nevertheless, it still sufficed for a Houtian warrior.

A quarter of an hour later, the meteoric iron had cooled off completely. The twelve scarlet characters on its surface gleamed with a menacing coldness, the patterns of the formula seemed like nature itself. It looked as if blood were circulating in the grains of the blade. Shi Mu’s eyes also gleamed, with relief and joy. He grasped the handle and studied the blade closely.

“What a high-quality weapon! The meteoric iron’s weight, plus the explosive

power of the five formulas... Brother Shi, I bet you will be uncontested against anyone else at your level!" Zhao Ping gazed at the blade unblinkingly, not without a pang of envy. The blade's value must increase dramatically, without a doubt. But Zhao Ping's righteousness prevented him from going further than a natural envy at a friend's success. He soon recovered from the pain and suggested, "Brother Shi, do you want to give the blade a try?"

"Yes! " Shi Mu raised his eyebrows and answered resolutely. He was very interested in trying out the power of the Great Fire Formula.

"Hehe, follow me, brother Shi. We have a practice field for customers to try their weapons." Zhao Ping grinned and led Shi Mu out of the forging room to an open area, where many wooden human figures clad with iron sheet were displayed alongside some boulders the size of a millstone. The boulders all had numerous marks - though varying in depth - left by knives and swords. Shi Mu could not wait any longer; roaring with excitement, he stomped, bent low against the ground, then galloped to the practice field in a flash. He wielded the blade wildly, stirring up strong gusts of wind, and a burning sensation in his chest, as he practiced the Thirteen Series of Gale Force Blade Art. The heavy meteoric iron seemed to weigh nothing in his hand, and, as it shifted in the air, the sun gleamed on its naked surface, the shadows it left all blurring into streaks of cold light. Each move saw the blade's speed increase until the blade turned into a black shadow circling around him like a vicious bird. After a brief lapse of time, Shi Mu felt his mind clarified, and the blade seemed to have taken over, moving as if by itself, following the Thirteen Series of Gale Force Blade Art's pattern correctly. The very art had been seared into his subconsciousness and was directing the blade without Shi Mu's involvement. He felt a stream of warmth welling up in his heart and flowing into his limbs, then his mind.

"Ha!" He yelled, violently, and the blade thrust forward with a sharp shake before thirteen shadows rolled in all directions like tempestuous waves; the blade caught light and glittered, with a sharpness that made Zhao Ping sweat in

fear. He stepped backward by reflex, awe-stricken by Shi Mu's thirteen cuts in one breath! Shi Mu himself did not expect this either, that his Wind-Blowing Blade Art had finally reached the consummate stage! He only managed it once, with the assistance of Body-Lifting Charm, and never thought he could accomplish the art all by himself.

Suddenly, tumultuous noises thundered out, and it turned out that a green boulder the size of a hill was chopped by the blade, and, with a dull sound, it collapsed into over ten pieces, which flew in all directions from the force of the blade.

Swish! A piece of the boulder as big as a millstone was flying towards Shi Mu's head! His face was calm as he tightened his grip on the blade, instilling his real qi into it. Instantly the Great Fire Formulas shone, and a layer of red light emerged, shrouding the entire blade. Shi Mu let out a low shout, swung his arm, and the blade left a red shadow in the air as it split the stone. A booming sound rang out as the stone exploded into myriad pebbles that scattered in all directions before they fell down like a shower. Shi Mu jumped back several steps like a bird, dodging the pebbles. Without making a sound he took back his blade and returned it to the sheath.

"Bravo! Brother Shi's blade art is just brilliant, and the power of the Great Fire Formula is really amazing. But I guess brother Shi didn't use all your strength at the last strike." Zhao Ping smiled, clapping his hands.

Shi Mu nodded. It was understandable that he would not use all his strength when testing out the blade. Only the first layer of the five formulas was activated.

"That really is a nice blade." A hoarse voice came abruptly from outside the practice field.

Chapter 101 - An Unexpected Guest

As the flat, unemotional voice fell, a lanky man slowly walked up to the smithy. He had a face pitted with acne, but this did not seem to lower his self-esteem, judging from the way he looked down on Shi Mu. However, as he looked at the black blade in Shi Mu's hand, his gaze became filled with lust.

Shi Mu felt quite uneasy about having his precious possession eyed by an unknown man of dubious background, especially since this man was licking his lips, like a hungry beast. Shi Mu snorted his contempt, his eyebrows tightly knit, and returned his blade to the scabbard. The lanky man shot Shi Mu a cold look, his eyes running him over unkindly.

"Brother Zuo! Welcome! What has brought you to my humble smithy?" Zhao Ping quickly sensed the tension in the air, and quickly greeted the man with a forced smile, in order to lighten the atmosphere. However, 'brother' Zuo did not answer, but, again, greedily looked at Shi Mu's sheathed blade.

Zhao Ping felt his heart in his mouth. He racked his brains and then spoke in a light and pleasing tone, aware of the lanky man's temper, "Brother Zuo, it is an honor to be graced with your presence! Let's talk inside. Please, follow me to the main hall. By chance, I have recently acquired some exquisite tea from the Misty Mountain. Would brother Zuo do me the honor of coming in and having a taste?"

"I came to your place for a new weapon, since the competition is around the corner, and was told that you were here, in this courtyard. So here I am. Why? Does my being here upset you?" The lanky man was apparently angered, his voice cold and arrogant, despite its hoarseness.

“Of course not! You do me a great honor by simply visiting my humble shop.” Zhao Ping smiled ingratiatingly, creases forming near the corners of his eyes.

“I’ve seen all the weapons in your shop, and none of them pleased me, but I am sure I can make do with that one. Is it your latest work?” Pointing his finger at Shi Mu’s hand, the lanky man cut off Zhao Ping’s words, demanding an answer. Being mentioned in his face, Shi Mu squinted. Judging from his air, the lanky man must be an older disciple, but, with no uniform on, Shi Mu could not guess which grade he was in.

Zhao Ping was slightly flustered and hurriedly explained, “Brother Zhao, you misunderstand. That’s brother Shi’s private property, how could my small smithy ever make such a good weapon?”

The lanky man frowned at the apparent lie. Shi Mu averted his eyes from the ominous guest, and addressed Zhao Ping before he left, “Many thanks for today, brother Zhao. I’ll send you the pay and some extra money to cover the two stones. I’m going to leave now.” This said, he strode to the gate and prepared to depart.

“Hold on.” Before he could leave the scene, the lanky man flashed to the gate and blocked his path.

“What’s your business with me, brother… Sorry, I forgot your surname.” Shi Mu raised his eyebrows and asked with an expressionless face, but his tone was filled with the scorn he felt at the man’s presence.

“I haven’t asked brother’s name.” The lanky man leered, a grim smile playing around his lips.

“Shi Mu.” The cold answer was all he got.

“Well, brother Shi. You look quite young, so I assume you are a new disciple.” The lanky man’s eyes sharpened. The name rang a bell but, for the moment, he could not think of where he had heard of it.

“Yes. What of it?” Aware that this man was coveting his blade, Shi Mu felt himself losing all his good manners.

“You have a nice blade, but mind you, do keep our sect’s rules in mind. As your kind senior, I’d like to give you a piece of advice. If the other old disciples ever get to know about it, I worry for your future. You’ll get yourself in trouble, be robbed of your property, or possibly even lose your life. How sad!” The lanky man clicked his tongue, shaking his head, hinting at something with a meaningful look.

“I hate to waste my time. If you have any questions, just ask them already.” Shi Mu interrupted, precluding the man’s further affected shows.

“Well, well, what a straightforward lad! Tell you what, that blade has captured my fancy. To save you from the sad misfortune of being robbed by heartless guys, I’ll pay you thirty thousand silver for that beloved blade of yours. What a great bargain for you.“ The lanky man spoke with a cunning smile.

The nearby Zhao Ping almost fell to the ground at the lanky man’s “suggestion”. The blade, before it was upgraded, already cost a city. Now that it had become a magical weapon, the price must have, at the very least, doubled or tripled. The lanky man’s offer only signaled his intention to bully. But, considering the man’s special status, even Zhao Ping, a member of the Li Fire Group, would flinch from having any animosity with him. Therefore, however friendly he had been with Shi Mu, he could only stand by as this all unfolded.

“Wow, you’ve got really an intelligent mind. Your offer is quite generous, but I have to say no to this kind offer, since I have no intentions to sell it. Please do not bother yourself anymore with my blade.” Shi Mu snorted in his heart and, again, gave a blunt answer.

“You ungrateful chap! Do you know who you are speaking to?” The man’s mask fell, revealing his true face - a truly savage visage.

“I’m sorry, but this ungrateful chap has a very limited knowledge about our sect.“ Shi Mu responded with a sneer, which drove the man crazy. He shouted viciously, “You are asking for death!” Then his body flashed forward. The next second he was, seemingly, floating in front of Shi Mu’s face, like a ghost. His arms swayed, one of his fists rushed forward, with a thunderous noise, while his other hand reached to try and grab the blade in Shi Mu’s hand. Before the fist hit him, Shi Mu felt a gust of wind cutting at his face, like a sharp sickle. The speed of the lanky man had exceeded his expectations, and the fist neared his face in the blink of an eye.

Shi Mu jumped back, then let out a low shout, and threw one of his fists forward, which clashed with the opponent’s incoming fist. His other hand pulled the blade from its sheath and stabbed at the palm that was reaching out to grab his weapon.

Two dull sounds reverberated in the practice field. The two clashed, then separated in a moment, both drawing back one step.

“It seems you have some skill! No wonder you act so arrogantly! I’ve given you a good offer, then you rudely declined! I’ve remembered your name, and I’ll take good care of you. Believe me, I can do whatever I want to fix you. Just taking

your blade is far from cooling my anger. I think I'll take one of your arms as well." The lanky man's eyes burned, his voice quavering in a fit of rage. One of his hands was bleeding, a wound incurred when Shi Mu stabbed his palm. The pain of the cut, or rather, the humiliation of getting cut, made his stomach churn. He fumbled at his waist, and a silver sword emerged out of nowhere, reflecting cold light. The sword was much longer and narrower than average, and the light it gave off registered an unworldly coldness, especially the blue characters imprinted on its edge. The air was chilled around those characters. Undoubtedly, this was a magical weapon, too.

Shi Mu's countenance changed, knowing that a magical weapon's power was never to be underestimated. Before he could back up, the cold sword was prepared to strike.

"Brother Zuo, brother Shi, why not calm down and have a good talk?" Seeing that the two were gearing up for a real fight, the poor Zhao Ping stepped forward and tried to persuade them to stop.

Without warning, an ear-piercingly shrill cry rang out, cutting off Zhao Pin's words. The lanky man flicked his wrist and the sword, giving off an extremely murderous aura, turned into a long silver streak that quickly made its way toward Shi Mu's chest. The shrill noise was the sound of the sword moving through the air extremely fast, and it dulled Shi Mu's mind the moment it wound into his ears. He immediately fell into a trance.

Before he knew it, the sword had reached his chest, and the murderous aura made him shiver.

Notes:

EliteCreature: Is it just me, or are we in the age of cliffhangers right now?

Neji : No doofus, cliff was hanging, so all Elites was eaten by a creature.

EliteCreature: Huh!!! what you mean!? i am Wearing pink, pinku!

Neji : What's with pinku, bitch!

EliteCreature: i love you Neji!

Neji : I love you all, thanks!

Chapter 102 - Destruction of a Magical Weapon

Shi Mu cried out in defiance of his trance, his heart beating fast. As a result, his body regained control, and the murky cloud that had fogged up his mind was expunged. Regaining muscle control, he rotated his body and did his best to jump out of the path of the attack, but the sword still left a mark on his right shoulder, and blood began to gush out. Without delay, he used the Art of Accumulating Spirit Power, muttering incantations in his heart. Then he raised his arm, and the black blade chopped down at the lanky man with numerous black shadows gathering into one streak of cold light.

The lanky man gave a snort of contempt, his bloodshot eyes seemingly filled with malicious spite. Like a ghost rising from hell, he swayed his silver sword wildly, producing the same shrill noise similar to a baby's heart-rending cries. The blade seemed to morph into hundreds of shadows, which then sped toward his opponent.

The two weapons clashed and the cacophonous clang of metal reverberated through the practice field; simultaneously the shadows of the two weapons were dispelled. Shi Mu stumbled backward several steps before he managed to come to a stop. His eyes revealed the profound shock he had felt, since the situation was worse than he had originally thought. He had thought the thin silver sword would break once it slammed against his blade, but the reverse happened: he felt his blade cutting at a pliable spring force, which dissolved much of his blade's momentum.

The lanky man also was pushed back by the clashing force, and though his countenance did not change, his mind was deeply disturbed. The horrible power transmitted by the black blade almost turned his stomach upside down, not to mention that the part of his right hand, between his thumb and the index finger, was so heavily abraded that blood oozed out from within. But the most

exasperating part was not the wound. It was that his pride had been wounded. How could his Ghost-Weeping Sword fail to vanquish this brat before him?

“I didn’t think there was someone like you among the new disciples! However...” The lanky man took a deep breath and spoke slowly, with a grim face, while he secretly activated the real qi all over his body. Shi Mu did not pay attention to what the man was saying and swooped down upon him like a fierce eagle. A thunderous noise resounded as Shi Mu picked up a huge boulder and threw it at the lanky man. The lanky man was taken by surprise, his face blanching in great anger, and his hand tightening on the handle of his sword. In a second, a faint layer of blue light emerged floating above the surface of the silver sword, and he wielded it with his full strength, slashing at the boulder. In a split-second, scores of silver shadows blossomed, like venomous snakes, winding their way to the boulder, hissing. It only took the snakes a second to dissolve the stone into pieces, which now fell before the snakes, like a lump of soft tofu, scattering in all directions.

However, just as the lanky man was about to sigh in relief, he found himself confronted by Shi Mu, who had followed the giant stone and hid behind it! Now that the stone was cut to bits, Shi Mu appeared with a loud shout that startled his opponent. Next came the black blade, like a flash of lightning, bringing with it a large streak of cold light which then turned into thirteen shadows that cascaded onto the lanky man, who found himself hopelessly cornered by the shadows!

“Your. Courting. Death!” He cursed, flustered, as he realized that there was no way for him to escape. Desperately, he empowered his silver sword, and the blue characters glowed intensely, the air around it becoming chill and thick. The sword adopted an irregular dancing pattern, which produced a blue screen that shielded its master, who proceeded to jump backward.

A gleam of irritation flashed across Shi Mu’s eyes. He found that his thirteen

cuts were dispelled by the blue screen as soon as they clashed, though the screen itself was dispersed, too. He narrowed his eyes, not content with the situation, and gave another great shout as he instilled all his spirit power into the black blade. In a blink of an eye, the formulas on the blade shone glaringly bright, and flames emerged, roaring above the blade's surface. The flames resumed the attack just as the thirteen blade shadows began to recede, and a streak of red light rolled toward the silver sword, depriving the sword of all its remaining luster.

A ball of fire exploded on the thin silver sword, and an explosion sent the lanky man flying back. Dust was aroused, blurring their views. And after the dust lifted, Shi Mu saw his opponent lying prone on the ground, his body burned. The hand that had been holding the sword was badly mutilated, and trickles of blood ran down from the wound. At the sight, Zhao Ping could hardly close his mouth. But his surprise turned into sheer shock as he saw the lanky man's thin sword break into tens of pieces with a crack, leaving only a handle in his hand - a sight that could not be more humiliating. The lanky man's face went ghastly pale. Gripped in extreme shame and anger, he spat out a mouthful of blood.

"How dare you...how dare you! My only magical weapon was ruined by you!!!" He shouted so harshly that his voice began to become hoarse. All he could do was curse Shi Mu.

However, Shi Mu was not the least bit frightened, though his complexion was a little bit pale, due to his exertion. He snorted, then stabbed the black blade into the ground. Flames were still sprouting from it, the heat spreading into the air. He spoke quietly, "if your gracious excellence would like to continue, I won't retreat. I shall happily accompany you to the end."

The thunderous noises made during their fight had attracted the attention of many other disciples. For some time, a small crowd of black-uniformed disciples had been gathered in the courtyard. Under their watchful eyes, the lanky man

struggled to his full height, and quickly scanned the audience. The vengeful gleams in his eyes glittered for some time, then, as if having made up his mind, he gritted his teeth and said viciously, “Well, I will remember this. You will come to regret this transgression!”

This announced, he threw the shattered sword’s handle on the ground and turned abruptly to leave the place. The audience dared not get themselves involved, all making way for him wordlessly.

Shi Mu did not say a word either. He picked up his blade and studied it carefully. After making sure that it was not damaged, he quickly put it back in its sheath.

“Brother Shi, are you OK?” An embarrassed voice rang out, and Zhao Ping walked to him with a flushed face.

“I’m fine. Who was that man? It appeared to me that you too were acquaintances.” Shi Mu answered without a change of countenance.

“He is Zuo Yan, an old primary disciple who is usually ranked in the top one hundred of the outer disciples. Though he’s quite strong, he always acts out on his own and is not a part of any group. He’s got a narrow mind and is known to be quite vengeful, so people usually avoid having anything to do with him. You need to be careful, now that you’ve broken his magical weapon.” Zhao Ping heaved a sigh of relief, seeing that Shi Mu did not hold a grudge against him. He hurriedly stepped nearer and offered him the information.

Shi Mu only nodded. He knew clearly that this Zuo Yan was definitely the strongest enemy he had ever met, and if he had not ruined his weapon, the fierce fight would have been prolonged. If that had happened, either one of

them could have won. The Black Demon Sect abounded in Houtian arts, and you could never know everything about an individual disciple, plus, a magical weapon could only enhance one's strength. The world he lived in had changed, he was no longer a teenage boy practicing arts in Feng City anymore. But Zuo Yan was right when he warned him that the black blade could be a misfortune in disguise. Either he should hide it, or prepare himself for more challenges coming from the covetous eyes of other older disciples.

Lost in thought, suddenly an idea dawned on him. Shi Mu whispered to Zhao Ping's ear, "brother Zhao, could I ask you to forge some gadgets for me?"

Zhao Ping was bewildered by the sudden request.

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"...Please use the exact material I asked for. It may be a little bit troublesome, but I believe that it will be a piece of cake for brother Zhao to make these. Could I order sixteen of them?" Shi Mu stepped back and spoke seriously.

Zhao Ping thought for a while and then answered, "No problem. I'll do as you asked."

Shi Mu gave him a faint smile and left.

Chapter 103 - The Moonlight Sea Chestnut

Three days later.

Shi Mu was sitting, cross-legged, inside his stone house. He was surrounded by sixteen curved daggers, each about ten centimeters in length. The daggers were rather thin and was shaped like a crescent, with a silver luster that resembled the cold gleam of moonlight on a quiet river. Elegant was the perfect word to describe them.

Shi Mu curled up his lips in satisfaction as his eyes caught the beautiful gleam of the deadly weapons. This kind of dagger was a peculiar weapon recorded in the Secret Art of the Zhong Clan and had an odd name quite befitting it: the moonlight sea chestnut. However, this poetic name somehow belied the insidious trick of it - the dagger was actually a hidden weapon of the first rank. Named after a special kind of sea chestnut discovered in the seas of Qi the Heavenly Country, the dagger is, in every way, the incarnation of the sea chestnut. It has this most alluring body, like a piece of white jade, or a bright crescent moon, but it harbors one of the deadliest poisons in its bones, which, once touched, will sprout poisonous thorns in all directions until some of the thorns find residence in a victim’s body. Most likely, anyone who gets stabbed will die a quick, excruciating death.

Forged of a special mixture of silver, iron, and zinc, it is extremely thin and fragile, and will break into pieces once knocked against. According to the Zhong’s record, the dagger can be accompanied with a virulent poison on its edge, this way, in a fight where life and death are on the line, whenever the enemy tries to repel the strike of the dagger with his own weapon, the dagger will break and stab the enemy with the poison on it. However strong the enemy might be, within such a small distance, it is hardly possible to dodge a shower of metal pieces.

The difficulty of making this kind of weapon goes with its high performance, and the most difficult part does not lie in the obtaining of the metal, but in the making of the special poison. Shi Mu had never heard of such a poison, but that would not bother him. He was going to modify the design of the dagger in his own way. Pondering over his next plan, he carefully stored all of the daggers but

one and sat down by his desk. Turning his right palm up, he produced a red magical brush out of nowhere.

The next moment, his pupils became golden, and he quickly plunged into drawing magical characters on the curved dagger. He performed with great ease, his wrist flying briskly over the desk, and in a short while, magical characters emerged in succession on the dagger, composing the formula which was none other than the Great Fire Formula he had imprinted on his black blade! The only difference was that due to the texture of this dagger's metal, the lizard's poison was no longer indispensable, not to mention softening the dagger in a stove. Therefore, he planned to overlay ten formulas on each of the daggers. According to ancient books, even a low-level formula would produce an unexpected power once it was repeated ten times!

All went well, and it only took him half an hour to draw six formulas on the dagger without a break. Shi Mu let out a soft sigh, relaxed his wrist, and started on the first stroke of the seventh formula. However, this time, before he had even finished the first magical character, Shi Mu's countenance changed as he drew back his brush in a haste. A violent fluctuation of spirit power was erupting from the dagger! The next second, with a clear sound, the dagger became engulfed by a ball of red flames. But just as it had come without warning, the flame ball died in a flash, leaving only sparks scattered in midair. The curved dagger, which had broken into myriad bits, was now lying scattered on the floor.

Shi Mu frowned. He spent a short moment mourning over the dagger's end, then fetched another one and started the same process all over again. However, the second try ended up almost exactly the same, his spirit power broke down before he had finished the seventh formula, the dagger breaking again. Shi Mu's face fell. However, as he racked his brains he could not find where things had gone wrong. Who could be more familiar with the Great Fire Formula than himself? Who had better eyesight? Who was able to draw seven identical designs?

His spirits were fully dampened. After pacing around his room for some time, he returned to his bed with a heavy heart, shut his eyes tight and sank deep in meditation.

After what seemed an eternity, his eyes sparkled, and, springing from his bed,

Shi Mu strode to the desk. On another dagger, he began the whole process again. After finishing the second formula, he closed his eyes and stopped writing. Meanwhile, he practiced the Art of Accumulating Spirit Power in his heart and gradually lost himself in a wonderful feeling, as if all his spirit power had left his body, floating in the air around him. The world around him grew more tangible and clear. Bit by bit, he got a tense sensation of energy waves undulating on the dagger's surface, the kind of energy wave that would elude one's eyes if he had not entered this tranquil state of mind. Having discerned this, Shi Mu opened his eyes and continued to draw the third formula, but at an incredibly low speed this time, since he had just now detected the origin of the previous failures: though he had this perfect ability to copy things, he had overlooked some minute subtleties that would lead to a tiny disorder between each two formulas that were overlaid. As he went on with more formulas, the disorder grew, and the spirit power in the formulas went loose until to the last minute of the ultimate breakdown of all formulas. So, this time, he took his time, keeping an eye on the energy waves to make sure that the strokes combine in the firmest way that each character was just like a brick for the entire substantial building of the formulas.

An hour passed, and he had finally completed the seventh formula. Letting out a long sigh, he continued to draw the eighth formula. But after having tightened his nerves for such a long time, he could not help but feel tired, and the moment he relaxed the dagger in front of him exploded.

Shi Mu's eyes were as still as an undisturbed pond. Without hesitation, he chose another dagger and immersed himself in drawing again.

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Eventually, after a good two hours, the room was radiating with a purplish red light. A silver curved dagger, imprinted with twelve magical characters, lay still before Shi Mu's eyes. The first successful work, the sixth dagger he had worked on. Shi Mu had finally made a variation of Moonlight Sea Chestnut overlaid with ten Great Fire formulas. Stroking this dangerous, fragile piece of art, his eyes were filled with excitement. But the next minute, he felt something pop in his head and a stinging pain flashed across his mind, and he could not help but fall limp. If he had not propped himself against the desk, he would have fallen hard

onto the floor. It was then that he found his spirit power already drained to the last bit. He hurriedly sat on the bed and worked up the Art of Accumulating Spirit Power, calming his mind. He was not in a hurry anymore. Bit by bit, spirit power returned to his body.

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He spent the following three days working in the same fashion. Resting his mind and body, making the weapon, repeat. Such an intensive consumption of spirit power had exhausted him, and there was little color left in his cheeks. But good things come to him who puts in a great deal of effort. By the third day, he had successfully made three magical weapons out of the sixteen daggers.

He spent a whole day lying in bed, recovering from the exhaustion, though a full day of doing nothing was more like a torture to him than a rest. Finally, he thought he had regained enough strength and could not wait any longer to sneak to his secret spot - the clearing in the valley - in the middle of the night to have a try of his new weapon. When he reached the clearing, he scanned the environment and chose a black boulder over ten meters in height. He moved his fingers to his waist, and, in the next moment, a silver gleaming dagger was in his hand. Its surface was covered with purple characters that were radiating with a threatening light.

The cold light reflected in Shi Mu’s eyes, and suddenly spirit power erupted from his body, and the purple characters responded by shining even more intensely. The next moment saw the dagger shrouded by a layer of purplish red light, and the thin body of the dagger quivering violently with a shrill hum, caused by the full awakening of the ten formulas.

“Ha!” Shi Mu flung the dagger with his real qi, and a crescent moon shot toward the black boulder at a phenomenal speed. The distance of over thirty meters was covered in the time it takes one to blink! As soon as the dagger knocked against the huge stone, the layer of purple light exploded, emitting a the glaring light that would make anyone believe a small sun was rising from the earth. The black boulder was totally swallowed by the flooding light, and after a few booming noises, vapor balls of great heat shot in all directions, accompanied by countless black pebbles.

Chapter 104 - The Three Fortress Prefectures

When the flames finally died down and the smoke cleared up the view he saw astonished him. The giant stone was no longer there, and the air was filled with an overpowering smell of ash. More surprisingly, a huge pit had formed near where the stone had previously laid, measuring almost ten meters in diameter. The pit was all burnt inside, and the heat seemed to have melted much of the nearby soil.

Unable to believe what he saw before his eyes, Shi Mu found himself overwhelmed with joy. This strike should be on the level of what a Xianxian Saint could unleash!

...

The next morning, Shi Mu left his residence and made his way to the plaza in the valley.

The sun was high in the sky when he left the plaza. His bad was bulging with weapons and gadgets that he had purchased: two rings, forged from refined iron, two incredibly elegant silver blade sheaths, and a black sheath whose dullness stood in stark contrast to the elegance of the silver sheaths. He also got two threads of heavenly silk. This silk came from silkworms that were raised in the north part of the country, where winter lasted longer and the temperature was always freezing. Therefore, the silk produced was exceedingly tough and almost transparent - you would miss it if you weren’t looking for it.

After returning to his room, Shi Mu emptied his bag and grabbed the rings and silk. He tightly fastened the rings to two of his curved knives and then put each knife into a silver sheath. Next, he put his favorite black blade into the humble-looking black sheath. Last, he found two strong strips of leather and used them to tie the two silver sheaths and the black sheath to his back. The two sets of sheaths instantly gave him the overpowering air of a gallant warrior. He stretched out his right hand and quickly pulled out the black blade, which was like a dark shadow, flitting through the air. He activated his Qi and threw out thirteen shadows that pierced the air, swirling around him like a whirlwind, his blade roaring like a lion. Before the whirlwind abated, his blade had already

returned into the sheath, the windows still rattling in the wind. The whole process was accomplished in one breath, and not a wasted movement was made. Without taking a breath, Shi Mu accumulated Qi in his left hand, and accordingly the ring in his left index finger shook violently before it emitted a cold light rushing skyward, accompanied by a streak of silver light that rose like an unbridled beast from the silver sheath at Shi Mu's back.

The Knife-Throwing Art he learned from Li Canghai! [A]

Swish! The silver bent knife, linked by the heavenly silk to his ringed finger, changed its direction abruptly once it was fed Qi from the silk, then began circling incessantly above Shi Mu's head - a bizarre sight as if a silver bird was hovering in midair, crying in a strange way as it circled. Each time the silver bent knife was about to fall, Shi Mu would instill some Qi into it, via the silk, and the knife would be reinvigorated, continuing its flight. Therefore, with the heavenly silver there to transmit Qi, he could control the knife as he willed. The Knife-Throwing Art worked perfectly.

For the following few days, Shi Mu shut himself in the room, practicing the Gale Force Blade Art and Knife-Throwing Art, trying to achieve a perfect coordination between the two.

In this way, seven days slid by without him noticing. His room kept shaking under the roar of wind created as he wielded his knives. The sharp edges of the curved knives and black blade created many bright gleams of light. The black blade, once in his hand, was wielded in such a way that its dark blade shadows turned into a solid shield that denied any attack. Meanwhile, a gleam of silver light danced among the shadows nimbly, like a bird, weaving its way through the shadow shield unceasingly. Its erratic movement made it quite difficult for an enemy to tell where it was going to be.

Suddenly, Shi Mu's left index finger flicked, and the silver bent knife swished toward the stone table in the other side of the room. A crash seemed inevitable, but without warning, the silver knife made a sudden twist at the last second, tracing an arc in the air and arrived at the right side of the table in an instant. The next moment, the rotating black shadow shield suddenly came to a stop,

and the silver knife shot back like a tired bird yearning for its nest. In accordance with the black blade, the knife found its way back into the sheath effortlessly, without making a sound.

Shi Mu let out a soft sigh, radiating satisfaction as he took the ring from his finger. Lost in deep thought, he played with it in his hand, his eyes drifting off and becoming unfocused. Now he had his own trump card to protect himself in fierce competitions and from the greedy old disciples who coveted his precious blade. The recent fight with Zuo Yan had given him a chance to get a feel for the general strength of older primary disciples, and that came as a warning to him. For if it had taken him a great deal of energy to fight Zuo Yan, who ranked, at best, within the top one hundred. How could he win against even stronger ones in the annual competition? If the Art of Throwing Knife could not be mastered by that time, then he must make some more preparations in order to obtain decent grades in the competition.

Shi Mu's eyes sparkled with a thrill as he had a sudden insight and he began to think about the Great Sutra of Formulas. The Sutra had told of a defense formula of the earth element named The Golden Armor Formula. The Body-Lifting Formula consisted of twelve magical characters, likewise, this formula had the same number of characters, but a different degree of complexity. Each character demands more caution and energy to draw it, but, in return, provides a much stronger protection that could bear against a heavy strike from an advanced Houtian warrior. With the assistance of this defense formula, his chances of winning in the annual competition should be greatly enhanced. After giving the idea some more thought, Shi Mu eventually decided to give it a try.

He needed to get his hands on some heavenly stones of the earth element, for he was not equipped with earth sensing. Therefore, the next day he paid a visit to the Hall of Wealth, and published a notice asking for some earth stones, whose reward should be paid by making a limited number of low-level formulas for the stone supplier. It was very likely that, due to the approaching annual competition, that there were a lot of disciples in need of formulas. Almost as soon as he had put up the notice, disciples of the Li Fire Group and the Holy Spirit Association were knocking at his door. Assured that the two groups were both dying for the chance, Shi Mu purposely raised the price and the two sides

nodded their heads and handed in the required number of earth stones happily. In the following ten days, he fulfilled both the orders and successfully earned twenty low-level earth stones. He also some extra money, amounting to nearly a hundred thousand silver, much more than the pay he had asked when putting up the notice. For the following period, many people kept pleading at his door for more formulas, some offering even better pay, but he dared not accept the orders. For one, the incoming competition would not allow him more spare time making formulas. It was also because he knew that a great number of low-level formulas in the market would only cut down the price and demand in the near future, which was not something Shi Mu wanted to see.

Ten days later.

With a brown heavenly stone in hand, Shi Mu moved his brush slowly, leaving green marks on the magical paper. All went smoothly, until the eleventh character, which suddenly flared upon completion. Amid the yellow flames, the whole formula was burnt to ashes.

Shi Mu sighed with a heartache in his chest, regretting the loss. This was already the eighth time he had failed in drawing the Golden Armour Formula, and also the farthest he had made it in any of his attempts, but it all still turned into nothing. Seeing that the earth stone was running out of energy, he stared at the ashes in a trance, at a loss as to the next step. He was painfully aware of the reason for his failure: the twelve characters in the formula were not independent of each other. On the contrary, a subtle link had combined them all, woven in every stroke of the twelve characters. Therefore, the more complex a formula is, the more intangible the links would be. A failure to catch the links would lead to the whole formula becoming unstable. It can be said that the success of the Golden Armour Formula actually depends upon the inscribers luck.

Finally, after three good days of trial and error, he succeeded in making a paper charm of the Golden Armour Formula, at the cost of two low-level heavenly stones. But the problem with making a paper charm is that you cannot test it out.Once you activate it, it will be made unusable, unless you've got a batch of them and the loss of one copy would not amount to much. Therefore, considering the difficulty of making this formula, Shi Mu stored it, untouched, though his mind was in a fluster as to the charm's effect. Anyway, the most

reliable thing in a combat is not the weapon, nor charms, but one's real strength. He decided that before the competition came he should stay indoors practicing the Art of Heavenly Elephant and the art of Accumulating Spirit Power with all his might, hoping to achieve some progress before the big day.

But the world outside was not so simple. Thousands of miles away, in his home country, a sensational event was taking place, making the three kingdoms all hold their breath.

...

In Qi the Heavenly Country, Wu, Fu, and Rui are three fortress prefectures among all the thirty-six prefectures of the country, neighboring the wilderness that is controlled by the barbarian tribes.

The barbarians live in barren lands, and, as a result, have very little in the way of resources, especially in rigorous winters, when their tribesmen could barely tell in the morning if they would still be alive when evening falls. As time passed, the barbarians began to covet the wealth of their neighbors - the three kingdoms, who lived in comfort and wealth. Therefore, their tribe would dispatch soldiers from time to time to the fortress prefectures, plundering resources and captives to keep them as servants. The three prefectures of Da Qi naturally fell prey to the barbarians, and the smoke of war rose from the earth year-round. There was no way the Qi court would sit watching, so, time after time, they sent armies to quell the barbarians, but they were a people that inherited a bloodline of an ancient giant tribe, so the barbarous generally grew taller and stronger than normal human beings. They had an innate disposition to kill and were undaunted before death. There are some Totem Warriors among the barbarian soldiers, whose strength was greatly enhanced by tattooing the body and sealing some monster's spirits inside. As a result, their character was even fiercer, the desire for fresh blood burning in their chest unceasingly until it was satiated. But the totem warriors do not account for a large part of the barbarians, like cultivators among normal humans. Even so, in the war with the barbarians, human armies had always been put at a serious disadvantage, until a hundred years ago, when Yue Tai, the National Guardian of the Heavenly Qi Country came to power and put an end to this passive state. Under his leadership, the Qi armies were sent out and drove the barbarians out of their

country, back to the desolate land where they had come from. Since then, peace had reigned in the Three Kingdoms for a hundred years, while the barbarians curled themselves up in the merciless coldness on their wasteland, daring not to direct their eyes to the warm land of the Three Kingdoms. On that account, Yu Tai was given the title of ‘Great Warlord of Crushing the Barbarians’ for his illustrious war exploits and raised to be one of the few warlords not born of the king's families.

However, this time of peace is soon to come to an end.

One day, in the deep of night in Xing He City, Wu prefecture, the following took place.

Xing He City covers an area of over six million square meters, and, looking from afar, its winding walls sprawled like a giant dragon, crouching on the land, forming a rectangle that enclosed the whole city. It lies quietly at the juncture where the Wu Prefecture borders the barbarian’s wilderness, constituting a shield for the former. This was the most important fortress against outside attacks. Speaking of Xing He City itself, it had the best location a city could ever have wanted: mountains, waters, rich resources. Outside the north gate is a rolling mountain that, though not majestic in height, is one of the longest mountain ranges in the country, meandering its way for over a thousand miles, leading to the well-known Qi Mountain (renowned as the Protector of Wu Prefecture). Whereas the mighty river of Lun Jin roars day and night out of the south gate, running a distance of over ten thousand miles. The river harbors a great number of reefs, which unnerves even a veteran fisherman, preventing him from going further than the middle of the river, not to mention the barbarian men, who know little of traveling on water. With a hundred thousand permanent soldiers in the city, Xing He is a powerful fortress, and many barbarians have died trying to conquer it. On the other hand, since the Wu Prefecture lies in the middle of the three fortress prefectures, as long as it is still safe, the armies in the city can give a helping hand to the Fu and Rui Prefectures. Consequently, even if the barbarians made an attempt to attack the cities of Fu or Rui, they never dared to go too far.

Therefore, the city of Xing He assumes a self-evident significance to Qi country, and thus, without a doubt, falls to be a thorn in the barbarian’s sides. Aware of

this, Yue Tai, the Great Warlord, chose this city as his place of residence, in the Military Hall in Xing He city, and imposed a curfew on the city all the time. Except for some patrols, there was barely a citizen to be seen during the night.

However, this night saw something alarmingly different. Under the cover of the dark night, an inn's back door creaked open, and some ten-odd figures, dressed in dark tight-fitting suits, appeared. They entered the inn in single file, and, after a few minutes, reappeared in a city street, moving silently toward the west part of the city. Judging from their smooth movements, they certainly had a clear knowledge of the city's roads, and always chose the less visited alleys.

Meanwhile, a file of patrol soldiers passed a shop in a certain area of the city. Just as they had walked past, the gate of the shop was quietly pushed open, and out flashed a few figures, disappearing into a nearby alley.

All of this went on as if it had been rehearsed several times. At the same time, the door of a citizen's yard also opened, and seven more silhouettes emerged and also soon vanished into the dark night.

Notes:

[A] - Okay, I am pretty sure this art has multiple names in this translation, because it has never been used and has simply been mentioned, in passing, several times. I simply assumed the author had made this and then forgot about it, and that it was now useless. I apologize for this.

ANYWAY, this is the blade art the Li Canghai taught Shi Mu for winning the matches between all the major martial clubs in Feng City.

Chapter 105 - Night raid

These were not the only cases of this happening. All over the city, mysterious figures appeared, tiptoeing under the dark cover of night, like streams, winding their ways through remote alleys toward the west part of the city, bypassing every patrol.

The buildings in that area were mostly squatty and run-down, an image of total disorder. Since it was adjacent to the west city gate, it was exposed to the barbarian armies during the war. In fact, most of the buildings had been ruined before Yue Tai came to the rescue of this disintegrating city. Even though the conditions of this area had been much improved, only paupers were willing to live here and the district naturally became an urban slum. For the past century, this urban slum had been deserted by wealthy citizens and enjoyed its precious time in peace.

But tonight, that peace was gone.

An hour later, in an ordinary dilapidated hut, the pungent smell of blood filled the air. On the ground six bodies lay in a pool of blood, a woman about thirty was among them, with a hole on her neck, and her pale right hand was still holding a little boy who was two or three years old whose throat was also cut. The mother and son had obviously been dead for a while, and, judging from their cuts, the one who killed them was obviously quite skilled at what they did, working without any unnecessary emotions, like sympathy or guilt. A first-rate killer, cruel and accurate. They could kill a person with just one attack, leaving them no time to call for help.

At this moment, just near the bodies, seven men were clustering around a middle-aged man who had a sinister and ruthless smile, all of them looking extremely serious, as if awaiting something.

Suddenly, a silhouette entered the hut. It was a slim young man with a dark complexion.

“Lord Mandrill, all the warriors in the city have assembled and the houses on the path had been cleaned!”

The sinister middle-aged man nodded as he heard the report, running his

tongue over his dry lips.

“It seems it is time to start. Transmit the order, let’s set out!”

At his command, more than three hundred dark silhouettes emerged from the neighboring houses and gathered into a stream, moving toward the west gate quietly. Every one of them seemed to be itching to fight and their faces were covered with excitement, their bloodshot eyes blazing with menace. Judging by appearances, these men looked almost the same as normal people but were actually barbarians. They were the children of the human women who had been captured by barbarians and raped. For the past ten years, small groups of these normal-looking barbarians had been repeatedly sent to the city to spy and prepare.

The barbarians were proud of their bloodline, treating normal people as slaves or domestic animals, and, in some tribes, they even ate normal-looking humans. So this generation of normal-looking barbarians had suffered a lot of discrimination ever since their childhood. Thus, they hated normal people more than any other barbarians. They showed no mercy when they were ordered to kill the residents of the slum.

On the west city wall, there was a turret every hundred meters, in which a hundred soldiers could live and take turns to patrol the city day and night. Right now, two soldiers were holding their spears watching the suburbs out of sheer boredom. Suddenly the two soldiers saw a frightening scene. The vast darkness below them was broken by a patch of glaring flames, and the light spread at an alarming speed, stretching as far as a dozen miles, and in a minute the city was swallowed by a sea of fire! The light rose to the sky and illuminated the whole city! Moreover, amid the boundless torchlight countless barbarian warriors appeared without anyone’s notice; with braids on their heads and fur on their body, each held a strange weapon in one hand, and a huge shield in the other. They were all above three meters in height, strong as beasts, and had many strange tattoos on their skin. Their weapons and tattoos may have differed in shape, but they all had a common feature - a pair of eyes overflowing with a desire to kill.

A thunderous explosion shook the earth. At the signal, these barbarian warriors soon formed up into numerous battle arrays and galloped toward the

city wall. Looking down from the turrets, it was as if a great wave in a sea of fire was surging in the direction of Xing He city. Behind the warriors holding shields, armies with scaling ladders followed, and then numerous archers.

A rapid, shrill clarion rang out, tearing through the entire night sky.

On the city wall dozens of miles in width, numerous human soldiers rushed out of the turrets in order. In no time bows were raised, arrowheads shining with cold light. In the eyes of the barbarian warriors outside the wall, the meandering city wall suddenly glared with cold light, as a giant dragon had opened its mouth.

Then came a loud buzz as a hail of arrows plummeted from the top of the wall. Like hundreds of locusts, the arrows covered the night sky, obscuring the moon for a moment. As some of the arrows found their targets, the barbarians uttered horrible screeches that pierced the air. After just one volley of arrows, many barbarian soldiers holding torches had frozen to the spot permanently. But casualties did not stop the horde. On the contrary, the scent of blood only provoked them to go forward, shouting like beasts. These frightening cries would frighten one to their very bones.

Over the thousands of dead bodies, the barbarian army finally made it to the base of the city wall, then, amid endless roars and the endless rain of arrows, hundreds of scaling ladders were eventually erected against the wall. Then barbarian warriors carrying weapons on their backs began to scramble up the ladder swiftly, which showed that they must have rehearsed this a hundred times. Among the climbers, some Totem Warriors were as agile as heavenly apes that flew to the top of the wall without the help of scaling ladders. Sadly, as the first ones up the wall, they could, at most, kill a hundred of normal soldiers before they themselves either got killed or beaten off the wall.

Just as the attention of the defending soldiers was completely attracted by the enemies outside the wall, a group of three hundred soldiers had approached the west gate without making any noise.

“Who’s that? Don’t move!” The officer on the guard of the gate waved his silver spear and shouted.

The hundreds of soldiers turned round abruptly and adjusted their order, staring at the utmost with sharp vigilance. The next moment, a strange sound of

something piercing the air rang out, followed by a streak of cold light shooting to the defenseless normal soldiers, who were caught completely unprepared. After some bitter cries, the land was covered by dead bodies penetrated by a group of spears.

“Alarm!”

The officer responsible for protecting the gate was a Houtian warrior in his middle stage. He waved his spear violently, forming a silver shield before him to repel all the flying spears. He shouted, his body almost shivering in rage, and by merely shouting it seemed that he might shake his enemies to death. But what followed was against his will. Before he could make out a palm was coming his way, behind which was a middle-aged man’s sinister face. The next second, a horrifying scene took place that made the officer gasp. The man’s palm, with an incredible speed, had turned enormous, covered with thick brown fur, just like a giant bear paw, striking down on the officer’s face.

An irresistible force poured into the officer’s hand, and the arm soon went numb. Unable to hold his spear, the officer froze to the ground, watching his weapon break into halves, leaving his chest open to attack. Before he could do something the middle-aged man smote him with another “paw” , which was like a heavy metal mace hitting on his chest, sending the officer flying into the air before he landed on the ground like a sack of potatoes, losing all his vitality.

Subsequently, seven figures flashed from behind the sinister man and disappeared into the gate. These men were apparently Totem Warriors, and aided by the three hundred half-barbarians inside the city, the remaining hundreds of human soldiers were soon cleaned. By then some soldiers on the wall had detected this uproar, thus, many of them came down to their aid, along with some patrol riders who also came to reinforce the gate guards. The cobblestone paths kept echoing the deafening sound of their horses’ hooves stomping on the ground.

The middle-aged man was apparently well prepared for this and he raised his hand to call half of his men to form a flesh wall to stop the reinforcements, while the other half proceeded with their march toward the gate.

The battle turned white-hot as more soldiers joined each side. Faced with

many times more men than they, themselves, had, the barbarians suffered heavy casualties, including several Totem Warriors, but still they desperately tried to defend the gateway they had fought so hard to occupy.

Before long, something terrifying happened, sending chills through the human soldier's bones: though slowly, the west city gate was opening! Though the opened slit, the bellows of the barbarian army poured in like a tidal wave, the gate quivering in the energy of the sounds. Before the gate was opened wide enough for them to pass, a picked troop of hundred thousand barbarian riders rushed in like a gale. They soon slaughtered all of the defenders near the gate and then part of them spread into the city, while the others dismounted their horses to climb onto the wall.

The inner city soon sank into a chaos, the whole city was wailing and crying, and constant military bugle calls only compounded the great panic. The military camps set inside the city were a total mess, and male citizens, as long as they could still walk the earth, was summoned to reinforce the west gate.

At the same time, the street connecting the west gate and the residence of the Great Warlord was attacked too. Bodies of men and horses littered the ground, making for another brutal scene. The dead soldiers were still wearing armor, and, judging from their ghastly faces, the killers must have used every possible cruel way to end their lives. Native citizens could tell, from a glance at their suits, that these men were none other than the private guards of the Great Warlord.

Right now, in the middle of the street, five men were standing still, not making a sound at all. Four of them were extremely tall, clustering around an elder who was in normal height. Therefore, seen afar, the sight was like four adults circling a small boy.

The elder wore a fish scale armor, with a white robe embroidered with a pattern of dragon draped over his shoulder. He had silver hair and a ruddy complexion. In his hand was a trident [A], as tall as he was, that seemed to weigh more than a hundred kilograms. As his eyes ran over the four tall men slowly, his mouth remained tightly shut. The four men seemed not in a hurry to attack him either. Among them, the man on the right was tattooed with a black spider on his face and had rather sharp eyes. The ugly man on the left had a big red sarcoma on his forehead. Of other two, one was a masked woman with a big

golden earring on her left ear and the other was a vicious-looking one-eyed man.

The four men were all Totem Warriors and they all gave off a threatening aura that, in no way, was inferior to that of a Xiantian saint.

Just then, the fire from the west gate shined more brightly, and the shouting from all over the city grew louder.

The elder turned to looked at his horse lying in its blood, his silver hair catching the night wind. After taking a deep breath, his unblinking eyes hardened, and he tightened his grip on the trident in his hand, which replied by ring loudly. The next second, all the normal human soldiers and barbarians miles away heard a thunderous sound like a bolt from the blue!

Notes:

[A] - Note, this was translated as a ‘fork-shaped weapon’, so I changed it to trident (considering its size). There is a possibility that this is just a massive fork….. Cause, you know, weapons in Xianxia… -_-; -EliteCreature

Chapter 106 - Havoc

Shortly afterward, the court of Qi the Heavenly Country was shaken by a piece of sensational news. It was said that the country's three fortress prefectures had fallen in a night raid made by the barbarians. Over the next three days, over half of the cities of the three prefectures had fallen. More shockingly, the Great Warlord Yue Tai, who had dedicated most of his lifetime to guarding the fortress, was declared missing! Nobody knew whether he was still alive or had sacrificed his life in the war, but three hundred bodies of his private guards were found lying near his mansion. Come to think of it, how terrifying! The three hundred picked guards were all strong Houtian warriors, but none of them survived. So, for a time, the whole country was profoundly shocked.

At last, someone woke up from their shock. The king, tortured by fear and anxiety, demanded that reinforcements be immediately sent to the fortress, not forgetting to send messengers to inform the three big sects of this tragic event, in hopes of getting their aid.

In the Yan Fire Country. The Black Demon Sect.

The sect's landmark, the thirteen mountains, stood unperturbed, though the scent of war had already reached the sect. As the peak numbers fell, the mountains grew in height and peril. For example, the No.3 mountain rose almost perfectly straight toward the sky, and barely an edge could be seen from halfway up the mountain. Besides, contrary to the No.13 Mountain, which was in a constant hustle and bustle, this mountain hardly contained any life. No human figures, no buildings. Only a somber black hall that stood by itself at the peak, giving off a gloomy and cold feeling.

At this moment, the hall was dim, as per usual. Emptiness was the only thing that filled the space. A man in a seamless robe was sitting, motionless, in the center of the floor, his brows heavy and sharp like a sword. Strangely enough, a film of black rays had wrapped around him, and the rays were moving and gathering like a fire, except that it was black.

All of a sudden, the bracelet on his wrist glowed, making a faint black ring that contained tiny magical characters. The characters kept moving up and down,

soon forming a small round formula. Then a part of the air seemed twisted, and a black jade slip the size of a palm emerged from nowhere. The man with sharp eyebrows suddenly opened his eyes, snatching the black slip and putting it against his forehead. After a moment, he raised his eyebrows and stood to his full height, and the film of dark rays immediately vanished without a trace. He quickly left the hall.

Almost simultaneously, on the adjacent mountain, a hall was also pushed open and out came a middle-aged man with long beard. His face looked rather severe. In his hand was the same black jade slip that the man with sharp eyebrows had...

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Throughout the years, the No.1 Mountain peak remained eternally snow-capped and was lost in clouds and mist while biting wind whistled day and night. Amid the vast whiteness, a majestic black hall stood out. The entire building was made from a kind of heavenly stone as dark as the night sky, and it had three stories that stretched toward the sky until they ended in a pinnacle, on which a gigantic globe was in constant slow rotation, emitting dark light as if there was a huge ball of dark fire burning inside. The whole scene gave off an feeling which was so strange as to not be able to be described with words.

At this moment, the twenty big stools placed in the hall of this building had all had people sitting in them, except for the main seat at the center. Whoever had the qualification to sit in this congregation was either the sect's leader, the mountain host, or an elderly saint. Among them were some that Shi Mu had met when he was kidnapped for their sect: Tiger Bone, Ning Ping, and Jin Xiaochai (the pretty girl who had been disguised as Han XiangXiu on their way to the Black Demon Sect). Although these people wore different expressions, they were all casting expectant glances to a small door in the hall every now and then.

Beside the main seat sat two middle-aged men. One was Master Xie, whom Shi Mu had met the day he was registered as an Adept scholar, whereas the other was a purple-robed man whose coat was embroidered thickly with magical patterns that kept giving off magical energy. He was wearing a big ring of blue jade on his right thumb, and in his hand was a purple magical cane that was made from some unknown material. The cane had a purple crystal stone at its top which would shed a purple light from time to time. The man with dashing

brows at his opposite looked to be around the age of thirty and had sharp eyes. If not for his sandy whiskers and a slightly haggard face, he would have looked younger. People in the hall seemed to have divided into two groups which had the two middle-aged man as their respective leader. An antagonistic aura could be sensed in the air between the two sides.

Just then, a figure flashed out of the small door, and a black-robed old man had shown himself in the hall. The diminutive figure proceeded at a leisurely pace. His face was wizened, and the black robe he was wearing did not have a single decorative design on it. Judging from his appearance, this old man seemed to be one of the most commonly seen grandpas in one's neighborhood. But as soon as he entered the space, all stood up in great reverence, their breath held.

"Your Highness the Head Saint." Simultaneously they bowed deeply with the uniform respectful face.

"No need for rites in special time. Sit, all of you." The black-robed old man said lightly, seating himself on the main stool.

All obeyed, not daring to make a sound.

"The barbarians have come and they have taken the three fortress prefectures of the Heavenly Qi Country.

Even Yu Tai is missing. I'm afraid the odds are against him rather than being in his favor." The black-robed old man put aside pleasantries and went directly to the main issue.

The listeners exchanged looks but none dared to speak up.

The old man directed his look to master Xie and asked, "brother Xie, you are responsible for all Message Formulas in and out of our sect, so have you gotten any news? Have the other sects in the Heavenly Qi Country taken any measures?"

"Your Highness, there are not many spies of our sect in the three fortress prefectures, so I haven't gotten any news yet. But I've been informed that the three big sects have all sent disciples to the fortress, and the that the Qi court has dispatched three hundred thousand soldiers divided into three armies to reinforce the three prefectures." Master Xie straightened his back and answered

with clasped hands. After a momentary pause, he added, “Your highness, please rest assured, I have contacted the three sects of the Heavenly Qi. Once they get any relevant information about the barbarians, they will send messages to us immediately.”

“Brother Xie, I understand it’s a time of emergency, but how could you have contacted other sects without first consulting the Head Saint and the great elders? I think you have overstepped your authority in making such a rash decision.” The man with dashing eyebrows immediately spoke up and expressed his disapproval.

“As brother Xia has said, it is, indeed, a time of emergency, or I would never have acted so rashly. I apologize for this. May the Head Saint punish me for this.” Xie didn’t even change his look when he bowed to the black-robed elder and replied.

“No harm was done. Brother Xie has done nothing inappropriate, considering the circumstances.” The black-robed elder waved his hand and said.

Xie nodded slightly to show his thanks. A malicious gleam flashed in the eyes of the man with dashing eyebrows. He gave a snort but said nothing more.

“As far as I know, the barbarians have carried out a full-on invasion of a huge scale and acted quite swiftly, which is something they never did a century ago. Their purpose in this invasion still remains unclear and I want to know the view of you who are the backbone of our sect.” The black-robed elder let his eyes roam over the people present and asked.

“Head Saint, the seven sects of the three kingdoms have reached an agreement before. When the barbarians invade any part of the three kingdoms, all seven sects must unite as one against the common enemy. In my opinion, we should meet the head saints of the other sects as soon as possible, muster troops of our sect and hurry to the Heavenly Qi to repel the barbarians.” Xie said immediately, his voice rhythmic and sonorous.

Just as he had finished his words, many mountain hosts and elders soon echoed his view and nodded.

The Head Saint of the Black Demon Sect also nodded slowly, as if in approval of Xie’s view too.

“Head Saint, despite the agreement, I still don’t think we should dispatch reinforcements so soon.” The man with dashing eyebrows interposed amid the nodding heads. As his words were spoken all the people in the hall cast sidelong glances at him. Xie, on his opposite side, looked gloomy and was just about to say something when the Head Saint raised his hand to stop him.

“Please speak your opinion, brother Feng.” The black-robed elder said.

“Just as your Highness has observed, the purpose of the invasion was still not clear now, so it’s not unlikely that the barbarians are just snatching resources again. If so, why not stay and watch a little longer? I don’t mean to abandon the Heavenly Qi, but I only want to see how the three sects will handle the barbarians before we make our own plan.” Feng sneered and came to a pause.

“May head Saint remember, “ He continued, “five years ago the barbarians invaded the Shang Que Prefecture of our Yan Fire country, breaching several cities in a dozen days. At last, we of the Black Demon Sect allied with the Wind and Fire Sect to beat them off. Not a single troop of reinforcement came from the three sects of the Heavenly Qi.” Feng finished the rest of the sad story in a moving tone, sending the big hall into a total silence that hung over everyone’s heads. Soon a few of them nodded, deeply agitated by the memory. The Head Saint ran his fingers on the chair handle, his eyes drifting in deep thought,and his face seemed a persuaded one.

Seeing this, Xie stood up in a fit of irritation. “Head Saint, it was just a small tribe invasion five years ago and we two sects had no difficulty in crushing them at all. Now the condition has changed, and how could the barbarians have conquered Xing He city in just one night if they had not planned all of this beforehand! They have become crueler and if we, the seven sects, scheme against each other at this moment, we may be defeated one by one.It would be too late for us then!”

Hearing this eloquent speech, his rival also got up for his turn in this debate.

The elite of the Black Demon Sect apparently had split into two groups, one serving Xie as the leader and the other Feng Kong Zi who had dashing eyebrows. (Translator’s note: Maybe they serve the eyebrows.) It was clear that there had been both open strife and veiled struggle between the two sides (TL’ note: or

two groups of eyebrow-pursuers). [TL's note: Dear readers, it's not that I wanted to repeat the expression of "the man with dashing eyebrows", I had to. The Author has this way of writing, haha. So I think it's not bad just doing the same.]

"Well, you two don't have to quarrel at this juncture, do you? Let's hear what the others think." The head saint raised his eyebrows [TL: ...] and waved his hand to forestall an interminable debate that was sure to bore him.

Xie and Feng Kong Zi both snorted, and then returned to their seats, their eyes continuing the confrontation in a silent way. Just then, hurried footsteps came from outside the hall. A middle-aged black-robed man [TL: ...] scuttled in with big strides and announced in a great panic," Head Saint, bad news! The great elder of the Black Tortoise Sect, Bright Fire, and Gongsun Yu of the Tian Yin Sect have met misfortune!"

"What's the matter, say it slowly." The head saint was shocked, although more by the announcer than the news, and stood to ask. Other people present were also astonished.

"Your Highness, and honored elders, I have just received messages that Huo Yao - Bright Fire - was practicing in a restricted area of his sect when the strongest Totem Warrior of the barbarians, Wild Killer, appeared suddenly and killed him! And it was the same day when Gongsun Yu took a walk outside his sect and was later attacked surprisingly by several barbarian warriors of Earth Grade! Though he at last successfully fled to his sect, he had been badly injured and won't recover for a long time." The man said loudly in a slightly trembling voice.

All the people were shocked hearing these words. And the head saint of the Black Demon Sect also changed his countenance, taking his seat slowly.

"Are you sure?" Xie asked in a quivering voice.

"It was the spies in the two sects who had sent the messages at the same time, absolutely no mistake." The black-robed man hesitated for a while and replied.

The head saint waved his hand to send the middle-aged man out of the hall. All the people in the hall wore a face of extremely sullen look, especially those who served Feng Kong Zi as their leader. The news had struck both fear and an unbearable embarrassment in their hearts.

Chapter 107 - Beckoning Ceremony

“Head Saint, as far as we can tell, the barbarians are definitely planning to do something unusual this time, so shouldn’t we do something to strike back……?” Xie spoke in a voice filled with urgency.

The Head Saint nodded, looking pensive.

“Wild Killer had always been known as the strongest warrior amongst the barbarians, having already achieved the middle stage of the Earth Grade decades ago. Though Fire Yao is at the primary stage of the Earth Grade, he is relatively weaker than Wild Killer, but Earth Grade is still Earth Grade! Wild Killer would never dare to go deep into the restricted area of the Black Tortoise Sect and he should also be unable to kill Fire Yao in just one strike! Therefore, I assume that Wild Killer may have made some progress since we last saw him, and it is very likely that this has got something to do with the barbarians’ large-scale invasion. So we can infer that the previous attacks and this invasion are on completely different levels.” Sitting near the door, a black-robed man wearing a tiger mask suddenly spoke up. This was none other than Tiger Bone.

All who were present became silent upon hearing these alarming words.

“Head Saint, I think things concerning warriors of the Earth Grade must be reported to the Great Elder before we come to a decision.” Feng Kong Zi finally gave his advice.

“I agree. As these events show, the only action we can take is to disturb his highness. Also, dispatch more disciples to strengthen the guards and let it be known that all disciples are forbidden to leave the sect. Improve all the seals in order to ward off any barbarian warriors making a surprise attack.” The black-robed Head Saint ordered.

“Yes, your Highness.”

All the people present stood up and bowed, and then quickly strode outside the hall.

Xie and Feng Kong Zi stepped out of the hall last, glaring at each other expressionlessly, they parted without saying anything.

Feng Kong Zi stepped slowly down a flight of stairs, his eyebrows tightly knit(TL's note: The god of eyebrows was angry!), and his deep thoughts were veiled by a concerned expression. When he reached a corner he stopped, and turned around to cast a meaningful glance at the No.1 Peek. From his current angle, he could see that there was a quiet and secluded courtyard hidden in the shadow of the mountains, faintly peeping through puffs of dark mist. That was where the great elder was meditating in seclusion, undisturbed except when the Head Saint requested his audience. Even the mountain hosts and the other elders were forbidden to get close to there.

Feng Kong Zi's eyes flashed momentarily before he stepped down the stairs and walked away. After he had left, a charming girl slowly walked out from behind a huge stone. This was none other than Jin Xiao Chai. She stared at the receding figure of Feng Kong Zi, her beautiful eyes twinkling.

…

Outside the courtyard situated on the No.1 Mountain, the Head Saint of the Black Demon Sect pushed the door open and stepped in. There was nothing unusual about the courtyard, with grey walls and green tiles. It looked exactly the same as any other courtyard in the sect. The only difference was a small altar placed in the middle of the yard. On the top of the alter was a piece of flame that was burning and crackling quietly. The air in the courtyard felt thicker than the air outside, which may be a result of the black flame. The Head Saint felt a little out of breath as soon as he walked in. But it was obvious that he had been here many times, judging from the smooth steps he took when he bypassed the alter and stepped slowly to the front of the house.

"This is Zong Yan coming to call on your highness, the great elder." The black-robed elder bowed toward the house and spoke reverently.

"Come in." A dignified voice resounded and the door opened itself. The head Saint thanked him and stepped in.

The room was quite spacious, but with no table or chairs or beds in it. There were some strange patterns drawn by some dark red paint on the walls around, some looking like men, and some looking like standing beasts. There was a total

of eight patterns on the walls.

From the doorway, the room seemed quite dark and scary. The big room was quite empty, and deep in it stood a big black statue. The statue was of a strong man wearing a black robe, with red hair that curled up like flames. Its face was ferocious, black, with two horns on his head and two long canine teeth sticking out like a demon. There was a long-handled weapon in his hand and his arms raised high, like he was going to chop down on an enemy. This statue was exactly the Black Fire God who was worshiped by the Black demon Sect, but there was no incense table or burning candle for it, which seemed quite strange.

Just in front of the statue, a tall man was sitting on the floor, back to the doorway, his face unseen.

“Great elder.” The head Saint wore a respectful face and spoke softly.

“What happened?”Without turning back, the tall man asked in a low voice.

“I have learned of some disturbing news.” Then the head Saint recounted the events that the great elder of Black Tortoise Sect had been killed and that the great elder of Tian Yin Sect had been attacked .

“Really? How strange! Fire Yao was killed in the forbidden area of his sect! There is a Great Formula of Dark Hell outside the forbidden area of Five Poles Palace in the Black Tortoise Sect, and the formula was connected to the qi of Yin in the deep earth and had no weak point at all. That Wild Killer had to destroy it by sheer force before he could sneak inside! It seems that he has made a lot of progress in his practice. He might have even reached the last stage of the Earth Grade. It seems he really has some talent.” The great elder laughed lightly at himself and turned back.

He had long black hair that tumbling down to his neck and his skin looked as smooth as silk. Satiny without any wrinkles, which made him look like a man who was, at most, forty years old and much younger looking than the head Saint. However, the great elder of the Black Demon Sect only looked young. As a matter of fact, he was already over three hundred years old.

“Great elder, we are expecting on your highness to decide what measures our sect is going to take.” The head Saint said.

“We don’t have any choice at all at this juncture.The real strength of the barbarians is beyond what you think. If the three sects of the Heavenly Qi were ever to be destroyed, we, of the Black Demon Sect would not survive much longer. Now. Summon disciples and dispatch reinforcements to the Heavenly Qi.” The great elder ordered without any hesitation.

“Yes, your highness.”

“Now that Wild Killer has strengthened a lot and other barbarian warriors of Earth Grade have shown themselves, I must negotiate with the warriors of Earth Grade in the other sects about this. I’ll leave the barbarian armies, as well as normal Totem warriors, to you.” The great elder stood to his full height and ordered seriously.

The head Saint changed his look but still nodded respectfully.

The news that the great elder of Black Tortoise Sect had been killed and that the great elder of the Tian Yin Sect had been badly wounded found its way into the three kingdoms and the seven sects. Consequently, people were all shocked and filled terror, everyone from ordinary citizens to high-level warriors was feeling very insecure

By this time, the seven sects had figured out the situation and started to negotiate forming a union, and working to repel the invasion of the barbarians with an alliance.

In the Black Demon Sect, however, the high-level leaders chose not to openly announce the invasion of the barbarians, but the senior disciples and part of the junior disciples still got the information,which had gone viral among older disciples. Everyone was stricken terrified before the incoming enemy. But the primary disciples, at the bottom rung of the sect, did not know anything about the invasion. They were all still bustling about in preparation for the annual competition, completely unaware of the grave news that the world had changed.

These days Shi Mu was still practicing in his stone house as per usual, knowing nearly nothing about the outside world, not to mention things taking place thousands of miles away. During this period, he mainly practiced the Art of the Heavenly Elephant and the Art of Accumulating Spirit Power. He would occasionally accept some orders for charms for other, equally unaware,

disciples, who were working hard for the upcoming match. Hence, he was normally quite busy, but this business paid off with many silver notes and other resources flowing into his account each day. After some days of accumulation, he had finally gathered up the materials for the summoning formula.

Finally, it was time. Shi Mu shut his door firmly, even his windows, so that no one could see what was happening in his house. Shi Mu had closed himself in his house like a snail in its shell for days had attracted many people's attention, but considering Shi Mu's reputation among the new disciples, no one dared to allow their curiosity to develop into any real action.

In his room, Shi Mu stood up, and the golden light in his eyes faded away slowly. With a black magic brush in hand, he looked exhausted, but his eyes were as focused as usual. Now in front of him on the floor was a strange octagonal formula, drawn with many magic characters that were different from what Shi Mu had learned before. The magic characters looked very odd, just like some kind of ancient hieroglyph. For example, some of the strange characters looked like domestic animals, some like birds, and the other were just scribblings, but all of them connected properly to each other.

Embedded in the formula were five grey and black crystal stones, glimmering and emitting a chilling sense of dark and coldness. These crystal stones are crystals of the space element, and Yin quality respectively, which are even rarer than heavenly stones of the five elements, and had cost him most of his income.

Shi Mu took a deep breath and put the magic brush away. Then he began chanting several spells, after which all the formula began to shine black. Shi Mu relaxed a little at the sight. It was the first time he arranged a formula on the ground, and the difficulty could not be compared with making formulas on magic paper. It took him a good three days of attempting to draw it before he finally accomplished it.

She Mu sat on the floor with his legs crossed and downed a Spirit-Enhancing Pill. It pained his heart thinking of how precious the pill was. After taking several deep breaths, he suddenly opened his eyes, resting one of his hands on the formula so that his magic power could rapidly flow into it. Meanwhile, he worked the spell, using another hand to point successively at some places in the formula.

Beams of dark light shined and disappeared on to the formula, and the crystals on it soon shone with a bright light. Afterward, the light of the formula shined even more brightly, and the magic characters started to glitter correspondingly. Within several breaths, the brightness became even brighter and a buzzing sound could be heard.

Shi Mu's spell started to be louder and, in accordance, the light of the formula became brighter. After a quarter of an hour, the light of the formula was almost dazzling and black mist began to appear in the stone house. If it was not for the tightly closed door and windows, the amazing scene may have been seen by people outside.

Shi Mu's head was straining so hard his veins could be seen, and beads of sweat were rolling down his face. The formula had now been completely activated and it began to absorb his remaining spirit power quite quickly. His breath came to be heavy, but the spell he was chanting was still very distinct.

The space in the middle of the formula suddenly twisted, and a black mist spread in all directions. A sense of death started to permeate the room.

Chapter 108 - Silk, Silk of Smoke

This sight gave Shi Mu hope. Without hesitating, he took a white bottle out from his shirt and pulled the plug, swinging the bottle in the grey fog oozing out of the formula. Its contents - some mysterious black fluid - flowed out of the bottle and disappeared into the fog, which soon turned the small patch of drifting fog into a wildly rolling surge of air. It bellowed like an energetic beast, and, as if under some guidance, began to swirl about at a constant pace, forming a grey vapor vortex that was about three meters wide. In this process, large patches of grey fog fled from the vortex and spread in all directions. Eventually, the entire formula was shrouded in darkness.

Shi Mu gazed at the formula seriously. his lips quivered and his eyes were unblinking. After letting loose some incantations, he thrust his thumb into the formula. A streak of dark light shot from his fingertip and flew into the grey vortex, getting completely swallowed up in the dark swirling mess. A few seconds later, a succession of clear clanks rang out, made by the heavenly stones set around the formula breaking simultaneously. This was followed by a cracking sound, then a black electric arc, as thick as an arm, suddenly appeared in the middle of the vortex! After wriggling in the air for some time, the arc disappeared without warning just as it had come, accompanied by another cracking sound. This time, the entire stone house seemed to be shaking at this great energy!

Immediately, the light of the octagonal formula went out, and the vortex at the center was also gone, replaced by an indistinct, small human figure, around which were some remaining wisps of grey fog that floated like silk bands around the thin body, making it impossible to clearly see its face. Amazed by the sight, Shi Mu subconsciously stood up, his eyes drawn to the blurry silhouette. But he soon came to himself, and, acting quickly, grabbed hold of the meteoric iron blade that he had long placed nearby, just in case, whereas with the other hand he fished out a wad of paper charms from his shirt. He stood, ready and waiting, for a few minutes, but the figure remained glued to where it was, which made Shi Mu relax a little. He waited until the grey fog completely lifted, in which process the figure also grew clearer, until it showed itself as a human skeleton of

greyish white color, a bit shorter than himself. It stood in the eye of the formula, its eye sockets flickering with green gleams.

Shi Mu approached it and felt the spirit sign he had planted on the skeleton before. So he was now sure that this skeleton before him was precisely the one he had chosen in the Death Space.

But upon taking a closer look at it, Shi Mu felt a bit of doubt. This skeleton did not tally with the one in his memory, which was a tattered, mutilated, one-armed patchwork of bones! However, this one standing in front of him had not a full equipment of limbs, but more wholesome bones with fewer fissures. Even the color of the bones deepened.

As Shi Mu lost himself in studying the skeleton, it raised its skull, the two beaming sockets directly facing Shi Mu, as if watching the young man in return. Shi Mu remained silent for another moment, and, convinced that this skeleton was not hostile, he spoke up, “Could I ask what your name is? Can you understand my language?”

However the skeleton gave no response. It stood in the same spot, unmoving.

Shi Mu frowned in disappointment. After all, it had cost him an arm and a leg to beckon this skeleton to this world, and it had turned out to be an inert and stupid creature. He suddenly felt a strong sympathy towards uncle Ju, who also used up every last of his penny to bring Vibrant to this space. But Vibrant, however useless it may be, can at least speak, whereas this skeleton cannot even understand human language.

Just as he was lamenting silently his folly, the green gleam in the skeleton’s sockets swayed, and slowly the skeleton nodded its head.

Shi Mu was exhilarated, and expectantly he said, “Try and move two steps forward.”

The green gleam swayed again, this time twice. After a long while, it seemed to have comprehended Shi Mu’s order. Staggering, it did as it was told.

“So you can understand. However, you seem to be a bit... slow.” For a moment, Shi Mu was confounded as to how to further communicate with his newly gained servant.

“Can you sit down?” He tried another order.

The skeleton swayed its head, and, like an obedient pet, it seated itself on the floor, its bones making creaking noises as it did so.

Shi Mu was at least satisfied with his pet/servant’s meekness, though it seemed a bit weak in the head. At last, he walked up to the skeleton, prepared for any possible sudden attack from it, and said to it slowly, “Alright, so I’ve brought you to this world, then I should at least show the quality of a responsible master. Now I’m gonna plant a magical contract in your body. Don’t be afraid, it’s going to be ok.” All the time, the skeleton sat facing him, its sockets glowed, and nothing abnormal happened.

Shi Mu relaxed his knit eyebrows, his heart resigning himself to this fate. Maybe it’s because he had talked too long this time, so however slowly he pronounced each word, what he said still eluded the skeleton’s poor intelligence. He did not waste more time explaining to a skeleton, so he rested his hand on its skull and began muttering the incantations. Instantly, black light shot up from his palm, and the skeleton did not resist at all. The only thing that happened was a slight dimming of the green gleam in its eye sockets. It sat patiently, letting the black light seep into its skull and turn into a black magical character. Shi Mu’s spirit power also melted into the skeleton’s spirit, along with the contract, and soon the master and the servant’s spirit elements blended. With the skeleton’s cooperation, the whole process went on extremely smoothly. Shi Mu heaved a sigh of relief, removing his hand.

Now that the contract had officially been made, and this skeleton was his official pet/servant.

For the next few minutes, Shi Mu asked the skeleton to move about freely and try to attack him, and though the results were not out of his expectation, his was still in drooping spirits. This skeleton had been proved to be an average one, with no special abilities except for its high attacking speed. Generally speaking, its strength, at most, equaled that of a beginner Practitioner.

“Alright, I’ve got no work for you to do right now. If ever I need your help, I shall beckon you here again. By the way, you emerged in our world for the first time amid drifting smoke, which looked like bands of silk, so I’d like to give you a

name, ‘Silk of Smoke’. Do you like it? Or we can just call you ‘Silk’, if you prefer.” Thinking in his heart that Silk would not be of much use to him, Shi Mu sighed and asked it to leave.

With the magical contract established between the two, the skeleton seemed to have become quicker in understanding Shi Mu’s words. It nodded it's head right after Shi Mu finished speaking.

To keep a servant in this world requires a great deal of spirit power, and before this, Shi Mu had used a lot of energy setting up the formula, so he felt completely exhausted after talking to the skeleton for some time. He waved his hand, and muttered an incantation in his heart. Soon a large patch of black smoke appeared around Silk, wrapping around it.

“Be careful, keep yourself safe in the Space of Death.” These were the last words Silk heard before it totally disappeared from this world.

.....

At the foot of a giant mountain in the Space of Death, a puff of black smoke suddenly appeared, and out came a grey skeleton, which was precisely Silk. For a few moments, it stood still, somewhat lost in its own world. The green gleam in its eye sockets seemed stronger, and the swaying gleam looked just like a pair of starry, liquid eyes that was lost in thought. A black magical character could be seen vaguely on its body, and the character seemed to link Silk with a distant existence. From the link came wisps of faint but cool energy that made Silk feel consoled, its head becoming somewhat clearer than before.

Silk stood in the same spot for a few more minutes, scanning its surroundings, then began to walk.

Maybe it was because of the black magic embedded in its body, but Silk now moved with a quicker speed. It advanced steadily, and, after a while, heavy footsteps were heard in front of it. Not far from Silk, an ashen skeleton was making its way ahead with tottering steps, and its sockets were also glowing, though not as brightly as Silk’s.

Skeletons are the most commonly seen creatures in the Space of Death, or rather, the lowest existence. Equally, there are an alarming amount of them. Just around this giant mountain, the aura of several skeleton armies could be felt, so,

before their commander convened them, many skeletons would wander around aimlessly, on the condition that they could not go further than the limits ordered by the commander.

The ashen skeleton had taken notice of Silk too, but it did not show any response. After all, as common low-level creatures, they would not fight each other meaninglessly unless in a large-scale war. Silk blinked its eyes, and did not make any unusual movements either; without slowing down its pace, it kept marching forward.

The two skeletons passed each other at an interval of about half a meter. Just then, without warning, the ashen skeleton heard a swishing sound by its ears, and the next moment its world flipped upside down.

Crack! The ashen skeleton's head fell on the ground. Before it could make out the happenings with its ill-equipped mind, a grey foot became quickly enlarged in its just refocused view, and the next second, its skull was crushed.

A ball of green light shot up from the splintered bone pieces. Silk tilted its head back and drank in the light ball, Its eyes glittered with enjoyment. Next, Silk squatted down near the headless skeleton, picked at some bones that looked relatively firm, then removed them and placed them onto its own body, where the bones were missing. A puff of black smoke emerged floating around it again, and after the smoke vanished, some ribs with an arm bone on its body had turned white, no longer grey.

With this grey-white body, Silk looked odd, but obviously this did not bother it at all. It tried moving its new body, and was delighted, could not help but dance about merrily for a moment, like a small girl that had just gained a new dress at her birthday. After celebrating for a while, Silk resumed its journey ahead.

But where am I going? Silk asked itself. Unfortunately, it did not know. But it had a vague thought forming in its poor mind after meeting a strange man in some distant place. This thought urged it to grow stronger, as soon as possible, while at the same time a sound kept reverberating in its deep heart, goading it to find something it once lost. And time was ticking.

But what am I trying to get back?

Silk could see no light at all in its mind, only a vast murkiness. It abandoned its

thoughts, and kept moving forward, somewhat aware that the road ahead of it were as horrible as hell.

Chapter 109 - Ambush

A year has passed.

In the suburb of the fortress city Mou, Fu Zhou prefecture. Shi Mu was sitting cross-legged on a huge bough, his eyes tightly closed in meditation. He was wearing a short black jacket, and had the silver knife and black blade slung over his shoulder. If not looking closely, one might not be able to tell that it was him at a glance - the years since he left the fishing village had seen many major changes to both his body and his countenance. Although the big eyes and bushy eyebrows of his had not changed much, the outline of his face had been sharpened by years of hard training, the facial features more distinct. His nicely tanned complexion had completely been replaced by a nearly bronze color. When it comes to his stature, the change was remarkable he had grown much taller, with wide shoulders and a tough chest, and his arms were just as strong as cast iron, which added to his innate stubbornness a sense of wildness. All in all, the fishermen of his native village would definitely mistake this strong young man as someone else, should they ever meet again.

Right at this moment, Shi Mu was breathing faintly, deep in his contemplation, with the thick foliage fully shielding him. Looking afar, there were no other living creatures in this woods, except the plants, which, whenever the wind came, would rustle in the breeze, swaying helplessly - a bleakness only a fortress of trees would display.

As a matter of fact, as early as one year ago, the city of Mou fell under the merciless attack of the barbarians. Throughout his journey from the Black Demon Sect to this part of the land, Shi Mu had witnessed countless tragic scenes that would send shudders through his spine. Villages plundered by the barbarians could be seen everywhere in the prefecture, and the once flourishing fields were trampled by barbarian riders. Adult normal men were harnessed and treated less like servants and more like animals, who would get a good whipping whenever their “master” felt like it. Women were raped and killed, their naked bodies left scattered all over the ground, like litter. As for the elderly and the children, they could not provide any practical usage (either manual labor or sex), hence, they met a quicker end, which was, in some ways, less suffering.

This atrocity of unparalleled savagery drained the last bit of equanimity out of Shi Mu's head. His hands itch, his teeth grit, and the thought of avenging his people grew uncontrollably stronger each day. For all that mattered, he is one of the human species, and this country, Qi, is his homeland!

That's why he was holding his breath in this woods, not far from a camp which was set up by the Zheng Yan Tribe, one of the eight tribes that launched the invasion against the three countries. Shi Mu had received a mission of ambushing the patrol group of this camp earlier.

Some time later, sounds of horses trotting this way to the woods grew increasingly audible. Shi Mu's ears stirred, and his eyes immediately opened, gleaming gold. Through the leaves, he could see clearly a group of ten barbarian riders moving toward him. These riders were all extremely big, each standing at least three meters tall, with spears made of bones slung over their backs, and stone axes, which hung from their waists. Even the horses they were riding were much stronger than normal horses, otherwise, how could they bear the enormous weight of their masters and their weapons

The man leading them was a young barbarian of heavy build, whose arms were thicker than Shi Mu's thighs. He was holding a mace, which looked extremely heavy, in the most casual looking way, as if the mace weighed nothing. He was, himself, bared to the waist, showing the eye-catching tattoos on his chest - a howling blue lion.

Information about the barbarians soon flashed across Shi Mu's mind. As far as he knew, the leaders of barbarian patrol groups were uniformly Houtian Totem warriors, roughly the same level as normal Houtian warriors. Thinking this, Shi Mu quietly reached for his black blade at his back, his eyes narrowing with hatred.

The leader with blue lion tattoo looked rather wary, for, just one month ago, their camp had been raided by strong human warriors who caused great damage to their unit. But, just as they had passed under a big tree, the unexpected still came. As far as they could make out, the dense foliage of the big tree burst open without warning, and a large streak of cold light cascaded down to their heads with thirteen black knife shadows blending into the light. The silhouette of a black-robed youth pierced through the leaves. this was, precisely, Shi Mu!

The young barbarian leader shouted angrily, his eyes widely opened. In a split-second, his bulked arms grew even stronger, and oddly enough, blue lion hair started sprouting from his skin. He wielded the mace wildly, tracing an arc in midair and stirring a cold wind. In his hand, the mace went directly to meet the black knife shadows, like a fierce dragon.

Boom! The two weapons clashed in midair amid ear-deafening noises and the hum of metal vibrating. The thirteen shadows were dispelled, as well as the mace. Shi Mu was quite amazed to find himself severely challenged, both physically and mentally, by the brutal force of the barbarian leader; after all he had always been confident of his own huge strength. But right now, his right arm was groaning in the aftermath of the clash, almost struck numb. Undoubtedly, this barbarian leader must equal a Houtain warrior in his actual strength!

Shi Mu soon tumbled through the air, minimizing the impact. But the pursuing mace would not let Shi Mu go, and it rotated in the air, coming his way. Shi Mu's eyes dilated, and, still in midair, he instilled his magic power into the black blade in the shortest time and then swayed his weapon, chopping heavily at the mace.

The two weapons collided once more. But this time, a glaring ball of fire exploded in the air! The barbarian leader was left no time to figure out what had happened, and he could only feel enveloped by an irresistible heat wave, his eyes could see nothing other than burning fire, and his hands stung from the blow, almost unable to hold the mace. The horse beneath him was in a worse condition heavy as it is, how could a horse bear the two succeeding strikes from Shi Mu Sadly, its four legs were instantly broken.

Tumbling down the horse, the barbarian leader managed to steady himself, and held the mace against his chest to protect himself from further strikes. Shi Mu dropped down from the tree as well, his right arm would not work for a while, aching and limp, but his right hand had posed a strange gesture while he muttered some incantations quietly. Suddenly, he opened his lips, and a ball of white breath shot out like an arrow! The distance between them quite near, the barbarian leader could never dodge this unexpected arrow!

Pu! The white breath ball bypassed the mace and submerged into his chest. Immediately, a huge boom resounded, and the upper body was blown up, blood scattering in all directions while his braided head rolled over the ground

pathetically. All happened in just a blink of an eye, and the ten-odd barbarian soldiers were frightened out of their wits seeing their leader killed in an instant before their very eyes. In a flurry, they flung their bone spears at Shi Mu, which flew toward Shi Mu with air-piercing sounds. Shi Mu did his best to duck, but still got wounded in his right arm. The disciplined soldiers took the chance to pulled their stone axes, and quickly circled Shi Mu, howling in great anger.

However, Shi Mu was not even slightly daunted by this. He put on a sardonic grin, and began to rotate the black blade in his hand. Soon the glint and flash of the cold steel surged though the barbarians. Though of heavy build, and equipped with a bold heart that did not fear death, these soldiers still fell under such a skilled attack. After some ten seconds, all the remaining soldiers had been killed.

Shi Mu sheathed his blade, his face stern. Then he walked to the headless body of the barbarian leader, fumbling in his shirt. Soon a silver-edged bone token was found in his waist, and on its surface were written several lines of some strange characters. Shi Mu was overjoyed, storing the bone token in his shirt. All done, he did not linger over the place any more and turned to make his way into the woods, going in a northwesterly direction.

One hour later, another group of barbarian riders, consisting of over a hundred soldiers, passed through the woods where the previous fight had happened. The leader was an extremely big barbarian, whose height was above the average for normal barbarians, and his waist was as strong as a bear's. He was carrying huge steel axes twofold the size of normal human's weapons.

The troop stood was profoundly shocked by this shameful sight; in alarm the barbarians all pulled their weapons, ready for any possible enemies, only the middle-aged leader dismounted his horse, scuttling up to the headless young barbarian. He knitted his eyebrows, facing the miserable looking corpse, his face grave.

"The Lion Totem! Could this be warrior U Luo " Another tall barbarian approached, his eyes on the abdomen of the headless body, his face furious.

"Should be." The middle-aged leader forced the words out through gritted teeth.

U Luo was born of the same tribe as him, and, moreover, the two of them were related. So the tall barbarian did not say anything more.

“The human bugs! How dare they! They’ve been so arrogant these days, killing our warriors right under our noses! We’ve lost over twenty brave leaders in the past few months.” The middle-aged leader cursed bitterly.

“The humans must have set up strongholds in this area, aiming particularly at our totem warriors. We’d better report this to our Great Leader, and scout for nearby humans.” The tall barbarian thought for a while and suggested.

“We’ll report this jointly, and the Great Leader will definitely approve. U Luo was the youngest, bravest totem warrior of our Black Fire Tribe, and I’ll revenge him with my own hands, offering the killer’s head to U Luo’s dead spirit!” The middle-aged leader’s face twisted in agony and rage.

But the killer he cursed had already traveled tens of miles by now, approaching some foggy woods. He galloped to the entrance of the woods nonstop, keeping a vigilant eye on his surroundings. Once he had made it several miles into the woods, he relaxed his pace. Feeling the bone token in his shirt, he heaved a sigh of relief.

One year ago, the barbarians launched an unprecedentedly large-scale invasion into the Heavenly Qi country, hence, the seven sects of the three kingdoms reacted quickly, forging a union that fought jointly against the barbarians, whose power was, thus, largely weakened due to this quick response that far exceeded their anticipation. Therefore, after taking the three fortress prefectures of Qi, the invasion was gradually repelled, and the flames of war did not stretch any further into Yan and Huang Countries. Even so, millions of people had been made homeless, or become servants of the barbarian’s. As a result, the elders of the Black Demon Sect decided, after negotiation, that the annual competition should be canceled and that all disciples would go to reinforce the Qi fortresses in turns, as a special training. Meanwhile, tasks assigned by the sect changed to battles with the barbarians.

For the first six months, Shi Mu was not dispatched to the fortress for his outstanding skill of making charms. He was demanded to stay within the sect, making commonly used low-level charms for the battlefront. But as the battles

grew more intense, the Black Demon Sect began to grow short of manpower, so, at last, Shi Mu, too, was dispatched to the front, sent to the most dangerous prefecture, Fu, of all the three fortress prefectures.

Shi Mu had been through these woods many times and smoothly traveled to a cliff at the other end of the woods, resting by a huge tree. He carefully scanned the area, and listened hard for distant sounds. Once he had made sure of his security, Shi Mu fished a blue token out from his shirt. On the face of the token was five red magical characters, circled by complex heavenly patterns. He held it tightly in his hand, muttering spells. As his magic power went into the token, the characters lit up and a faint blue light shot out, flying up into the huge tree.

Chapter 110 Ke Er, Another girl

As green light shone on the tree root, a black hole, about three meters in diameter, appeared out of thin air. There seemed to be stone ladders inside, which extended down into the ground.

Shi Mu moved swiftly and soon disappeared into the hole. After he left, the air rippled for a while, and the hole became blurry and gradually disappeared.

Shi Mu passed through a short passage and soon arrived at a spacious space underground. There were white ores on the walls that shone with white light, allowing people to see in this, otherwise, dark space.

The underground space seemed to be a deserted mine. The air inside was fairly dry. Traces of excavation were left everywhere on the walls, and a dozen of stone rooms were still there. Deep in the space, there was a crude table and several stools, all made of stone. There were seven or eight people were sitting discussing something heatedly. As footsteps approached, all of them looked back vigilantly, their faces reflecting the faint silver light emitted by the fluorescent stones, and thus the scene took on a dreamy quality, making it look like an illustration of some mysterious story. Everyone in the room looked to be around the age of eighteen or so, and they wore varied suits belonging to several different sects.

As they saw Shi Mu come in, some of the disciples around the table smiled, greeting Shi Mu energetically.

“Brother Shi comes back much later than usual this time.”

“See that smile! He must have fulfilled his task again.”

Shi Mu smiled, not saying a word, and nodded to the disciples who were greeting with him.

“Ah, brother Shi, you are wounded!” A melodious voice rang out, and among the male disciples stood up a green-robed girl about sixteen. Her innocent, starry eyes blinked. Her nose beautiful and cute. Anxiously, her eyes ran over Shi Mu’s bare arm that was smudged by congealed blood. A long knife wound was still distinct on his bronze skin, stabbing her heart.

“Its just a little cut, nothing serious. Though I thank Ke Er[A] for her concern.” Shi Mu looked casually at his wound and replied to the beautiful girl with a smile.

The green-robed girl frowned and wanted to say something, but a young man, who had been silent, stood up and spoke with a cold face, muffling all the other’s voices.

“Brother Shi, how was your mission?” The young man who wore the blue suit of the Black Tortoise Sect asked sardonically.

Shi Mu frowned, and then handed a silver-edged bone token to the young man, who received the token and checked it several times before taking out a round jade plate and a short silver stick. The young man gently touched the plate with the silver stick, and the plate vibrated in response. Instantly, the jade plate was covered by a glowing layer of white light, which then formed a light screen in the air, with lines of words floating on it. The screen obviously recorded all the missions distributed to the disciples, who simultaneously cast their concerned eyes to the screen.

The young man in blue then pointed at a mission of ambushing barbarian patrols with the silver stick, and a beam of light shot up, forming an image of a young barbarian with a stone token on whose surface strange characters could be clearly seen. The young man then compared the bone token in his hand with the image carefully for several times, and his eye corner twitched, betraying his displeasure. At last, he gave a reluctant nod, muttered something to himself and pointed at the screen another time. Immediately the mission disappeared from the light screen.

Seeing this, Shi Mu fished out a black token the size of a palm and tossed it to the young man indifferently.There was his name on one side of the token and magic characters shaped like clouds on the other, with the number 452 etched in the center.（TL’s note: maybe they use the cloud computing!)

The young man in blue looked gloomy but said nothing. Taking Shi Mu’s token, he touched it with the short silver stick again. A silver beam was shed as the number increased by twenty into 472. This done, the young man tossed the token back to Shi Mu, who took it without exchanging looks with him. After giving the others a brief nod, Shi Mu turned to walk to another stone room.

Now let's have an overview of the warfare up till now. During the last year, apart from the several head-on battles between the two parties, the union of the seven sects had also waged three wars against the barbarians, convening all the strong warriors they had. But the results always turned out to be detrimental to both sides, with many Earth Grade saints getting badly wounded, and many Xiantian saints got killed. Though the union boast more Earth Grade saints, the number soon lost its preponderance before the overpowering strength of the barbarian's top warrior Wild Killer. Therefore, somehow after the third big war, a mutual understanding was established between the two parties, and a delicate balance was attained. It was tacitly agreed that warriors and saints at and above the Xiantian level would no longer come to battle within a certain extent, thus leaving Houtian warriors as the main force on the battlefield. Under such conditions, the human union dispatched large numbers of Houtian warriors to the war-ridden districts that had been captured by the barbarians, constantly raiding their strongholds as well as assassinating the Totem warriors, in the hope of undermining their strength bit by bit. However, the barbarians did not just sit by, waiting for their deaths. They adopted the same policy. Consequently, no large-scale battles ever happened again, replaced by constant skirmishes all over the fortress prefecture.

At home, the union of seven sects had arrived at an unprecedented understanding that they should mobilize all the disciples to fight back for their communal land. The high-level elders had reorganized all the resources of the seven sects, and set up a special system of union missions which rewarded the disciples according to how many feat points they managed to obtain from their tasks. Also, the sects' disciples were reshuffled and distributed into teams that worked together. Along with the kingdoms' official armies, these teams would actively fight against the invasion. As for the mission system, the union would reward a disciple with feat points that could exchange for further training resources from the union strongholds or their respective sect. The missions may differ in difficulty, but to be sent to the forefront, deep into the barbarian's camps like Shi Mu's team did would be, undeniably, among the most dangerous tasks.

Not that Shi Mu was against this set up. The union had made this iron rule that every disciple had to stay at the battlefront for at least one year before they

could apply for a transfer back to the inland. Only by implementing this rule inexorably could the union guarantee their combat effectiveness.

This mine is one of their secret strongholds behind the enemies' frontlines, and there are tens of disciples of all the sects convened here, most of whom are on the primary or junior stage of Houtian level, and they constitute quite a crack troop for assassinating barbarian warriors as well as gathering top intelligence about the enemy. In a word, this is one of the most significant strongholds of the union, which runs dangerous missions day and night.

The young man in blue was called Jade White, and is an inner disciple of the Black Tortoise Sect. He has reached the advanced stage of the Houtian Warrior level, and is preeminent above all his comrades. Naturally he was nominated as the leader of this team, and had been a competent leader except that he had always failed at seeing eye to eye with Shi Mu. Thus, whenever the two met, the air around them felt even denser. And the girl in green is named Ke Er. She is an Adept apprentice of the Ethereal Phoenix Sect and is good at the Curing Magic of the wood element. As one of the only two Adepts in this stronghold, she naturally became quite popular among the male disciples, not least because of her pretty face.

Undoubtedly, the other Adept was none other than Shi Mu, so the two of them got to know each other quite well, sharing many things in common. Also, Shi Mu had been concerned about Zhong Xiu, who had also joined the Ethereal Phoenix Sect, so he was willing to talk with Ke Er more than anyone else. And who knows, maybe Ke Er's moving beauty attracted him? Anyway, they spent quite a lot of time together in this war.

"Hold on, brother Shi, let me check your wound." Ke Er had approached him and held his wounded arm without having even the slightest bit of an embarrassed expression. The sight filled Jade White with displeasure. Moreover, Shi Mu's noncommittal acceptance of Ke Er's good will only compound Jade's miserable mood.

The wound was long but not deep, and there was no indication of poison. Ke Er relaxed, extended her long, thin finger to the wound, while opening her pink lips to chant some clear and melodious spells. The next moment, a ball of green light emerged on her finger tip, moving with her finger slowly onto the long wound

and soon wrapped Shi Mu's arm in. The blissful youth stood completely still, not knowing how to show his refreshed feeling. Then he felt an irresistible itch from the wound, which was rapidly healing, and, after a while, had recovered, leaving only a slight scar on his arm. And he knew that the scar would totally disappear after three or five days.

"Thanks a lot. Ke Er's curing magic is always so effective." Shi Mu tried swinging his arm, feeling no pain at all.

"Don't be so polite, brother Shi, it's all thanks to you for the charms you make for our missions." Ke Er smiled sweetly, her curved eyebrows quivering.

"Tsk, sister Ke always speaks to us so politely, but it seems that there is someone that can make her act just like a little girl. I feel she is biased against us!"Suddenly, a strange voice broke the moment.

But Ke Er was not bothered by the joke at all. She tilted her head naughtily and made a fake grimace at the other disciples. The witty face together with her beauty had quite a unique air that even made Shi Mu feel attracted to her. But, on the other hand, this only made White Jade feel even more miserable, his envy mingled with a simmering anger, and his face more gloomy than ever.

"Sister Ke, why not give me a private treatment in my room? I've got a wound here too. " A fat man also participated in the joking party, grinning amorously. Ke Er turned back to glare at him without saying a word. She then bid Shi Mu goodbye and made way to her room. Another tiny girl with a cold face stood up and left with Ke Er, whispering to her while they two of them walked away. This girl was always quiet and all Shi Mu knew about her was that she was a female disciple of Tianyin Sect and was on good terms with Ke Er.

Seeing that Ke Er had left, Shi Mu also turned back to his room, which was situated deep inside the mine. He chose the room for its seclusion and quiet.

Shi Mu changed into clean clothes after he came back, and then there was a clear knock on his door. Shi Mu frowned and when he opened the door he found a young Taoist warrior with a sword on his back standing there.

"Brother Shi, I know you've just returned from a mission and I didn't want to disturb you so soon. But I've just received a difficult mission and am in desperate need of a Golden Armor Charm just in case..."The young Taoist said sheepishly.

“Don’t be so polite Brother Qin, just come in with your materials.” Shi Mu invited him in with a smile.

In this stronghold deep in the enemy-occupied territory, he was the only one could make charms, so, naturally, all the disciples had to ask Shi Mu for charms. This way, Shi Mu held a very high status in the stronghold, and everyone was quite polite to him. After all, in this war, even just one charm could decide life or dead.

Note:

[A]: Ke means white jade in ancient Chinese, and "Er" is an affectionate form of address, often adopted to show intimate relations.

Chapter 111 - An Encounter in the Woods

“Many thanks, brother Shi! I’ll rely on you then.” The young Taoist warrior was all smiles, and he quickly took out several pieces of magic paper, a bottle of yellow ink, and a heavenly stone of the earth element. Shi Mu placed and ordered the stuff on his desk, and then spread one piece of magic paper before him. With brush and stone in hand, Shi Mu lost no time in drawing magic characters, which, one-by-one, filled the paper within half an hour. When the last stroke was finished, a brand-new Golden Armour charm was completed.

Shi Mu felt quite gratified at the result - this kind of charm had been the most frequently requested during the war, thus his proficiency in drawing it had saved him the trouble of making use of his supernatural eyesight. He could probably even make it with eyes closed.

Returning the remaining ink, paper, and stone to the Taoist warrior, along with the completed paper charm, Shi Mu smiled gently. He was friendly to all except those who bear enmities against him.

“Brother Shi is just superb at making charms! The charm Adepts of our sect can no long compare with you. They’d waste a dozen pieces of paper and other items without making one charm successfully.” The Taoist warrior took his charm and paid a tribute to Shi Mu’s achievement.

“Hehe, I appreciate that, brother Qin. But I won’t charge you less just because you praise me, haha. The old rule, one charm, two feat points.” Shi Mu made a joke, which he secretly took pride in, and handed his identity token to the Taoist youth.

“Sure.” The youth fished out his own ID token and rubbed it twice; immediately two light dots shot up from his and flew into Shi Mu’s token. All done, thanking Shi Mu again, the Taoist youth exited the room.

Hardly had the youth’s figure disappeared from view, when another blue-robed Black Tortoise disciple walked in, greeting Shi Mu earnestly, “Brother Shi, I’ve been waiting for you for ages! You must make me a Body-Lifting Charm this time!”

Shi Mu looked through his window to find two more disciples waiting outside

the door impatiently, which made him grin to himself resignedly. However, White Jade, who had been sitting by the stone table in the meeting room was exasperated by the sight even more. He coldly announced the end of the meeting, and, without turning his head back, went to his room. The image of a soft body floating in his mind, White Jade's eyes hardened. "Humph! He'd better count his luck! Next time he'll never make it. A primary Houtian warrior can die at any time in this damned place." White Jade banged his table and kicked his stool, cursing loudly.

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It took Shi Mu another hour to finish all the requested charms, and, seeing the added twenty feat points, his face creased into a contented smile. All he had to do now was endure the hardship of war and await his return to the rear base, by which time his accumulated feat points would be of great use. The union of seven sects had gathered all the essential materials at this base, most of which were rarely seen and could only be obtained with feat points, including some precious heavenly stones, powerful magical weapons, as well as some herbs and pills. With enough feat points, even other sects' arts and techniques were not out of reach.

Shi Mu closed his door and sat cross-legged on his bed. Taking out a small jade bottle, he poured out a Bone-Tempering Pill and downed it. After some time, his complexion changed into an irregular blend of blue and white, and his clothes seemed to bulge, squirming restlessly, as if an invisible vapor stream was flowing beneath them.

Shi Mu did not open his eyes for a long time. Eventually, his face lit up. He had just made another small step forward in the Art of the Heavenly Elephant. It is worth noting that even the smallest advance in this art costs a tenfold investment of time and energy. For the last year, though he constantly received tasks of fighting enemies in every dangerous district and thus led a hard life, he did not slack the slightest in his self-discipline. What's more, the extreme conditions of war - the killing, the blood shed, *etc.* - had all stimulated his potential. By now, with the assistance of pills, he had reached the fourth level in Heavenly Elephant Art, not far from the fifth level also, and become a Houtian Warrior of middle stage. Furthermore, due to his Moon-Swallow Art, his Art of

Accumulating Spirit Power had also advanced greatly, entering the fourth level months ago. But ever since he had reached this level, the speed at which he crystallized moon energy had slowed down considerably. A month's effort of accumulated moonlight crystal sized to, at most, as big as a rice grain, and could only enhance his spirit power to the smallest extent. He had not experienced the euphoric sensation of making a spurt of progress in his spirit power by just accumulating a bean-size moonlight crystal for a long time.

But this was not a strange phenomenon. The higher stages of an art requires a greater investment of effort. Shi Mu had a rough estimation that, even with the Moon-Swallowing Art there to facilitate his training, he'd have to spend at least another two years in making it to the fifth level in the Art of Accumulating Spirit Power. Thinking this, Shi Mu sighed, then laughed to himself scornfully, nodding his head. So the old saying is right, one never gets gratified. In introspection, he knew he had been too ambitious, insatiable, and impatient. For any new disciple, to reach such a stage as Shi Mu within two years is indisputably an extravagant hope, not to mention his mysteriously learned Moon-Swallowing Art! In hindsight, the way he got access to this art was unimaginably queer. Who could ever learn a miraculous art of swallowing the moon's heavenly energy in a dream!

Shi Mu made a self-interrogation in his heart, exclaiming how greedy a human being could be. The realization restored his peaceful state of mind, and, re-closing his eyes, he continued with the training, at an appropriate speed this time.

Soon, night had come. Disciples had returned to the stronghold, one after another, all with haggard faces and worn-out bodies that could only be restored by a good night's sleep. Apart from the ones on guard, all had fallen asleep.

So it was then that Shi Mu pushed his door open and tiptoed through the mine, making his way to the huge tree at the entrance. Outside the mine, the heavens and the earth were filled with an all-embracing tranquility, and a bright moon hung solitary in the night sky, pouring its clean, liquid light on the earth.

"Brother Shi, you heading out again?" Behind a boulder at the entrance, a disciple on watch stuck his head out and greeted Shi Mu in a low voice.

Shi Mu nodded without a word, then relaxed his pace and moved to the nearby wood quietly, soon disappearing into the darkness.

By this time, the stronghold's disciples had all learned that Shi Mu would, for sure, stay out whenever there was moonlight in the night sky. About this strange habit of his, Shi Mu had explained that he was definitely not a werewolf, or a psychopath mesmerized by the moon. All he was doing was a decent training that demanded the involvement of sufficient moonlight. And he well convinced them, after all, there are all kinds of strange arts in the world.

Shi Mu did not stop his steps until a quarter of an hour later, when he reached a clearing in the woods some distance away from the stronghold. He carefully scanned the environment, and was assured that there was not a soul except himself in this area. Although basically no one dared to spy on him, considering his identity as the sole charm Adept in this stronghold, but Shi Mu would still carefully choose a new spot every time he went out for his nightly training.

Next, he fished out four pieces of blue charm paper, which he then placed around him, and chanted a spell that lit the four charms. After a short glare, the light went out and the charms returned to normal. Seeing this, Shi Mu was quite satisfied, nodding to the charms as if they were his loyal servants. Actually, the four paper charms were not usual at all. Named 'All Around Charms', they could combine to make a simple probing formula able to detect any suspicious phenomenon within a radius of 500 meters. These charms were exchanged by Shi Mu from a disciple of the Wind and Fire Sect with ten thousand silver and a low-level fire stone. Only with them could he relax when out for training. All ready, he sat, cross-legged, on the grass and made the posture for the Moon-Swallowing Art, and soon entered his usual ape dream, in which the moonlight flooded the earth, and the ape his incarnation watched the moon with head raised, absorbing the heavenly energy from the moon.

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A whole night slid by, and day broke. Shi Mu's body twitched as he was dragged forcibly from his dreamland. In his brain, a bean-size crystal was floating, emitting a faint luster, reminiscent of the moonlight. Ever since he found that the crystal would not help as much as before, he had begun to save it for further use, in hopes that he could find a better way to use it. Or rather, he'd

like to wait and see if the crystal would turn into something else one day.

Exhaling a long breath, he got up to his feet and started walking in the direction of the mine. The morning sky had gained in brightness, and mists floated among the verdant trees like bands of delicate blue gauze, constituting an ethereal picture resembling a wonderland. Shi Mu was taking pains not to tramp on the newly grown plants when the faint ripple of a stream reached his ear, refreshing his spirits. After all a night's training had drained his energy, and he felt his mouth parched. He scuttled to the rivulet, filled his canteen with the clean water. Just as he was to lift it to his mouth, a vague sound of water splashing caught him unguarded.

Shi Mu soon put away his canteen with a nervous face, like a rabbit that got startled. The next moment, he reached for the black blade at his waist, and, with his back arched, began to move slowly toward the source of the sound. Behind a dense bush, he carefully stretched forward, his rabbit ears stirred in search of any little sounds. Finally, he saw where the water-splashing sounds had come from. Not far from the bush, in a puddle that connected to the rivulet, a girl's naked back was exposed amid morning fog that floated above the water, drops of water glittering on her skin. Her dark, black hair tumbled down like a cascade, drifting in the water like gracefully mists that hung about her. It was just her bare, thin arms that were splashing water, making the same sounds that had frightened Shi Mu out of his wits. (Ok, not that serious, I'm making fun of Shi Mu again. H.J.)

Shi Mu felt it was hard to catch his breath as he saw water bead down the girl's curved shoulder, and her skin was just glaringly fair under the morning sun. Shi Mu was frozen to the spot, not knowing how to react. His heart pounded as the girl turned back and was just about to face him. He was all jolted within, and before the soft breasts were to be exposed to his eyes he managed to turn around, only catching a glimpse of the girl's face.

Ke Er!

This time Shi Mu was really frightened out of his wits, and at a loss as to how to apologize. For a moment his mind was a total blank, and by reflex he thought of fleeing from the embarrassing scene. But like every unfortunate plot he tramped on a withered twig and made a cracking sound.

“Who’s there!”

Ke Er’s voice resounded, not as sweet as usual. The next moment, as she swayed her arm, a green vine branch leaped up from the water and shot towards Shi Mu like a deadly snake. Shi Mu was frightened again, and managed to recover from his trance, jumping aside to dock the branch.

Pa! A powerful clear sound. The branch landed on where he had stood, and sprang up, leaving a deep mark on the earth. Then the nimble snake made its second attack without delay. Shi Mu was quite amazed, aware that Ke Er had also been hiding her actual strength, just like himself. The branch jumped, swooping over him, and Shi Mu pulled out his blade in a second, his eyebrows raised. A sway of his arm produced several blade shadows that surrounded the vine branch. As red light shone within the shadows, the branch stopped its movement, falling onto the earth in several pieces. But the cut pieces were not dead yet, black fluids gushing wildly out, and the branch grew complete at a lightning speed with its color completely black and its body emitting an unpleasant, fishy smell.

Shi Mu was frightened again, and quickly defended himself with the black blade, while his other hand fished out a charm. All the while he had forgotten the quickest way to end the fight: just call her name.

“Why, brother Shi, it’s you!”

Ke Er had got out of the water at some unknown time, well dressed, only leaving her bushy hair untied. Her face was all surprise when she saw the unexpected visitor, fighting clumsily with a vine branch.

Chapter 112 - A Mission of Blood

The beautiful girl looked at Shi Mu in astonishment, her eyes wide open, and as she had just bathed, the moisture on her skin only added an unusual appeal to her gracefulness. In Shi Mu's eyes, she was just like a lotus flower appearing above the water, so clean and charming that his chest stung.

Suddenly, coming to himself, Shi Mu found it imperative to give a decent explanation. He blushed and stammered a little, speaking in a great haste, "Sister Ke. it's… it's not what you are thinking… Oh I didn't presume to mean that I know what you are thinking...it's just that...I wasn't peeping. Please believe me, I was just passing by when I heard something so I thought I'd better have a look..."

"It's ok brother Shi. Of course I believe in you. I've been hiding in the mine for days, waiting for my next mission, so I thought why not have a bath here when the sun still hasn't risen." Ke Er replied, her face also blushing. Then she waved her hand, and the black vine branch soon disappeared into the earth.

Shi Mu had a quick, last glance of the branch, his eyes thoughtful. The two of them exchanged an embarrassed look wordlessly, feeling the air around them grow dense.

"Huh, the day's breaking, let's hurry back ." Giving a dry cough, Shi Mu sheathed his blade, trying to break the ice.

Ke Er blushed a little but said nothing. She casually straightened out her hair and followed Shi Mu toward the way back to their stronghold.

So the two of them walked silently through the trees, soft morning rays piercing through the foliage. Except for the chirping of birds, the world seemed to have been enveloped in total quietness. Shi Mu slowed down his pace while the Ke Er followed, with a short distance between them. Both were enjoying bathing in the light without saying anything. Seen from afar, this constituted a perfectly romantic picture, with the youth tall and stalwart, his arms waving like wind, and the girl small and delicate, looking rather timid and endearing. [HJ: As a feminist I'd rather not translate this sentence...But I am a loyal TL, you know.]

[EC: I feel our TL is going to have a lot of issues with this, considering the fact

that the author is definitely NOT a feminist.]

“Brother Shi was out at this time of the day, so were you practicing all night?” Ke Er’s beautiful eyes blinked innocently as she sped up to catch up with Shi Mu.

“Yeah, it is quiet outside. Which is good for practicing alone.” Shi Mu nodded as he replied.

“Brother Shi is so hard-working, no wonder you are such a strong warrior and also a talented Adept at the same time! I could never match you in practice at all. As I far as I know, there’s no one in the young generation of our Ethereal Phoenix Sect that can compare with brother Shi.” Ke Er’s gaze turned soft as she spoke gently.

“Sister Ke flatters me. You are also very brilliant in the magic of wood. The vine branch you controlled just now should be something quite unusual, right?” Shi Mu asked in a casual tone.

“It was just an ordinary wood spell. How can it compare with Brother Shi’s magic? Oh, speaking of your magic, I’m running out of charms, could brother Shi help me make some Fire Ball charms? Or would that take too much of your time?” Ke Er suddenly changed the topic and asked him in a sweet voice.

“If Sister Ke offers the materials, it should be no problem.” Shi Mu answered quickly.

The atmosphere between them became quite cordial as they chatted all the way. Soon they had come near to the stronghold’s entrance where the huge tree stood. Suddenly, the leaves of the tree rustled violently and out came a dashing man.

Ke Er was taken aback at first, but when she made out that it was White Jade she lowered her guard with a soft sigh. But Shi Mu frowned, for an ominous feeling arose in his heart.

“You two ….” Staring at them, White Jade could not help but feel a fit of indignation turning his insides upside down. His face stern, he snapped a fierce look at Shi Mu, which the latter had already expected. Resting his eyes on Ke Er and himself in turn, even Shi Mu began to feel an involuntary sympathy toward White Jade: Ke Er’s hair was still wet, which suggested a recent bath. As for

himself, dew had wet his clothes, due to him staying up all night on the grass - a sight that resembled a post-bath scene. Therefore, what else could White jade think of before two such wet people?

By now, Ke Er had also realized this, recalling herself naked before Shi Mu, her face reddened even more. Her rosy cheeks and quasi-acquiescence of the bath ignited the jealousy that had already been simmering in White Jade's chest.

"Does brother White have any business with me? If not, please excuse me. " Shi Mu broke the silence in an indifferent tone, then strode away before White Jade could say anything. He was well aware that if he tried to make any explanations it would only make the situation worse. Ke Er saluted White Jade perfunctorily then also walked away, bypassing him to follow Shi Mu. Gazing painfully at the two receding figures, White Jade's eyes were full of malice that even he himself could not contain.

After returning to his room, Shi Mu sat thinking deeply. White Jade had always been hostile to him, and would cause him trouble now and then in recent months, but had still dared not go too far, considering Shi Mu's Adept identity. But that was before today. Now that this embarrassing event had happened, the two of them had officially fallen out, as it is. So he had every reason, from now on, to be wary of White Jade. However, since Shi Mu was accustomed to concealing his actual strength before the other disciples in this stronghold, all had always considered him an average warrior. Plus, the many charms he had with him, as well as many secret techniques and gadgets as his trump cards, he was confident to survive any of White Jade's plots. Also, he would not just bite the bullet without striking back if White Jade ever resorted to indecent means.

For the following period of time, Shi Mu sat with his legs crossed, and fumbled in his shirt for some time before he took out a black bone slip on which was recorded the Art of the Stong Ape. A cloud of deep regret covered his eyes as he held the slip in his hand, studying it once again - he still could not practice this art. After he had reached the fourth level of the Art of the Heavenly Elephant, Shi Mu had exchanged for a bottle of Demon's Qi and some blood of the heavenly apes with his feat points at a stronghold of the union's. With this stuff, he tried to practice the Art of Strong Ape, but his accumulated real qi was still far too weak before the Demon's Qi, which subject him to the danger of being infected

by the Demon's spirit. Judging from the current conditions, he might as well try it later when he had reached the fifth level of the Art of Heavenly Elephant.

Shi Mu sighed deeply and carefully put the stone slip away, solely concentrating on practicing the Art of Heavenly Elephant. By convention, he could rest for several days after having performed a mission out of the stronghold.

This way, two days' time quickly flew by. Shi Mu would practice the Art of Heavenly Elephant in his room during the daytime and go outside to practice the Art of Swallowing Moon at night, and White Jade never once came to pick a quarrel.

But on the early morning of the third day, when he returned after a whole night's practicing the Art of Swallowing Moon, his expression changed as he stepped into the mine. All the disciples had gathered around the table, sitting silently with serious faces.

"Brother Shi, we've been waiting for you, come to your seat." The young Taoist who had asked Shi Mu to draw Golden Armor charms before stood up to greet him.

"What happened? Why are all of you here?" Shi Mu asked.

Ke Er, who was sitting among the disciples smiled to him and pointed at a stone stool beside her. Shi Mu thought briefly and then came to sit by her.

The shadow in White Jade's eyes darkened, but he said nothing, only the protruded veins on his neck betrayed his anger. "Now that all of us are here, I will talk business. Look at this." He took a deep breath and diverted his eyes from Shi Mu and Ke Er. He took out the white plate he had shown before, and, as white light shot up from the surface, a light screen appeared in midair again. A line of red characters on it attracted everyone's eyes.

Shi Mu's countenance shifted. The other disciples were also shocked at the sight. As a rule, the union had its own standard in classifying missions distributed to disciples. Ordinary missions are written in white color and special ones are black, only extremely urgent missions will be red. So why, all of a sudden, did a mission of red appear?

“It was a mission we just received this morning. They called upon us to make a surprise attack at a barbarian stronghold that stores their provisions. It’s thirty kilometers away from the mountain range. We have been told to burn all the barbarian’s provisions there.” White Jade looked around and said in a grave tone.

“A stronghold of army provisions... Is it the one near the Eagle Worrying Ravine?” A disciple of the Wind and Fire sect asked with fear.

“Yes, exactly.” White Jade nodded with an expressionless face.

“How could it be possible? I have gathered intelligence about the enemy there before, and the geography there was perilous, with hundreds of barbarians guarding the stronghold, including many Totem warriors. But we only have a dozen people!” The disciple asked anxiously.

“I know, it’s highly dangerous, but we have to perform it ‘cause it’s a mission of blood from the union.”White Jade threw the disciple a scornful look and said coldly.

All the other disciples present sank into a deep silence as they heard the answer. Punishments to disciples who refused to follow an order were usually merciless. Light ones included sealing one’s skills and distributing them to remotes places for hard labor, whereas serious punishment would be a total destroy of one’s skills and a relegation to being the lowest of servants, imprisoned in the sect for life.

“Though quite difficult, the feat points for this task are very generous too, as many as eight hundred points altogether. And it counts on your contribution as to how many points each of you will receive at last.” White Jade’s eyes swept over all the disciples as he announced the reward mechanism. And this news surely comforted the disciples a little, their expression relaxing to some extent.

“Now that the mission is set, let’s move on to the plan. ” White Jade spread a piece of paper on the table and began to draw a map of a valley on it. “I’ve been to the Eagle Worrying Ravine before, and it used to be a mountain stronghold of a gang of robbers, which, I’ll admit, was quite hard to find. When the barbarians invaded, the robbers abandoned it so the barbarians took it over as a stronghold to store provisions. I remember the general terrain and have drawn it for your

reference.” Saying this he showed the others the map, which Shi Mu also raised his head for a look at. White Jade had drawn quite a detailed map of the Eagle Worrying Ravine and all the places around had been clearly marked.

In the valley shaped like a calabash, some buildings, like that of a stronghold, were accented, and it could be roughly said that the stronghold had two layers. Shi Mu specifically looked at the disciple of the Wind and Fire sect, who had been to the Eagle Worrying Ravine, and felt assured when he saw that the disciple had no objection to the map. So the terrain drawn by White Jade should be real.

“As brother Zheng has said, the barbarians guarding the Eagle Worrying Ravine are large in numbers and strength, so we shall not make frontal attack with only a dozen of us.” Jade White said seriously.

“Has brother White come up with a smart idea?” Ke Er asked in a clear voice.

“Hehe, I would not say it’s all that smart. I have discussed this with some of my brothers and we all decided that we should divide ourselves into two groups, one feigning an attack in the front to attract the enemy’s attention as much as possible, while the other seizing the chance to sneak into the base to burn the provisions.” Jade White smiled to Ke Er and explained.

Disciples around the stone table all sank into a brooding silence as they heard the plan. Many frowned and wore thoughtful expressions. It really was not a smart idea at all, it was, at best, a conventional one. And there is really a chance to complete the mission if no accident happens. After a moment’s contemplation, no one opposed to the plan at last.

“Now that we do not have a different view, let’s discuss how to distribute our people.” Jade White cracked into a smile, which he rarely did, as he saw the plan was accepted.

Chapter 113 - The Eagle Worrying Ravine

Without a better choice, the disciples all looked at White Jade resignedly, waiting for him to expound upon their assignment.

“The fewer people that sneak in, the safer our team is. After deliberate thinking, I found the optimum number would be four. So let’s say that brother Qin Jing of the Heavenly Sword Sect, brother Di Tong of the Wind and Fire Sect, brother Shi Mu of the Black Demon Sect, and I are the four who will sneak in. The others will take concerted action outside the enemy’s camp, trying to draw their attention,” White Jade declared in a flat tone.

Shi Mu ‘s eyes flashed alertly, but only for a second. Among the other members, the Taoist youth with a sword over his shoulder and another muscular youth with dark skin jerked momentarily but did not make any complaints. Most of the other disciples, who had not been chosen to be in the surprise party, secretly heaved a sigh of relief, all knowing clearly that though the surprise party would get the most feat points, those who stayed outside were definitely much safer. After all, their team was hopelessly understaffed compared with their enemy, hence slipping into the barbarian’s area means that being found out is a death sentence.

While some were secretly rejoicing at their luck, some cast doubtful glances at Shi Mu. Ke Er broke the silence by bravely suggesting, “Brother White, you three are quite strong, but not brother Shi. He’s better as an Adept, you know. Don’t you think it is inappropriate to include him in this dangerous task?”

“Sister Ke, you are quite right. The reason I included him was just because of his Adept identity,” White Jade explained to her with an indulging smile, “I have a middle-level fire charm, and as long as the four of us could sneak in successfully and work this charm, we’d burn all the food without difficulty. But this charm won’t work unless we have the power of an Adept, so you see why I asked brother Shi to come with me.” This said, he showed them a red charm with magic patterns on it bursting with heavenly energy that sent the air around it rippling.

There was a gleam of surprise in Shi Mu’s eyes when he looked at the red

charm. It was the first time he had seen a middle-level charm, whose power had long since reached his ears. With the timely assistance of this charm, the task instantly got much easier. Ke Er knit her eyebrows in suspicion, but Shi Mu prevented her from making any further objections, waving his hand at her, and smiling, “Since brother White has made such a thoughtful plan, I’d be very glad to go with him.”

“Brother Shi is a real warrior! Once we’ve completed this mission, I’ll report your feats to the union. Well then, we should rest so that we can ready ourselves for the mission. We’ll set off this afternoon and try to make it to the Eagle Worrying Ravine before dusk. We’ll act during the night.” White Jade cast a meaningful look at Shi Mu, a grim smile playing across his lips. The others certainly had no differing opinions, so the meeting broke up with people getting up and chatting as they hurried about. All went around making preparations.

Shi Mu headed to his place directly, and, after walking about the room for a while, a hint of a knowing smile flickered across his face. Of all the members in the mine, he was the one who understood White Jade’s intentions the best, but he would not satisfy him this time. With his current cultivation, as long as they did not encounter Xiantian Saints, he felt quite sure of surviving this task. Now that White Jade’s cunning hand had reached out toward him, he would not sit idly and look unconcerned, nor treat him politely anymore.

Suddenly, someone gently, yet with some trepidation, knocked on the door. Shi Mu opened the door to find Ke Er waiting with a face lined with concern, her long green dress rustling.

“Sister Ke, is there some urgent matter to discuss?” Shi Mu let her in and asked.

“Brother Shi, I feel so bad… It’s all my fault that brother White misunderstood you the other day...Or he would not have asked you to slip into the camp...” Ke Er raised her head, looking apologetically at Shi Mu.

“Hehe, you are imagining things. The Black Tortoise has long been at odds with our Black Demon, this has nothing to do with you.” Shi Mu’s eyes glinted. He tried to speak in a tone that was as soft and gentle as possible.

“But...”

“Don’t worry about me. Even if I’m to slip in the enemy’s camp, I’ve got means to protect myself. It’s yourself that you should be concerned about. Do be careful when you feign an attack outside. “ Ke Er was cut off by Shi Mu.

“Uh...Alright, I’ll do as you said. “ Ke Er’s big naive eyes blinked, and then she took out a green paper charm from her sleeve, and handed it to Shi Mu. The charm was giving off a green light that twisted and turned like a living thing.

“This is a Rejuvenating Charm. Please carry it with you. It will be of use.” She pleaded.

Shi Mu could not help but feel moved. Though the Rejuvenating Charm was only a low-level charm, it was rather difficult to make, and cost far more than ordinary charms of the same level. Even he himself had not succeeded in making one. This kind of charm could heal wounds fairly quickly, which made the demand for it far outstrip the supply during times of war.

“That’s a very precious charm. How could I dare to take it from you? Please keep it for yourself.” Shi Mu shook his head violently.

“Please don’t say that. I’ve got more than one Rejuvenating Charm.” Ke Er flashed him an encouraging smile, which made it difficult for Shi Mu to refuse a second time. She slipped the charm into his hand obstinately, and the moment her fingertips touched his skin, his heart melted. He did not insist and nodded his head, taking out some Fire Ball charms and Water Sword Charms and handing them to her, “Thank you, sister Ke. Here are some charms that you might find useful in combat. Just take them to protect yourself.” To this generous reciprocation, Ke Er did not decline, and received the charms in a most cheerful mood. After prolonging the meeting by chatting some more, she bid him goodbye and left.

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At the same time, in a remote cave in the mine, White Jade was standing with a fat youth wearing the Black Tortoise’s uniform. The two of them engaging in an intimate conversation.

“Brother White, I’ve been wondering why the union gave us this special task so suddenly? Indeed, our stronghold is not that significant, but, after all, we offer timely intelligence of the enemy, and we are in the enemy’s area. If our

stronghold gets destroyed, it would be a great loss to the union.” The fat guy asked, knitting his brows.

“Hehe, that’s a question you’d better figure out for yourself. “ White Jade gave him a prevaricating smile.

“Could it be that the union is going to do something really big?” The fat guy seemed to have a moment of enlightenment, his eyes flashing.

“I held back a piece of information from the others. The union has found out that the barbarians have decided to scour this area, for we have been causing them a lot of issues. Therefore, this stronghold is no longer safe and should be evacuated soon. And this will be the last mission we perform before leaving.” White Jade snorted coldly.

“So I see.” The fat guy understood.

“I’ve been thinking how to deal with that Shi Mu recently, and this mission just happened to come at such a timely moment...” Licking his lips, White Jade muttered with a sinister smile.

“Hehe, brother White is a real genius!” The fat guy echoed, praising White Jade.

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The night had descended, and the moon was rising among the mountains, it's cold light coming down through the night sky and enveloping the whole valley, where buildings made of wood squatted against the hills. Some were taller while most were short. A tower was erected at the periphery of the valley, its height was around 7 meters and it was entirely made of thick logs whose tips were sharpened into the shape of an arrowhead. There were two sentry posts at either side of the tower, each guarded by a tall barbarian, on the watch for any suspicious signs.

This is the valley of the Eagle Worrying Ravine, a stronghold of the barbarians within the boundaries of Fu Zhou province. Though it was already dark, no torches were lit to illuminate the valley, which was completely enclosed in darkness - due to the necessity of absolute secrecy. But inside the colossal wooden gate, muffled footsteps were constantly heard, which suggested a

vigilance inside that contrasted with the tranquility of the valley.

At this moment, in the dense forest adjacent to the valley, a dozen figures soundlessly made their way to the entrance of the valley. The leader was a lanky man, who waved his hand gently to make an order, at which the figures around him all split in all directions, each closing in on the entrance with hushed footsteps. The lanky man stopped, stretched his arm up, and reached for something over his shoulder, which reflected the cold moonlight. At almost the same time, in the post a burly barbarian froze, looking in the direction of the forest, and was just about to open his mouth to shout out a warning when a black shadow whizzed through the woods towards him at an incredible speed. The next moment, a feathered arrow penetrated his throat with terrifying accuracy. The barbarian gasped, and looked hopelessly downward, but only managed to utter some groans before his bulky body fell off the post, blood gushing out of his throat like a shower. The other barbarian on the opposite post witnessed the whole process, and was scared half to death, but the next moment, the same black shadow flashed through the air with a hellish smell, and pierced his heart to end his life, nailing him onto a log of the tower.

“Ah!!!!” His last sad and shrill cry at least traveled far enough to memorize his baleful death.

On the other hand, roughly at the same time, another figure cut through the woods and darted to the wood gate of the camp. Moonlight shone on his purple robe, showing himself to be a tall and well-built young man. He gave a quick upward flick of one arm, and next moment a huge greatsword, the length of his height, appeared out of nowhere. He swayed the blade, tracing an arc in the air which resembled a crescent, and then, with a howling wind, he chopped heavily at the gate with his blade.

Ka The split gate gave a huge creak as it fell on the earth in two pieces, the whole valley echoing with the sound. Just near the gate a patrol group made up of nearly twenty barbarians was shocked dumb by first a series of bitter cries, then the ear-deafening sound of the door splitting. Before they made out their enemies the bold barbarians had already pulled out their weapons, running outside amid angry shouting. The purple-robed youth showed not the least sign of fear, and wielded his long blade and confronted the barbarians gallantly. The

clang of weapons soon reverberated in the dead of night. As the flashes and shadows of his blade danced wildly, three or four of the barbarians had been beheaded, their blood beginning to pool beneath their bodies.

“Go! Kill!”

Without warning, from the adjoining forest came a burst of appalling shouts, which suggested a large number of attackers. Immediately, dark figures filed out of the trees, swooping down on the barbarian soldiers, all the while arrows kept shooting out from the woods, each taking away the life of a barbarian, not a single arrow missing its target. The patrol group had no Totem warriors in it, so it was soon annihilated by several human warriors. Their bodies were trampled upon by more barbarians that issued out of the buildings nearest to the gate, mutilated in the subsequent confused fighting between human and barbarian warriors.

But while these people were fighting furiously, in some place further into the woods, dozens of torches were flickering, coming like waves in the direction of the camp. By now all the sleeping barbarians had wakened from their dreams to find themselves in a perilous state. Their faces turning pale with fright.

“The humans! They are coming!” A barbarian, who looked like a captain, shouted at the top of his lungs, then fished out a black ox horn and blew it with all his might.

The stars trembled while the forlorn bugle call resonated through the valley.

Chapter 114 - The Sudden Appreance of a XianTian

The loud and desolate sound of the bugle woke up the entire valley, which was now completely illuminated by hundreds of torches carried by the barbarian soldiers flowing toward the gate.

“What? A large number of humans suddenly appeared and are storming our stronghold? What is the status of our stronghold at the moment?”

Deep inside the stronghold, in the highest building, a hefty barbarian, looking like a iron tower, glowered at the soldier in front of him, speaking in a demanding tone. It seemed to be a meeting hall with strange patterns of beasts carved on the walls, together with some specimens of various unknown monsters’ heads. Laying in the middle of the floor was a huge patch of hide. Behind the hefty barbarian stood another, who was young and sturdy, shirtless, and had a blue tattoo of a wolf’s head on his chest. His brooding face was as stern as a statue’s.

“Master Wu, though we have temporarily blocked the invaders, they are very strong and seem to have more than one hundred reinforcements coming our way, not including those we are fighting with.” The soldier, half kneeling on the floor, answered swiftly, with blood all over his face and body. The blood was, apparently, not his.

“So there must be quite a few Houtian Warriors among the invading human bugs, but how could it be possible that so many of them suddenly appeared here…” The man’s face became even more serious.

Just at that time, a huge explosion was heard from the entrance of the valley, even shaking the hall slightly. The hefty barbarian changed his look and stepped out of the hall, only to see flames rising skyward amid thick smoke that could be seen miles away. The hefty man’s intuition told him that something terrible must have happened.

“Damn! Those dirty human bugs are trying to burn the provisions!” The barbarian was shocked as he realized his enemy’s intentions.

“Tu Ma Gu, lead your warriors to the entrance and call all our men. You must repel the humans’ attack!” The barbarian hefty man resolutely turned around

and ordered the young Totem warrior with wolf head tattoo.

“Yes!” The young barbarian replied, and the next second his figure transformed into a puff of smoke, flowing out of the hall and into the distance.

The hefty man then waved his hand to dismiss the kneeling orderly soldier, whereas he himself stayed for another thoughtful moment before he turned to walk even deeper into the hall.

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On another mountain at the other side of the valley, four young men were standing still side by side. They were none other than Shi Mu, White Jade, and the other two members of this surprise party.

“Our plan seems to be working quite well; most of the barbarians have been attracted to the entrance.” The Taoist youth first commented.

By that time the battle at the gate seemed to have become white-hot. Flames and smoke rose all over the ground while the sound of fighting never stopped. Though there were only tens of humans which put them at a total disadvantage, but they were all at the level of Houtian warriors\ and much stronger than ordinary barbarian soldiers, so they did not worry too much at fighting tenfold their number. If all went well like this, this distraction tactic would probably work.

“There is no time to lose, let’s go. They can’t hold very long.” The dark-skinned young man urged, an eager gleam in his eyes.

Shi Mu’s eyes followed the direction of the dark-skinned young man, narrowing to protect themselves from the glaring torchlight. There were more than ten tall figures moving swiftly towards the entrance of the valley from the inner stronghold. Apparently they were Totem warriors.

“Let’s go!” White Jade’s face fell. Holding a thick rope whose other end was tied to a tree by the cliff, he jumped directly down the mountain. The others also followed him, holding a similar rope. After several breaths, they reached the valley safely, and with a few flashes of their bodies, the four of them had moved to the rear of a building. White Jade made a quick scan of the surroundings and then waved his hand, taking the initiative to storm deeper into the valley,

followed immediately by the other three.

The stronghold had two layers, according to the results of their previous reconnaissance, and it was precisely in the interior layer that the barbarians stored their provisions. Though most of the guards had been attracted to the gate by now, there must still be some of them remaining inside. On their way to the interior part of the stronghold, the four of them smoothed out all of the guards without difficulty, and most of the barbarians even did not have the chance to see clearly their enemies' faces before they got killed. Therefore, the surprise party had little trouble sneaking into the storing area successfully, which was quite out of their expectations.

"There is so much food here…." They were all amazed at what they saw in the storehouses.

In a secluded yard, tens of wooden cylinder buildings loomed in the dark, all stuffed with grains, weapons, and armors. Alongside the houses, some ten tents were set up to help store the surplus grains.

"So many provisions… there's enough for tens of thousands of soldiers. Maybe all the provisions for the barbarians in the Fu province are kept here?" The young Taoist said in amazement.

Hiding on a piece of open ground [TL: you sure you are hiding?] behind a storehouse, Shi Mu looked around apprehensively, an unpropitious idea vaguely on his mind. It unsettled him that the interior of the stronghold was not under heavy guard, and that not a single patrol group could be seen near the storehouses which should be considered of overriding importance. Or could it be that the fighting at the gate had drawn all the guards there?

"Let's not lose time burning these provisions! So we can return with great credit!" The dark-skinned young man from the Wind and Fire sect exclaimed cheerfully, overjoyed by the slack supervision of the place.

"Haha, never thought it so easy to be here. Seems I can get a new sword after returning." The young Taoist agreed with excitement.

"OK, let's do it." White Jade half nodded before he had a last scan of the environment, musing for a while. Shi Mu did not protest, nor echo. Somehow the strange smell of the air prevented him from making any hasty judgments.

“Then just as we have planned, brother Shi sneaks in and works the Fire Cloud charm while we three will support by taking coordinated action. We must burn all the provisions here.” White Jade’s eyes glinted as he took out the charm and passed it to Shi Mu, the way one would throw a bomb to someone else as quickly as possible. Shi Mu stretched out his hand and was just about to take it when he jerked aside, his face contorting in great alarm.

Whiz! Before he knew it a dark shadow had darted past him, seizing the Fire Cloud charm in White Jade’s hand and then disappearing into the darkness like a bolt of lightning, leaving White Jade uttering a heart-rending cry. He jumped back, blood flowing down his right hand from where two of his fingers used to be.

This came as a great shock to Shi Mu and his fellow team members. He stomped on the ground and jumped aside, pulling out his black blade and propped it against his chest. At the opposite the young Taoist and the dark-skinned young man had also prepared their weapons in hand, eyes widely open in panic, ready to fight a fierce enemy.

“Who’s there?” White Jade yelled in agony to the darkness, struggling to suppress his groans.

“Hng, useless pigs! Five hundred crack soldiers and twenty Totem warriors to guard the place and they still let four dirty mice in!” A cold voice rang out in the darkness and out came a black-robed man, strolling at an unhurried pace. On his pale, beardless face was frosty look that could make people shudder, and though he was not as big as your average barbarians, he still stood three meters tall. The pitch back cloak over his shoulders had crow feathers interwoven into the fabric, which glittered under the bright moonlight. But for his fair hair, one might mistake him for an overgrown normal man. A frightened looking towering barbarian was standing beside him. He looked rather wretched and shrinking next to the black-robed man smaller than himself.

All of a suddenly, just as they were getting over their surprise at the sudden appearance of the two barbarians, something hissed and broke forth. From behind the black-robed man, a huge snake head sinuously flowed out, its black-and-grey striped body, which amounted to at least three meters long, was twining around the man’s waist. The snake’s eyes snapped with coldness, and in

its mouth was the Fire and Cloud charm, from which blood was dripping onto the ground.

The black-robed man did not launch an attack, however, and by simply standing motionless on the spot with a supercilious air, he pressed the surprise party with an overwhelming heaviness, a soundless menace that made the young boys gasp for air.

“A Xiantian saint!” Shi Mu ejaculated in great shock.

White Jade and the other two also sensed the devastating strength of the man, and their faces turned pale with fright.

“Fire and Cloud Charm, tsk tsk... The old toads in your union are really generous this time, even giving their grandchildren a middle-level charm as a toy present.” The black-robed barbarian remarked in a deliberately exaggerated tone. But, much to the man’s surprise, just as his voice fell a ball of burning flames suddenly emerged, flying towards the charm in his hand, blowing heated air billows into his face even before the fireball had reached him. But White Jade and the other two members of their team were apparently even more surprised than the black-robed man. Never once had they thought Shi Mu was capable of making such a forcible attack! And by now, Shi Mu had pulled out four or five more red charms, and, with quick flicks of both of his wrists, glaring lights made all of them squint, while four or five flame balls again appeared in the air, but flying in the directions of the storehouse this time.

As soon as the fireballs shoot out, Shi Mu abruptly turned around and, without any hesitation, rushed off into the distance at full speed. This series of lightning moments struck White Jade and the others numb in bewilderment, and when they finally came to themselves, Shi Mu had made it at least a dozen meters.

The black-robed man snorted scornfully, slipping the charm into his coat. His body glowed with a hellish blue, and, before the others knew it, he thrust his fist forward like a bolt of lighting. The Fire and Cloud charm, as a middle-level charm, could be detonated by even the slightest bit of magic power of the fire element, thus unleashing a terrible energy that would even hurt a Xiantian saint within it’s blast radius.

Boom! The man’s fist hit straightly on the flame ball, which was repelled

instantly, dwindling into a puff of smoke and embers that subsequently got lost in the air. But this gave the surprise party some leeway to react, and as if waking up from a drunken sleep the three began to flee in utter confusion.

The black-robed man narrowed his eyes, which were gleaming with malice. Just as he was about to run after them, a series of explosive sounds attracted his attention. The fire \balls sent by Shi Mu had by now set fire on several of the surrounding storehouses on fire, and the destructive power in these fireballs had accelerated the spreading of the fire. The houses mainly contained flammable stuff, which demanded immediate measures to be taken, or every last grain would soon be burnt to ashes. The black-robed man's face twisted in rage, and he had to take care of the fire first. A queer blue light flowed around his body and gained in brightness, and he soon clapped his hands in great anger, producing four or five huge blue shadows around his palms, shooting them toward the burning flames. The man's art was of the ice element, so it could easily quench the fire. Wherever the shadows fell, they would turn into patches of blue fog that reduced the heat dramatically. In an instant, most of the flames had died out. The snake around his waist seemed to be no normal snake either, swooping down on one of the burning storehouses and wildly sweeping the fire away with its tail, physically extinguishing the fire that had just crept up.

"Call our men together to put off the fire, I'll deal with the humans." The black-robed man commanded, throwing the towering barbarian a scathing look. The next moment, he rose straight up from the ground, and, like a fierce eagle, he took off in the direction which Shi Mu had fled in.

Chapter 115 - Fighting the Snake

The big black snake twisted its body, then shot forward like an arrow, following the black-cloaked barbarian at an alarming speed.

At this moment, Shi Mu was making for the opening of the valley at full speed, and a faint layer of blue light surrounded his body. He was using a Body-Lifting charm, with which he flew through the buildings so fast that he left a black line of afterimages. White Jade and the others were surely slower than him, as they did not have the assistance of the charm, and there was an interval of 50 meters between them which kept growing even larger. But Shi Mu's knitted eyebrows did not relax for a second, for he distinctly felt he was being hunted by a venomous killer, going after him at an equally high speed. He began to regret that he had not brought more Fire Ball Charms with him, so that he could have bought more time, leaving the black-cloaked man the trouble of dealing with the fire.

As he fled, barbarian soldiers tried to stop him, but none succeeded, usually they were barely able to see Shi Mu's figure before they lost sight their enemy.

A few minutes afterwards, a black silhouette flew out of the inner base, changing direction in midair before landing on the ground. This was, without a doubt, Shi Mu. He quickly glanced to his left, his eyes flashing. A short distance away should be the cliff that the four of them had crossed, and, unless something had gone wrong, the ropes should still be there, with those ropes, he could climb over the mountain and run away from the valley.

This train of though only took him a fleeting moment, before his body shot in the opposite direction, toward the opening of the valley, instead of the cliff to his left.

After two or three minutes, a succession of air-piercing sounds rang out as three more figures rushed out of the inner base. They were the other three members of the surprise party. The youth with sword and his dark-skinned companion scurried to the cliff anxiously, their faces pale with fright. The way they almost stumbled for their destination resembled someone desperate for a chunk of wood when lost at sea. White Jade halted for a moment, a gleam of

hesitation in his eyes, but then rushed up behind the two, aiming for the cliff with the ropes.

Shortly afterwards, a wind whistled and a figure flashed in the dark. The black-cloaked barbarian had also made it here.

“Wow, so our cute kids have chosen different paths...” He murmured scornfully, having a quick look in either direction, one leading to the opening of the valley and the other toward the cliff.

“Well, go and have your dinner,” He made his decision, pointing at the valley.

The snake understood its master’s words and instantly whizzed past him. The barbarian allowed himself one more minute on the spot, sneering triumphantly to himself. This snake was a heavenly beast he captured in his homeland, and was raised according to the ancient barbarian’s method to cultivate a super-sensitive sense of smell, as well as shocking strength that was not to be underestimated - it was at least as strong as a Houtian warrior of the advanced stage. Thinking this, a sense of fulfillment welled up in his heart, and, amid overflowing indignation, he cursed inwardly, vowing to kill the four human kids who had looked down on his people. His sense of pride made him to move at an even faster speed, pursuing White Jade and the others.

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At the entrance to the valley, more Totem warriors were beginning to join the battle, the condition soon became lopsided. The human warriors who had been feigning the attack were cornered, and the barbarian soldiers seized the chance to assist the Totem warriors, separating the human warriors for them to kill, one by one. Therefore, casualties grew every minute.

In the dense woods at the edge of the valley, Ke Er was holding her jade magic cane and chanting spells, and around her a dozen vine branches suddenly emerged out of the earth, each winding to the opening of the valley with a torch. A sheen of sweat had oozed from her forehead due to the beckoning of so many vines, beads of sweat shimmering as they rolled down to her nose. Color seemed to have been drained from her face.

Just then, a slender figure flashed through the bushes and landed near Ke Er, which turned to be the girl of Tian Yin Sect. She always wore inscrutable

expression on her face.

“Hurry up, let’s withdraw, time’s up!” The inscrutable girl urged loudly.

Ke Er’s expression slightly changed; casting a deep look into the valley. Her eyes glinted hesitatingly. Red lights appeared against the western sky, then soon vanished after a few breaths’ time.

“The barbarians are coming, more of them! There’s no time for you to worry about that guy!” The inscrutable girl pressed in a more high-pitched voice.

Ke Er nodded her head, sensing the edge of exasperation in the girl’s voice. She gave a gentle wave of her cane, and the dancing vines soon disappeared from sight, getting into the earth. After consuming so much of her energy, Ke Er seemed to have reach the limit, her body shuddering, her face as pale as ash. The inscrutable girl frowned resignedly, coming her way as fast as she can, and then supported her with the hand. In a short time both girls began racing to the distance.

Near the entrance to the valley, some seven or eight human warriors were also fleeing in all directions, and the slower ones could only get besieged by barbarian soldiers and Totem warriors, losing their lives one after the other. Many Totem warriors gradually realized that the number of their enemies amounted to, at most, a dozen, and that the troop in the dense woods was no more than a deceptive trick, thus they were extremely angry, howling and cursing in great rage as they chased after the fleeing human warriors. Soldiers in the valley also wielded their weapons to join the chorus, but were scolded by a middle-aged barbarian, who appeared to be their leader,

“The enemy has been vanquished! Leave the rest to the Totem warriors. You stupid pigs just return to the base and count our losses!”

He then threw a scornful look at the valley, and turned about to lead his army back. But just then, a rather short young barbarian soldier clad in beast hide attracted his attention. Against his order, the youth was running against the grain, cutting across the crowd just under his very eyes, undauntedly making his way out of the valley. The middle-aged leader’s face fell. Feeling his authority challenged, he shouted madly, “You, STOP! Which team are you in? Haven’t you heard my order?” He put the accent on the word “order” and almost screamed

at the end.

The youth did not slacken his pace at the least, and continued his trudging through the crowd. The leader's order going unheeded, he stared at the youth and suddenly changed his countenance, "No wait, you are not one of us! You are human!" The leader shouted, pressing his hand on the long blade at his waist.

The youth waved his arm, and a streak of black light shot up from his hand, flying into the middle-aged barbarian's throat like a lightning bolt, irresistible and powerful. Blood gushed out from the wound, and, before he could withdraw his blade, the leader had already dropped dead onto the ground. The young barbarian quickened his pace, and his figure disappeared into the dense bushes after a few quick movements.

The barbarian soldiers were shocked for a moment, struck dumb by the sudden death. Then aroused by a few shouts of their team leaders, the army dashed all the way to the edge of the woods, but all they saw was a blank darkness. Not even a footstep could be heard. The team leaders stood gaping at each other, but then they almost felt their eyes deceiving them as a long black shadow whizzed past them and further into the woods. The army was stupefied, at a loss for words. Looking through the bushes and tree branches, they could see no enemy at all. The world was dead silent.

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The youth who disguised as a barbarian was, without a doubt, Shi Mu. He was born extremely tall, and, with his bronze skin, he made for a somewhat passable barbarian. Right at this moment, he was speeding through the woods, and dared not slow down. Until having made it a good ten miles he halted to catch his breath. Exhaling a long breath, he looked over his shoulder in the valley's direction, his heart still pounding in fear. The sudden appearance of a Xiantian stage barbarian was out of his expectations, and the terrifying strength of one could not be exaggerated. At this moment, he would be crushed like a bug by a Xiantian saint, that was beyond question. After resting for a few seconds, he got up. He would not linger any longer.

But just as he was to hurry on, a strange wind came abruptly from his right flank, and a black shadow shot up from the woods, aiming straight at Shi Mu's

neck. It was the black snake of the black-cloaked Xiantian barbarian!

Shi Mu's body jolted in great shock, and every muscle of his screeched in fright. By reflex he ducked aside, and simultaneously raised his arm to punch at the snake.

Peng! A hard voice rang out, and it turned that Shi Mu had hit the snake's jaw. It was struck down to the ground, its body wrenching, and the next moment the snake turned its head back to bite at Shi Mu's hand. Shi Mu could not be more appalled. His strike was one of the Stone-Breaking Fist at its consummate stage, and how could that fail in giving the snake even a slight injure? When he hit it, all he felt was the roughness of its skin. But he did not have much time to stand still in shock. The snake's fangs had neared his hand, and he had to stomp hard on the ground to shoot his body backward. Fortunately, the effect of the Body-Lifting Charm was still on him, and he was able to move at a speed equal to that of the black snake's.

Having missed its target twice, the snake's narrow eyes flared, and it hissed viciously, its red tongue swaying wildly. It temporarily halted for a rest. Shi Mu pulled out his black blade swiftly, holding it at his front, his face grave and determined, his eyes confronting the snake's.

But while his face looked extremely composed his belly was full of anxiety. He kept looking from side to side, wondering if the black-cloaked man had also come with his snake. But the silence and normal air proved that the snake had come alone. It seemed that the black-cloaked man had chosen the other way, hunting White Jade instead. Shi Mu heaved a sigh of relief.

But the black snake proved to have less patience than Shi Mu, as he stood lost in thought, and its thick body, which looked just like a withered branch, sprang up from the earth, breaking the subtle peace the two of them had maintained for a while. Like an arrow, it pounced on its target, at a speed faster than before. At the same time, its head jolted, and duplicated many confusing images. But Shi Mu was not in the slightest aware of the snake's painstaking trick, his eyes glittering gold. With a yell, his black blade chopped at one of the images of the snake's head.

This produced a dull sound, and the snake's body was pushed back. It

managed to raise its head after rolling on the ground for a few meters, and, with an effort, it managed to get up. The only sign of damage was a bleeding scale. The snake shook its head violently, its eyes somewhat hazy and stupid, which suggested a concussion and possible loss of some consciousness.

Shi Mu's eyes, however, were not stupid. Instead they dilated in amazement. He could not be more sure of the sharpness of his blade, and now his one all-out strike could only cause a concussion!

How on Earth was the snake's body so hard?

Shi Mu felt faintly dizzy. He began to wonder if he was the one who had gotten a concussion.

But his movements were not dull. Before he knew it, he had dashed to the snake. Meanwhile the magic characters on the blade had lit up, and a layer of bright flame had formed around the blade's surface. He shook it once, and thirteen red shadows rolled out in an instant.

The snake had by now regained its full consciousness, but it was not given enough time to dodge the attack. It twisted its body while moving back, and its huge tail simultaneously swung, piercing the air and whipping the red shadows.

Another dull sound resounded. The shadows were dispersed, but the snake was knocked into the air again, thumping against a big tree several meters away.

Chapter 116 - Meeting After Long Separation

The snake fell onto the ground with a thud. It had some black burns on the its tail and a lot of broken scales. Unfortunately, rather than sapping it's strength, searing pain seemed to have only encouraged its fierceness. It hissed as it opened its fierce mouth, its body twining around a tree, ready to launch a counter-blow.

At that time, green light appeared near the tree, and some wide vines rapidly broke out from the earth. They wound tightly around the body of the snake, precluding any of its movements. The snake seemed quite alarmed, giving off a frightened expression, like a human's, and in it's desperation, it wriggled with great force to try and break the vines. Many had cracked, and it seemed that the remaining vines would not hold much longer.

"Brother Shi, do it now!" A clear shout came from the thick bushes, and Shi Mu could not be more acquainted with voice - it was Ke Er's. Shi Mu sprang up and in no time had approached the black snake. He wielded his blade and the burning weapon suddenly became blurred, again spouting thirteen beams of red light. He gave a low shout, and the beams gathered into one wide streak of red light, rapidly cutting at the vital organs of the snake, like a lightning bolt.

The tree that the black snake was wound around snapped in half, falling onto the ground heavily, the a burnt cut seared into it. The body of the snake was also cut in half, each half twisting and turning on the ground. It did not rest in peace until after quivering vehemently for some time.

Shi Mu exhaled a long breath. The snake being unreasonably solid and quick, without the fire of the black blade to cut through it, and Ke Er's timely help, he would have gone through a bitter fight. But just as he was secretly celebrating his escape, a clear crack disturbed him. The heavenly fire stone embedded on his blade had just broken.

Shi Mu frowned, sighing with a heartache. He had increased the power of his last cut by fully harnessing the energy of the stone, and now he had finally exhausted the spirit power in the stone. Unfortunately, he had no fire stone to replenish the blade, however, the fierce enemy had already been killed.

He put the black blade back to its sheath and looked expectantly at the thick forest nearby. Two slim figures emerged side by side, which were none other than Ke Er and the inscrutable girl of the Tianyin Sect.

“Thanks to sister Ke for her assistance.” Shi Mu cupped his hands to Ke Er and nodded to the girl of Tianyin Sect in greeting.

“Brother Shi, I know you will be safe. Well, what about the provisions in the stronghold?” Though a little pale, Ke Er’s face wore a cheerful expression.

“Don’t mention the mission. We’d never thought there was a Xiantian barbarian guarding the place, and we were all in a hurry to flee, having no time to attend the mission at all.” Shi Mu forced a smile and explained.

“A Xiantian warrior!” Ke Er and the inscrutable girl both changed their look with a jolt.

“Maybe there was something wrong with the information from the union. The black snake is just a monster the man keeps.” Shi Mu sighed softly and said.

“And what about the others? Had they….” Ke Er was shocked.

“We had set apart to run away. I don’t know if they can escape, but I think there is little chance.” Shi Mu shook his head and answered.

Ke Er looked dejected as she heard these disheartening words.

“If the black snake was a monster kept by the barbarian warrior, we must leave here right now!” The girl from Tianyin Sect suddenly suggested in a quavering voice.

“Sister Qi, is there any danger?” Ke Er was taken aback again. Shi Mu also looked at the girl trying to figure out her suggestion.

“I’ve heard from my mentor about how the barbarians keep their monsters. There seems to be some connection between monsters and their owners. If the monster dies, its owner will know it, even if he is a hundred kilometers away. Therefore he may soon arrive here!” The girl explained seriously.

“Then what are we waiting for, let’s leave here now!” Ke Er turned pale as she was made aware of the condition.

Shi Mu and the girl named Qi apparently could not agree more. But a

murderous air burst forth from the thick forest just as they were about to leave. Shi Mu turned around as fast as he could, and rapidly drew his blade, putting it in front of his chest. Ke Er and the other girl also readied themselves for the incoming enemy, however scared they were, one raising her magic cane and the other drawing a thin sword.

A shadow flashed across the air all of a sudden, and in no time a man in black had showed his presence in front of the three disciples, with something like a blue head in his hand. Shi Mu stole a glance and felt his heart in his mouth. The thing in his hand was precisely the head of White Jade, frozen by some blue ice while still retaining the terrified face on it, reluctant to accept his doom. The eyes were still widely opened, but had lost every last trace of luster.

The two girls' faces turned ghastly pale once they saw clearly the head. At the same time, the man in black also moaned his pet's death in distress, clenching his fists as he saw the body, which was now cut into halves.

Peng! As a clear sound came, White Jade's head and the ice around it broke into pieces which then scattered onto the ground.

"Well, I never thought I could have misjudged you. You've killed my pet, so you should just die together with it!" The man glared at Shi Mu and cursed.

Shi Mu felt as if he was being stared at by a venomous snake, and a shudder went through his spine. But he soon activated the Art of the Heavenly Elephant and the unease faded away. Unhesitatingly, he whispered to the two girls, "Run, right now!"

Ke Er hesitated for a while but the girl name Qi rapidly grabbed her arm and rushed away.

"Don't dream of escaping now, all of you will die today for killing my pet!" The man laughed wildly, and there was dark blue light screen shining around his body. He raised one hand and instantly a great deal of real Qi of the Xiantian level formed a big blue palm and sent it toward them.

The air around the three suddenly grew thick and sticky, a formidable force rolling onto them, like a mountain collapsing, pressing in on them. Shi Mu just felt all his blood burning and bubbling as those flew back into his heart, and his own Qi proved too weak to stand a single blow in front of such a force that could

topple the mountains and overturn the seas. In desperation he activated the real Qi in his body to the limit and his body expanded twofold to instill all his magic power to his black blade.

The black blade soon was burning with a flame half a meter high. Shi Mu shouted with his eyes widely opened and then sent a burning cut at the incoming big palm in midair.

Boom! A great noise reverberated in the woods. The flames above the black blade were all dispersed, and Shi Mu spit blood as his body was sent flying several meters before he finally recovered his balance. Though Shi Mu had managed to take the strike, albeit with much difficulty, Ke Er and the other girl were not able to protect themselves and were thus struck into the air, falling dozens of meters away and losing consciousness.

The corners of Shi Mu's eyes twitched in pain as he saw the scene, but his body did not move.

"You are quite smart, being able to bear one strike of mine."The man in black seemed quite amazed, but he soon recovered, sneering, and lost no time in making a second attack.

Shi Mu gritted his teeth, a fierce look flashing across his eyes. Fumbling with one hand at his back, he threw out one cut without warning. A silver light shot up into the air, flying while revolving toward the blue palm. Taking the chance, Shi Mu rolled aside to the trees near him.

The man in black frowned as he saw what Shi Mu did, but the silver light had hit the palm head-on. With an ear-deafening noise, the silver blade turned into a shining purple light, blowing up like a small burning sun. Meanwhile, a wave of scorching flames spread out, engulfing the blue palm in no time.

A great force of heated air soon spread out and forced the man to step back. As dust was sent flying, the man found one of his arms to be slightly burnt. The explosion of the silver blade could equal one powerful strike of a Xiantian saint! This both shocked and enraged the man, and he shouted and took out a pair of blue gloves with a flash of red light. He punched heavily at Shi Mu, and the strike, which seemed to be solid, was so rapid that Shi Mu hardly had time to defend himself. His countenance changed greatly, and had only time to put his black

blade in front of his chest.

The blue fist hit heavily on his body and Shi Mu felt like he had been struck by a thunderbolt, as his body was knocked through the air, like a leaf. His body thumped against the trees and did not fall onto the ground until after breaking several big tree's trunks.

Wriggling on the ground, he spit out blood, feeling that his bones might have all been broken. If he was not so physically strong he may have been already dead. But he was now no different from a dead man as all his sinews had been broken and he could hardly move for a while.

As a shadow whizzed forward to stand in front of him, the man in black appeared without making a sound. He looked more brutal at the moment, raising his one fist again. Shi Mu smiled bitterly to himself and closed his eyes, resigning himself to his fate, dreaming of a sweet death. But at just the same time, something broke through the air, stopping his mind's travels. An ice flower suddenly appeared above the man's head, descending while revolving. The man was profoundly shocked and pointed at the ground with one foot to move several meters away like a startled big bird.

"Who is there?" He cast scathing looks in all direction, searching anxiously for the newcomer. But no one replied, except that the ice flower kept glistening in the air without a pause, and ice crystals emerged one by one, shooting to the black-cloaked men like arrows that knew their target.

The man's face twisted in alarm, and blue light shone even more brightly than ever all over his body. He raised one hand and a blue palm darted toward the ice flowers.

As the sound of the clash rang out, two light balls, of blue and white respectively, stroke each other amid an icy wind that could cut one to the bone, and which dressed the trees nearby with a layer of frost. The man in black gave a muffled snort, and reluctantly stepped back.

Shi Mu, who had been lying on the ground, was shocked to his very marrow as he saw the white ice flowers, and a strong yearning came over him, like a tidal wave that denied any struggle. Suppressing the excruciating pain all over his body, he managed to raise his head.

The leaves rustled, and out came a girl who looked like a nymph, dressed in white, and barefooted, taking slow and graceful steps. Her beautiful eyes glittered and in her slim hand was a short jade ruler. As she took each step, puffs of mist floated around her body.

Shi Mu was suddenly dumbfounded and frozen to the spot. His eyes were riveted on the barefooted girl and could not be moved away by any force under the heavens.

Chapter 117 - Between Xiantian Saints

This beautiful girl was the Devil Witch of Tianyin, whom Shi Mu had lost his heart to at first sight. An interval of several years between their two encounters, there had not been one day passed that Shi Mu did not miss her bitterly. Different from Ke Er, whom he felt he could talk to and share a warm friendship in the hardships of war, this nymphish girl made his chest ache. She just dropped from the clouds again this time, showing herself before his very eyes, like an unworldly dream, making his heart beat as wildly as could be imagined.

“The Ice Ruler! No, wait, it’s only an imitation!” The ruler in the girl’s hand struck the black-cloaked man’s eyes, his face contorted in terror. But a second glance eased him much; he exclaimed triumphantly, shaking his head.

“If I haven’t come to the wrong person, you should be Zong Yuan of the barbarian’s Cold Moon tribe.” The Devil With of Tianyin cast him a frosty look, her lips curling up in a scornful smile.

“That’s right, I am Zong Yuan. So who are you, hussy? What’s your business with me, with that imitation?” He gave an arrogant sneer.

The girl giggled, showing not the slightest intention of answering him, while her eyes swept over Shi Mu, who was not far off, and then she gave a gentle wave of her hand and white cloud floated towards them from the woods, sleeping on it was a girl in white, who was exactly the girl named Qi.

“So, that was your doing?” The Devil Witch asked in a casual voice, cocking her head, as if taking the matter lightly. The girl named Qi was evidently in a coma at this moment, her mouth smudged with blood, and her face was deathly pale.

“So what?” Zong Yuan did not beat around the bush but admitted frankly, with even a slight hint of proudness in his voice.

The stunning girl opposite him giggled again. Suddenly, the smile vanished from her jade-like face, though her melodious laughter was still drifting in the air, a murderous hatred had also filled that very air. The next moment, her wrist flicked, and the glow of the Ice Ruler in her hand grew much brighter. An overwhelming coldness filled the air.

Then came a series of air-piercing noises. A dozen white ice sticks appeared without warning, darting towards Zong Yuan, and they had neared him in a blink of an eye. The barbarian Xiantian saint smiled, full of contempt, and simultaneously struck at the ice sticks with his palm. The glove he was wearing immediately gave a stronger blue light, and a huge image of his palm appeared in mid air, crushing the ice sticks to crumbs. But before he took back his hand, the shrill sounds rang out again, accompanied by another bombard of ice sticks. At the same time, the Ice Ruler twinkled unceasingly, shooting out more ice sticks coming Zong Yuan's way, who swept the sticks away with his fist and feet easily. Such an attack came in several rounds during the following time, leaving Zong Yuan barely enough time for a respite, but equally causing him no harm at all.

Then, bored by the humdrum attack, Zong Yuan complained impatiently, "Humph, bitch, I'd pay you more attention if that ruler was the real one. Don't expect me to be afraid of a mere imitation!"

The final round of the ice sticks had come to an end, and the Ice ruler had, at some unknown time, left the Devil Witch's hand, and was now hovering above her head. She totally ignored her enemy's words, and started to bend her fingers, striking an odd posture.

"Ice Soul, go!"

Suddenly, the ringing sounds of ice breaking all over the ground threw Zong Yuan into utter confusion, and large patches of white fog formed from the ice crumbs on the ground, gradually wrapping the hopeless man up, forming a globe of fog. The man's face paled, and he desperately stomped, trying to bolt out of the globe. But it appeared that, no matter how he tried to evade it, the fog just would not let him go, enveloping him obstinately. His attacks ended completely in vain, and each strike would disappear into thin air after penetrating the fog.

"Real Qi turning into spirits? How is that possible!" Zong Yuan shouted in despair, though he still refused to believe what he had seen.

"Ice Dungeon!" The Devil Witch called out, as if taking no notice of the black-robed man's struggle. Her fingers kept changing postures to launch the attacks, and finally she clasped her hands, and that was when the final move came.

With a loud cracking sound, the white fog surrounding the man froze

immediately, turning into thousands of white round crystals that together sealed the man in the globe. the black-robed man was inside was struggling with his limbs, like a fly trapped in amber.

The girl relaxed, her eyelids drooping, a sheen of sweat gleaming on her nose. Evidently, applying this secret art had consumed a great deal of her strength. As for Shi Mu, who had been lying crippled, unable to move an inch, he was completely amazed, hardly able to close his mouth (TL: not drooling). His thoughts and emotions in a total turmoil. For one thing, with his current cultivation, most of the battle had been a blur to him, but he had by now gained a clear-cut impression of how fights between Xiantian saints went, which would benefit him tremendously in his training afterwards. But for another, watching his beloved girl fighting had made his chest heave in pain. And now looking at her bare feet, he could not move his eyes away. The oath he had made years before still rang in his heart, and years later, he would still pay his life to realize it.

The first time they met, “the Devil Witch of Tianyin” was a name unheard, a fair maiden from heaven. Whereas he himself, a nameless youth, creeping on the earth. The distance between them looked so insurmountable. Now that they had met the second time, the girl’s position in his heart had not changed for the slightest, and she remained that heavenly maiden beyond reach. But the distance had shortened. He felt he could look at her in a way that was more intimate, and the gleam of her hair was less far off. Being a Houtian warrior of the middle stage, he had made much progress, nearer to the goal set by her that he should reach Xiantian level before turning thirty.

“How dare you look at me in that way! If you don’t stop I will gouge your eyes out!” Feeling the intent looks at her back, the Devil Witch turned around, warning with a cold face.

“You said that last time too. But it took me so many years and so much hardship to see you again, so even if you’d gouge my eyes out, I’ll still be beholding you for the rest of my life.” Struggling to prop himself against a tree, Shi Mu’s face creased into a smile that was not as embarrassed as his usual ones, but one involuntarily conveying warm indulgence that one would treat a beloved child with. But his talking and movement had reawakened the wounds all over his body, and they now gushed trickles of blood. Blood trickled from his mouth

as well.

“You are...” Hearing the words, the girl’s face softened, a trace of doubt creeping around her lips. She gave a close look at Shi Mu again, knitting her delicate eyebrows.

“So you’ve forgotten me, haven’t you? My name is Shi Mu. Back then, in the woods out of Feng City, in the Heavenly Qi Country, I made the vow to marry you!” Shi Mu was, by now, sitting in a pool of blood, but the smile on his face remained.

The Devil Witch’s body jerked, her countenance changed. “It’s you!”

“Yes. So you’ve finally remembered. Every day these past few years, the words you said that day have been ringing in my ears. “Shi Mu’s face lit up, and his eyes glinted affectionately.

“So you are in the union now? One of the sects’ disciple?” The Devil Witch bit her lips in surprise.

“Shi Mu is now an official disciple of the Black Demon Sect, and though his cultivation still falls far behind you, he’s reached the middle stage of Houtian level, and not far from being a Xiantian warrior...Also, he’s passed the appraisal test for Adepts and has registered as an Adept scholar. He’s doing really well in magic. All in all, He’ll absolutely reach Xiantian level before thirty, by when he’ll set out for Wanlong Mountain and propose to you! He promises!” Shi Mu thought loudly, speaking to her in a blissful mood, though due to excessive loss of blood, his face now looked like that of a dead man’s.

Facing a most queer and bold guy, the Devil Witch was struck speechless. For a good while she stood dumb on the same spot, her sensual mouth slightly ajar out of shock. All the time Shi Mu rested his eyes on her beautiful face, reluctant to move them for a second, for fear that he would lose sight of her again. Who knows when will the next meeting be?

“Sh...Shut up! Say those nonsense to anyone else but me!” The girl was made nonplussed, stammering in embarrassment, blushing: a sight that only added to her an irresistible loveliness! Shi Mu gazed at this Devil Witch in her shy moment, and could not help but smiling more softly, his heart melting. He wanted to pick himself up, but failed, almost falling flat on the earth with his face down. Every

piece of his bone was broken.

But just as he was to reach the ground, a cloud emerged, supporting him.

“Are you all right?” The slender figure flashed to his side, and the Devil Witch asked with some concern.

“Are you worrying about me? I...I’m so glad...” But before he finished his words, a fit of violent cough came over him, and blood gushed out from his mouth.

“Shut your mouth, and..your eyes too. You are not allowed to look at me. “ The Devil Witch said, her voice soft but commanding.

Shi Mu obeyed with a contented smile.

A cold, soft hand pressed on his chest, followed by an equally cold real qi, which entered and circulated quickly in his body before slowly seeping into his veins. Shi Mu’s muscles relaxed, the gnawing pain which had made them tighten retiring bit by bit.

“You’ve been injured by the palm and all your sinews and bones are broken. It won’t be easy to make a full recovery.” Removing her hand, the Devil Witch’s voice returned to its normal calmness.

“Is there not any hope?” Shi Mu opened his eyes and sank into a brooding melancholy.

“There is a way, but it will be torturous. If you don’t have guts, you will lose your life, not to mention your bones.” She answered, a gleam in her eyes, not without a hint of encouragement.

“I have to do it. I’ll definitely make it. I still have a long way to go... a girl to marry...”

The Devil Witch blushed, hearing the bold words, and gave Shi Mu an angry stare. Shi Mu returned a wry smile, stopping halfway. He looked over the girl’s shoulder at the ice globe, reminded her, gently but forcibly, “Setting aside my issue, you’d better make sure this barbarian Xiantian saint has been killed. I just saw some blue light on his body.”

“What?!” The girl’s color changed, and hastily she turned back.

Just then, the black-robed barbarian in the globe suddenly glowed with bright blue lights, and in front of his body floated a blue image of a tiger's face. He opened his mouth shouting something, but the voice was muffled by the ice. Shi Mu and the girl could only see blue rings rippling out in all directions, and in a minute the ice globe had broken with numerous cracks!

Peng! The black-robed man collapsed onto the earth with a terribly pale face. He quickly struggled to his feet while casting the Devil Witch a fearful glance, and then stretched his arms, darting to the distance like a mighty black eagle. The girl aimed for a blow, the Ice Rule in her hand brightening. But the tiger image over the man's shoulder suddenly opened its mouth to spout a blue light column that shot towards her like lightning. The Devil Witch jumped aside alertly, and simultaneously waved the ruler. A white light glittered, forming a wall of ice in front of her shielding the blow away. With a crack the ice wall crumbled, and the blue light column also disappeared, along with it the black-robed man's figure. The Devil Witch raised a sardonic brow, not in the mood of pursuing him any longer.

TL: This chapter is REALLY romantic. I'd like to try a romantic novel next time, haha. (Would you like to try with me, Eli our brilliant editor?) But I love it! DO you, dear readers?

The following chapters are gonna be more interesting, and our hero's romantic relationship is gonna be REALLY complex... Don't forget the other heroine, Zhong Xiu! She's going to play an important role. I'm sure you'll waver between .....(or among...?) Can't wait to translate more for you! (P.S. Can't believe Shi Mu is capable of falling in love. That's cute:)

ED: (I would be interested, but we still have a few years left on this project… also, should we really be talking in the chapter?) To make this note an actual note: Devil Witch of Tianyin went Tsundere mode… :(

Chapter 118 - In the Cave

“Was that the mysterious Totem magic of the barbarians? It was so powerful to have broken your ice ball.” Shi Mu glanced at the Devil Witch of Tianyin in an attempt to figure out her mood.

“It was my fault. Zong Yuan had, unexpectedly, absorbed the soul of a Thunder Tiger.” She stamped her delicate bare foot, and her tightly knit eyebrows suggested a reluctance to resign herself to defeat.

“It was purely by luck that he could escape, don’t let it bother you. If you really mind this, I can get revenge for you.” Shi Mu blinked, a gleam in his eyes, trying to smile away his beloved girl’s irritation.

“I wonder if you are really ignorant or just too full of yourself. You know nothing about the difficulty of upgrading to Xiantian stage. Do you know that, even among Xiantian saints, Zong Yuan is considered to be a very strong one and you will not be a match for him even if you can upgrade by good luck. Cherish this life I have saved!” The Devil Witch of Tianyin could not help but feel both angry and amused. Laughing heartily, she found her tone had softened involuntarily.

“I will do as promised.” Shi Mu said solemnly, to her surprise.

“Humph! You? A man that can not even stand up on his feet! Where does that boldness in you come from, bragging about avenging me. You are such a idiot!” The Devil Witch of Tianyin snorted and waved her jade ruler, not moved by the serious vow at all - at least, that was what her face said. Immediately the two patches of white cloud that supported Shi Mu and the girl named Qi rose, floating in midair, ready to take departure.

“Wait. Sister Ke is still left untended. She was injured by Zong Yuan too, and I’m concerned about her condition now. Could you find her and take her with us?” Shi Me’s voice resounded with a touch of worry, prompted by the sudden thought of Ke Er.

“Ke Er….” The Devil Witch of Tianyin frowned, her long eyelashes drooping, casting a shadow on her eyes. Her voice was full of doubt.

“There’s nothing special between the two of us. We have just been assigned to the same stronghold. She was an Adept of wood element from the Etherial Phoenix Sect and has helped me several times.” Shi Mu’s heart leaped into his throat, and he hastily explained.

“Humph! You don’t have to explain it to me. The girl has a defensive treasure with her and has resisted most of the attack so she was not badly wounded. She is awake now.” The Devil Witch of Tianyin blushed slightly and scolded Shi Mu coldly, turning her eyes away.

Shi Mu was stupefied at first, being quite at a loss. But he turned aside as well, following the Devil Witch’s sight. From behind a tree, he saw Ke Er stagger out, pale, with bloodstains on her lips. She was pleasantly surprised as she saw Shi Mu was safe.

“I am so happy to see brother Shi is Ok.”She said brightly to Shi Mu at first, much relieved; then turning her face, she greeted the Devil Witch of Tianyin reverently, bowing deeply, “It’s my honor to see you here, Saint.”

The Devil Witch of Tianyin looked at Ke Er for a brief moment, a gleam of suspicion in her eyes. But she did not make any remark, and only gave a casual wave of the jade ruler to produce another patch of cloud to lift Ke Er into the air, too. After a moment of silence, she spoke in an authoritative voice,

“It’s not safe here. Let’s move and I will find somewhere to cure you.”

The Devil Witch of Tianyin then floated upwards and sit beside Shi Mu, sharing the same cloud, and raised her fair hand once again. Instantly, the three patches of cloud moved, flying towards some distant place amid air-rending sounds.

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They flew for more than two good hours before they landed on a huge mountain peak. The Devil Witch of Tianyin settled them in a natural cave there and began to heal the girl named Qi first. She had the slightest wounds, and the Devil Witch fed her a pill before massaging her body to activated her blood for a while. Without much difficulty, her breath became regular again, and color returned to her cheeks, though her eyes were still firmly shut, showing no sign of waking up.

All the while Shi Mu lay on the ground, a contented smile around his lips, looking at the Devil Witch busy herself in front of him. Before they came here, all his external injuries had been cured by her as easily as picking up a leaf from the ground, and, thanks to this, he was not bleeding any more.

Ke Er sat beside them, propping herself against the stone wall, eyes shut. Her body was twinkling green. Apparently she was also using spells to cure herself.

Just then, the Devil Witch of Tianyin stood up and stepped up to Shi Mu.

“You have just had a fierce battle, and carried us for a long time. It must have cost you much real Qi, so just have a rest and don’t worry about me. I won’t die if you take a short rest.” Shi Mu stopped her as he saw her pale face.

“I’m OK. It doesn’t take my real Qi to heal you.” The Devil Witch of Tianyin replied, waving the topic off. Without further words, she beckoned another cloud to lift Shi Mu into the air. Red light glittered in her hand and a short red stick appeared.She stooped down and began to draw on the ground. Judging from her skillful movements, she was quite versed in formulas too. With a flick of her wrist, a dark red character was completed on the ground. The thought that she could also draw a formula had never crossed his mind. It was not that he did not believe in her abilities. It was just that he simply had not imagined this scene, which was, at the moment, taking place right before his eyes as, and he simply felt breathless.

It was just amazing that she was so proficient in drawing formulas! In a quarter of an hour, she had finished quite a complex one!

When Shi Mu was still lost in amazement, the Devil Witch waved her hand and Shi Mu found himself sitting in the middle of the formula the next second. A beam of red light shot up from her hand and then disappeared into the formula on the ground, which then rapidly began to work, forming a red light column that enveloped Shi Mu. Quickly, he felt a warmness well up inside his body, and was much comforted, as some Qi contained by the red light seeped into his body.

“All your bones have been broken, so you have to recombine them and rebuild your veins and sinews.” Telling him this, she pulled out a red jade case, which contained a red, half-transparent pill the size of a pigeon egg. The pill was full of

red light that floated around it, like wisps of mist, through which the faint image of a ferocious tiger could be seen in the pill, giving out strong magic power that spread into the air.

“The Pill of Black Blood” Ke Er opened her eyes in astonishment, crying with her hands on her mouth.

“This little girl does, indeed, have quite a bit of knowledge. Yes, this is the Pill of Black Blood, with refined blood of a Blood Wind Tiger sealed inside,” The Devil Witch of Tianyin glanced at Ke Er, then turned her face to Shi Mu, warning him, “If you can bear the pain and contain the black blood in your veins, you can then rebuild your body. Also, the Qi of fire inside the pill will also be stored in your body and you will benefit a lot in future cultivation.” Thus she spoke of danger without any expression on her face, but Shi Mu was still moved, studying the pill in the jade box closely. Judging from Ke Er’s reaction, he reckoned that it must be very precious,which proved the Devil Witch’s concern for him. “So she does care about me, doesn’t she?”

Shi Mu was over the moon now, secretly savoring this sudden happiness. Decisively, he took a deep breath and said, ”No need to worry, no matter how painful it is I will bear it to the end.”

The Devil Witch giggled when she heard this, and this sound was like a lotus flower blossoming on an icy river. Her laughter was music to his ears, and could simply sweep him off his feet. For a moment, he was lost, and the environment faded. It seemed that he did not care about anything else now.

By now, Ke Er had, at last, realized that there was something unusual going on between Shi Mu and the Devil Witch of Tianyin. She was struck stupefied for a moment, her face clouded with amazement.

“The Formula of Reincarnation can reduce your pain a bit.” The Devil Witch of Tianyin smiled and, before Shi Mu knew it, she was back to her icy cold self again. She stepped outside the formula as soon as she finished speaking.

Shi Mu nodded, and took a deep breath. The Devil Witch raised her hand and the pill in the jade case flew into Shi Mu’s mouth. Instantly, his face began contorting with pain, and he downed the pill with much effort, feeling the aftertaste lingering in his mouth. The pill was as hot as a piece of burning

charcoal, and, for a brief moment, he slipped into unconsciousness. It went down his throat and into his stomach, feeling like a burning fire ball, spreading hot waves of flame inside his body. “That was too much,” he thought to himself as color receded from his face and beads of sweat slid down his forehead. Blue veins protruded on his skin. Even so, he clenched his teeth as hard as he could, without letting out a tiny groan.

The Devil Witch of Tianyin glanced at him and opened her rosy lips, chanting incantations with a clear voice while waving her fair hands in the air. The formula soon shone brightly with red light, which came to his body and twined around it like silk. Though it was not much, Shi Mu felt the pain lessening a little bit. He trembled, gasping, but the pill in his abdomen had already turned into flames, the red light could even be seen from the outside. The pain soon grew more fierce and transferred to every patch of his body, his blood and flesh felt like it was burning and being cut with countless sharp knives over and over again, torturing him to death.

“Hold your mind and don’t let yourself loose, otherwise you’ll fail!” The voice of the Devil Witch rang out beside his ears, like a cool spring reaching out to a hot, dry desert.

Shi Mu tried hard to suppress the physical pain, and simultaneously worked the Art of Accumulating Spirit Power to protect his soul. The pain in his body kept disquieting his soul one round after another, but under the guidance of the Art of Accumulating Spirit Power his mind gradually regained its steadiness. The hot wave in his abdomen circulated all over his body and through his veins, but as the heat ran over every bone, he could felt distinctly a tendency of his broken bones recombining. Shi Mu was quite elated, and began to focus more on the Art of Accumulating Spirit Power.

The Devil Witch frowned in surprise, her eyes dilating. Then she chanted more incantations and pointed a finger at Shi Mu. The formula seemed to burst as more red light came out to wind around Shi Mu until it finally formed a red cocoon-like thing that wrapped him up, seeming to move like a breathing human chest. The sight seemed to have settled the Devil Witch down, and she stood still, gazing at the blood-red cocoon, lost in thought.

Time crept by and, before they knew it, the sky had gradually turned bright.

Inside the cave, the Devil Witch sat motionless with her legs crossed, still staring at the blood cocoon. The girl named Qi and kE Er had both already gotten up, standing next to each other and watching the Devil Witch of Tianyin.

The Formula of Reincarnation was still at work, buzzing while emitting a faint red light from its surface. All of a sudden, the Devil Witch stirred, and ran her eyes over the cocoon for several times. At last she nodded and murmured to herself some incantations.

The formula soon stopped working and the red light on the ground gradually died away, but the red light on the blood cocoon had not faded at all.

“Saint, how is Brother Shi now?” Ke Er hesitated for a second before she got the courage to speak.

He had his bones and veins rebuilt after suffering the pain of the pill, but he still needs to rest for a couple of days to recuperate.” The Devil Witch of Tianyin turned to Ke Er and said, her bright eyes reflecting light.

Ke Er finally let out a long breath after hearing that Shi Mu was safe.

Chapter 119 - The Arrow of Fire

“That’s all I can do for now. I’m afraid I can’t stay here long. I’ll leave him to you girls.” The Devil Witch rose to her bare feet, titling her head for some last words.

“Yes, Saint.” The girl named Qi answered obediently, but Ke Er stirred with surprise at the Devil Witch’s sudden withdrawl.

“Your stronghold is no more, smashed by the barbarians in the Great Purge. There’s no need to go back,” the leaving Devil Witch paused, thinking for a moment and then fished out a jade slip to pass them, “Here. The map can help you know the terrain of this area. Go and find the union’s stronghold fifty miles away from this mountain. Wait till he fully recovers before you check in there.“

The two girls nodded briskly. However, just as the girl named Qi was about to take the slip, the Devil Witch suddenly twisted her stretched hand’s direction, passing it to Ke Er instead. Gravely she suggested to the former, “Xuan Er, you are the only student Lan Yun[A] ever had. Why not return to our sect with me? The old guys of the union won’t stop you if you are with me. They dare not.”

“Thank you, Saint, for doing so much for me.” The girl named Qi lowered her head, her eyes holding a small bit of sorrow as the memories of her deceased master were evoked once again. She sank into a brief silence, then shook her head, going on in a determined tone, “But our sect’s disciples never breach the union’s orders, so I’m not in the position to leave them in battlefield. Moreover, master once said that real fighting and danger are the only thing that could help one break through.”

The girl’s resolute voice reached her heart, and the Devil Witch sighed softly without persisting. “Then do take good care of yourself. Don’t make me worry if next time I can’t pull you out of danger,” added the Devil Witch. This said, she turned to have a last glance at the blood-red cocoon, halting momentarily, then took her leave with another sigh. A cloud floated her out of the cave and into the far distance, disappearing from the girls’ sight. Meanwhile Ke Er watched the receding figure, seeing it half-covered by wisps of clear clouds and her bright eyes were filled with melancholy. There was a feeling of loss in her heart, mixed

with a grain of envy.

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Two days had passed since the Devil Witch left. Shi Mu was still in a recuperative rest, his eyes closed, unaware of the outside events, nor the passage of time. The wounds all over his body had been cured and the broken bones and sinews had miraculously been restored. His appearance changed little, except that the color of his skin had deepened. As he was working the Art of the Heavenly Elephant in his mind, the two girls sat by him, watching quietly. Shi Mu could feel his real qi surging like tidal waves inside his body, his muscles protruding at the force so evidently that his clothes were bulging, and nigh-invisibly small whirlwinds circled around him.

After what seemed an eternity, he breathed out, opened his eyes, and his face radiated with contentment. By now, the heavenly energy of the Black Blood Pill had completely been absorbed, and he had not only a full recovery, but also gained a much strengthened supply of real qi, preparing him for upgrading to the fifth level of the Art of the Heavenly Elephant afterwards.

But the absence of the Devil Witch left his heart aching and empty. He sniffed the cold air for some time, as if making a decision, or just allowing himself one minute to get lost in the remnants of the Devil Witch's scent. At last he shook his head and stood up, clasping his hands solemnly to the two girls and said, "Shi Mu is really grateful for your company. Now Let's get out of here." His words met no disagreement, and the three of them left the cave shortly afterwards.

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One month later, deep in thick woods.

With the black blade in hand, Shi Mu was confronting a barbarian of similar height to himself, his eyes snapping coldly. The opponent was, without doubt, on the smaller side among his kin, but on his bare chest was a tattoo of a blue wolf howling under the full moon, its neck strained skyward. Not far at his back stood another Totem warrior, stooping over them like a giant, and the golden earrings he wore glittered now and then. The two barbarians thus constituted a position ready for a converging attack.

Actually, half a day before, Shi Mu slipped into a barbarian camp on the border

of Fu Zhou City, and the mission went smoothly until the last minute, when he was about to leave. These two Totem warriors approached without warning, blocking Shi Mu's way. The camp lay just next to this forest, which meant that the longer Shi Mu was delayed by these two enemies, the more perilous his situation would be.

Coming to the conclusion, Shi Mu's eyes flared, and his figure flashed forward a distance of several meters, getting closer to the smaller barbarian. A black light bolted over the enemy's shoulder in no time.

"Go!" Shi Mu shouted, and the black blade vibrated violently in midair, throwing out thirteen shadows that cascaded down toward the enemy's head, blowing chills through his bones. Suddenly, the wolf on the barbarian's chest howled loudly, and blue light glowed on his chest. In the light, both of his arms transformed into wolves arms, covered with dense fur, and the nails grew sharp-edged, gleaming blue. His eyes glistened in the cold light, and his two wolf talons swung wildly before his chest, producing interwoven blue images that clashed with the black blade.

Some ear-deafening noises resounded, and after that the black shadows and images of blue talons collapsed in disorder. But almost without a respite, another ten blue images swished toward Shi Mu's face, backed by a forcible wind toppling him from behind.

Shi Mu snorted, and instead of stepping back from the talons, he rushed forward with the black blade humming with magic power. The magical characters on the blade's surface were lit up. Flames leaped up, devouring the blue talons hungrily.

The flames exploded with a loud noise, and the overwhelming heat swept the talons away. The small barbarian was not expecting this, and his body was knocked back by the scorching air billows, thrown into the air like a sack. Still in the air, he saw a small white cloud shoot towards himself at an alarming speed, and the ominous sight made his hair stand on end. This was the Air Billows Art.

Shi Mu took a sudden turn, thrusting his fist toward a black ox's hoof, the size of a human head, that had neared him stealthily. His fist clanged at the impact, and a great force pushed him back. All he knew was that he felt like he had been

thumped by a gigantic wild ox with the force of a landslide and the power of a tidal wave, and that his chest was almost ripped open. The heavy after-sensation pressed upon his body, and he staggered like a helpless infant.

The sneak attack was launched by the big barbarian with the golden earrings. He himself was tossed into air by the clashing force, and before hitting the ground he heard a dull sound behind him. It turned out that the small barbarian, in his desperation, had tried to resist the air billows with his arms folded in front of his head, but the arms were torn to pieces, and his chest badly mutilated. Hardly had he thudded onto the ground when a figure flew to his side. Then, in the next moment, a shrill cry resounded, rending the air. Dark blood gushed skyward, and the small barbarian had his head cut in half.

Immediately, Shi Mu heard footsteps of someone scuttling away. He turned around to find the giant barbarian fleeing in a frantic state, having made it as far as some thirty meters in the time since he witnessed his companion's ghastly death. However, the sight of a barbarian Totem warrior running for his life was quite comical, to the extent that Shi Mu could not help but laugh. He laughed scornfully, thinking of how these barbarians had once slaughtered his people. Gritting his teeth, he clenched the blade in his right hand, and it traced an arc of burning flame in the air before it got out of its owner's hand, flying toward the gigantic barbarian at lightning speed.

The running barbarian had been secretly taking pride in his speed before a strange shrill sound came from his back. Before he knew it, his chest stung, and a blood-stained blade tip protruded under his eyes, after having penetrated his body.

A ball of flames shot from the dead man, licking every inch of his skin and turned him into ashes in a split-second. By now, Shi Mu had picked up his blade and streaked away, disappearing into the woods.

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Several months later, in the suburbs of Rui Zhou City.

In a dilapidated hut surrounded by the ruins of a village, Shi Mu was sitting cross-legged, his chest rising and falling rhythmically. He seemed to be at rest, accumulating strength. Laying by him was the Purple Steel Bow.

Soon the silence was disrupted, as from the distance came a hubbub of noises. Shi Mu sprang up, like a vigilant cat, holding the bow with one hand, and sneaked out of the hut to move eastward of the village.

A moment later, he was lying on his stomach on a roof of a hut half burned, straining his ears to listen to the sounds. Several hundred meters away, it seemed that at least two hundred barbarians were fighting a human army made up of similar number. They were engaged in a fierce battle, and shouting and crying almost shook the earth.

Though better equipped, challenged by opponents whose physical strength far prevailed over themselves, the human soldiers were evidently losing. Even so, this human army still reacted with discipline and order, fighting back while gradually moving closer to the village, in hope of seeking cover. The barbarians would, naturally, not let them have their way, swooping down on them one by one. Thus the battle grew more pitched, and casualties increased on both sides, though with different speed. All in all, the humans were definitely going to lose.

Shi Mu turned his eyes toward the center of the human army. A leader dressed in full armor caught his eyes, and, judging by his uniform, he did not belong to any sect but to the Qi country's official military force. The leader was wielding a silver spear and was involved in a straight up fight with a Totem warrior whose weapons were a pair of axes. The clashing sounds of metal echoed through the woods.

Shi Mu knew clearly that unless this human army could kill the Totem warrior to make the barbarians headless, it would, undoubtedly, be wiped out in time. However, the human leader had quite a bit of strength that, for the time being, the fighting would not come to an end.

Suddenly, something about the human leader struck Shi Mu as overwhelmingly familiar. But his mask prevented Shi Mu from having a clearer view. Curiosity grew in his heart, as well as the desire to save his kin from being annihilated by their foe. Though he had completed his mission and was taking a rest, he would not simply stand by.

After a close survey of the terrain, he climbed down from the roof soundlessly and approached the battlefield like an experienced hunter. It took him half an

hour to reach a ditch behind the barbarians, and during this short period of time, another twenty human soldiers had already lost their lives. The barbarians were in a triumphant mood, and the human army was at an important juncture.

Shi Mu's eyes gleamed gold as he drew out a peculiar arrow from his back. The arrowhead was red, and a formula of extremely small size could be seen faintly on it. This was a magical arrow named the Arrow of Fire, on which the Great Fire Formula was thrice overlaid.

The number three is quite small compared with that of the formulas on Shi Mu's black blade. But it's not that he did not want to overlay more. Due to the tiny size of the arrowhead, it was extremely hard to draw formulas on it, even harder than when he drew formulas on the Moonlight Sea Chestnut Daggers. Three was the limit.

The Arrow of Fire has an average power, only one tenth of the Moonlight Sea Chestnut Dagger's, but once it penetrated the human body and exploded within, the sight would be frightful to behold. After fetching his Purple Steel Arrow, Shi Mu took great pains in making ten of these Arrows of Fire. The rest of the arrows in his bag were all ordinary arrows without magical power.

And today, on this occasion, he would like very much to try this arrow's power.

This decided, he nocked the arrow on the bow, accumulating his strength for a full power shot.

Note:

[A]Lan Yun: The Devil Witch's best girl friend.

TL: Dear readers, don't expect more of Ke Er's part in the following chapters! She won't reappear! It's not that Shi Mu has forgotten her, it's the author! (Alright, finally, I'm pleading for Shi Mu..Can't believe this myself...)

ED: I think I shall call this chapter the timeskip chapter! (cause we time skipped 2x…)

Chapter 120 - A Challenge From An Old Competitor

The arrow was ready, and both sides were fully wrapped up in fighting, so no one noticed a deadly arrow fitted to a bow, aiming at its target from the dark woods.

Finally, the arrow swished through the dense air. It flashed by like a piece of black thread, fast as thunder. The air whistled, giving pause to the two armies that were locked in battle. The barbarian Totem warrior titled his head, flustered, but when he finally made out the gloomy shadow coming his way, it was already too late for him to dodge.

The Fire Arrow sank into the chest of this tall barbarian. Immediately, his upper body burned with a glaring light before the sound of an explosion burst forth. With a screech, the barbarian Totem warrior collapsed, fire energy bursting from his chest, making a hole as big as a human head, where blood spewed out, like a stream, showering on the human commander's face.

The commander was struck dumb by the abrupt event. Who would have thought of a strange arrow hitting his enemy in a hopeless battle just as he was about to lose? For a moment, he just stood at the same spot with his spear in hand, shocked.

Swish! The sounds of arrows did not stop. A barbarian warrior had just knocked the weapon of his enemy away, and his stone hammer was rising up into the air, when a shadow pierced his throat. On the edge of the battlefield, a barbarian warrior who had been flinging bone spears had just raised his hand when he was shot on his forehead by another arrow and fell down heavily onto the ground with his spear. Similar scenarios were occurring continuously on this field, and every arrow caused the death of a barbarian warrior, but the explosion had not happened again.

The human commander had, by now, eventually realized that the hidden archer was on their side. His spirits were greatly boosted, and, shouting energetically, he rushed into the barbarian army. Surely the ordinary barbarians were no match for him, and his silver spear danced like a snake, hissing, and every attack of it would wound one barbarian fatally.

With the encouragement of the mysterious archer and their commander, the

remaining human soldiers got a boost in morale and began to launch a counterattack. In just a few minutes, the barbarian army of more than two hundred soldiers was decimated, leaving the human soldiers to clean up the battlefield.

The human commander who wore a suit of armor stepped forward toward the direction where Shi Mu was hiding, shouting at the top of his lungs, ”Thanks for your help, brave warrior! Please do us the honor of showing yourself!”

Shi Mu looked at his half-empty arrow quiver, and decided to step out of the ditch. Slowly, he walked towards the human commander, holding his Purple Steel Bow.

“Shi Mu?” The commander cried, so immensely surprised that he stopped his steps.

The person opposite him also jerked in amazement as he heard his own name called out.

The commander saw Shi Mu’s curiosity on his face and realized that he was still wearing the mask. In an excited haste he unmasked himself, showing a familiar face.

“Wang Tian Hao!”

Shi Mu was even more amazed at the fair young man’s presence.

“You…you entered the Black Demon Sect? That’s amazing!” Wang Tian Hao stared at the emblem of red flames on Shi Mu’s coat, exclaiming in surprise. The Black Demon Sect enjoyed a fame that was similar to the three big sects of the Heavenly Qi Country, far surpassing that of the Kai Yuan Martial Arts School.

Shi Mu replied with an embarrassed smile. He had been through so much that a few words would not help explain. Besides, circled by so many soldiers of the Heavenly Qi country, he would rather let his experiences remain a mystery. There was nothing to brag about.

“Haha, I never thought that brother Shi would have run to the Fire Country. The Wu Clan and the Jin Clan have offered a reward of five hundred thousand silver to find you! They wouldn’t be able to sleep at night if they ever knew that you had joined a sect!” Wang Tianhao sensibly discerned Shi Mu’s

embarrassment, so he diverted the topic and laughed the former question off.

Shi Mu felt dazed, and old memories stirred in his mind. He really did not know this, but it was not unexpected that the two families would continue hunting for him.

“It’s hard to explain. A better question, brother Wang, is why have you become a commander of the Heavenly Qi?” Shi Mu pointed at Wang Tianhao’s armor and asked.

“Shortly after you left our city, I Joined the Kai Yuan Martial Arts School. When the barbarians invaded our land, the school sent the new students to the army in turns to test us. Now that you are here, it must be due to the orders of your sect.” Wang Tian Hao answered frankly.

“You can say that.” Shi Mu nodded and returned a friendly smile.

“I still remember that, back then, you had been detected as having the Stone Ape bloodline and had, thus, been declined by the Kai Yuan Martial Arts School. But so what? It turns out that it was a blessing in disguise, because now you have joined a sect. You know, the Black Demon Sect is one of the big seven sects in the three kingdoms, boasting a large collection of secret arts and magics. You must have already reached the primary stage of the Houtian level.” Wang Tian Hao remarked with shining eyes.

Primary stage? Shi Mu rubbed his nose and said nothing about this.

“How the two of us have ourselves a friendly competition right here and now? I’ve been longing for a competition with a disciple from a great sect for a long time, but I never have gotten a chance before now.” Wang Tian Hao waved the silver spear in his hand and looked at Shi Mu fervently.

Shi Mu was amazed at these words, and he thought about this request for a moment. From the fighting before, he could see that Wang Tian Hao was not weak but was, undoubtedly, not his match.

“It’s just a competition. No matter whether I win or lose, I will still offer you a hundred thousand silver. What do you say?” Wang Tian Hao sensed Shi Mu’s reluctance and was worried about whether Shi Mu would receive the challenge or not.

“I’d say good if brother Wang loses. And, throw in two more low-level heavenly stones.” Shi Mu blinked naughtily and flashed him a smile.

“Good, that’s a deal!” Wang Tian Hao accepted without thinking.

Shi Mu nodded and put his Purple Steel bow aside, then bowed to Wang Tian Hao before adopting a prepared pose.

The soldiers cleaning up the battlefield saw the scene and their faces lit up with excitement. They soon stopped what they were doing and came to circle around the two, making a ring that centered around Shi Mu and Wang Tianhao. After what they had been through, the soldiers that had survived the war were all grateful to Shi Mu, who had helped them secretly with his wondrous arrows. Now that they knew their commander was familiar with him, they could not help but cheer in exhilaration. After all, what would stimulate a warrior more than seeing two experts competing? Moreover, such a chance was rare to come by.

Wang Tian Hao could wait no more and laughing heartily. Then, after the gale of laughter, he waved his silver spear, and the tip of the spear glittered and then became blurred. Then twelve red flame balls suddenly appeared in front of him, blossoming dazzlingly in the air. In the past two years, he had already accomplished the latter half of the Firing Spear Art, and the flames had been more powerful than before. Now he could strike twelve flame balls in one breath.

Next, Wang Tian Hao held out his spear with both hands and traced silver circles in the air, and the twelve flames seemed to be led by a mysterious force to flow into the circles.

Soon the silver circles were completely engulfed by flames and Wang Tian Hao suddenly stabbed out, and a fire dragon flew out from the center of the circle and towards Shi Mu’s chest.

In front of the spear was a burst of hot air, making everyone gasp for breath. Shi Mu concentrated seriously on the flames, and then punched out with his right hand. White light shined from his fist before shooting toward Wang with a loud sound.

Boom! The sound of the explosion burst forth.

It was as if a huge rock had hit the fire, and sparks flew off in all directions. It was very dazzling to the eye. But Shi Mu's Stone-breaking Fist seemed to prevail, and the fire dragon gradually faded to expose the silver spear pointing at Shi Mu.

Suddenly there came noise of explosion from within Shi Mu's arms as they bulked up to the size of a barbarian's, and blue veins protruded thickly. Then he shouted, his jade like fist hit upon the head of the fire dragon, causing deafening noises, like the sound of metal being crushed, as the fire faded and the silver spear was fully shown.

Wang Tian Hao was knocked back by the great force and it took him several steps to regain his balance. He had a look of shock in his eyes. Shi Mu had remained where he started during their bout. He slowly pulled back his fist, as if nothing had happened.

After Wang Tian Hao had steadied his body, he looked seriously at Shi Mu and shifted his stance into a strange pose to hold his spear. It was at that time that Shi Mu finally found a line of red magical characters on the tip of the silver spear, which suggested that the spear was a magic weapon, too.

"The Black Demon Sect really lives up to its name. Brother Shi, if you can receive my Dragon Tail Spear attack, I will bow to your superiority." Wang Tian Hao spoke with his usual great confidence.

The Dragon Tail Spear was a special Bloodline art which Wang Tian Hao acquired after he joined the Bloodline Hall of the Kai Yuan martial arts school. It could strengthen one's bloodline and only someone with the corresponding bloodline could practice it.

As he finished speaking, Wang Tian Hao's spear became bright, burning with a great fire, and the spear twisted in the fire like a living snake, the hot air felt even thicker than before.

Wang Tian Hao dragged his spear with its point on the ground, and twisted his waist after rushing several steps to strengthen the force. The spear point suddenly sprang up from the ground, bring with it tens of fire snakes, all leaping up towards Shi Mu at a ridiculous speed.

Shi Mu's expression didn't even change. His right hand stretched out to his back and, with a dark light, his blade shivered and thirteen cuts flew out and hit

the fire snakes.

After a round of deafening explosions, all thirteen blade beams had been launched and repelled the fire snakes, before they themselves too faded.

Wang Tian Hao was quite satisfied seeing this, and he rotated his body where he stood, his wide spear end forming a red tail of a dragon, whipping wildly at Shi Mu.

“Fire Dragon Tail!” WangTian Hao shouted.

Shi Mu was only shocked for a second before he activated his spirit power, and the formula on the black blade glittered with red light, great flames appearing all over it. The next moment, the blade hit the tail, straight and clean.

With a thunderous noise, the fire exploded on the tail and the great force made Wang Tian Hao hardly able to hold his spear, which was sent flying into the ground several meters away, where it sank into the earth.

Wang Tian Hao looked at Shi Mu’s calm face with great amazement, and his lips quivered without saying any words. All the soldiers were also in great shock at the sensational scene.

Indisputably, soldiers who have fought battles of life and death worship strong warriors much more than ordinary people.

Just then, a soldier in the crowd broke the spell, walking up to deliver to Shi Mu the twenty steel arrows, which were used to protect their lives a few minutes earlier. Shi Mu thanked him and showed no more courtesy, putting the arrows away into his bag. He then picked up his Purple Steel Bow and strode away.

“Brother Wang, just store what you betted in the big stronghold nearby. I will fetch them myself someday. I still have a mission right now and can stay no longer. Please excuse me.” From far away, Shi Mu’s voice came.

“I will definitely keep my words!” Wang Tian Hao gazed at Shi Mu’s back, sighed, then replied loudly.

Chapter 121 - There is No Real Victor in War

Time went by slowly. As this time passed, Shi Mu's name became more and more known by those in the fortress areas, for the number of Totem warriors who fell under Shi Mu's black blade kept increasing, and he had he had resisted two blows from the Xiantian saint Zong Yuan previously, which had become a legend in the passage of time. Therefore, most preferred to call him by the name of "Flaming Blade", and the tales of his feats were widely spread among the barbarian warriors, always with a tone of fear and indignation.

Half a year later.

This day, on the borders of Rui Zhou City, one could hear the clang of swords striking helmets, shouting, and crying.

On an open area deep in the valley, a dozen powerfully built Totem warriors were in a wild battle with five human disciples, among them Shi Mu. The ground was already littered with around twenty dead bodies, and those belonging to human warriors accounted for most of them, being torn apart and scattered all over the valley by the barbarians. Broken limbs, ripped insides, and dark blood - the whole valley was filled with a repellent smell that would make anyone vomit with disgust.

Actually, Shi Mu and his ten-odd companions were attacked by these barbarians on their way back to the union's stronghold after completing a mission. Initially there were, at most, seven Totem warriors, which gave the disciples much confidence, considering that there was safety in numbers. Young and ambitious, the disciples chose to confront the enemies to show their valor. However, shortly after the two sides started fighting, the situation became lopsided since ten more Totem warriors streamed into the valley to reinforce their own. The disciples leader, XiaHou Xuan, who came from Tian Yin sect, sensed the unfavorable prospect, but, by then, it was already too late for them to flee.

Now the human disciples were outnumbered. Add in their exhaustion after a mission and the barbarians were guaranteed to win. However desperately they fought, their team was already crippled. By now, most of the disciples alive were fighting with serious wounds, and Shi Mu was no exception. His face was

smudged by blood, and a two-inch long wound on his back was a horrible sight to behold. The Golden Armor he wore inside his armor was also scratched, and raw flesh could be seen. Blood had soaked his shirt, and along his ribs and thighs one could see giant scrapes left by fingernails. But for the Rejuvenating Charm Ke Er had given to him, he would still be bleeding and might have collapsed at any moment. Currently, of the nine Totem warriors still alive, four were besieging him. Then at a dangerous juncture, Shi Mu decided to work a Golden Armour Charm, and, at lighting speed, dispatched two relatively weak enemies. Coordinated by XiaHou Xuan, who finished off several enemies in one breath, the situation was saved temporarily. But presently Shi Mu was recognized by the enemies to be the “Firing Blade”, so all the Totem warriors began to direct their full attention to him.

Although Shi Mu was still wielding his black blade with outward composure, warding off the enemies’ succeeding attacks. His inward anxiety began to take over. He threw a quick glance around him, and found, to his dismay, that XiaHou Xuan was already bathed in blood, though still managing to deal with two other Totem warriors. The other three disciples were at the brink of breakdown, one of whom had lost an arm, and was only still alive and fighting by his sheer willpower and conviction. Shi Mu burned to save his companions, but he could not extract himself from his besiegement. The barbarians making the attack had switched to a delaying tactic: for one thing, they still feared the black blade in Shi Mu’s hand. For another, they foresaw the doom of the human disciples, and, thus, were not in a hurry to finish him off.

Shi Mu was keenly aware that the three disciples would not be able to live long under the fierce attacks of the Totem warriors, at which time he and XiaHou Xuan would be left in extreme peril. He ducked another blow, and swept the opening of the vale at his back with his golden pupils. What he saw made his heart quiver. About three hundred meters away from the opening, some ten black dots were galloping toward the battlefield, looking bigger every second. His eyes gleamed gold, and, as he took a second look, he now saw that these were all Totem warriors!

Just then, two heartrending cries rang out almost at the same time. Shi Mu turned to the source of the cry and saw that XiaHou Xuan had pierced the throat

of a Totem warrior with his spear, killing him on the spot. But he himself was hit in the back by a shorter barbarian with his axes, the wound so deep that white bone could be seen. Blood splattered the axes, coloring them red. Shi Mu's heart sank, clouded by deep sorrow. The next moment, the one-armed disciple was chopped in half, and streaming blood washed his insides out. Even so, his last strike helped blind an enemy's left eye.

The one-eyed barbarian was enraged, blood tricking down his craggy face. Looking around, he chose to vent his savage anger on XiaHou Xuan, and he stormed over to XiaHou's back, brandishing his axes. The former was now in dire straights, fighting two brutal barbarians with anguish filling his body.

Shi Mu was also suffering. He ran his eyes over the vale, with the dire predictions of this battle hanging over his heart. Finally he made up his mind. Holding the only Golden Armour Charm in his hand. His body flashed aside abruptly, dodging a curved dagger of a tall barbarian's to his left, and purposefully exposed himself to the bald-headed barbarian at his right flank. The bald-headed barbarian was overjoyed, his eyes glinting excitedly. His right palm was now bulking like a bear's paw, striking at Shi Mu's right shoulder with a howling gale. The two twin barbarians at Shi Mu's back also would not let this ideal chance slip away; they both brandished their mantis-like arms, lifting four blades that reflected cold light, blocking Shi Mu's route of retreat at either side.

However, Shi Mu had been expecting this. His left hand suddenly glowed gold, and he slapped his left hand onto his chest and a slim layer of golden light immediately shrouded him. At the same time, he turned, without warning, toward the twins, totally ignoring the bald-headed man. His black blade howled like a dragon amid red flames, spouting thirteen red shadows that rolled towards the enemies.

"Kill! My flames!" Just as the shadows were to clash with the twins, Shi Mu shouted, instilling his real qi into the black blade and thirteen red shadows suddenly gathered into one streak of red light, and, like lightning, it chopped at one of the twins' head.

The clang of metal pierced their ears. The twin barbarian was in a great shock that he folded his arm in front of his chest, hoping to ward off the blade. But to no avail. His two arms were cleanly cut off, followed by a "pu" sound. It turned

out that his huge head full of braids was sent flying into the air, leaving his headless body standing at the same spot, while his blood gushed out like a fountain. The whole process was done in one breath, without a single redundant movement.

But the next moment, two blade shadows and a bear paw also fell on Shi Mu. Some dull sounds rang out, and, after a frantic twinkling of golden lights, Shi Mu's body darkened as if enveloped by some mysterious dark force. The other twin barbarian, after witnessing his brother's tragic death, had almost lost his mind. Like a frenzied beast, he swooped down on Shi Mu, completely unaware of the latter's movement. By now, Shi Mu's left hand had posed into a strange posture, and a high-pitched sound shook the earth. A cloudy white ball had shot up from Shi Mu's mouth, and within such a small distance, the twin barbarian was left no chance of surviving. Before he could even utter a cry, his chest was blast open, and he slumped down to the ground with a thud.

Almost at the same time, Shi Mu twisted his black blade, and the black shadows hit right at the bald-headed man, while his left fist simultaneously stopped the knife chopping at his waist. After this brief strike, Shi Mu and the bald-headed barbarian both stepped backward to regain their balance. Shi Mu's face paled, and both his physical strength and magical power had reached their limits. But he dared not pause, his black blade once again held before his chest. The dark glow flashed menacingly, as if in preparation for another attack.

Finally, a gleam of fear filled the tall barbarian's and his bald-headed companion's eyes. The two of them exchanged a meaningful look, and steped away from Shi Mu's blade with coordinated steps. Then they began to roam around Shi Mu at a distance of thirty meters.

Just then, a series of sad cries reverberated through the vale. Shi Mu's heart beat rapidly, and peering to the side, he saw two other disciples lying in blood. Before they died, the two disciples had used the last of their last strength to injure a Totem warrior severely and kill another. The badly wounded Totem warrior seemed to be feeling no pain at all, still trying to strike at XiaHou Xuan's back, forming a converging attack with the other two barbarians. XiaHou Xuan was instantly thrown into mortal danger!

Shi Mu could not stand the sight of his companions being slaughtered

mercilessly any more. He stepped forward, then sprang up while swaying his blade in the air, throwing thirteen blade shadows at the injured Totem warrior who was sneaking up to attack XiaHou Xuan's back. But the tall barbarian and the bald-headed barbarian would not let Shi Mu get his way. They roared angrily, and chased after Shi Mu.

A trace of determination flashed across XiaHou Xuan's eyes. He knew he would never survive the battle, but he would not let go his enemies either. Seeing the three barbarians darting towards him, he snatched his spear, which suddenly emitted a black light, and traced some eerie arches in midair. He leaped to the one-eyed barbarian's front in a second, without giving any thought to the other two enemies at his rear. Clearly he had abandoned any thought of surviving.

Boom! The injured barbarian let out a shrill cry, and two spear shadows penetrated his body. Blood spurting out from huge cuts, and he fell onto the ground, in three pieces.

Another heartrending cry! The sword in XiaHou Xuan's hand pierced the throat of the one-eyed barbarian, but XiaHou Xuan himself was cut in half at his waist by the shorter barbarian's axes. Blood flew from his body, along with his bowels and other organs, dying the earth red.

"Haha! Our leader Tu Yan is coming here with more of our men. Flaming Blade, your time has come!" The bald-headed man burst out laughing loudly as he made out the figures coming their way from Shi Mu's back. The other two barbarians were also overjoyed, standing at either side of the bald-headed man, completely blocking the way to the opening of the vale.

Danger was imminent. Shi Mu heaved a sigh, and took out all the charms he had with him. His face betrayed nothing except a solemn determination. He worked his magic power, and threw out the charms - the Charm of Fireball, the Charm of Firing Snake, the Charm of Huge Rock, the Charm of Water Sword, ect.. He threw them all together at the bald-headed barbarian in the middle. At the same time, his two left fingers stirred, and shot out two silver lights that swirled while flying towards the two Totem warriors at either side of the bald-headed man. The silver light emitted a strange groan in the air. These two lights were two Moonlight Sea Chestnut Daggers that Shi Mu had just gotten from Zhao Ping!

The barbarian with the axes on his left side sneered, and rotated the axes in his right hand. The white shadows surged like waves. Fearlessly, he struck at the silver light coming his way. The tall barbarian also rushed to the other silver light, the curved dagger in his hand vibrating rapidly like a hummingbird.

Suddenly, the silver Moonlight daggers shone brightly before they reached their targets, the purple characters on their surfaces glowing brightly. The two barbarians sensed the sudden heaviness in the air, but before they could react, two tiny purple suns rose into the air simultaneously, and dazzling purple light submerged the three of them. After some deafening noises, the light receded, and the three barbarians were no longer there, leaving two combing huge pits on the ground where they had been standing.

Though he succeeded, Shi Mu dared not pause for a rest. Losing no time, he stuck another charm onto his chest, and immediately his body flew towards the opening of the vale, like a gale.

Chapter 122 - Two Fair Ladies

At the same time, deep in the Green Sky Mountain, in the Qing prefecture of the Heavenly Qi Country.

The mountain was extremely high, stretching up into the clouds. On its peak, there stood a palace which was surrounded by a number of other buildings. Various people were hurrying to and fro. This was the headquarters of the union of the seven sects.

Separate from every other building was a lofty palace that stood under the cover of mighty trees, emanating a different air which made it stick out from all the nearby buildings. The palace had its back against a precipice, and no disciples were on guard there. Right at this moment, snatches of an angry argument could be heard from inside the palace.

Suddenly something rattled like a cup breaking, and, at the same time, the back door of the palace was silently opened, and two beautiful figures rushed out and stepped quickly towards a bamboo bush near the precipice, not once turning their heads.

One of the girls was dressed in white clothes and had a graceful air that made her resemble a heavenly goddess rather than an ordinary worldly girl. She was the Devil Witch of Tianyin. Compared to her, her companion's face may attract less attention, but her figure was rather alluring, and her every action seemed to be full of seductive charm. She was Jin Xiaochai of the Black Demon Sect.

"Those old fools always quarrel a lot about such issues, but get nowhere in the end. All they how to do is 'weighing the risks', and worrying about gains and losses. It's so dull to talk with them!" Jin Xiaochai pursed her rosy lips indignantly.

"Don't ask too much from them. If it is not for the invasion of the barbarians, the seven sects would not just quarrel with their mouths." The Devil Witch smiled, as if alluding to some past event in a mocking tone.

"Well, you are right! We shall thank the barbarians a lot because now the two of us can talk like this." Jin Xiao Chai turned to the Devil Witch, and spoke with a lovely and innocent face.

“You are not a little girl any more, so don’t say such words lightly, like a brainless animal. The barbarian invasion is not a minor matter. All seven sects were likely to be destroyed if we didn’t work together to deal with it.” The Devil Witch frowned and gently scolded Jin Xiaochai, as if she was teaching her a lesson.

“They are just a bunch of barbarous animals. Thus, they are not that big of a deal!” Jin curled her lips and spoke in disapproval.

As the two girls bickered playfully, they soon came into the bamboo forest. The green bamboo was swaying gently in the wind, which gave the forest a more enchanting and secluded air, and only made the girls seem even more attractive.

“I have just heard that the body of Shang Heng, who was called Cold Sword, has been found in the Yue Yang mountains of the Fu prefecture. Did you do it? “ Jin suddenly ventured a question.

“That guy! Humph! He was as sly as a fox. I don’t know why Yun Er was cheated by his flattery so easily that time. He was residing in the Fu prefecture under an assumed name, but, luckily, the barbarians had driven him out, or I would not have found him without difficulty.” The Devil Witch’s eyes glinted coldly, though she did not deny or admit her doing verbally.

“Humph, men are always unfaithful heartbreakers! By killing him, you were letting him off lightly! He deserves nothing less than dismemberment and that his soul be imprisoned in my Black Snake Jar, tortured by the poison forever! It was such a pity Yun Er died for such a bastard!” Jin Xiaochai wore a cold face and cursed scathingly.

The Devil Witch’s eyes flashed tentatively as she heard these words, and a pair of warm, stubborn eyes suddenly emerged in her thoughts. Her heart felt heavy and her chest became tight.

Jin Xiaochai did not notice the subtle change in the Devil Witch’s expression, as she went on to say, “I heard that the only disciple of Yun Er was still fighting the barbarians on the battlefront. I had seen her once, that girl called Xuan Er. She seems to share a similar characters with her master, Yun Er. Being the same obstinate, silly girl. Why don’t you transfer her to a safer place?”

“I had tried, but she was even more stubborn than Lan Yun. She insisted in

hardening herself through life-and-death battles.” The Devil Witch sighed with regret.

Hearing this, Jin Xiaochai could only sigh resignedly.

“Alas… anyway it’s not that bad for her. If she does not experience the experience the hardships of fighting, she may not make much further. During these two years of fighting against the barbarians, many young disciples in the union of the seven sects have made much progress, and a number of new seeds have appeared.” The Devil Witch said slowly.

“It makes sense then. Well, you have been more attentive to the routine business of your sect recently. I have not seen you care about young disciples before.” Jin Xiaochai narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

“My master was hurt by Wild Killer, and has not recovered yet, so, naturally, I must share part of her responsibilities.” The Devil Witch’s voice was calm and flat.

“Oh, if so, I wonder which disciple in the seven sects could win your favor. Just tell me, I know you have keen eyes.” Jin Xiaochai asked curiously.

“About half a year ago, Xuan Er was on a hard mission, which was making a surprise attack on a barbarian stronghold. I was worried about her, so I followed her team. There was a disciple of your sect who was quite strong and brave, and stood out amongst his companions. His name was… Shi Mu” The Devil Witch did not reply for a while, as if reluctant to speak the name.

“Shi Mu? I have heard this name. What is he like?” Jin Xiaochai seemed to be interested now, her bright eyes twinkling excitedly.

“He was quite tall, with bronze skin and decent features, and was good at using a blade. Oh, he’s also a Charm Adept.” The Devil Witch frowned.

“Oh, it was him. I remember him now. He made quite an impression on me. He should thank me for bringing him to our Black Demon Sect,” Jin Xiaochai gave the name some thought and smiled delightedly, clapping her hands. But soon her delicate brows frowned as a thought dawned on her, and she asked, throwing a suspicious look at the Devil Witch, ”Snow, you seem to care about this disciple named Shi Mu. Usually you don’t remember an ordinary disciple’s

looks so clearly.”?

“I just think he has potential and remembered that he was a disciple of your Black Demon Sect. So I thought I’d remind you to pay attention to him.” The Devil Witch responded with the same flat tone, ignoring the touch of suspicion in Jin Xiao Chai’s words.

Suddenly, the Devil Witch’s eyes were dazed as a figure flashed in front of her, blocking her way. It was Jin Xiaochai.

“Snow, you promised me when we were children that the two of us should stay together forever and that you should never fall in love with anyone else. Don’t you remember your words?”?Jin Xiao Chai asked sadly, and the look she gave the Devil Witch grew more intense and fervent. Meanwhile, she stretched out her hand to touch the pure white face of the Devil Witch.

The Devil Witch immediately shunned her hand, stepping back while slapping Jin Xiaochai’s reaching hand away. “It was just a childish joke. Do not take it so seriously ever again. I don’t want to ever hear you mention it again.” Her face became as as cold as jade in the winter. Then she dismissed Jin Xiaochai by saying that she still had things to handle and quickly left.

Jin Xiao Chai watched the receding figure motionlessly, and, after a few minutes, she stamped her foot furiously. Her ample breasts rose and fell, and there was an extremely menacing light crossing her charming eyes.

After a short while, her face became calm again, and there was no trace of anger discernible at all. As she began to walk away, a broad smile covered her face.

[ED: I think Jin Xiaochai is a yandere… That is actually quite terrifying. o.o]

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Shi Mu had been carefully choosing remote paths for the past three days, and had just arrived at a secret mountain cave late at night. The stronghold was much larger than the underground mine he had been in, and it was one of the most important strongholds of the union in the Rui prefecture. There were more than a hundred disciples here and there was an accomplished warrior of Houtian to in charge!

Shi Mu's identity as the Flaming Blade, and his special identity as a Charm Adept, had earned him quite a bit of fame. Therefore, when many disciples saw him in such a bad state, they showed shocked faces but none dared to pry. Shi Mu had set out with a team of twenty disciples, but now he had come back by himself, full of wounds. What this meant was quite evident.

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"What? I can't believe this!"

Before long, a loud and clear voice, filled with shock and anger, came from a stone room deep in the cave.

The one who was yelling was named Jin Chen, and he looked to be about thirty years old. He was big and tall and quite muscular, looking even stronger than the barbarians. Shi Mu was quite tall, but he was a head taller than Shi Mu when he stood beside him.

"I will report this to the union, and it is to your credit that you were able to bring back this message. You will get ten extra points added to the basic rewards. Have a rest here and don't bother about going out for more missions." Jin Chen's voice resounded.

Shi Mu thanked him, receiving the identity token and stepping back.

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After a while, in another stone room, Shi Mu was stripped to the waist and sitting on a stone bed with his legs crossed.

Now the wounds all over his body had stopped bleeding, only leaving scars and bruises covering his skin, which was quite a breath-taking sight.

He picked up a soft-textured golden armor from the ragged clothes tainted with blood on the floor, his eyes glowing painfully.

During his past two years on the battlefront, he had gone through more than a hundred battles, and he owed it all to this armor that he had avoided being badly wounded, but the armor was now badly slashed.

The battle this time was one of the most fierce ones he had been in, apart from the meeting with Zong Yuan when he and his team members burnt the provision

of the barbarians that year. However, the soft armor had now been rendered too tattered to be of any more use.

Shi Mu forced a smile and put the golden armor aside. He then fished around in a bag under his bed and took out a green bottle, applying the ointment within to his wounds. After a while, refreshing feelings began to cool the wounds. This ointment was given to him by Ke Er the day when she was transferred, by the order of her sect, to another stronghold. The medicine was quite efficient at healing wounds of blades, but it was no match for the Ke Er's curing magic. He could not help but think of the days that the two of them had fought side by side. If she was here, she would not leave his wounds unatended like this.

Shi Mu sighed and shook his head, starting to activate the real qi in his body to heal himself, in coordination with the ointment.

After he had taken the pill the Devil Witch gave him, his Ape Bloodline had been strengthened a little. His practice of the Art of the Heavenly Elephant had also benefited a lot from this, increasing his self-healing power.

Together with his physical strength, which was, usually, quite quick in rebounding, he had almost recovered from the wounds in just four days.

During this period he had not been idle. He spent most of his time drawing another set of low-level charms, since the charms he had with him were used up in the raid a few days ago.

He had also not forgotten about the special Moonlight Sea Chestnut daggers he needed. He had asked Zhao Ping to make some more before he took the last mission, and it was only due to the intense warfare that he had no opportunities to return to his sect to fetch them.

Chapter 123 - An Order of Transfer

One day, when Shi Mu was absorbed in drawing charms in his stone room when he heard someone knocking at his door. He raised his eyebrows and stood up to open it. He had expected another disciple coming for charms, but it was Jin Chen's tall figure standing at his door, which surprised him a little.

"What has brought Brother Jin here?" Shi Mu led him in and asked, some doubt in his voice.

Jin Chen did not answer immediately, but scanned the room and then rested his eyes on the table. There was some magic paper lying disorderly on it alongside a bottle of ink and a writing brush. Several charms had already been finished.

"Brother Shi is so hard-working. Why not take some time and rest? You've just come back from a mission." Jin Chen laughed uneasily and did not mention his reason for coming.

"Senior, you are joking. I just feel dull doing nothing, so drawing charms serves to kill time." Shi Mu smiled.

Jin Chen picked up the charms Shi Mu had just finished and studied them for a while.

"Brother Shi is really smart - I think I'd even call him a genius - your strokes are smooth, and the charms are full of spirit power. Moreover, you've got quite the knack for it. I can tell from the charms themselves. I've seen other Adepts drawing charms, including some Adepts of the Spirit Rank, but even they cannot beat you in your success rate. The more I think of your skills, the more I felt it a pity that our stronghold can't enjoy your presence any longer." Jin Chen sighed genuinely and spoke in a regretful tone.

"What does Brother Jin mean? Why can't I stay here?" Shi Mu was taken unprepared, asking with a wary expression on his face.

"Well, I have just received an order of transfer from the union, saying that Brother Shi should be transferred to the Northeast stronghold. I've got nothing in hand today, so I thought, 'why not pay Shi Mu a visit'. And now I'm here." Jin

Chen uttered another laugh and fished out a jade slip from his shirt, passing it to Shi Mu.

Shi Mu was dazed by this sudden news, and, with a blank look, he received the jade slip and read it. It turned out that this was really an order of transfer signed by the union. It says that he should come and report for duty in a secret stronghold in the Xuan Ling Mountains within ten days. The location was noted in a map that indicated the surrounding terrain of the stronghold.

Shi Mu was quite delighted to see the order. As the map showed, the indicated stronghold was quite far from battlefront, and it must be much safer than here. Though the jade slip did not specify the reason why he was transferred, it is never a bad thing to be transferred to the rear.

“Sorry for giving senior Jin so much trouble. I will follow the order of the union and set out immediately.” Shi Mu put away the jade slip and cupped his hands to Jin Chen.

“May I ask brother Shi for a favor before you leave?” Jin Chen ventured the words in an embarrassed voice, after having hesitated for a short while.

“Just speak, brother Jin. I’ll do everything I can to help you.” Shi Mu answered without thinking.

“Thank you very much, brother Shi. On behalf of all the disciples in this stronghold, I express my genuine gratitude to you. You know the war is rough and the consumption of charms is always more than we can supply. I hope brother Shi can draw some charms for us before he leaves. To be frank, when you came back I intended to ask you after you had fully recovered, but now that this order has come... It’d be too late if I didn’t ask you now. I have listed the materials and the required charms here, and the reward of feat points for these charms will be fifty percent more than usual.” Jin Chen cupped his hands and then took out a jade slip, along with a pile of magic papers, from his sleeves, putting them on the table, then carefully handing Shi Mu several heavenly stones.

“Rest assured, brother Jin, I will finish the task on time.” Shi Mu smiled and promised with an easy heart. He had quite a good opinion of the commander of this stronghold, who was always peaceful and fair to his fellow disciples. This

task, though urgent, could bring him more feat points, as well as the opportunity of practicing charms, so he would not decline the offer.

Seeing Shi Mu's radiating face, Jin Chen let out a sigh of relief, and happily thanked him for another minute before he left Shi Mu to his business.

……

Ten days later, deep in the Xuan Ling Mountains. At the foot of the mountain which soared thousands of meters skyward, a young man, strongly built, and clad in a black short jacket, was standing on a huge stone, scanning his environment. The space between his eyebrows contorted slightly. He was none other than Shi Mu, who had made his way here as told by the map, but strangely, no one came out to welcome hims after he had wandered around the area for a while.

"The door must have been covered by a formula. Maybe they expect me to find it myself?" Shi Mu wondered in doubt. He was still new to formula arts, so it was not easy for him to see through a formula set by others. [TL: Does our author really mean this? I think Shi Mu is quite skilful in formulas, isn't he?] But, still, he had his own ways.

Shi Mu jumped down from the huge stone and narrowed his eyes, his pupils becoming golden, then he observed the ground closely. After a while, he squatted down near a patch of grass where a blurred footprint could be distinctly seen. The footprint was either not fresh or had been washed by the rain, which made it indiscernible to ordinary eyes. However, Shi Mu smiled with a hint of pride. Though quite shallow, the footprint could not elude his eyes, under which it looked like a mark left by a huge prehistoric elephant trampling the grass.

Shi Mu stood up to follow the direction of the footprints. Ahead of it, many traces followed, though some were left on raw stones or solid ground and thus were very swallow and hard to be recognized. He still found the right direction to track along. The marks grew clearer as he went ahead, all leading in the same direction, which boosted Shi Mu's confidence even more.

After a while, he arrived at the front of a cliff where all the traces converged and disappeared. The golden light in his eyes faded, and he stared at the cliff

closely before gently rested his hand the surface, feeling for its texture. Suddenly, the stone felt softened, and before he knew it his hand sank into the cliff, as if it was made of some liquid.

“That’s it…” Shi Mu nodded and took back his arm.

Just then the cliff shined and cracked a slit, where a man in green was standing with an inscrutable smile.

“You must be Shi Mu from the Black Demon Sect. Welcome to the Rat’s Nest, I am called Mountain Green, from the Ethereal Phoenix Sect.” The man ran his sharp eyes over Shi Mu and said with the same smile.

“Yes, this is Shi Mu. Thank you for welcoming me, Brother Green.” Shi Mu took out the identity token of the union and the jade slip containing the order of transfer.

“Come in!” Mountain Green did not receive the stuff but stepped aside to invite Shi Mu in.

Shi Mu did not change his countenance, carefully storing his token and jade slip before he stepped in. The next moment, his eyes closed by reflex as a glaring light flashed, and when he reopened his eyes, he found himself in a spacious paved alley that lead deeper underground. The man in green was standing shoulder to shoulder with him.

Shi Mu looked vacantly ahead but the pitch-black darkness of the alley played tricks on his eyes, which made him be unable to judge the distance. He also didn’t know how long the path would be. Suddenly, as he groped ahead, a sonorous male voice resonated in the underground, “Brother Shi really is a genius, to be able to find your way here all by yourself. You definitely deserve the recommendation from Master Jin.” Mountain Green let out a clear laugh and said this.

“Recommended? Me? By Master Jin?” Shi Mu was amazed, freezing halfway. By then, his eyes had adjusted to the darkness and he could vaguely make out the outlines of Mountain Green’s body and face. The latter saw Shi Mu’s surprised expression and stopped his steps as well, asking in confusion,

“What? Doesn't Brother Shi know about this place?”

“No, I just received the order of the union to be transferred here. As for other things, like what we do here and what this place is like, I have absolute no idea.” Shi Mu replied honestly, a little embarrassed as he could not offer Mountain Green a satisfactory answer.

“So it seems. Well, I will explain this place to you. Our place is not an ordinary stronghold but one for drawing Charms for the union.” Mountain Green studied Shi Mu’s face in surprise and said slowly after a while, convinced by Shi Mu’s honest eyes that kept blinking innocently.

“Drawing charms?”The answer was quite unexpected.

“Now the prospect on the battlefield is gloomy, so the union gathered the elite Charm Adepts to deal with the large demand of low-level charms on the battlefront. Your talent in charms has been noted by some masters, and Master Jin, of your sect, has strongly recommended you to the union, so... That’s why you are here now.” Mountain Green continued to lead Shi Mu in as he explained briefly, however doubtful he was.

But Shi Mu was not excited by the news, nor by the recognition of his skills by the union’s masters. It baffled him that Jin Xiaochai, whom he had only met once, at the time he joined the sect, would recommend him. After all, after he had met her on his trip here, the two of them never met again. How come a Xiantian saint like her could notice a fresh disciple? He frowned, lost in contemplation, and his intuition told him to beware this Jin Xiaochai. Blessings often come in disguise, and vice versa. Various hypothesis swarmed tumultuously through his mind as he followed Mountain Green silently down the path.

The two of them walked for nearly eight minutes before they arrived at the end of the path, where there stood a stone door. Without a word, Mountain Green took out a white jade peice, the size of a palm, on which a few formulas were carved, and, as he shook it gently, a beam of white light shot up and sank into the stone door.

The door then split down the middle, opening to both sides, and revealing the interior scenes. A huge hall of about three hundred square meters appeared in front of them, while hundreds of people walked to and fro amid heavenly lights

that illuminated this underground hall. The hall had a great deal of stove-like furnaces that spouted raging flames, each tended to by several disciples, who kept putting many kinds of materials (even including furs and the bones of beasts) into the stoves. Shi Mu knew that the stoves were not for making pills, but for making charm paper. A burly man was standing guard beside one of the stoves, dumping some green stringy liquid into square molds. The liquid cooled down soon and formed a piece of green charm paper, which was carefully put away by another man standing nearby.

There were more than forty such stoves in the hall, with were creating all kinds of charm paper without stopping.

“Let’s keep moving.” Mountain Green detected Shi Mu’s curiosity, and patiently waited at the side, for a few moments, as Shi Mu gaped at the bustling scene, before urging him to the other side of the hall.

All the workers (some low-level disciples gathered from all sects) using the stoves to make charm paper seemed quite respectful to Mountain Green. They bowed to him in succession and cast curious looks toward Shi Mu, who followed behind him. However, Mountain Green did not care in the least about these men. Without looking at them for a second, he led Shi Mu through the hall into another long pathway, and there were some closely shut stone doors spaces at regular intervals down the sides of the path, whose use Shi Mu could not figure out. [TL: Shi Mu's reaction to the new place reminds me of Lin Daiyu's entering the Jia Mansion for the first time. (A classic chapter of the Chinese novel Dream of the Red Chamber) Haha!]

[ED: Yet another thing that I have not read. ^.^; {Added to “To Read” list}]

After a while, they arrived at a stately stone door again.

“The hall you just saw is where the workers make charm paper, and here is the place for the elite Charm Adepts to draw charms. You are new here, so don’t hesitate to ask others for advice whenever you feel the need.” Mountain Green said this amiably - showing a very different attitude than the one he had shown the workers earlier - He pulled out the white jade again, and, again, opened a large stone door.

There was another huge hall inside the door. The ceiling was shaped like an

arch vault, dotted with white chandeliers every ten meters, which illuminated the entire space. There were many stone desks laid in a very orderly manner throughout the hall, and all the nations' blank charm papers, magic brushes, and ink seemed to have convened. There were almost thirty of these desks, each occupied by men who were either sitting there thinking, engaged in drawing formulas, or discussing having soft, yet serious, discussions with their neighbors.

There were some other individual rooms around the desks, all of which were tightly shut, except the one nearest to the exit.

On the other side of the hall towered a huge jade wall, and lines of characters were glittering on it, looking like missions distributed to the Adepts.

Most of the people inside saw them come in, but they only gave a quick glance before they bent their heads again to focus on their tasks. Only a few nodded to Mountain Green briefly before going back to their own business.

Chapter 124 - Preference

“Brother Green, the task ordered by Master Fang three days ago is almost finished. It would be done if bother Tong of the Tian Yin Sect had not been sick today. He is really unwell, making mistakes all the time, so I’m afraid we can’t finish on time. What do you think we should do?” A blue-robed youth scuttled toward Mountain Green, speaking with great haste.

The news clearly did not appeal to Mountain Green and his lips curled up as he pondered over the unexpected matter for a minute. Afterwards, a meaningful smile spread over his face. “Leave it to me, I’ll find you a capable substitute,” Mountain Green said reassuringly, then nodded his head toward Shi Mu, who was standing beside him, “Come see our new team member. Brother Shi Mu, from the Black Demon Sect. He’ll help reduce our pressure greatly.”

The blue-robed youth stirred at the mention of Shi Mu’s name, and he immediately sized him up, his eyes opening widely.

“Shi Mu? What?” The blue-robed youth’s face tightened in surprise.

[ED: As a reminder, Shi Mu spent some time helping two young men with some gang fights while he was in Feng City. Feng Li was the more polite and considerate of the two, still thinking that Shi Mu would go places when everyone else was rejecting Shi Mu for his ‘waste blood’.]

“You are...Feng Li?” After recognizing him, Shi Mu was also startled. This young man standing before him was, one-hundred percent, the Feng Li of the Black Fox Gang back in Feng City, but his appearance at this moment did not match with the passage of the long years since he the two had last seen each other. He looked even ten years younger than he was back then, as if time did not elapse for him, but had been flowing counter-clockwise.

“What? You two are old acquaintances?” It was Mountain Green’s turn to be taken aback.

“Yes, brother Shi and I are of the same origin, and we met several times back in our hometown.” There was a hint of fluster flashing across Feng Li’s eyes, but he quickly recovered and explained in a quasi-calm tone.

“No wonder. Go back to your work, I’ll take brother Shi to Master Fang’s office. You two can catch up later. “ Mountain Green was not interested in this old-friends topic but dismissed Feng Li lightly, oblivious of his initial strange reaction. However, smiling as he was, Shi Mu did not let any detail pass his keen eyes, which recorded the momentary agitation in Feng Li’s expression. The latter nodded briefly to Shi Mu and turned his back to them, walking off.

“Follow me.” Mountain Green said, and they continued their journey, this time by another pathway. Shi Mu stole a quick glance at Feng Li’s back and then followed Mountain Green wordlessly. The proud leader resumed to brief Shi Mu on the stronghold’s roles and rules, changing into a more affable voice, “Unlike other disciples, fighting at the battlefront, we make charms in this stronghold, which offers safety and more generous feat points. However, missions distributed here are not less challenging, after all, a mission is a mission. You must have discovered that everyone here is busy with his own work, and that’s because every task is demanded to be finished on time. A single slip-up may ruin your stay here. You’ll be transferred back to the battlefront and do more dangerous tasks!” Taken by the mood, Mountain Green deliberately exaggerated the outcomes, admonishing Shi Mu of the possible peril.

“Thanks for senior’s instruction.” Shi Mu nodded, but with a face not the least worried, contrary to Mountain Green’s expectation. But the man was too absorbed in his demonstration that he took little notice of Shi Mu’s indifferent face as he went on, his voice toned down for he had sensed his over-harshness in the previous teaching, “But there’s no need to be flustered, we are still understaffed concerning the large amount of charms demanded by the union each day. So unless you make some really big mistakes, you won’t get sacked easily. Ask for help if you feel the task is too much.” This finished, Mountain Green still failed to perceive Shi Mu’s easy mood, but savored the feeling of being a teacher, which he had just felt secretly in his heart, much satisfied with his performance - a presentation with a perfect blend of stateliness and amiability.

After a while, the two of them had traveled through another long hallway and reached yet another hall, which was smaller, but not any less majestic than the former. Mountain Green adopted yet another manner, and this time was quite

disciplined and submissive. The hall seemed to be a simply decorated reception room, where some tables and chairs were clustered around a platform that rose above the floor several inches. On this platform, a white-haired old man, dressed in a light green long gown, was sitting imposingly. Right next to the old man was laid another chair where perched an impressively charming young girl, clothed in gilt-edged robes from head to toe. Her eyes were half-closed, lethargically, like a sleepy cat wallowing in a luxury nap. Her face, if anything, was not the stunning type, but rather delicate in a way that reminded one of a chaste virgin, but an odd discordance could be detected between her face and her body, which was mature and sexy, like that of a grown woman's, especially her full, pointed bosoms that could take any man's breath away. Notwithstanding, her looks were not the reason she was exceedingly alluring. It was her air - flirtatious and inviting - which exuded from her very large, shining eyes. She could be a deadly killer with the most disarming appearance. An elegant, furry cat that lounged on a sofa in a half-sleep, but could awaken suddenly and kill a passing prey in less than a second.

This girl was exactly Jin Xiaochai.

Shi Mu entered the hall behind Mountain Green, and, after seeing her on the platform, his blood froze. Although he had got information from Mountain Green that she was the one who had recommended him to the union, he had not supposed that Jin Xiaochai herself would be here in this stronghold. What was her purpose?

Seeing Shi Mu come in, Jin Xiaochai's eyes lit up, and she slowly straightened her back, leaning against the chair, and threw Shi Mu a most enigmatic look, her pupils glowing green. Shi Mu failed to contain his shivers, his face contorting slightly, and his body feeling like it was being looked at by a viper. His heart throbbed abruptly, out of control. But to his surprise, this hair-raising sensation vanished promptly the next moment, as if it was all an illusion. The unfathomable expression on Jin Xiaochai's face had now been replaced with a gentleness. Her liquid eyes watching him in a manner that only resembled a mother's - embracing and warm. Shi Mu would not believe in this semblance of an angel, and without casting her more looks, he directed his eyes to the white-haired old man, his heart still beating fast. This elder had a diametrically different

air about him, reminiscent of a bottomless deep hole that lurked under a pitch-dark cliff. Instinctively, Shi Mu knew that this elder could beat any of the Xiantian saints he had met before, and was, roughly, at the same level as Master Xie, the Star Grade Adept of the Black Demon Sect. Shi Mu had only a cursory, if not furtive look at him, before he bent his head, assured that this one must be the Master Fang that Mountain Green had spoken of, who was the guiding master of this stronghold.

"Master Fang, Shi Mu of the Black Demon Sect is here." Mountain Green said reverently, bowing to the elder man. Shi Mu also followed his fashion and saluted.

"Right. Stand up, you two young boys," the white-haired saint opened his lips slowly.

The two of them stood to full height hearing this. Then the elder man examined Shi Mu, nodded his head, and then turned to speak to Jin Xiaochai, who was at his side, "So this must be the disciple Sister Jin has mentioned. Good, his magic power is deep and refined. If he really is that skilled in making charms, I'd have no objections."

Jin Xiaochai giggled, uttering a relaxed laugh. Pursing her lips, she answered sweetly, "That's for sure, brother Fang. I hope he's as good as you said. I got along quite well with the boy, and have always thought of him as a brilliant disciple. Recently I heard that he had learned to draw charms, so I thought, why not bring him here, to learn from brother Fang?"

Shi Mu was totally flabbergasted by Jin Xiaochai's words, and so was Mountain Green, though they didn't let anyone know they felt this way.

"So if there's no problem, Mountain Green, take nephew Shi[A] to receive a jade slip so that he can come in and out freely. Then sort out the stone room Kun[B] for nephew Shi. He'll work there from today on." The white-haired saint nodded his head, and gave the order without consulting Jin Xiaochai.

Mountain Green's continence changed to surprise, and he did not answer the order until he gave Shi Mu another close look, his lips quivering.

"Nephew Shi, as long as you work hard here and make progress in your charm magic, I promise to ask our sect's leaders to receive you as an immediate disciple

to one of our sect's elders." Jin Xiaochai also assured Shi Mu with a benign countenance and that same motherly smile again.

However suspicious he felt, Shi Mu could only say "yes" on such an occasion, and keep the doubts to himself. With various thoughts in a tumult in his mind, he answered with a forced grateful smile, "Yes, thank you for your instructions, senior Jin. Your humble disciple will do everything to live up to your expectations."

"Alright, you two can go now." The white-haired elder man waved them off. The two of them bowed once more before turned back to leave. Shi Mu felt again a sharp look at his back, and his skin stung. He quickened his pace to walk out of the hall, and only felt release from the gaze after that. He turned his head to look at the tightly shut stone gate, his eyes glinting in suspicion.

"Brother Shi, I never thought that Master Fang would value you so much that he would give you an independent room." Mountain Green could no longer restrain his curiosity and envy, breaking forth the question.

"Oh, are independent rooms rare here?" Shi Mu asked, baffled.

"Of course. You've just seen it. Every Adept works in the commune hall, where it's easy to be affected by the environment. But the stone rooms are clear of such worries. Each is fully equiped, not to mention, they have a Reincarnation Formula set by Master Fang himself, which is able to restore your magic power and peace of mind quickly. This stronghold has, altogether, four independent stone rooms, and should have been reserved for Master Fang and the three Spirit Grade Adepts. But half a month ago, the Spirit Grade Adept living in the Kun room was transferred back to his sect, Tian Yin, so the room was emptied." Mountain Green explained.

Shi Mu nodded his head slowly, and his face did not show much delight.

"Brother Shi, in our stronghold, the independent rooms are a signal of high status. You've just come, and now you have one of the four rooms, so I fear that some Adepts may hold a grudge against you. Do pay attention." Mountain Green reminded, assuming the earlier teacherly manner again.

"Thank you for your instruction, brother Green." Shi Mu cupped his hands to express his genuine gratitude. Mountain Green smiled, seeing that his gracious

manner had worked. Then without any more words, he walked on, like a teacher that had just ended a class.

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Meanwhile, in the reception hall.

“Sister Jin, I’ve done as you asked, so don’t forget your promise to me.” The white-haired saint shook his head and spoke resignedly.

“Rest Assured. Your sister has promised you, so she’ll keep her words.” Jin Xiaochai stood up from the chair and giggled.

“By the way, what’s that special about this Shi Mu? You rarely recommend someone in person.” The elder man threw his “sister” a curious look.

“Do you really want to know?” Jin Xiaochai’s eyes shimmered, and she titled her head back, showing a trace of a wicked smile around her lips.

“Well...all right, I won’t ask again. Not interested in your odd penchants. But one word, leave Ke Er alone.” The white-haired elder man changed his tone, warning her seriously as his white brows twitched slightly.

“Hehe, I just meant to have some small talk with her, and ask her about something I care about. Besides, she wasn’t there at all. Why are you so nervous?” Jin Xiaochai sneered, a smile that was beautiful enough to overthrow a kingdom.

“That girl has five degrades in Wood-sensing - a rare talent in my sect - so keep your fingers far from her, or I’ll teach you a lesson on behalf of your master.” The elder man snorted and said.

Jin Xiaochai replied with another laugh, completely ignoring the old man’s warnings. She had her own plan.

Just then, some vague noises of someone bickering came from outside the hall. The old man frowned furiously and started to walk to the door. Jin Xiaochai rolled her eyes, and cracked into a knowing smile, quickly following the old man with nimble steps. The two of them soon came to the big hall where the Adepts made charms, and the hubbub came from a circle of twenty-odd Adepts in the hall, fiercely discussing something.

The crowd stirred after seeing Master Fang and Jin Xiaochai coming their way, and hurriedly stepping aside for them to pass. Most of them shut their mouths immediately, except one hapless Adept who continued shouting indignantly,

“...In a word, you, a new-comer, gets the Kun room? To this, I am the first to oppose! Why on earth should a new guy get an independent room? Others won’t have their mouths shut at this matter, either!”

Shi Mu was standing on the opposite side of this angry young man, his chin pulled in. But even though the young man’s slobber had been spit all over his face, Shi Mu was still wearing his usual cool face.

Notes:

[A] Nephew Shi: Here “nephew” does not convey its biological meaning, only an amiable form of address to someone of your nephew’s generation. So is “Sister Jin”. It does not signify that Jin Xiaochai is Master Fang’s biological sister, nor that the two of them are of the same generation. Here the sequence of seniority is decided by one’s level in cultivation.

[B] The Kun Room: “Kun”, one of the Eight Diagrams, denoting the earth. Here it is just used to signify the room’s number, like Room A, B, C or Room 1, 2,3.

Chapter 125 - A Competition for the Kun Room

Intoxicated in his monologue, the angry young man was posturing around with aggressive body language. His cleanly shaven head shimmering accordingly. When he finally found that the echos around him had died down, he turned around and saw Master Fang and Jin Xiaochai watching him. Embarrassed, he reluctantly shut his mouth.

“What’s happening, have you all completed your missions? How dare you waste your time quarreling here!” Master Fang scolded seriously.

“Master Fang, the truth is….” Mountain Green was lost for a second as to how to deal with the matter, then, taking a deep breath, he hurried to the angry old man’s side and whispered in his ear about the whole event. As it went, it was all because Shi Mu had gotten preferential treatment to use the Kun stone room - the second best of all - as soon as he had arrived, so it aroused other Adepts’ resentment, of whom the shaven-headed man was the most irritated. The commotion was, thus, led by him.

Master Fang heard these words and turned back to shoot Jin Xiaochai a blaming look, but the beautiful girl stood behind him like an angel, with a dazzling smile in her eyes, completely keeping herself away from the difficult matter.

“Qiu Ming, do you have any objections to my decision, and think that Shi Mu doesn’t have the qualifications to use the Kun room?” Master Fang said, with a sullen face.

“I dare not object, but brother Shi has just joined our stronghold and has not made any contributions, and yet he gets the best treatment. Though all the other disciples said nothing about it, they won’t be genuinely convinced.” The shaven-headed young man slighted bowed and answered respectfully, not without a hint of indignation in his voice. He was rather tall and thin, a half head taller than Shi Mu, and had quite a regular, yet proud, look. When he was speaking, he glanced at Shi Mu sideways, full of enmity. Judging from the expensive-looking purple clothes he was wearing, with every complex embroidery invented by human hands on them, he must be a disciple from the Dark Charm Palace of the Huang Bright Country.

The Dark Charm Palace was not a strong sect of all the seven sects, but quite famous for its charm and formula arts, and thus was known as the leading sect in making charms, with its disciples all being professional charm Adepts. To prove its strength and influence, the disciples from the Dark Charm Palace accounted for at least thirty percent of all in this stronghold.

Master Fang swept all the people present with his scathing eyes, and the disciples all lowered their heads one after another, though still with resentful looks on their faces. So it seemed that Shi Mu's occupying an individual room as a new man really broke a taboo here. Now even Master Fang began to feel himself caught in a dilemma, cursing Jin Xiaochai silently in his heart as he tried with an effort to remain his outside calmness.

Just then, the shaven-headed man suggested to Master Fang, in an insinuating tone,"Master, I have an idea. May I say it?"

"Go ahead." Master Fang's face was expressionless, but inwardly he felt the young man's voice was like music.

"Now that the missions of the union are becoming more pressing each day, we understand that it is inappropriate to keep the Kun room empty. I think it would be fair to let the best charm Adept in us use it. If brother Shi can convince us, I will not say a word." With master Fang's permission, he was more forward in tone as he stated his advice.

Master Fang frowned, as if quietly weighing the suggestion. Of course, he could refuse the advice with his authority, but it seemed unfair to the other disciples and would only bitterly disappoint them. The poor Master Fang turned back and glanced at Jin Xiaochai again, with a pair of pleading eyes, asking for her help like a troubled pupil, but she just kept smiling, as if the meaning did not make it to her.

"Of all the magic scholars in this stronghold, you are the most skillful in drawing charms, Qiu Ming. So now you and Shi Mu can have a competition and the winner will have the Kun room." Master Fang declared painfully, cursing in his heart that Jin Xiaochai was such a "sly little fox".

The shaven-headed man was quite satisfied hearing the decision, and he instantly answered, filled with joy. Then he tilted his head, throwing Shi Mu a

provoking look and demanded sardonically:”Brother Shi, let’s have a competition of drawing charms.”

“Well, now that you insist to compete with me, I will not refuse.” Shi Mu smiled politely and replied without hesitation.

“How about drawing the Body-Lifting Charm for two hours. The one who draws more wins?” The shaven-headed man “asked” proudly.

All the disciples around broke into heated discussions, eyeing Shi Mu excitedly in anticipation of his response. They were clear that Qiu Ming was a Wind adept and that he was the best at drawing the Body-Lifting Charm, despite its high difficulty. At this moment, Feng Li was standing in the crowd and he shook his head, almost indiscernible, at Shi Mu, attempting to persuade him to give up.

“Well, that’s a deal.” Shi Mu promised light-heartedly, turning a blind eye to Feng Li’s action. A half-smile appeared on his lips.

Seeing that Shi Mu agreed without thinking, the disciples burst into whispers, exchanging their opinions which were mostly gloating at Shi Mu’s brainless acceptance of the challenge. The shaven-headed man was overjoyed, busy in cupping his hands to the audience around, and abandoned himself in his blissful thoughts of moving to the Kun Room this evening.

During the following time, some helpers straightened out two stone desks and put tools in order, including ink, brushes, and heavenly stones of wind element, as well as a sandglass for marking the time. All set, Shi Mu and his confident competitor both sat themselves by a desk.

“The competition begins!”

At master Fang’s order, the proud look on the shaven-head man’s face instantly vanished, replaced by a fully concentrated expression. He took a deep breath, and, with a heavenly stone in hand, brush in the other, he started to draw smoothly, with each stroke steadily performed at a pace that was neither too slow nor too fast. Before long, a perfect green character had emerged on the paper, so vivid it seemed like it could fly off any minute. However, at the opposite, Shi Mu did not begin his drawing immediately, but shut up his eyes and sat quietly to adjust his breath after Master Fang’s announcement.

And he did not open his eyes until a good quarter of an hour later, unhurried, and refreshed. During his rest, all the onlookers were busied by a further discussion of Shi Mu's lack of intelligence in a low voice. They were all charm Adepts, who all understood the shortness of the two hour challenge. Made up of many complex characters, Charms like the Body-Lifting charm demanded a long time to to draw, but Shi Mu's easy manner constituted a most odd action beyond anyone's understanding.

Meanwhile, on the paper in front of the shaven-headed man, eleven characters had been finished, and the twelfth was not far from completion.

At length, Shi Mu opened his eyes, which were as still as a deep, waveless lake, and leisurely picked up a piece of paper. Then he held up his brush and dipped it in the magic ink. All his actions were skilled and natural, exuding an air that was only seen in real experts, therefore, in a second, he had tamed the scornful looks from the onlookers, and the arrogant gleams in their eyes gradually died away.

Shi Mu narrowed his eyes and his pupils reduced slightly. But he did not apply his golden pupils on this occasion, only fixing his spiritual power on the tip of the brush, which he lifted and then gently lowered to the paper, with a heavenly stone in the other hand. The Body-Lifting Charm was the most complex one among all primary charms. The formula was formed with many characters and heavenly patterns that were quite challenging to draw out, but seeing Shi Mu's unperturbed face, and his smooth movements with the brush, one would never have thought that he was drawing such a difficult charm.

Soon, winding and intricate characters swiftly emerged on the paper, one after the other, and Shi Mu drew so skillfully that the characters looked like rather elegant art, clear and steady, without any incoherent points.

All the time, dim yellow lights wound down to the tip of the brush, and all the finished characters shone and glittered with overflowing spiritual power, not a single sign of unsteadiness. The people standing around gradually changed their looks as they saw the dynamic characters on Shi Mu's paper, all trying to ease away the amazement by murmuring to their companions.

After a short time, Shi Mu drew his last stroke with a flick of his wrist. The completed formula on the charm flashed, then the light gradually faded, the

characters now giving off a vague green light.

So a complete charm was accomplished.

Master Fang's eyes glinted in surprise, for it had not been more than half a quarter of an hour since Shi Mu had started drawing, and the shaven-headed man had just finished one copy and barely started drawing the second. He had his full attention on it and was not aware of Shi Mu's performance.

All the disciples were astonished, gaping at each other. But Shi Mu did not even change his expression, and appeared as if he was not aware of the other people's responses. He put the first charm aside and picked up another piece of paper, then started drawing again. The complex formula was rendered as if it was a no-brainer to Shi Mu's, his brush moving nimbly and did not pause for even a second. The second charm took even less time to complete, then the third one….

He did not notice that the hall had sunk into a heavy silence. Nobody whispered, all staring at him shocked. Shi Mu remained sedate and expressionless, moving his hand like an accurately machine that produced one charm after another, without a hitch.

The deep, still look on Shi Mu's face made Jin Xiaochai's smile lift, bit by bit, and her pretty face hardened. Narrowing her eyes sharply, she studied Shi Mu's face in a way a scientist would observe an object of his experiments. As the sharpness accumulated in her eyes, she abruptly turned around her body and walked towards the exit of the hall, without once looking back. She had gotten the information she needed.

Hardly anyone noticed her leave, except Master Fang, who had sensed it vaguely. But she had fast, light steps that, in a twinkle, carried her far off. Master Fang shook his head doubtfully, and turned back to gaze at Shi Mu's movements, his eyes shining with excitement. He had not seen such a charm Adept like Shi Mu for a long time, and, in the eyes of an adept of Star Grade like himself, Shi Mu could already be counted as proficient, even beating many Adepts of the Spirit Grade.

[ED: I guess a 'twinkle' is a short period of time? :P]

With a green light shining, Shi Mu put down his brush and looked at the

sandglass. It was quite near to the two hour deadline. Now there were five charms lying on his table, each shining energetically, indicating the abundance of spiritual power in them. By now, the audience's expressions had frozen, and they all looked at Shi Mu as if he were a monster.

At the opposite side, the shaven-headed man also put down his brush and wiped his forehead, appreciating the three charms on his table as if an indulgent father. He nodded at them with satisfaction, marveling in his heart that he had beaten his past record, successfully finishing three charms in two hours. He took pride in this new record, thinking that, in general, a magic scholar could hardly complete one charm in two hours.

The shaven-headed man raised his head, but then his proud look vanished as he saw Shi Mu circled by almost all the disciples present, whereas he had only a few standing by his desk, and they had embarrassed expressions on their faces, as if they were sorry for his failure.

"Time's up!"

Master Fang's voice resounded, and all the people around Shi Mu's desk stepped away. The shaven-headed man glowered at Shi Mu's table, where five charms were glowing merrily. He could not help but tremble, unable to believe his eyes.

"The winner is Shi Mu. And, as arranged before, the Kun room goes to Shi Mu and no one should raise an objection." Master Fang nodded to Shi Mu with appreciation, then turned to whisper Mountain Green some more words before he left with light steps. All the people around now suddenly awakened from their surprised states, hailing praises to congratulate Shi Mu. After a minute, the crowd dispersed, all going back to their own business, as if nothing had happened. It had taken them much of their time to watch such a wonderful competition, and now they could not afford to lose more time.

The shaven-headed man glanced at Shi Mu with fiercely burning eyes, and shaking his sleeves venomously. he too returned back to his desk. And thus the farce had ended perfectly.

[TL] Dear readers, I really want to know how you find Jin Xiaochai? Do you think her charming or sinister? [Actually she is fun! You'll see in further

development.]

[ED: Now I want to know what ‘fun’ is. O.O]

Chapter 126 - Catch up with an Old Friend

“Congratulations, brother Shi! You surprised me with your skills! Any chance you would be willing to give me some pointers? “ Feng Li accosted Shi Mu suddenly, full of ingratiating smiles.

“You flatter me, brother Feng. Sure, let’s learn from each other.” Shi Mu replied with due politeness. Then, after exchanging some pleasantries, the two parted, a friendly atmosphere between them.

“Brother Shi, please follow me. I’ll show you to the Kun room, where there are some other things I think I’d better let you know about.” Mountain Green returned his gaze to Shi Mu after everyone else had left. Then, with Shi Mu’s agreement, the two left the hall and traveled to the Kun room.

The two pushed the door open and got a look at the interior space, which amounted to approximately thirty square meters. It had a stone bed in the corner, and all kinds of tools and equipment, for making charms, set up and ready. There was also a giant formula covering the four walls, each carved with numerous magical characters - this was the Reincarnation Formula, which Mountain Green had mentioned before.Mountain Green fished around in his shirt and then took out a white jade ornament, passing it to Shi Mu, “This is the token of this stronghold, Rat Nest. Do store it carefully. Also, you need this to activate the Reincarnation Formula.”

Shi Mu nodded without saying a word, and received the token. Instilling some spirit power into it, he lifted it into the air and gave it a gentle shake. The magic characters on the walls soon shone brightly and the air inside the room felt cooler, like streams of a burbling autumn stream. He soon felt like a soft breeze was brushing across his cheeks. Slowly, the whiff of fresh air seeped into his skin and quickly ran through his body. As a result, his spirit felt refreshed, and both his spirit power and physical strength began to restore at a speed one third faster than usual. Quite satisfied, Shi Mu nodded to Mountain Green to show his fondness for this room.

“Good. Brother Shi has trudged a long way to our stronghold and just finished an intensive competition. So please have a good rest today. Leave work for tomorrow.” Mountain Green said warmly, and then sensibly excused himself. Shi

Mu did not stay in the room long either. After a careful, curious inspection, he pushed the door open and strode forward. He'd spend the rest of the day exploring the stronghold.

.....

Night fell. Shi Mu returned to his room and sat quietly on his bed. It was high time for him to practice the Art of the Heavenly Elephant, especially now that he was in this formula-blessed room. He did not reopen his eyes for a long time.

During the daytime, he had travelled to almost every nook and cranny of this Rat Nest, acquainting himself with the stronghold and its people. The underground citadel was well built, with paths leading in every direction, and an entrance at each of the four major directions: East, West, North, and South. No wonder it was named Rat Nest, mimicking the way rats would build their own homes. As for the people here, most Adepts would be assigned tasks of making charms by Master Fang each day, and could act freely as long as one finished the charms on time. In their spare time, some would take on extra tasks from the jade wall in the hall for more feat points - that is, under the condition that these extra tasks would not account for much of their training time. Also, the Rat Nest was not far from Lan City, which was another big stronghold of the union where a large supply of daily essentials and training materials could be exchanged for with feat points. All in all, at the moment, this was the perfect place for Shi Mu. Right now he had reached the fourth level in the Art of the Heavenly Elephant, a bottleneck that he was having trouble breaking through. Hence, the most urgent requirement for him now was a steady period of time, in safety, where he had a comfortable environment fit for self-training.

However....

Shi Mu knitted his eyebrows, and a beautiful figure floated before his eyes. Jin Xiaochai. What was she up to? The very thought of her unfathomable eyes sent chills down his spine. He could not help but believe that the whole situation had some dark side to it. What on earth that could attract a Xiantian saint's attention to him? But he felt relief when he heard that Jin Xiaochai was not a regular elder in the Rat Nest.

Just as he was combing through these strange thoughts, a knock at his door

broke his concentration. He stood up to open the door and the blue costume of the guest standing outside attracted his eyes - it was Feng Li.

“Brother Feng, what a wonderful surprise! Please, come in.” Shi Mu did not let his facial expression betray his inner turmoil. With an inviting smile, he made room for Feng Li to come in.

“I came without an invitation. I hope I haven’t interrupted brother Shi,” Feng Li said apologetically.

“What? No, As a newcomer, I’ve got loads of things to ask brother Feng. You’ve come at the right time.”

After making some small talk, the two sat down by the desk, in a pleasant mood.

“Alas, I never thought that we, the once-practitioners, could meet again in this stronghold. By the way, you killed Jin Tian of the Jin Clan, and offended the Wu Clan. The two families offered a generous reward for your death, and news said that they had sent Houtian warriors to kill you...And now! You have not only fled successfully, but also joined the Black Demon Sect.” Feng Li exclaimed, a sense of nostalgia filling the room.

“It’s all by chance that I’ve become what I am today.” Shi Mu also signed wistfully, an image of a pretty girl appearing in his mind. As a matter of fact, due to all sorts of accidental mishaps, Zhong Xiu had a lot to do with his joining the Black Demon Sect. According to Ke Er, after being brought back to the sect by Red Herb, Zhong Xiu was greatly valued by the elders, due to her rare bloodline, and, thus, was offered the best training. She was not required to come to the battlefield either. Because of this, there was no need for Shi Mu to worry about her, but the sad thing was that the two of them would not meet during this time of war.

Having these thoughts tumbling in his mind, Shi Mu chatted with Feng Li casually, giving him a rough recount of how he joined the sect. Feng Li also told him some of his own experiences, including how the Black Fox Gang was eradicated by another gang after Shi Mu left the Feng City, and how he himself fled from the confused fighting while most lost their lives. After his chance survival, Feng Li joined up with a gang of bandits in the mountains, and later

succeeded the leader's position, due to his outstanding performance. Once, they robbed a group of bodyguards halfway to the city, and from a young man amongst them, Feng Li got the token to join the Black Tortoise Sect. Thus, he became a sect disciple in a very odd way.

However, Shi Mu was not completely convinced by this story, especially the part of him joining the Black Tortoise Sect. But he decided to remain silent and respect his friend's privacy.

"Brother Shi has really changed a lot. I barely recognized you at first." Feng Li smiled heartily.

"So have you, brother Feng! No wonder the Black Tortoise is one of the seven big sects! Their arts are so magical that you are looking younger than you were back in Feng City!" Shi Mu threw out the question in a casual way, indicating that he was not trying to pry.

"Hehe, this is an art I've been practicing called the Rising Sun Art. It's only effect is to remain youthful! I mean, it's really useful in helping you keep a good appearance." Feng Li gave a bitter smile.

"Wow, I've never heard of such an art. By the way, does brother Feng know how my Auntie Zhen and half-sister are doing? I did ruined everything back then, and I worry if I got them involved." Shi Mu nodded, and, after a hesitating for a moment, he ventured the question that concerned him the most. Auntie Zhen was the only one that treated him like a motherly figure in Feng City, and Shi Yuhuan was the only one related to him by blood, so, naturally, his heart was always thinking of them.

"Brother Shi killed Jin Tian that year, which was a sensational news in Feng City. Even the patriarch of the Jin Clan was appalled. So your Auntie could not go unpunished, but she was not severely punished - she was only confined. As for Shi Yuhuan, I heard she was enrolled into the KaiYuan Martial Arts School, but I have no idea how she is doing now." Feng Li answered, after giving the question some thought.

Shi Mu heaved a sigh of relief after hearing this. The two talked a bit more before Feng Li stood up and bid him a goodnight.

.....

It was in the dead of the night, and the entire world was enveloped by a complete silence. The moon hung high up in the night sky, flooding the earth with its bright light.

Just then, a figure sneaked out of the west exit of the Rat Nest, quickly moving through bushes and under trees. The figure stopped after traveling through the mountains for an hour. He sat down, cross-legged, in a flat open area. This figure was none other than Shi Mu. The moon shed its cool, soft light on his body, and soon Shi Mu entered his dreamland again.

.....

In the Space of Death.

A majestic mountain tower dominated the area around it, making the ragged land at its base look shabby in comparison. Several meters away from the foot of the mountain there lay a small, muddy pond, and beside it, the ground was littered with broken bones, which came in many different sizes, but, judging from the amount of bones, they could make up, at least, six complete human skeletons. The pond would spout a bubble every now and then, and, apart from its water quality and the blood-red color, there was nothing special about this pond.

Silk was now lying inside this pond, her mouth repeatedly opening and closing, as if absorbing the blood water and then spitting it back out. Each time, the color of the water would deepen to some extent. But after what seemed an eternity, the pond cleared, the water transparent again.

Splash! The gleams in Silk's eye sockets glittered as she suddenly stood up to her full height.

[TL: Alright, I prefer "she" because Silk would be a really beautiful girl later. :)]

[ED: HELL YEAH! {XD} (But I am keeping it gender neutral JUST IN CASE) Forget that. I am changing it all back to feminine. Gender neutral possessiveness sucks. I'm going to be upset if this turns out to be a dude. -_-;]

Two years had past since the day she had formed a contract with Shi Mu. She did not look that much different to how she looked two years ago. The only difference was that her bones seemed strengthened, and her eye sockets

gleamed more brightly. Also, she now had a bone sword hanging from her waist, and a crude bone armor covering her arms and waist.

Silk bent her head, looking at the pond's surface. Right now, the twelve blood-red moons were casting their reflections on it. The water, which had been made transparent, was returning to its former redness, but at a tremendously slow rate. It passes anyone's knowledge to foretell how long it would take to regain a full redness.

Silk returned her gaze to the distance, and, turning around, she marched forward, lonely but determined.

.....

Day was breaking.

On a mountain near the Rat Nest, Shi Mu awakened from his ape dream with a jolt.

.....

One month later, in the Kun room.

Shi Mu sat on his bed, a white jade bottle in hand. His eyes were glinting thoughtfully.

During this period, he had gained the approval of all the Adepts in this stronghold, as well as Master Fang, as a result of his outstanding skills. He had helped the stronghold with many urgent tasks. Under Master Fang's permission, like the other two Spirit Grade Adepts, he could visit the stronghold's storehouse freely to fetch materials needed for making charms. If the material was for his own use, he'd need to exchange for it with his feat points - a rather fair deal. Several days ago, he broke a record while finishing a very urgent task, and the union broke a rule to award him a Wall-Breaking Pill.

As designated by its name, the Wall-Breaking Pill helps one break through a bottleneck in a warrior's training, and holds special effects for Houtian warriors. Due to the difficulty of its production, it is, usually,not sold in any markets.

With this pill, the prospect of breaking the fourth level of the Art of the Heavenly Elephant became quite promising.

Having made up his mind, Shi Mu put the white jade bottle at his hand's reach, and began to adjust his breathing.

Chapter 127 - Temptation from the Fair Lady

Once he was prepared for the training, Shi Mu's chest began to heave, and wisps of real qi started slowly flowing out of his dantian, circulating Qi through all the veins in his body before returning back to his dantian. This process was repeated over and over again, and during its circulation, his real qi kept drawing heavenly energy in from the environment, which then joined the real qi in his body and gradually strengthened it.

As the cycles went on, the speed with which his real Qi was flowing continually gained momentum. Eventually, it finally grew to the point that it was like a massive river was surging through his veins. At this time, Shi Mu was cloaked in a thin mist, his skin moistened and red, and his veins all standing out, like earthworms that appeared to be trying to break free from his body.

Shi Mu's eyes were glinting in great pain as every one of his muscles protruded, attempting to break the blockade that was his skin. Meanwhile, the flow of real Qi in his body had reached its highest speed! He did not hesitate and grasped the jade bottle at his side, pouring out the Wall-Breaking Pill and swallowed it. Immediately, he felt as if a cold polar ice had plummeted down to his stomach, and the pill's coldness soon spread to his torso and limbs.

Shi Mu trembled and felt his blood freeze, while his face turned abnormally pale. The flood of real Qi came to a sudden halt, and was forced by the coldness to compress and become denser.

As time went by, his real Qi was finally condensed to a thin wisp. But the next moment, without warning, it suddenly exploded and turned into the wild flood again.

A thunderous noise reverberated through his body, and his heart throbbed fiercely at the impact. Simultaneously, a undescribable force rushed out from his dantian.

He felt as if his skin had suddenly broken, like a piece of thin paper pricked open. All of a sullen, a great deal of the heavenly energy around him flooded into his body. Just like a prisoner who had not seen the sky for years, Shi Mu felt that the air was indescribably fresh - a freshness that he had never tasted throughout

his young life, and that every pore of his skin had been bathed in a comfortable coolness. At the same time, the mist that had been curling up his body lifted, his body also recovered its normal look. Shi Mu tried clenching his fists, elated to find himself full of energy, and his force one-level stronger than before.

So he had finally succeeded in breaking into the fifth stage of the Art of the Heavenly Elephant! The bottleneck was like a high wall before he took the pill, but now it had melted down, like a piece of thin paper. No wonder it was named the Wall-breaking Pill.

Hardly able to contain his excitement, he stood up, throwing his fists into the air and stretching his body. To his surprise, his movement created a strong wind, accompanied by the sound of explosion as his fist or foot thrust into the air.

Shi Mu was so excited that he drew his black blade and began to practice the Thirteen Series of Gale Force Blade Art. A beam of black light floated distinctly in the air near his body, and the glint of his blade suddenly divided into six or seven shadows at either side, simultaneously striking a spot in the air from both sides.

He played with his sword, like a young boy presented with a toy for the first time, and was reluctant to stop until an hour later. He then went to his stone bed, sat on it, and sank into a deep contemplation, his eyes glittering like the surface of a pond under the moon.

At the time when he reached the fourth stage of the Art of the Heavenly Elephant, he had tried to practice the Art of the Great Ape, but failed, due to his lack of real Qi.

But he had not been idle since then. From that failure, he knew that he would have enough real Qi in his dantian to resist the corroding force of Devil’s qi as long as he made it to the fifth stage of the Art of the Heavenly Elephant.

.....

Twelve blood-red moons were suspended in the dark grey sky.

In a yellow valley laid a small pool that was just two meters in diameter. Its red water seemed quite vibrant in such a grey world. Fragments of skeletons lied disorderly around the pool, and, judging from the number of bone pieces, there were enough bones here to make 5 skeletons.

Right now, the clamor of weapons clashing disturbed the water, making it quiver a bit. Three skeletons wearing bone armors had besieged a skeleton in broken bone armor. The one with the broken bone armor was Silk. Through her broken armor, broken ribs with numerous fissures could be seen, and three of them were missing. Her upper body was trembling from the imbalance.

Silk swept with her bone blade and repelled two blades that striking at her from the front, but the impact made her body shake more violently. Just then, a white bone spear stabbed from another side at her vertebra. If the spear did hit its target, Silk may have been smashed to peices, and there was no way she could duck, given her present condition. But she had her ways. Without warning, the black formula sealed in her soul inside her skull suddenly shone! In no time the green gleams in her eye sockets gained alarming brightness, and, with a strange movement, she flashed to the saide, the spear missed her bones and stabbing at empty air. Then she stepped forward, effortlessly cutting down one of the skeletons with her bone blade.

But, again, the other two blades launched their attacks with air-piercing sounds. Silk suddenly knelt down to duck the attacks, and the blades missed.

The next second, the two skeletons were cut into halves at the waist, and, with two clear sounds, they fell to the ground, followed by another two crisps sounds as their skulls crashed onto the floor. Silk did not hurry to stand up but quickly stomped on all the bones near the pool. Each bone piece would release a ball of green light when it was crushed, which would then flow into Silk's mouth and strengthen her soul.

During the next few moments, she fumbled in the piles, looking for some solid bones to fit her missing parts. After a short while, her body was rebuilt, solid and sound, which delighted her very much. She cracked into a blissful smile, gazing at the red pool in front of her, the green fire in her eyes flickering.

After the first time she had bathed in such a red pool, she began to seek out similar pools subconsciously, and then a voice emerged from her soul, telling to her that the red pool would strengthen her.

Half-conscious, Silk walked down to the pool and slowly submerged herself in the water.

Before long, bubbles floated up.

……

Shi Mu was cheerfully walking along a path that lead toward the Rat Nest deep in the Xuan Ling Mountains.

He had just exchanged his feat points for a bottle of extremely pure Devil's qi in the stronghold of Lan City, and also bought three bottles of ape blood.

He is excited about getting to see the body-strengthening effects of the Art of the Strong Ape, and he can't wait to arrive at the stronghold and practice the art.

But when he had just turned around a corner, his face contorted in alarm while his legs involuntarily stopped moving. An extremely beautiful young girl in a golden dress was standing in the front of him with a charming smile on her face. It seemed that she had known he would come this way and had been waiting for him.

Who else could she be except Jin Xiaochai?

"Master Jin, it is an honor for your disciple Shi Mu to see you here." Shi Mu suppressed the distress in his heart and steeled himself to step ahead and bow to her.

"You have fought together with me and we have known each other for so long, don't be so polite... So, how are you doing in the Rat Nest?" Jin Xiaochai giggled and spoke in a sweet voice, meanwhile she stepped near Shi Mu, staring at him with great interest in her beautiful eyes and a passionate smile on her lips.

"I don't dare not be polite! As for the stronghold, it is much better than risking one's life in other places. Thanks to Master Jin for her recommendation!" Shi Mu could not help but step back to keep distance from her, his heart beating nervously. He had a bad premonition that this foxy woman had sought himself out as a target for some evil doing.

"I recommended you so that a genius of our sect could get more efficient training. It's my duty, no need to thank me. Master Fang appreciates you very much and I have heard that you have been awarded a Wall-Breaking Pill. You seemed in a hurry, maybe you have some arts you want to practice? Trying to

make another breakthrough again?" Jin Xiaochai stepped forward, licking her upper lip, and her beautiful eyes were still staring at Shi Mu enthusiastically.

Under Jin Xiaochai's fervent eyes, Shi Mu retreated subconsciously and replied with his head bent down, "Your humble disciple really has an art at a bottleneck and was trying to seize this valuable chance to break through it."

"I appreciate your efforts. Feel free to ask me if you have any problems in your practices." Jin Xiaochai detected Shi Mu's nervousness, so she stepped forward again, a small smile on her lips. A puff of delicate fragrance immediately filled his nose, and made his heart start trembling, so he stepped back another step. However, a coldness mercilessly pressed against his back, and he turned his head to find that he had already reached the base of a cliff.

"Master Jin had helped me a lot. If there is anything I can do for you, please let me know." Shi Mu felt himself hopelessly cornered. Resourceless, he, at last, raised his head to meet Jin Xiaochai in the eyes and spoke frankly, hoping to end this ridiculous conversation as soon as possible.

"Why are you so nervous? Are you afraid of being eaten by me? You look so young and handsome, and I guess you must still be single. May I introduce a beautiful female disciple to you?" Jin Xiaochai did not stop her steps, and smiled even more charmingly.

"Thanks a lot for Master's concern, but your humble disciple only wants to cultivate and practice the arts. Marriage is out of my concerns right now." Shi Mu hurriedly waved his hand and refused in a determined tone.

"Hehe, which man would turn down the invitation of a beautiful woman? You can rest assured, the disciple I shall introduce to you is just like me, both in features and figure." Jin Xiaochai threw a flirtatious smile. The next moment, Shi Mu was shocked out of his wits as she stepped even nearer, her bosom pushing against his chest. Completely flustered, Shi Mu tried to duck to the side, blood rushing to his head, but Jin Xiaochai's right hand had stretched out to prop herself against the cliff, blocking Shi Mu's way. Her soft body was completely pressed against him.

Shi Mu almost fainted, and a whiff of slight fragrance of her body whipped against his face. His mouth felt parched, and his muscles were in a great tension.

Right now, Jin Xiaochai's face was touching his, her lips so near that Shi Mu felt his heart stop beating. Her large, liquid eyes were gazing into his, like a passionate lover. Her breath was blowing intimately against his face, as fragrant as a rose. Her full breasts seemed as if they were bursting forth from her clothes, pushing against his chest.

He could not help but feel that his heart was trying to break out of his chest, beating fiercely like a drum. The air was making his head feel light, and he felt like fainting every second. In his entire life, never had a woman, especially a woman of such unearthly beauty, been so close to him! Shi Mu had totally lost his usual peace of mind as lust charged emotions filled his head.

Looking at such a beautiful face, with rosy lips and a lovely expression, no man would not want to have a kiss.

"Wouldn't you consider a disciple looking identical to me?" Jin Xiaochai came even nearer. Opening her lips, she breathed out another warm breath into Shi Mu's ears, almost pleading.

"My heart is taken, please behave yourself, Master Jin." Shi Mu bit his tongue to regain his balance, answering relentlessly with his teeth clenched.

[TL: Haha, so you finally did it! Well done, Shi Mu!]

Chapter 128 - Practicing the Art of the Strong Ape

“Oh? That’s quite unexpected. You’re in love at such a young age? May I know who she is?”

“Er…” Shi Mu hesitated. The last thing he wanted to do was to speak her name on such an occasion.

“Don’t hum and haw, or you are kidding me about this girl?” Jin Xiaochai’s face hardened, and the smile in her eyes vanished.

“I wouldn’t dare.” Shi Mu was scared stiff.

“If so, tell me. If it is true, I will not be hard on you.” Jin’s tone softened, cajoling Shi Mu to let her know his secret. In accordance, her body moved several inches away, which gave Shi Mu some room to draw his breath.

“It is the Devil Witch of the Tian Yin sect.” Shi Mu’s eyes grew more determined as he pronounced the name. It made no sense to hide his thoughts now.

“The Devil Witch? Did I hear you right? Do you know that she is the greatest genius of the Tian Yin Sect in centuries? She reached the Xiantian stage when she was twenty years old, and now she is the only disciple of Master Gongsun Yu, the Earth Grade Saint of the Tian Yin Sect.” The enchanting expression on Jin Xiaochai’s face evaporated, and she was staring at Shi Mu sardonically, as though she was talking to a mentally handicapped man. Notwithstanding, for an instant, however momentary, her eyes spoke of suffering - a trace of sorrow clouded them, though she quickly managed to hide it.

“The Devil Witch of Tian Yin has said that if I can reach the Xiantian stage before I turn thirty, I can then go to the Wan Long Mountain to meet her.” Shi Mu was not deterred at all by Jin Xiaochai’s sarcastic words, and he replied in a most serious tone.

“Haha.” Hearing his words, Jin Xiaochai returned a big smile, almost unable to hold herself, as if she had just heard the most humorous joke in the world. She was grinning from ear to ear, with one hand on her stomach for quite some time. Then, after a good laugh, she closed her delicate mouth and her expression became frosty. Without saying a word, she averted her eyes from Shi Mu and

wandered off. It almost felt like an unearthly dream. Only the remnant smell of her fragrance proved that she had actually been there.

Shi Mu's eyes shone suspiciously as he gazed at the receding figure. His fists fast clenched. He would never forget that sense of powerlessness he felt, both mentally and physically, in front of a Xiantian saint like Jin Xiaochai. Because the disparity between their strength was so painfully felt, he knew he had no chances of survival if the two of them ever fought. The disdainful sneer she gave him had been full of venom, and would always remain in his mind. Though he did not know what intentions she had, approaching him so many times, he knew, for sure, that this woman would never let him go easily.

However, there was one thing that he was sure about at the moment: he must strengthen himself as fast as possible. For one thing, it was for his pledge made to his deceased mother. For another, the stronger he became, the narrower the gap between himself and the Devil Witch would become.

Shi Mu stared hard in the direction that Jin Xiaochai had disappeared one more time, and then turned his head and strode into the Rat Nest.

After he was back in his Kun room, he sat on the bed and spent a lot of time than regaining his inner calm. With eyes shut, he recalled the details of the Art of the Strong Ape once again, from beginning to end, and, when he was sure about his memory, he started to practice it.

As the art began to work inside his body, Shi Mu began to pull in the pure heavenly energy in the environment. This time was different from when he practiced the Art of the Heavenly Elephant. This time, the power did not flow into his veins but, instead, melted into his skin and muscles.

The pure heavenly energy was then transformed into infinitesimal crystals that stored themselves in Shi Mu's body in accordance with the art. Within just one hour, hundreds of crystals had formed.

Shi Mu was quite happy that this art was as easy to practice as the jade slip had said, and he had not suffered any hardship to make this much progress in a short time.

After six hours, Shi Mu's body jolted and he opened his eyes. He turned over, with his hands on the bed, and quickly got to his feet. He closed his eyes and

tried to sense the power. Though it was hard to say, he did feel something different in his body. A satisfied smile broadened on his face.

Since he was diagnosed as having the bloodline of the Stone Ape, he had clearly felt that he was slower than others in practicing Houtian arts, for his Qi flowed more slowly through his veins. But the art of the Strong Ape was just a supplementary art that only served to strengthen his body, not his Qi, so he had no problems practicing it. All went perfectly well.

Shi Mu rejoiced in his heart at how lucky it was for him to have chosen the Art of the Strong Ape, which had proven to be the most appropriate Houtian art for him.

In the next month, Shi Mu mostly led a secluded life. He would accomplish the daily assignment of the union as quickly and efficiently as possible, and then spend rest of the day working on his cultivation. In just a few days, he had reached the first stage of the Art of the Strong Ape, and his first chance to strengthen his body and veins had come. Now it was time to use the Devil Qi.

.....

Shi Mu sat on his bed with his legs crossed, his eyes fixed on the bottles in front of him. One was a green copper bottle, as big as his palm, while the other three were white china bottles.

After a while, he picked up the green copper bottle and took a tiny peek inside, shaking it cautiously. A puff of black smoke soon spread out from within.The black smoke twisted like a distressed snake in the air, seeming to be quite uncomfortable in this environment. It soon rushed into the ground, disappearing like a snowflake melting into a pool of water.

Shi Mu nodded, knowing that the Devil Qi was a kind of special qi generated in dark and dirty places and, thus, had a strong resistance to the pure heavenly energy of the sky and earth. Generally speaking, Devil Qi hid deep under the earth.

Thinking this, Shi Mu opened one of the white jade bottles and a fishy smell soon filled his nose. It simply contained ordinary ape blood. He rapidly opened the lid of the copper bottle and poured all the ape blood into it. Just like pouring oil onto a fire, the ape blood soon vaporized and caught fire, but the remaining

black smoke inside the bottle seemed quite excited, transforming into a black snake that swallowed the blood-red flame, rotating wildly in the bottle.

As time went by, the blood flame dwindled, as if it was digested by the black smoke. When the blood flame totally disappeared, the black smoke snake returned to its original form again, now faintly glowing red.

Shi Mu repeated the action with the other two bottles of ape blood, and they, too, were also swallowed by the Devil Qi. Meanwhile, the red light became increasingly bright. Shi Mu was quite satisfied with this. He covered the copper lid, and grabbed the bottle with his hand.

All done, Shi Mu took the posture of Five-Hearts to the Sky -

[TL: actually I've no idea what is this in Chinese either… :( ]

-and adjusted his breath, sinking into a state of total oblivion.

After a while, the Art of the Strong Ape was activated and he soon felt all the crystals in his body. But the heavenly energy in the environment was unable to enter his body, as if it was being blocked by something. This was what he had been waiting for. Shi Mu immediately lifted the green bottle, opened the lid, and, without any hesitation, poured the contents out onto his skin.

A black smoke bursting with red light flowed out of the bottle and then the light flickered within it, as if having received a message. Then the black smoke turned abruptly towards Shi Mu, instead of rushing into the earth, and soon enveloped his body.

Shi Mu's face turned pale, and sweat began to pour out from every pore. When the Devil Qi touched his skin, every part of his body felt like it was being pricked by thorns of steel, and the pain accumulated, growing stronger and stronger - a kind of inexpressible pain that made one feel like he was, little by little, having his skin peeled off.

With his body trembling uncontrollably, he clenched his teeth in reflex, and his heart thumped like a huge drum.

Why did it have to be so painful?

After the Devil qi entered his body, it crushed the crystals created by the Art of

the Strong Ape into powder, which then transformed into spiritual power that blended with the Devil Qi. When the crystals broke, Shi Mu ached from his internal organs to his skin, and every part of his body, even his soul, felt like it was being torn apart. His face twisted, and around his neck, blue veins protruded and throbbed. Even his muscles were affected, twitching like crazy.

It hurts. It's agonizing. I've never felt such pain. This pain will kill me! These were the only thoughts in Shi Mu's mind right now.

The Devil Qi darted around inside his body at lightning speed, and soon invaded his bones and organs. The pain grew more and more, and he finally knew what it was like to be pained to the very marrow of his bones.

As all of this was happening, the energy of his environment, which would normally be transformed into the tiny crystals, also entered his body, being absorbed and strengthening his constitution.

The main use of the Art of the Strong Ape was simply to strengthen one's muscles and veins with the help of Devil Qi. When it was invading his body, the Qi in Shi Mu's veins also started to activate and resist the invasion, protecting his crucial veins.

However, the bottle Shi Mu bought was no ordinary Devil Qi, but the purest of all, and, with the help of the Art of the Strong Ape, Dark and cold Yin energy was blended into his Qi.

After a full two hours of torture, the black smoke covering Shi Mu's body finally faded away. The Devil Qi had finally been exhausted. He had not suffered pain in vain: Shi Mu had succeeded in the first step, which was to purify his blood and strengthen his marrow.

He stopped activating the art and slumped on his bed, like a dead fish. His eyes were unfocused and spiritless. His lips were ashen. Sweat glistened all over his body, mixed with a kind of black, turbid fluid, that made him feel like hell. After having relaxed for almost an hour, he recovered a little, and staggered to the bathroom to scrub his body with clear water he had prepared before. With this, his will to live started to return. Just a moment ago, he still felt like Death was here with him, having an intimate conversation with him in this very room.

His eyes recovered their vitality too. He stretched his limbs in the room, and

happily found that his body had become much stronger than before.

His speed and strength had increased. His skin was strengthened, tougher, and more pliable.

A coldness in his dantian drew his attention. He paused on the spot, pondering how he used to temper his body as a Practitioner years before.

After a while, Shi Mu raised his brows with an enlightened smile, and quickly activated the Qi in his body with the Art of the Heavenly Elephant. The next moment, he was thrilled to find that he had Yin energy at his command. It had already mixed with the Qi in his dantian. He thrust out his right fist and a fierce coldness burst forth with it.

His eyes glinted with irresistible joy, knowing that, despite its current weakness, the Yin energy inside him would grow tremendously once he could reach the fifth level in the Art of Strong Ape, even able to kill an enemy without weapon.

But his heart trembled at the thought of the Devil Qi. He had to absorb it again the next time he did this.

Soon, he managed to suppress the fear, and his eyes regained their usual determined luster. It was beyond his expectations that the Yin power could seep into his own Qi, and this ‘bonus’, per se, was worth the pain, however unbearable it was at that moment.

Chapter 129 - The Soul-Comforting Spell

Days went by like this, and, before Shi Mu had realized it, two months time had passed. Now it was time for him to conduct the next Blood-and-Marrow Cleansing. Though he had long since prepared himself for it, mentally, when the Devil Qi, again,invaded his body, the excruciating pain was even stronger than the last time. Even with his superhuman perseverance and ability to bear pain, Shi Mu shuddered at the thought of the third experience that was to come in a few months time. Fortunately, he had reached the fifth level in the Art of the Heavenly Elephant, which helped him tremendously in protecting his veins, so at least the hellish second Blood-and-Marrow Cleansing, though painful, ended successfully.

After he recovered from the pain and exhaustion, he was delighted to find that his physical strength and toughness had been boosted to a great extent. Currently, his speed and strength had almost been doubled compared to what it was before he began the Art of the Strong Ape. Thus his confidence was greatly enhanced. With a cheerful heart, he continued to climb up the ladder to the third level.

However, after three months, when he steeled himself for the third wave of pain, he found his luck had been exhausted.

Shi Mu was sitting on his stone bed, his face puckering in pain. His bare upper-body was already smudged with blood, as if he had just finished taking a shower in blood. Every pore was leaking blood, as if someone had been cutting at his muscles with a sharp-edged knife. His bed was already dyed red.

At this moment, his marrow seemed to groan, as though being gnawed at by hundreds of ants, which created an unbearable numbness mixed with itchiness. This time, the pain was two times worse than last time. It seemed to focus on Shi Mu’s spirit, so much so that Shi Mu almost broke down. At length, after having endured the constant pain for a complete hour, Shi Mu fainted, darkness filling his eyes.

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Shi Mu’s consciousness gradually returned, and, by reflex, he shook his head in

an attempt to shake off the dizziness and heaviness he felt. But, to his great shock, he found himself unable to budge an inch. He groped in the dark, and stared out at his surroundings, then was filled with shock: white hair had sprouted all over his body! He was that mysterious white ape again! He was in his dream, except that the environment had shifted. He was not on the familiar boulder on the cliff, but in a huge open space, surrounded by verdant trees. The trees seemed to tower into the sky, each at least as high as three thousand meters. Quiet and energetic, these giants stood and watched the world.

Suddenly, a booming noise resounded, shaking the earth, and dragging Shi Mu's consciousness back to the ape's body. By then, he had noticed that, this time, the ape was not practicing the Moon-Swallowing Art, but had half of his body buried in the earth, leaving his hairy head sticking out. It seemed he was at the center of a great formula drawn on the ground, dotted thickly with unfathomable characters and brightly flashing patterns. These patterns extended out in all directions, constructing the immense formula that was blurred by lights and shadows.

At either side of the formula stood a mountainous yellow-cloaked man. Their heads were cleanly shaven, making light gleam off of them. Their features were as ugly as a ferocious ghost's. Every vein in every muscle protruded. The two men were each wearing sloppy yellow cloaks, with glittering silver magic characters on the surface of these cloaks.

The two were both expressionless. They each had an iron hammer the length of thirty meters in their hands. They were hammering at the periphery of the formula, each strike making an earthshaking noise, and simultaneously shooting silver light into the formula, making the lights on it flash even more wildly.

Meanwhile, at the center of the formula, Shi Mu could feel the earth vibrating, and strange energies wrapping him in like cool liquids, squeezing him constantly. As the silver hammer in the yellow-cloaked giant's hands moved even faster, the pressure of the strange energy grew accordingly. Shi Mu felt his body temperature falling, and the energy soon penetrated his skin, like countless tiny needles.

The white ape screeched, grimacing in pain. The tiny needles of energy whizzed into his body, occupying his organs, and stabbed fiercely. The inexpressible

agony inflicted Shi Mu to the extent of wishing to die. More frighteningly, Shi Mu's spirit felt fits of pain tenfold times more excruciating than that he experienced before he fainted.

Thirty meters away from the silver formula, a white-haired elder with long brows was floating in the air on a dark green cushion. He saw the white ape screaming in the formula, and then raised his brows and flicked his fingers, muttering something under his long brows. This old man was the mysterious elder in Shi Mu's dream that had imparted the Moon-Swallowing Art to him.

By now, Shi Mu had neared another breakdown, and the gnawing pain was about to make him lose consciousness again. He felt like he was going to faint in a few breaths, unable to resist the pain any longer.

But just then, the elder's incantation, which eluded his comprehension, reached his ears, clearly and sonorously. Then, to his surprise, the white ape began to imitate the elder, despite its great pain, muttering those words with a widely opened mouth, like a human being. The language of the incantation sounded both foreign and familiar to Shi Mu, as if he had spoken it himself a thousand times before.

Then the most eerie thing happened. As the ape articulated the words, the pain in his body and spirit began to wear off, until what was left was fairly tolerable. This was undoubtedly a pleasant surprise to Shi Mu. He relaxed a bit, but the next moment, the dizziness came over him again, and, before he knew it, he lost consciousness.

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Without warning, Shi Mu's eyes opened, and he was in his stone room. He made no attempt to move, his brain feeling rather heavy on his body, and an overwhelming vertigo came again, accompanied by sore limbs. Lying exhausted on the bed, he sighed at the pain of the third Washing, which had far surpassed his expectations. As Auntie Dream had warned, having to wash one's blood and marrow was the deadly disadvantage of the Art of the Strong Ape.

But the next moment, his body shuddered, and he finally detected something unusual inside him. His physical toughness had been again, and the Yin power in his dantian increased tremendously. He sat up in his bed with excitement. So his

third Washing had succeeded!

Various thoughts started to fill his mind. The reason for his successful breakthrough this time may have everything to do with the dream, and, at its root, the incantation of the white-haired elder that markedly eased the pain. He anxiously racked his brains, trying to recall the spell that the white ape had learned in the dream, but his memory was in a tangle, and not even a single word was remembered. Regardless, he would not abandon this, and, after much deliberation, he sprang up from his bed and began to scrub the blood from his body with the clean water he had prepared beforehand. Changing into clean clothes, Shi Mu headed for the stronghold's east exit, his black blade in hand.

It was the middle of the night and the moon was hanging brightly in the sky. He easily found his way to a clearing in the dense forest. After making sure of his privacy, he drew the blade and dug a hole in the open ground, then jumped into it without hesitation. He raised his right fist, which glittered under moonlight like crystal, and then he punched the edge of the hole.

The surrounding soil instantly fell, completely burying his body, except for his head. Shi Mu closed his eyes hastily. After a short while, he entered the dream again.

Everything went as he had expected. The white ape appeared at the center of the formula, and the two yellow-cloaked giants were stilling hammering. The intense pain paid its visit again....

After some time when Shi Mu woke up with a jolt, his forehead glistening with sweat. He did not climb out of the pit immediately, but knit his brows tightly, trying to recall the spell. However, to his disappointment, the memory grew somewhat clearer, but still he could not remember a thing.

He clenched his teeth determinedly. Then, with eyes shut, he reentered the dream.

For the following period, he reenacted the scene, time and time again - waking up from the dream, then entering it again, with all his attention focused on the white ape's spell. Though each time he had to go through the same pain, it was worth it. He slowly began to hear the spell in his mind, even when he left the dream. After repeating it forty times, he finally managed to rememberl the weird

incantation - though with much effort - even in the ape's dream. And, after he could finally remember every word of it, three silver characters appeared in his mind - Zhen Hun Zhou - [The Soul-Comforting Spell].

Eventually, he returned to the real world, and tried to repeat what he had learned by heart in the dream. And, to his excitement, he was already able to use this spell, uttering it in the language beyond his understanding.

He leaped up from the pit. After donning his shirt, he began to head back - or, should we say dance back - to the stronghold, filled with joy.

At the moment, the sky was still pitch dark, the moonlight slanting toward the earth from the west. Shadows were cast among the trees, and, together with the pale starlight, they created a surreal world. Suddenly, something rustled in the distance, and then came footsteps that resembled a human's. Shi Mu's muscles tightened up, and hurriedly he hid behind a bush, his black blade grasped in hand.

The sounds went deep and faint, as if leaving. Shi Mu was rather confused, and narrowing his eyes, he followed the direction of the sounds quietly.

However, after making it some three hundred meters, the footsteps suddenly stopped. He waited for a few breaths, but nothing stirred in the distance. Eyes flashing, he paused to sniff the air. Faintly, a fishy smell was coming from the source of the sounds.

Shi Mu's face creased in alarm, and he followed the smell to a small hill. What he saw there was a ghastly scene: lying in a pile of pebbles and stones was a piebald leopard, small in build, some three meters in length. The hide around its skin was scratched and slashed, the exposed flesh had blood congealing on it. From the look of it, it must have only recently died. The most strange thing about the body was that it had shriveled, as if the essence inside had been sucked out.

Just as Shi Mu was about to have a closer look, a foul wind blew up from behind him. and a hairy black claw was seen trying to scratch Shi Mu's head. Shi Mu was startled, and he twisted his body like thunder. His right hand became crystalline, and thrust forward like a white light, meeting the black claw. Surprisingly, the hairy claw immediately turned into a fist, too, clashing heavily

with Shi Mu’s fist.

With a dull thud, Shi Mu’s body trembled, and he was forced backward by the impact. But this allowed him to clearly see what was attacking him: a giant, grey ape-like monster. The fur around its mouth was smeared with blood, which proved that this was the one who had sucked the leopard’s blood out

The previous clash of fists had sent the monster flying into the air, but caused no harm to it. The ape rolled over the ground for a moment, then quickly got to its feet, its bloodshot eyes viciously glowering at Shi Mu.

Chapter 130 - The Life Story of Feng Li

Shi Mu was shocked, drawing his black blade by reflex.

“Ah!” The grey ape howled in distress, then hurled itself on Shi Mu with the speed of a striking snake, nearly forming a grey shadow in the air. In no time, it had neared Shi Mu. It thrust its two hairy claws out, one at Shi Mu’s abdomen, and the other at his throat. The claws were like sickles, stretching and then contracting - it demonstrated an amazing level of control over its claws.

The golden light in Shi Mu’s eyes flashed and he twisted his wrist, thrusting the black blade forward. Two cuts were thrown out, like two black shadows suddenly emerging in the air, and they clashed with the claws.

The clash of metal resounded, sparks sputtering in all directions. The two cuts seemed to have hit on iron columns, rather than the claws, but the grey ape was, again, struck backwards into the air.

Shi Mu’s face was filled with surprise when he saw the grey ape ward off his black blade with just its claws.

He stepped on the ground and jumped forward, catching up with the grey ape. In no time, the black blade created thirteen blade shadows, covering the grey ape. It seemed that the next moment the ape’s body would burst asunder amid the blade shadows.

But Shi Mu suddenly had a surprised look come over his face, and gave his blade a sudden wrench, hewing the ape on its back instead. A loud noise came when the grey ape flew backwards, like a falling leaf, felling several big trees before finally falling to the ground.

The monster’s face contorted in agony as it struggled to get up. But a foot suddenly trampled on its back, pinning it on the ground. Shi Mu looked at the struggling grey ape coldly, and then his eyes returned to his black blade. During the past two years, the black blade had gained more and more weight. Now it was more than three hundred kilograms. Otherwise, he would not have beat the grey ape so quickly.

Shi Mu waved his right arm and the black blade passed narrowly by the grey ape’s shoulder. A piece of grey fur was cut down, revealing blue clothes

underneath.

“So it is…” Shi Mu trampled on the palm of the ape with his foot and a black steel glove, with its fingers uncovered, could be faintly seen.

Suddenly, the grey ape stopped struggling and shrieking. Shi Mu was very astonished. The grey ape trembled and the grey hair gradually started receding into its body, exposing the worn-out clothes beneath. Its sharp claws also receded, changing into a human hand.

After taking several breaths, the grey ape turned into a man, panting as he lay on his stomach. There was an unexpected dark red totem pattern on his back, similar to that of an ape, which was wriggling, as if alive.

“Barbarian!”

Shi Mu frowned and turned the man over with his foot, but he soon got shocked.

“Feng Li!”

The man that had turned from a grey ape was unexpectedly Feng Li.

By that time, the red hue faded from his eyes quickly, replaced by a pair of clear pupils.

Shi Mu’s pupils shrank for one second, and his arm jerked, his black blade returning to Feng Li’s neck.

After a while, Feng Li’s eyes came back to life, and he finally recovered his consciousness, his muscles stirring involuntarily.

”Stay still, or I will kill you, no matter who you are.”Shi Mu held his blade to Feng Li’s neck.

Feng Li’s eyes bulged and he felt as if there was a mountain crushing his shoulder, his bones creaking in great pain. But, when he finally made out that it was Shi Mu who was trampling on his back, his face paled, and he pleaded earnestly, ”Brother Shi, please…”

“Please?” Shi Mu was expressionless and he put his blade down again.

“Ahhh” Feng Li screamed again.

“Brother Feng, I did not expect that you were a spy of the barbarians. Do you have anything to say in your defence?”

“You can believe me brother Shi, I swear…Do you really think a spy of the barbarians would come out at midnight to do such things….” Feng Li gasped sharply, scared stiff of the cold blade held closely to his throat.

Hearing these words, Shi Mu halted in hesitation, but the blade in his hand did not even budge a centimeter.

“I do have a totem on my body and am something different from ordinary humans… but I can explain all of this.” Feng Li saw a glimpse of hope as the frost in Shi Mu’s eyes began to melt, so he hurriedly tried to explain.

“OK, you have a chance. So, who...or what are you?” Shi Mu frowned and raised his blade slightly.

Feng Li appeared to be in a great mental agony, struggling in his mind. Only after a while he opened his mouth and said slowly:” I am a person of mixed race. My mother is a human and my father is a barbarian.”

Shi Mu had guessed this far so he did not seem very amazed. Over the next few minutes, Feng Li told him about his life slowly, though still a little reluctant and ashamed. His mother was an ordinary human being of the Heavenly Qi Kingdom, and she was captured by the barbarians in an invasion and thus became a slave of his father.

Mostly humans would not live long in barbarian camps, but Feng Li’s mother was pregnant, so she survived. She gave birth to Feng Li who was half barbarian, but they were treated unfairly wherever they went.

After a few years, they finally succeeded in fleeing from the tribe, and managed to return to the Heavenly Qi Kingdom after having experienced all kinds of hardships and perils. But his mother was in low spirits all the time, and she eventually died.

Feng Li seemed to be honest when he was talking about his experience with a painful face. The hatred in his eyes was intense and sincere. No one could fake such a look full of agony and rancor.

Shi Mu relented at such a heart-rending story, which evoked his early

memories that bore some resemblance to Feng Li's experience, though the latter was evidently much more tragic than his own. He could not help but sympathize with him.

"So you can only be counted as half-human. What do you want from the Black Tortoise Sect?" Shi Mu thought for a while and asked seriously.

"I need strength! I have to be stronger! The barbarians owe my mother too much and I will get them back for what they have done!" Feng Li's face flushed with bitterness, and he even shouted the words.

"But what was that earlier, when you were changed into another creature?" Shi Mu did not remark on his statement, but, instead, asked another question.

"You have seen the totem on my body, brother Shi. It was planted on me by a barbarian shaman when I was a child and I don't know what it is. I never had an issue with it before, but two years ago strange things started happening, and ever since then, the mutation happens every several months. I would then become this ape monster, and my mind go unchecked, becoming fierce, and only fresh blood can calm it down." Feng Li said painfully, his teeth clenched. His face was creased in deep sorrow.

Shi Mu looked at Feng Li silently, sorting out the thoughts in his mind. After a while he suddenly put back his foot and withdrew his black blade.

Feng Li felt relieved, and sat up to look at Shi Mu nervously.

"How can I believe you, even if your words are true?" Shi Mu asked, containing the deep sympathy roused in his heart.

Feng Li was at first stunned, then lost in deep thought. After a moment of painful hesitation, he seemed to have made a final decision. He stamped his foot and took off a strange-looking necklace that was around his neck, giving it to Shi Mu. In a subdued tone, he said," It was a magic weapon given to me by my mother at her deathbed. She said it was important to the totem on my body. She warned me to keep it safe, or I would die if it is broken. I had not taken it seriously until two years ago... At that time, I started treating it as if it was my life. I know you won't believe me for just words, so I give it to you to show my innocence."

Shi Mu was quite moved by his words, and received the necklace from Feng Li to examine it carefully. The necklace seemed to be made from some kind of soft jade and should be quite antique judging from its weather-beaten expression. There was a monster like an ape curved on it, which was similar to the totem pattern on Feng Li's back!

But when Shi Mu's spirit was trying to get into it, there was a shield obstructing him out. And when his spirit touched it again, he could feel something fierce and angry inside, struggling to get free. More surprisingly, when he was trying to inspect it with his spirit, Feng Li screamed and fell down on the ground with his hand holding his head, his eyes again filled with brutality. Shi Mu was quite shocked, and he soon took his spirit back from the necklace.

Only then dd Feng Li come back to himself and climbed up with a forced smile.

"Well, now that brother Feng gives this to me, I can place my trust in you." Shi Mu thought for a while and frowned when he took his black blade back to his sheath.

"Thank you brother Shi." Feng Li staggered to his feet, and Shi Mu helped support him as he stood up. He bowed to Shi Mu to show his gratitude.

"You don't need to thank me. But I will keep an eye on you, and if you go astray I will not let you go. But I will not intervene in your other business. Just remember to control your barbarian blood, then I won't bother you, whatever you decide to pursue." Shi Mu cast a sorrowful look at the breaking sky, and spoke in a mild, but determined, tone, then he turned around calmly and walked back towards the stronghold.

Feng Li sighed, watching Shi Mu's back. Then he ran to catch up with Shi Mu. The two of them headed for the stronghold in the pale morning rays.

……

Time flew by and three months quickly passed.

The war between the two sides was still in a stalemate, with serious battles bursting out ever now and then. Yet neither side could be said to have the upper hand.

The Rat Nest was far from the battlefront, and thus did not suffer much from

the war, except for receiving more missions to draw charms. So life was quite calm.

The pain from the Blood-and-Marrow Cleansing was greatly reduced by the Soul-Comforting Spell, so, without much difficulty, he made it all the way to the fifth level in the Art of Strong Ape.

By that time, Shi Mu was inconceivably strong, and his strength had doubled. He was able to lift more than three thousand kilograms. Now he could easily snap a stick of steel, and his Stone-breaking Fist could break huge boulders to pieces. Also, his body had become much more solid than before, and ordinary weapons, without real Qi, could never injure him.

And since Shi Mu had accrued more Devil Qi as he practiced the Art of the Strong Ape, the Yin Qi in his body had also accumulated accordingly, reaching a fairly high level.

Shi Mu was very cheerful about this, but now he needed the blood of a monster ape, not ordinary ape, so he had to suspend the practice for a while.

However, just as Shi Mu was happy with his practice, a peril was silently approaching.

Chapter 131-Attacked

The earth was shrouded in darkness, and thick clouds covered the night sky. This was undoubtedly a moonless night.

On one of the wooded hills encircling the Rat Nest, giant figures were convening quietly from all directions. They halted at a spot several miles away from the stronghold. Holding their breath, nobody broke the silence, as if they were all waiting for some kind of signal.

After a short time, a dark cloud rolled by from the distance, swirling menacingly. Its form changing all the time. Sometimes it looked like a tiger, other times, like a leopard. The cloud gave off an evil aura. For a while, the dark cloud paused over the hill, hovering, and then slowly began to descend, revealing a small barbarian clad in black hide.

The barbarian man was wearing an odd-looking black hat, which looked like a black goat head. He could not be called old, but his arms had shriveled, looking like a wizened branch. Holding a white cane made of bone, he looked just like a fiendish wizard. The cane had a white skull at its top, its black eye sockets glowing with two dark fires.

At the moment, there was already a couple of giant barbarians waiting at the hilltop, who bowed deeply to salute the small wizard, like devout admirers.

“Your Highness, our Great Commander!”

“Is everything ready?” The small wizard, who was called “Great Commander”, opened his mouth, his voice deep and husky.

“All set. All four exits are manned by our people. Today we’ll definitely eradicate this stronghold. None of the human Adepts can live!” A bear-like middle-aged barbarian stepped forward, answering in a harsh voice. He was holding two axes over his shoulders.

The Great Commander coldly nodded his head, gazing at the stronghold. His eyes were full of venom.

“Commander, according to our intelligence, this stronghold is under the protection of a Star Grade Adept. Our men are brave, but they are still not that

Adept's match." The middle-aged barbarian added, after a hesitating moment.

"What are you worrying about? Why do you think I would come here, if I was not determined to meet those human bugs? " The Great Commander said, a condescending look under his dark, sinister brows.

"Of course! There's nothing to worry about with your Highness here," the middle-aged barbarian hurriedly answered.

The Great Commander waved his hand to cut off the flattery. He then shook his staff, and a white light shot up, emitting a harsh noise. Hearing the signal, all the barbarians near the stronghold burst out shouting. Rancorously throwing themselves toward the stronghold.

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In the Rat Nest.

Shi Mu was sitting cross-legged on his bed, slowly working the Art of the Heavenly Elephant. As his real qi circulated through his body, stripes of black air emerged, floating around him like silk.

During the time when he practiced the Art of the Strong Ape, he did not slack in the Art of the Heavenly Elephant. By now he he was not very far from reaching the 6th level of the art.

Just then, a huge booming noise came from outside. Shi Mu was startled, and he hurriedly got to his feet and grabbed his black blade. Just as he was to walk out of the room, a thought dawned on him. Returning to his bed, he stooped down and groped under the bed, drawing out a wooden case which contained a thick wad of charms. Without hesitation, he grabbed all the charms and stuffed them into his shirt. Then he quickly made for the door.

The booming sounds grew louder, and were coming from all directions.

"Could it be that someone is attacking our stronghold?" Shi Mu made a fearful guess in his heart, quickly scanning the environment. Then he chose a direction and ran off.

He did not make it much far when the neighboring passageway echoed with rapid footsteps. He paused with vigilance, grasping his black blade with more

strength. But the next moment he relaxed as he saw some five or six Adepts scuttling to him, among them Feng Li.

“Brother Shi, do you know what’s happening?” The group of Adepts were alarmed at first, but relieved after making out Shi Mu’s face. A male Adept in the Tian Yin sect’s uniform stepped forward and asked.

Shi Mu shook his head, “No, but it’s possible that we are under attack.”

Just as his voice fell, shouting and clashing of magic power came from the passageway ahead. The Adepts blanched with fear and looked at each other in confusion. After a minute, determined, they marched forward. Shi Mu lagged behind purposefully to approach Feng Li. But just as he was to say something, the two Adepts at the front went around the corner.

“No! Watch out!” Shi Mu’s face fell, and he called out to warn them. However, it was already too late. Two piercing sounds rang out, followed by black-feathered arrows that shot through the two hapless Adepts. They each uttered a heart-rending cry, and the arrow hurled them onto the wall behind them, nailing them to it. The black, thick feathers at the arrow end quivered violently for a long time, tracing a fan-shaped shadow in the air.

One of the two Adepts was hit in the heart, and thus died instantly. The other young Adept was still breathing, and he looked at Shi Mu pleadingly, his arms struggling to rise.

Whiz! Another arrow whistled past, and it found the Adept’s throat, sinking into the wall half an inch. The strength behind the arrow created a circle of fissures on the wall. Shi Mu looked at the two bodies mournfully, then hurriedly leaned against a slanting wall, drawing out five charms from his shirt. Straining his ears, he paid full attention to the sounds in the distance. The other Adepts were frightened out of their wits, stepping back from the two bodies, as though they were some objects of some ill omen.

The air around Shi Mu stirred as Feng Li approached. Shi Mu gave him a quick, questioning look, then glanced at the others a few meters away. He whispered to Feng Li, almost inaudibly, “the barbarians that have come...is this your doing...?”

“Brother Shi, I hate the barbarians to the bone, how could I do such a thing against us humans? Besides, I’ve given you the token of my life.” Feng Li replied

in a low voice, with a bitter smile.

Shi Mu nodded, convinced. Without any more words he turned his head to the direction of the sounds again. The urgent issue was to figure out the current conditions of the stronghold. Unfortunately, the corner ahead lead to the only place that connected to other passageways. It was imperative to kill the barbarians who were blocking the way. But this was a matter difficult to handle as long as they were unclear of the number of the enemies. Otherwise, even with his strength, he would not choose to force his way rashly.

Just as Shi Mu was wavering, Feng Li's eyes flashed determinedly, and he stepped nearer to whisper into Shi Mu's ear, "Brother Shi, if I am sensing it right, there should be four barbarians ahead blocking the passageway."

"How do you know this?" Hearing these words, Shi Mu was amazed.

"It's the totem on my back. Ever since my body started mutating, I could sense other totem warriors at a limited distance. The range is about a hundred and fifty meters. Further, I could only get a fuzzy idea." Feng Li answered frankly, without the least intention of trying to hide his ability.

"Well, if there's only four Houtian totem warriors, there's nothing to fear. " Shi Mu thought to himself, tactics to deal with the enemies crossing his mind rapidly. He did not question Feng Li's sincerity for a second.

Just then, another earth-shaking noise came! It was as if some huge monster was punching the mountain in which the stronghold was built, and the great force had violently shaken the passageways, so much so that the walls cracking. Feng Li lost his balance, slumping on the ground, and the other Adepts were also tottering. Shi Mu shrank his pupils, and shot up his body without waiting for the quake to calm. In a flash he sprang into the passageway around the corner.

Feng Li had been right, there were indeed four barbarians waiting in ambush. Two of them were archers, but due to the quake they could barely stand up, and, thus, could not aim at their targets. Shi Mu felt lucky at this great chance, and, without thinking, flung a couple of charms at their faces. The charms shone, and seven or eight icicles emerged in the air, dashing toward the four barbarians, who, at the sight, blanched in terror. In a confusion they ducked the icicles, and narrowly escaped some. But the next moment, a figure had flashed to their side.

Shi Mu raised his arm, and a glint of leaping flames fell on one of the archers holding a green bow. The barbarian archer bellowed, warding off the flames with his bow. He had great hopes in this special bow, which was made from the green crystal found exclusively in the barbarian's wastelands. It was said to be even tougher than iron. As long as he could withstand this blow, his companions could seize the chance to rescue him.

Crack! The green bow was easily cut to pieces by the hot flame, rendered as fragile as a lump of tofu. The flame did not pause for a moment, and it fell on the archer's chest, immediately chopped his body into halves. Blood splashed violently from the giant cut.

Shi Mu's face was as stern as steel, not changing a bit at being showered with blood. His arm waved another time, and the flames leaped up again, hurtling to the other archer who had just put an arrow on the string. Blood gushed out again, and this one also fell to the ground in halves. The rain of blood washed this underground passageway once more.

The other two barbarians finally came to themselves after watching their companions' violent death. They uttered a furious shout, and brandished their weapons, swooping down on Shi Mu. Their arms bulked up in a second; apparently they had activated the power of their totems. One waved a colossal blade with a ghost's head carved at the handle, while the other chopped at Shi Mu with a gigantic axe.

Shi Mu twisted his waist nimbly, and simultaneously thrust his black blade horizontally.

Crack! The two barbarians felt their hands emptied, and, in the next second, their weapons both thudded onto the ground in halves. Scorching flames flashed before their eyes, and Shi Mu withdrew his blade with an expressionless face.

The two barbarians stood in dumb horror, a circular red mark emerging around their necks and enlarging rapidly. Soon their heads tilted involuntarily, and then rolled down their bodies. The two headless corpses fell down to the ground.

It only took him a few breaths to finish all the four barbarians, and by then, the quake had died away. His eyes traced along the passageway ahead, and he frowned indignantly at the sight. Lying behind the four barbarians' bodies were

three dead Adepts, who must have been killed by the four barbarians. The fighting they heard before was probably the fight between them and the barbarians. One of the Adepts was Qiu Ming, who had fiercely opposed to Shi Mu's living in Kun room. His chest now had a huge hole in it, and he must have been dead for a while.

Footsteps reverberated through the tunnels, and Feng Li ran up to Shi Mu's side. Looking at the four dead bodies of the barbarians, a trace of extreme horror crept upon his face. Though at heart he could tell Shi Mu's supreme strength, which could be seen from how Shi Mu had beat himself after he transformed into the ape, he never would have believed that Shi Mu had grown so strong as to be able to kill four Totem warriors in a blink of an eye. After taking a deep breath, Feng Li recovered his calm, and, with great caution, asked, "Brother Shi, what are we to do next?"

Shi Mu answered without hesitation, his voice firm and fearless, "Since the barbarians have made this deep into the stronghold, I that that the Rat Nest has fallen. We have many Adepts here, but most of them do not have much experience in actual combat. The servant disciples cannot be counted on either. We have to force our way out - that's the only choice we have left."

"But we still have Master Fang, the Star Grade Adept. Isn't he a match for these barbarians?" Feng Li hesitated, and then asked this of Shi Mu.

Chapter 132 - Breakthrough

“The barbarians must have a comprehensive plan, since they dared to march so deep behind our lines and attack our stronghold. We cannot rely on Master Fang to rescue us this time.” Shi Mu shook his head.

“So…” Hearing these words Feng Li felt his heart was as heavy as a stone.

“No time to talk now, it’s dangerous to stay here. Let’s move!” Shi Mu said brusquely, striding forward.

Feng Li nodded and followed closely, not saying a word.

“Brothers! Please wait!”The sound of hurried steps came from behind, and the Adepts that had been with them previously emerged, still trembling with fear.

Shi Mu frowned anxiously and reluctantly stopped.

“Brother Shi, can we follow you?” A young man wearing clothes of the Ethereal Phoenix Sect pleaded, his face deadly pale as he saw the mutilated bodies lying desolate on the ground. The others echoed eagerly and cast beseeching looks toward Shi Mu. These charm Adepts had been living peaceful lives under the protection of their sects, hence their lack of experiences of real fighting. They had definitely not fought with barbarians on bloody battlefields. But their eyesight had not faded. While panicking in the chaos, they had clearly seen how Shi Mu reacted when the barbarians raided their stronghold. Therefore, they clung to Shi Mu, as if he was a heavenly savior.

Shi Mu’s quickly looked over them, and a hint of embarrassed hesitation crossed his eyes. These people had not experienced actual combat and could probably not even put up a fight when meeting with the barbarians. As a matter of fact, without their charms they were no better than children, and to flee with them would be a most unwise choice. But after all, they had lived in the same stronghold, which made it too difficult to refuse them.

“Brother Shi, we are, after all, companions. Just take them. We can use them as a shield in the case of danger…” Feng Li came near and suggested this in an awkward tone, lowering his voice toward the end of his statement.

Shi Mu shook his head in disapproval, then looked at the others and, in an

encouraging tone, said, ” If you want to go, just follow me, but you can only rely on yourselves when we fight with the barbarians.”

The Adepts were all very glad and nodded briskly and, thus, these people followed Shi Mu. Before long the group had come across a split in the path.

“Brother Feng, now you go first.” Shi Mu said.

Feng Li nodded and waited for a second before he went into the left pathway. Shi Mu followed him without any hesitation. Though the others felt this was quite strange, they said nothing and continued to follow the two closely.

The Rat Nest was not a big stronghold, but it had many other small passages, besides the four main passages, which lead toward the exits to the stronghold. They had probably been built for times such as this. With Feng Li leading the way, they made many detours and gradually approached the north exit. They had met a few barbarians on the way, but they were killed by Shi Mu’s black blade and the Adepts’ charms, so the group passed through without meeting any real danger.

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After a quarter of an hour, Shi Mu halted for a breath, leaning on a stone wall. They were only a few steps away from the north exit of the stronghold. He stepped back after glancing outside the exit. There were some tall figures walking back and forth, which seemed to be the barbarians on guard.

“They have thirteen men. Except for the two senior Houtian warriors, the others are all just primary or junior stage Practitioners.” Feng Li stood near him and whispered in a low voice. He had just spent some time sensing the barbarians with his eyes shut.

Shi Mu’s face showed a little surprise. Feng Li could, unexpectedly, sense the number of the barbarians, as well as their strength, at a short distance!

“Step back now.” He waved his hand and they retreated back to the secret passage.

Shi Mu pat on the wall and then a crack appeared on it, through which they edged their way inside before closing it again. Inside was a small room, used for storing odds and ends for the stronghold, and it was too remote for the

barbarians to find in a short time.

The other Adepts were waiting here, and they gathered around their leaders as soon as they came in.

“Brother Shi, how is the front exit?” A young man in green asked.

Shi Mu told them about the condition of the exit, which made them feel great amounts of fear.

“Now we can only fight for our way out.The noise of fighting is fading and the longer we stay here, the more dangerous it will be.” Feng Li made a quick analysis. The others looked at each other and nodded helplessly.

“Well, the barbarians have the advantage in number, so we must decide our tactic.” Shi Mu said seriously.

Just then, the door of the room cracked with a loud noise and a green figure jumped in. The man was wearing barbarian clothes and a fur mask on his face. He seemed to be surprised when he saw Shi Mu and his companions.

The next moment, a cold light shone, and a sword stabbed mercilessly towards the unexpected visitor. Feng Li had launched an attack. The man was caught off guard, and the distance was so short that he couldn’t dodge the attack. But just as the man was to be killed by Feng Li, a black blade appeared suddenly and warded off the sword in Feng Li’s hand.

“Wait, brother Feng, he is not a barbarian, he is just disguised as one.” Shi Mu grabbed Feng Li’s wrist and spoke rapidly. Hearing the Shi Mu’s resolute voice, the others, who were jumping to their feet and drawing their weapons, also stopped their movements.

“Brothers, it’s me.” The man pulled down his mask, revealing a familiar face. He was none other than Mountain Green.

“You are brother Green!” Feng Li was dumbstruck, putting down his sword. The others also withdrew their weapons, feeling at ease.

“Brother Shi has such a good eyesight or I have died wrongly.” Mountain Green closed the door behind him and said, forcing a smile.

“Brother Green wore the clothes of the barbarians but did not change his

shoes, and if you are really a barbarian, Brother Feng will know.” Shi Mu said slowly.

Feng Li blushed as he heard the words. He had been too nervous just now, so he attacked once he saw the clothes of barbarian, totally forgetting to consult his special ability. Mountain Green wore a curious look upon hearing these words, and looked at Feng Li suspiciously, wondering what Shi Mu meant.

“Well, that’s not important. Brother Green also intends to escape from the north exit of the stronghold, right?” Shi Mu let out a dry cough and diverted to another topic.

“Yes, I have just checked out the situation. It seems that there are quite a lot Totem warriors guarding the exit. It is not easy for us to escape.” Mountain Green sighed and put on a forced smile.

“We had just planned to rush out from the exit. Do you want to join us?” Shi Mu suggested, without any hesitation.

Mountain Green frowned at the kind-hearted suggestion and showed hesitation on his face.

“If brother Green has another plan, it doesn’t matter. We can just take action separately.” Seeing Mountain Green’s expression, though a little surprised, Shi Mu spoke even more decisively. As Mountain Green was just a Adept Scholar, his participation would not affect the result.

“Thanks for brother Shi’s understanding!” Mountain Green could only replied with an embarrassed smile, standing aside and blankly looking at Shi Mu discussing with the others.

“Remember, we must use as many charms as possible when rushing out. We have to disorder them. It depends on our luck whether we can escape or not.” Shi Mu said quickly.

Now they only had no other methods but to throw the enemies into a total disorder and seize the chance to rush out.

The others nodded and clutched all their charms in their hands, wearing surprisingly resolute faces.

“Let’s go!” Shi Mu opened the stone door and they stepped out.

“Wait, brother Shi, I want to go with you.” Mountain Green caught up with them and said, his eyes glistening, as if he had made a final decision.

“Why did you suddenly change your mind? Nevermind, we do not have the time now. You know what we’ve decided, if you have any good charms, just take them out.” Shi Mu shook his head and did not ask more.

Mountain Green sighed and nodded, picking out two charms that were shining with green light. Characters were interwoven each other on them, forming a shape that looked like a green tornado. Shi Mu looked at the green charms in Mountain Green’s hand, feeling they looked strange to his eyes. But, considering the conditions, he would not ask him, and turned his body to lead the others to rush toward the exit.

“Go, go!”

Rounding the bend, Shi Mu shouted and stamped on the ground, shooting out like a shadow, flitting through the air at high speed. Meanwhile, he waved his hand and hurled six charms, which transformed into six firing snakes, each about one meter long, that stirred up hot winds and exploded into a torrents of fire, which fell on the barbarians near the exit.

These were Firing Snake charms, one of the few kinds of low-level charms that could attack a wide area. Mountain Green also threw out the two green charms in his hand, and, as green lights glared, two tornados emerged in mid air, quickly combining into one, rapidly expanding, and flying towards the exit, like a huge monster roaring. Where the wind passed, stones broke and were swept up into the wind, widening the passage ahead.

“The middle-level charm, Tornado!”

All the other disciples were cheering at the sight of such a powerful charm, and, thus, began to throw out all kinds of charms at the barbarians. In a short time, fire balls, icicles, and lightning bolts broke out, like a driving rainstorm.

The barbarians guarding the exit were taken unprepared at the hail of charms, and before they could strike a counter-blow they had already been drowned by the charms, lost in gales, fireballs, and snowstorms.

In the danger, all the barbarians were shocked and began to activate their totem magic, their bodies transforming into various monsters.

Though the charms had surprised and slightly wounded the barbarians, these low-level charms did not have enough power to badly wound them, unless they hit the vital organs. But it was enough. All the barbarians had been thrown into chaos, and their formation was messed up.

Shi Mu seized the chance and rushed out for the exit. But, at just the same time, a blood red spear stabbed out of the smoke toward Shi Mu's chest, like a poisonous snake. The spear came so fast that it was in Shi Mu's face is a split-second.

Shi Mu was shocked, but he acted nimby. He paused his movement, then stamped on the ground, his arm twisted, and struck the right side of the spear with his elbow, creating a sound like thunder.

A loud, dull noise resounded, and the spear bounced off, as if it had been hit by some massive object.

There came a surprised shout from the smoke and then the spear started shaking, transforming into several blood-red shadows, which struck back at Shi Mu's chest and lower abdomen.

Shi Mu sneered coldly, and his eyes shone with golden light. He punched out fiercely toward one of the spear shadows.

Chapter 133 - To Cleave a Road

“Peng!” The blade rumbled as it clashed with the spear. The blood-red shadows were dispersing, revealing a bruised spearhead. Shi Mu spread his fist and grabbed hold of the retreating spearhead, giving it a sturdy pull. The vague figure in the smoke quivered, and out staggered a broad-shouldered barbarian, clutching the handle of the spear with a stupefied face. He had his clothes stripped to the waist, and the strong arms were full of blue veins, which were protruding from his dark skin. He was one of the Totem warriors guarding the north exit, a Houtian warrior at his advanced stage, and was powerfully built. Even so, in front of Shi Mu’s horrific force, that had just been upgraded by the Art of the Strong Ape, the barbarian was just like a defenceless child.

The barbarian was still at loss when Shi Mu’s fist thrust forward again with lightning speed, catching him helplessly unprepared. The barbarian, in a great surprise and alarm, let his spear thud onto the ground, and crossed his bare arms in front of his chest, in an attempt to resist the blow. However, with a dull thud, his muscular arms fractured instantly under the brutal force, and the fist sunk into his chest. The burly man howled in pain at the heavy blow, and was struck into the air like a leaf, slapping against the stone wall before his body slipped onto the ground, like mud. Writhing wretchedly, he spat blood and then heaved out his last breath.

Therefore, Shi Mu finished the powerful Totem warrior of late Houtian stage with a single blow. All he had used was his real qi and his superhuman strength. This easily-won victory threw the other disciples into a momentary confusion, but, after a second, they all came to themselves, cheering enthusiastically. The morale was, thus, tremendously boosted, but their short celebration also gave the other barbarians enough time to respond, and they had quickly surrounded them, like a surging wave, howling and roaring.

“Let’s cleave out way through!” Shi Mu uttered a booming shout, pulled out his black blade, and activated the Great Fire Formula on it, throwing himself into the herd of barbarians. A stab of red lights glared! With his current cultivation, along with the consummated Thirteen Series of Gale Force Blade Art, enabled him to roll through the herd of barbarians like a wolf through a herd of sheep. In

a split-second, two Totem warriors had been cut into several pieces by his black blade.

But the disciples following him were more like a flock of sheep than fierce wolves. With the exception of Feng Li and Mountain Green, who were capable warriors, the other Adepts were wounded easily among these bestial barbarians. One Adept from the Wind and Fire Sect got stabbed on his arm, and immediately fell on the ground, paralyzed with fright, shrieking like a large bird. The barbarian beside him struck like a ferocious eagle, swooping down upon him with his bulky mace. The Adept, horror-stricken, sprawled on the ground without even trying to dodge, watching the mace coming at him with wide eyes.

Shi Mu saw the scene from a short distance away. Knitting his brows in exasperation, he swayed his arm, shot his body out, like a streak of light, and flung his black blade at the eagle-like barbarian. With a crisp sound, the mace flew out, broken in halves. The barbarian's arm hand was cut off his arm, and was thrown skyward, blood spurting from the wound. "Get up! If you want to live, then don't just lie there! Charge forward!" Shi Mu picked up the paralyzed Adept, shouting in great anger, like the parent of the timid bird who would throw his baby bird down a cliff to teach it how to fly.

The baby-bird Adept was dragged out of his trance, and finally came to himself in Shi Mu's arms. Without a word of protest he rushed out of the exit with a pair of haggard eyes.

Shi Mu remained on the spot for another moment to clear the road for his other baby birds. His arm shook and the black blade produced several black shadows that rolled the chasing barbarians to all directions, badly injured. Then with a flash of his body, Shi Mu, once again, dived into the doorway, then back to the front of his group. At this moment, all the disciples had made it to the exit, and, with some effort, they would be able to break through the encirclement.

However, just then Shi Mu felt his heart throb involuntarily, and his hairs stood on end. A green light stabbed toward his eyes. His muscles tightened, and he intuitively ducked aside, simultaneously thrusting his black blade forward. There was a clash of steel amid sparkles of flame. Shi Mu felt his body shaken, and his thumbs sore and feeble. But the green light was also struck flying backward,

sinking into the wall beside him and leaving a fist-size black hole on the wall. It had completely merged into the wall, far too deep to be seen with the eye.

Shi Mu titled his head back to the exit, and found a pair of bloodthirsty eyes glowering at him. A young green-skinned barbarian was blocking the way to the outside.

The young barbarian did not seem very strong, and by his emitted qi he was probably only a mid-level Houtian Warrior, but the white bone bow held in his hand was no ordinary weapon. It had numerous tiny magic characters carved on the surface, and the magic power stirring inside the bow seemed able to beat his black blade. Without doubt, this should be a mid-tier magical weapon!

More alarming was the quiver hung at his waist, containing ten-odd green arrows which were also carved with bean-size magic characters, giving off strong ripples of magic power. These were all magic arrows!

No time to marvel at the enemy's stuff. The sooner he dealt a blow, the likelier he would win. Shi Mu stepped on the ground abruptly and his body shot forward like an arrow that had left the string, dashing to the green-skinned barbarian.

The barbarian was caught unprepared by this sudden attack, and, having no time to knock an arrow on his bow, he groped at his back hastily and produced a bronze mace, which was twice as long as a human mace. Brown characters were glittering on it, which proved it to be a low-tier magical weapon.

"Go to hell!" The green-skinned barbarian cursed loudly, and, without thinking, he shoved the mace at Shi Mu's chest. However, the target did not try to duck and, unexpectedly, gave his black blade a sudden, powerful jerk, producing a swirl of red lights that dazzled the barbarian's eyes. Soon the red lights swirled toward the barbarian's head like a whirlwind, with a momentum that overrode the opponent's attack.

The green-skinned barbarians was profoundly shocked, and hurriedly drew back his mace to resist the red lights. However, to his surprise again, the swirling of the lights snapped, and Shi Mu had taken back the blade to hold it with both hands. Then his body quickly leaped up into the air, then nosedived down at the barbarian's head. He had learned this movement from Wu Tong, who had practiced the Art of the Roaring Eagle. And Shi Mu's technique was quite good.

His body looked just like a huge black eagle.

The green-skinned barbarian was panic-stricken, and he held up his mace to greet the blade. The brown characters on it shone furiously, and a column of yellow light burst forth, hitting the descending black blade. The lights clashed, and were soon blasted apart. The violent shock sent the green-skinned barbarian flying straight backward, bumping heavily against a rock, his mouth full of blood.

Shi Mu did not pursue him and sprang out of the exit,shouting, “fan out!” At his command, the disciples all rushed out of the exit and ran to all directions. Shi Mu himself also darted toward the dense forest. But a thought suddenly stuck him, and, just in case, he threw out a curved silver dagger. The dagger swirled, flying toward the green-skinned barbarian lying powerless beside the rock.

“Young master, watch out!” A burly old man sprang out, sheltering the green-skinned barbarian in front of him, the huge axe in his hand swatting down the incoming silver dagger.

The dagger, upon clashing with the axe, immediately exploded, and roaring flames leaped up into the air, quickly spreading in all directions. The old barbarian was filled with fear, but, catching a glimpse of the green-skinned barbarian at his back, who was still only half-conscious, he grit his teeth in determination and did not budge an inch.

The blast quickly died down. The explosion had jerked the green-skinned barbarian back to consciousness.

“Young master, are you alright? Good, good...” The old man put on a strained smile, and, as he finished speaking, he fell down at the young barbarian’s side.

“Uncle Iron!” The green-skinned barbarian cried in despair, and hurriedly supported the old man. Suddenly, his body quivered in great distress and anger and his face turned ghastly pale. The old man’s back was blasted open, flesh exposed and burned. Even the bones and organs could be seen. Behind him was a giant pit, and smoke was swirling menacingly in its depths. The stones and soil were all burnt. The young barbarian was grief-stricken at the scene, his eyes bloodshot.

“It’s that human! I know him! Uncle Iron, hold on! I’ll kill that human to avenge you!” The green-skinned barbarian gritted his teeth and spat out the words in a

quivering voice. He was painfully aware that the old man was severely injured. Unless they had a high-grade Adept here to cure him with magic, there was no way Uncle Iron could live. Gently he let the old man lie on the ground, and the fire of hatred started smoldering in his tearful eyes. He felt a hot wrath of blaze light up in his heart, and his body started glowing with red light. Scales slowly emerged all over his skin, and his pupils looked like two flickering fires. His mouth widened, and out danced a thin forked tongue, swishing threateningly in the air.

"Don't, young master..." The old barbarian made an effort to murmur something, but his thin voice did not reach the mad young barbarian's ears. The latter had already sprang forward, bolting in the direction where Shi Mu had fled. He was using his full speed, and his body disappeared into the distance in a blink of an eye. The old man stared hard at the receding figure, his chest heaving. He struggled to make even the slightest sound as life was leaving him fast. The luster in his eyes gradually died.

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Shi Mu halted for a breath when he traveled over ten miles from the stronghold. He thought it temporarily danger-free to take a break. He took a deep breath, and lifted his eyes over the bushes, back towards the direction of the stronghold. In the sky above the stronghold, a black cloud and a green cloud were involved in violent clashes, emitting glaring light every now and then. Though it was over ten miles away, the loud noises of their clashes still traveled all the way here. A yearning gleam twinkled in Shi Mu's eyes as he stood watching the two forms hovering and fighting in the sky. These were the exemplar of real warriors, roaring in the highest of heavens, and shaking the earth with their great might. With a wave of their hands, the mountains crashed, and the seas split. He gazed at the clouds for a while, then withdrew his eyes and returned to the present. It was no longer safe to linger here. He had to tramp forward.

Just then, a high-pitched noise rang out from behind, and a green light flew to his front at a horribly high speed. Shi Mu quickly stooped near the ground and threw himself into a nearby bush. The green light whistled past him, thudding into the dense forest. Shi Mu minimized his breathing behind a thick shrub, lying prone on the ground. He knew who had come. The combination of the middle-

level magic bow and the low-level arrows could even beat a high-level magical weapon. A moment ago, out of fear of that green-skinned barbarian, he had used one of his Moonlight Sea Chestnut Daggers. He was bitterly disappointed that the attack had failed.

A rustling sound came from the shrubs behind, and the green-skinned barbarian came out with unhurried steps. By now, the red glow over his body had grown glaringly bright, forming a red screen around him. Shi Mu was slightly startled at the sight from the bushes.

“Human, stop hiding. Come and receive your death. How dare you to kill Uncle Iron!” The green-skinned barbarian’s eyes were full of hatred, and he swept around the bushes and fixed his eyes precisely in the direction where Shi Mu was concealing. His lips curled up in a grim sneer, and losing no time he nocked another arrow. A dazzling blue light shot up, landing after a flash in the shrub where Shi Mu was in. It came so quickly that Shi Mu failed to completely dodge the arrow. His left arm was pierced, and blood started gushing out. Fortunately the arrow had missed his bones.

Shi Mu uttered a painful groan, and his eyes glinted in rage. Though unclear of the method by which the green-skinned barbarian had found him, Shi Mu knew it was useless for him to hide any more. The barbarian certainly would find him again.

Without waiting, he activated the real qi in his body, and the energy rippled out, causing all the blades of grass to tremble and wave, as if a storm was coming through the forest. Dust was blown all over the sky, obscuring the area in a cloud of dust. Then, out of the dust, a figure swooped down on the green-skinned barbarian.

Chapter 134 - The Eternal Doom Spell

The green-skinned barbarian grinned hideously upon seeing Shi Mu's figure in front of his eyes. His lips quivered excitedly, and he aimed his bow precisely at Shi Mu, giving the string an abrupt pull.

A long, green arrow whistled to Shi Mu's chest, making an ear-splitting noise in the air. The young barbarian's bow had never missed a single target within a distance of a hundred and fifty meters, which made it a breeze for him to shoot Shi Mu with a distance of less than one hundred meters between them.

Just as he had expected, the blue arrow flashed and quickly penetrated Shi Mu's upper body. Blood streamed from the wound.

The green-skinned barbarian's face creased with a grim smile of satisfaction. At the last second, Shi Mu's body had shifted a little from where he had previously stood, thus avoiding the vital part, but since his Arrow had sunk into his body, Shi Mu's strength must have been crippled.

However, his smile quickly froze. Shi Mu's movements did not stop, even for a moment, after he was shot. Keeping his momentum from before, he raced to his side, quickly covering about sixty meters. Then he waved his arm, and the black blade turned into a hot blaze, glaring while swooped down at his face. Halfway through the swing, the blaze shook vigorously, transforming into thirteen shadows that plummeted down from all directions.

A scorching heat rolled towards him! The green-skinned barbarian was scared stiff, unable to draw the iron mace from his back. In a great fluster, he instilled power into his white bow in his hand, and the bow responded by increasing to threefold its original size, as long as an average man's height. He brandished it and threw out a fan of light.

Then a crisp clash resounded, and the light fan flashed and died out after resisting most of the blade shadows. But two or three shadows of blaze were not stopped, and thus exploded on his body in the next moment.

Bright lights flashed wildly around the green-skinned barbarian to shield him. Gritting his teeth, he was able to withstand the blow, but just as he halted for a breath, Shi Mu spat out a white vapor ball, which slammed into the green-

skinned barbarians face. Shi Mu had used the Art of Air-Explosion!

[ED: The only other time this has been mentioned was back in chapter 87. Yep. That's right. 47 chapters ago. I completely forgot he had this skill -_-;]

A roaring explosion resonated, and the pale light of the red shield was hit head-on by the vapor ball, thus breaking at the irresistibly great impact. The green-skinned barbarian's face was blasted, bleeding profusely, and he fell down, uttering a sad cry.

Shi Mu's eyes glared, and, without the slightest hesitation, the black blade in his hand turned into a streak of red light, flying into the barbarian's chest and nailing him onto the ground. From this giant wound, blood gushed out horribly.

After finally sending the barbarian to the other world, Shi Mu staggered back a few steps, gasping heavily, and kneeling down on the ground. His left side had been pierced by the arrow, and through this gaping hole his organs could been vaguely seen. Owing to the Art of the Strong Ape, his physical body was highly toughened. Otherwise, he would have slumped onto his face.

After having a brief respite, Shi Mu took a quick look at the green-skinned barbarian nailed to the earth by his blade. The light shield around his body had completed faded and the barbarian's heart was perforated. There was no chance that he had survived.

Panting, Shi Mu took out a Rejuvenation Charm out from his shirt and stuck it to the wound on his stomach. Soon a sense of coolness spread from it. Bust just then, an alarming sight came into view! The green-skinned barbarian's body suddenly swelled up, and the totem on his back glared! Shi Mu immediately knew that this was a threatening sign, so he stepped on the ground and hurriedly jumped backwards. This movement had stretched his stomach, and he was not able to act as quickly as he wished.

"You human bug, die with me!" The green-skinned barbarian raised his head abruptly, like a corpse rising from the dead. A grim smile appeared on his blood-washed face, along with his bloodshot eyes, constituted to a most horrendous sight. Just as his rasping voice fell, the light over his body shone more sharply, and his balloon-like body exploded, blood splattering all over. To Shi Mu's astonishment, a light, which was shaped like a snake, wriggled out of the mists of

blood at lightening speed, striking into Shi Mu's body before he realized it.

Shi Mu's face turned ghastly pale, and he was not able to get to his feet until after rolling on the ground for a few seconds. He managed to regain his balance, and tried to inspect his body. He suddenly felt a surge of heat well up inside his stomach, as if a ball of fire was leaping up within it, constantly eating at his flesh.

Shi Mu let out a painful groan, not knowing how to deal with the heat. It felt like it was darting around inside his veins, like streams of scorching magma, and his body exuded a layer of red light, just like that of the green-skinned barbarian.

Shi Mu flopped down on his knees, his body twitching due to the extreme pain. Beads of sweat were streaming down his cheeks.

Fortunately, the agonizing feeling vanished. After taking a few breaths, it left Shi Mu's body, as if all were just an illusion.

Shi Mu sat up slowly, feeling completely exhausted. He panted heavily, and a hint of doubt crept over his face.

After a long time, he struggled to his feet, not feeling the slightest bit of heat in his body, let alone any other abnormal sensations. More surprisingly, the wounds all over his body, including the big hole in his stomach, had miraculously healed.

"What's going on?" Shi Mu murmured, his brows clouding with doubt. The mad shouting of the barbarian in his last moments showed his ill intentions. Shi Mu stood still for a thoughtful moment, then shook off the bewilderment. He decided to stop worrying about it, then strode to his black blade, which had been blown away by the barbarian's self-destruction.

He had to leave this hill as soon as possible. Due to its short distance from the stronghold, that fight must have attracted the attention of some of the barbarian's companions. Shi Mu picked up the black blade and sheathed it. Suddenly, just as he was to move, he was caught unprepared by a strange sight. The Black Demon's uniform he had been wearing was slashed badly during the battle. He looked down and saw a red light inside his shirt. His countenance changed to that one filled with great alarm, and, tearing the clothes open, he saw a giant tattoo of a red viper on his chest! This was, unquestionably, a barbarian totem!

Suddenly, the face of the barbarian's, full of blazing hatred, floated up in his mind, and he felt his heart freeze in despair, sinking to the bottom of a great chasm. For a moment, he could not stand still, his body shaking in panic.

By taking a few deep breaths, he managed to steady himself. His mind had been disrupted and needed to a moment to refocus.

He stood motionless for a while on the same spot, his mind a total blank. Then, bit by bit, consciousness returned, and he quickly scanned his surroundings. He picked up the barbarian's white bow and quiver, which was full of green arrows. Then he scuttled off.

On all accounts, it was wise to leave this place as soon as possible. By virtue of his familiarity with the surrounding terrain, as well as his superb eyesight, Shi Mu took a detour that avoided most of the other barbarians, taking a full two hours to arrive at the union's stronghold in Lan City. By that time, it seemed that some of the Adepts had made it back here from the Rat Nest, and the whole city was ablaze with lights, guarded heavily by patrols of disciples, who were keeping close watch on any possible attacks from the barbarians.

Shi Mu was let into the city after showing his union pass. He headed directly to a large hall, which was situated in a certain building inside the city. According to the guards, all the Adepts who had successfully fled from the Rat Nest had convened here. They used to have as many as twenty charm Adepts at the Rat Nest, but, right now, there were, at most, ten, most of whom were disciples that had followed Shi Mu, forcing their way out of the north exit. Though many were wounded, they still wore a blissfully happy face, which was quite understandable. When Shi Mu entered the hall, they were discussing something in groups of two and three.

"Brother Shi, so you made it!" AS soon as Shi Mu stepped inside, a blue-robed youth enthusiastically scampered to his side. This was Feng Li, and he happily welcomed Shi Mu with great joy. Shi Mu nodded in great pleasure, and Feng Li smiled back, looking rather relieved. But just as he was to say something, his face darkened, his eyes clouded by a trace of doubt. Shi Mu noticed the nuanced change of expression on Feng Li's face, and his eyes shone in surprise. But the approaching Adepts who came to offer their gratitude disrupted this train of thought. The familiar faces, now glowing with happiness, were haggard but also

rather relaxed. When Shi Mu saw them, he was taken by surprise, then cracked into a hearty smile, “So you guys also made it! So good to see you!” He exclaimed.

“We owe everything to brother Shi. We could never have fled without you.” The Adepts all were all deeply grateful, expressing their genuine gratitude to Shi Mu.

Suddenly, Shi Mu became aware of Mountain Green’s absence, and he asked anxiously, “Why isn’t brother Green here?”

“He made it here too. The elders just had a few questions for him. Don’t worry.” Feng Li explained, with a light heart.

Shi Mu relaxed upon hearing this. Mountain Green was one of the Adepts that he felt more close to.

For the following time, these Adepts, who had survived a life and death encounter together, chatted in a jovial mood, savoring the hard-won safety and newly generated friendship.

After some time, the door creaked open, and a white-robed elder man came through, followed by some more warriors, who seemed to be this stronghold’s leaders. The crowd soon turned their heads to look at the comers. Shi Mu’s eyes shone sharply, and he could tell that the elder man must be a strong Xiantian saint.

“The union has been notified of the attack on the Rat Nest stronghold. You have all shown the virtues of qualified union disciples by breaking through the barbarians’ siege. Please rest as long as you wish in Lan City, and don’t be worried about missions.” The elder’s eyes swept over the crowd slowly, full of authority, as he announced in a mild, yet powerful, tone of voice. The announcement met no opposition for sure, and the disciples all nodded meekly.

The followers of the white-robed elders soon distributed single rooms to these disciples. The one Shi Mu received was rather clean and spacious.

Two hours later, in Shi Mu’s accommodation, he was walking restlessly about the room, his brows tightly knitted. Though he had successfully gotten rid of the barbarians, and gained an extra magical weapon, he was disturbed by his queer

snake tattoo. In spite of its current lifelessness, Shi Mu knew that there would be future ramifications.

Just then, there came a knock at his door. Shi Mu pulled open the door, raising his eyebrows, and saw Feng Li waiting outside.

“Brother Feng, it’s you. Come in, I was just about to look for you. Got something on my mind I’d like to hear your opinion about.” Shi Mu was happy to see Feng Li, and hastily invited him in.

“Brother Shi, how come you have the eerie sense of a barbarian totem on your body?” Feng Li first looked to both sides outside the doorway cautiously, then entered the room and quickly closed the door. He stepped near Shi Mu and asked, with a voice full of concern.

“Just as I’d expected...” Shi Mu gave Feng Li a wry smile. Though he had already made the same guess, the confirmation from Feng Li still made his heart sink. He sighed softly, and took off his clothes, revealing the tattoo of the great red viper on his chest. Feng Li’s countenance changed profoundly after seeing the pattern. Shi Mu saw his face, and was further disappointed. After a moment he put on the shirt again.

“I got this after beating a Totem warrior who followed me from the Rat Nest, and the barbarian blew himself up...” Shi Mu related the story about how he fought with the green-skinned barbarian to Feng Li in great detail. The latter bent his head with a thoughtful look after hearing the whole story. He did not break the silence until after a long time. Looking up with a pair of solemn eyes, he paused before he opened his mouth.

“Do you have any ideas, brother Feng? Seems that you know what has happened.” Shi Mu’s eyes widened in expectation.

“I left the barbarian tribe when I was little, so I do not dare to say that I know much about them. I’m not quite sure about your condition either, so I can only make a guess.” Feng Li spoke up hesitatingly.

“No problem, brother Feng, just say it.” Shi Mu persuaded earnestly.

“I remember that I once heard about an ancient magic of the barbarians. It was a magic to bring evil to people. It’s called the Eternal Doom Spell. It bears

some resemblance to your condition.” Feng Li paused for a brief moment when mentioning this spell.

Chapter 135 - The Island of Starlight

“The Eternal Doom Spell?” Shi Mu’s face darkened.

“As far as I know, this vicious spell is barely known, even among the barbarians, and would only be used on extreme occasions, because this spell requires the Totem warrior to offer his own spirit to the monster sealed in his tattoo. After devouring its master’s soul, the totem monster would then enter the enemy’s body, and gradually corrode his spirit. This process would generally last as long as a year. After that, the monster’s power will break out and send the enemy down into the deep abyss of despair, torturing him until his whole body festers, then he will bleed to death. The more horrible aftermath is that the enemy’s spirit will, thus, fall into the eternal doom.” Feng Li answered haltingly.

Shi Mu’s face blanched immediately at this dreadful news, and his body was struck out of balance, shaking involuntarily out of extreme fear. He subconsciously propped himself up against the desk to keep himself from falling.

“Don’t worry, brother Shi! To the best of my knowledge, there’s a way to lift the curse.” Feng Li hurriedly supported Shi Mu.

“Spit it out! I almost fainted!” Shi Mu relaxed slightly and raised his voice, throwing Feng Li a half-blaming look. But he soon came to himself and apologized for his rudeness. Feng Li shook his head, apologizing for delaying in telling him the remedy. He scratched his head. Then, after a pause, he continued,

“Generally speaking, there are two ways to lift a curse like this. One is to seek help from an Earth-Grade or the above level saint, and asking this saint to impose another seal upon the totem to suppress the monster forcibly. But the sealing consumes a large amount of the saint’s spirit power, and there’s a small chance of getting the saint involved. The monster may infect the saint, too. By all means, to suppress it could only be counted a temporary measure...”

Shi Mus stroked his jaw thoughtfully, his face gloomy. The seven sects were now fully engaged in the war with the barbarians, hence even a Xiantian saint had become immeasurably important, let alone an Earth-Grade saint. Even if he reported this to the union, probably nobody would care about a disciple at such

a critical juncture, not to mention the risk involved.

“Can I hear the second solution?” Shi Mu asked after a long deliberation.

“The second way is that brother Shi must learn this Totem Art yourself. Whoever is cursed with this spell only needs to seal another bigger, more powerful monster inside him, and this monster will gradually tame the previous, weaker one, absorbing its power for its own use.” Feng Li answered after a short pause.

“To seal an even fiercer monster?” Shi Mu was astonished. During the past few years of fighting with the barbarians, he had gradually come to know a little of the secret Totem Art.To enact it, one had to seal a certain monster’s spirit inside one’s body in order to take on the sealed animal’s attributes. But the process of sealing demanded far more effort than usually imagined, usually involving great pain and peril.

Shi Mu’s expression changed several times as he pondered over the two choices carefully. Eventually, his face became determined one as Shi Mu, with clasped hands, said, “Thank you very much, brother Feng. I know it will be quite difficult, but the second choice seems to be more likely to be accomplished than seeking an Earth-Grade saint’s help.”

“Don’t mention it. I’m only telling you what I know. As for how to find a monster’s spirit that is stronger than the one you carry now, I’m totally at my wit’s end.” Feng Li’s face was lined with worry when he replied with a deep sigh.

“It’s all right. It’s a lot better than waiting for my death.” Shi Mu forced a comforting smile, as if he was consoling Feng Li for his loss. By now, he had set his mind on journeying to the barbarian’s wasteland for even the glimpse of hope to undo the spell that was placed upon him. But Feng Li was clearer than anyone of the multitudinous perils that awaited Shi Mu in the depths of the wasteland. He changed to a more solemn tone, warning Shi Mu, “do pay attention to one thing when you arrive in the wasteland.”

“What?” Shi Mu frowned apprehensively.

“I don’t know which tribe the green-skinned barbarian you killed belongs to, but his tribesmen, especially the Totem warriors, might be able to sense the Eternal Doom Spell cast on you.” Feng Li said seriously, looking directly into Shi

Mu's eyes, searching them.

Shi Mu was profoundly shocked. This was the first time he had heard of such a thing, which further increased a risk that was already terrible enough. But this time he did not faint, knowing that Feng Li probably had a remedy for this issue.

"But there's also a way to fix this problem," Feng Li went on, which was quite a relief to Shi Mu, "I once saw the unicorn viper's blood for sale in this stronghold of Lan City. You might as well buy some before you set out for the wasteland. Apply the blood to the tattoo on your body. The unicorn viper is one of the higher-ranking monsters among the beasts in the wasteland, thus it may be able to contain the spell for some time." Feng Li suggested.

This would be the most uplifting news Shi Mu had heard today, if it wasn't mixed with a deep sorrow and danger. For the following time, Feng Li briefed Shi Mu about the basics of the barbarians' wasteland, and did not leave until he thought he had told him all there was to know for his dangerous trip.

When he stood up to excuse himself, Shi Mu stopped him, his clear, resigning eyes glistened gratefully. He hesitated, and then asked, "brother Feng, could you clear up my confusion on something?"

"Please say it, brother Shi." Feng Li's eyes flashed.

"Since this Eternal Doom Spell is, as you have said, rarely used, its remedy must be equally secret. How did you know about it?" Shi Mu asked, hesitating a little.

Feng Li stirred upon hearing the keen question. He raised his eyebrows nervously, then returned a heavy, embarrassed silence. Finally, Shi Mu reopened his mouth and tried to ease the atmosphere, "If this question embarrasses brother Feng, then there's no need to answer it."

"That would be most kind of you." Feng Li seemed much more relaxed, and quickly left the room.

Shi Mu closed the door. His eyes sharpened, keenly aware that Feng Li's life story must be more complex than what he already knew. Though by now, his suspicion about Feng Li's true identity had been largely dispelled, he thought it still inappropriate to return the token to Feng Li. After mulling over the issue for

a while, he shook his head and decided to drop the matter for the time being, diverting his attention to the Sealing Art Feng Li had mentioned.

He had read from the ancient books kept in the Black Demon Sect that the barbarous wasteland was fraught with many perils. Ever since ancient times, the seven sects had sent strong warriors there, many Xiantian Saints among them. Even so, few had ever returned from that gruesome place, and most were declared missing after sneaking into the enemy's land.

However, no matter how abominable the journey felt to him, he had no other way. Before he set out, he still had arrangements to make. The union should be notified of this matter, otherwise he would be deemed a deserter and thus listed as wanted. After a long time, he pushed the door open and headed for the Great Hall in the stronghold, where he could exchange for the materials he would need.

Two days later, in the early hours of the morning, Shi Mu left the city after confirming Feng Li's information by collecting whatever intelligence he had available. He had also left a letter on his desk for the Black Demon Sect's leaders. Then, solely by himself, Shi Mu departed for the barbarous wasteland, with quiet, yet unfaltering, steps.

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Approximately a hundred miles off the east coastline of the Heavenly Qi Country, there laid a group of small islands, dominated by a large one, which was the eastmost island in the archipelago. This was Starlight Island, and it was shaped like a half-opened fan. The landscape rose all the way from the east to the west, and thus shielded the entire archipelago from the east.

On the eastern part of the island towered a rolling mountain that was three hundred meters above open fields at its foot on the west. The ground was fertile, and fresh water was just enough for people to survive. For the past few decades, this favorable island had attracted a large number of poor people from the Heavenly Qi Country. Thus, together with the local freshmen, Starlight Island now boasted a population of over a hundred thousand people.

Since the East Sea abounded in sea monsters, whose hides and bones are the best material for making pills and magic weapons, the island had also drawn

many warriors and Adepts, and a port had flourished. The warriors came in groups to hunt for sea monsters, which they then brought back to their countries to sell. A major industry gradually developed. Thanks to this, Starlight Island saw a daily hustle and bustle, and business thrived day by day, even beating many wealthy coast towns in the Heavenly Qi Country.

However, the semblance of peace and wealth in this island was constantly under the watch of five thousand permanent soldiers, placed there by the Qi court. The island was also heavily guarded. So far, nobody had complained, since the army had neither affected their lives nor brought trouble to the warriors when they came to the sea.

This night, the earth was covered by a total darkness. At this hour, all the common people and warriors on the island were soundly asleep, restoring their energies for the next day's busy work. At the beach, a file of fifty soldiers were patrolling with torches, the torchlight forming a winding dragon, when looked at from afar. As they walked further down the beach, their feet made receding crunching noise on the sand, leaving footprints, which were soon covered by sands again. In a short time, the beach, again, fell into a silent darkness once more.

However, a moment afterwards, the blackish sea water near the beach suddenly surged, though no wind was in the air. A black line, several meters high, suddenly rose from the sea's surface, roaring and nearing the beach at an alarming speed. If at this time someone had been walking nearby, they would be surprised to find the wave strewn with dark heavily armed figures. Some of the figures had fish scales all over their bodies. Some had fishtails. Others were clad in solid tortoise shells. Despite their various appearances, all of the alien creatures shared the same thing: a pair of evil eyes.

At the same time, in the biggest camp of the military station on the island.

Sitting by a dark-purple wooden desk, a middle-aged general was reading a scroll by candlelight. He had a scar on his right cheek, and his eyes were serious and alert. He was completely armored, and a naked silver blade was within his right hand's reach. The blade was covered with magic characters that were light gold in color. This was the general of Starlight Island, a consummated Houtian warrior.

“Who’s there!” Suddenly, his eyes flashed, and the silver blade was quickly grasped by his hand. He raised his head abruptly and shouted fiercely.

The only reply was an ear-piercing sound.

The roof of the camp suddenly collapsed, and down wriggled five or six gigantic deep blue tentacles, flinging themselves down toward the general’s head at a striking speed. Meanwhile, the air in the room felt strangely thicker, as if it had been filled with deep sea water, rushing and circling the general torrentially from all directions.

Ha! The general cried, and the silver blade shone glaringly. His eyes widened in rage, and his face flushed violently. Exerting his strength, he got rid of the pressure, stomping and leaping up into the air. Simultaneously, his silver blade danced wildly, producing a light shield that firmly protected him from behind.

Four of the blue tentacles struck at the light screen from four different directions, and the light screen ceased swirling immediately, eventually dispersing after a moment. The middle-aged general’s face changed his countenance to a look of horror, and he fell down, staggering. Before he could take another action, two cold tentacles had wound around his neck and waist, and pulled with an irresistibly giant force.

With a clear sound, the general’s head was torn off his body. His face still contorted in fear and anger. A shower of blood fell, along with a headless body and a wretched head.

The six blue tentacles then squirmed, and soon gathered into a blue whip that wound around the slender arm of a girl in a white dress.

The girl looked up at the night sky, and suddenly opened her mouth. Though no sound came out, the air rippled, spreading violently up into the air. Next, from all directions on the island, raucous shouting resounded. Starlight Island woke up with a start, finding herself lit up by numerous torches that seemed to drive the night away.....

The same scene was also seen near the coastlines of both the Yan Fire Country and the Huang Bright Country.

[ED: HMMM. HMMM. I seem to remember that there was a holy pearl girl

back in chapter 2… I wonder if she is this girl in a white dress? (If not, she is probably connected to this new enemy in some way…) XD]

[TL: Eli, we are not leaking the future plot again...I doubt if this is the girl, haha.]

Chapter 136 - Disguise

In the depths of the Purple Spirit Mountains in the Chen Prefecture of the Heavenly Qi Country.

This chain of mountains rolled, unbroken, for a thousand miles, with multiple ranges of low hills, which were densely covered with lush vegetation and trees. Rivers and streams ran down the hills and wound around the mountains. Whenever there were clouds and mists rising from the mountains, the magnificent scenery would resemble an otherworldly picture, an abode for dragons and phoenixes. The biggest of the chain were two purple-hued mountains of regular height. Like the two horns of a dragon, the two mountains stood amid purple mists all year round.

Buildings of various styles peeped through the mists, the tops of which were clearly seen. Most of them had attics which were connected by airborne bridges. The wooden door-frames and roofs were carved with phoenix patterns. Through the mists, shadows of people moving about the airborne bridges could be seen.

This was where the Ethereal Phoenix Sect - one of three big sects of the Heavenly Qi Counrty - was situated. The peak of one of the two mountains had a four-story purple palace that stood out among all the buildings. This palace was entirely made from some kind of purple rock, which was dotted with golden spots which would shimmer beautifully in the sun.

At this time, in an interior stone room of the palace, a graceful lady was sitting cross-legged on the floor. She was wearing a green gown that had thick blue magical characters embroidered on it. The dress floated in the breeze, sending ripples of magical power of the water element into the air.

A column of blue light shot up above her head, and, in a flash, the light, like a whale blowing out it’s spout, turned into a blue rain that fell around her, forming a clear stream that flowed to her feet. The water accumulated and eventually turned deep blue. After an unknown amount of time, the water surface suddenly jolted, and then a blue lotus flower appeared under her and started lifting her into the air.

Just then, a jade bracelet around her wrist quivered, emitting a light purple

circle that consisted of many tiny characters. In a short time, a small formula appeared in the air with a flash of purple light. The light then transformed into a palm-size jade slip, which the graceful lady immediately caught hold of with two of her fingers, then gently placed it on her forehead.

The lady opened her eyes wide abruptly, and her countenance changed. The blue light surrounding her vanished into thin air. With a great haste, she stood up and left the stone room.

At the same time, a dozen figures flew from all directions toward the palace, entering a conference hall inside it.

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One hour later, the hall became empty again. The graceful lady herself still sitting in a chair prepared for the elders. Her delicate brows knitted tightly and her forehead was creased with fatigue. She rubbed her temples, relaxed a little, and then took out a white jade slip and stuck it to her forehead.

After a moment, she, once again, set the communication formula to send a message. Her right hand flicked in the air, and the white slip soon vanished. All done, she lifted herself up from the chair and walked to the rear of the hall, her heart heavy.

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In the Heavenly Green Mountains of the Heavenly Qi Country. Here was where the headquarters of the union of the seven sects was situated.

In a certain stone room, a green-robed middle-aged woman was reading a white slip, and the content soon made her face furrow with worry. She hurriedly exited the room. At almost the same time, other stone rooms opened one after another, and out came men and women with the same severe looks on their faces. Among them the man named Xie of the Black Demon Sect.

Shortly afterwards, the seven figures convened in a major hall on the great peek. They sat in two rows at either side of the hall, and each of them emitted deep, powerful qi that belonged only to powerful warriors. These seven elders were the leaders from the seven sects, who stayed at the headquarters to govern the routine matters of the union. Appointed by their respective sects,

these elders had the right to rule on every issue related to the barbarians.

At present, the hall had a rather stifling air. It was so repressive that none spoke up to break the ice. Finally, the Black Tortoise's leader stood up. He had bushy brows and looked to be around thirty years old.

"Elders, several days ago, a total of eleven islands, from all three of our kingdoms, small and large, were attacked by the Sea Dwellers. The guards on the islands were mercilessly slaughtered. Among them, we of the Heavenly Qi Country suffered the most casualties. Never before, throughout the past three hundred years, have such events happened. It seems that the Sea Dwellers have discarded the truce which our forefathers, with much difficulty, fought for, and will break in at any time. We should give this matter our utmost attention."

This was answered by an old lady dressed in purple gown, "Now that we are at war with the barbarians, if the Sea Dwellers come, we'll be being attacked from two sides. At the present time, I think we should negotiate for peace with the barbarians." She suggested in a depressed tone.

Just as her voice fell, two or three people agreed by nodding their heads, while the others remained in a meditative silence, not showing their views on the subject.

The man from the Black Tortoise Sect, who spoke first, frowned, "the barbarians have so many tribes of different scales, so, even if we openly appeal for peace, they may not come to a consensus as quickly as we wish. Some may even propose presumptuous demands. How should we deal with that?"

"Humph! The East Sea is boundless, and the Sea Dwellers will never be defeated by us humans or the barbarians alone. If any of our three kingdoms fall, the barbarians will be exposed to the danger. What we need to do is remind them of this fact. Unless the barbarians are born without brains, they would not sit by idly and let the Sea Dwellers gain so many advantages." The graceful lady from the Ethereal Phoenix Sect retorted in a disapproving tone.

"The barbarians are brutal and bloodthirsty, and their tempers are quite eclectic, so ordinary theory does not apply to them. As far as I'm concerned, we should try both ways. On the one hand, we reinforce the coastline with guards and ban all the sea-going activities. On the other hand, we send a secret

ambassador group to talk with the barbarian's Great Shaman." The blue-robed elder man from the Heavenly Sword Sect shook his head, speaking slowly.

"Good idea. The Great Shaman never leaves the barbarian wasteland, and is widely known for his wisdom. He would never make a decision against his people's benefit. Besides, he is the spiritual leader of the barbarians, and is very much revered among them. If he nods his head, all the tribes will follow him." The man named Xie agreed.

This suggestion won most of the elders' approval. And the elder lady from the Dark Charm Sect spoke up, asking another question, "If so, do we have an appropriate candidate to lead the ambassador group?"

"The Fleet Fire Princess of the Heavenly Qi Country. She is currently a disciple of our Tian Yin Sect." A middle-aged woman suggested quickly, her eyes glinting. She was wearing white gown and a golden hair clasp.

The Fire-Dancing Princess was, indeed, the best candidate, as she was both a representative of the Qi court and the union of the seven sects. Other elders also nodded their agreement after a few brief thoughts.

Since the candidate was settled, the elders then began discussing affairs concerning shortening the battle line, as well as sending reinforcements to the coastlines of the East Sea. The following session did not witness a peaceful consensus again, and the hall rang with heated arguments.

Three days later, the ambassador group, led by the Fleet Fire Princess, had a quiet, covert departure from the Heavenly Qi Country.

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There was not a single cloud in the sky, and the scorching sun was constantly baking the vast wasteland. Within one's sight, every patch of land was dusty and dry, being full of cracks. Straggling purple bushes dotted the arid land, and, every once in while, one could see one or two stunted trees standing stubbornly among the squatting bushes. Occasionally, some orange-colored rocks peeped through the bushes or lied listlessly on the sand. These weather-beaten rocks had been there for years, being constantly abraded by the wind. Every now and then, a gale blowing past would roll myriad crumbs into the air, which would dance pathetically, as if telling sad stories of the deserted land.

Such a scene of desolation was a true portrayal of the barbarian wasteland, and such a scene could be seen for thousands of miles.

A barbarian clad in hides was trudging heavily toward the shadow cast by a huge rock a dozen meters high. This man had dark skin, and was powerfully built, though could only be counted as a small one among his kinsmen. A silver sheath was hung over his shoulder. Adjacent to the sheath was a colossal bow. In his right hand was a black blade wrapped in a tattered cloth. The quiver was filled with arrows, which made his steps particularly large and heavy.

This small barbarian was none other than Shi Mu in disguise, and, at this point, he had been in the barbarian wasteland for two weeks. His journey was not the safest of all, since he had to not only bypass the barbarian riders, who passed every now and then, but also fight ferocious beasts all the way. The strangeness of this land also poised problems that slowed down his pace. But fortunately, he had now finally reached the very depths of this wasteland.

He swept the surroundings with his vigilant eyes, and was relieved by the unchanging bleakness he saw before him. No life inhabited this place. He slowly put down his black blade, and drew the canteen to have a sip of water. Then he seated himself in the shadow of the rock, and concentrated his thoughts, starting to practice the Art of the Heavenly Elephant.

The barbarian wasteland was not known for having much water, and to journey during the daytime naturally demanded a large supply of water. Therefore, Shi Mu had decided to rest in the day and advance in the night, to conserve the little water he still had with him. This was a hard decision to make. Nights in the wasteland had proved themselves to be extremely dangerous, with the beasts and poisonous bugs being most active at this time. Regardless of traveling at night, he was still running out of water. Up till now, he still found it formidably difficult to find water when needed, and the only regular pattern he had discovered was that whenever there were bushes, there would be water.

When he first entered the wasteland, he was not well prepared, and had run into the plights of water shortage many times. However, thanks to the kind barbarians he had met on the road, who, after hearing Shi Mu’s pitiful story, would gave him their own water canteens generously, Shi Mu eventually survived. These common barbarians would also give him some tips about finding

water, which had saved him from falling into bigger dangers.

[ED: O.o Now I want to know this 'sob story' that Shi Mu told these people. (Certainly he didn't tell them the truth? I would think he would get killed on the spot. :/)]

[TL: Yeah. I had this doubt when I translated this part. The author certainly wanted it ambiguous.]

Once, when he journeyed during the night, he was bitten by a very small poisonous ant, and his right leg immediately swelled up, being filled with great pain. Later, a passing old barbarian man had helped him, voluntarily, using a strange-looking herb nearby to cure the ant wound.

Experiences such as these made Shi Mu realize that the common barbarians were just like human people, and most were kind and generous. This newly gained knowledge helped reduce much of his hatred toward the barbarians.

At this moment, just as the last ray of the sun was devoured by darkness, Shi Mu's eyes flashed, having been alerted by something. Swiftly, like a leopard cat, he sprang up from the ground, with the black blade already in his hand.

He soon found himself surrounded by a hundred animals - lion-like beasts, as big as calves, with light purple fur. Those hungry eyes were twinkling with fierceness. Shi Mu could tell at a glance that these savage animals were the notorious Wind-Chasing Wolves, an aboriginal beast of the barbarian wastelands. Their fur was similar in color to most plants in this land, and their steps were light and quiet, which enabled them to approach a target without being noticed. Once they had encircled the target, they would charge en masse. Thus, they are best at making sneak attacks.

Shi Mu took a quick glance at the approaching enemies, and, though concealed behind the wolves, a relatively bigger one still drew Shi Mu's attention. That must be the Alpha of this pack.

He raised his eyebrows, and raced forward, leaping up into the air and swaying his black blade. A large patch of blade shadows soon rolled to the Alpha wolf.

Then an ear-splitting sound rang out!

Some six or seven forms swooped down on Shi Mu from all directions, as quick

as lightning, showing off their white teeth. Shi Mu waved his arm with great force, and a dozen blade shadows were cast in all directions.

The dull noises of sharp weapons cutting into flesh resounded. After a second, the rust-like smell of blood filled the air, and seven Wind-Chasing wolves were cut into halves.

Shi Mu paused to adjust his movements, but before he could act again, a dozen black forms came down upon him, while the Alpha wolf's form disappeared into the darkness.

Chapter 137 - New Friends

The blade rung loudly again, and the dazzling black shadows swept in the air, like a dragon hovering above the wasteland, creating a rain of blood wherever it passed. The dozen swooping Wind-Chasing Wolves were cut into pieces in a few breaths.

Shi Mu then activated the Great Fire Formula on his blade, and a flame leaped up from it. With his real qi, the flame spread into the surrounding air at a high speed. Other wolves, who were ready to attack, were forced back by the searing heat. However, the fierce gleams in their eyes did not fade, and they stayed completely riveted on Shi Mu.

This respite was a best chance for Shi Mu to find the Alpha wolf, who was concealing itself in the pack. His pupils turned gold, and he cast a quick glance over the ravening beasts. After a second, his right hand gave the blade a powerful jolt, and a flame shot out from it, like lightning, whistling through the wolves. Along its trail, the blaze devoured some ten-odd wolves, leaving the others howling in great pain and fright.

Suddenly, an air-piercing, forlorn howl was heard. The cunning Alpha wolf sensed the incoming danger and was just about to flee when a burning black blade pierced its bosom directly, pinning its body on the land. Blood gushed out profusely, and its body was soon licked by the blazing flames. After a few seconds, there was only dust left on the ground.

The sight of their strong leader dispatched in a single blow terrorized the remaining wolves, and all then fled for their lives in a panic, with their tails down. Shi Mu had no intention of persuing them, and simply strode to where the head wolf was burnt and pulled his blade out, returning it to the sheath. Next, he took out the canteen and, with proficiency, siphoned the wolves' blood into it. This was his most frequently used approach to obtaining "water" in this wasteland.

Shi Mu took some mouthfuls of the blood, and then to a rest. He did not move again until night had fully descended. He hurried on with his journey for a whole night, and, before the sun rose, he stopped by a massive rock that looked like a small hill. He walked around the rock and then found a natural cave, which

constituted a desirable place to hide and take a rest in, despite its relatively small size.

He stooped down and got into the cave, then seated himself cross-legged on the ground, and began to practice the Art of the Heavenly Elephant.

It had only been a short time when he heard horses coming from nearby. His eyes sharpened, and his face was filled with alertness. Judging from the hurried hoofs, the riders must be making their way in Shi Mu's direction. He stuck his head out of the cave, and suddenly Feng Li's warning rang in his ears. Hence he grabbed his black blade and jumped unhesitatingly out of the cave.

Once out, he saw clearly that, about sixty meters away, three horses were coming towards this rock at a gallop, two abreast in the front, while the other chasing them from behind. The two front horses carried a male and a female barbarian respectively, whereas the third one looked more a horse-shape monster than a real horse. There was no rider on it, and the monster itself was in hot pursuit of the two barbarians.

Out of curiosity, Shi Mu narrowed his eyes, and was shocked at the monster’s appearance when seen closely with his golden eyes. It had an ox’s head, a deer’s body, a horse’s hooves and a lion’s tail! What a breath-taking sight! The two barbarian riders were also surprised to see Shi Mu appearing suddenly by the rock, and, by reflex, pulled on their reins. However, the monster behind them seized the chance to launch an attack, giving a loud, eerie bellow!

The two horses in the front were startled, and both knelt down in fright, throwing their two riders to the ground, who rolled about the sandy land near Shi Mu. Before he knew it, a foul wind blew against his face, and, even more astonishingly, the giant creature mysteriously steered its course, hurling itself towards Shi Mu at a breakneck speed. Its two sharp horns stabbing at Shi Mu like a pair of daggers.

A flame shot up, and the black blade instantly threw out thirteen burning shadows at the creature’s head. A thought came upon him when the flames were just about to meet the monster. He suddenly recalled that this peculiar monster, a patchwork of four kinds of animals, was named Four Odds, and was a rare evil monster, seen exclusively in the barbarian wastelands. Though they

were not that strong of monsters, they were favored by the barbarians as riding animals, due to their remarkable speed.

Shi Mu's eyes sparked with excitement, and, at the last second, he twisted his blade and flung it over his head. The black blade whistled out of his hand and sunk deep into the rock.

The Four Odds, seeing that the imminent danger was lifted, charged forward with renewed confidence, ready to plunge its horns into Shi Mu's heart. But Shi Mu would not let that happen. He gave a loud, earth-shaking shout, and instantly unleashed his real qi, sending it circulating all over his body. Meanwhile, he clutched at the horns with his two big hands, which were as powerful as a pair of tongs. He lowered his waist, squat with his legs apart, and, with all his might, resisted the beast's charge.

A dull thud was heard as Shi Mu felt a great force surging wildly along his arms. Blood rushed to his face. However, his body did not budge in the slightest, like a mighty tree, planted firmly in the ground. The beast neighed bitterly, feeling as if it had slammed against an iron plate, and a hint of fear flashed in its ox eyes. Reluctant to submit, it wriggled fiercely, using all its strength. Tts hooves struggled furiously in the air, while its head swayed tumultuously in an attempt to toss Shi Mu aside, so that it could turn around and flee.

However, its horns ached, sending an overriding force to its head, and, against its will, the beast was hauled over to Shi Mu's side. At the moment, Shi Mu's muscles strained, and the real qi in his body had grown like mountainous waves. Obviously, he had almost reached the limit of his might. If it had not been for his Art of the Strong Ape and the Art of the Heavenly Elephant, which were currently both at the fifth level, he would not have been able to tame this gigantic creature with his strength. It was very likely that he would have already been tossed away by this Four Odds.

[ED: Note: I have no idea when Shi Mu reached the 5th level of the Art of the Strong Ape.]

[TL: In the Rat Nest when he closed himself in Kun room. - -]

Now that the beast was at hand, Shi Mu gave its horn a sudden pull, which made it cry out in great pain and stagger forward two more steps. Shi Mu took

the chance to lower his upper body, then he flipped his body over and mounted the beast, his hands still holding the horns firmly. On its back, Shi Mu gripped its abdomen with his two legs.

The Four Odds was filled with extreme terror, and was doing everything it could to throw Shi Mu down from its back. However, Shi Mu sat rooted on it, not turning a hair, and each time the Four Odds attempted to stir, he would give its flank a good kick, making it cry in pain. After a quarter of an hour, the beast finally learned its lesson, and quieted down with submissive and fearful eyes. Whenever Shi Mu pressed it with his feet, it would smartly turn in the designated direction, and a harder press would make it halt.

Shi Mu was immensely satisfied, and relaxed his grip of the horns. He jumped down its back, and was pleased to see the Four Odds timidly following him, without the slightest intention of fleeing.

Just then he found the two young barbarians had already stood up, and were watching him dumbfounded. The young man looked to be fourteen or fifteen, and was half a head shorter than Shi Mu. There were a few black feathers stuck in his hair, and fresh scratches were left on his cheeks. Clearly he had suffered a bad fall. The girl seemed to be a year or two older than the boy, had slightly dark skin, and pleasant features. At her age, she was already about the same height as a normal human adult woman. A cursory glance found the horse behind the barbarian girl, which had fallen near the cave, was whining plaintively, its legs broken.

“How can we thank this brave warrior? Please accept my deepest gratitude!” The young barbarian man bowed low to Shi Mu, gazing at him fervently, his eyes filled with something akin to worship. The barbarian girl also saluted Shi Mu respectfully, clasping her hands.

“Don’t mention it!” Shi Mu withdrew his black blade and shook his head, answering courteously.

“My name is Sand Girl, and this is my younger brother, Sand Star. Can I ask this brave warrior for his name? Would you like to honor our humble tribe, the Tribe of Flying Raven? We’ll have our Annual Raven God Ceremony soon, and it will be great fun. My father will be very glad to have such an honorable guest like you.”

The barbarian girl looked at Shi Mu expectantly.

[ED: The TL decided that this form of name was better/more correct… “Hello SAND GIRL. I am DUMB EDITOR!... TANTOR! TANTOR!”]

[TL: Ha? I just translated it this way for you to edit...You can certainly choose a better one!]

“Exactly! The Raven God Ceremony is very exciting, and is chaired by my father himself.” Speaking of his father, the barbarian youth’s eyes blazed with pride.

Shi Mu was immensely tempted. According to his knowledge, the barbarian’s ceremonies could only be held by the tribe’s shaman. His lack of sources of information on the barbarian’s totem culture had been bothering him recently, and he would never have believed that the chance would present itself like this. The barbarian brother and sister were, undoubtedly, the children of the tribe’s shaman.

“My name is Mu. Thanks very much for your invitation. If I won’t be a burden, I’d very much like to see the ceremony of your tribe.” Shi Mu gave a friendly smile.

“Really? I’m so delighted! Father will be happy too!” Sand Star burst out with excitement. Sand Girl was also full of smiles, watching Shi Mu with glistening eyes and tilting her head.

“Sister, what are we waiting for? let’s go, now!” Sand Star jostled her sister gently.

Sand Girl threw her brother a half-blaming look, and then jumped on her horse. Sand Star also mounted the horse, sitting behind his sister. The girl pulled on the reins and they began to ride towards the northeast.

Shi Mu ascended the Four Odd and gave it a gentle kick at the stomach. The beast got the signal, with its high intelligence, and soon caught up with the horse. Therefore the three of them, with Sand Star and Sand Girl sharing the same horse, rode abreast as they traveled.

“Sand Girl, how come you two were chased by this Four Odd?” Shi Mu asked curiously, trying to make a conversation.

“It’s all Sand Star’s fault,” Sand Girl answered, eyeing her brother with annoyance, “he insisted on my going hunting with him today, claiming that he would catch some rare beasts and offer the meat to the ceremony. And then, what happened? This Four Odd just rushed out from nowhere, and our trap did not catch him, and, on the contrary, actually piqued it’s anger, almost costing us out lives.” This said, Sand Girl gave Sand Star an angry stare. The youth did not protest, bending his head, crestfallen, which was quite amusing to Shi Mu’s eyes.

Since the three of them were roughly the same age, the journey went on in a merry mood, and the three almost already friends when they drew near the tribe’s region. A river, which was about three meters wide, came into view after one hour’s ride, and around the banks, some one hundred tents made of ox hide were scattered on the grasslands. Cattle and sheep were grazing lethargically. Every now and then, one or two bleats and moos could be heard, adding a sense of tranquility to the peaceful scene.

Suddenly, a flock of ravens appeared flying to the sky above the river. When they neared the tents, the ravens croaked harshly, then, like arrows, shot towards the three of them at alarming speed. By reflex, Shi Mu grabbed ahold of his black blade, but the next scene made him relax. Sand Girl and Sand star had spurred their horses forward to meet the ravens, which were now all hovering around them intimately. Shi Mu was enlightened. These ravens must belong to their father, the shaman of this tribe, and was their totem animal. And their amicable conversation during the journey had informed Shi Mu of the basic conditions of the Flying Raven Tribe. Theirs was only a small tribe, with a population of no more than three or four hundred people. It only had three Totem warriors, among them their father, who was also the shaman.

Chapter 138 - Two Types of Barbarians

In the central area of the tribe was a broad open space. There stood an altar, which was about ten meters wide, built of some large slabs of black stone. Beside the altar stood three giant barbarians. One of them was a middle-aged, with bushy brows and a square face. From his shoulders hung a long black cloak.

Sand Girl and Sand Star briskly dismounted their horse and ran quickly to the middle-aged barbarian. The big man held his children in his arms with a happy smile, then patted them affectionately on their backs. The three then began conversing in a merry mood.

Soon the middle-aged man started to throw Shi Mu frequent looks, also looking at the Four Odd behind him. Shi Mu knew that Sand Girl and Sand Star must be recounting their adventure, telling him how Shi Mu had saved them and tamed the Four Odds.

Not surprisingly, shortly after the intimate conversation, the middle-aged barbarian walked to Shi Mu with long strides, and the smiling eyes under the black eyebrows sized Shi Mu up again. Suddenly, though only for a passing moment, his countenance changed, almost imperceptibly.

“I, Sand Sun, am the shaman of the Flying Raven Tribe. Brave Warrior Mu, thank you very much for saving my children.” The square-faced middle-aged barbarian bowed deep, with a sincere face, one hand on his chest.

On his way to the tribe, Shi Mu had learned that Sand Sun was, at the same time, this small tribe’s shaman and military leader/ He was also the strongest of the three Totem warriors in their tribe. His actual strength roughly equaled that of a Intermediate Houtian Warrior.

“Shaman, please do not be so polite!” Shi Mu returned his smile, then held out his right hand to straighten the shaman up.

Sand Sun’s eyes sharpened in amazement. The previous observation did not tell him how incredible the youth’s force was. The hand that supported him up had a terrible might that made him stand up with chills in his bones. So Sand Star was right when speaking of the youth’s tremendous force.

“Brave Warrior Mu, may I ask what have brought you here, and is there anything our Flying Raven Tribe can do for you?” Sand Sun asked earnestly, in a deep, gentle voice.

“Thank you very much, shaman. I left my tribe simply hoping to widen my experience and do some self-training. I am simply wandering, and have no set path.” Shi Mu shook his head and answered in a convincing tone of voice.

“If so, why not stay longer in our Flying Raven Tribe, and give me the opportunity to repay your kindness of saving my children? After all, I’m the leader here. How could I neglect my honorable guest?” Sand Sun laughed heartily. Then, having a look at Shi Mu’s travel-worn clothes, he suggested, “You must have had a long journey. I’ll prepare you clean water in the tent.”

“Thank you very much, shaman Sand!” Shi Mu did not decline the generous offer, nodding in an easy manner. Water was the most precious thing in this region, and he had not enjoyed a bath ever since he entered the wasteland. Furthermore, the wrestling with the Four Odds had been a strain, and his entire body poured with sweat, which was making him feel ill.

Sand Sun’s face creased into a broad smile, and soon beckoned a tribesman to water the Four Odds by the river. Then he guided Shi Mu to a nearby tent, which was made of the most exquisitely materials of any tent. This was the best tent, except the one for the shaman. Sand Star and his sister also followed them to the tent, with Sand Girl wearing a baffled face. She could not help but wonder at her father’s outpour of enthusiasm today. Though it was their tribe’s tradition to treat a guest with hospitality, her father was evidently going too far. Moreover, between the heavy bushes of his eyes, was a hint of awe, unbefitting to his position.

After a few minutes, Shi Mu was left alone in the tent. Sand Sun had exited with his children. In a relaxed mood he unfastened the weapons hung in his body, and put them in order on the table. Before long, two burly barbarians lifted in a big wooden barrel filled with lukewarm water. After the two barbarians left, he took off his clothes deftly, then bathed himself fully in the balmy water.

At the same time, in the shaman’s tent. Sand Sun was answering his children’s questions.

“Father, you are the great leader and shaman of out Flying Raven Tribe. Why do you have to be this polite to warrior Mu?” Sand Girl questioned her father with a critical flash in her eyes. Her brother also lifted his head and looked directly into his father’s eyes.

“My dear children, you are still too young and naive, so I don’t blame you for not having spotted warrior Mu’s true identity. He has a high status, and is probably a person a royal blood from some major tribe.” Sand Sun looked at his children with a pair of doting eyes, and, for a moment, there was a trace of guilt crossing them. For he knew in his heart that Sand Girl and Sand Star had a fair amount of talent at being Totem warriors, At least they would if they had not been born to this small, insignificant tribe. They would have been given better resources and had more chances to hunt fierce beasts if they were raised in other bigger tribes. However, he himself was only a low-level shaman, and not a powerful warrior either. He lacked the power to cultivate his children and make them Totem warriors.

“Royalty?” Sand Star and Sand Girl were all surprises.

“That’s right. I can sense it when speaking to him face to face. There is a powerful beast sealed inside his body. Any small tribe of average warriors would never have achieved that. Moreover, he is carrying some really powerful weapons. He must be a magic weapon above the mid-tier, and many low-level black magic weapons. Therefore, he must have been born in some big tribe. A small tribe like ours does not even hold a low-tier magic weapon, and most of our tribesman have never seen one. This confirmed my guess even more. On the other hand, warrior Mu’s cultivation is unbelievably high. As far as I’m concerned, even if all the Totem warriors in our tribe attacked together, they could not even injure him.” Sand Sun said with a sigh.

Sand Girl and Sand Star were deeply shocked by their father’s words, especially Sand Girl. The luster in her eyes dulled when she heard so.

After one hour, Shi Mu finished the bath and went out of the tent to talk with the tribesmen. When the father and his children left their tent, they saw Shi Mu engaged in conversations with some ten-odd men, who were trying their best to befriend Shi Mu, a respected guest invited by their shaman. They were asking Shi Mu to taste of their home-made milk wines and dried cheeses. In this small tribe,

such food was definitely a luxury. Hence these tribesmen, who were barely managing to feed themselves, once more moved Shi Mu with their sincerity and generosity.

Shi Mu was very interested in learning some techniques for surviving in the wasteland. Therefore, he carefully led up to his favorite topic, and, in a short time, had learned the basic skills concerning finding water source and dealing with poisonous insects and beasts. To reciprocate their kindness, Shi Mu taught the barbarians how to fish. Growing up fishing, he knew a lot about catching fish, and, with some simple tools, he quickly caught many fish and shrimp in the river that ran by their tents. The tribesmen had not eaten fish for months, and this pleased the water-loving, but bad-at-swimming, barbarians very much. The fire of friendship was soon kindled.

When dusk fell, they gathered in Sand Sun's spacious tent for a hearty meal. A whole sheep was roasted golden at one side of the tent, and the tempting smell filled the room. Sand Sun sat in the main chair at the center of the tent, beaming with a face full of smiles. Sand Girl and Sand Star sat next to Shi Mu, all on Sand Sun's left side, opposite to two thirty-year old burly barbarians. The two were wolfing down meat with their mouths smudged with oil, mouthfuls of wine being drunk every few moments.

Shi Mu had a bite at the meat, then looked at the two happily feasting barbarians. One of them had curly golden hair, and the other looked just like any other barbarian man, with his hair braided up, and a golden earring in his right earlobe. The second man unfastened his shirt, revealing his bosom, on which was a tattoo of an aggressive-looking raven. The two of them were the only Totems warriors, save Sand Sun himself, and both were equivalent in strength to Primary Houtian Warriors.

Through the conversations he had with other tribesmen, Shi Mu got a piece of valuable information by means of indirect questioning. The barbarians, en masse, were divided into two types - the calmer Peaceful Barbarians, and the war-seeking Belligerent Barbarians. The latter were more primitive, had savage natures, and were rather bloodthirsty. They would plunder other tribes, and even conquer them. The more extreme of them even propagated the religious idea of "The Holy War", and it was this group who had waged war against

normal humans. They deemed “The Holy War” as their ultimate aim. However, the Peaceful Barbarians had a much milder disposition by contrast, and were a hospitable people. But, due to their weak bloodlines, they had a much smaller number of Totem warriors, and thus less power. Their daily activities mainly involved hunting for food. The Flying Raven was just such a tribe, and this explained why, with a population of three to four hundred people, they only had three Totem warriors.

Another thing that confused him was that in the feast people seemed rather awe-stricken in front of him, and even Sand Girl and Sand Star adopted a much more modest manner when talking with him. He tried to not let this bother him, after all, he was not planning to stay that long. However, he was not in that high of spirits, as he had that deadly curse on him. He had been in the mood to inquire of Sand Sun about the Poisonous Snake Tribe, but the chance had not come by.

Seeing that all had dined and wined to satiety, Sand Sun clapped his hands and a file of ten female barbarians entered the tent at a gentle pace. Amid the monotonous drums, the girls began performing their primitive dances.

“Shaman Sand, is your honored tribe’s totem the black ravens I saw this afternoon?” Shi Mu asked as he saw tattoos of raven on the girl’s dresses.

“Yes. At least it is currently. The ravens are a low-level beast in the wasteland, and they are quite fierce. They act in flocks, and their enemies fear them, even the average Totem warrior should be scared of them. They can dive as quick as lightning, and their beaks are as sharp as spear.” Sand Sun nodded, speaking with ease and pride.

The ravens were indeed powerful. But, in Shi Mu’s eyes, they could, at best, threaten a Primary or an Intermediate Houtian Totem warrior, and even then, they would have to act in a large number to do so.

“Is there any chance that your tribe used to have a different totem?” Shi Mu’s eyes flashed keenly, since he had heard undertones in Sand Sun’s answer.

“According to our tribe’s ancient history, we, of the Flying Raven Tribe, used to belong to a big tribe - The Golden Crow Tribe, whose secret totem art could not only seal crows and ravens, but also most bird beasts.” There was a gleam of

pride in Sand Sun's eyes as he said this, "But sadly, wars and strife made our tribe fall apart and gradually dissolve. Our Flying Raven is the only one that has survived. For decades we failed in producing a powerful shaman, and were thus unable to seal strong beasts. Alas! We did have a dream of reviving our great tribe." Sand Sun's eyes spoke of deep sorrow as he said so.

Sand Star and Sand Girl also fell into a depressed silence, and Shi Mu was in a loss for comforting words.

After a long while, the depressing atmosphere slowly began to lift. Shi Mu searched for words to try and ease the atmosphere faster. He then diverted the topic by asking the question that concerned him most.

"Shaman Sand. I once saw a viper's totem, as red as blood, and the beast sealed is overwhelmingly powerful. Could your tribe's secret art seal such a beast?" Shi Mu asked.

"We could if we had a powerful shaman. You know, at our prime, we sealed the legendary Roc of the Golden Wings! By the way, the man you saw, did he have green skin?" Sand Sun suddenly thought of something and asked bluntly.

"Exactly." Shi Mu nodded after giving it some thought.

"If I remember it right, that totem you mentioned could only belong to the Poisonous Snake Tribe, one of the eight major tribes!" Sand Sun's look changed slightly, looking quite pale.

"Shaman Sand, if I ever wanted to see the tribe, could you show me the way?" Shi Mu met Sand Sun's eyes and asked straightforwardly. The former was amazed at Shi Mu's guts, and pointed in the direction of the tribe. This was a piece of information most welcomed, and Shi Mu's spirits were lifted. During the following time, he enjoyed the feast, and talked with Sand Girl and Sand Star late into the night. Then the hosts and the guest bid each other goodnight and went to sleep.

Chapter 139 - The Raven God Ceremony

Whiz! A green arrow whistled through the air and disappeared behind a huge rock, where a withered yellow branch was covered by a shrub. The arrow sank accurately into the branch.

However, the dead yellow branch suddenly flipped and started rolling wildly. It slapped against the shrub, and the leaves fell down to the ground.

As the matter of fact, the withered branch was the head of a large viper. It was over fifteen meters long, was so thick that a grown man could barely wrap his arms around it, and had striped scales, which seemed to be as solid as rocks. The arrow had pierced its head up to the fletchings. The yellow viper's sturdy body, at first, made an unyielding struggle, twisting and turning like crazy. Its thick, long tail sweeping the ground vigorously. Some towering trees nearby were struck in this undiscriminating attack, torn down after a succession of rustling sounds. A quarter of an hour later, the large viper lost the last bit of its strength, barely able to make the slightest twitches. It eventually lay dead, with its belly upturned.

Out of a huge rock, some one hundred meters away, jumped a couple of figures. The one rushing in the front was Shi Mu, whereas the ones behinds him included Sand Girl, Sand Star, and some tribesmen of the Flying Raven, who were each carrying a number of animals, which they had hunted.

Shi Mu was holding a large yellow bow in his hand. The bow was decorated with snake's heads at either end, and the bowstring ran through their mouths. This long bow was none other than the one he had gained from the green-skinned barbarian. For fear that it might be recognized by the barbarians, he had deliberately applied some beasts' blood to the bow, dying it yellow. At this moment, he was looking over the bow with satisfaction. This 'Air-Piercing Bow' was even more powerful than his Purple Steel Bow, and the characters carved on it were, according to Feng Li, some black magic, unique to the barbarians. They held some mysterious ancient might, and worked in a similar way to the magic characters of humans. To some extent, human magic and barbarian black magic learned from each other. Once one learned of something, the other could, more or less, perceive it.

With the black magic on it, this Air-Piercing Bow had a range much longer than the Purple Steel Bow and, moreover, it could apply its magic to arrows that were fired from it, intensifying them so that they were able to pierce through armor. Also, when instilled with magical power, the bow could change its size freely within a range that made it suit the user's need at anytime. The large viper it had just shot was powerfully built, able to beat an intermediate Houtian warrior in a fight. However, this Air-Piercing Bow, together with the Wind-Chasing Arrows he was using, had rendered it as weak as a rabbit.

Shi Mu and his barbarian friends soon marched to the viper's side. Sand Star gave its body a heavy kick, but the overweight body barely moved. This filled Sand Star with awe.

"Brother Mu, you are a hero!" Sand Star looked at Shi Mu with glittering eyes, shouting proudly, as if Shi Mu was really his brother.

"I agree! This kind of viper can change the color of its scales to disguise itself. A sly animal, if there ever was one. Also, you can barely smell its scent. It's scales are solid as iron. Even a heavy weapon may not leave a cut on them. However, brother Mu can kill it with a single arrow! You are a real Balute of our kinsmen!" Another barbarian with curly golden hair echoed, his eyes filled with admiration.

"You flatter me, brother Hu Han. It's not me who killed it, it's my arrow." Shi Mu returned an embarrassed smile, thinking of the dead green-skinned barbarian.

Balute is an honored title for heroes in the barbarians' culture. They are a people that worship bravery and strength more than anything, and would only hail someone they truly admire as "Balute". And this yellow viper's changeable color is, indeed, difficult for ordinary people to handle. But it is only a sham under Shi Mu's superhuman eyes. If you include the Air-Piercing Bow and the Wind-Chasing Arrow, the snakewas a good as dead as soon as Shi Mu decided to kill it.

Saying this, Shi Mu stepped forward and stooped over the ground, withdrawing the arrow from the snake's head. He wiped the blood off the arrowhead, then carefully returned it to the quiver. He had, altogether, thirteen such magical arrows, which he got from the green-skinned barbarian. Despite

their killing power, the effect of this black magic would dwindle slightly each time the arrow was used. A crude estimation told him that each arrow's life was no longer than five uses, at which point the magic power would have fully run out.

The barbarians around him all gazed at the bow and arrows helplessly and enviously. They couldn't avert their eyes. Their tribe was a poorly-equipped one, and barely had any metal. Most of their warriors were still using weapons made of bone.

"Brother Mu, is that a black magic weapon?" Sand Girl asked, her watery eyes glistening.

"Sort of," Shi Mu scratched his head, and meanwhile the bow flashed, shrinking quickly until it was as small as a palm. Then he slipped it into his shirt.

"Eh...It's getting dark, and we have hunted enough animals. Let's go back." Sensing Shi Mu's reluctance to talk about the bow, Sand Girl changed the topic and suggested they return to their village.

The others answered gladly, and smartly trussed up the viper and then merrily started returning to their camp, singing barbarian songs in high spirits. They soon forgot about the weapon that had reminded them of their scantiness, thinking solely of the yellow viper. This is absolutely a treasure: its skin can be made into soft armor, and its sinews and bones into arrows and bows. The remnants will be good material to exchange for valuable things with other tribes. Above all, the snake meat will suffice to feed the entire tribe for a few days.

So the blissful barbarians brought the huge yellow viper back to their tribe. Immediately a commotion was aroused. Some children had not seen a viper's body before, so they chased after each other, shouting and yelling excitedly around the snake's body. Shi Mu stood like a pleased father near the children, with his hands on his hips. Looking around, the whole tribe had done much to prepare the night's ceremony. Several high wooden platforms were built on the central open space, and around them there stood over ten unlit torches.

On the altar, a black bird, carved from some unknown material, was placed, looking so vivi, it could have been real. Especially that pair of blood-red eyes. They cast obscure red lights, as if watching the tribe quietly the entire time. Shi Mu knit his eyebrows, and narrowed his eyes to stare at those realistic bird eyes.

An eerie feeling crept upon his heart, but soon vanished, as if it were only his illusion.

Sand Girl and Sand Star could not wait to retell how Shi Mu killed the yellow viper with an arrow, and a fit of enthusiastic cries burst out among the crowd. The simple-minded tribesmen immediately encircled Shi Mu, hailing him, and throwing him adoring looks. Sand Sun walked to Shi Mu, applauding, “Master Mu is really a Balute! You can even kill a yellow viper! That’s incredible!”

“I don’t deserve this, Shaman Sand. I’ve already brought much trouble to your honored tribe, so I don’t want to attend your ceremony with empty hands. So this yellow snake is my gift for the Raven God. I hope it can add color to the great ceremony you are holding tonight.” Shi Mu turned his eyes from the crowd and smiled widely.

“Master Mu is so generous, I, on behalf of our Raven God, accept your sincere gift.” Sand Sun bowed with one hand on his chest, commenting in a serious tone. As a shaman, as well as the leader of the tribe, he feared and worshiped the Raven God more than any of his tribesmen. Shi Mu’s blessing of their ceremony won his liking immediately. So any suspicion of Shi Mu’s identity and purpose, if there was any, was swept away cleanly. After chatting with his children, Sand Sun then called out his tribesmen to deal with the viper.

Shi Mu, standing by peacefully with a heartfelt smile, suddenly frowned, gripped by a pain without warning. The curse of the tattoo on his chest had, unexpectedly, activated, sending a burning pain, like a sharp knife, piercing into the depths of his spirit. His face blanched in pain, and his body staggered helplessly for a moment before he managed to regain the balance.

“Master Mu, are you alright?” Sand Girl asked, full of concern, after detecting Shi Mu’s abnormal change.

“It’s nothing, I’m just tired. Let me have a rest and I’ll be ok.” Shi Mu took a deep breath and forced a smile. He then told San Sun that he would like for a nap, and turned for his tent.

Watching Shi Mu’s receding back, the unadorned, pretty face of Sand Girl was clouded with worry.

After returning to his abode, Shi Mu hastily took off his clothes, and saw the

snake tattoo glowing red on his chest. The pale, red lights flowed quietly, like blood. The sight made him gasp, and his face dropped. The Eternal Doom Spell had finally begun to corrode his spirit.

He took a deep breath to calm his nerves, then took out a gourd shaped jar made of green jade. Pulling out the plug, he poured the content on his palm with great care. A thick, transparent light blue liquid slowly streamed out. This was the unicorn viper's blood he bought before he left Lan City.

He slowly applied the blue blood to the tattoo, and a soothing cool feeling spread across his chest. In accordance, the red lights emitted by the tattoo faded until they, at last, vanished. He exhaled a long, deep breath. Even though the pain was only momentary, it had made him perspire all over his body.

Storing the jar cautiously, he rose and walked to the window. The vast sky in the east was darkening, and the air felt thin and melancholy. He clenched his fists, and his eyes grew forlorn and cold.

"Mother, your Mu Er will definitely survive, and become a strong warrior. Believe in me and don't worry!" He murmured, softly.

Under the night sky, the camp fire leaped up high merrily, and lit up the sky. So the Annual Raven God ceremony had begun.

All the tribesmen had convened before the high altar, and Shi Mu sat by Sand Sun and all the other elders of the tribe. The great ceremony had two stages. The first was for the shaman Sand Sun to chant a song of praise for the Raven God, and then the whole tribe would offer food and gifts to the Raven God, praying for the Raven God's bless them in the coming year.

After the solemn sacrifice came the all-night party. A huge bonfire was lit before the altar, and the blazing flames illuminated the whole tribe. People swarmed by the fire, and placed delicacies and wines, rarely seen in normal days, which were shared between all the tribesmen.

The ox horn cups, and camel bone bowls were filled with excellent wines. Amid a Twelve-String qin's clear and beautiful sounds, the tribesmen danced in a festive mood, holding each other's hands. A jovial atmosphere pervaded in the air above the vast, night-sky covered wasteland.

“Master Mu, please.” Sand Sun passed Shi Mu a full bowl of wine, which Shi Mu accepted with pleasure and drank in one clean gulp. The barbarian wine was less delicious than a human wine, but this wine was made from the yellow viper’s gallbladder and, thus, had a peculiar, yet pleasant, scent and tasted rather refreshing.

“Good Wine!” Putting down the camel bone bowl, Shi Mu exclaimed loudly, stroking his knees.

“You flatter us, Master Mu. You’ve seen the world, so how could the poor wine of a small tribe please you?” Sand Sun replied humbly, but his eyes were sparkling with joy.

“You are very polite, shaman. Your honored tribe’s wine really impresses me. This drink is strong, pure, and has a unique flavor after concocting it with the snake’s gallbladder. I’ve never tasted a better wine.” Shi Mu laughed heartily.

Although Sand Sun knew this was just Shi Mu being courteous, the praise still delighted him, the leader of a small, struggling tribe. He could not help but laugh with Shi Mu to his heart’s content.

Just then, there was shouts of joy among the tribesmen by the campfire. Sand Girl had appeared among them at some unknown time. At this point, she was wearing a long dress, which was as red as the flames. On her clear forehead was a silver band decorated with moonstone. Her slim wrists and ankles were wound with red threads, from which silver rings were hanging. This image was radically different from her usual valiant and heroic bearing, and the long dress showed off her delicate figure even more.

Chapter 140 - The Tribe of the Heavenly Wolf

Bowing to Sand Sun from a distance, Sand Girl caught a fleeting glimpse of Shi Mu sitting beside her father. She stood on her tiptoes, then sprang into the center of the square with a single step, moving lightly and gracefully, like a swallow. The people watching clapped and shouted out encouragements for her to continue.

The musicians on both sides began to play stringed instruments and drums. Loud and melodious music resounded over the land.

As Sand Girl was dancing, the clear sounds of silver rings flowed with her pace as her slim figure kept moving with the music. Her skirt floated in the air, and the scene of her dancing in her red dress resembled an blooming flower, especially when her smiles blossomed as she tilted her head and concealed her large bright eyes under her beautiful eyebrows.

As the drum boomed, the red skirt was expanding and contracting according to her fluent movements. Her body looked just like an opening azalea flower, so bright and attractive that it was beyond description.

When the music finally stopped, the train of the skirt, which she was holding, suddenly fanned apart, like a rising sun, outshining the stars in the sky and casting shadows onto all where were there.

The barbarians burst out in applause, especially the young men, whose eyes were shining greedily as they gazed at Sang Girl as if they were drunk.

“Brave Warrior Mu, how do you like my daughter’s dance?” Sand Sun stroked his short beard, full of pride for his daughter.

“Sand Girl was did very well, and I have never seen such a beautiful dance.” Shi Mu praised sincerely.

Sand Sun laughed loudly, raising his bowl of wine and drinking it all in one gulp.

It was the the ceremony for the Raven God, but it also belonged to the tribesmen, who had worked hard for another year.

All the tribesmen were wishing happiness to each other, and drinking happily. There were young men and women walking into the square, singing and dancing,

while accompanied by musics of the barbarian style. Many people were already drunk, their faces red...

The revelry ended late at night. In the big tent, Sand Star was drunk and unconscious, but Sand Girl was still sober, just a little red-faced, apparently having drank alot as well. She was tirelessly taking care of her drunk brother.

After she had taken Sand Star into the inner room and wrapped him in a fur blanket, she headed to the other room, where the lamps were still glowing. Sand Sun and Shi Mu were having a jovial conversation.

Sand Girl stared at the light blankly, sinking into some thoughts. Then she suddenly blushed and turned to another room.

At the same time, in the lit room, Sand Sun sat, knee by knee, with Shi Mu.

Though they had both drank a lot of strong wine, yet they were only slightly red-faced and did not seem to be drunk.

“Shaman Sand, I want to thank you and your people for your cordial treatment. I felt the warmth of the Flying Raven tribe, but I still have important personal affairs to deal with, so I will leave here tomorrow. I simply wanted to bid farewell to you first.” Shi Mu finally clarified his intention for coming after chatting for a bit.

“Brave warrior Mu, I can guess that you are not an ordinary man and that you must have very important things to do, so I will not urge you to stay. You must intend to go to the Poisonous Snake Tribe, right?” Sand Sun did not show any surprise, but only sighed lightly and asked him.

Shi Mu nodded solemnly.

“From here to there is more than five thousand kilometers, and you will have to cross the black desert, which starts a mere fifteen kilometers away from our village. This desert is very large, taking even the strongest man more than three days to get across. Besides, there are many poisonous sand scorpions. They can bite you before you know it. ” Sand Sun warned him, “But the sand scorpions are afraid of Fragrant Roebucks. They will avoid approaching you once they smell a Roebucks, because there is a fragrant ball in each of the male Roebucks, which sends out a certain kind of fragrance. Take the fragrant ball with you to keep the

scorpions away. I will ask my daughter to be your guide tomorrow and the two of you can find and kill a Roebuck.” Sand Sun added after some thought.

“Thank you, Shaman Sand.” Shi Mu replied gratefully, feeling the warmth in Sand Sun’s words.

At the same time, the tent’s door rustled softly.

“Is that Sand Girl? Come in.” Sand Sun looked at the door and frowned.

The door curtain was opened, and Sand Girl stepped in, her face a little pale. She had a serving tray in her hands.

There were two cups and a teapot on the tray. But somehow water had been spilt on it. Sand Girl’s hand was scalded red.

“Father, brother Mu, this is tea of the sand chestnut, which can neutralize the effects of the alcohol.” Sand Girl placed the tray on the table, glanced at Shi Mu, and quickly left the tent.

Sand Sun remained silent, a slight frown on his face.

Shi Mu also sighed in his mind, and then bid Sand Sun goodbye and left without drinking any tea.

……

Early the next morning, when Shi Mu had just got up, there was someone outside his tent.

He walked out of his tent and saw many people standing outside. Sand Girl, Sand Star, and several dozen other young barbarians, who he had gotten along well with these past few days.

“Brother Mu, I had heard a lot of things about you from my father. Recently, the climate in the desert has been changing a lot, and the number of Fragrant Roebucks has decreased, so it may be difficult to catch a male one. We are all here to help you.” Sand Girl said, her head lowered. She was not looking as natural as usual.

“Consider this our send-off party for you.” Sand Star said, with a simple smile.

Shi Mu mind went blank when he saw the honest and kind-hearted faces of the

barbarians. Quite a complex feeling welled up in his mind as he recalled the hospitable entertainment he had enjoyed these past few days.

“Well… Thank you!” He smiled, knowing that, at this moment, a simple, genuine smile was better than flowery words.

After they had made all the preparations, they left the tribe and went out hunting.

On a high platform in the tribe, Sand Sun and a hefty barbarian with golden curly hair stood, watching the receding forms shoulder by shoulder, and following them with their eyes until the figures receded into small black spots near the horizon.

Eventually, even the black spots themselves disappeared from their view.

“It seemed that Sand Girl has quite a good opinion of Mu. Why not try to persuade him to stay here?” The barbarian with golden hair turned his head as he said this.

Sand Sun forced a smile and, shaking his head, said, “I also would prefer for him to stay here, but it is impossible. Shi Mu cannot be an ordinary person and he has quite a bit of ability. He must be a key person of some big tribe. How could he want to stay in our poor tribe?”

“If so, why did you let your daughter accompany him to hunt the fragrant Roebuck? It will only make her more sad in the future.” The man with golden hair asked, full of confusion.

“Rest assured. She is very strong-willed, even stronger than many of the males in our tribe. She can deal with it.” Sand Sun sighed and replied.

“The Holy War has lasted for several years, but the big tribes seem to have gotten nothing but losses.” The golden-haired barbarian changed the topic as he saw it was too sad for Sand Sun to go on.

“War will only bring death and sadness. It will never bring people any happiness.” Sand Sun cast his sorrowful eyes to the horizon. Apparently, he did not agree with the Holy War, led by the Belligerent Barbarians

“Well, I heard that there were some scouts seen near our tribe, and you know

that wild wolves can be more terrifying than tigers. We must pay attention.” The golden-haired barbarian suddenly thought of something and said.

“OK, I will let our people know and order them be careful when they are outside of our tribe. It would be best not to invite trouble on ourselves.” Sand Sun frowned and nodded.

After chatting for a while, the two stood up and began to get down the platform when they suddenly saw a billow of smoke and dust in the distance. It looked like a dragon was flying straight towards their tribe.

“It is….” The golden-haired barbarian trembled as a bad premonition crept up in his heart.

Sand Sun strained his eyes to see what was out ther. His eyesight was much better than the golden-haired man. Soon, he figured out it was dozens of horsemen running in the dust, followed by more many foot soldiers. A flag with a savage black wolf head on it was floating vigorously in the wind, held by one horseman in the front.

“Oh No! It’s the men of the Heavenly Wolf Tribe!” Sand Sun cried in a serious voice.

The golden-haired barbarian’s face became grave, as if he had just heard the worst news in the world.

“Hun Han, rally our people, right now! We will soon have some uninvited guests.” Sand Sun’s voice was still serious and he wore a gloomy face.

The golden-haired barbarian nodded and jumped down the platform.

As clarion call sounded out, and the tribe fell into a mess as they panicked.

After a while, all the adult males had assembled outside the tents, weapons in their hands. They had about a hundred and fifty people, and most of their weapons were made of bone or stone. Only a few of them had weapons made of iron.

Before long, the dust had approached them.

The first of the wolf-riders stopped in front of them, as their huge wolves roared threateningly. After them, there were more than a hundred soldiers, all

glaring at the people of the Flying Raven Tribe.

The riders of the wolves were surrounded by the aura of totem energy. Apparently, they were all Totem warriors.

In front of the people of the Flying Raven Tribe, Sand Sun wore a most gloomy expression as he saw the scene.

The only other two Totem Warriors in their tribe, Hu Han and another barbarian wearing a golden earring on his right earlobe, were standing at his side.

“Sand Sun, have you become a sand rat in the desert these years, hidden in your nest and not daring to go outside?” A lanky barbarian, with fierce and treacherous eyes, urged his wolf to step forward, and spoke with a sardonic sneer.

The power of his Totem was much stronger than the others’, revealing his consummate stage of the Houtian realm strength.

Sand Sun stepped forward, with a black wooden stick in his hand, and spoke loudly:” Fei Du, you hideous wolf, what have you come to our tribe for?”

The barbarian sneered again when he glanced at Sand Sun, and said, ” I am in no mood to catch up with you. In fact, we are acting according to the instructions of the Great Shaman, in order to crush the humans. Now I requisition a thousand kilograms of rice, ten jugs of your best wine, and the best ten horses in your tribe; all in the name of the Holy War!”

Just as his voice fell, all the people of the Flying Raven Tribe, standing behind Sand Sun, wielded their weapons and roared loudly.

The Flying Raven Tribe was not wealthy. In fact, they lived quite an impoverished life. Even if they could bring out the requested stuff, it would cost them all they had.

“This, so-called, Holy War was started by you Belligerent Barbarians. It has nothing to do with us Peaceful Barbarians. We will not lay our fingers on the spoils of your war, so equally, keep away from our stuff! You will not take anything from us!” One young barbarian, in the front of the crowd, shouted angrily.

A fierce light shone in Fei Du's eyes and he raised the whip, seizing one arm of the young barbarian with lightening speed, and attempted to drag him out.

In no time, Sand Sun's figure darted forward, and a black beam shot up and cut the whip in Fei Du's hand in half.

The young barbarian's body slumped heavily to the ground and two of his tribesmen hastily stepped up to help him.

Chapter 141 - The Bloodshed

Fei Du frowned as he saw there were visible burns where his whip was cut. Sand Sun's staff shone with a black light in the shape of a flame.

"Hehe, I never expected you to have made such progress in the black magic of fire in just a few years. But do you really think you can fend off our warriors of the Heavenly Wolf Tribe with just your pitiful magic?" Fei Du sneered, and, suddenly, an overwhelming qi burst out from his body. The black wolf he was riding howled.

All the other wolves and soldiers howled in response. They all stepped forward and an invisible pressure started pushing against the tribesmen of the Flying Raven Tribe.

Sand Sun wore a gloomy face under the pressure, because he knew, in a glance, that it was an old trick used by the Heavenly Wolf Tribe to disturb the minds of their enemies.

With no time to think, he wielded his staff fiercely, and then a beam of dark light was emitted, forming a shield of light in front of his tribesmen.

The invisible power flowed near the enemy as soon as the light shield took form.

Then, with a muffled noise, the black shield broke under Fei Du's attack, but it did succeed in obstructing the pressure from before.

Sand Sun's face turned unnaturally red, and he took a step backwards. The black light on his staff faded away rapidly.

All the tribesmen of the Flying Raven Tribe seemed to be frightened, looking to Sand Sun for more action, but no one took a single step back.

"Sand Sun, if you are sensible, you will not try to oppose us of the Heavenly Wolf Tribe. You have the alternative of giving me the resources. Otherwise, die with all of your people! Now give me your choice!" Fei Du said, sneering.

Sand Sun turned pale with rage. He sank into the most tumultuous thoughts of his entire life when he stared at the twenty-odd Totem Warriors in front of him.

“A thousand kilograms is too much. We can spare two hundred and fifty kilograms for you, and some horses and wine to make amends, OK?” After a while, he opened his mouth and spoke reluctantly.

A majority of the tribesmen were immediately ignited with indignation, shouting with rage when they sensed their Shaman’s intention to compromise.

Sand Sun waved his hand to suppress the voices around him.

“Haha, do you take us as beggars to give us only such few grains? A thousand kilograms or death! You do not have the right to haggle with me! ... Well, our young master has mentioned that he has interest in your beautiful daughter, Sand Girl. If you give her to us, our young master will have her as his concubine, and I can free you from the demand of grains. It is an honor of your tribe. Just take her to me!” Few Du was still sneering, this time more hideously.

“Fei Du, don’t take a mile when we give you an inch. Though we do not have many people, we can still feel insulted!” Sand Sun wore a fierce expression as he shouted. Meanwhile the tribesmen behind him all drew their weapons. The sound of war had broken out.

“Well, now that you are courting death, I won’t give you mercy!” Fei Du’s face turned pale with rage and he grinned coldly with his hand raised.

The wolf-riders behind him formed a formation that was like a river of steel, and they rushed toward the tribesmen of the Flying Raven Tribe together with the one hundred foot soldiers.

“Retreat to the inside!” Sand Sun ordered loudly, and then, with thick black light shooting up from his staff, he uttered a spell. Suddenly, a black cloud emerged in the sky, with muffled cawing noises coming from it.

Soon afterwards, dozens of black crows flew out of the cloud, like arrows aiming at the riders of the Heavenly Wolf Tribe.

The black crows were flying at a high speed, and their beaks were like awls, even sharper than real arrows. Some wolf-riders in the front were struck down from their wolves by several crows as they had no time to duck.

However stout, the body of Totem warriors could still suffer from the attacks of the crows. Therefore, the warriors all bled badly, especially the one who was

hit on his eye. The thin and long beak stabbed deeply into his head. This primary Houtian Totem warrior cried bitterly and fell off his wolf after getting hit on his head. He struggled on the ground for some time before he twitched and stopped moving.

Sand Sun uttered his spells loudly, then black light shone around him again. Suddenly, something dark speedily flew out from the tents and merged into Sand Sun's body. Next, the black light around Sand Sun's body formed a shape of crow, and his staff started glowing with red light.

Under the red light, his complexion became filled with vigor.

Sand Sun shouted, and thrust his staff forward like a spear. The staff pierced a wolf-rider, who was rushing towards him, through his chest, and lifted him up forcibly.

Meanwhile, two other beams of black light also came from the tents, coming into the bodies of the other two Totem warriors of the Flying Raven Tribe, though not with the same momentum as Sand Sun's. Even so, the two warriors were greatly refreshed, and red lights emerged on their weapons, obviously sharpening them.

The three rose up to lead the other warriors of their tribe to ward off the enemies. After the cost of more than twenty tribesmen's lives, they managed to repel the attack of the Heavenly Wolf Tribe.

Fei Du flew into fury when he saw his men were killed. The twenty Totem warriors were his capable helpers, as well as his private army. It was a heavy loss to lose even one of them. He shouted and lifted his hand into the air. Then a beam of dark light flew out, looking like lightning.

While Sand Sun was holding his staff, fighting energetically with a hammer-wielding wolf-rider, who was at the middle stage of Houtian Realm, he felt a sudden pain on his chest. Sand Sun turned ghastly pale when he lowered his head to see what had happened.

There was a big black hole burnt through his chest!

A loud noise resounded.

A second after getting smote with the black lightning, the hammer of the wolf-

rider in front of him smashed into his body and knocked him into the air.

“Shaman!” The golden-haired hefty man changed his look and cried out, but this left him distracted, and a black spear struck while he wasn’t paying attention. It stabbed into his throat and soon he bled to death.

The game was as good as lost. The last Totem warrior of the Flying Raven Tribe was killed by several wolf-riders’ spears a few breaths later.

The Heavenly Wolf Tribe had only lost a few riders, which, now that the three totem warriors of the Flying Raven Tribe were dead, made little difference to the battle.

On the other hand, without Sand Sun and the other two Totem warriors, the wolf-riders crushed the defenses of the Flying Raven Tribe with ease. Tribesmen would be killed wherever a wolf-rider wielded his weapon.

“Follow me, capture them alive!”

Fei Du raised his blade and urged his wolf soldiers, leading his army into the Flying Raven Tribe.

It was absolutely a carnage of war of the whole tribe!

……

It was getting late when Shi Mu got back to the tribe with Sand Girl, Sand Star, and the other young tribesmen.

Shi Mu was riding his Four Odds, along with the sister and brother, who were sitting shoulder by shoulder. He also had a yellow roebuck on his saddle. He was toying with a yellow round ball, which was as big as an egg, that was sitting in his hand. It felt as if he was holding a stone ball, but the ball discharged an odd fragrance.

“Thank you for helping me hunt the roebuck!” Shi Mu stored the yellow ball in a small bag hung on his waist, then smiled and cupped his hands to express his thanks. The tens of people had spent a whole day to kill this roebuck.

“Don’t be so polite, brother Mu, it is a matter of pride for us of the Flying Raven Tribesmen to help a friend.” Sand Star puffed out his chest and thumped on it, speaking loudly. All the other young tribesmen also waved their hands and

wished Shi Mu a good journey thereafter.

However, Sand Girl was riding wordlessly near him. She kept silent all the way back, in a solitary mood. Shi Mu sighed secretly to himself and did not speak to her.

In a jovial atmosphere, the hunting group soon came near to their tents.

However, Shi Mu suddenly frowned. The strengthened eyesight made him possible to see some faint black smoke swirling up from their tents. And the black clouds floating above only added to the ominous sensation.

A bad premonition emerged in his mind, which made his face stern and gloomy.

“Brother Mu, what’s up?” Sand Girl had been keeping an eye on Shi Mu, so she immediately discovered his change of expression. She finally mustered her courage to ask after a short hesitation.

“Something unusual may have happened at the camp. Let’s speed up.” Shi Mu said seriously.

The others also changed their looks, stretching their necks to stare in the direction of their home. Unable to see the situation there as clearly as Shi Mu did, they still hurried to accelerate when they saw Shi Mu’s troubled face.

Before long they arrived at the upper reaches of the river, and all were utterly stunned by the scene before their eyes.

The Flying Raven Tribe no longer existed.

It had been burned to ruins. All the tents on both sides of the river had been turned to ashes, and some were still smoldering.

In the ruins, bodies lay everywhere. Elders, children, and warriors of their tribe. There were stone hammers and bone spears dropped all over the ground.

All the warm faces they were familiar with had now become stiff. Many were cut into pieces, which showed the cruelty of the killers. The river seemed to have swelled up with all the blood it had received today, and the smell was terrible.

And began crying their hearts out. They jumped down their horses, and scuttling toward the ruins.

“Father!”

“Brother!”

“Little sister….”

“No, no, it’s not real!”

All of the survivors were full of tears, crying and shouting as they searched for their relatives’ bodies in the ruins.

An overwhelming dizziness came over Shi Mu, and his face went as pale as a piece of paper.

Due to spending his past few years on the battlefield, he had become used to seeing scenes of slaughter and bloodshed, but right now his heart was broken with grief. Just the night before, he was still drinking with these honest and kind-hearted barbarians, watching charming dances and listening to appealing music. Though they lived a poor life, and lacked resources, they had never lost their will to live. All of them were praying for the blessing of the Raven God, looking forward to a better life in the next year, with more cows, more sheep, and more food….

The Four Odd seemed to be terrified by this horrendous scene, too. It neighed nervously, digging earth with its hoofs without stopping.

Shi Mu clenched his fist, and breathed deeply several times with his eyes shut up. He had regained his senses, but the fierce light in his eyes did not fade.

He dismounted from the Four Odds, staring at the ground instead of stepping toward the ruins. There were many footsteps overlapping each other - human footsteps, wolf paw prints… It all constituted a chaotic scene.

He studied the marks for a while, walking along the footsteps, and fished his eyes on the desert ahead.

Though the earth was solid in the desert, with his eyesight, he could see the steps of more than a hundred people, who seemed to have come from the southeast. However, the number of footprints seemed to have doubled when the attackers left.

Cold light flashed across Shi Mu’s eyes, then he turned abruptly back and

hastened to the ruins of the tribe.

Chapter 142 - Ruins

Sand Girl and the others still did not abandon hope, and they desperately fumbled through the bodies, their faces covered with extreme agony.

The adverse circumstances in the wasteland had raised in her a toughness that deemed tears as a disgrace. But at this moment, every one of them were crying soundlessly, and their faces were already streaked with tears. This was too much for them, and thus their hearts cried out relentlessly.

Shi Mu walked up to Sand Girl in a feeble attempt to offer his condolences. But he opened his mouth, only to find no appropriate words coming out. At this very moment, words were only a jumble of meaningless syllables.

“Father...Father...!” A quivering, crying voice called out, tinged with the joy of surprise.

Shi Mu’s eyes glittered excitedly, and his body had already shot up in the direction of the voice. It was at the center of the square, where the altar for the Raven God was set up. The remnants of last night’s embers were still lying scattered on the land. But the altar was hardly able to be recognized now that it had been smashed to pieces along with the statue of the Raven God. In front of the shattered altar a cross was erected. This cross was taller than an average barbarian’s height, and on the cross was nailed a burly man, whose body was terribly slashed.

This was Shaman Sand Sun.

Sand Girl was holding her father’s legs and crying for help, and, despite his serious injuries, there was still some color left on his cheeks. He was still alive.

Sand Star rushed to the cross upon hearing his sister’s voice, tears streaming down his face. He had got a half-broken hacking knife from nowhere, ready to unfasten his father from the wooden cross. But Sand Sun’s hands and feet had been nailed fast into the wood, his bones pierced. The flesh near the wounds had been exposed, and blood had congealed there.

Sand Star was struck dumbfounded, for, at this time, he did not know how to unfasten his father without hurting him even more. He paced the ground near

his father anxiously. Just then, Shi Mu had flashed to his side. Jumping up to the cross, he took hold of Sand Girl's hand forcibly.

"Your father is seriously injured. Don't sway his body," Shi Mu commanded, with a stern face.

Sand Girl was jolted out of her grieved state, her eyes drooping, yet quickly staring into Shi Mu's eyes with a pleading look.

Shi Mu quickly drew Sand Girl aside, and, at the same time, bid Sand Star to remain still. He then drew his black blade, examined Sand Sun's wounds, and circled around the cross. Then he screwed up his eyes, and with full concentration, slashed the black blade around the cross. The metal glinted and glittered, then, with a few cracks, Sand Sun's body fell straight down from the cross, and the steel nails that had penetrated his hands and feet were cut cleanly against his skin.

[ED: in case anyone is wondering, this is an 'x' shaped cross, not a 't' shaped one.]

Shi Mu withdrew the black blade with a flip of his wrists, then held Sand Sun's body gently with both arms, placing him face-up on the ground with the utmost care.

"Father!" Sand Girl immediately threw herself on Sand Sun's body, and Sand Star tossed the broken knife aside, kneeling heavily on the ground.

With a gloomy face, Shi Mu put one finger softly on Sand Sun's neck. Immediately, a wisp of Shi Mu's real qi entered the latter's veins, checking out his internal conditions.

The brother and the sister held their breaths at their side, not daring to make a sound, though their hearts were being torn apart with anxiety.

After a few breaths, Shi Mu's face fell, and his eyes dimmed. He took his finger back, distressed.

"Brother Mu, how is my father?" Sand Girl trembled.

"His organs have been shattered, and his injuries are beyond repair. It's a miracle that he has stayed alive this long. I'm terribly sorry, but I cannot save

him.” Shi Mu answered, with a dismal face.

Sand Girl felt limp and weak for a moment, almost passing out.

“Sister!” Sand Sun strode up and supported her.

“Shaman Sand’s mind is still together, and I can try to stimulate that. But, once awakened, his injuries - inside and outside - will break out… and he won’t have long to live...” Shi Mu looked at the hapless sister and the brother, saying so after a few painful moments. He sighed bitterly, then went on to say, “But even if we let shaman Sand sleep like this, he probably won’t make it longer than a quarter of an hour...So...you’ll have to make a choice.”

Sand Girl’s slim body wavered, and the brother and the sister exchanged a deep look. They held their father’s hands for a moment, with bent heads. Then, with determined eyes, they looked up at almost the same time. Shi Mu was, momentarily, taken by surprise, for he saw the tearful eyes of Sand Girl’s glinting with hatred.

“Brother Mu, please awaken our father, and I shall ask who on earth has destroyed our tribe and slaughtered our kinsmen!” Sand Girl uttered every single word strenuously. Sand Star also cast Shi Mu beseeching looks, his face still bathed in tears, but his eyes had gained a firm light, akin to his sister’s.

Shi Mu looked at them for a moment, then nodded his head and took out a white bottle from his shirt, from which he poured out a small white pill. Then he flicked his hand, producing a green charm, which was none other than the Rejuvenation Charm.

Shi Mu chanted the spell, and waved his hand, sticking the charm to Sand Sun’s forehead. The charm instantaneously shone with green light, quickly wrapping around Sand Sun’s body. The wounds on his skin began to heal miraculously, and color quickly returned to his face. Sand Girl and Sand Star marveled with tears.

Next, Shi Mu’s eyes glittered gold, and his fingers moved deftly on Sand Sun’s chest and lower abdomen, where he quickly pressed certain acupuncture points. The overpowering real qi of heavenly elephant was divided into several streams under Shi Mu’s spiritual control, flowing slowly into Sand Sun’s body and stimulating his blood by force.

After some time, Sand Sun's body jerked without warning, and his breaths became more quick and vigorous. He coughed, and spat out some blood. Eventually, he opened his eyes.

An unnatural ruddiness appeared on his cheeks, like the glow of the sun as it sets. They were all aware that this should be Sand Sun's last few moments of life.

"Father!" Sand Girl and Sand Star threw themselves on their father.

Finishing his task, Shi Mu stood up silently and walked to the side.

"My girl, my star...So you are both safe...that's...too...good..." Sand Sun turned to look at his children with much effort, and struggled to find his voice. Though extremely weak, his eyes spoke of comfort.

The ten-odd tribesmen also rushed over to their shaman's side after hearing his feeble voice. They had been searching for other survivers, but their hands were empty, save for the blood and mud on them.

"Father, who has destroyed our tribe? Tell me!" Sand Girl was suddenly reminded of Shi Mu's words, so she snatched her father's hand and asked, grinding her teeth with hatred.

Sand Sun's eyes flickered, then grew dim. He managed to open his mouth again, "the enemy is too strong...not for you to deal with...forget about revenge..."

"We are not afraid! Shaman, there are no cowards in our Heavenly Raven Tribe! Only gallant warriors!" A young man at his side yelled angrily.

"We want revenge! Blood for blood!" Others also echoed in a fury.

Looking at his kinsmen exclaiming with indignation, Sand Sun's face creased into a bitter smile. Did they think he didn't desire revenge? It was only that the Heavenly Wolf Tribe was so horribly strong. Their strength far surpassing that of the Raven Tribe. He would rather die with regret than have his tribesmen courting death.

"Father, it's the Heavenly Wolf Tribe, isn't it?" Sand Star asked.

Sand Sun was startled hearing his intelligent son's accurate guess. The others were also struck dumb, though not for the same reason.

“So I’m right.” Sand Star slowly stretched out his fingers that had been clenching fast. In his palm was held some crude, grey wolf hair.

Shi Mu’s face puckered. Though he had not been long in this region, through the conversations he had with the tribesmen these past two days, he had gathered some inklings of the surrounding tribes conditions. The Heavenly Wolf Tribe, being the biggest Belligerent tribe in the neighborhood, was notorious for its overriding power and sanguinary nature.

Sand Girl and her kinsmen, on hearing the tribe’s name, gritted their teeth, seething with hatred. Especially Sand Girl, who could not help but tremble in rage. After a moment she raised her liquid eyes, which were so fierce, one would think they could burn holes in metal.

“My girl, I, under the name of the shaman of our tribe, now hand over my position to you. From now on, you should protect our tribesmen and do your duty… Also, keep your brother safe...I, swear to the Raven God, if ever you intend to seek revenge from the Heavenly Wolf Tribe, my spirit will never be free from pain and sufferings!” Sand Sun took a deep breath and suddenly gave a rigorous warning.

Sand Girl blanched, and her body slumped onto the ground, her lips quivering helplessly.

“No...Father...You can’t do this...You can’t do this to me...” She murmured, as if struck delirious.

“My girl, this is my last request, as our tribe’s leader, shaman, and your father. Would you disobey me?” Sand Sun was stirred, his chest heaving violently as he almost pleaded with gasps.

Sand Girl remained silent, biting her lower lip until it bled. The blood dropped onto the land, dying the dust red.

“Yes, father. I promise you.” She lowered her head, answering slowly.

Sand Sun finally relieved, leaning in Sand Star’s arms. Strenuously he stretched out his hand, stroking her beloved girl’s cheeks. A smile of content crept upon his face.

“Kinsmen, this order is made to you, too. Our barbarian wasteland has

witnessed the births and deaths of millions of small tribes like ours in the past thousand years. It has always been rule for the strong to survive. It's no big deal that our Flying Raven Tribe got exterminated. You only need to lead on with your peaceful lives, and only then shall I rest in peace in the other world." Sand Sun's eyes slowly swept over these young barbarians' faces.

All this talking had poised a strain on him, and gis ruddy face gradually crystallized, almost turning transparent. The tribesmen, watching their respected shaman dying bit by bit, felt a stab at their hearts. Though this was an order most against their wills, they still promised, choking with sobs.

Sand Sun relaxed much upon hearing their promises. He then tilted his head with difficulty, and said, "Brave warrior Mu."

"Shaman Sand." Shi Mu stepped forward and stooped by the dying leader. In great sorrow Shi Mu moved his head nearer to him. Sand Sun managed a smile, then suddenly took a deep breath before he opened his mouth to spit out a black bone piece the size of half a fist. With trembling hands, Sand Sun passed the bone piece to Shi Mu. The latter was shocked, but still took it, out of respect.

"Brave warrior Mu, this bone piece holds some black magic and Totem arts of our tribe, handed down from ancient times. Neither of my children has the gift for black magic, so now I want you to have it. Though it's not much to brag about...it's still the most precious thing our Flying Raven Tribe has..." By his last words, Sand Sun had already began gasping, his face deathly pale.

Shi Mu clutched the bone piece as asked, but a trace of doubt crossed his face.

"Shaman, by giving me this, do you want me to do something for you?" Shi Mu asked slowly, filled with sadness.

"Yes. This area is no longer safe, so I'd like to have you escort my children and the rest of my tribesmen to the Southwestern Wasteland. Their uncle is the leader of Tu Huo Tribe there. That's a peaceful tribe, too." Sand Sun looked at Shi Mu expectantly and said.

Shi Mu stood up slowly, clutching the bone piece in his palm. His eyes scanned his surroundings mournfully. The ruins, the incomplete cold bodies. All of it plunged into his heart like a sharp dagger. For a moment he was overcome with sorrow. At last he moved his eyes, resting them on the great shaman, and

promised solemnly, “Of course, shaman, rest assured. I swear to take them there, safe and sound.”

Sand Sun’s eyes regained some luster as he heard so, but the glow soon faded. Time was ticking down for this once strong man.

“Brothers, I need to talk to Shaman Sand, alone. Could you please give us a moment?” Shi Mu’s soulful eyes suddenly smoldered with hate, and he turned to ask the Sand Girl and her tribesmen for a most odd request.

Chapter 143 - The revenge

When Sand Sun heard Shi Mu's words, he looked at him with astonishment, his mouth ajar. All the people around them were also stupefied. It was clear that Sand Sun's time was coming, and they all hoped that his last few minutes could be left to his daughter and son.

"Just a few minutes, I need to ask him several important things." Shi Mu insisted, his expression hard and stern.

The tribesmen exchanged looks, as if trying to make a decision. At last, they all cast their eyes to Sand Girl - after all, she had the final say.

"Well, please be quick, Brother Mu." Sand Girl stared into Shi Mu's eyes beseechingly, then turned to look at her wretched father softly. Color was quickly receding from her face. Once making up her mind, the soft yet strong girl turned abruptly aside and stepped away with long, firm strides, pulling Sand Star with her.

Seeing this, what could all the other tribesmen say? They silently followed after their young masters.

In a minute, Shi Mu and Sand Sun were by themselves.

Shi Mu sighed, kneeled down near Sand Sun, and spoke with a6 hushed voice, "Shaman, I have checked the footsteps outside the camp. It seems that the attackers came with less people than they returned with. Besides, though I had not conducted a thorough examination, I do find that there are few very bodies of women and children here. They must have been captured by the Heavenly Wolf Tribesmen."

Sand Sun trembled as he heard his words, and a painful expression flitted across his face.

"You have sharp eyes, brave warrior Mu. It is my fault. I failed in protecting my people, and left them in the hands of the Heavenly Wolf Tribe."

Sand Sun was in an agitated state, once again recalling his outrage. Soon his breaths became short and violent.

Shi Mu quickly reached out and pressed his palm against Sand Sun's head.

Pure real qi flowed into his body and his breath grew smooth.

Sand Sun raised his eyes to study Shi Mu, his chest rising and falling, surprise in his eyes.

“They left here half a day ago, with the children and women. There are no ruts on the ground so your people must have been taken away on foot. If I set off right now, it is still possible for me to catch up with them.”

Shi Mu took his palm back, then he went on ,“I have received very kind treatment from your honored tribe these past few days. I truly love your people, but, regretfully, I had nothing to repay you, so now, please, let me go get your people back.”

For a moment, Sand Sun was speechless, his face confounded, and gratitude had made the muscles on it freeze. His mouth was half open, not knowing what to say.

“I can make a rough conjecture that there are more than a hundred people in the Heavenly Wolf’s troop, judging from the footsteps. But I do not know how many Totem warriors they have or how strong they are. If I go without knowing my enemies, it will be hard for me to succeed. Please tell me what you know.” Shi Mu said slowly.

“I appreciate your kindness, but must still decline the offer, “ said San Sun with a deep sigh. ” They are large in number, so, just like I do not want my own daughter to court death, by the same token, I will not get you involved..” Sand Sun looked deeply into Shi Mu’s eyes, shaking his head disapprovingly.

“I am clear on my strength, and I do not fear death. Rest assured, I will deal with it. Shaman, I know you can’t bear to see your people suffer at the hands of these Belligerent Barbarians.” Shi Mu persuaded with a cheerful smile.

“Now that you insist, I will not be polite to you any more. Thanks for your help. We of the Flying Raven Tribe will remember it forever.” Sand Sun looked at Shi Mu, with much gratitude in his eyes.

“You do not have to say that. Well, just tell me about the enemies, in detail.

Then Shi Mu listened with a serious expression.

After a while, he stood up, motioning for Sand Girl, who was standing off in the distance, to come to them.

Sand Girl and the others scooted up to Sand Sun's side, only to find his father lying with a ghastly pale face. Not a single hint of blood was there.

"Daddy!" Sand Girl threw her body upon her father, calling out the intimate form of address to her father, as if time had flowed back to when she was still that little girl, capering around her young and sturdy father. However, the harsh reality is this middle-aged man was already in Death's hands.

"My girl, take care of yourself and your little brother and….." Sand Sun panted for breath, lifting one arm to touch his beloved daughter's beautiful face. However, his arm stopped on its way up, and he finally breathed his last breath.

Sand Girl burst into tears,along with Sand Star, whose eyes had already been blinded by scalding tears. Though the other young tribesmen fought back their tears, some still sobbed quietly in the last rays of the sun.

At this moment, only Shi Mu turned back silently, leaving the camp without disturbing them.

He touched the Air Piercing Bow on his waist, then he stopped in front of the Four Odds, which was standing just outside the ruins of the camp. Then he recalled the words Sand Sun had just spoken to him, and his eyes narrowed. He quickly mounted the Four Odds, his face covered with a serious expression. He was ready to track the footsteps on the ground.

"Brother Mu!" A frail figure rushed out from the camp. It was Sand Girl.

Shi Mu frowned, and pulled on the reins of the Four Odds.

"Are you going to chase the soldiers of the Heavenly Wolf to save our women and children?" Sand Girl looked at Shi Mu apprehensively and asked.

Shi Mu kept his stern expression and, after a short silence, he turned and looked out into the distance, answering in a low voice, "It will be tough, and there is a good chance I will fail, but I refuse to live with the regret of not trying."

Sand Sun's wet eyes glistened beautifully in the glow of the sun. She clenched her teeth and prepared to say something.

“You are not strong as warriors, and I will have no chance if all of you come with me.” Su Mu precluded her from saying more, then changed into a gentler tone. He looked over and gave her a small smile, “Bury Sand Sun and the others. Wait for me for two days. I will come back to you, no matter if I make it or not.” Shi Mu retrieved his eyes from the distressed girl and turned around. He knew that he would not be the right person to console her, and this - fighting to bring back her sole tribesmen - would be the best way instead.

He pulled the reins and the Four Odd neighed, running forward with its four hooves galloping. Soon they disappeared into the horizon.

Sand Girl stood frozen as she watched Shi Mu’s receding figure under the setting sun, tears streaming down her face.

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Around two miles away from the Flying Raven Tribe, lied a rolling chain of hills. Currently, a troop of approximately two hundred soldiers were marching forward triumphantly. At the front were twenty-odd wolf riders, followed by a hundred or so ordinary barbarian soldiers. At the rear of this troop were roughly a hundred captives of the Flying Raven Tribe - all were women and children, their hands were bound by ropes. There were also some domestic animals and fowl.

The girls and children were strung with a grass rope, and their tear-streaked faces were still covered with extreme fear and panic. But right now they bit their lips, without making a sound. Heads down, they inched their way forward. The animals, however, were carrying a great deal of grains and wines.

Since women and children could not walk as far as those male barbarians, and they were also carrying loads of plunder on the animals’ backs, the entire troop moved at a relaxed pace as it returned home.

At the forefront, Fei Du was riding on a giant wolf, and he was in quite a good mood. This time he had wiped out the Flying Raven Tribe in one fell swoop. Though he had lost some of his men, the grains and women would definitely make up for it. Their tribe’s leader would probably grin from ear to ear when he saw what they brought back.

If there was still one thing that bothered him, it would be that he didn’t have Sand Girl. He failed to bring the pussy back to his young master.

“Master Fei is extraordinarily brave and strong. This is the fifth small tribe we wiped out in the last six months!”

“Who else but Master Fei could accomplish this heroic feat?!”

“The leader has promised Master Fei the position of Great Commander before. In my eyes, this will soon come true!”

The wolf riders by Fei Du all seized the chance to heap praises on him.

“Hehe, these small tribes are easy for me to take care of! “ Fei Du burst into supercilious laughter. Though he was clear that these men were only licking his boots at this point, his boots, indeed, “felt polished”, so why not?

“Master Fei, your humble servant has a question that’s baffling him. I heard that on the frontlines, our war with the humans has relaxed. Why does our leader still ask us to gather provisions for the army?” A totem warrior that had been broodily silent suddenly broke the joyful atmosphere.

Fei Du shot him a reproachful glance, his eyes cold enough to freeze water. The latter shrank back in guilt, and shut his mouth.

Though this was an inappropriate question at this juncture, Fei Du, himself, had also held doubts about this issue. But the order came from the Leader of the Heavenly Wolf Tribe himself, so he could only keep his lips sealed. On the other hand, small tribes counted for nothing in his heart, and murder and bloodshed were his favorite activities, by the loot was generally good.

Just then, a commotion was heard from the rear of the troop, where the captives were.

“Go and see what happened.” Fei Du’s face dropped.

A burly wolf rider soon answered and rode to the end of the file.

It turned out that, after half a day’s travel, the Flying Raven’s women and children were pale and limp. Their bodies were covered with dust and mud. Those haggard faces desired water. Some of them had blisters on their faces, and some younger children had fallen down onto the scorching hot sand.

“What’s the matter?” The burly rider yelled.

“Master, we have journeyed a whole night, and it seems that these women

and children cannot carry on.” A barbarian foot soldier soon stepped forward to answer the rider.

“Can’t carry on?” The burly rider sneered, his sharp eyes flashed. He flicked his wrist and a black shadow fell on a young girl’s body. The girl’s blouse was slashed around her shoulder, and blood started flowing from there.

The girl shrieked in extreme terror, and failed in maintaining her steadiness, collapsing onto the ground. Her body was shivering with pain and fear.

This satisfied the burly rider a lot. His brother was killed in the battle with the Flying Ravens, so that fire of hatred would never be put out, no matter how many captives he killed - though he had already stabbed twenty women to death.Did it really matter? These women had already fallen into their hands, and would be either servants in their camp or goods to sell to other tribes. What did it matter if he killed a few of them?

His arm raised excitedly again, and was about to swing down.

Just then, a black beam flashed and blinded every one’s eyes, and something like a bolt of lightning pierced the burly barbarian’s throat.

The man felt as if he had just been hit by a boulder. His body was quickly thrown backward into the air by a giant force. Next, his overweight body hit the ground and plunged into a pit. He struggled with his hands at his throat, his eyes popping out, and his face full of doubts. He murmured something rather unclear.

By now, the people surrounding him clearly saw a black long arrow had nailed him into the ground, it’s feathers swinging in the wind, outside his neck. The rest of the arrow had sunk into his flesh and then into the land,

Blood gushed out from his throat, and life quickly left his terrified eyes.

Chapter 144 - Snipe!

This unforeseen event threw the wolf soldiers into a panic, anxious about any arrows that may shoot up from nowhere at anytime.

All of a sudden, the earth quaked with a loud boom, and the twenty wolf warriors, who were at the front of the troop quickly galloped to the dead body.

“What’s up?” Fei Du rushed to the front, but before anyone could answer him, he saw the largel body of his man lying lifeless on the ground. He gaped, but before he could utter something, another air-piercing sound came, accompanied by a black beam that whizzed into another rider’s chest. The soldier was given no time to react, but was knocked straight off his wolf, being nailed into the ground like the previous stout barbarian. The arrow had been shot accurately into his heart, and, after a few twitches, he heaved his last breath.

“There!” Fei Du turned his head to find the archer, and vaguely he saw a moving form on a hilltop in the distance.

He was right. There was a small hill, approximately one mile away, on whose top a black-cloaked youth stood in the wind. In his hand was a yellow-hued giant bow. This was Shi Mu. He had pursued the wolf riders for a whole night on his Four Odds, without once closing his eyes to sleep. Eventually, after a long and arduous journey, he had neared his prey.

At this moment, his pupils were golden. The eyes he cast into the distance were sharp and cold.

Draw an arrow, put it on the string, and then pull the string back. All the movements he had rehearsed a hundred times in his mind on the way here.

Just as all the wolf riders were straining their eyes to stare in the direction pointed by Fei Du, another black beam sprang to life from Shi Mu’s hands, rending the air and, unleashing its simmering power.

The black light whistled through the air, and another wolf rider was nailed to the ground.

“Use your shields! Now!” Fei Du roared, infuriated.

The wolf riders were shivering in their boots, but the loud command dragged

them out of their frightened trance. Without a word, they hurriedly grabbed at the round, blackish iron shield hung on their riding wolves' reins, and propped the shields in front of their chests.

"Foot soldiers stay here! The rest, follow me!" Fei Du thundered, with a gloomy face, and gave his wolf a hard kick. Immediately the troop galloped in the direction of the hill.

In theory, the arrow had to cover an interval of roughly a thousand meters, without losing its remarkable speed, to shoot three people precisely through their hearts. Plus, by the looks of it, the giant bow should weigh at least fifty kilograms! Such a powerful weapon was rarely seen in the wasteland, and, even if one has it, even an advanced Houtian Warrior would not have the superhuman eyesight needed to achieve such a long-range shot!

Such appalling thoughts jumbled his mind as Fei Du rode on hastily. If he failed to approach the archer before getting shot, all the remaining twenty-odd wolf warriors would probably be decimated.

On the other side, looking at the wolf riders coming his way with shields held in front of their heads, Shi Mu's lips curled up in a disdainful smile. To him, those riders were puppies crouching behind their shields, driven by their master. Without hesitation, he grabbed at his back and withdrew a green arrow from the quiver. It was a Wind-Chasing Arrow.

The string quivered in the wind, and the bowstring was pulled back as far as possible.

Shi Mu's spiritual power swarmed into the bow, and the Air-Piercing Bow instantaneously glowed white. Multitudes of tiny magic characters lit up the arrow, causing it to rotate slowly.

The long arrow turned into a green shadow, flying off at an ever faster speed than the previous arrows.

A dull thud started the riders. Turning their heads, they found that one of their fellow warriors had been pinned to the ground, penetrated by a green arrow. A new rider died, but the way he died was no different from previous ones. More startling, the iron shield, which was as thick as ten centimeters, was effortlessly shot through! The huge opening told them that they were nothing to this archer.

Fei Du was profoundly shocked this time. The magic characters on the arrow blew chills into his bones. He narrowed his eyes in alarm.

“It’s a black magic arrow!” Someone shouted out the truth. And this scared some of the more death-fearing riders down from their wolves, recoiling under their giant beasts.

“Get up! You cowards! Keep rushing! Or I’ll end your lives here!” Fei Du berated angrily. This even harsher prospect raised the deserters up from the ground, and they could only steel themselves to move forward. Though, at heart, they were complaining bitterly.

All this time, Fei Du’s face had been creased in rage, yet, not matter how he searched his memory, he could not figure out the origin of this deadly killer. After thinking about it for a while, he gave up, and comforted himself that, because the tough bow required a large amount of strength to use, the archer must be nearing his limits. Moreover, magical arrows are not mass produced, so probably the archer probably only has few left with him.

“Fan out! Let’s besiege him!” Fei Du ordered, irritation in his voice, and he himself went straight for Shi Mu. He did not shield his body, but simply held a fifteen foot long, greenish black iron axe. The axe’s surface was bathed in a thin layer of black light.

The wolf riders were the cream of the Heavenly Wolf Tribe’s military force, each - that is, except those who had been scared down their wolves - being brave and skillful in warfare. At Fei Du’s command, they immediately scattered into small groups, circling the hill in the shape of a fan. The distance of a mile was soon covered with the wolf’s speed.

Shi Mu smirked seeing the black spots of the barbarians growing larger with every breath. Unexpectedly, he lay down the bow. Four successive shots had, indeed, made his arms sore and stiff. This time, he opened his mouth and whistled a long, clear tune. Shortly afterwards, behind the bush at his back, the Four Odds darted out.

Shi Mu mounted the beast, which then turned abruptly to run at full speed. The Four Odds was originally a faster runner than a wolf, thus, the besieging tactic was rendered futile.

Fei Fu was immediately filled with anger and humiliation. Two sounds rang out, almost simultaneously. It turned out that Shi Mu had shot two arrows successively, with just a flip of his wrist.

Two heart-renting cries! One arrow passed straightly through the iron shield into a wolf rider's belly, whereas the other hit on another rider's forehead. Both riders rolled down off their startled wolves.

This proved to be an absolute disgrace for Fei Du. But he restrained his anger and shouted at the top of his lung, "Go ahead! Don't Stop!" Meanwhile, he thrust his hand into his shirt and took out a patch of black hide, on which were drawn twisted patterns, which looked like wriggling earthworms.

Fei Du was irresolute for a moment, looking at the hide, but the cloud of hesitation quickly lifted from his eyes, and he opened his mouth to bite the tip of his tongue. A drop of fresh blood soon dripped on the hide. At the same time, he pulled at his reins and stayed at the back of the wolves.

Black lights glowed on the hide, and the patterns seemed to have awakened. Fei Du chanted some incantation, and the lights on the hide grew brighter and brighter. At last, with a small explosion, the hide caught fire. Amid the blazing flames, the hide transformed into a colossal black bird, its entire body burning with black flames. After stretching out its formidible wings, the bird dived down on Shi Mu at an incredible speed.

Fei Du sneered slyly, but the smile wavered when he looked around.

During the short time when he activated the spell, wolf riders' bodies had littered the ground. Only six or seven were alive, technically speaking.

"You bastard, go to hell!" The commander's face contorted before the outrageous scene, and, with a loud bellow, he threw himself down on Shi Mu. At this juncture, Shi Mu had run out of his Wind-Chasing Arrows, so the sudden appearance of the black bird in midair caught him unguarded. There was a gleam of fear in his eyes.

The giant bird was rather quick despite its huge body. In a few breaths, it had reached the hill, and, with a shrill cry, it's burning talons scratched down at Shi Mu rapidly. Shi Mu let out a threatening shout and his arms bulked up with black lights shining around them. He made a quick and accurate grab at the black

blade hung over his shoulder, then hacked into the sky.

Red lights glinted, clashing with the talons!

Boom!

Shi Mu felt a powerful jerk, and a brute force traveled to his body via the black blade, almost throwing his blade into the air. The Four Odds also staggered awkwardly. Shi Mu's heart throbbed. In a great fluster he grasped the blade's handle with full strength.

The black bird was also shocked back into the air, but, after a tumble, the impact was canceled out, and it, once again, swooped down, not giving Shi Mu a respite. The black talons traced two arches of black flames.

Shi Mu had no choice but to transfer his magic power wildly into the blade. As a result, the weapon was empowered instantaneously, its lights shining glaringly. Again he wielded the blade to meet the talons. But this time, his other hand had produced several blue charms in preparation.

An explosion resounded as the bird's burning talons struck the black once more. Red and black flames flashed and flickered, then both were jolted backwards.

His chance came! Shi Mu threw out the blue charms in his other hand, bombarding the bird with them. Immediately, white ice cones appeared, shooting towards the black bird. The short distance made the bird unable to dodge. None of the ice cones missed the target, and, amid cracking sounds, the bird howled bitterly.

Later, as the momentum of the ice cones decreased, the ice would melt before they touched the bird's body. But, similarly, the bird's flames flickered unstably and dimmed.

This should have been an ingenious tactic, but Fei Du and his remaining fellow barbarians seized the chance to launch a second round of attacks.

Shi Mu gritted his teeth, filled with fierce hate. Each time his hands swung wildly in the air, a charm would be unleashed, darting towards the bird with its particular magic. For a time, the sky was filled with the beautiful glow of all the colors of the rainbow: the Charm of Fire Ball, the Charm of Water Arrow, the

Charm of Ice Cone, the Charm of Whirlwind, the Charm of Thunder, *etc.* Though these were all low-level magic charms, hence their showy appearances and short effects, the endless number of them was powerful in its own right. In a twinkle, the black bird was submerged in the turbulent tides of the charms. Finally, after a few seconds, the black bird could not hold on any longer. With a sad cry, its body exploded from within, turning into black flames that clouded the sky.

Shi Mu propped himself against a rock, panting for breath. It was a marvelous sight to watch the magic bird explode, causing fireworks in the sky. But before he could find his breath, a high-pitched sound reached his ears from behind, and a white bone spear suddenly appeared at a distance] shorter than three meters. A cold chill whizzed up his spine.

By reflex, Shi Mu held the Four Odd's neck tightly, and his body lay prone on its back.

The spear whistled narrowly past his back, leaving a slash on his cloak. Before Shi Mu knew it, the next attack had come, with this spearhead coming lower than earlier one as it thrust towards Shi Mu's waist.

There was no chance to dodge it. He raised his black blade behind his body in an attempt to ward off the spearhead!

Shi Mu was thrown from his Four Odds, rolling about the ground until he was temporarily out of strength. The spear seemed to have still injured him seriously. Greatly terrified, the Four Odds abandoned his master and dashed off without turning its head. It's speed even quicker than before.

Faraway, Fei Du gasped with his hands resting on his hips, and his wolf also staggered for several steps, before rising back to its full height. The spear art he had just deployed was no ordinary spear art, but an art that was unique to his tribe, named "The Shooting Star Spear Art", which required a great amount of energy to use.

Seeing that Shi Mu was lying half-dead on the ground, the remaining six wolf riders were filled with joy. Exhilarated, they pounced on Shi Mu one after one, howling. The all wanted the honor of saying that they were the one who killed this mighty foe.

So the six wolf riders attacked Shi Mu fervently. It was hard to tell which one

was the first to near the target. As the riders raised them into the air, their knives caught light in mid air, glinting and flashing. Shi Mu soon had six shining daggers bearing down on him.

Chapter 145 - Survival

However, at the last second something unexpected happened!

Shi Mu, who had been lying prone on the ground, seeming to be half-dead, abruptly sprang up, like an energetic fish, and his arms waved from side to side, scattering two large handfuls of some white powder, which then showered on the six wolf riders' bodies. The riders felt a sharp sting in their eyes which made them close their eyes.

"No!" Fei Du cried to himself, seeing this from afar. He dismounted his giant wolf at lightning speed, and threw himself upon Shi Mu, like a huge black kite.

Just then Shi Mu leaped up into midair and his body spinned around like a top. The wind whistled, making some flapping sounds. The next moment, a flame emerged as his black blade drew an arc in the air. Seen from afar, it was as if a miniature rainbow had blossomed. Subsequently, the rainbow enlarged at a remarkable speed, turning into a three meter long blade that swept horizontally outward. The glint and flash of the meteoric metal engulfed the six wolf riders.

Crunching sounds were heard, and the flames turned into dazzling fireworks in the air. Afterwards, it could be clearly seen that the six rider's bodies had all been cut in half through the waist. For a moment there was a rain of blood that dyed the land red.

"Ah!" Failing to save his men at the last second, Fei Du uttered a devastated cry. Pain was gnawing at him inside his head. He gave a angry shout, and the green axe in his hand stabbed trhough the air, leaving a black beam. The air hissed with scathing heat as the axe plummeted down toward Shi Mu's head.

The previous strike had used much of his energy, and when Fei Du's blow came, Shi Mu had just planted his feet on the ground to steady himself. Therefore, it was impossible for him to dodge the incoming axe. His mind quickly worked out an idea, and, gritting his teeth, he let his inertia push him several inches forward, while he himself lifted the black blade again, producing a red light that met the axe head-on.

The weapons clanged loudly, and the force of the impact knocked Shi Mu back three steps. He halted, and his face flushed in exertion.

Fei Fu was swooping down in midair at the time, so the clash sent him flying backward too, and as he flew back, he tumbled through the air. Blood ran to his face, and his arm, holding the green iron axe, felt sore and numb. This was no ordinary axe, despite its average looks. It was made from several ores which were unique to the barbarian wastelands, hence its enormous weight - about five hundred kilograms. But the clash he just had with Shi Mu's blade suggested to him that the blade was an equally immense weight. But, judging from the qi emitted by Shi Mu, he was, at best, a mid-stage Totem warrior of Houtian Level.

"May I ask your excellency's identity? Why are you attacking our Heavenly Wolf Tribe?" Fei Du took a deep breath. He did not deem Shi Mu a powerful enemy until now. With some respect and awe, he ventured a question in a deep voice, while simultaneously stimulating his senseless arms.

Shi Mu didn't show the slightest intention of giving an answer. He stomped hard on the ground, and a pit, several meters deep, was formed.

Without delay, he flashed in front of Fei Du, like a black lightning, the black blade in his hand glowing blindly with magic characters.

"Courting death!" Fei Du's face dropped. He sneered sardonically, assured that Shi Mu's actual strength would not be higher than that of a mid-stage Houtian warrior. He felt that the only reason Shi My seemed to have a high cultivation was because of his amazing physical strength, which was probably being boosted by some Totem.

Filled with confidence, Fei Du shouted loudly, and his axe flashed through the air, producing three blackish shadows that struck at Shi Mu's head, chest, and stomach respectively.

Shi Mu's eyes glittered gold, and the black blade was instantly engulfed by blazing flames, which seemed to be quivering in excitement. At the same time, a red light appeared, which quickly separated into thirteen shadows, which rolled upward, forming a vortex of light and completely engulfing the three axe shadows!

"No! You are not a barbarian! You are a human!" Fei Du yelled with fury, a stunned expression on his face. He had experience with fighting humans on the battlefront, and, thus, was clear on the differences between the two side's

tactics. The barbarians' martial arts were, normally, simple and crude, beating the enemies with overwhelming strength. Delicate arts and nimble movements were not their thing.

At this moment, the axe shadows became tangled with the blade shadows, making a chain of loud clangs.

Fei Du had a lot of experience from his past battles on the human front, and had polished his arts to rival that of the humans.

Eventually, the three axe shadows flashed and vanished, though the blade shadows had become greatly diminished in strength, the remaining ones still stuck on toward the axe's handle. A mighty force was transmitted through the axe, paralyzing Fei Du's arm. Pushed to his limits, his eyes glared, and he shouted out loudly. His eyes soon glowed dimly green, and became cold and sharp, like a wild beast.

Simultaneously, his body bulked up, growing to twice his normal size. His feet and hands were covered with a thin layer of green hair. His nails became like talons, glinting menacingly.

Evidently Fei Du had aroused his Totem, so his hugely reinforced physical strength assisted him in successfully standing his ground.

His thick arms swayed, and the axe in his hand transformed into a blue blur, pounding against the black blade like a bolt of lightning.

There was an earth-shaking boom, and the black blade was thrown back like a feather, as was Shi Mu's body. This renewed Fei Du's confidence, which was clearly seen in his fiercely glowing eyes. Letting the momentum of his attack carry him forward, he intended to crush Shi Mu's head with one blow.

In response to this utter confidence, Shi Mu opened his mouth and shot out a ball of white breath. The ball quickly whistled through the air and exploded in Fei Du's face.

Shi Mu shouted excitedly, looking at Fei Du's bleeding face with a small bit of satisfaction. Though he was aware that this Air Explosion Art could, at best, be counted a diversion before someone at the level of a consummate stage Houtian warrior. Though not lethal, it certainly was painful.

Fei Du uttered a bitter cry, but since he had aroused his Totem, his speed of reaction had been accelerated. A disfigured face poised no difficulty for him to move, as his legs were healthy. He pushed hard off the ground, shooting his body backward.

But the enemy wouldn't let up. Shi Mu also pushed off the ground to shoot himself backward, while, at the same time, throwing out a curved silver dagger in his left hand. The dagger flew swirling toward Fei Du, who, for the moment, had lost his eyesight. But he heard something buzzing by, and the sound reminded him of the sneaky human gadgets.

He wielded his axe, and, with absolute precision, hit the curved dagger dead-on.

A thunderous noise rang out, and the knife burst into a large, red cloud, which enveloped Fei Du.

A sneer played around Shi Mu's lips. He clearly understood the power of a Moonlight Sea Chestnut Dagger. This was, regretfully, the last one he had with him. There was no way he could forge these daggers in the barbarian wasteland.

[TL: Zhao Ping, I miss You!!!!]

A high-pitched cry came from the cloud. The next moment, Fei Du rushed out of the whirlwind, his body completely burnt. He was running for his life off into the distance. His body was so burned that is was impossible to distinguish the original man.

A black light pierced the air and caught up with Fei Du in no time. The man was quickly nailed into the ground, a black arrow sticking out from his back.

Exhausted, Shi Mu let his strained arms slowly droop down. The part between his right thumb and index finger was bleeding heavily, this resulted from his jarringly fierce clash with Fei Du's axe.

His eyes narrowed, and he scampered to the body. He had no doubt that the man was truly dead. Who could survive a Moonlight Sea Chestnut dagger and a Wind-Chasing Arrow?

Shi Mu snorted. Why did you slaughter the innocent Black Raven Tribe? As he did so, he deserved this capital punishment.

He wielded his blade backhand, and cut off Fei Du's head. As the chief criminal, his head is needed to appease the dead spirits of the murdered barbarians. Shi Mu peeled off Fei Du's clothes and wrapped them around the hideous head.

With a clear sound a small black parcel dropped from Fei Du's clothes.

Shi Mu raised his eyebrows and carefully picked it up with a cloth.

The parcel contained a thick wad of golden leaves, as well as a black cylinder, which was about half an inch long. Shi Mu;s face lit up. The wasteland had a lot of gold, so, naturally, they do business with gold. This was was a large amount of money. The silver notes he had had already been used up exchanging for Bone-Tempering Pills. Also, silver notes were not accepted in this land. With the golden leaves, he could replenish his supplies in the barbarians' markets along the road.

Thus, he cheerfully stored the leaves, and then he picked up the black cylinder to study it. It felt cold to the touch and had the smooth texture of metal.

The more closely he examined it, the more tense his eyes became.

He cautiously turned it over. On its bottom was an opening the size of a small finger.

He was greatly shocked, and his face contorted. But then the muscles around his mouth relaxed into a broad grin.

He had presumed it to be a container, but upon looking closer, it had proved to be a rare gadget with a powerful background. It was called The Black Lotus Firing Tube, a deadly hidden weapon he had seen in the Secret Arts of the Zhong Clan. It was even ranked above the Moonlight Sea Chestnut Dagger. Its only limitation was that it could only be activated within a small distance, and required a lot of preparation time.

Shi Mu was overjoyed at his find. Now that he had run out of the Moonlight Sea Chestnut Daggers, this newly gained tool would quickly become useful.

He decided to conduct a more full examination at a later time, storing the object with great care. The ”treacherous” Four Odds had also returned, at some unknown time, crestfallen. Shi Mu did not blame it, but felt rather amused instead. So the two of them rode back, retrieving the Wind-Chasing arrows along

the way, and not forgetting to grab any treasure on the riders' bodies. In this way, Shi Mu, once again, found his way back to wealth.

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Under the hills, hundreds of foot soldiers of the Heavenly Wolf Tribe were looking into the distance, their eyes widely opened. [TL: At which time Shi Mu was still scouring the bodies for treasure.] Anxiety was eating away at their hearts. It had been a full hour since their general led the riders off to chase the mysterious archer. For the first half hour, they could still faintly hear the sounds of fighting, but then came a dead silence, as if the wolves had been eaten up along with their masters.

Just as these barbarian foot soldiers were on pins and needles, a form appeared on a hilltop, galloping towards them. The form approached at an alarming speed.

The soldiers blanched in terror, confused about what had happened.

Black arrows shot up from the mysterious man's hand, each penetrating a foot soldier with mighty force. Sometimes one arrow would cost two lives of the barbarians, which only accentuated how terrifying this archer was.

In a flash, over ten barbarians were killed.

"Run!" The soldiers shouted out in terror. Before this mysterious man, every last bit of courage was stripped away. Within a very short span of time, the land where the troop once lingered was emptied, leaving only the one hundred captives of the Black Raven Tribe.

Shi Mu came up to the captives and took off his mask.

"You… You are Master Mu!"

These women were familiar with Shi Mu's face, and so they shrieked out joyfully. The children all began to jump about merrily.

"I'm sorry you have suffered this much. I'm here to bring you back," Jumping down from the Four Odds, Shi Mu spoke in a soft voice.

This was met with a momentary silence. Then they broke forth in shouts of joy, and many were hugging each other with tears of joy in their eyes. Though at

heart they were painfully aware that their tribe had been destroyed, the freedom Shi Mu had won for them was still greatly cherished.

“Thanks you, brave warrior Mu! You are the Balute sent by our Raven God!” The women had calmed down more or less, and all hurriedly bowed to Shi Mu with their children. There were filled with ap reverence and gratitude could be seen in their eyes. Shi Mu was able to kill over twenty wolf riders all by himself! They were sure that he had been sent by the Raven God.

“Don’t mention it.” Shi Mu waved his hands, and spoke with a cool face.

Chapter 146 - The Ambassador Group

“Let’s move, this is not a safe place. I’ll take you back to the tribe.” Glancing back in the direction where the wolf soldiers had fled, Shi Mu urged the captives forward.

“Brave warrior Mu, What’s our tribe like... now?” A woman asked hesitatingly.

The question was one that many of them wanted to know the answer to. The captives quickly cast their apprehensive and expectant eyes at Shi Mu. He didn’t know how to answer them. After some thought, Shi Mu gave the poor homeless barbarians a brief recount of what had happened after they were taken prisoner.

The news met a momentary brooding silence, after which those tightened faces began to clear. Shi Mu did not understand this initially, but soon he was enlightened. Though the original tribe had been exterminated, they still had hope, as Sand Girl was named the tribe’s shaman. Their home could be rebuilt. For these barbarians, who had been raised in extremly squalid conditions, having a home to go to is a blessing.

The grueling trudge and the outrage conducted by the Heavenly Wolf Tribe had made the women and children exhausted. And many of them had serious wounds. For their sake, Shi Mu ditched some goods and materials to make sure each wounded person would have an animal to ride on. Thus, they made way for the Black Raven Tribe....

Several days later, the great team arrived home, where Sand Girl and the other survivors had been waiting. From there, Shi Mu led them on to the Tribe of Tu Huo, which Sand Sun had indicated at his deathbed. After seeing the matter trhough, Shi Mu said his farewells to the Black Raven people and left.

[TL: I really liked Sand Girl. I was hoping she could have stayed with Shi Mu...But this is a story replete with heroines...So sad]

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In a different area of the vast, yet dull, wasteland.

A team of some ten barbarian riders were plodding forward against the dusty wind, the hooves of their rides never once pausing in their westward journey.

By the barbarian's standards, these riders would be considered small. Apart from some bone-made weapons hanging from the reins of their horses, the ones they held in their hands were uniformly made of iron.

In the forefront of this group, three barbarian riders were side by side. The two on the sides were powerfully-built men, whereas the girl sandwiched in the middle looked rather frail. However, it could be faintly felt that the girl was the real leader of their group.

She had fine, delicate features, and looked to be around twenty. She was wearing a jacket made of leopard's hide. The horse bumped along the sandy path, so all the while her braided hair moved up and down in mid air. Her complexion was not on the fair side, but her winged brows suggested experience and a heroic spirit. She held her back perfectly straight as she sat on the horse's back.

"Sister, according to the map, we'll soon reach the territory of the Dagger Bull Tribe. Shall we bypass them?" On the left flank, a big young man suddenly tilted his head to the girl and inquired cautiously. He had rather heavy features with a pair of alert eyes.

"No need. We don't have all day. Enough time has been wasted just to bypass the previous belligerent tribes. The Dagger Bull tribe is relatively peace-loving, and they hold no grudges against us humans. It won't be a problem as long as we act low profile." The girl in the jacket shook her head disapprovingly, her face seemed capable and experienced which greatly contrasted her age.

The big youth answered, and was just about to turn his head back when the girl's voice resounded again, "Brother Leng[A], we haven't come across any water for seven or eight days. I'm afraid we're running out of drinkable water. Please go and look if there is any water nearby." Her voice sounded soft but potent.

"Hehe, rest assured, sister! The map says there's a small lake ahead, not a large distance from here. It's the largest water source in this area. I'll be very quick." The youth named Leng put on a confident smile, then gripped his horse's reins, which neighed loudly and galloped forward at full speed. In the next moment the youth and his horse were out of sight, leaving a large could dust

floating along the trail.

Shortly afterwards, a deep voice appeared by the girl's ear,

"Your Highness, in your opinion, how much confidence do we have in winning the peace talk with the barbarians?"

On the right flank, a middle-aged man goaded his horse near the princess and asked in a low, reverberating voice. He had a craggy face, and was holding a long-handled axe in his one hand. The qi he emitted was overpowering, reminiscent of his Xiantian realm strength.

"The Belligerent Barbarians wants war, whereas the Peaceful Barbarians would prefer to have a truce. In this situation, the Great Shaman becomes immensely significant. General Zhang[B], please have more patience. We'll see when we arrive at the Holy Mountain. But personally, I'd rather believe the barbarians would not let the Sea-Dwellers profit from the warfare between us. It's only that, even if a truce could be established, we, of the Heavenly Qi Country, will probably not get our three fortresses back anytime soon." The girl in the jacket analyzed with a cool face, only sighing regretfully at the end.

General Zhang echoed gloomily, increasing his grasp of the long-handled axe, and did not make any return comment. The girl in the jacket urged her horse forward steadily, looking up at the murky sky. Her beautiful, but cool, eyes were shimmering, but her inner thoughts were completely concealed.

After a quarter of an hour, the youth named Leng returned, with the information about the lake's specific location. Under the princess's order, the group of riders steered their course and headed towards the lake.

Bit by bit, the monotone scenery of the sandy land began to get replaced with patches of green grass. Eventually, the patches joined to be an unbroken land carpeted with vibrant grass.

Soon, a smooth, mirror-like lake, which was about thirty meters wide, showed itself before the water-seekers. The travelers, all fatigued from their journey, got refreshed instantly upon seeing this tranquil, clear lake. Most of them could not wait but ride swiftly to the lake, drawing their skin canteens and charging forward. The girl in the jacket and her two guards lagged behind, continuing at an unhurried pace, as if engaged in a discussion.

Just then, something unexpected happened!

With a resounding noise the water rippled. First, water rippled in the center of the lake, then a water column, some three meters wide, erupted violently, as if a whale was blowing beneath. The water column leaped up until it was as high as fifteen meters. In the wake of this giant fountain, a masked young man with a green whip in his hand appeared on the top, where the foam of breaking waves was swirling violently. The mask he wore had a design of a ferocious silver shark on it, and the man's aura was rather supercilious. He stood there, like a sculpture, overlooking the crowd with a pair of frosty eyes.

Also, the minute he made himself seen, a mountainous wave surged skyward, with the man as the center, blotting out the heavens and rushing toward the land. The lake, which was only thirty meters wide, soon caved in several meters deep, as if rolled by a giant hand. The people present all shuddered in cold and terror. The air felt dense and suffocating. It was filled with killing intent.

The youth named Leng and General Zhang's expressions quickly changed, and they began shaking with fright. They were quite aware that such a horrible murderous qi would beat all Xiantian saints, however powerful one was. This suspicious Sea-Dweller-looking man must be at the level of an Earth-grade Saint!

The girl in the jacket was also shivering uncontrollably, but she quickly regained her poise. She freed the rein in her hand, and stepped forward to salute the mysterious man after the barbarian's fashion - one hand at the bosom, and a deep bow. This done, she questioned with a calm face, "Respected Sea-Dweller saint, we are riders of the Green Teeth Tribe. If you kill us barbarians indiscriminately, war between our people and your people may occur. Doesn't this seem unwise to you?"

The princess' gentle voice brought her comrades back to life. They had almost forgotten that they were barbarians in disguise right now.

The princess certainly attracted the masked man's attention. He swept her with his cold eyes, and there was a hint of surprise when he saw who she was. But this only aroused his condescension and disdain.

Subsequently, he raised slowly the green whip in his hand. The magical characters immediately glared, emitting dazzling green lights.

“No! Leng YingJie, protect the princess, and you two, hurry away!” General Zhang shouted anxiously. The next moment, he sprang up high into the air, hacking at the man’s mask with all his strength.

Crack! A giant, red axe, formed with real qi, suddenly emerged in the air. Meanwhile, the air hissed and whistled loudly. A dozen bone spears pierced through the air darting towards the masked man. However, the latter simply stretched out his left hand, and a flood of green lights streamed out from his hand, diffusing in all directions to form a green light shield around his body. The shield was almost transparent, like a green gauze.

Soon a chain of “puffing” sounds was heard, as the furious spears, once touching the light mask, lost their vitality and turned to ashes in a blink of an eye. And the blood-red giant axe shared the same fate. After striking the shield, it burst into a cloud of blood fog, which then dispersed into the air.

The girl in the jacket mounted her horse promptly the moment General Zhang ordered her to leave. By the time the first round of attacks had finished, she had run some thirty meters, with the youth named Leng following her closely. The silver spear in his hand glittered and flashed, ready to ward off any blow that might obstruct the princess’s retreat.

“Well, what’s the fun in leaving now that you’ve all come so far!” The masked man thundered. Then he flipped his wrist, and a the long green whip began to coil up in the air, quickly forming a green vortex of real qi. From the depths of the vortex came hisses, resembling that of a snake’.

Not unexpectedly, large green snakes, each as long as fifteen meters, poured out of the vortex. Strictly speaking, they could, at best, be said as snake-like beasts, since they had a pair of wings on their backs. Upon their emergence, the beasts swooped down on the human riders at an alarming speed. The green light only flashed a moment before they had neared their prey.

A primary Houtian warrior in the ambassador group let out an infuriated shout, while the long blade in his hand gave the beast a good cut. However, the green snake acted like a heavenly animal, dodging the attack with extreme dexterity. The next moment, it flashed forward, sinking into the warrior’s chest.

There came a dull thud, and then the warrior’s body exploded, his blood

showering down on the land.

This scene repeated with some of the other ten warriors of the ambassador group. After the green snake sunk into their bodies, they instantly blossomed into blood flowers in mid air. For some time the air smelled fishy, and streams of blood started to flow across the earth.

At this moment, only General Zhang, who was a primary Xiantian saint, held on a little longer. The long-handled axes in his hands being swung vigorously, leaving blood-red colored traces in the air. He had managed to prevent a snake from entering his body, whereas other warriors all died within a breath!

Meantime, two more green snakes trailed the princess and her young guard closely. They had not made it much further.

Seeing this, the youth named Leng was startled, but only for a moment. He turned back to look at the girl in the jacket, and then the last traces of hesitation vanished from his eyes.

The silver spear in his hand suddenly glared like a small sun. The magical characters on the spear dancing wildly.

Boom! The silver spear exploded, turning into countless silver light spots which then joined to be a silver flame that greeted one of the green snakes.

At the same time, blood rushed to his face. Then he yelled, and threw himself down on the other snake.

The earth shook. Subsequently, an invisible vapor wave surged violently towards the princess. Meanwhile, three light beams were illuminated simultaneously - one blood-red, one silver, and the other green. Amid the glaring lights, a green snake - now much diminished in size - rushed out and darted towards the princess, like a thunderbolt. Whereas where the youth named Leng had landed was now empty save for a pool of blood. The tall young man was nowhere to be found.

Notes:

[A] Leng: a random Chinese surname. The young man’s full name is Leng

Yingjie, as can be seen later. Yingjie means gallantry. Here Leng Yingjie calls the princess “sister”, because they two are disciples of the same sect. Therefore Leng Yingjie can be less inhibited with the princess.

[B] Zhang is a random Chinese surname. General Zhang probably serves the Qi court, and guards the princess on behalf of Qi the Heavenly Country. His full name is not given.

Chapter 147 - An Encounter

The girl in the jacket sensed the imminent danger behind her, knowing that it was futile to persist with the attempt to escape. Determined, she pulled at the reins and dismounted the horse abruptly.

When she turned to face the pursuer, there was a golden token already in her left hand; it shined with thickly dotted magical characters. She worked her real qi and a thin layer of golden light began to emerge on the token's surface.

In a short while, the tinier green snake had drawn near, with an interval of less than three meters between them. The girl remained unmoved and activated the token with all of her real qi. Indistinctly, a Chinese character "Qiu" - meaning to captivate - emerged floating above the token.

The green snake's eyes flashed. It was just about to worm its way into the girl's bosom until a green light suddenly shined in front of the girl's breasts. It turned out that the green jade ornament she had been wearing around her neck, had bursted apart and formed a shimmering green light cover that wrapped around her. A deep woody scent soon pervaded the air.

Boom! The snake knocked against the light cover. As a result, the cover's shimmer dimmed, and the snake was further reduced in size - now only as small as a thumb. Even while injured, the green snake did not slack in its duty the slightest; it continued biting at the girl with its forked tongues while hissing menacingly.

The result was out of the girl's expectation - she had presumed that the impact would kill the beast. There was a gleam of fluster in her eyes, but still she reacted swiftly; her right hand fumbled at her waist. Amid a white flash, a sword shot up to meet the incoming snake. When the two clashed, the white flash of the sword suddenly surged and produced countless snowflakes that floated in the air.

The snake's body was soon covered with sharp frost. The sword pursued, chopping through the air.After the clang of the sword, the snake bursted into countless ice pieces and vanished. An oddly powerful real qi surged into the girl's body through the sword, turning her stomach upside down. The pain bore down on her unbearably, causing her to open her mouth and spit out blood. Her face

became pale as a piece of paper.

However, the Chinese character “Qiu” had grown fully intelligible on the surface of the golden token.

At the same time, above the lake.

The masked man seemed somewhat surprised by the youth named Leng’s self-sacrifice as well as the girl’s strength to resist one of his blows. However, he soon regained his composure and with a sneer, he once again lifted the green whip in his hand.

Meanwhile, General Zhang destroyed the snake that targeted him at the cost of one arm and his long-handled axe. The axe had exploded. Just as he was to take a quick breather, he saw the rising whip in the masked man’s hand. Fury smoldered in General Zhang’s eyes and he shouted desperately, “You’re courting death!”

Instantly, the air around General Zhang rippled visibly; it was his real qi being irradiated. In a flash, he covered a long distance of about thirty meters and pounced on the masked man. Simultaneously, a giant blood-red fist formed by his real qi punched out heavily.

The masked man did not even spare a look at General Zhang. He flipped the whip, winding it around the general in mid-air like a strong viper. The whip tightened up and with a dull sound, the general’s body burst, causing blood flowers to blossom in the air. He did not even have the chance to scream.

After the death of General Zhang, the real qi fist that contained all his might, dispersed sadly with a loud boom.

The masked man turned his sharp eyes to the princess nearby. He then raised one hand, pointed towards her, and shot out a dot of golden light.

However, at this time, he felt an ill-premonition. Before he knew it, the air around him rippled violently, and thousands of golden threads emerged out of thin air that weaved into a golden cage that imprisoned him. The masked man only felt his eyes being blinded by glaring golden lights before he found himself losing all connections to the outside world.

Infuriated, he spread out his green light cover, trying to burst the golden cage.

Boom! A thunderous sound rang out. The magical characters all over the cage glittered and the cage quaked violently. However, there were no signs of damage.

The masked man went into a tantrum and forcibly flipped his whip. In a short while, a dozen of green snakes appeared again, knocking against the cage from inside. This failed, but then the snakes began to merge into the cage, each one producing a loud boom. Bit by bit, the golden cage eventually lost its luster. After a full half an hour passed and all of the green snakes had disappeared, the cage finally burst open with a loud crash, leaving dots of crystal lights floating in mid air.

Thus, the masked man freed himself of the cage. However, he was not in a happy mood because the girl in the jacket had long ago disappeared with her horse. What irritated him more was that, she must have applied a secret magic to cover her tracks.

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In the bleak desert, the sun was as always baking the land, producing a searing temperature that would surely cause raw meat to sizzle on the sandy earth. The air also rippled due to scorching heat.

A tall man who had covered himself entirely in a grey cloak, was riding on Four Odd while advancing in a certain direction. Despite its hefty look, Four Odd can make a long stride of three meters each time it plunged its hoofs into the sand. Therefore, they advanced at a high speed, causing the scenery on the way to be constantly retiring from their sight quickly - that is, if there was any change of the scenery.

Suddenly, the man on Four Odd straightened his back and pulled on the reins. The animal soon came to a stop, raising its intelligent head to look at its master while meowing lovably.

The man uncovered his cape, revealing a young and handsome face. This was surely Shi Mu.

He squinted slightly, turned his pupils gold to inspect the ground, and then looked up into the distance.

After some thought, he gave the reins a jerk and said, “To the Southeast.”

Four Odd seemed to have understood its master’s words, and turned towards the right direction.

An hour later, a medium-sized oasis with verdant trees appeared before them. Some trees even bore a rich number of delicious-looking fruits. The oasis had a fairly large pool; the surface being as smooth as a mirror.

Shi Mu, being very delighted, nodded his head.

“Meow, meow!” Four Odd also cheered up upon seeing the oasis and the pool, meowing happily while quickening its pace. Shortly, they arrived by the lake. The blissful creature stooped to drink itself to its heart’s content; its tail swishing briskly.

Shi Mu also crouched down by the lake, scooping up the lukewarm water to drink with his hands. Then he took out his canteen and filled it.

Quite some time passed before he stood up and looked blankly at the tranquil lake.

It had been a month since he left the people of the Black Raven Tribe. During this period, he would practice during the daytime and travelled during the night. Thanks to the to the wine that Sand Sun had made earlier, with the yellow snake’s gallbladder, he made a smooth breakthrough in his training of the Heavenly Elephant Art, reaching the sixth level without much difficulty. As a result, his physical body was toughened to a further extent. Once he could make it all the way to the seventh level, he would officially enter the late stage of Houtian level.

The current pressing matter, was to find the Firing Snake Tribe as soon as possible so he could learn their Totem art. Judging from the frequency in which the snake tattoo attacked his chest, Shi Mu realized that the power of the unicorn viper’s blood must have waned. This is why he had hurried toward the Firing Snake Tribe without stop for the past couple days, almost without any rest during the night, for the single purpose of reaching his destination as soon as possible. He would leave the follow-up issues - like, how to deal with the tribesmen and coerce them to teach him the secret Totem art - for when he had at least arrived at the tribe.

However, his face suddenly changed, and his ears stirred vigilantly.

There came a chain of faint clangs in front of the oasis, sounding like a fierce battle was going on.

Shi Mu concentrated on the sounds, dexterously withdrawing the black blade and the Air-Piercing Bow from Four Odd's back. Stealthily, he slipped towards the battlefield.

The noises grew increasingly louder as he got closer. He heard angry shouts and the bitter cries of barbarians.

After going through the forestry, a large clearing came into view. He concealed himself behind a shrub and peered through the cracks.

There were some seven or eight barbarians fighting fiercely with a girl in a jacket. The clang of swords and knives had traveled from here. Shi Mu turned his pupils gold to observe the condition of the battle. Suddenly, he jolted in surprise. The girl in the jacket had intentionally disguised herself as a barbarian! Her delicate sword art and many nuanced details in her movements, all suggested that she was a one hundred percent human girl.

Shi Mu had to admit that her camouflage was nearly perfect and he wouldn't have noticed if it weren't for his superhuman eyesight.

The girl was wielding a shining white sword as long as ten meters that was giving off puffs of cold air. Dancing elegantly in the air, it left traces of silver shadows that gradually constituted a circle that protected the girl. The seven or eight barbarians were Houtian Totem warriors, roughly at their middle stages. They were using long green knives that glittered and flashed as they moved up and down nimbly like leopard cats in the air. Notwithstanding, the circle would always keep them out no matter how hard they launched the attacks.

By now, the girl in the jacket had a lot of blood on her clothes, and her face was like ash. Apparently, she was fighting with serious wounds. Three dead bodies of the barbarians laid on the ground at her side; each one only had a single cut on their throat, indicating that they were killed with one blow. The girl in the jacket was undoubtedly skilled in the sword art, but her physical strength was nearing her limits.

The barbarians had noticed this and adopted a delay policy. They besieged her, making random attacks that aimed to deplete her strength bit by bit.

Seeing this, Shi Mu unhesitatingly felt for his Air-Piercing Bow on his back.

On the clearing, the girl's eyes shimmered weakly and her face suddenly flushed. She coughed violently and the sword in her hand also wavered, causing her smooth movements to be delayed. The circle of the sword shadows also opened a crack.

This delighted the barbarians exceedingly. A tall barbarian hurriedly broke through the circle from the opening, chopping at the girl's neck. Apparently, he wanted her head.

The girl's eyes suddenly glinted with life and the silver sword quivered in the air, throwing out a shadow that fell on the barbarian's knife.

With a clear sound, the girl's shining sword cut the knife in half without difficulty. Next, she flicked her wrist, and with a lightning speed, she thrust out her sword. The sword moved so fast that it left no visible trail in the air save for a few cold glints.

The big barbarian lifted his arm skyward to duck, but that arm was cut cleanly off his shoulder. At the same time, a thin red line emerged around his neck while he staggered back with his hands covering the wound. After some sad cries, he flopped onto the ground with his face up.

"Brother Meng!" His fellow barbarians called out simultaneously, but they flinched from the girl's devilish sword. They could only wield their knives and press on with more fiercer, intense attacks.

On the other side, after killing the big barbarian, the girl seemed to have overexerted herself; a wound inside her body was torn open. Her eyes spoke of intense pain and her mouth spat blood. The sword slowed down in her hands.

The barbarians, though spotting the chance, did not step forward rashly this time. They continued to wield their knives at the periphery of the circle. Clearly, they intended to tire her to death.

Chapter 148 - A Misunderstanding

At this critical juncture, an ear-splitting sound rang out.

A black shadow darted out of a nearby shrub, flitting through the air like a crash of thunder in the night. In a blink of an eye, the shadow vanished into one of the barbarians' chest.

The hefty barbarian was knocked backwards against the bough of a huge tree, bringing a blast that blew the leaves off their branches. The tree shook violently in the wind.

The barbarian's body hung in mid air, penetrated by a black arrow that sank deep into the bough. The feathers at the arrow's end were still quivering. The barbarian's face twisted in terror as his mouth dropped. However, this arrow had taken his life before he could let out a sad cry. His eyes soon became unfocused, and his feet, after some futile twitches, finally stopped moving.

This caused the other barbarians and the girl in the jacket to start panicking. Before they could to look back, another two black shadows whistled through the air with the same incredible speed.

"Ahhhhhhhh!" Two shrieks echoed almost simultaneously and another two barbarians were thrown backward by the momentum of the arrows. Similarly, they were nailed into the trees and died a quick death.

Another black shadow flashed when the fourth arrow shot up. One barbarian twisted his body to duck the arrow; his eyes as fierce as a snake. He brandished his long knife in mid air to stop the arrow, but the impact set him stepping back with a jolt. There was terror in his bestial eyes. He had not expected so much force from the arrow.

"What are you guys waiting for? Perform the Knife-Binding Formula! We have to stop this!" The red-eyed barbarian shouted desperately for help to his companions, who finally came to themselves and temporarily left the girl in the jacket to perform the knife formula. Instantly, they stood in a circle with backs against each other, cooperating with superb partnership and dexterity. Each one of the four guarded a direction, swaying the steel knife in their hands. The blue screen of knife shadows constituted a perfect fortress.

Swish! Another black arrow penetrated the dense air like electricity with unstoppable speed. However this time, as soon as the arrow came near the whirling knives, it lost its supercilious air. In the next moment, it fell crestfallen in four pieces. This caused delight in the red-eyed barbarian. Encouraged, he sneered in the dark as his eyes glimmered like an insidious insect that was ready to pounce on a prey. Then, by an almost imperceptible movement of his right hand, a scorpion as big as a fist slipped out of a small purse at his waist and sprang out in the direction where Shi Mu was hiding. It moved so quickly that its body left a black line of afterimages behind.

On the other side, this hidden archer, whatever his intention might be, gave the girl a respite to rest a bit. She staggered back several steps, heaving for breath. Meanwhile, she caught a faint glimpse of the scorpion that flew out of the barbarian's hand and was quite alarmed. Just as she was to warn the archer, a shout low and deep reverberated in the woods as a red light flashed for a second. Immediately the black scorpion flew back, fell under its owner's feet in halves, and stopped moving after a struggle.

The red-eyed barbarian was enraged and his eyes were filled with anger and fear. The same expression came to the girl's face. Before their shock subsided, the next arrow had shot up, aimed at none other than the red-eyed barbarian. He immediately sensed something different; the arrow was blue instead of black. However, his self-confidence in the knife formula reassured him, and with one hand fumbling in the waist purse, he seemed to be up to something.

It did not take the blue arrow more than a few seconds to reach its target. With some rustling sounds, the knife screen was vanquished like paper scraps that got lost in the wind. The four strongly-built barbarians were shaken by the force of the arrow, limping back involuntarily and unable to even hold onto their knives.

The red-eyed barbarian was taken unguarded and his knife almost slipped off his hand. In a moment of desperation, he propped the knife in front of his chest while swiveling it wildly. Unfortunately, the arrow perforated his shelter of knife shadows like a breeze, and then pierced into his chest while his eyes were still widely opened due to the great shock.

"Wind Chasing...Ch..." Before his lips could mumble some ambiguous syllables,

the red-eyed barbarian was thrown backward for about thirty meters until he fell dead on the ground. Now, did the other barbarians learned their lesson; with ghastly pale faces, they turned back and ran away with tacit understanding. However, even the fastest of them could only made about sixty meters before he was nailed into the ground by a blue arrow. In a minute, the woods regained its dead silence.

“Magical arrows?” The girl in the jacket stared hard at the patterns drawn on the arrows, murmuring to herself.

After a brief moment, Shi Mu emerged out of the woods. His shirt was torn with a long slit, obviously slashed by the black scorpion. He stroked his chest with a lingering fear. The vicious little thing was probably at the primary level of Houtian stage, but its speed was incredible. It was all thanks to his superhuman eyesight that he was still breathing. A quick glance would tell that the shiny pitch-black stinger at the end of its tail, contained a venom that would kill through the smallest scratch on the skin.

“You are...one of us?” The girl in the jacket looked Shi Mu up and down, asking tentatively.

“That’s correct. I am Shi Mu of the Black Demon Sect. And what about you?” Shi Mu asked, looking straight into the girl’s eyes.

“Do you have something that can prove your identity?” The girl did not answer the question but asked in response, still having some doubt in this stranger.

Shi Mu was mute for a moment, knitting his eyebrows. Then he fished out a black token from his sleeve and swept it before the girl’s eyes. It was the token of the Black Demons. This assured the girl, causing her face to relax.

“Nice to meet you, brother Shi. I am Tian Huowu[1], thanks for your help just now. Sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you...” The girl cupped her hands to thank Shi Mu.

“It’s ok. I didn’t expect to meet disciples of the union other than me in this wasteland. Nice to meet you.” Shi Mu answered.

Tian Huowu smiled cheerfully, but her face suddenly went pale and she spat blood. Her body shook weakly, about to fall on her back. Shi Mu hurried to

support her by the shoulder, and then helped her sit down against a tree.

“Thank you again.” Tian Huowu managed a smile, took out a delicate jade bottle from her sleeve, and then out poured a pill. But without warning her face clouded as her body stiffened instantly.

“Sister Tian, what’s up?” Shi Mu was still in the dark.

But just as his voice fell, Tian Huowu flipped her wrist and the white sword in her hand struck at Shi Mu’s chest at lightning speed. This shocked him greatly as he swiftly shot himself backwards to dodge the attack.

Pu! No matter how quickly Shi Mu reacted, the short distance between them made him unable to duck unscathed. His shirt got terribly slashed, exposing his chest, and he was a centimeter away from being eviscerated. Shi Mu changed his expression as anger overtook him. He was about to shout out in anger until Tian Huowu interrupted him, jumping to her feet, “You shameless barbarian impostor, how dare you pretend to be one of us! Courting death!”

The sword in her hand glinted cold and hard, like a white lightening, striking at every vital part on Shi Mu’s body mercilessly. Shi Mu twisted his body and ducked several strikes, his eyes turning golden. He thrust his one arm speedily into the sword shadows, cutting directly at the sword in Tian Huowu’s hand. The girl let out a dull groan, dropping her weapon onto the ground. Shi Mu kicked up the sword with his foot, gripped it in his hand, and then jumped backwards until he was several meters away.

Tian Huowu’s face paled as she spat blood again, staggering a step back to prop herself against the tree. Color had drained from her beautiful face, and her delicate body could not help but start shivering. Finally she knelt down on the ground while leaning against the trunk.

Although she had escaped the pursuit of the Earth Grade barbarians by a narrow margin, her body had not survived uninjured. The wounds and internal injuries had been serious, caused by the fierce battle with the many pursuers. Although she had by force suppressed them a bit with her secret arts, the fight with Shi Mu had made them finally act up.

Tian Huowu turned back to look for the white pill she had dropped. She would have taken it if it weren’t for the unexpected fight. She now reached out her

hand to pick it up. However, the hand would not comply, trembling like an old man, causing the pill to slip through her fingers constantly.

Just then, two gentle fingers picked the pill up and brought it to her lips. The girl raised her head to find that the imposter had moved beside her with the pill in his hand, his eyes peaceful and calm. She deeply looked into that pair of eyes, hesitated, and opened her mouth to receive the pill.

After giving her the pill, Shi Mu stood up and stepped back again to wait for the girl to relax. Tian Huowu wore a puzzled face that spoke a mixture of doubt and gratitude, but after some minutes she seemed to have made up her mind, seating herself once again against the tree, and adopted a more snug posture with her legs crossed.

Later on her, body began to glow faintly white, and a light circled around her slowly with cold air. As time went by, the ground near her became covered with frost. Shi Mu fixed his eyes on her, full of surprise. Judging by her real qi, she was probably at the later stage of Houtian Level. Therefore, by no means could she have achieved this without the pill.

After a long while, she reopened her eyes as her complexion had returned to normal. Slowly, she stood up while looking at Shi Mu in a inquisitive manner.

“Sister Tian, I guess you must have been mistaken. Is it because of this tattoo?” Shi Mu smiled wryly. Saying this, he tore open his shirt, exposing the tattoo of the appalling red python on his well-muscled chest. The tattoo had now taken on an even brighter touch, which rendered it more life-like.

“Humph! That tattoo proves you to be a barbarian. What’s your purpose in disguising as a Black Demon’s disciple?” Tian Huowu threw out her doubt with a clear, harsh voice after having a quick glance at the python with slightly blushing cheeks. As if trying to dissemble her shyness, she added grimly, “Or, are you presuming that I am credulous of your feigned goodness in rescuing me?”

“Hehe, of course not. This tattoo is not the barbarian totem. On the contrary, it’s a curse...” Shi Mu sighed softly, not triggered by the girl’s verbal attack this time. Before Huowu could say anything else, he poured out the whole story of how he got the curse - that the Rat Nest stronghold was raided by barbarians, and how he was attacked by a green-skinned barbarian who put the curse of

Eternal Doom on him.

"...After the accident, I asked around and finally got the information needed. To lift the curse, I have to either ask help from an Earth Grade saint, or learn this secret totem art of the Firing Snake Tribe. You know, I am an ordinary disciple... so which Earth Grade saint would help me? That's why I'm here now in this barbarian wasteland: to try my luck," Shi Mu explained in a composed voice.

Chapter 149 - Together to the Sacred Mount

While Shi Mu talked tirelessly about his extraordinary experiences, Tian Huowu listened silently, her facial expressions changing all the time. When Shi Mu was done, she sank into a brief contemplation.

Word did reached her about the raid of the Rat Nest, which conformed well with Shi Mu's story and gave much credence to it. As for herself, she entered Tian Yin sect as a little girl and had been under the instruction of several saints of their sect since, hence her rather comprehensive knowledge of the martial arts ring. Therefore, the barbarian's secret curses were not unfamiliar to her. On top of this, if Shi Mu was really an enemy, there was absolutely no need for him to help her earlier; he could have waited for the best chance to take her life.

In conclusion, Tian Huowu was assured that it was her that was being oversensitive. To accuse somebody without solid proof is unfair, let alone to try to kill him. Thinking this, Tian Huowu flushed with shame. However, she soon recovered and questioned Shi Mu, "What you have just said makes sense, but how can I believe your story without any proof?"

"Well..."Shi Mu found himself in a predicament, mumbling helplessly. Unless he became a sorcerer, he did not know how to conjure up an exhibit to convince this suspicious judge. Eventually he gave up hope while feeling rather exasperated, and answered indifferently, "If I have failed to dispel sister Tian's doubts, then so be it. Please excuse me." Saying this, he turned back without Tian Huowu's consent and walked along the road he had come.

"Hold on. You still have my sword." Tian Huowu reached out her hand as her eyes blinked hesitatingly.

Shi Mu frowned and passed her the sword wordlessly. The girl took it with a hint of smile. But suddenly, she thrust the sword forward with a flick of her wrist, aiming at Shi Mu's chest with the speed of an attacking snake.

Profoundly shocked, Shi Mu shot himself backward thirty meters while his face twisted in great anger. The giant snake on his chest was bleeding.

"Sister Tian, what do you want? Do you really want to fight with me?" Shi Mu asked in a cold voice as his face turned serious.

A heavy silence hovered between the two. Tian Huowu did not answer as she withdrew her sword and held it before her eyes. She stared intently at the tip of the blade that was smeared with Shi Mu's blood. A moment later, she smiled faintly and said, "I'll help myself since you can't provide proof."

After saying this, she took out a bead the size of a thumb that looked like it was made from a kind of transparent jade, with tiny, fine magic characters glittering inside. This should be a magic weapon without doubt.

The sulky look on his face subsided while his eyes were fixed on Tian Huowu's hands. Shi Mu knitted his brows.

The girl chanted some incantations, and in response, the bead began to glow mildly white. Next, she shook her wrist swiftly, causing the blood on the sword tip to drip onto the bead. With a sizzling sound like water falling onto a heated iron, the white glow of the bead deepened as a gray and misty cloud emerged and tumbled inside the bead. Tian Huowu observed closely, holding her breath. After a while, she nodded confidently and stored the bead away.

Finally she broke the embarrassing silence, "The tattoo on your chest gives off a very profound and evil power. Now I believe your words completely. That is indeed a kind of evil working."

Shi Mu made a discontent noise through his nostrils and remained mute.

"Brother Shi, please accept my sincere apology. I was being rather rude, but please try to understand that I'm on a serious mission that requires me to act as cautiously as I can. Any small mistake may lead to a series of immeasurable consequences; that's why I was being so… obnoxious." Tian Huowu made a deep bow to Shi Mu, apologizing sincerely.

Now it was Shi Mu's turn to feel embarrassed. The girl's genuine attitude made the angry waves in his heart calm down. He relented and asked, "What do you mean by this serious mission?"

"Well... Actually, I'm not only a disciple of Tian Yin sect, but also the princess of Qi, the Heavenly Country..." Tian Huowu managed a bitter smile. She then told Shi Mu the story of her being ordered to negotiate with the barbarians to save the situation, now that the sea dwellers had launched a full-scale invasion into the peripheral islands of the three kingdoms. She also told him about how their

fellowship was attacked en route.

Shi Mu was filled with consternation at the news. In the recent days, he had wandered the depth of the wasteland where the wings of pigeons rarely arrived. He had been in the dark about the sea dwellers' clandestine moves and the much hoped truce between man and barbarian.

"Can I make a bold guess that brother Shi has not been informed of all these affairs?" The princess asked with a surprised face.

"Yes, you are right. I entered the wasteland months ago, when the sea dwellers had not invaded us yet." Shi Mu's look gradually returned to normal as his thoughts went wild about how this new international situation would affect his mission of obtaining the secret totem art of the Firing Snake Tribe.

After seeing the distracted look on Shi Mu's face, the princess sank into a momentary hesitation. After thinking it through, she resolved to ask as she bit her lip, "I know I was being really rude to brother Shi that I dare not ask you to forgive me. But still, I have a presumptuous request that I wish brother Shi will hear out."

Shi Mu gave her a reassuring look and answered, "Your Highness, I now understand perfectly your difficult situation. You did what your responsibility require you to do. Besides, I'm not a narrow-minded person. So just speak whatever you want."

"Thank you, brother Shi. As I've said before, our fellowship has been completely wiped out except for myself. Now that I'm heavily injured and the barbarian Sacred Mount is still a month's journey ahead, the road will be full of danger. As a disciple of the union, could brother Shi escort me to the destination until we meet the Great Shaman of the barbarians?" The princess made the request earnestly.

This entreaty of hers set Shi Mu's thoughts tumbling in his mind. The negotiation directly concerned his people's safety and being a civilian of the Qi country, made it is his duty to protect the princess on the road. However, the journey would take him at least two months, jeopardizing his every last hope to lift the curse.

"About the curse, please don't let it worry you, brother Shi. Since this

negotiation is equally important to the barbarians, I'll seize the right moment to ask for this secret art of the Firing Snake tribe from the Great Shaman. I'll do everything I can, and the cost shall be covered by the union. Even if the Great Shaman should decline this request, we can return to the union. As the direct disciple of the saint GongSun, I have my way to seek help from an Earth Grade saint. Therefore, we can fix your problem either way." The princess beamed, as if already seeing Shi Mu through.

This was definitely a rewarding offer. Shi Mu immediately consented after a brief thought. He was clear that even if he could slip into the tribe at the risk of his life, it would not ensure his final success. On the contrary, to steer his way to the Sacred Mount with the princess, proved to be a better approach with bigger odds. Even if he failed in procuring the art from the Great Shaman, he was sure he could find some other ways. After all, as the holy land of the barbarians', the Sacred Mount should be abundant in secret arts.

The princess's face lightened after Shi Mu agreed to be her guard. She said, full of excitement, "Then let's depart immediately. This is not a safe place." However, the next moment, her face went pale again as she had coughed violently.

"You are still not recovered. Let's find a place to rest, at least for tonight. We can set out the first thing in the morning." Shi Mu urged, a trace of concern crossing his eyes.

The princess' face was furrowed with anxiety as she vaguely felt the dull pain in her bosoms aggravating. Though the injuries inside her body had been temporarily suppressed by the pill she had taken, they would probably break out in an immediate trudge.

"All right… But what should we do with the dead bodies?" She nodded hesitatingly, and then asked.

"Leave the job to me." Shi Mu answered briefly and then began the clearing of the barbarians' bodies lying in a mess on the ground. He scoured each of them, and was disappointed to end up with only a few golden leaves. Next, he assembled the bodies and fished out a patch of grey hide from his shirt that had some red magic characters of fire element drawn on it. This was a Fire Ball

charm. The hide was a magical paper that he happened to buy a half a month ago in a certain barbarian tribe. The paper, made from the skin of some fierce animals, was material for making dark magical charms. After several times of trial, he was surprised to find that this paper had a highly flexible property that enabled it to bear the human magic, working even better than normal magical paper.

He flicked the hide and it immediately caught fire, turning into a giant fire ball that fell onto the pile of the dead bodies. After several minutes, there were only ashes swirling low above the ground.

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The next morning, in a wood not far by the oasis, Shi Mu was sitting cross-legged in a clearing while absorbed in meditation. His breath was slow and regular; his expression calm and rapt.

“Brother Shi,” the princess’ clear voice came from behind his shoulder.

Shi Mu opened his eyes slowly and looked back, only to be surprised by the sight. A strange barbarian man, heavily built in a grey cloak, was walking towards him. He had dark red complexion and a shaggy ginger beard. If it was not for the familiar ringing voice, Shi Mu would definitely take him for a genuine barbarian.

“You are… the princess?” Shi Mu asked tentatively.

The big barbarian giggled girlishly. “Sure, who else would I be? I picked up the art of disguise in my sect. After the attack yesterday, I thought I’d better be more discreet. So… Well, let’s give you a makeover, too.” The princess sneered.

Shi Mu nodded his consent. Although barely anyone knew him in this wasteland, his appearance still resembled a normal man’s. A good disguise is always welcome when it involves an undercover job.

The princess proved herself to be a professional after an hour’s effort. Shi Mu now looked exactly like a middle-aged barbarian man with dark complexion and a weather-beaten air. Even Shi Mu himself was amazed while looking at his reflection on the lake; he could not help but give unceasing praises for the princess’ proficiency.

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In the Death Space. Chilly wind whistled, adding to the dingy land a bleakness that made one shudder with a heavy heart. The sky was dim and cloudy as usual, with a row of blood-red moons hovering like dead spirits. If Shi Mu was here at the moment, he would find that one moon was somehow missing, leaving only eleven others gazing at the land. However, each of the moon had grown slightly bigger.

The creatures on the land did not care the slightest about the blood-red moons or about how many there were now or where the missing one had gone. Numbly, they moved on.

At the foot of a dead mountain, broken bones littered the brownish ground; they gave a sad cry whenever a stiff wind howl past. Apart from some normal skeletons, there were also bone pieces of zombies, skeleton riders, and some fierce beasts on the ground, suggesting a recently ended war.

Amid a mass of bone pieces, the skull of a damaged skeleton suddenly jiggled; its eye sockets flashing. The skeleton had lost both its feet and half of its left body, left with only a smaller part of its chest supporting its head and the right arm.

The skeleton propped itself up with the single hand, endeavoring to straighten up. Examining its injured body, the green gleams in its eye sockets wavered as if in sorrow.

This skeleton was exactly Silk.

Chapter 150 - The Mount of White Horse

With the only arm, Silk scrambled forward tenaciously. Its ribs were full of cracks imposed by the war. Fortunately, its head, right arm, and shoulder managed to survive intact.

Silk kept creeping arduously in search of bone pieces that could be used to piece its body together; the job did not take it much time. Shortly afterwards, its frame was complete again, and back was its usual deftness of movement.

Silk tried the new limbs and was quite satisfied with them. After fully adjusted to the new body, it began wandering about battlefields, and then paused by a grey skeleton that had been cut into halves. The two pale green flames in the skeleton's eye sockets had not died out, causing Silk to rapidly lift its foot and crushed the skeleton's head.

With a crisp sound, the skull cracked into pieces, causing a green light to float out which Silk immediately breathed in.

Battlefields in the Death Space had many skeletons whose spirit fire had not completely extinguished. Silk ambled along and in a short while, had absorbed many of the spirit fires. Its own spirit power thus got strengthened, causing the flames in its eyes to turn into a pale blue and gaining in brightness. From a distance, the two eyes looked just like two small blue torch lights.

In the process, the cracks in its bones all over his body had gradually merged until they finally disappeared. After an hour, Silk halted on the ground; the blue fires in its eyes were jumping.

Abruptly it turned back and squatted by a half-dead silver skeleton, gazing at it intently. The blue fires kept blinking, indicating that their owner was in deep thought.

The silver skeleton returned Silk's gaze fearfully while the pale green spirit fires in its eyes shuddered quietly.

Suddenly, Silk bent over and snatched the skeleton's head off its body while simultaneously opening its mouth. The skull released a green light and Silk quickly inhaled it. Immediately, the spirit fires of Silk's underwent some violent

change, tumbling like waves inside the eye sockets.

After a short moment, Silk reopened its mouth and spat out another green fire that vanished into the silver skeleton's head. The skull responded, and then its eyes were lighted up again. As if in communication, Silk's eyes flashed several times accordingly before it put the skull back to the skeleton's body.

There were some creaking and cracking noises from the silver skeleton. Slowly, it staggered to its feet, turning out to be even higher and stronger than Silk. Reverently, it knelt down at Silk's feet. Silk raised its head, opened its mouth, and then made a soundless cry. After doing this, it turned around and moved on to the next battlefield. The silver skeleton rose up and closely followed Silk.

After less than half a day, when Silk left the next battlefield, it was followed by two pious skeletons, both of them being much stronger than itself.

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One month later.

Somewhere in the northwest the wasteland, the landscape took on a different fashion; there were flowers and grasses as far as the eyes could see, replacing the ordinary bleakness of the desert. There was even a verdant green forest causing a striking difference from the babbling blue river that winded through it. The current was swift and clear. At the end of the river stood a towering mountain as high as three thousand meters.

The mountain, from foot to top, was strangely white. The stones were oddly shaped as well. Looking afar, the mountain resembled a white horse standing on its hind hooves. Hence its name the "Mount of White Horse" by the barbarians.

The White Horse stood there as a mountain of peculiar significance; the surrounding area was said to be the origin of the ancient giants, deeming it as a sacred place. Accordingly, the White Horse Mount became a sacred mountain.

At its top, stood an imposing white palace; it was the Mecca for all the barbarians as well as the residence of the Great Shaman. It is known as the the Sacred Snow Palace.

At this moment, on a hill not far from the sacred mountain, a couple of travelers were overlooking the White Horse. The man was wearing an overcoat

of lion hide on a Four Odd, whereas the woman had a cloak of fox fur around her shoulder. She was riding on a chestnut barbarian horse. The couple was exactly Shi Mu and the princess, who had endured all the drudgery to come here.

During the journey, the two of them had changed their disguise numerous times, also going out of their way to dodge some of the fiercer tribes. Finally, they had made it all the way to the peripheral area of the sacred mountain in one piece. Arriving at the location allowed them to now contentedly throw away their disguises, though still maintaining the barbarian garments.

Shi Mu shifted his eyes from the Sacred Snow Palace, to the foot of the hill of where they were now standing. There was a barbarian military camp guarding day and night. The tents were all white and even all the buildings were made from white rocks. This camp could not be counted a big one. At best, it consisted of three hundreds soldiers who were on the watch for the sole pathway leading into the sacred mountain.

“Brother Shi, let’s go there!” The princess’s eyes glittered exuberantly. The sacred palace was like a destination at hand’s reach to her.

This said, she goaded the horse and galloped to the barbarian camp downhill. Shi Mu gave the Four Odd a gentle spur and followed her.

“Whoever coming must stop now! It’s not time for pilgrimage yet! Anyone who dares to enter the sacred mountain at the wrong time shall be killed indiscriminately!”

When the two came to the gate of the camp, they were immediately surrounded by a group of barbarian soldiers who held weapons in their hands.

“I am the Fire Dancing Princess of Qi the Heavenly Country. On behalf of the Union of the Seven Sects, I request to see the Great Shaman on an issue of great importance.” The princess raised her eyebrows, announcing her identity.

The leader of the guards was a barbarian wearing a red headband. The announcement certainly surprised him. After a short hesitation, he spoke to a fellow barbarian in a whisper before he raised his head again. He did not utter a single word, and stared at the two normal humans more suspiciously. If anything, it was the humans’ supreme disguise of barbarian garments that piqued him.

After receiving the order, the fellow barbarian immediately scuttled back to the camp. Several minutes passed, and a middle-aged barbarian with eagle-like eyes rode out of the very deep building of the camp. The guards soon made way for him in a great haste. The middle-aged barbarian had three fiery red feathers decorated in his hair.

“My name is Ahguna, the leading general of this camp. I heard from my soldier that you two called yourselves ambassadors from the Union of the Seven Sects. Do you have any proof?” The general said in a cold voice after shooting Shi Mu and the princess a wary look.

“This is my token which proves my identity as the ambassador. The saints of the seven unions have made it themselves. There’s no way to make an imitation. The Great Shaman shall know when he sees it.” Assuming a calm poise, the princess took out a white jade token and claimed. This token resembled a white slip at first glance, but the obscure magic characters imprinted on it proved otherwise; it was definitely no ordinary thing.

“Hehe, young girl, the Great Shaman is not someone anyone can have the honor to meet in person. Too young and too naive! Show me your token, and then I’ll examine it myself. If it’s not a fake, I’ll forward it to the Great Shaman.” Ahguna sneered and answered.

The princess sank into a hesitating silence. She looked at Shi Mu for help. Shi Mu moved his lips gently, saying something in a hushed voice. The princess then gave it some thought and finally threw Ahguna the token.

The barbarian general reached out his hand in a satisfied manner and took the token with a powerful grip. However, without even looking at it, he slipped the token into his coat. Immediately, he changed his countenance and adopted a harsh voice, “Human spies! Come and take them!”

His voice roused more than hundreds of barbarian soldiers that rushed out of the camp uproariously. Among them, there were at least ten totem warriors who instantly besieged Shi Mu and the princess, as if performing an action that they had long rehearsed.

The soldiers by now, had readied themselves for an attack at anytime. Those in the first row had adopted a pose, ready to throw out their spears. The ten-odd

totem warriors had also began stimulating their totem power; their bodies speedily bulking up.

The princess stayed unperturbed before such a scenario. A white light flashed around her waist and in the next moment, a soft and white sword was already in her hand. The sword glowed with a layer of white mist, quite on the alert.

However, Shi Mu did not even change his expression. The black blade was already shining with red magic characters, and the way he looked at Ahguna seemed to suggest the latter's incoming death. Shi Mu's upper lip slightly curved ironically.

"What? You bastards want to fight? Look at your surroundings!" Somehow, the penetrating cold look of Shi Mu had made Ahguna feel disturbed. He shouted with an affected authority.

Just as he was about to make the order, a low and reverberating voice came into his ears.

"At this sacred place, Ahguna, how dare you disturb the Great Shaman's repose? Do you think you are still at your own tribe, the Firing Snake?" A burly barbarian man walked out of the camp in a manner full of genuine authority. He was at least three meters high, wearing a blue cloak, and had a necklace made of blue tusks. In his right hand was a giant blue axe that slung over his shoulder; it looked like it was at least a thousand kilograms in weight.

Hearing his words, Shi Mu's eyes flashed as he searched the part on Ahguna's chest where a tattoo was most likely to be done. His eyes narrowed slightly.

"Master Ulan, these two humans are the spies I've just found out. It's not inappropriate to arrest them, I think." Ahguna's voice staggered, but the right arm he had just raised was not laid down.

"Master Ulan, I am the Fire Dancing Prince of Qi the Heavenly Country, the ambassador sent by the Union of the Seven Sects. I've got urgent issue to report to the Great Shaman. Ahguna has my token. Please, master Ulan." After having a glance at the necklace around Ulan's neck, the princess's eyes lighted up as she hurriedly reasserted her identity.

"Ahguna, show me her token." Ulan titled his head and demanded.

Aghna’s face dropped, and in a sullen mood, he passed Ulan the white jade token.

Ulan took it coldly, and then stuck the token onto his forehead. A moment later, he removed the token with a hearty smile.

“So you are really the human ambassadors! Good! You guys can retire.” Ulan waved the soldiers around Shi Mu and the princess away. The barbarian soldiers obeyed immediately and returned to the camp.

“Ahguna, do you still want to have a look at this token?” Swaying the token in his hand, Ulan eyed Ahguna by his side austerely.

“I’d like to.” Ahguna reached out his hands to take the token, answering with his head bent down. But soon he returned the token, crest-fallen, and stood by Ulan without a word.

“Ahguna, a piece of advice. As the leading general of the Sacred Palace, you’d better pay attention to your responsibilities!” Ulan looked directly into Ahguna’s eyes piercingly, and then simultaneously unleashed the supercilious qi inside his body belonging only to a Xiantian saint.

This display of overpowering Xiantian qi shocked Ahguna into a lurch as he staggered back several steps, shuddering and flushing with shame. Hurriedly, he apologized and retired from the stage like an embarrassingly dismissed clown.

Chapter 151 - The Ambassadors of Sea-dwellers

“Your Highness, the Great Shaman is busily engaged at the moment so I’m afraid you’ll have to wait. I suggest that you rest for a few days before everything is settled. Please follow me to the Palace of Blue Teeth, if you will.” Ulan turned back to face the princess, and then gently made the invitation.

“Thank you, Master Ulan. I’ll do as you said then.” The princess returned a charming smile.

Ulan slipped the white jade token into his sleeve and turned to lead the way, after which Shi Mu and the princess followed closely behind. Soon, their figures melted away into the depth of the camp.

Later, the three came to a wide pathway made purely of white rocks. It was spacious enough for Shi Mu and the princess to ride in a more leisurely mood. Even though she was on a horse, the princess still looked much shorter than Ulan. During the short trip, Shi Mu kept a short distance between himself and the princess, riding on the Four Odds while constantly keeping an eye on the landscape.

“We owe everything to Master Ulan today, or I daren’t think of the consequences.” The princess cupped her hands to express her genuine gratitude to Ulan.

“You’re welcome, your Highness. I just did as ordered.” Ulan waved his hand indifferently.

“Could I ask from whom you received the order?” The princess asked, feigning the same attitude as Ulan.

“Hehe, of course from Master Yanya[A], the shaman of my tribe, Blue Teeth.” Ulan laughed as if tickled by the princess’ innocence. The prince however, did not show a surprised look in response. As known to all, the barbarians differ in their attitudes toward warfare; naturally, the peaceful tribes do not see eye to eye with the military ones. Earlier, when they were besieged by Ahguna’s men, the necklace of blue teeth dangling around Ulan’s neck gave the princess a hint that this man was probably on the peaceful side.

After another twenty minutes or so, the small ambassador group was led to a clearing halfway up the mountain, where a blue palace of medium size was erected. After dismounting their horses, Ulan ushered his guests into the palace, leaving the tired animals to be looked after by servants.

In the great hall of the palace, a gaunt elderly man was sitting solemnly in the main seat in his blue frock. The moment they entered the place, Shi Mu and the princess felt as though they were seized by a strong current rolling to the depth of a deep sea; the inexorable magnetic power came from just the sitting old man. This indescribable power held them in awe and suspense.

“Shaman Yanya, thank you very much for helping us out of the predicament today. I am Huo Wu, the Fire Dancing Princess of Qi the Heavenly Country, at your service.” Once entering the hall, the princess immediately made a step forward to salute the shaman with a hand folded at her bosom. Shi Mu also bowed deep to the shaman after the barbarian fashion. Ulan waited patiently for the two ambassadors to present themselves, and then submitted the princess’s identity token to Yanya the Shaman. This done, Ulan stood reverently behind the elder man.

“Welcome, princess. Please take your seats.” The elder man gestured to the two seats reserved for them. He then went on to dismiss the white jade token in Ulan’s hand, smiling amiably, “I did this because the last thing I want to see, is to let the war nuts - I mean, my aggressive kin - and sea-dwellers have their way.”

“Sea-dwellers?” The princess raised her delicate eyebrows in surprise.

“I presume that news has not reached you yet, princess Huo Wu. Seven days ago, the Saint Girl of the sea-dwellers, Pearl by the name, who has recently risen to fame, led an ambassador group to the White Horse Mountain. She asked my tribe to join them in the war against you humans, in the name of Sea-Dwellers. Therefore, shamans of the eight great barbarian tribes were called together to the sacred mountain a few days ago. That’s why I’m here now.” Shaman Yanya once again shocked the two young ambassadors by breaking the latest news.

The princess’s countenance changed visibly. By any chance the sea dwellers and the barbarians should join forces, the human species’ situation would be greatly jeopardized.

“Master Yanya, considering the relationship between your honored tribe and the sea-dwellers, I guess you’d probably say no to the proposal.” The princess regained her calm quickly, and then asked the elder man with bright eyes blinking.

“Hehe, you surprised me with your broad knowledge, little princess. That’s correct. My tribe, the Blue Teeth, is one of the four big peaceful tribes, and we hold the same attitude as the other three peaceful tribes toward the sea-dwellers. From generation to generation, we live near the East Sea; there are always feuds with the sea guys. To join hands with them is out of the question.” Shaman Yanya shot the princess an admiring look and spilled out his true feelings slowly.

“Could I ask, Master shaman, what is your opinion of the proposal put forth by the sea-dwellers?” After giving the question much thought, the princess ventured to ask.

“The aggressive tribes are quite enthusiastic about the idea, but we four peaceful tribes are against it. As for the Great Shaman, he is still wavering. Hehe, so your appearance was timely.” Yanya laughed heartily.

“Thanks very much for shaman’s instruction. I shall definitely try my best.” Hearing the encouraging words, the princess was extremely delighted as she hurriedly bowed to express her heartfelt thanks.

At this moment, Yanya seemed suddenly to take notice of Shi Mu. A thought dawned on him and he asked in confusion, “Princess, are there only the two of you in this ambassador group?”

“Certainly not. This is a long story. I shall begin with the events after we left the capital of Qi...” In the following hours, the princess told Yanya every detail about the massacre of her fellow companions, holding back no information, especially about the killers that included an Earth Grade saint of the sea species.

The ambassador group’s misfortune sent the shaman into a moody silence. After a long while, he spoke out, “Princess, the Earth Grade saint you told about sounded familiar to me. It reminded me of the No.1 warrior Zakku of the Firing Snake Tribe. That man uses a whip called the Dark Snake Whip, and his fighting image[B] is a green sea serpent.”

Shi Mu and the princess shared a tacit look, both feeling chills down their spines. Recalling the scenario at the entrance of the camp, they shuddered with a panic of fear.

“By the way, I can sense a small dint of the Dark Green real qi[C] left in your body. Though you have suppressed it, it can be a real latent danger over long-term. I’ve got a Yin-Dispelling Pill[D], you can take it to drive away that dangerous qi.” Shaman Yanya took out a wooden case and passed it to the princess.

“Many thanks to Master Shaman!” The princess stood up to take the case in a great excitement. After having a few more words with the shaman, the princess left the hall with Shi Mu. A servant led them to two neighboring stone flats outside the hall as their temporary residence.

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Shi Mu took a stroll in the his abode and found himself in a three-roomed big flat that was exquisitely decorated. This should be the place for VIP guests.

Then someone knocked gently on the door. Shi Mu pulled the door open and saw Huo Wu outside.

“Princess, please come in.” Shi Mu smiled kindly and invited her in.

“How many times have I told you! Just call me Huo Wu, no princess thing, ok?” Huo Wu gave him a reproaching stare and complained.

Shi Mu closed the door with a dry smile, but did not answer.

The two sat in the drawing room in a sour mood. For a time, no one broke the silence.

Eventually, the princess let out a weary sigh with downcast eyelashes that clouded her bright eyes. “I’d never thought that the sea dwellers would have forestalled us! Seems the conference won’t be as easy as we thought.”

The sea dwellers had entered this deep into the barbarian wasteland seven days earlier than herself, proving a heavy blow to the princess. The vision of a large group of fierce-looking enemies led by the Saint Girl Pearl also vitiated her self-confidence. Who does she have to turn to? Only one poor warrior, Shi Mu.

What team should be smaller and more pathetic than theirs? No matter what the Great Shaman should decide, the enemy has gained a numerical advantage before the actual war begins.

“From what shaman Yanya said, the barbarians have not reached a conclusion yet. That means we still have a chance.” Shi Mu look at her comfortingly and said.

“Hope so.” Huo Wu nodded as her face slightly brightened. Then, suddenly thinking of something, the princess’s beautiful eyes became eclipsed with a cloud of regret, “Brother Shi, now that the situation has gone intricate, I’m afraid we’ll have to defer asking the Great Shaman about the totem art of the Firing Snake Tribe.” After an embarrassing pause, she added affirmatively, “But I shall definitely bring this matter up at the right moment. Please don’t worry.”

“I’m already grateful that princess has kept this in mind. I can wait until we have a good result in the conference.” Shi Mu smiled, trying to take the burden off the princess’s mind.

“Please rest assured, brother Shi. I have made promises that I can’t keep.” The princess heaved a sigh of relief.

“Then I’ll thank the princess in advance.” Shi Mu nodded.

Huo Wu did not linger in Shi Mu’s place after the conversation. She bid goodbye and left in a nervous spirit.

After seeing Huo Wu off, Shi Mu returned to his bedroom and sat by the desk. Temporarily, he is known as Huo Wu’s personal guard, and has no say in the conference. Plus, the Firing Snake Tribe has its men up there in the sacred mountain, so he did not dare to walk around freely.

Shi Mu took off his shirt, revealing the tattoo of that big viper that was now veiled by a pale blue ring. The tattoo itself seemed as normal as before.

Seeing this, he was much assured. Judging from the previous happenings, the men from the Firing Snake Tribe had not sensed this curse on him yet. Seems that the unicorn viper’s blood is working quite efficiently.

Shi Mu put on his shirt again with a solemn look that was not relieved in the slightest.

During the following days, Huo Wu acted in a rather mystical way, being out of her abode most of the days. She met with important people of the peaceful tribes frequently, and rarely visited Shi Mu. The latter however, hardly ever ventured out. Apart from a few servants who attended to him, Shi Mu barely saw anyone else. For three days, the sacred mountain was serene and eventless, causing Shi Mu's guard to drop down.

One day, he walked out of his flat and ambled in the mountain. Neither the great hall or Huo Wu's flat was guarded. Everywhere seemed empty and deserted.

Soon Shi Mu came to the entrance to the hall and was about to take a look inside.

"Are you Warrior Mu of the human ambassador group?" A young voice resounded from his left shoulder.

Shi Mu tilted his head and looked for the source of the voice. A barbarian youth in a green shaman frock was coming to the hall, making a rustling sound. He was beaming all the way to Shi Mu.

"Yes, this is Shi Mu. Could I ask who is your highness?" Shi Mu asked with raised brows.

"Hehe, my name is Minh Tu. I am a primary shaman of the Blue Teeth Tribe. Master Yanya is informed that warrior Mu is walking around in the sacred area, so he sent me to be your guide. Many places in the sacred mountain is forbidden from extraneous visitors, and some places are even sealed by black magic. It would be dangerous to enter those places by force." Minh Tu admonished in a serious tone.

Shi Mu was mildly shocked to know that his whereabouts were being monitored constantly, and was more shocked by his own ignorance of it.

"I see. It will be so kind of you as to show me around. I've long heard of the beautiful scenery of the sacred mount, and have been tempted to see it with my own eyes." Shi Mu managed to keep a cool expression, smiling lightly. Meanwhile, his eyes glittered, and a hint of golden glimmer flashed. He looked around with a jerk, then had a quick glimpse into one corner of the palace's roof above his head. There was a black crystal stone inlaid in the wall exuding a pale

light whence he could sense a hint of magic power with his superhuman eyesight.

“So this should be the monitor...” Ironically Shi Mu felt rather relieved seeing the stone.

“It’s my honor.” Minh Tu’s eyes slightly shined as he heard Shi Mu’s reply. Then he immediately started leading the way. It seemed that he had grown an interest in Shi Mu; he was rather friendly when showing him around, and his attitude could be even said enthusiastic.

The sacred Mount abounded in religious building, temples, palaces that featured the barbarian’s bold and unconstrained character. Though poles apart in their aesthetic preference, the barbarian buildings, when compared with human counterparts, have their own flavor not short of artistic value.

While leading Shi Mu the way to various scenic spots, Minh Tu kept pouring out the anecdotes and historical events of the buildings, even taking the time to mention details about each wall painting. He was equally curious of human’s history, conventions, etc., asking Shi Mu information now and then. Shi Mu returned the same hospitality and answered each question with earnest readiness, increasing the warm feelings Minh Tu had in his heart towards Shi Mu.

Notes:

[A] Yanya: In Chinese “Yan Ya” means fiery teeth.

[B] Fighting Image: Fighting image is usually an animal that created by the inner power of a warrior during a battle, so that the warrior can manipulate the animal to fight for him/her.

[C] Dark Green real qi: The real qi of the warrior Zakku.

[D] Yin-Dispelling Pill: This is a kind of medicine pill that can drive away the yin qi in one’s body. Yin stands opposed to yang in Chinese culture, meaning darkness, coldness, *etc.* Yin qi can be harnessed to strengthen a warrior’s body, to attack an enemy, and can cause harm to the enemy’s body (in this case Huo Wu is injured by the yin qi left by Zakku in her body). Therefore, sometimes readers may come across a warrior absorbing yin qi, like Shi Mu, to strengthen

his body, while in other cases Yin-Dispelling pill is needed to drive away the yin qi left by an enemy.

Chapter 152 - The Multiple-headed Viper

“Brother Minh has an expansive knowledge of human culture. How erudite you are! “ Shi Mu exclaimed with genuine admiration.

“You flattered me, brother Shi. I am just a humble shaman that stays all year round in the Sacred Snow Palace. I have never really been in the outside world; all I have is large amounts of time that is used to read ancient books.” Minh Tu smiled shyly.

“Oh, do you mean there is sort of a library in the Sacred Snow Palace? Can I go there?” Shi Mu’s eyes lighted up at the mention of books.

This request embarrassed Minh Tu as his smile froze apologetically, “I’m afraid not. The library is not allowed for even the kinsmen of the eight big tribes to enter without permission. This rule is set by the first Great Shaman and is followed strictly thereafter. Though warrior Mu is an important guest to the sacred mountain, this rule cannot be broken.”

Shi Mu was rather disappointed hearing the words, but he could only nod his head.

“But...warrior Mu can ask me whatever question you want to know about. Basically, I have leafed through all the books in the library.” Seeing that Shi Mu accepted his explanation resignedly, Minh Tu relaxed; consequently, he could not help but feel sorry for Shi Mu, so he hurriedly proposed to help him through his good memory.

“Well...not that I have any questions in mind...It’s only that ever since I came to the wasteland the curiosity for your barbarian culture has been growing in my heart...” Shi Mu stuttered, as if embarrassed by Minh Tu’s kind offer. He kept walking with Minh Tu while casually mentioning various conventions he had seen in the barbarian tribes en route.

The topics Shi Mu brought up were all but innocuous common customs, which made Minh Tu relax his vigilance. He soon adopted a sprightly manner to give explanation to Shi Mu’s doubts. The two were actively engaged in this conversation about barbarian conventions when Shi Mu led the topic bit by bit to totem arts in a roundabout way. Totem arts was a confidential matter so

Minh Tu immediately became guarded in his speech. To figure out Shi Mu's intention, he also began asking about human martial arts. But to his surprise, Shi Mu seemed completely unguarded, answering every question frankly in a way that baffled Minh Tu, and compelled him to answer Shi Mu's questions out of reciprocal respect.

Once his vigilant tongue was unsealed, Minh Tu forgot the scruples that had prevented him from talking freely. The two walked even slower, lost in conversation. Eventually, they simply stopped by a concealed place and concentrated in discussing about the barbarian totem magic and human martial arts.

The ensuing cultural interflow between the two youths proved extremely beneficial to both parties. Especially for Minh Tu, who had always harbored a great interest in human charm magic. He seized this hard-won opportunity to delve into the subject, asking Shi Mu numerous questions about charms.

Shi Mu behaved rather generously by not only displaying a few low-level magical arts, but also gave two low-level charms to Minh Tu for his further study. Actually, as a primary shaman, Minh Tu ranked roughly as a human Adept scholar, so the questions he asked were all but elementary. No secrets at all.

"Since brother Mu is so generous, even telling me about the secrets of charm magic, I'll tell everything I know to you. Please ask whatever concerns you." Retreating his rapt eyes from the charms in his hands, Minh Tu suddenly fell silent for a moment. Then he returned the charms to Shi Mu and said straight-forwardly, as if he had just made a resolve.

Shi Mu smiled faintly, taking the charms. After a brief silent, he answered, "I do have something to ask you, brother Minh."

"Just speak out what is in your mind. I won't conceal anything I known." Minh Tu answered with a serious face.

"Have you heard about the Eternal Doom Curse, brother Minh?" Shi Mu did not beat about the bush this time, but asked frankly.

Minh Tu raised his eyebrows, rather astonished at the mention of the curse.

"Seeing brother Minh's expression, probably you know about it." Shi Mu's

heart leaped up excitedly, but his face was the usual coolness.

“As far as I know, this curse belongs to one of the eight tribes, the Fiery Snake Tribe. Technically it’s not a secret at all. The eight tribes all have some similar curses, but in my tribe, the Blue Teeth, this sort of black magic is strictly forbidden. I only read some in the library. What does brother Shi want to know about this curse?” Minh Tu nodded after a thoughtful moment.

“I’d like to know the cure to this curse. Please enlighten me, brother Minh.” Shi Mu stated solemnly.

“Is there any chance that...brother Shi somehow is suffering from the curse?” Minh Tu was really astonished this time by Shi Mu’s serious attitude.

Shi Mu gave a bitter smile, and then out poured his story unequivocally. He related the whole process in which he got the curse with only a few embellishments to avoid embarrassment, because after all, Minh Tu belonged to the barbarian tribes. From their earlier conversation, he had figured out Minh Tu’s life story through ways of devious questioning, knowing that the youth had always stayed in the Sacred Snow Palace ever since childhood, causing him to have a candid and pure personality. Otherwise, it would be unsafe to tell him about this experience.

After hearing Shi Mu’s relation, Minh Tu thought for a while with a grave face, and then spoke up slowly, “As far as I know, to break this curse one has only two ways. One is to have an Earth Grade saint impose an even higher seal on the curse...”

“I’ve known about the two approaches. As for the first one, I know it’s impossible for me. That’s why I escorted the princess to the sacred mountain - to seek the second method.” Shi Mu sighed softly and said.

Minh Tu did not answer immediately. It was only after a while that he resumed, “Apart from the secret totem art of the Fiery Snake Tribe, you’ve got to hunt a strong snake beast to get its spirit.”

“I know. This is risky, but my life is also all I have to risk for.” Shi Mu sighed again.

“I’m sorry I can’t help you more. But shall I first have a look at the tattoo on

your body so that I can see what kind of beast is sealed inside you?" Minh Tu nodded, stood up and asked with an echoing sigh.

This was all Shi Mu had been secretly asking for.

The two went back to Shi Mu's flat by the way they had come. There Shi Mu took off his clothes and revealed the horrible tattoo on his chest. The pattern certainly shocked Minh Tu, with its vibrant red color and the life-like fierceness of the snake. After a close look at the tattoo, Minh Tu's face only grew more clouded, and the way he looked at Shi Mu took on a note of unaffected sympathy.

Shi Mu caught all these minute details through his eyes, and his heart sank hopelessly. After some time he said, "Please just speak the truth, brother Minh. No need to worry."

"To be frank, the tattoo on your chest is the infamous fierce beast of our wasteland: the multiple-headed viper. Though this one is only a low-level viper with one head, its strength at least ranks among the late stage of Houtian level. To suppress the curse, you must hunt an even stronger multiple-headed viper. But even a two-headed one is stronger than a Xiantian saint of primary stage. So..." Minh Tu shook his head, sighing.

"Even so, I still have to risk it. May I ask where can I find a multiple-headed viper in the wasteland?" To Minh Tu's surprise, Shi Mu was not the least frightened as he asked in an unhurried voice.

"The multiple-headed viper was extinct several hundred years ago in the wasteland. Even if brother Shi has Xiantian saints to help you, I'm afraid there's no such viper for you to hunt." Minh Tu spoke up only after a long while, as if did not have the heart to break this sad news.

Shi Mu was finally showed traces of panic.

"Actually, there's only one place where this beast might still exist. Inside the portal of the brave warriors. The Fiery Snake tribesman who brother Shi killed may have got this beast's spirit there. But the portal is a forbidden place in our tribe. Even when it is officially opened, a non-barbarian warrior is not allowed to enter, let alone when it is closed." Minh Tu let Shi Mu into the secret after a long time of hesitation.

This added the last touch to Shi Mu's desperation. For a moment his eyes were mournful, and the usually persevering young man finally was defeated by the harsh reality. Minh Tu did not bear to look at such a woeful countenance, so he excused himself after a few more words.

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The dark clouds swirled like a tempest in the sky; the stiff wind howled more and more loudly. The earth and heaven was a uniform depressing darkness.

Under the gloomy sky, there was a small basin surrounded by several grey hills where dust was blown by the wind into midair. From the heavy smoke dust came grating noises of weapons striking.

In the basin, fragmented bones and skeletons were scattered all over the ground. Meanwhile, some ten skeletons were still engaged in confused fighting.

Among the skeletons, some were wielding bone knives and axes while others used bone spears and hammers. The rest were fighting empty-handed. However, all of them had green spirit fires gleaming in their eye sockets. Every one of them seemed to have sunk into a frenzied condition, totally blind to their ramshackle bodies. As long as they could still move, they would keep attacking each other.

A broad-shouldered skeleton had just successfully ducked an incoming bone spear shot by the skeleton opposite it. Immediately it stepped forward, waved its bone knife, and cut its enemy into halves from the waist.

However, by the next breath, its left hand had already been fiercely hit by a weapon made from some animal's leg bone. With a clear snap, the broad-shouldered skeleton lost its left arm. Without delay, it turned about, and chopped the attacker's hand off. The attacker would not show weakness easily; surprisingly, it took off one of its ribs without hesitation, and then once again plunged into the fight with the broad-shouldered skeleton.

Such insane and monotonous battle was enacted time and time again among the ten-odd skeletons. Soon, five or six of them soon became fragmented.

Not far from the center of this battlefield, a skeleton with a bone blade was fighting fiercely with a giant skeleton using a spear. The blade skeleton warrior was none other than Silk. The one who gained the upper hand was the giant

skeleton.

Pu!!! Something pierced the air. The bone spear was thrust forward by the giant skeleton to Silk, aiming at its throat. The spear flew at lightning speed, far surpassing any normal skeleton's ability to take reaction. Along with the weird attacking angle, there was little possibility Silk could dodge it.

However, Silk twisted its body even more quickly, leaving a series of afterimages behind. Narrowly it escaped.

The next moment, one of the afterimages stopped by the giant skeleton as Silk emerged from the vague images. Its blade was already hacking at the giant skeleton.

However, the enemy reacted almost simultaneously, and with a flick of its arm, the spear collided with Silk's blade. Instantly, an irresistible force rushed to Silk, pushing it back several steps.

Before Silk could regain its balance, the green fires in the giant skeleton's eyes flashed, and the spear once again was shot into the air coming Silk's way, dancing like a white ghost.

Chapter 153 - The Great Shaman

The pale spirit fires wavered in Silk's eyes. Once again, it ducked the white spear at an even higher speed. Such a scene repeated several times; each time, Silk was able to raise its speed to a higher level even though there was always a short duration between each attack. Finally, the giant skeleton lost its patience, and then switched its weapon from the spear to a whip which appeared to be some animal's tail. With a crack of the whip, several white shadows rolled howling to Silk.

Silk adopted the same technique to dodge the incoming whip, leaving many afterimages in its flash movement. However, this time the bone whip turned around halfway abruptly, chasing after Silk's afterimages like a dragon stalking its prey.

Silk had just steadied itself and was hardly able to make the next move when the whip, in its hot pursuit, had approached. Like a flower flashing into blossom, the whip snapped. In a second, it had entwined itself around Silk's limbs, tieing it up solidly on the spot.

Silk struggle desperately, but only in vain. Its spirit flames flickered nervously in panic. The giant skeleton opened its big mouth, though with no sound; it seemed to be laughing triumphantly. Then with a stretch of its right hand, the giant skeleton snatched Silk up and simultaneously flung its spear towards Silk's head.

Right at this moment, Silk stop struggling, and then made an appalling action! Swiftly, its head tilted to the side, and then voluntarily poked out to meet the spear!

Peng! With a loud crack the bone spear broke into pieces, whereas Silk's head remained intact! The giant skeleton halted in surprise, giving Silk a chance to retaliate. Pulling hard on the whip, Silk thrusted towards the giant skeleton, knocking its head against its opponent's with a burst of speed.

Crack! The giant skeleton's skull was instantly crushed; the crumbs drifting profusely and disorderly into the air. Amid the dust and smoke, a ball of green light flew out. Silk leaped up and breathed the light in. Immediately the pale green light of its eyes grew vaguely stronger.

Silk made a tumble in the air and landed on the ground dexterously. Its mouth opened and closed several times, then with an exertion it shook off the bone whip without much difficulty. In the howling wind, Silk turned back to the basin where the confused fighting was still going on.

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In the stone flat near the Palace of Blue Teeth.

Shi Mu was sitting cross-legged on the bed, his eyes somewhat drooping. After a long time, a light returned to his eyes as he recovered from the moody trance, sighing.

It had never occurred to him that it was this difficult to lift the curse. So it turned out that he had always downplayed the curse, which now appeared almost impossible to conquer. Then why did he come all the way here, to the sacred mountain, through all kinds of hardships! What for, if all the endeavors came to nothing!

However, he was not good at admitting defeat; he must see it through to the end.

Shi Mu shook his head in an attempt to shake off all the anxieties that had been gnawing at him. He took a moment to regain his peace of mind, then swallowed a Bone-Breaking Pill to work the Art of Heavenly Elephant. Eyes closed, he forgot himself in self-discipline.

After a long time, Shi Mu collapsed with a bitter cry. From the innermost of his spirit came fits of sharp pains that almost ripped his heart open. He sank into convulsions, and his face went deathly pale.

Gradually, he suppressed the pain, and then struggled to his feet with gritted teeth. Right now, he had been drenched in icy perspiration. He tore his clothes open, took them off, and then quickly reached for the blue jade calabash at his bed from which he poured some of the blue liquid into his hand and then applied it to his skin. Immediately, a coolness spread all over his body, comforting his bones.

After about fifteen minutes, the red light around his chest died away eventually, leaving a vague ring hovering above the tattoo of the viper. The beast

seemed to have come back to life, wriggling slowly.

Shi Mu's face was pallid and grave. Up till now, the power of the unicorn viper's blood had been dwindling, and at this moment, was almost used up. Every few days the curse would break out, and dreadfully, also with increasingly smaller intervals.

However, the key issue at the moment was that the unicorn viper's blood was running out. At the thought, Shi Mu's brow clouded with worry.

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At the same time, in the Sacred Snow Palace.

The conference hall made entirely of white rocks was extremely spacious and the walls had all kinds of animal's skulls hanging on them, adding a crudeness to the atmosphere inside.

In the depth of the hall, a black stone desk of extraordinary length stood exceedingly eye-catching. Behind the long desk, a barbarian saint was sitting cross-legged.

In every way he looked rather in his dotage. The old man's shriveled skin was criss-crossed with deep wrinkles, looking like a landscape filled with ravines and gullies. The pair of eyes were turbid and lifeless, as if he was lost in an eternal slumber. His right hand was holding a crutch that looked almost his age, like a wizened branch.

Before the black desk, eight barbarians in various styles of clothes were standing in two groups, engaged in a heated argument that might escalate into war at any time.

On the left side, a middle-aged barbarian with eyes shining like bells stepped forward, bent his head to the old man behind the desk, and then burst out shouting with foam at the mouth, "This is a heaven-sent opportunity not occurred in a hundred years! What are you guys waiting for! Now the heaven is on our side! Once we join forces with the sea guys, those human pigs can no longer stop our Holy War! By then, we will ride on the fecund lands we have always been dreaming of! Great Shaman, please warrant this alliance!"

"Humph! You Brutal Bulls are born merciless killers! Near sighted animals! Who

do you think the sea-dwellers are? They are much stronger than us and the humans! If we make an alliance with the sea-dwellers, once they beat the humans, we will be their next target! We Golden Feathers strongly oppose to this mad proposal!" Before the great shaman behind the desk could speak, a barbarian elder on the right side immediately protested. The three golden feathers on his hair vibrated excitedly.

"Hehe, stop barking at the moon, shaman Jin. Where do we live? The great wasteland! I don't think the sea guys would like such a place." Just as the gold-feathered elder's voice fell, another old barbarian at his opposite retorted. His eyes narrowed like a fine snake, and in his hand was a magical crutch made of red bones.

"How do you Fiery Snakes know the sea-dwellers' intention?" Shaman Jin threw the old man a hard stare.

"Well, anyway, our tribe helped get the three fortress provinces of Qi in this holy war! And the most barren provinces, by losing hundreds of our brave warriors! What do you say to that? Now we are presented the best opportunity to get countless fecund lands, and what do you guys say to that? If we let go of this chance, what do you say to the brave souls who have sacrificed their lives for us!" A middle-aged barbarian scolded Shaman Jin furiously.

On the opposite side, an old shaman in a green frock was ignited by this refutation, but before he opened his mouth, the old barbarian of the Fiery Snake tribe spoke up, "Everyone, please hear my advice. Let's ally ourselves with the sea guys, and - quiet - when we set up treaty of alliance, we can add an appendix that each party takes its own occupied areas. This stipulated, the sea guys will definitely mount a large-scale offensive against humans. By then we can mass troops along the frontline, but not get a move on. Because we shall send messengers to talk with the humans. We offer truce, and they must submit large amounts of provisions. If the humans can see reason, we shall halt the troops and bide our time."

This said, the narrow-eyed old man gave a purposeful pause before he went on with a sneer, "Then, when the stupid humans shift their main force to concentrate on the battle with sea guys, we shall avail ourselves of this opportunity to get in, taking lots of lands as our own. By that time, with the

appendix, the sea guys can only keep their grievances to themselves."

Such an intelligent idea won unceasing applause from the other three shamans from the aggressive tribes, their faces glowing with the vision of their incoming triumph. Amid the ear-deafening clap, the dim-sighted great shaman narrowed his eyes lethargically and yawned with a face not interested at all.

"Want to play fire, huh? You brainless war nuts! Why do you think the seven sects of the humans can survive hundreds of years? They have their solid foundation! Even if the humans are to lose lots of lands, the seven sects will still have their place! However, if we not only offend the sea-dwellers some day, but also have the humans as our sworn enemy, what should we do then? Sandwiched between two races that hate us to the core! Do you have the confidence to extract ourselves from the pincer attack?" Shaman Yanya snorted contemptuously.

Then beside shaman Yanya, another shaman in a green frock spoke unhurriedly, "You aggressive tribes are far from the sea, so you've never tasted the power of the sea-dwellers. We peaceful tribes have lived by the sea for generations, and thus know their strength. They vex us deeply! At any rate, we Naro tribe will never join the alliance with sea-dwellers."

"That's right! Years ago, the sea dwellers declared truce with humans, but what happened then? They ignored the agreement, and launched war arbitrarily. Such a race should never be trusted!" A black-frocked shaman at the farthest of the right side echoed. Around his neck was a necklace of skulls.

"The sea guys are not to blame! It's humans that played the dirty trick! They went fishing on the sea!" The shaman of the Brutal Bull tribe made a confutation immediately, glaring angrily. This set the simmering anger of both parties eventually exploding; at the time shamans of the eight tribes became entangled in endless quarrels.

After some time, shaman Yanya frowned disapprovingly, waved gently to his three companions. Soon shamans of the peaceful side stopped arguing.

Shaman Yanya stepped forward, saluted the great shaman behind the desk and said solemnly, "Please give us the final ruling, Great Shaman, that should we have a peace talk with humans!"

“Please give us the final ruling, Great Shaman, that should we make alliance with sea-dwellers!” The bell-eyed shaman of Brutal Bull tribe followed the fashion immediately.

All the others also sank into a tacit silence, all turning their expectant eyes to the great shaman. However, to their surprise, the great shaman closed his eyes like a bothered father averting the childish look of his son who nagged him for a toy gun.

The shamans looked at each other in astonishment, but remained patiently silent in tacit agreement. Shaman Yanya and his competitor also kept their bowing posture, their faces free of any sign of impatience.

Then after a full fifteen minutes, the great man’s shrivelled hand moved, almost imperceptibly. The old, glazed eyes opened a slit after some struggle. Seeing this, shaman Yanya and shaman Mo vied to plead again.

“All right, do not argue, all of you. Now I have made the decision. Both sides are to each select fifty totem warriors below Xiantian level to enter the Portal of Brave Warriors to hunt for beasts. Then, based upon the level and number of beasts hunted, I shall decide the winner. The time limit is ten days.” At length, the great shaman Billigerd announced his resolve fairly slowly.

This sent the eight shamans into a heated discussion which centered around the doubt why the great shaman wanted to open the portal ahead of the conventional time.

The Portal of Brave Warriors leads to a vast sealed space: a reserve for the ancient life. Therefore, it overflows with heavenly energy and being abundant in numerous fierce beasts that have already been extinct in the outside world. For barbarians living in the barren wasteland, this space is virtually a gigantic storehouse of myriad treasures. Notwithstanding, opening the gate ahead of appointed time will be detrimental to every tribe’s interest - no wonder all the shamans despite their side feels uncomfortable towards this ruling.

But the expressionless face of the great shaman spoke for the ultimate situation. Therefore, they spoke no more, but instead, began calculating the odds of their success.

Soon, shamans of the aggressive side glowed with pride, while the peaceful

ones looked rather frustrated.

Naturally, the peaceful tribes inherited less blood from the ancient giant barbarians, so they fall behind their aggressive kinsmen in their fighting strength. It appears obviously that odds are against them.

“Sea-dwellers and humans can each send two warriors into the gate to assist their respective side.” Seeing that the crowd had calmed down, the great shaman added slowly.

Chapter 154 - The Holy Girl

Billigerd's words started a commotion in the hall immediately.

"The Great Shaman, this is out of the question! Please reconsider it!"

"The portal is not only our race's forbidden place, but also the resting place for our ancestors. By no means should humans and sea-dwellers be let into the gate! What a disgrace to our deceased heroes and forefathers that would be!"

For several moments, both parties were quite agitated, and at this time they had the identical idea in their minds.

"Hehe, I won't let them in for free. For each quota of participants they should hand in a large sum of refined iron or provisions, and each can have at most two participants." The great shaman pursed his dry lips and stated calmly. Though not loud, his voice was filled with authority that tamed the eight shamans immediately, who all stood mute and awe-stricken with stern faces.

For humans and sea-dwellers, however, once this resolve should be officially announced, basically they would have no choice but to participate. After all, they had come for the same purpose of making alliance with the barbarians, which means that the barbarians had the final say. On the other hand, for the barbarian tribes, refined iron and food had always been in shortage in the wasteland. Therefore, whatever scruples the shamans were holding at the moment, they would sooner or later be dispelled for the sake of the rare resources. To say the least, four participants from extraneous tribes would not make much as compared with one hundred barbarian warriors.

Suddenly, the narrow-eyed shaman of the Fiery Snake tribe thought of something and asked directly, "Great Shaman, we still have a problem here. The quality of the beasts' spirits differ tremendously from each other, so how should we calculate the scores each party gets in the competition?"

"That's easy. Let's make it now: Scoring begins with beasts at the primary stage of Houtian level. That's one point. Then comes Houtian beasts of middle stage, which scores a hundred points. A consummate Houtian beast makes a thousand points, whereas a primary Xiantian beast should be ten thousand points." The Great Shaman expounded slowly.

This said, he threw a casual look to shaman Yan who was apparently in low spirits, then closed his weary eyes, ready to fall asleep at any minute. After the eight shamans got this mute dismissal, they left the hall one after another, leaving the great shaman in his solitary doze.

After a short while, the three shamans from the peaceful tribes convened in the Blue Teeth Palace halfway up the sacred mountain. There, they plunged into an urgent discussion.

Basically, the peaceful tribes are no match for their belligerent kinsmen in military force, laying bare the unjustness of the competition. As for the Fire Dancing Princess and Shi Mu, they were not considered as capable participants at all.

Four hours passed, the conference ended without a satisfactory outcome. The shamans left with anxiety more or less on their faces.

Later on, a servant left the hall in the direction of the princess' abode.

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"So, the great shaman said that we should offer provisions or refined iron in exchange of the right to enter the Portal of Brave Warriors?" The Fire Dancing Princess asked shaman Yanya sitting in the hall. The news certainly had provoked her.

"That's right. The great shaman's words are ultimate. Nobody is to challenge the decision. But whatever you get in the secret space inside the gate shall belong to you only." Shaman Yanya nodded his head sympathetically.

The princess knitted her eyebrows, sinking into the chair with a sour face. For a moment she remained sullenly silent. However, though Shi Mu standing beside her did not change his countenance, he was extremely thrilled to learn of the news at heart. What an unexpected chance! After all the vicissitudes he had been through on his way to break the curse, he now had an opportunity! Yesterday, he was still wallowing in melancholy. But today, a life-changing opportunity came of itself!

After a few moments, the princess raised her head and said resolutely, "Good, then. We humans shall offer fifty thousand kilograms of refined iron and a

hundred thousand kilograms of rice. We'll have the quota of two participants."

Though the princess knew exactly that this exchange was a blatant extortion, but what else could they choose in this situation?

"Good. Now the tribes are in busy preparation for the competition. I'll keep you informed." Shaman Yanya nodded approvingly, not a bit surprised at the quick decision.

Subsequently, the princess asked about the basic information on the Portal of Brave Warriors, which shaman Yanya had no intention to conceal. He began talking tirelessly about the gate and the secret space.

According to Yanya, the Portal of Brave Warriors was created by several shamans jointly back in ancient times, and inside it was sealed an independent space that was enormously huge. As a result, many fierce beasts that had already died out in the outside world still inhabited the place, including some of the earliest creatures. Every ten years on the big ceremony held in the sacred mountain, the great shaman would open the gate after prayers. Then each tribe shall sent a group of warriors into the gate to hunt animals and obtain their spirits. For generations, this ceremony had been the most solemn one, anticipated ardently by all the tribes; the beast spirits obtained in the secret space were far better that that in the outside world.

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In the interval, Shi Mu stayed most of the time in his flat practicing martial arts, except for a brief visit to the market near the sacred mountain. In the market, he bought materials for an ancient prescription he got from Minh Tu that was said to be able to suppress the multiple-headed viper. Besides that, he also bought a batch of hides to make low-level magical charms. According to his experiments, Body-Lifting Charms drawn on such hides could raise one's speed one third higher than normal magical paper. Apart from these, the princess also gave him three middle-level charms called the Cold Dungeon Charm for emergency needs. Though the Cold Dungeon Charm was only an ordinary charm of middle level, belonging to the element of water, it was still beyond Shi Mu's current power to draw it. All these preparations gave him more assurance in the pending competition.

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Several days later, in the valley behind the sacred mountain.

This is a rather broad valley that covers at least seven hectares. White rocks are erected in a certain place of the valley, each carved squarely and is about three meters in height. On their surfaces are drawn blood-red dark magical characters. Seen from above, these huge rocks constitute an enormous ring about three hundred meters in diameter like an imposing Stonehenge.

Peculiarly, on some of the huge rocks are overlaid one or several rocks of the same make either uprightly or horizontally, creating a pattern that appear both erratic and meaningful.

Not far from the stone formula, a black altar that was several meters in width is built. In front of the altar, all the eight shamans were standing with serious faces silently, as if in anticipation of something. The heavy air among them spoke much for the dignity of the occasion.

On the square before the altar, a hundred or so barbarians in various styles of clothes were standing in two groups opposite each other. One of the two groups was obviously stronger in both build and morale. Undoubtedly, it was the group of Houtian totem warriors from the four aggressive tribes, whereas the weaker group consisted of warriors from the four peaceful tribes.

Shi Mu was now standing side by side with the Fire Dancing Princess in the group of the peaceful tribes. On their opposite, seven or eight odd-looking men were clustered around a girl; she was wearing a blue dress who appeared to be their leader.

The girl looked roughly the age of thirteen or fourteen, her skin snow white, and her features strikingly beautiful. The shiny black eyes of hers were looking in the direction of the stone formula curiously.

The odd-looking creatures around the girl would look much the same as humans save for the scales all over their bodies. Some also had ears like fins, and some even had a fishtail. They were heavily-built guys with protruding muscles, using giant trident as their weapon. Some of them were casting coldly provocative looks to the Fire Dancing Princess but the princess did not care in the least about it, returning those insulting looks with radiant smiles. Shi Mu also

looked at them overtly, sizing them up and down.

So these queer guys should be the sea-dwellers, and the girl in blue their Holy Girl. A day before the ceremony, he learned from Minh Tu that the holy girl was one of the two participants of the sea-dwellers in this competition; he could not help but seize the chance to study her closely. However, the result was most baffling; somehow, Shi Mu had a vague feeling in his heart that he had met the girl before, but he could not remember for the life of him when or where.

Just as he was lost in thought, Shi Mu sensed a hostile look shot towards him. Immediately, he raised guard and tilted his head slightly to search the look. It turned out that an old shaman with a red crutch and a pair of serpent eyes was looking daggers at him. The wrinkled skin of the old barbarian had a glow of faint green. Seeing that Shi Mu had taken notice of him, the old shaman quickly averted his venom eyes in a casual manner.

The Fiery Snake Tribe! The name immediately flitted across his mind, but Shi Mu dared not make any obvious moves.

Just then, the crowd stirred slightly, and then everyone's eyes turned to the opening of the valley. Shi Mu also followed their direction, and saw an old, gaunt barbarian ambling into the valley like a withered leaf blown staggeringly into the air. He was walking with a branch-like crutch, old and clumsy, with unsteady steps.

However, at the sight of this frail old man, all the eight shamans and the hundred barbarian warriors tensed up, and the earlier provocative atmosphere vanished without trace.

Shi Mu was most astounded at the scene. He could never have imagined that the most reverent person of all the barbarians should be this old feeble man! Moreover, he could not sense the any miniscule amount of qi from him. The great shaman looked just like any old barbarian; one would never associate him with the ruling emperor of the barbarians.

Billigerd walked at an extremely slow pace, as if each step would cost all his strength, if he still had any. However, the barbarian warriors and shamans waited patiently; their eyes were fixed intently on the old man who was making his way strenuously to the black altar.

The valley was absolutely quiet.

It took the great shaman fifteen minutes to reach his destination. Once he ascended to the platform, the eight shamans scattered around the altar to form a circle.

“The brave warriors of our sacred God, the Portal is to be opened. Are you ready?” Standing on the altar, Billigerd swept the whole audience with his turbid eyes, and then asked slowly.

“Yes!” The thunderous answer shook the earth, the brave word reverberated through the valley. Then all of the warriors burst out shouting, rushing towards the stone formula.

Shi Mu and Huo Wu exchanged a look and then also followed the warriors of peaceful tribes. The girl in blue whispered something to her fellow companions and then walked to the stone formula with the fishtail guy.

The enormous stone formula stood there waiting for its visitors quietly.

Chapter 155 - The Green Demon Wolf

In a flash, both parties of the barbarians had gathered in the square surrounded by the rocks; the two contrasting groups glared at each other provocatively. There was a strong sense of opposition in the air.

After everyone had entered the stone formula, a chant sung in obscure language was heard from the altar. Shi Mu and the princess found themselves standing in the peaceful barbarians' side; their eyes looking in the direction where the song was coming.

On the black altar, the great shaman Billigerd was in a hypnotized state while dancing in a bizarre manner with a withered branch in hand. At this moment, though those turbid eyes of his did not brighten the least, the limbs seemed to have shaken off their stiffness, moving agilely that made a striking contrast with his earlier tottering steps. The eight shamans knelt down around the altar with intense faces, their arms lifted while their mouths muttered some prayers.

Then in the next moment, the heaven energies around the altar became rather agitated. With the altar as the center, neighboring areas within a radius of about three hundred meters were affected by this outburst of energy. Light dots appeared indistinctly and thickly in the air, and then as if at an agreed moment, all of them rushed to the great shaman from every direction like big waves. Upon their arrival, the mighty currents of the light dots centering around the great shaman began to swirl above his head, forming a visible vortex that sent powerful energies into all directions like torrential waves.

High above in the air, clouds gathered, driven by the wind, and raged like a storm. The sun was eclipsed by the dense clouds until its original scathing brilliance was completely obliterated.

Just as the whole valley became murky and gloomy, the great shaman stopped his dance abruptly; his limps frozen in a most strange posture. The chanting of the eight shamans also snapped to a stop suddenly. However, in the stone formula, all the barbarians were under great excitement; their eyes blazed eagerly.

In the next moment, the wizened branch in Billigerd¨s hand glared with red

lights, and then released an overpowering energy that threatened to devour the heaven and the earth. Red light flashed skyward, and Billigered¨s qi transformed into a mightily powerful and sacred one. At the same time, the black magical characters on the huge rocks of the stone formula began to echo with a red glow.

Shi Mu was shocked at the mind-blowing scene, as well as by the great shaman¨s true strength. So all the time the old man had been hiding his abilities! In his secret admiration, Shi Mu was disturbed by an unexpected warmness in his chest. Startled, he slipped his hand into his shirt. At the same moment, the girl in blue dress standing opposite Shi Mu also felt something as her beautiful eyes penetrated the crowd until they alighted on Shi Mu¨s face. Suddenly, her face lighted up with a tremor of pleasure. She opened her mouth, as if about to say something, but was prevented when a large patch of red light suddenly cascaded down from the air and enveloped everyone.

When the red light disappeared completely, it was a bleak quietude that reigned the area. Both the valley and the stone formula was empty.

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When he came to, Shi Mu found himself in a pitch-dark space only disturbed by irregular shots of fuzzy light that reminded one of meteors in the night sky. His body was floating in the dark, like a fallen leaf in midair. He was totally deserted in the space with no foothold.

But reassuringly, this hanging-in-the-air state did not persist. After some time, he felt his body pulled down by a terribly mighty force, and before his eyes, myriad stars glittered in heaven. The splendor of the spectacle dazzled him, and then with a sudden brightness and an ear-deafening noise, his body hit hard on something rough. His shoulders felt a scathing pain. While sucking back a breath of cold air, he struggled to his feet.

The view before him eventually became clear once more. As far as his eyes could see, it was a dense forest that was standing in front of him. The trees were unusually tall and mighty, and one could see hundreds of them towering up with heavy and luxuriant foliage that covered up the sky. On the ground, bushes and

shrubs and grasses grew in clumps: a picture of vigor.

Shi Mu took a deep breath, and felt his lungs filled with a rich supply of heavenly energies. Although he had heard much about the portal as well as the world inside it from shaman Yanya and Minh Tu, it was totally different when he was actually in the scene.

After a full immersion in this new world, he returned his attracted eyes, and swept the surroundings with a pair of vigilant ones. His hands were gripping his black blade tightly.

Everything seemed quiet and normal.

He then heaved a sigh of relief, and then took out a patch of yellowed hide from which he had received from Minh Tu. It was a rough map of the space. He looked around, and then climbed onto a biggest tree within his sight. In a flash, he had arrived at the top where he gained a vantage point to have a panoramic view of the surrounding areas.

Now he had a rough idea that he was in a dense forest sandwiched by two mountains. On his right hand was an even denser forest, whereas on his left, the land caved in and formed a low-lying field, beside which lied a tranquil lake. Shi Mu consulted the map and soon found out that he was at the southeast section of the world.

Shi Mu sank into a quiet contemplation, and though his face looked as calm as usual, his eyes were thoughtfully confounded.

This map only showed a limited area that had been searched before, and was called the periphery region of the space. Up in the north end of the map was marked a giant river that traversed the world from east to west. The land on the north of the river was named the Middle Land.

From what he had learned, the environment of the Middle Land was much more dangerous than that of the periphery region, bounding in fierce beasts of Xiantian level. Though the barbarians had opened the portal uncounted times in their history, the Middle Land had only been visited by bold Xiantian barbarians; therefore, information about the area remained scant, though not none. The depth of Middle Land was called the Central Area of this space, only having been visited by a few Earth Grade barbarian saints who claimed that there were a

large amount of savage beasts above their own level, making the area truly primordial and savage. About how large this space inside the gate was, nobody knew; all they could say was that it was boundless, and that no one had ever reached the end.

Shi Mu followed his eyes to the north. He knew clearly that the primal target in this trip was to hunt a multiple-headed viper above Xiantian Level, which entailed an inevitable excursion into the depth of Middle Land.

Thinking this, he retraced his line of sight, jumped down the tree like an ape, and quickly made for the north.

The space within the gate overflowed with heavenly energies, rich in all kinds of rarities. He had not traveled far before he discovered several kinds of heavenly herbs rarely seen in the outside world. Correspondingly, fierce beasts equaled the herbs in number, making him weigh the pros and cons before finally giving up to pick some herbs within reach while mostly concentrating in pushing on with his journey. After all, he could not stay in this wonderland forever, the time limit was only ten days.

After an hour, Shi Mu came to a natural stone bridge. Standing at one end of it, a giant green wolf at least three meters in length blocked his way at the other end. The bridge couldn't be counted a long one, at most fifty meters or so, but it served to connect two cliffs that otherwise could only be linked by a roundabout that would take at least half a day's time.

"The Green Demon Wolf!" Shi Mu looked at the giant wolf up and down, murmuring to himself. The wolf was certainly in its prime judging by its muscled body and the bushy and bright mane. It even had a green horn on its head. Those enormous and bloodshot eyes were staring fiercely at Shi Mu.

It may have been Shi Mu's fearless eyes that piqued the wolf, sending it to howl viciously and swooping down on Shi Mu with fiendish claws. It moved with incredible speed and agility, biting at Shi Mu¨s neck with its mouth widely opened, exhaling a puff of fishy wind. The tusks were as sharp as daggers.

Shi Mu jerked his body aside and the next moment, vanished into thin air. The green demon wolf unexpectedly missed its target. But before it turned around, Shi Mu had reappeared at its back, his face unperturbed, and punched heavily

onto the wolf's head. The fist took on a jade-like blue color, glowing like a stone.

A dull thud sounded out; the fist had found its way onto the wolf's skull. A terrible force like that of a falling boulder, attacked the wolf's head with a crack. As a result, the hefty body of the animal was throwm backward into the air and then tumbled to the ground.

A hint of surprise crossed Shi Mu's eyes. The wolf was at most in the middle stage of Houtian level, but his full-strength Stone-Breaking Fist only cracked its skull. It should have ended its life in one blow.

But if a barbarian were present at the scene, he would have been under great shock. The Green Demon Wolf had a reputation of being as solid as metal, especially for its skull. Never had a barbarian attempted to kill such a wolf by smashing its brain.

The demon wolf let out a painful groan, and then leaped up to its feet. The eyes dilated in an outrage, and the horn on its head flashed with green light.

Suddenly, a green electric current as long as half a normal human's height shot out from its horn and flashed towards Shi Mu at lightning speed. Shi Mu, who seemed to have already been prepared for this sudden attack, spat out a ball of white breath that clashed with the green electric current.

Boom! The two exploded simultaneously and died out. But before the air regained its lucidity, a black shadow had darted out of the chaos and shot towards the wolf's heart - undoubtedly, it was the black blade.

Blood splashes! Although the monster had tried to duck, it only half-managed it; one foreleg was stabbed, bleeding profusely. Shi Mu seized the chance to stride to the wolf¨s side, and then kicked at its waist with his foot that was hard like steel.

The wolf was sent flying backwards, and then thudded onto the ground; its waist bone had already cracked and contorted. It howled in agony, struggling on the spot. But Shi Mu continued the attack with strong punches on the wolf's head. This time, it failed to survive the rainstorm of fists, and its head cracked like a melon; the brains flowed out like a red and white river. The huge monster's groan snapped short, and its bulky body stopped twitching finally.

A ball of green light the size of a fist emerged floating above the smashed head, and a fuzzy miniature image of a wolf peeped through the light. Shi Mu was attracted by the light ball. With a curious face, he took out a bag made of red hide that he had obtained from the Sacred Snow Palace. Some obscure characters of black magic were written on the bag's surface to seal animals' spirits. Shi Mu instilled some magic power into the bag, and it immediately bulged with light, and then drew the green light ball into it.

Shi Mu nodded, satisfied, and retrieved his black blade to cut the dead wolf's horn off. The wolf was not a strong one, technically speaking, but its horn was a valuable material for making magical weapons. Considering that the smell of blood may cause further trouble, Shi Mu kicked the dead body off the bridge and then resumed his journey in a great haste. Up to the north. Nonstop.

Chapter 156 - The Broken Statue

The grassland smelt fresh and sweet after rain, washed even greener. The girl in the blue dress was standing solitary on a boulder, her dress drifting in the wind. She looked exactly like an otherworldly nymph in the picture, carrying the scent of an orchid in a remote vale.

The girl wore a rather puzzled expression as she stared vacantly into the distance.

“Could it be him...?” After a long while, the girl’s lips trembled with discernible excitement.

Just then, a black dot emerged from far away as it darted in her direction at lightning speed. The girl shook her head and tensed up while turning towards the black shadow that was growing larger every second until a full view of the comer was possible. This was the sea guy who had a fishtail. However, he was now wearing a black armor. His tail was wagging rapidly behind him like a swimming snake, and in a blink of an eye he had come to the girl.

“Holy Girl!” The fishtail guy saluted her in a hoarse voice that sounded like two wood bricks rubbing against each other.

“Let’s go.” The girl in blue dress said flatly after which she sprang up and swiftly landed on the ground next to the sea guy. Without another word, she turned toward the north and marched forward. The fishtail guy followed along without a word of protest.

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It was an area of undulating hills. Somewhere between two hills lay a marsh land that smelled obnoxiously of blood. Down in the marsh land, over ten dead bodies of a kind of yellow lizards were thrown chaotically on the ground, most of them were cut into halves and bleeding profusely until a small river had formed in the marsh land.

A girl in a yellow cloak was standing beside the dead bodies. She was exactly the Fire-Dancing Princess. In her hand was a water canteen that she was using to wash the blood off her silver sword. However tinted the weapon had been, her

clothes were not smudged by blood in the slightest.

After washing down the sword, she pointed on the ground and like a yellow cloud, drifted up to the top of a hill. After a careful observation of the terrain, she nodded and drifted on to the next chosen location.

ED: Like flying nimbus xD

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In a grisly gorge, five barbarians were fighting fiercely with hundreds of blood-red bats. The bats came in different sizes. Some were bigger whereas some rather small, but all of them had sharp talons and grimly white teeth. With their marked preponderance in number, the bats besieged the barbarians like a fog of blood. Now and then, some would dive down towards the barbarians to sneak a bite.

However, the five barbarians showed not a trace of fear or confusion, and deftly made a circle with their backs stuck together. They swished their weapons quickly and the glint of metal merged into a patch of cold light that shielded them. Every attacking bat would be cut into pieces once they approached this shield.

Maintaining such a formula, the five barbarians slowly pushed on for the opening of the gorge. Three of the five were wearing light red clothes, and on their bare right arms were a tattoo of a giant viper, suggesting that they came from the Fiery Snake Tribe.

The leader of this small group was a bare-headed barbarian who had deeply sunken eyes and small pupils. Occasionally, those pair of eyes would shine coldly. He was a consummated Houtian warrior, and the rest of the fiery-snake members were both middle-stage Houtian warriors who could not be looked down upon in actual strength.

The three fiery-snake men were each holding a green whip, and wherever the whips whistled past, they left a track of bat blood in the air. The other two barbarians were also strongly-built, their skin rather dark. The green soft armor they wore each had a tattoo of the head of a black ox on it. This was the sign of the Brutal Bull Tribe. The two brutal bulls were also powerful warriors. The one with plaited hair had consummated Houtian level; his muscles protuberant and

hard. The way he stood mightily causes the image an iron tower to come to mind. The other one who was dark-complexioned, was at advanced stage of Houtian level. The massive and menacing axes in their hands were rendered as though lightweight.

Therefore, however fearless these bats were, they still could not beat the concerted attack of the five barbarians. It did not take them too much time to reduce the bats' number dramatically to less than a hundred, which was around the time that they had approached the opening of the alley.

It appeared that the large column of sunlight was the bats' nightmare; soon, the rest of the blood-red bats had disappeared into the distant air in the form of a red cloud flying back into the depth of the gorge.

"Thank goddess! What a hell those bats were! Wicked and useless beasts that isn't even good for making magical materials! Too much of a pest!" The tower-like man of the Brutal Bulls tribe sighed indignantly.

"You could say so, but this gorge is the only way to the north district. Well, brother Mang Kun can count as half a Xiantian saint - I mean, how could the bats be a problem for you? Take it as a warm-up!" The bare-headed man of Fiery Snake tribe took back his green whip and echoed as he smiled.

The flattery was most welcome to the tower-like man. He showed a complacent smile, and then bursted out laughing thunderously.

"By the way, does brother Mang Kun have a further plan? What are we gonna do next?" Following the tower man's line of sight, the bare-headed barbarian asked in a seemingly casual tone.

"Of course to the Forbidden Area! No time to play with those weaklings in the periphery. Their souls are useless to us. This year's award is reeeealy delicious, so let's move on and hunt as many high-leveled beasts as we can!" The tower man gritted his teeth proudly and said.

In the past, warriors who were selected into the portal could keep one third of the beasts' souls he had hunted in the space for himself after the competition - a rule to keep the morale high. However, this time, the percentage was raised to a half.

“Haha! I am looking forward to brother Mang Kun’s performance! If so, could we three ask for a favor from brother Mang, with all the beasts’ souls we’re gonna get?” The bare-headed barbarian fixed his eyes on Mang Kun, his face rather intense.

“Oh? What favor?” The tower man had a quick glimpse of the bags at the three fiery snakes’ waist, asked curiously, being rather piqued by the idea.

“I’d like to have brother Mang kill somebody for me.” The bare-headed man answered.

“Kill somebody? Of which tribe?” Mang Kun furrowed his brow and asked.

“It’s not someone of our race. It’s the human guy that followed the princess here. I assume that brother Kun must remember him.” The bare-headed man said seriously in a muffled voice.

“I remember him vaguely. Did that guy offend your tribe?” Mang Kun nodded thoughtfully.

“That man killed our young master months ago. It’s not convenient to take his life in the sacred mountain, but now that he has made it here, we must give him what he deserves!” The bare-headed man’s eyes shone with malice.

“I see. Fine, I’ll do it for you.” Mang Kun promised in a light mood without further thinking.

“Wait. General Bronze, if I remember it right, that human does not seem quite strong. Maybe a middle stage Houtian warrior? Any one of your tribe can kill him with ease. Why do you guys ask brother Mang to do it?” The dark-faced barbarian beside Mang Kun suddenly thought of something and asked directly.

“But he did kill our young master… So that guy, he’s not that simple. That’s why we have to rely on your help. Otherwise...” The bare-headed man answered.

“Even so...” The answer seemed to have failed in satisfying the dark-faced man. He paused hesitatingly, as if contemplating something else.

“Well, end of the Q&A. Where’s that human and I’ll kill him in a second so that we can get moving and hunt beasts!” Mang Kun waved his dark-faced

companion off and stopped his further questions impatiently.

“Thanks for brother Mang’s help!” Saying so, the bare-headed man took out a round object made of bone on which a vivid picture of a viper was drawn. In the middle of the round plate was a scarlet pointer that looked just like a forked snake tongue.

The bare head then chanted some incantations, and the pointer immediately began swinging. Gradually, it decided on a direction, pointing to the west north.

“Good, the guy’s in this direction. Let’s go find him.” A cold light flashed across the bare-headed man’s eyes as he quickly led the team to the designated direction.

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By a pond, a fiery red beast that looked like a wild boar was drinking by itself. The beast, at least ten meters in length, had giant tusks and scale-covered hide, rendering it exceedingly ferocious.

All of a sudden, a black arrow whizzed past from a nearby tree and disappeared quickly into the boar’s head, its feathered end sticking out. The boar let out some bitter cries, threw its bulky body into wriggling like crazy, before it eventually thudded down to the ground after knocking down several big trees. Blood streamed out from its head.

From a tree by the pond, someone jumped down, his black cloak bulging in the wind. This was exactly Shi Mu, with the Air-Splitting Bow in hand, who strode to the red boar’s side swiftly. He took out his bag and absorbed the beast’s soul with it. A red light ball floated out of the boar’s head, flying into the Soul-Gathering Bag like a meek servant.

By now, he had had twenty-odd souls sealed in his bag, but most of them belonged to beasts of primary Houtian level. Shi Mu hung the bag at his belt, ready to move. Suddenly, he raised his brow while stopping by the boar again. Carefully, he extracted the black arrow from the head and smashed the head with his black blade. After finishing, he set out hurriedly.

At this moment, he was between two high mountains that rolled endlessly into

the distance. A narrow mountain valley tapered before him. With brows knitted tightly, he wondered if the road would lead to a dead end in front. After consulting the map, he was further frustrated by the lack of information on this area.

Shi Mu looked back, had a careful survey, and then pondered the next move. He was far too deep into this valley; to return by the old route would waste too much time.

After a hesitating for a moment, he resolved to move onwards as he had come.

The further he went, the narrower the valley became. Giant shades casted by the two flanking mountains reigned the entire valley with a dead silence. Besides, trees and vegetation grew suffocatingly heavy as he proceeded, and the ground was submerged by a thick deposit of dried leaves that had been there too long to remember their history. The leaves groaned under Shi Mu's quickly moving feet, making their voices reverberate in the old valley.

Shi Mu's face was tense and worried, though he did not slacked his pace all the time.

After two hours, he finally stopped with a bitter smile playing around his lips.

Perching on a fallen and withered old tree, he saw clearly that the mountain cliffs finally merged in front of him. No road at all ahead. The cliffs were precipitous and endlessly high, which meant that it would take him forever to climb to the top, let alone to find a road even if he could reach the end.

Faced with the reality, Shi Mu sighed deeply, and resigned to his only choice of walking back. But suddenly, his eyes caught onto something blackish and shiny hidden in the bush at the end of the road. It looked smooth and round. What could it be, at such a place?

He raised his eyebrows and walked up, but was stunned at what he saw after he pushed aside the grasses.

That blackish stuff was about thirty centimeters in width and was quite old. It should be a fallen part of some statue.

A statue? If it were outside in the human world, it would be something so common that it would never catch his attention. But ever since he entered the

portal, all he had seen was a primitive world dominated by wild animals and plants. So why was a statue here signifying - be it human or barbarian - civilization?

Chapter 157 - The Mystic Stone

“Could it be the handiwork of the barbarian ancestors?” Staring enchanted at this blackish fragment, Shi Mu murmured to himself. He let his eyes run over the adjacent bushes, and then something glittering caught his attention. He strode forward to the left, and then brushed his way through the thistles and thorns until a larger part of the statue showed itself before his very eyes.

This was the bust of the artwork, lying slanted and submerged in the grass leaves. Judging from the two pieces he had seen, this statue appeared to be a strange monster that was half-human and half-animal with two ears atop its head and canine teeth jutting out of its mouth. This look resembled a werewolf.

Shi Mu knitted his brow. This statue resembled totem warriors in their animal form. Thus, the assumption that this statue was made by the barbarian ancestors may have some truth in it.

Following his line of sight through the forest ahead, Shi Mu was surprised to discover more of the broken parts scattered along the way. He followed the path where the fragments were and the deeper he explored into the forest, the more stone works he saw. Among them were further parts of the same statue, but also stone columns and dilapidated walls and curbs.

The mysterious fog clouding his mind deepened. He hastened his steps, and found that the trees grew increasingly scatty as he approached the other end of the forest, where the next scene shocked his body into a jerk.

His eyes were overwhelmed by the sudden presence of a vast open space. In the center stood a series of crumbled stone buildings built against the mountainside; this should be some ancient remains.

Shi Mu carefully walked up to the buildings, and then found the relics of some altars, temples, *etc.* In the middle of the remains stood a stone temple with a dome. It was relatively more in its integrity through the long passage of time. Its adjacent buildings had long collapsed, turning into crumbs that cluttered around it like stars around the moon.

Shi Mu had a quick glance of the site and eventually set his eyes upon the dome. Half of the building had crumbled, exposing a towering statue that was at

least thirty meters in height standing erect inside it. Shi Mu's eyes shone as he detected some similarity between this statue and the broken one he had seen. Both were half human and half animal.

This one had a face roughly of human, but was rather fierce and contorted. Those angry eyes stared hard at some point in the air with its tusks sticking out. Two curved horns like that of a goat's thrusted skyward from its forehead, and the ears bore much resemblance to goat ears. The animal-human had its bust bare, and powerful muscles protruded to the extent of as if it was about to burst. The hands were human hands, but the feet were once again goat hooves. The pair of arms was different in posture: one was raised high, while the other drooped. The former was clutching a flute-like thing which had three holes on it. It was quite puzzling.

The most admirable thing about this statue was its completeness, which made a striking contrast to the uniform fragmentation of the environment. Shi Mu could not help but shift his eyes between the statue and the surroundings before once again keeping them riveted to the statue.

Suddenly and without warning, Shi Mu was grasped by a fit of extreme fear, as if something invisible had just attacked him that he could barely breathe. By reflex, he averted his eyes from the statue, and then his body slowly returned to normal mysteriously. He could not explain the sudden visit of that terror, but simultaneously a hope stirred in his heart. Since this statue had the ability to manipulate one's mind, this site should bear some monumental significance to the barbarians even in ancient times. Shi Mu kept his eyes out of the sweep of the statue, walked into the remains, and then began rummaging in the relics.

Soon he had finish checking the place out, and was rather disappointed by his fruitless research. Things were old and useless here: either ruins of the buildings or rotten wood. There was nothing of value.

Shi Mu would not admit defeat yet. He went over the remains again, but the result was the same.

He smiled wryly at his avarice. How greedy human beings are! He turned about, and was ready to leave. But at the last moment, his eyes caught sight of a red glimmer which came from the drooping hand of the statue.

He followed the dim light without hesitation, and soon discovered that the red light was a ruby stone the size of a fist; it would have easily escaped his attention if it weren't for his excellent eyesight.

All kinds of thoughts tossed about on the stormy sea of his consciousness until he finally gritted his teeth, resolved, and then sprang up to take the stone. Without once looking back, he ran madly back along the road he had come.

After several minutes, he paused to gasp for breath and get a feel for the stone in his hand. Nothing unusual. Then he heaved a sigh of relief and took the stone to his eyes to have a careful study.

The ruby stone had a texture of red, fine lines on its surface that were shining as if they were alive. It had a warmness to the touch. By no means should it be an ordinary decoration. A brief examination could at best prove this, with no certain answer of its origin. Shi Mu carefully stored it into his bag and did not linger any longer. In a great haste, he returned to the valley.

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At the same time, near the entrance to this same valley, a group of five barbarians showed up. These are exactly the totem warriors of Fiery Snake Tribe and Brutal Bull Tribe. The bare-headed one was still holding the bone plate. The pointer on it was pointing to the depth of the valley.

"Seems he's entered the valley." The bare-headed barbarian claimed after a brief consideration with his eyes closed.

"Ain't look like a nice place. No mark on the map. Should be a dead end. Hehe, catch a turtle in the jar - the old guys used to say. Will Save us a lot of time. No way he can flee out of this valley." The thinner guy of the Fiery Snake tribe took out a map and let out some dry giggles.

"Then what are we waiting for? Hurry up!" Mang Kun snorted coldly, being rather unsatisfied with the low efficiency of his team members.

"Hold a moment!" The dark-complexioned Brutal Bull guy called out, scuttling to a pond nearby. There, a huge body of a blood-red wild boar lay with its head split open by a blade-like weapon. The boar was almost cut into halves by this

cold-blooded killer.

“The Red-Flame Warrior Boar!” The man was shocked, and blurted out the name of the dead boar.

The others also gathered to have a look of the horrible scene. All of them changed their countenance to varying extent.

“By the looks of it, that boar should at its late stage of Houtian level. The guy must have killed it with one blow.” The bare-headed man now took on a sour look.

“That Shi Mu must have some strength! We can’t be too careful!”

“Humph! It’s just a Red-Flame Warrior Pig! What’s all the fuss? Hurry up and kill the chap. I’ve already wasted a lot of time!” Mang Kun gave a snort of contempt and turned towards the direction of the valley, leaving the others fidgeting by the boar. After a moment, the dark-complexioned barbarian followed Mang Kun with recharged confidence. The bare-headed man took another look at the lying boar. A trace of suspicion crossed his eyes. Vaguely, he sensed that something was wrong, but could not figure it out. He shook his head vigorously, trying to spin the doubt out of his mind. This done, either successfully or not, he led his two fellow men also into the valley.

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In the depths of the valley, Shi Mu was galloping with light steps. After passing through a dense brushwood, he froze on the spot. His penetrating eyes looked steadily ahead with golden light. The next moment, his countenance changed dramatically, and then he immediately flashed aside to hide behind a big tree. With ape-like agility, he climbed up the tree in a few moments.

Halfway up in the tree, he paused and once again looked into the distance. The overlaid dense shadows of trees failed in blocking his view, and he could clearly see five barbarians rushing into the valley some three hundred meters away from his location at the moment. The barbarians’ faces were full of menacing air, and their eyes kept sweeping around vigilantly in search of something.

“The Fiery Snake tribe...” Three of the barbarians had a snake tattoo on their arms. Shi Mu closed his eyes, and those razor-sharp eyes of the Fiery Snake

shaman's crossed his mind with unfailing acuteness.

After some thought, Shi Mu returned to the ground and took out his Air-Piercing Bow. Nimbly, he concealed himself behind a nearby shrub, and then prepared for the incoming combat.

The three fiery snakes were taking the lead. Suddenly, the bare-headed man stopped abruptly with one hand raised up. The others stopped at the sign, and then began to listen for any audible sound.

"What's up?" Mang Kun frowned discontentedly.

The bare-headed man did not answer immediately, but cocked his head to listen for a few more moments. A hint of doubt crept upon his face. He had heard a strange sound just now, but it was too fleeting for him to catch. He even began to doubt if it was his ears that were cheating him. What a pity that the round plate could only detect a rough direction, without further exactitude.

"Careful, everyone. I'm afraid the fellow has noticed us..." The bare-headed man sighed, speaking up his mind. But just as his voice fell, a rustling sound came from a dense wood ahead; simultaneously, a black shadow flitted across their view.

"That's him! Go!" The bare-headed man narrowed his eyes. Inside, he was thrilled, and could not wait to pounce upon his quarry. The five of them were all excellent runners, and it only took them a few moves to arrive at the place where the shadow had disappeared into. But it was all empty now except for trees and plants with no shadow at all.

"Up there! In the three!" The bare-headed man quickly surveyed the environment and caught a glimpse of a black figure looming above their head. He flicked his arm, and the green whip in his hand immediately sprang up like a viper, turning into several whip shadows that bombarded the shadow with great force. The other four followed without thinking; all of them launched attacks skyward.

In a short time, the leaves of the tree were almost pulverized, revealing the black shadow which turned out to be a cloak made of wolf hide! The bare-headed man and his tribesmen were confounded for a moment, but Mang Kun only gave a snort full of contempt, throwing up his axe to cut the cloak into

pieces. For a moment, the shreds rained down upon them like grey raindrops.

But just then, a dull sound reverberated amid the whirling shreds, and a kind of unknown white powder suddenly stormed down all over the sky, completely enveloping them. The five of them had been looking up at the shreds; the sudden appearance of the white powder totally caught them unguarded. Defenseless, they each had some of the powder fall into their eyes that caused an intense sting that made them let out shrill cries in agony.

At this juncture, an air-splitting sound came.

“Beware of arrows!” The bare-headed man caught the sound with his keen ears even though his eyes were still closed due to the sharp pain. Reflexively, he ducked aside, shouting loudly to warn his companions.

Before his voice fell, another two whizzers flitted past.

Ahhhhhhh! Two shrill cries!

The bare-headed man’s heart missed a beat. In this extreme condition, he could not tell to whom the cries belonged as he tumbled to the ground and rolled aside.

Boom! The tree that the cloak had been in seemed to be a trick from the start. At the moment, it unexpectedly fell down and crunched through the two crying barbarians.

The bare-headed man rolled on the ground for about several meters to get away from the dangerous center. By now, the pain in his eyes were still as gnawing him, but had lessened a bit. He managed to open his eyes to have a look at the miserable scene.

At the same time, in a shrub nearby, a red blade shadow was cutting forcibly down. Another bitter cry came, followed by a thud of a heavy body flopping down onto the ground.

Chapter 158 - The Blood Fog

The bare-headed man was profoundly shocked. He was more than familiar with the voice - it belonged to the thin guy from the Fiery Snake tribe. In a flurry of alarm, Bare Head, with his bare head glimmering and cold shivering down his spine, fumbled around his waist for a secret weapon he always carried with him.

In the next moment, a white light shot up towards the red flame like an arrow. It was a boomerang made of bone, emitting blinding white light!

A thud was heard as the boomerang hit on the tree trunk. Evidently, it had missed its target. When the bare-headed man approached the tree in a few flashes, he could see no one there except his murmured companions. The thin one lied on the ground with a deep wound in his chest that almost split his body open, utterly breathless. The other two that had been crunched by the tree were already quite dead.

Bare Head gritted his teeth with intense hatred; his face contorted in an upsurge of extreme emotions. Just then, clashes of weapons, mixed with Mang Kun's occasional angry shouts, reverberated in a nearby dense wood. Without thinking, Bare Head rushed to the place with long and desperate strides. In the next moment, he saw Mang Kun fighting fiercely with a man who had bushy eyebrows and a pair of large and concentrated eyes. This was exactly the Shi Mu they had been after!

Mang Kun was still shutting his eyes tight, and around the corners of his eyes were some white power stubbornly stuck there. But at the moment, Mang Kun's body had bulked up to the double size of its original; the muscles all protruded madly. His two strong arms, with blue veins visible on them, had turned to a pale green. Two curved and sharp horns had thrusted from his forehead. The black axe in his hand was swishing like crazy, forming a screen of dense shadows that shielded him in.

On the opposite, his opponent Shi Mu was wielding a long blade that had red flames swirling around it. The blade was moving so fast that red shadows kept sprouting up towards Mang Kun and caught the latter in a storm of red flames. Fully engaged in the battle, though he had heard someone approaching, Shi Mu

could not afford to attend to the new comer.

Bare Head gloated over Shi Mu's weak point with a wicked smile on his face. He could not wait to throw himself upon his mortal enemy.

"Huowu, you've come at just the right moment! Help me get rid of this man!" After shooting a glance at the bare-headed man, Shi Mu allowed himself a moment to think before he shouted loudly with surprised expression, his eyes shining excitedly.

The bare head was caught unguarded, frozen in confusion. But soon he knew it was a trick, and his face dropped in angry humiliation. Simultaneously, Mang Kun let out an annoyed cry. By the next moment, a layer of black glow had emerged around his axe.

Hearing this, Mang Kun immediately threw out several successive blows, each with the momentum of a thunder; some seven or eight black shadows shot from all directions towards Shi Mu as well as the coming figure behind him.

"Brother Mang, it's me! Don't fall for the guy's trick!" Bare Head could only try to duck the blows in a great haste, yelling anxiously. Mang Kun slowed down his movements after hearing Bare Head's warnings, and for a moment he was nonplussed while he held his axe in hand. But this proved to be a deadly pause when his opponent's black blade had seized the chance to penetrate his chest. Immediately, blood gushed out violently, and Shi Mu had already approached him to deal him the last blow.

Mang Kun's body stiffened, and then he spat blood helplessly like a defenceless soldier. In the next moment, a red flame sprang up and traced a smooth arc in the air, cutting Mang Kun's body into halves from the waist. The bulky body thudded down unto the ground.

Shi Mu swung his arm to throw off the blood from his black blade, his face totally unperturbed. Then after taking a deep breath, he turned his cold eyes to the last enemy to kill.

Bare Head shivered, and his eyes spoke of extreme fear. Involuntarily, he

stepped back slowly.

“You must have pursued me to avenge your young master's death.” Shi Mu walked toward Bare Head with easy but steady steps, asking in a flat voice.

Bare Head changed his countenance after hearing his young master mentioned by the sworn enemy, and he stepped back once more in anger and fear.

“If so, go and see your young master now!” Shi Mu's eyes shone mercilessly, and in a flash of his figure, he had come to Bare Head's front. The red glow of the black blade stirred once, and thirteen overlaying blade shadows emerged cascading down at the fear-stricken barbarian heavily.

As if spell-bound by Shi Mu's cold air, Bare Head failed in reacting at the first moment. However, before the blade shadows hurt him, he managed to break the spell while shouting angrily. Brandishing the green whip ceaselessly, he produced a screen of green whip shadows that protected him from without.

The grating noise of friction echoed in the bush, and Bare Head repelled Shi Mu's blow successively. The latter would not let go of him easily, of course. Without hesitation, Shi Mu narrowed his eyes and activated his real qi. As a result, the thirteen black shadows suddenly gathered as one giant red flame that stormed down to the bare head.

Instantly, Bare Head felt a scathing hot air blowing against his face. He was startled, and the green whip in his hand took on a green blow. Bare Head swung his arm in exasperation, and a thick whip shadow emerged in the air, rushing towards the incoming red flame. Simultaneously, the tattoo of red viper on his red arm also worked up, and all over his skin scales sprouted - Bare Head had stimulated his totem power!

However, before he went through the preparation procedures, his eyes caught Shi Mu aiming at him with a black cylinder in his other hand! This was outrageously horrifying! Bare Head stood on the spot in a panic.

The next moment, Shi Mu shook the black cylinder vehemently, and a blackish thing shot out of the cylinder with hellish roars, dashing to Bare Head's chest at lightening speed that almost blotted out the sky and the land with its overwhelming blackness.

Within so small a distance, how could Bare Head escape unharmed?

Cracccccck! The black shadow pierced the red scales on Bare Head's skin like a breeze, throwing the big barbarian backwards until he fell heavily on the ground several meters away. On his chest were countless tiny holes that reminded one of the honeycomb. Through the holes blood was oozing out like little trickles.

Bare Head then experienced some painful twitches, thus could only convey his dying message through his vicious eyes riveted on Shi Mu. After a minute, the luster in Bare Head's eyes faded, filled with the resentment that had sent the two men into a life-or-death war. Eventually, his body grew hard and motionless.

ED: Pretty sure that rigor mortis doesn’t set in that quickly… xD

Shi Mu let out a long breath, and weariness finally overwhelmed him. Faced with five Houtian warriors of late stage, this would have been an otherwise prolonged battle had he not resorted to some artifice which saved him much energy to further deal with any multiple-headed viper above Xiantian level. Even so, this series of fighting had also exhausted all his energies for the time being. Although much of his real qi was retained, his spirit power was virtually running out.

For some time to follow, he just stood there while breathing deeply and slowly. It was not until a good two hours had passed, did the weariness on his face began to retire bit by bit. After a prolonged resting period, he returned to his normal cool face. Subsequently, Shi Mu rummaged in the five barbarians' bodies, and gathered a small pile of spoils. The five Soul-Sealing Bags were bulging with animal souls already captured by the five barbarians, though the souls were all weak ones of some primary-or middle-staged Houtian beasts. Without the luxury of enough time to think about it, Shi Mu unthinkingly poured all the souls from the five bags into his own. After doing this, he turned his eyes to other spoils for an inspection.

Five weapons had been gathered at his feet. Among them the green whip of Bare Head and the black axe of Mang Kun were inscribed with black magic characters, suggesting their status as black magic weapons. The other three were just ordinary ones. Apart from the weapons, Shi Mu also scraped together a thick wad of golden leaves: two charms of black hide which had the same black

magic characters on them. It's highly likely that they should be identical. Judging from the magic energies emitted from them, the charms should be rather powerful. Bare Head must have lost the chance to use them before he got killed.

Shi Mu took the two charms without scruples, calculating in his mind an opportune moment to try them. He also stored up the golden leaves, but not all of the weapons, from which he only picked up the portable green whip, leaving the others as they were on the ground. After taking a brief rest, Shi Mu marched out of the valley with renewed vigor.

.....

Half a day later.

Deep in a dim forest, Shi Mu was leaning against a treetop, overlooking the distance with limpid golden eyes. After a moment, he clambered down the giant tree dexterously, taking the north direction.

From what he had observed, his current location was less than a day's journey from the middle region designated by the map, where it was the sole place to hunt for multiple-headed vipers if they did exist.

Thinking this, Shi Mu took a deep breath but failed in calming his mind - something unknown was clearly fretting his mind. He paused in confusion, a sense of insecurity welling up in his heart.

The next moment, he was shocked to the fact that the environment had been enveloped by a vague, pale red fog without his noticing it. More alarmingly, the fog was thickening at a speed that even naked eyes were able to detect. Shi Mu was given quite a turn, and reflexively looked up over the close-packed dark treetops where the sky had turned blood-red.

Shi Mu knitted brows, and immediately his memory about the red fog was jogged; Before he set out, shaman Yanya of the Blue Teeth tribe had told him of some hazards lurking in the forbidden space. Among them, this kind of unexpected blood-red fog that dropped abruptly from the clouds was mentioned. Any warriors below Xiantian level, totem warriors and aboriginal beasts included, would lost their nature and be overcome with bloodthirst and frenzy. However, the fog would cover an area of 5 kilometers at most. Out of whose boundary was where one would retrieve his sanity.

Thoughts and ideas flitted through his mind in a single moment, and without hesitation, he took out a Body-Lifting Charm drawn on a piece of hide and stuck it to his skin. Immediately, the charm turned into a green light screen that sheltered him in. By the next breath, his body had grown as light as a fallen leave that floated towards the boundary of the fog.

However, as time ticked by, the fog around him did not show any sign of thinning. Although he was holding back his breath as best as he could, Shi Mu could not help but inhale some of the blood fog, which, even only of a minimal amount, still made him uncontrollably agitated. A desire for blood and killing grew increasingly strong in his heart and body.

This was the first time he was ever under such a control, and the inside irritation was only compounded by a lack of remedial strategy. For a time, he was thrown into an utter disorientation.

Just then, at the critical juncture, the crystal bead that he had been storing in his shirt gave a sudden jolt. Immediately, a cool air pierced him to the heart, followed by a comforting stream of coolness that traveled throughout his body. In an instant, his mind was settled; the reddish glow in his eyes died down gradually.

However, before he had a jubilant moment, a black shadow quickly passed his one corner of the eye. Immediately, his left hand threw out a crystal white light.

Peng! Then a bitter cry of a beast rang out, followed by a form the size of a wolf that was struck flying into the air.

Simultaneously, he swished his black blade in his right hand, and another black shadow that was swooping down upon him was cut into halves. The odorous smell of blood immediately permeated the air.

However, the next second, shrill cries echoed from all directions around him, and this time came more black shadows that moved at an alarming speed to besiege him. By then, Shi Mu abruptly found out that the beasts attacking him were about a hundred fox-like animals with grey hair, each at least at primary stage of Houtian level, not to mention some that had reached the middle stage. These fox-like creatures had blood-red eyes and slobbering mouths - obviously under the spell of the blood fog.

Even worse was that in the distance where the red fog blurred his view, more such creatures were peering through the dense air, howling menacingly.

Chapter 159 - The Tide of Beasts

“What bad luck! A tide of beasts!” Shi Mu was started as he quickly scanned the environment. At his left side was a high mountain sloping sharply into the sky. His eyes turned gold again, shining briefly, before he turned decidedly to seek shelter in the mountain.

The beasts would not let go of their prey easily, of course. They followed Shi Mu in the new direction like torrential waves rolling to sabotage a solitary boat in the sea.

Something swished through the air and ear-splitting noises reverberated. Twenty to thirty grey foxes pounced upon Shi Mu like sharp arrows from all directions; their claws thrusted out at Shi Mu, glinting coldly. Without slowing down his pace, Shi Mu brandished his black blade and among the glow of red flames the blade, spiralled like a giant red viper. For a period of time, anguished cries were heard from all around, and mutilated bodies piled all over the place.

Therefore, in the face of danger, Shi Mu took his courage in both hands and carved a way out, leaving blood all the way as he rushed to the mountain. With the extra help of the Body-Lifting Charm, he soon outran the foxes and dropped them far behind.

However, though disadvantaged in speed, the foxes kept increasing in number. By the time Shi Mu reached the foot of the mountain, at least five hundred foxes had gathered behind him like a mighty torrent in hot pursuit.

While being enveloped by the green light of the charm, Shi Mu found his body being supremely lightweight and supple, enabling him to move up the cliff and arrived at a terrace near the top in a short time. Standing there, he caught sight of a dim cave a short distance ahead, giving him a reason to relax a bit. The narrow opening of the cave - at most three meters in width - would at best, allow two or three people to come through at one time.

Within the time of a few breaths, Shi Mu had reached the cave. Without the slightest hesitation, he flashed into it, not being surprised when he saw that the interior view conformed exactly to what he had already seen on the foot of the mountain with his outstanding eyesight.

The cave turned out to have a sealed space, about thirty meters in length, and was much wider inside. Aside from a boulder that was slightly taller than himself at the entrance, there was nothing more except for some rubble scattered freely on the floor in the cave. The whole place felt cold and empty.

Without a warning, Shi Mu turned around to face the entrance. In the next second, he put his hands on the boulder and gave it a full-strength push with his real qi surging torrentially in his body.

Boom! A huge noise resounded in the cave as the boulder half-closed the entrance, now allowing only one person in. Whiz! Suddenly, a grey shape flitted up, and Shi Mu swung his black blade unhesitatingly to hack the coming fox into halves as it leaped into midair. Before its blood and insides scattered down, three more grey shapes sprang up and made their attack, baring fangs and brandishing claws.

Shi Mu his real qi once more and caused thirteen black shadows emerged in the air, blocking the narrow opening completely. Next, the three grey shapes were chopped to pieces amid the glint and flash of the black blade.

However, these creatures took up the positions of the fallen and rose to fight one after another, quite undaunted; their blood-thirsty eyes glowed red. Fortunately, the narrowness of the opening kept most of the beasts howling outside of the cave, and each time at most, three or four foxes could force their way in, greatly relieving Shi Mu's burden.

Inside the cave, Shi Mu dared not to relax his vigilance for a single moment and constantly adjusted and guided his real qi. Meanwhile, he had found a stable tempo of fighting the beasts, wielding his blade methodically. According to shaman Yanya's teaching, this tide of beasts must have been caused by the blood fog, and would usually last from several hours to a day, a period of when one had to do everything he could to come through.

Suddenly, sounds of fierce fighting were heard not far outside the cave. Shi Mu looked in the direction of the sounds with much interest and curiosity and found two figures in a fierce battle with the foxes, fighting their way to the cave. One of them was the black-amoured sea guy with fishtail and scales whereas the other was the blue-dressed holy girl. In her hand was a piece of coral about thirty

centimeter in length. Both of them were covered by a sheen of blue light.

Among the foxes that they were fighting with were over ten powerful porcupines, of which the strongest had obviously reached the late stage of Houtian level. The porcupines paused now and then during their pursuit of the two sea dwellers to shake their body to shoot a storm of countless quills towards the two.

Nevertheless, every time the bombardment of quills came, it was easily repelled by the black-armoured sea guy whose blue trident wheeled like a windmill amid dazzling shadows that overlaid each other. Thus the blue-dressed girl was perfectly protected. Even though some quills escaped from the net of trident shadows, the blue light screen around the sea guy's armour would always defend against them. After a regular interval, the sheen of the screen would fade and then the blue-dressed girl would raise her left hand gently to release a blue water bubble from the coral, immediately being absorbed by the sea guy's armour. Hence, the sheen would be renewed. In observing this process, Shi Mu also found that this blue sheen could also magically keep the blood fog out.

Just as the two sea dwellers were within a hundred meters from the cave, all of the porcupines suddenly stopped in unison and began to shake their bodies. Countless quills shot up towards the two like heavy raindrops.

The black-armoured guy let out an angry shout, and then the trident in his hand suddenly glared. The next moment, myriad trident shadows formed a blue screen as a shield against the quills which clashed as they hit the screen. The quills then evidently lost their momentum, falling down to the ground as the black-armoured guy also slackened his movement.

As it turned out, the large number of foxes had seized the moment to launch a raid, springing up and pouncing down upon the two onto their backs. Though the trident, a superb weapon, could manage to ward off the foxes, its wielder was certainly approaching his limits. His face was furrowed with anxiety, and the physical exertion had made him pant for breath.

At this critical moment, the coral in the girl's hand suddenly shone brightly and glowing rays shined in all directions. Gradually, the colorful rays joined into a ribbon. In a flash, the rays reached the biggest one of the porcupines.

The big one had just ended its first round of shooting, and was ready for the second. Some seven or eight quills erected from its back, itching for their turn. However, this wish would not be granted; the ribbon, after a twist in the air, quickly wound around the beast's body and bound it up. As a result, the porcupine was unable to budge an inch.

Soon after, an ear-splitting sound echoed in the air, and a blue ice spear whizzed through the air, piercing one of the beast's eye and eventually nailing it to the ground. In the same manner, the blue-dressed girl dispatched over ten porcupines in a blink of an eye with the coral's colorful rays that merged with the blue light of the ice spears.

Shi Mu could not even turn his eyes from this thrilling scene as he continued wielding his black blade to kill his share. The holy girl's young face seemed rather out of proportion with her great attainments in magic art; she was already a powerful Adept of water element at this young age! Judging from her ice spear art, she must have reached the Spirit Level in magic art.

Obviously, the two sea dwellers aim was the cave where he himself was in at the moment. After the holy girl's help, the black-armoured sea guy accelerated his pace towards the cave. After all, the beasts had the absolute advantage in number. A prolonged battle would only consume their energies and tire them to death.

Soon, the two came to the opening of the cave, and after a round of ice spear attack, the ten-odd foxes around the entrance were killed in a minute.

"Sir, you seem to know what's happening, and the tide of beasts may not end in a short time. Could you please share this haven with us?" The blue-dressed girl was delightedly surprised at seeing Shi Mu being in this cave, a trace of excitement crossing her shining eyes. She asked in a clear and melodious voice.

Shi Mu raised his brow in doubt, and after a brief moment, he had his resolution. Stepping aside swiftly, he let the two into the cave, who happily obeyed. Once inside, the holy girl riveted her eyes towards Shi Mu with an animated smile. Save for the unexpected uproar outside the cave, she was hearding overtures.

A great number of quills interrupted the friendly atmosphere in the cave

without warning, and another tide of foxes had also forced their way into the cave one by one. Shi Mu and the sea guy rushed to the entrance simultaneously, and in tacit agreement, each guarded one side of the opening. The blue screen of the sea guy's trident and the red flames of Shi Mu's black blade worked in perfect coordination to defend the entrance.

With his Gale-Force Blade Art, Shi Mu managed to repel the foxes pouring in. However, with the long-distance attack of the porcupines', he began to feel strained; the quills would always stick in from every angle possible. You cater for this, and will lose that. A typical example would be this: in midair the red flames spiraled, and down cascaded the burned bodies of three foxes, amidst a rain of blood. However, just then, some seven or eight quills would penetrate the blood rain and shoot towards Shi Mu from three different heights. Shi Mu would then have to swing his black blade in several turns and ward off at least four quills at one time. Simultaneously, he would twist his body to dodge another three quills. This would invariably produce a weak point: by no means could he duck the third blow of quills.

However, this time when he was rendered defenceless, a coldness soothed his tense body. At the same time, he found himself tenderly wrapped in by a blue screen. The screen then rippled like water, and the third wave of quills bounced away as if hitting on a wall. Quite surprised, he felt cold sweat trickling down his forehead, and only after a moment did he come back to reality and take out a Golden Light Charm. He activated the charm and instantly, another screen of golden light added to the blue screen.

Without delay, Shi Mu once again threw out a succession of black shadows, protecting the entrance with the sea guy. The blue-dressed girl, after helping Shi Mu with the blue screen, pointed the coral at the entrance, causing colorful rays to immediately roll out of the cave to bind up the next porcupine. In the same fashion, the porcupine was killed by an ice spear without the least bit of strength to struggle.

The joined force of the three soon eradicated the strong porcupines outside of the cave. Shi Mu sighed a sigh of relief, and felt more confident in concentrating on the foxes. However, the next moment caused his pupils to contract. Just adjacent to the cave, a warrior was mired in the tide of beasts, her cloak tainted

by blood, and her white sword dancing like a lotus in a river. She was exactly the princess!

Clearly, however skillful her sword art was, her strength was failing her in the face of such an overwhelming number of enemies.

“Please, you deal with the foxes, I’m gonna save her!” Shi Mu claimed resolutely in a strained voice.

Without waiting for an answer, Shi Mu drew back her sword and retreated into the cave. The black-armoured guy snorted, which resulted in a cold stare from the blue-dressed girl. The guy did not speak any more, but was rather discontented. His trident moved even quicker, sealing the entrance with more shadows.

Inside the cave, Shi Mu put away his black blade and untied his Air-Splitting Bow from his back. Taking out a black arrow, he set it on the string and pulled the bow widely open like a full moon.

With a smooth sound, a black light whizzed out of the cave. After a second, a fox that had just sprang up to dive on the princess was shot through its head, and the giant force threw it backwards for a long distance before it thudded down onto the ground.

The princess was startled for a moment, and then looked in the direction where the arrow had come. She was confounded when first discovering the black-armoured guy at the entrance of the cave, but then immediately became exhilarated when saw Shi Mu inside the cave. Greatly encouraged, she moved towards the cave in great haste.

With black arrows finding their way one after another to their targets, the princess found the foxes around her shot dead one by one, which proved to be a great relief. With enhanced confidence, her sword grew sharper and quicker until it soon brought her to the opening of the cave.

Chapter 160 - Pearl the Holy Girl

The sea guy glowered at the princess, his fierce eyes glinting with the trident propped before his chest. He looked just like a demon from hell.

“Su Gu, get out of the way!” The blue-dressed girl’s metallic voice rang out, precluding the sea guy from taking any impetuous actions. The guy shot the holy girl an uncomprehending look, but still withdrew his weapon resignedly.

The princess peered through the attacking foxes at the cave, swinging about to repel those at her back. In the next moment, her body twisted nimbly, darting into the cave like a bird.

Once the princess was in, the sea guy once again blocked the opening, and dispatched the three pursuing foxes in a blink of an eye. Three were slashed open while the other two, though comparatively stronger, were struck out of the cave.

Shi Mu nodded appreciatively at the blue-dressed girl, and then had a quick look at the princess to inspect her body for wounds and injuries. Fortunately, aside from some bruises, the princess wasn’t severely injured, causing Shi Mu to be relieved. On the other hand, her survival from the blood fog proved that she must have been carrying some treasure given by her sect.

The princess exchanged a look with Shi Mu, also sweeping the holy girl and the black-armoured sea guy with her keen eyes. With a suspecting look, she seated herself cross-legged against the stone wall in a corner.

Just as Shi Mu was about to say something, an ear-splitting howl penetrated the opening of cave. The three of them simultaneously tensed up while looking out of the cave. As it turned out, the odor of dead bodies mixed with fishy blood outside the cave were drawing more of the beasts here.

Peeping out from the opening, grey foxes scattered everywhere over the mountain and among them, stood a good number of porcupines. Now and then some of them would raise their heads and let out howls that were echoed by their companions.

“Princess, please rest yourself here and we shall talk after the tide’s over.” Shi

Mu said in great haste. Before the princess had a chance to answer, he had rushed to the opening of the cave with his black blade. He and the sea guy once more supported each other at either side of the entrance. The holy girl also entered into combat readiness, activating the coral in her hand. The coral soon weaved between Shi Mu and the sea guy, creating a light screen surrounding them that ready to seek the opportune chance to kill the porcupines.

Seeing this, the princess swallowed down a pill and began adjusting her breaths with her eyes closed. Her right hand did not slacken the grip on her sword.

This time, the beasts had come in a much stronger wave than any of the ones before. Large groups of grey beats launched unceasing attacks one after another, accompanied by the heavy rains of sharp quills that would not let go of any opportunities. Owing to previous experiences, the three operated in good coordination that enabled them to pull through.

Eventually, after two good hours, when the sky outside the cave had dimmed, the porcupines were almost all eradicated. Though the foxes still flowed to the cave in unceasing amount, their momentum was lost without the porcupine's assistance. The odds were clearly against them.

Anticipating their success, the three, though still panting for breaths, heaved a sigh of relief. Inside the cave, the princess had accumulated some strength during this break. Therefore, Shi Mu suggested them have a brief rest alternately. First the holy girl, then Shi Mu, replaced by the princess and the holy girl, each turn taking an hour. This way, the four of them managed to resist the tide of beasts while maintaining coordination.

The long night finally passed, and the first rays of the morning shone on the countless corpses piling all over the mountain with the blood streaming between the bodies. Then, after another hour's combat, the blood fog began to recede bit by bit, and the wild beats regained their sanity accordingly. At length, the grey tide of foxes began to ebb down the mountain.

At this moment, it was the princess and the holy girl's turn to rest inside the cave. Seeing that the foxes were leaving, Shi Mu and the black-armoured sea guy both relaxed. Shi Mu smiled self-mockingly to himself; he could never had

anticipated this cooperation with the sea-dwellers, one that protected both sides from destruction. The two men looked into each other's eyes searchingly, and then simultaneously darted out of the cave. By tacit agreement, they kept a distance between them and began to collect the beasts' souls.

After a short time, both gave up resignedly after obtaining thirtyish souls of primary or intermediate Houtian level respectively. They had killed more than a thousand beasts during the night, but the long hours also saw most of the souls vanishing into the air.

When the two men returned to the caved, the princess and the holy girl sitting at two opposite corners also had wound up their rest, each on the lookout for the other. The atmosphere inside the cave felt subtly awkward.

Fully aware of this change of attitude, Shi Mu smiled bitterly ease the tension. Just as he was then to say something, he caught sight of a black shadow at the corner of his eye!

In reflex he knew the worst had come. Immediately he swung his black blade, throwing overlaid black shadows towards the black shadow heavily.

Weapons clanged, and through the blade, a rolling wave of real qi traveled to Shi Mu. He stepped back involuntarily at the great shock, but the black shadow of the figure seemed to also be inflicted by Shi Mu's beastly might which was only resolved by two steps backwards.

Forestalling Shi Mu's further actions, the black figure bolted to the entrance of the cave and blocked it with his sturdy body like a firm wall. This was undoubtedly the black-armoured sea guy, who was now staring at Shi Mu and the princess like a tiger at its prey, full of grim smiles.

The princess did not show much surprise. With the tide of beasts ebbing, there existed no reason for the perpetuation of their temporary friendship. Shi Mu had his eyes riveted on the holy girl. Judging from their previous coordination, this girl was a master in water magic, the last one he wanted to have a fight with. Also, the black-armoured sea guy was no less strong: a warrior in his consummate Houtian stage. A combat between the two sides should be a fierce one whose result was hard to predict.

"Back off, Su Gu!" The blue-dressed girl's face fell, and her voice was tremoring

with anger.

“Holy Girl, the alarm was over, why should we....” The black-armoured sea guy halted in great dissatisfaction.

“Are you going to act against my order?” The girl dropped her voice and asked authoritatively.

“Never!” The sea guy startled, hurrying off and giving the way but still cautiously remaining a short distance from the entrance of the cave.

Shi Mu and the princess exchanged a suspecting look; their vigilance for the holy girl increasing instead.

“Gongzi[A], so we met, finally! Two years ago, I went to the village but you weren’t there. I thought you must have ran away and that I would never meet you again.” The holy girl turned to Shi Mu, exclaiming excitedly.

“Could I ask who...”Shi Mu was quite shocked hearing this.

“Shi Gongzi, don’t you remember this?” The holy girl puckered her face in a smile, then raised a slender finger to point at Shi Mu gently.

All of a sudden, something in Shi Mu’s shirt burned with unbearable heat, and he furrowed his face, stretching his hand to get grab of it.

“So you are that white clam years ago at the bottom of the sea near my village?”

The girl giggled. “So you do remember me, don’t you? Anyway, after I left that sea I met my master, I became the holy girl of the East Sea Area.” Seeing Shi Mu’s surprised look, the girl smiled. A charming smile indeed. Simultaneously, white light began to shine behind her back, and soon, a pair of giant and pure white clam shells emerged and floated in the air like two wings.

Shi Mu stood frozen in the spot, unable to divert his eyes from those jade-like shells free of the slightest flaws. Long buried memories began to pop out, flitting across his mind in a single moment.

To be frank, the reason he could be what he was at the moment was mostly because of the help he had got from this stunning girl standing in front of him.

Both the sea guy and the princess stared in amazement. Who could ever have

known that not only does Shi Mu and the holy girl of the sea species know each other, but that they share a memory and a close relationship as well? From now on, the princess looked at Shi Mu with a feel of suspicion.

“By the way, I’ve got a name now. My people call me Pearl the Holy Girl, but you can just call me Pearl! Gonzi, I haven’t asked your name yet. Where have you been all these years?” The blue-dressed girl gave him a warm smile, the clam shells behind her fluttering archly. The memory of the village boy saving her life stayed with her all the years, unfaded by time.

“My name is Shi Mu.” With some embarrassed reluctance, Shi Mu uttered his name slowly. Though he cherished the warm friendship between them when they were still young boys and girls, he understood perfectly the change of situations and hence their stances. Thus, he told her his name but not his experiences hitherto.

Pearl seemed finally to have taken notice of the awkwardness between them. Her beautiful face puckered in doubt and the genuine and warm smile faded away. The white clam shells also withdrew in low spirits.

A hesitating silence hovered between them. After a long time, Shi Mu took out a crystal pearl from his shirt and handed it to Pearl, “Holy Girl, this should be yours. Please take it.”

“No need. Keep it, Shi Gongzi.”Seeing that Shi Mu had been carrying the pearl all the time, her eyes kindled with delight once more. But the next moment, after hearing his words, she raised her hand, causing countless blue magic characters to instantly emerge, floating up from her palm. Next, all characters merged into three blue light balls which flashed into the pearl in Shi Mu’s hand.

Shi Mu was rather surprised.

“Shi Gongzi, see you later. Su Gu, let’s go!” The holy girl turned to walk out of the cave without giving Shi Mu a chance to say anything. The black-armored sea guy threw Shi Mu a hard stare, then twisted his fishtail, following the holy girl closely out of the cave, leaving a contemptuous snort behind.

Shi Mu gazed at the two figures until they receded into the dark mountain forest, then looked back at the pearl in his hand. Shaking his head uncomprehendingly, he store the pearl away in his shirt again.

“Good. Now you can talk about your relationship with the Holy Girl.” The princess’ cold voice rang out in the dark cave.

“You’ve heard all that I can tell. If ever you have any doubt, please just leave me alone.” Shi Mu answered matter-of-factly. He preferred to have all those experiences all to himself. Besides, he would not easily let anyone into the secret of the strange blood that had contributed to his body mutation.

“How dare you!” The princess was raged by Shi Mu’s defying manner, but she quickly thought of something and calmed herself down.

“Humph! Alright, do as you like. I’m not interested in your personal experiences. Let’s go!” This said, the princess left the cave first with her white sword in hand, walking in the opposite direction of the two sea dwellers. With many thoughts tumbling in his mind, Shi Mu followed her without a word.

Chapter 161 - The River of the Brave

After leaving the cave, Shi Mu and the princess joined in a northbound travel thereafter. Considering their strength, the journey would not be a dangerous one unless they met beasts above Xiantian level or large herds of animals. After a strenuous trudge that took them two days, the two reached a broad river. The water surged across the land for more than thirty meters in width as it rattled by, loud as thunderclap.

“This should be the well-renowned ‘River of the Brave’ in this forbidden space. After crossing it, we should be in the Middle Area.” Shi Mu exclaimed, his eyes glinting as they marveled at the broadness of the river. He knew clearly that his destination was near at hand: exactly across the river. However, the river gave off a deterrent mana, as it were. The bubbling water foreboded a tough time ahead.

“That’s it. Shaman Yanya has mentioned that in ancient times, a barbarian saint had set a seal on this river that prevents beasts above Xiantian level from crossing it.” The princess echoed matter-of-factly, her eyes alight on the river as well.

Suddenly, something caught Shi Mu’s attention, and his eyes narrowed instantly, turning golden. On his left sight, some five or six figures were making their way quickly here. The princess’ beautiful face puckered in vigilance; her one hand pressed to her sword hilt while the other fumbled inside her sleeve.

“It’s all right. Those are the peaceful guys.” Shi Mu pacified the princess as the golden ring in his eyes fading away.

The princess was quite surprised, wondering how the youth beside her could see through such a long distance, which was absolutely beyond her capability. After all, she had been trained in aspects of eyesight-enhancement. She took a deep and meaningful look at Shi Mu. Ever since they met the Holy Girl in the cave, she had felt something rather mysterious about this youth, something like a veil that kept her from seeing him through.

It did not take the barbarians much time to approach the river. Once the distance between them were quite near, the princess relaxed, convinced that

they were indeed peaceful tribes. One of the leading two was wearing the tribal clothes of the Green Teeth Tribe, around the age of thirty, while the other had his clothes stripped to his waist, and had a crest made of golden feathers on his head. This was the costume of the Golden Feather tribe. This group of barbarians comprises men from the four peaceful tribes.

The two leaders emitted a strong real qi that suggested their consummate Xiantian level. The others may appear less powerful next to those two, but they definitely far surpassed Shi Mu who was merely at the middle stage of Haitian level.

“Such a coincidence to meet you guys here, guests of the human race.” The saint from the Blue Teeth tribe greeted Shi Mu and the princess with a big smile.

“Brother Molang. “ The princess requited his hospitality with a genuine smile. Shi Mu also grinned, a step behind the princess. The two of them had stayed with the Blue Teeth tribe ever since they arrived in the sacred mountain, thus they felt more familiar and at ease with the Blue Teeth tribesmen. Shi Mu had also met Molang once.

“Let me introduce brother Jin Huang from the Golden Feather Tribe to you.” Molang burst into laughter, pointing to the feather-crested young barbarian standing beside him. The youth appeared to have a taciturn and nonchalant disposition, only nodding slightly to Shi Mu and the princess without further exchange of pleasantries.

“Nice to meet you, brother Jin!” The princess beamed, as if not discerning the youth’s coldness. Shi Mu tipped his head to have a quick glance at the shining golden object behind Jin Huang’s back; it was a gigantic golden wheel with jagged periphery, reflecting the sunlight coldly that sent chills down Shi Mu’s spine. He studied the black magic characters faintly visible on its surface. Being secretly astonished, he was sure that it must be a mighty weapon of devastating effect.

Just as Shi Mu was lost in marveling at the great wheel, Jin Huang sensed the intent eyes and looked back. The two youths’ eyes caught each other. Shi Mu was momentarily and slightly shocked, but his expression was as cool as usual. He gave Jin Huang a smile, nodded his head, then diverted his eyes. Jin Huang

raised his eyebrows in suspicion, his eyes lingering on Shi Mu for a few more moments.

Molang then engaged in a brief introduction of the rest of their team members. Two of them belonged to Naro Tribe, and the other two the Wu Jiao tribe. Though the members all had different experiences and origins, their common interests bound their closely together, enabling a congenial atmosphere.

“Brother Molang, could I ask for the reason that you have come to the River for?” After a few innocuous greetings, the princess hit directly at the question that concerned her.

“To be frank, as you can see, we have a little group here. However, this group was not founded until the other day when we joined force to kill two strong beasts nearby. Now, we are searching for other target animals. If you will, what about joining us in hunting for more beasts?” Molang invited amiably.

“Good idea. The forbidden place is not very safe. More people means the higher chances of surviving.” The princess nodded her approval after exchanging a look with Shi Mu.

“Good! Good!” Molang cracked into a hearty smile, clapping hands. He had calculated that the princess must a good team member to be counted on, considering both her actual strength and her identity. She must be carrying a good number of treasures and weapons. Given this, it would not be a big trouble to travel with a weak guy like Shi Mu, who was disappointingly a mere Houtian warrior at his middle stage.

“So where are you going now? Do you have a plan?” The princess asked.

“Not yet. I’ve thought of killing more beasts along the River. Better those below Xiantian level.” Molang answered without hesitation,.

“Real beasts, huh? Then I guess we should cross the River.” The princess’ large and bright eyes glittered as she mentioned the other side of the river.

Hearing this, everyone directed their eyes to the speaker in astonishment.

“You mean it?” After a tacit exchange of look with Jin Huang, Molang asked with a hint of smile.

“That’s right.” The princess answered dispassionately. During the past four days in the forbidden space, she had gradually felt the strength gap between the peaceful side and the aggressive side. She must venture to kill more advanced beasts if she still hoped for their triumph in this match.

“Little girl, has nobody told you that the other side has countless beasts above Xiantian level, have they? You’ll surely die considering your strength!” A barbarian shouted in protest. He was from the Wu Jiao tribe. The other two Naro men also shook their heads in disapproval. The Middle Area was the last place they wanted to leave their footprints in.

The princess knitted her brows, quite dissatisfied at their lack of courage. She then tilted her head to look at Shi Mu with searching eyes. To her surprise, Shi Mu answered without the least hesitation.

“I shall go wherever you go, even if it means the other side of the River.”

The four Wu Jiao and Naro barbarians shot a contemptuous look at Shi Mu who was the sole warrior still at the middle stage of Houtian level among all that had entered the portal. It was already a miracle, his survival hitherto. In the barbarians’ eyes, Shi Mu was having grandiose delusion concerning himself, and his marching into the Middle Area would only end up with his miserable death.

“What do you think, brother Molang and Jin Huang?” Ignoring the protest of the Naro and Wu Jiao barbarians, the princess directed her eyes to the two leaders.

“You have spoken my mind. I’ve been planning a trip there!” Molang laughed heartily, bringing the other barbarians into quite a sudden shock. Discerning his team members’ doubts and misgivings, Molang explained patiently in a low and thick voice.

“Everyone, we’ve been into this forbidden space for more than four days. Half of the alotted time has already passed. Nobody knows better about our achievement than ourselves. The aggressive guys are way stronger than us. No risk, no chance. “

This proclamation proved to be a bitter reminder. All sank into a hesitant silence, weighing the odds.

Sometime later, the taller one of Wu Jiao tribe broke the silence, shaking his head, “Brother Molang, please forgive me that I could not go to the Middle Area with you. I know that this match is important, but it is not more important than our lives. If you insist on going in there, I’m afraid I’d have to call it an end to our cooperation.”

“Of course. I won’t force you guys.” Molang nodded with a pained expression.

Thus the two Wu Jiao guys cupped their hands and then walked away with resolute steps.

“Brother Molang…The Middle Area is too dangerous for us. I’m so sorry that we cannot follow you either…” The two Naro guys also made up their decision, mincing their words with a dry smile.

“Don’t be silly. Of course you can choose your own way. Don’t worry.” Molang put his hands on their shoulders and answered with a touch of sadness.

Therefore, the two tribesmen also cupped their hands and left on a separate track from the Wu Jiao guys.

In a moment, Shi Mu and the others were the only ones left on the spot. For some time, nobody had the heart to say anything.

“Now it’s only the four of us. I daresay that it’s a big group, but that makes it easier to move.” Molang finally managed a laughter to dispel the embarrassing atmosphere.

“Now that we’ve decided to cross the river, we’d better think of a safer way. The river does not look inviting. It may deplete a lot of our energy.” Shi Mu took up the topic in a seemingly casual way.

“That’s correct. You may not have been informed, but a species of some carnivorous fish inhabits this river; they are great in number and fierce in nature. Anything alive that falls into the river will meet their wild attack. Even Xiantian saints will find it a hard time dealing with such creatures.” Molang said with a set face.

“Carnivorous fish? I can’t see any fish at the moment.” The princess asked in surprise.

At this moment, Jin Huang, who had been silently listening, suddenly fished out a piece of meat still smudged with blood; This should be newly cut from some beast's carcass. Without a word, he threw the meat into the river.

Instantly, after four or five breaths at most, countless fine silver lights emerged floating up from the depth of the river and with lightning speed, sprang up to bite at the meat.

Shi Mu stood watching the horrible scene with profound shock. Those silver lights turned out to be a great number of silver fish whose body was as sharp as sword. By no way could they be counted large animals; or more precisely, they were quite small in size. Each one was as long as fifteen centimeters. Only their extended mouth that was as sharp as blade, added a sense of brutality to that small body.

In the next moment, water around the meat suddenly began rolling and foaming. The silver blades surrounded the meat, forming a massive silver ball that made the water tumbling violently.

Splash!!!

After a few breaths, the silver ball disappeared without trace into the deep river. The small piece of meat had also vanished like it had never existed in the first place.

Chapter 162 - The Dark-Force Fruit

Her eyes riveted on the rippling water as the princess sighed with knitted brows. Beside her, Shi Mu was in deep contemplation. The two shared a mute and pensive moment.

Could it be that this river, being infested with dangerous fishes, was the reason that the beasts living in the Middle Area did not dare to enlarge their territory and push it across the river? Shi Mu was lost in thought, letting his eyes wandering above the water.

“Since you two have already known of this kind of fish, I bet you must have thought of a plan.” The princess suddenly asked curiously as her eyes continued to blink.

“Sure! A pretty easy way, I’d say. All we need is a raft of logs. The sturdier, the better. The raft will take us to the other side of the river.” Molang revealed the secret with a confident smile.

The answer caught Shi Mu and the princess quite unprepared; both of them were amazed at its simpleness.

“So it is?” The princess asked apprehensively.

Shi Mu echoed readily, “The fish’s teeth are far too sharp. I daresay that the logs may not withstand their bite.” The voice was steady but with a hint of worry, too. After all, if ever the worst happened - the raft being sabotaged by the diabolical fish - even Xiantian saints would find it a challenge to survive intact.

“Rest assured, brother Shi. Our people have tried this method for generations and never once has it failed. Brother Shi can make the raft as strong as possible.” Molang placated the two newcomers in a easy and encouraging tone of voice.

Discerning something, the princess puckered her face in a smiled and asked, “Brother Molang’s self-assurance seems to be telling me that he must have tried this method last time he visited this space, and with a good result, mhmm?”

Molang blushed in embarrassment; his eyes evaded the interrogating ones of the smart princess’. After a hesitating moment, he nodded with much reluctance. This spontaneously aroused Shi Mu’s suspicion, but he did not

change his expression at all.

“Then what are we waiting for? Let’s make the raft.” The princess snickered half mockingly, and then turned to the woods with Shi Mu to fetch for logs.

The whole process proved without much difficulty once the four joined force. Within four hours, a raft about ten meters in width and fifteen meters in length was made. Shi Mu had built it with three layers of logs to ensure safety. Upon completion, Molang took out a broad hide and put it up to serve as a sail.

Thus, the four of them boarded the raft as Molang fished out a blue charm. After a few incantations, the charm caught fire immediately and sent out beams of blue light amid a wild gust of wind. The sail was pushed forward, aiming at the opposite bank at high speed.

Standing on the raft guardedly, Shi Mu grasped his black blade with one hand while secretly clutching a black hide charm with the other in his sleeve. This black magic charm was exactly one of two he had got from Bare Head, the one from the Fiery Snake Tribe. The other copy of this charm he had tried the other day, and the result was not unsatisfactory. The charm had a magic power similar to that of a low-level charm of the wind element, able to generate a strong wind that allowed the user to be able to fly across a length of distance. This Wind-Wing Art rang a bell in his memory, but he could not remember when and where he had learned of it.

On the other end of the raft, the princess was actively looking around, in a quite casual manner as if she was enjoying the scenery. However, both of her hands had coiled back into her sleeves, obviously holding some secret charms. By contrast, with the previous successful experience, Molang and Jin Huang appeared much more at home.

Fortunately, this seemingly crude approach worked out; the voyage wound up safe and smooth. The river was as if it was just like any other river in the world.

When the raft finally pulled in, Shi Mu leaped onto the bank excitedly; the feeling of standing on the land gave him much comfort. After storing away the charm in his sleeve carefully and inconspicuously, he began scanning the environment like a curious boy. He found that the tense spirit had kept him from observing the scenery closely, and there was a huge difference on this side of the

river. The varieties of plants and trees were much the same, but the size of them almost doubled on this side.

“You two must be quite familiar with the Middle Area, so where should we go next?” The princess’ clear voice rang out.

“Please wait a second, princess. It’s your turn then, brother Jin.” Molang turned at Jin Huang and said.

However, his interlocutor did not answer, but only took out a yellowed map drawn on a patch of hide wordlessly.

“Is that the map of the Middle Area?” The princess asked in a pleasant surprise.

Jin Huang nodded, then checked the environment by the map. Soon he found out their location on the map.

Shi Mu had a quick glimpse at Jin Huang’s map, then minced back two steps and took out a smaller map which had much fewer marks on it. A simplified version which Minh Tu had copied for him from the books and memoirs kept in the library of the sacred mountain. The marks on it signified where the multiple-headed viper may appear. Shi Mu had a quick comparison between his and the one in Jin Huang’s hand, and then his eyes flashed.

“Let’s walk in this direction,” Jin Huang pointed his arm to a certain place and said after a silent moment.

He meant that they should enter the depth of the area directly!

“It’s too risky! March into the hinterland directly? We’re not in the periphery areas!” The princess protested roundly.

“Princess, if I remember it right, it was you who first suggested we cross the river to hunt for beasts. Are you regretting it, now that we have made it here?” Jin Huang complained with a sullen face.

“Be that as it may, us two are not Xiantian saints like you. We can help deal with consummated Houtian beasts, but what if we stumble across a Xiantian beast? Will you two help us run away? Who’ll cover up for us?” The princess’ voice hardened to an even greater degree.

“All right, calm down, princess. The four of us share the same goal - that is, hunt as many beasts as possible during the remaining days - so what are we arguing for? Let’s be friends, shall we?” Seeing that atmosphere between the princess and Jin Huang tensed up, Molang quickly began to appease the two sides.

“All right, let’s be frank. Don’t sneak around anymore, you guys are plotting something, aren’t you? You aren’t here simply for beasts, anyone can see that.” Shi Mu suddenly intervened.

“What are you hinting at?” Molang raised his brow, displeased.

“Friends shall not hide anything from each other, that’s the tradition in my country that’s among my people. So if you two won’t tell us your true purpose then we’ll part with you here and now.” Shi Mu continued, undeterred and in a cold voice.

Hearing this, Molang exchanged a look with Jin Huang. After a moment, he let out a dry smile and cupped his hands apologetically, “I’m sorry, truly. We did hide information from you, but without any bad intentions. It’s all because that the place we’re aiming at is quite dangerous, so we thought it’d be better if we let it out later...”

Shi Mu grinned as the princess’ heart thumped. But both remained silent, waiting for further explanation.

“Indeed, we have a purpose coming here. By any chance, have you heard of the Dark-Force Fruit?” Molang went on.

The Dark-Force Fruit? Shi Mu started searching his memory, but in vain.

“Don’t you mean the fruit is here?!” The princess exploded.

“Yes, princess. How knowledgeable you are! Indeed, the fruit exists in this forbidden space, right at the place we were going to.” Molang nodded his head eagerly, his eyes burning with desire.

The princess’ expression froze in utter amazement as her breath paused for a moment. Then her eyes were also kindled passionately.

However, Shi Mu found himself totally in the dark. He was sure this was the

first time he had heard of this kind of fruit. He then asked what it was and why it was so valuable.

“The Dark-Force Fruit only grow in places of extreme coldness, nurtured by yin qi. The tree will only bear fruit every hundred years. So its value is self-evident. The fruit is a rare medicine, able to wash your veins and enhance your marrows. Also, it helps tremendously in breaking the bottleneck to Xiantian level.” The princess made a brief explanation quickly as her eyes glinted even more fervently.

Shi Mu was profoundly astounded. Xiantian level! Now he understood his fellow travelers’ perfervid yearning.

“If we traveled about thirty miles in this direction, we would arrive at a snow-capped mountain. At its foot was a cave in a covert place, and inside the cave the tree grows, full of the fruits. It’s even enough for the four of us to share.” Molang narrowed his eyes and spoke in a hushed voice, detecting the change of countenance of the princess and Shi Mu’s.

The princess was now burning with eagerness. However, Shi Mu was even more unperturbed. He pursued his questions, “If the cave is concealed, how did you two first discover it?”

“Last time we entered the portal, we two chased after a demon beast and by pure chance found that cave.” Molang answered with unwavering voice.

“Such precious fruit must be guarded by heavenly animals. Why didn’t you take the fruit last time? Could it be for the guarding animal?” Shi Mu furrowed.

“Exactly. There was a consummated Houtian beast in that cave, an Ice Scorpion. With topographical advantage, the beast equaled a primary Xiantian saint in power and strength! Plus, we were not as strong as we are now, so we could only manage to escape empty-handed.” Molang let out a resigned sigh.

“But after all the years that we’ve been doing research on the beast, we have come up with a plan to deal with it. The plan requires four people. As long as you two join us, we’ll kill the beast and share the fruits equally.” Molang promised in all sincerity and seriousness.

“But why specifically four people?” The princess was not convinced by the

plan, raising her doubt.

“The plan centered on a black magic formula which needs three people to activate and one more person to entice the beast. This way, we can trap the Ice Scorpion for at least half an hour, during which we’d have finished picking the fruits.” Jin Huang took up the topic.

Pleased with the answer, the princess’ face lighted up. Consequently, both Jin Huang and Molang were heartened. However, Shi Mu did not offer his share of exultation, leaving the three in a gladdened atmosphere by themselves. For Shi Mu, however plausible the plan sounded, the Ice Scorpion would not be that easy to bring under control, considering that it was the guard of the Dark-Force Tree. Also, he had come to the forbidden space simply for multiple-headed vipers. The fruit could not beat the viper in significance by any means. After all, the latter decided whether he was able to maintain his life! Otherwise, what is the use of the Dark-Force Fruit?

Chapter 163 - The Ice Scorpion

“Brother Shi, what do you say about that?” Puzzled by Shi Mu’s indeterminate expression, the princess asked in a voice indicative of her eagerness for the plan.

“I won’t go against your decision. So I’m all yours.” Shi Mu nodded. He had thought about turning down the offer, but second thought brought him around. After all, the cave and the suspected habitat of the multiple-headed viper located in the same direction. Roundabout journey he would have declined, but now it was a matter of coincidence that he would like to see it to the end. On the other hand, it would be easier to have two consummated Houtian warriors lead the way before he got acquainted with the environment. The Dark-Force Fruit would be most welcome if by any chance they could obtain some.

“Then let’s try our luck.” The princess announced definitively.

“Good. There’s no time to be lost. Let’s set out as soon as possible.” Molang was overjoyed hearing the princess’ decision.

The four-men group thus went on their journey without delay. And out of Shi Mu’s expectation, the Middle Area, though complex in terrain, was not the worst place in the world. They barely met any large beasts en route. According to Molang, this is because that though Xiantian beasts are at the top of the power ladder among all creatures in the Middle Area, there are not many of them. Moreover, most Xiantian beasts prefer staying in their own territory, and will not be a bother or hazard as long as they are not provoked. As for the weaker creatures, they do not pose threat to the their small group at all.

After half a day, the group reached the foot of a mountain. Staring at the cave in front of him Shi Mu was as calm as usual. But somehow his eyes glittered resolute and solemn.

The cave was about three meters in width, its depth unfathomable, though. The sun was scorching in the outside, but cold air kept pushing out of the cave.

“That’s it. Let’s go.” Molang claimed, then without turning his head back marched into the cave, followed by a mute Jin Huang. Shi Mu and the princess exchanged a look and also stepped inside.

The instant he went into the cave, Shi Mu could not help but shiver all over with cold. At the opening of the cave they could still withstand the cold air, but now inside it the coldness deepened radically, and the slump in temperature made them feel like sealed in an ice-house, with biting air seeping into their very marrows from all directions.

Trembling, Shi Mu resorted to his real qi to ward off the cold. However, before he activated his real qi, a sudden pulse of his lower abdomen brought a stream of yin qi upward, which then circulated all around his veins. Immediately the exterior coldness was driven out of his body, and he felt snugly warm.

Shi Mu was confounded for a moment, but soon realized that he should thank the yin qi accumulated during his training of the Strong Ape Art. He relaxed, then swept the environment with his keen eyes, discovering a think layer of ice on the walls. Illuminated by their torches the walls glistened with crystal light, stretching into the heart of the cave.

Led by Molang and Jin Huang the small group wound their way inside the cave, had many turns, then finally arrived at a vast space that looked just like the main hall of a crystal palace. The “hall” was at least three hundred meters in length and width, comprising purely ice. Scattered all around the floor were countless ice cakes of all shapes and sizes.

At the center of the hall was a tall, silver fruit tree encased by a huge ice plank, standing there exceedingly eye-catching. Next to the tree was a pond of cold water about ten meters in diameter. The water had frozen on the surface.

The silver tree had not a single leaf on it, its barren branches hung pitifully in the cold air. Five fist-size fruits dangled sparsely on it, sparkling with heavenly light. A glance can tell that the fruit was by no means ordinary. Even Shi Mu felt his heart beating faster under the brilliance of the fruit. However, the dead water in pond drew his eyes compellingly from the tree. He could not help narrowing his eyes at the dazzling light emitted by the frozen surface of the pond.

The other three also stopped their feet in concert. Watching the tree fervently, Molang and Jin Huang did not care the least to conceal their thirst, while the princess was relatively more reserve in showing her avidity.

“I’ll go have a look.” Molang withdrew his covetous eyes and mumbled in a low voice. Taking out a green axe from his back he edged forward vigilantly. Though extremely tall and sturdy, the man managed an unusual light step that made little noise at all. He would take a few steps, then pause to have a careful look around. Everything fine, he would then advance at a low pace.

The hall reverberated with a deadly silence. But for Molang and Jin Huang’s assertion Shi Mu would have doubted the existence of the ice scorpion here.

Another ten minutes passed, and Molang was almost under the tree. He hid behind a giant ice boulder, and took the vintage point to have a last round of inspection, then after a brief pause raised his arm seriously.

The three that had been waiting then got the signal and began making their way stealthily to the boulder. They gathered with Molang, then all fished out a black, triangle flag made of beats’ hide. The flag had a lively white spider embroidered at the center which looked extremely ferocious.

“The ice scorpion should be in the pond. I’ll entice it out, then you three try your best trap it. After I get the fruits we’ll retreat by the road we’d come.” Molang instructed in a low voice.

Thus Shi Mu, the princess and Jin Huang made for the pond noiselessly, then each hid behind a boulder respectively, constructing a siege of the pond. Next, they bit the tip of their tongues to spit blood onto the flag, dying the white spider red. Immediately, the black magic characters in the flag shone with red light, squirming like resurrected worms.

The three instilled some real qi into the flag, and the three spiders instantly spun a giant transparent net over the pond. After a few flashes the net disappeared into thin air.

Molang nodded his head satisfactorily, then a sudden green light covered his body. In a few strides he had reached the tree, and sprang up, climbing unto it like an ape. In a few breaths he had approached a thick branch where a glistening fruit was within his hand’s reach.

Molang had a last glimpse at the pond, took a deep breath, edged a few steps forward on the branch, then gingerly reached out for the fruit. It only took a gentle pull to tug it from the branch.

All of them felt almost breathless at this moment.

The next moment, crash!

Just behind the silver tree, a most ordinary-looking ice boulder burst open without a warning. Next a crystal light glared among the showering ice pieces, hitting at Molang. The light traveled extremely fast, and until it had approached Molang, the other three could only made out that it was a giant, crystal-clear tail of a scorpion!

Molang narrowed his eyes. No time for ducking. His right arm swung the axe almost reflexively, and a large patch of green light rolled directly towards the stinger.

A loud clang rang out, and the axe was struck flying backwards into the air with Molang, who was shocked profoundly, his face full of fear and fright.

Just then, at where the giant boulder had been, a glistening white fog emerged floating up, and amid that crystal light was a huge scorpion about twenty meters in length. Its entire body was made of translucent ice - just like an ice engraving!

The Ice Scorpion!

The minute it showed up, the beast leaped up and blew out a a puff of cold white air.

“Xiantian level...”

Before Molang even finished his words, his body was completely submerged by the cold air, and the just raising arm slowed down, with the green light around his body faded hopelessly. A layer of frost had taken on where the light had been.

The overtaking coldness froze his body almost in a blink of an eye. The next moment, his stiffened body thudded down to the floor.

The ice scorpion dashed to the body, and shook its tail. With a clear sound Molang’s corpse was struck into pieces. The fruit he had picked was still firmly grabbed by that dismembered hand which coincidentally fell a few steps in front of Jin Huang.

All this happened as if in a twinkling, and the consummated Houtian totem

warrior, Molang, was dead on the spot.

The three were electrified, madly terrified. The ice scorpion, during its incubation inside the ice, had reached Xiantian level. Assisted by the coldness inside the cave, it almost counted a Xiantian beast in its middle stage!

Just as they stood numb marveling at the mighty power of the scorpion, the beast had again jumped up and made a turnabout in midair. An even deepened coldness immediately spread all over the place, and countless ice balls the size of a fist shoot up in all directions. The walls would split open once hit by the ice balls.

The next moment, three forms almost jumped out simultaneously - the boulders behind which they had been hiding were struck asunder by the ice balls.

Exposed to the immediate threat, Shi Mu and the princess ran wildly in the direction of the opening of the cave without a word, but Jin Huang remained, a hint of hesitation flashing across his eyes. Resolved, he warded off the attacking ice balls with his weapon, and surprisingly marched forward to where Molong was lying. He bent over and grabbed the fruit.

Just then, a great number of ice balls plummeted down to his head amid an angry howl. Jin Huang was given no time to escape, thus could only face the attack head-on. His face flushed, and gritting his teeth he pointed at the feather cap he was wearing, chanting an incantation.

Pu!!! The feathers glared golden, splintered into myriad pieces like stars. The light soon shielded him, and giant golden bird's image emerged in midair, bringing Jin Huang towards the opening of the cave at lightning speed.

In a flash Jin Huang had passed Shi Mu and the princess over their heads!

"Bastard!" The princess glared hate at the receding golden light. They both realized that Jin Huang had employed a secret art to carry him out of danger, leaving themselves as his scapegoat. And with the fruit in hand.

Shi Mu and the princess were running side by side at the moment, not far from the opening. After seeing the golden light that flitted past their heads, his face hardened too. After a moment, he grabbed the princess' tender waist without a word. The princess startled, by before saying anything the charm in Shi Mu's

hand exploded, and a pair of giant black wings unfolded behind their backs. The wings took them fly to the opening no less quickly than Jin Huang's golden light.

Almost simultaneously, an ear-splitting sound rang out with an army of ice arrows flashed past them, almost scraping their arms. A succession of noises like raindrops beating leaves echoed in the cave. And glance back shocked the princess: the place where they were a moment ago was now havocked by ice arrows as thick as huckleberries. If they had remained on the floor, there would have been no chance for them to survive!

Chapter 164 - The Spider’s Thread

In midair the princess looked down at the shambles, a lingering fear in her thumping heart. Then as if called back to reality, she found her waist clamped by a strong, iron arm. Lifting her head, she caught sight of Shi Mu’s face in the profile, and a scent of virility from him made her blush.

“Jin Huang’s in trouble.” Shi Mu frowned.

“Eh...What’s up?” The princess was startled, and hurriedly looked in Jin Huang’s direction. The young barbarian had made almost to the entrance of the cave, but confusingly, the ice scorpion was not in pursue of him; instead, the scorpion remained staying still on the same spot all the time.

However, just as Jin Huang was to approach the opening, a colossal ice boulder near him exploded without warning! Amid the ice fog that blurred their view, the ice scorpion bolted to the entrance and blocked it with its own body. The cold air surrounding it felt deadened a little, but its body had frozen again to the form of an ice sculpture.

“!” The princess exclaimed in horror.

Shi Mu’s face clouded, and he subconsciously fastened his grasp of his black blade.

The next second, the ice scorpion leaped up abruptly, its two rows of legs supporting its weight by pressing onto the ground, while one pair of its huge pincers raised to midair with great force. In an instant, a translucent ice claw gripped at Jin Huang rapidly, bringing with it a draught of cold air. At that time Jin Huang was still flying in a cloud of golden light, and the incoming attack made him force an emergency stop. His face was full of anger, and snorting, he flung his round golden dagger to the claw.

The dagger clanged with the claw, making a deafening noise. For a time blinding golden light shone in all directions, with ice crumbs showering down in the air, hissing. However, after a few moments the light faded, and would die down completely in a moment.

Jin Huang’s eyes sharpened, and in response the magical characters on the round dagger came to life, all dancing like small insects. After a few seconds, the

dagger cracked into myriad pieces, and as a result, the scorpion's claw turned into a cloud of spray, evaporated like snow under the sun.

However, a flurry of hissing noises echoed in the air at once. On second look, Jin Huang found himself threatened imminently by large ice flames spurted from the scorpion's mouth! He quickened his pace in an attempt to run away, but the ice flame overtook him at an even higher speed, and caught his two feet. In an blink of an eye, his feet was totally frozen!

Unable to advance, his body fell from midair and thudded onto the ground. With a loud clunk he was petrified to find that the part below his knees had all crashed into bits of frozen ice!

"Ah!!!!!!!"Jin Huang collapsed onto the ground with a bitter cry, watching the approaching monster in despair.

In midair, the princess's eyes were riveted on the scene. For a second her face puckered in hesitation, but presently she bit her lips with a determined glitter in her eyes. Fishing out two silver charms that shimmered in the snowy wind, she slipped one of them into Shi Mu's sleeve and said hurriedly, "This is the last trump card I've got. My teacher gave it to me. The Charm of Telesport. Can carry you a distance of more than 5 kilometers in an instant. I used one when attacked by the fox monsters, so here're the last two ones. Cannot be sure if it might transport you to another monster's lair, mind you."

Before Shi Mu answered, the Fire Dancing princess stuck the charm to her forehead, and immediately was enveloped by silver light. The next moment, Shi Mu was stunned by the sudden glare of the silver light, into which the princess' figure disappeared.

Thus Shi Mu was left with the charm given to him in his hand. A fragrant scent still lingered on it. He clutched the charm and without activating it, he urged the black wings behind him and suddenly turned around. The wings gained in brightness and carried Shi Mu at a faster speed back to the fruit tree.

The ice scorpion at once discerned Shi Mu's intention, and hissed thunderously in great rage. Having a look at Jin Huang in a short distance, the beast moved on to him speedily with its stinger swaying menacingly.

At the same time, Shi Mu's body was surrounded by a thin film of golden light,

and was aiming at the fruit tree with ever quickening speed. The interval was being diminished. Simultaneously, he did not forget to always look back and keep an eye on the scorpion.

Less than three meters to reach the tree. A heart-rending cry from behind made his ear strain uncomfortably. Then followed the rancorous sound of an ice boulder splitting. Without delay, the the ice scorpion was dashing at Shi Mu in a powerful gale!

Soon, the translucent claw of it arrived, diving for Shi Mu like a final judge. Shi Mu gritted his teeth and chose to ignore the claw temporarily, at least before he got the fruit. At one grasp he had had three Dark Force fruits in his hand, and with a nimble twist of his body he thrust his black blade to resist the claw close at his head. The black blade was glowing with red flames, and in a blink of an eye thirteen red shadows was thrown out. The shadows gathered in the air in the shape of a prodigious fiery snake that met the claw undauntedly.

The claw crackled loudly, and the first strike brought the ice scorpion's claw down. Shi Mu seized the chance to grab at the last Dark Force fruit on the tree, and not daring to lose a single second started the charm.

Splaaaaash!!! The ice scorpion fell down on the ice floor after a failed attack the second time in a total consternation. Its target had vanished into thin air under its very eyes!

.....

Somewhere in the Middle Area, a silver light popped up, followed by Shi Mu staggering out. A few steps later he lost his balance and tumbled to the ground, rolling down a hillside and then struggled to his feet with painful expressions. Once back to his full height, the dizziness left him and he felt as cool as usual.

The lost strike from the ice scorpion still had its lingering sensation on Shi Mu's body. Luckily he had resisted it with his Gale-Force Blade Art, and the attack was further cushioned by the Golden Armour Charm. On top of these, the yin qi inside his body also responded immediately to cancel out the cold air from the ice scorpion, and as a result protected Shi Mu well from the cold.

Safe and sound, he stood still for a moment watching the four glistening fruits in his arms, and never had he felt more relieved and fulfilled. After a full

immersion in happiness, he looked around for an inspection of the environment. It seemed that he had landed on a peaceful side of the territory which was barely visited by large-size animals. No trace of them could be found. Shi Mu began to wonder where the princess was at the moment. He sighed softly and took out a Rejuvenation Charm, stuck it to the wound on his back.

A quarter of an hour later, Shi Mu was standing on the top of a high mountain nearby with the map made of hide in hand. This map was distinctly different from the shabbier one he got from Minh Tu, an updated one he had made by adding new marks to the original one with information he learned from Molang's map. It all owed to his powerful memory - a by-product in the process of practising the Moon-Swallowing Art - that he had memorized most the details of Molang's map in a glimpse. And to be precise, very near to an extraordinary retentive memory.

Shi Mu consulted the map and quickly found out his current location - about thirty miles to the northwest of the Snow Mountain, and not far from a likely den for the multiple-headed vipers.

After storing the map carefully he went down the mountain, and headed for the spot with a guarded mind.

.....

In a dense forest about twenty miles further in the direction of the vipers.

Whiz! Whiz! Whiz!

About tens of black nut fruits were shooting through the trees toward a running girl, who was none other than the Fire Dancing princess. Her face was full of anger, and her body was wrapped in faint green lights. She was moving nimble her way through the bushes and trees, as fast as a bird. Whenever a nut hits on a tree, a piece of bark would be bruised, whereas those weaker saplings could snap in two. The black nuts shot out like little stones, carrying with them a great force, and came in many numbers. But none of them had so far hit the princess, whose figure was supple like a floating willow catkin among the trees. The close and numerous nuts could not find their routes to her.

Behind the princess, about twenty grey apes were jumping over treetops in hot pursuit of her. Each ape was at least above the middle stage of Houtian level,

and in their hands were black nuts that they would shot from time to time. The two sides, one chasing and the other running, soon made about three hundred meters.

Without warning, a hairy one of the apes suddenly let out a shrill cry which brought his fellow companions to an abrupt halt, though some reluctantly, fizzing viciously to the princess in a display of their wrath. But still, led by their hairy leader, the apes retreated by the route they had come.

The princess continued running forward for some distance and stopped for a break when convinced that the apes would not come back. She stood panting, and found many bruises on her body which had smudged her clothes red.

It appeared that the princess was not as lucky as Shi Mu, having been transported to a den of strong grey apes. She had intuited the danger at once, and deployed a Body-Lifting Charm to help her escape the converging attacks of the apes. Still, she had some minor injuries in need of treatment. The princess thus brought out a green charm and stuck it to her body. The charm soon emitted some healing green lights, and some wounds healing rapidly were visible to the naked eye.

After some minutes, the princess had a deep breath. Once again, her figure leaped up and floated away like a bird.

.....

In a vale in the Middle Area. A limpid rivulet trickled out of the gorge. The mountains stood high and verdant, while the air tasted sweet and cool. Among the bushes several incomplete, lofty statues protruded conspicuously. By their looks the statues appeared like half-human and half-animal. If Shi Mu had been here he would recognize them instantly, for these statues resembled the ones he had seen earlier very much.

Two figures were flying this way from the stream, and then stopped near the statues. They were exactly the Holy Girl and her guard Su Gu, the sea guy with a fishtail.

“It should be here...” Pearl looked at a blue crystal ball in her hand, and the pointer inside the crystal ball was pointing to the depths of the vale, shivering slightly. Pearl stored the ball carefully away, and then cast her glittering eyes to

those giant statues. She thrilled with excitement, and stepped towards the silent stone works.

Just then a thick, white shadow bolted out of the vale without warning, pouncing down upon the holy girl at lightning speed.

“Careful, Holy Girl!” Su Gu’s countenance changed. A few steps behind her, he knew it would be impossible for him to protect her for the high speed of the moving thing, so he could only shout as loud as he could to remind her of the pressing danger.

Pearl did not expect this either. But she reacted rather speedily, and one foot of hers pointed on the ground to throw her body sideways, escaping the white shadow narrowly. However, the thing also took its way back abruptly to chase after Pearl, as if it was alive and could see clearly.

Boom! Su Gu finally caught up with the white shadow, and the trident in his hand shone with blue light that collided with the whitish thing. The white light had a mighty power that forced Su Gu a step back, his face pale and sweaty. He still clamped the trident, but his hand felt numb due to the impact.

Su Gu needed a brief respite, but was shocked to find his trident fastened to the white shadow closely. His face turned ghastly pale. On second look, he found out what the whitish thing was exactly: an arm-thick spider’s thread.

Taking Risk Out of Desperation

As soon as the white spider thread's attack missed, it was immediately recalled. It was tightly wrapped around the trident with Su Gu pulled along with it.

At this moment, a blue blight shone past extremely swiftly, slicing downwards onto the spider silk.

"Cha!"

The spider silk was cut through.

Not far away, Pearl's left hand grasped the five-coloured coral, while in her right hand, she held a blue coloured serpentine scimitar which emitted a blue lustre meaning it was obviously a valuable treasure.

It was plain to see that the spider thread was cut in half by this sword.

The left over spider thread dashed into the valley. In the next moment, from within the valley trees, a "whoosh" sound resounded loudly and a gargantuan shadow jumped out.

It was an impressively large spider, approximately the height of a human and when looked upon, you could see jagged hairs sticking out from all over its body. On it backs, there were markings alternating between black and yellow in colour, almost as if they were tiger stripes.

From within the giant spider's mouth a set of dagger-like venomous teeth

appeared. They glowed green as 4 different sized eyes gazed at Pearl and Su Gu.

“Tiger-Striped Demon Spider!” yelled Su Gu as his face turned a pale white.

“At a glance, it has probably just advanced not long ago, we will undoubtedly obtain the things in the valley,” Pearl indifferently said. The serpentine scimitar and the five-coloured coral lit up with radiance in her hand.

In another location in the Middle Area, 5 barbarians had just encircled a large blood red tiger.

The blood tiger was a Xiantian beast, but at this moment, one of its hind legs had been pierced through by a bone spear, making it limp.

These five people were from a vicious tribe. Their movements were unparalleled and their synergy with each other was perfect, enabling to capture this blood tiger within a circle. It had tried to burst through a few times, however, the five barbarians were able to block it.

Not far from where they were, there were four to five barbarian corpses laying on the ground still flowing with blood having died a horrible death.

Barbarians, commoners and even mariners made an attempt at the Middle Area. As long as you had power, you would all have an interest in it.

But the Middle Area was was covered in numerous dangers. While hunting beasts, many people have also succumbed to beasts, becoming their food.

Below a black mountain peak in the Middle Area, there was a black cave measuring ten feet high. The inside looked dark and humid, while the green moss grew from the ground and the walls.

Momentarily, a figure appeared from behind a large rock next to the cave. He carefully peek his head out to glance inside the cave. This was Shi Mu.

His condition at the moment wasn't very ideal. His eyes are bloodshot and his face looked emaciated.

Ever since he had stepped in the Middle area, three to four days had already passed. The travel time would be ten days, which meant that he only had two days left.

He had followed the map that Minh Tu had given him, each searching for traces of the python. They had searched everywhere, which came to no avail. The place in front of him, was the last place it could be.

Shi Mu looked at the cave in front of him and relaxed the wrinkle in his brow. He had a glint in his eye.

This cave looked just like a place where snake beasts would reside. From within the cave, a certain stench could be smelled.

The glint in his eyes got bigger and bigger, but he obviously wouldn't recklessly charge into the cave.

Shi Mu breathed a deep breath, calmed his mind and moved carefully into the cave.

His footsteps were taken with great care, and did not utter even a slight sound.

The cave’s interior was made up of a type of black shiny rock.

As soon as Shi Mu saw this, the hope he held had been raised greatly, which could be reflected on his face.

By the time he had moved ten feet into the cave, the light had gradually faded and ended up becoming complete darkness.

However, Shi Mu’s eyesight was very good so the darkness posed no problem for him.

The cave was quite complicated as it winded around. As he headed downwards, fifteen minutes had already past but there was no sign of the python at all.

Shi Mu did not have an impatient look on his face as he held the handle of his black sword in one hand, and a few talismans in the other in his sleeves.

At this moment, Shi Mu had reached a corner, which led to an open area.

Shi Mu stuck fast to the cave walls, and peeked one eye out to look around aththe cavern.

From the large open area in front of him, a large stalactite hung down from the ceiling.

The humidity from this area far exceeded that of the entrance. Even water

droplets would fall from the ceiling.

In the middle of this cavern, there was a pool and its area was fairly large. When the water droplets fell into this pool, it made a light “ding” sound.

Shi Mu’s expression suddenly changed and revealed a look of ecstasy on his face. Next to the pool, there was a concaved nest which had a massive black python measuring more than ten feet.

The scales on the python were pitch black, and some of them even had flame-like patterns on them.

Shi Mu was ecstatic to the extent that his body was faintly trembling.

These flame-like markings confirmed that this was the python that he was looking for.

However, as soon as his eyes laid upon the black python, his expression changed greatly.

He saw a gigantic multi-headed python with three large skulls all sleeping at the moment.

Shi Mu suddenly started to sweat heavily and a hesitant look appeared on his face. He began to slowly back out, carefully walking the way he came.

When he had backed out from the cavern and reached the jungle a hundred feet away, he let an anxious breath of air out, but his brow was still wrinkled.

Even though the multi-headed viper was found, it was completely larger than expected. It was a vicious three-headed python, meaning it was a mid-level Xiantian beast.

According to his level now and adding other secret means, he could possibly defeat an early-stage double-headed Xiantian python, but he could definitely not overcome a middle-stage triple-headed Xiantian python.

His body was still trembling a little. Fortunately, the three-headed python was still deep asleep, otherwise getting out with his life would have been a problem in its own right.

A gravely solemn expression surfaced on Shi Mu's face. In his mind, he was constantly weighing out the benefits and detriments to taking on the three-headed beast.

If he did take action, the chances of succeeding were very slim, needless to say he would probably lose his life.

Should he give up? He had a limit on his time so finding other multi-headed serpents were not an option and according to the information he had gathered, there was no chance of coming across another one.

PoW Chapter 165.2 – Taking Risks Out of Desperation

Even though princess Huowu promised to have an Earth-rank expert to help him with the seal, the totem tattoo on his body could erupt at any time. Whether or not he could hold on until he return to the alliance was definitely a problem. In addition, he couldn't be a hundred percent sure whether or not an Earth-rank expert would agree.

While staying within these sacred mountains, he learned quite a few things about the totem curse from Min Tu.

Based on what Min Tu said, even though an Earth-rank expert could seal up the totem curse's power, it would also seal up a large portion of his own qi as well. In other words, even if he was able to live through a fluke, he would turn into an ordinary person.

"No!"

Shi Mu's hesitant expression slowly began to disappear, and his gaze became decisive.

He already promised his mother that he was going to become a true martial expert. He could not disappoint her now.

He also promised the Tian Yin beauty that he was going to become a Xiantian expert before the age of thirty and find her. How could he be willing to become an ordinary mortal?

When Shi Mu thought up to this point, his expression immediately lifted. He quickly scouted out the area around the cave before standing at a comparatively empty place.

"This is the place!"

He muttered this sentence before retrieving a small bag and opening it. Inside, there were a few charms, spiritual stones, and other things.

These were all prepared by Shi Mu ahead of time for the sake of killing the multi-headed python. His preparations were extremely meticulous, but faced with a mid-stage Xiantian Three-Headed Python, he wasn't sure whether or not these preparations were going to display their intended effect.

Shi Mu brushed away the dead leaves on the ground. Lowering his body, he began to draw out the formation's symbols stroke after stroke. Gradually, the outline of the formation appeared.

After roughly two hours, he stopped. His forehead was full of sweat.

As for the Three-Headed Python, he still did not have any great methods of dealing with it. He could only use everything he had to lay out these formations and traps, then find some way to lure it over. He was going to use this external assistance to see if he could snatch victory.

Following that, Shi Mu found a shaded place to sit down. He took out a pill and began to meditate.

Only after the sun began to set in the western mountains did he feel the power in his body recover to an optimum level. He stood up and first walked over to the formation traps to check them carefully one last time. Only then did he move towards the distant cave entrance.

At this moment, the sky had already completely turned dark. A moon appeared within a sky full of stars, lighting the sky up with tiny specks.

He took out a charm drawn on a piece of beast skin and stuck it onto his body.

A green color enveloped his body and he immediately felt much lighter. He was about to go inside.

Shi Mu was suddenly stumped for words. Within his sea of consciousness, he suddenly recalled that hazy skeleton.

After summoning it a long time ago, he almost forgot about that skeleton after so many years.

He muttered for a bit, then his mouth began to recite a spell.

A lump of black qi appeared in the space before Shi Mu. A short moment later, a lanky skeleton that was a bit shorter than him appeared.

The skeleton was wearing a rather tattered bone armor, and in its hands was a wide bone blade that was roughly half its height. Inside of its eyes, a green soul flame was burning.

Shi Mu's eyes were both opened wide.

Was this rather formidable looking skeleton warrior really the broken small skeleton from before?

As he circled around Silk, the expression in his eyes was of amazement.

With a sweep of his mental strength, he quickly realized Silk's current strength. It had already reached the initial Houtian stage.

"I never thought that this skeleton's strength would increase so drastically after not seeing it for those few years…"

Shi Mu was was absolutely shocked!

It should be known that the first time he summoned the Silk, its strength was only equal to seventh or eighth level of bone-tempering, and its expression was lifeless. If it really fought, it was likely that it was far from being able to match even an ordinary warrior apprentice.

As for the current Silk, an ashy-white color was present in its bones. However, it seemed like its right arm and skull was a bit different from the rest of the bones on its body. It was as if they were a bit brighter.

Silk's expression was blank, its gaze slowly moved towards Shi Mu.

One human and one skeleton looked face to face for a brief moment. Shi Mu's brows slightly furrowed.

The cyan soul flame within the opposing side's eyes seemed to carry a vague hint of emotion.

However, when he carefully looked again, that feeling had already completely vanished.

PoW Chapter 166 – Lure Into a Trap

“Could it be that even skeletons can be sentient and feeling?”

This thought suddenly rose from Shi Mu’s mind, but he shook his head soon after. Throwing this ridiculous thought to the back is head, he began to think about the matter at hand.

“There is a formidable vicious beast within the depths of this cage. Go inside and lead it out.” A moment later, Shi Mu gave Silk this order.

The magical markings immediately displayed its might. A wave of strange force was used on Silk’s body, urging it to step towards the depths of the cave. Powerful resounding steps could be heard.

“Walk softer!”

When Shi Mu saw this scene, he immediately added this sentence.

When Silk heard what was said, its right leg that had just stepped out suddenly stopped, sticking straight out in the air. The faint green soul flame within its eyes began to slightly tremble before that leg slowly fell. Following that, its left leg began to slowly raise…

Silk’s steps became rather slow, and it was almost comical as it walked in a tiptoe manner. However, there were no longer any sounds that could be heard.

Mu Yi felt somewhat speechless when he saw it walking so slowly. However, he didn’t have too many expectations for Silk to begin with, so these actions were already beyond his expectations.

After lightly exhaling, his figure flickered, before soundlessly entering the jungle.

Within the cave, Silk’s figure gradually moved deeper and deeper. However, it seemed to have gradually grown accustomed to this kind of quiet movement, so its steps were much sharper than before.

When Silk was no longer far from that spacious place, the soul flame within its eye sockets suddenly jumped.

A wave of extremely ruthless aura filled the depths of the cave, making it not

want to go any closer. However, under the force of the contract, it couldn't disobey Shi Mu's order and could only continue forward.

Following that, Silk's soul flame surprisingly weakened by a great amount. Its steps also became more quiet, and even the aura around its body was retracted.

Soon after, it arrived at the deepest parts of the cave. The vicious Three-Headed Python appeared within its field of vision.

Even though Silk was able to retract its own aura, its method was naturally not comparable to Shi Mu's.

When its gaze fell on the Three-Headed Viper's body, its coiling body suddenly moved. On top of its three enormous heads, six vertical eyes opened.

The snake heads turned around one after another, and its six ice-cold eyes immediately fell on Silk's body!

Silk's body was sluggish at first, but soon after, the soul flame within its sockets lit up. There wasn't the slightest bit of hesitation as it turned around and fled towards the exit. Its movements became extremely nimble.

The instant it turned around, a black beam of light also flashed through the air, striking down fiercely on where it previously stood.

Honglonglong!

Shattered rocks were blasted everywhere, and a pit roughly one zhang deep was created. At the same time, a nasty sharp odor filled the air.

The Three-Headed Viper's left head opened its mouth wide, releasing an indistinct and faint black light. A low hiss was released;its eyes were full of fury.

If it was before, it wouldn't have been so furious. However, not long ago, it's stomach became pregnant with a new life, so it needed a long and deep sleep. Only then could it deliver a healthy descendant.

However, someone actually dared to enter its territory to disturb it from its sleep. This was definitely an unforgivable matter.

The Three-Headed Viper's enormous body began to sway left and right, suddenly turning into a dark shadow. It shot out, chasing after Silk.

At this moment, Silk had already reached the passageway, its speed extremely quick.

However, this speed was still not enough for the Three-Headed Viper to care about. Its body swooped down towards the passageway like a dragonfly touching water. After slightly moving back, it once again flew out like an arrow from a bow string. In the blink of an eye, it traveled several dozen zhang, catching up to the skeleton.

The right head opened its large mouth wide, using its sharp teeth to directly smash down. It wanted to crush this wretched skeleton into two!

However, right at this moment, Silk's body suddenly became indistinct, turning into a silver afterimage before appearing again several zhang from its original position. It narrowly dodged this snake.

Honglong!

The Three-Headed vicious python clearly didn't anticipate this situation. The snake head couldn't stop its momentum, smashing into the cavern wall. The entire cave immediately began to shake, causing countless crushed rocks to fall in succession.

Silk didn't turn around, but it heard the huge rumbling sound that sounded behind him. The soul flame within its eye sockets began to shake in disorder, as if was showing a shocked expression. Its speed seemed to have increased by a bit.

When the Three-Headed Viper raised its head, Silk had already escaped from through the cave exit.

The vicious Three-Headed Python released a furious hiss from its mouth before frantically chasing after it. The right head opened again, spitting out a thick beam of black light that arrived behind Silk in a mere instant.

Silk's soul flame eyes flashed, and in the next moment, its body became misty again. After leaving behind a string of silver afterimages, it reappeared outside the cave.

With a rumbling sound, the sound of mountain stones blasting apart rang out once again.

After moving twice at such speed, the faint green soul flame within Silk's eyes had already dimmed by quite a bit. However, it still didn't stop and continued to quickly run towards the jungle where Shi Mu's traps were laid.

After failing twice, the vicious Three-Headed Viper went completely mad.

As the overlord of everything within ten li, it rarely miscalculated. However, right now, it couldn't even deal with a mere initial Houtian thing.

Peng! A loud sound rang out.

The cave began to swirl with shattered stones. A huge hole was actually blasted open by the Three-Headed Viper, its enormous ten zhang length body rushing out from the cave.

Within the jungle, there was a certain tree with luxurious leaves. Shi Mu was perched on top of one of its branches as he overlooked the scene excitedly. With a flip of his hand, he took out the Sky-Shattering Bow, and with the other hand, he took out a Wind-Chasing Arrow.

After placing the arrow on the bow, he slowly pulled it to its greatest length. A hint of gold swept past his eyes.

The vicious Three-Headed Viper was extremely fast, and with only a few breaths, it appeared several zhang behind Silk.

However, as soon as its enormous body swayed about, its thick and solid tail suddenly slammed down on the ground. The gigantic body seemed to fly into the air like a black arrow towards Silk. The left head opened its mouth wide, and as a black light flickered inside, it was going to spew out a black beam of light again. The right head bared its fangs, as if it was charging up for a great attack.

Silk could feel the terrifying force fluctuating over from behind him. However, it already ran out of power to use its blink skill. In the middle of running, it suddenly threw its body down to avoid the attack.

However, at this moment, a sou sound streaked across the air!

This was precisely the green-colored arrow that flashed out from the forest, aiming at the Three-Headed Python.

The arrow was wrapped up in green symbols, reaching a terrifying speed as it

tore through the air. Taking advantage of the moment the enormous python's right head opened, it sank right into it.

The Three-Headed Viper immediately released a painful cry. The right head that was struck by the Wind-Chasing Arrow began to frantically swing back and forth, continuously smashing into the ground.

Honglonglong!

A huge hole was smashed open in the ground. Dust flew into the air, and a gale began to engulf the surrounding area.

Silk, who was lying on the ground, was picked up by this gale. It began to fly like a willow branch into the air before dropping into the jungle.

After tumbling forward and backwards for a while, Silk lied on the ground, unmoving. It seemed to have received serious injuries from the fierce attack just now and could not budge an inch.

Within the nearby jungle, Shi Mu revealed a face of shock. Just now, he could clearly see that Silk had merely been affected by the gale. The bone armor on its body did not seem to suffer much damage.

However, the current situation was desperate, so he didn't have time to think about Silk's matters. He once again took out a Wind-Chasing Arrow and placed it in the bow.

A ear-splitting xiu sound whistled through the air!

The green arrow was like a shooting star as it went straight for the middle head's left eye.

The Three-Headed Python's left and middle heads' eyes shot out ominous looks. The head in the middle opened its mouth wide and spat out a slender red streak, accurately engulfing that long green arrow. This was precisely the vicious python's tongue.

However, the Three-Headed Vicious clearly underestimated the power of the Wind-Chasing Arrow. Even though the tongue wrapped itself around the arrow, it couldn't knock it out of the way.

The long green arrow only slightly altered its trajectory. With a pu sound, it

firmly smashed into the scales surrounding that middle head, a small portion of the arrow piercing through.

The Three-Headed Python received another injury. As it released a loud hiss, the ice-cold snake released a burning gaze. It no longer paid attention to Silk, instead rushing towards the location where the arrow came from like a streak of lightning.

Within the jungle, Shi Mu restrained all of his body's aura. As he watched the incoming Three-Headed Python, his eyes revealed a happy expression.

His arm gently tugged. The transparent silk in his hands connected all the way into the distance.

Several zhang out, the jungle leaves fluttered, and a huala sound could be heard.

The vicious Three-Headed Python looked in that direction with a flash of understanding. Its enormous body immediately leapt out from within the forest, and the left head opened, releasing an expanse of black light. It was not a light beam like before, but instead a rolling bucket-thick black wind that swept towards the jungle's branches and leaves.

However, right at this moment, it overlooked something!

Suddenly, a beam of yellow light shot out from within the forest. It interweaved and condensed within the air before turning into a giant circular net, directly trapping the Three-Headed Python's body.

The vicious Three-Headed Python's body seemed as if it was being suppressed by a small mountain, directly thrown down onto the ground.

The yellow light that formed the circular web had confining properties. As a result, the Three-Headed Python with mid-stage Xiantian level power became sluggish within the circular web.

Within the jungle, Shi Mu began to mutter to himself. A palm-sized yellow disk began to float in front of him, and many formation symbols were carved on it. As it spun about, it released waves of yellow light.

After seeing that the vicious Three-Headed Python was trapped within, he

revealed an exalted look. He turned around and jumped down, about to carry out his plan.

However, right at this moment, the Three-Headed Python's six vertical eyes released sinister looks from under the circular net. Its thick body began to violently squirm about, and large amounts of black qi began to appear on its body's surface, attacking at the golden bindings surrounding it.

The yellow binding light became unsteady. They began to shake, and faint cracks were starting to appear.

Within the nearby jungle, Shi Mu was greatly alarmed. He immediately lifted a hand and threw out a blue-colored charm. This was precisely the cold yin charm that princess Huowu gave him before they entered the forbidden land.

The blue charm flashed with a brilliant light in the air before turning into pieces. Seven or eight streaks of sky blue colored tentacles appeared, extending into the golden light beams. They tightly wrapped around the Three-Headed Python's body, binding its movements.

The vicious Three-Headed Python became agitated. The furious snake began to ferociously twist about, and the black mist around its body immediately doubled as if it was going to materialize. As the python attacked the blue tentacles and yellow light beams that were restricting it, waves of thunderous noise were released!

PoW Chapter 167 – Shocking Change

Haha, the moment had arrived!

The cold yin symbol was worthy of being a mid-level charm. Under the forceful attacks of the Three-Headed Python, even though the freezing-blue tentacles trembled slightly, it still remained firm without any noticeable signs of breaking.

Shi Mu's eyes suddenly had an excited look. His figure flashed before reappearing on a treetop nearby.

Currently, he was surrounded by a layer of dim golden light.

This was precisely the golden armor charm!

He looked towards the struggling Three-Headed Python, and without any a single bit of hesitation, he sprung out.

While still in the air, he suddenly raised his arm. A fist-sized cloth bag was thrown towards the Three-Headed Python's head.

The vicious Three-Headed Python's body suddenly stood up straight. One of its head was raised a bit, staring at Shi Mu with viciousness. The large mouth opened, releasing a burst of black light.

However, Shi Mu was faster. After pointing out with a finger, a ball of flame flew out like a meteor, striking the cloth bag. Borrowing the recoil of the fireball, he turned him body and dropped down.

A muffled peng sound rang out!

The cloth bag exploded, sprinkling out a large amount of yellow powder. A powerful sulfuric smell wafted through the air, enveloping the Three-Headed Python within.

The yellow powder was a medicinal powder he previously prepared just for the vicious Three-Headed Python.

As soon as the yellow powder made contact with the vicious Three-Headed Python, its entire body began to emit waves of chi chi sounds. Quite a few of the scales that covered its body were eliminated. And among them, the leftmost head received the greatest impact. The majority of the scales covering its face

melted off!

All three heads were raised towards the heavens as they released screams of its suffering. It was as if they received an extremely serious injury. At the same time, the black energy around its body continuously seemed as like ice that been set aflame, dissipating by a large amount.

Shi Mu became excited. With a sudden kick with his feet, his body soared several zhang into the air. With a turn of his hand, he took out the black meteoric sword from his back.

Power began to surge from within his body into the blade.

A hong sound rang out!

Raging flames ignited from the sword, reaching out roughly a meter in length as it enveloped the sword. It turned into an enormous blazing sword.

“Kill!”

Shi Mu shouted loudly. The blazing warblade turned into scarlet lightning as it hacked down ferociously.

The Three-Headed Python was startled, beginning to struggle helplessly. Its head swayed to and fro as if it wanted to dodge to the side. However, it was tied up by the yellow beams of light as well as the cold yin symbol. Its movements were restricted, so it couldn’t avoid this attack.

The blazing warblade ruthlessly hacked at the neck of the left head. Thanks to the fact that it lacked the protection of scales, a clear bloody wound appeared. An enormous snake head was separated from its body, as if a huge boulder suddenly flew out.

Immediately after, warm fishy snake blood gushed out like a fountain from the Three-Headed Python’s broken neck.

Shi Mu was close to victory. His entire body was immediately dyed red by the endless spray of dark blood.

He wiped off the snake blood from his face. The flame rising from his warblade shone even greater. With a shake of his wrist, the flaming sword slashed out thirteen identical afterimages, creating a huge cloud of flames that engulfed the

remaining two heads.

The other two heads of the Three-Headed Python stared blankly, almost as if they didn't show any response. Only when the flaming blade radiance was about to strike his body did it react.

Hou!

The two snake heads released a tremendous hiss, as if it was the cry of a dragon. The middle head's eyes flashed with blood red light, and the entire snake became crimson in color. It opened its mouth with lightning speed to bit one of the blades of light.

The Three-Headed Python firmly bit the blade radiance as it swirled in the void, not fearing the flames that covered it at all.

The other twelve streaks of fiery blade radiance flashed. Soon afterwards, they dispersed.

A kacha sound softly rang out, ringing out from the blade itself!

Shi Mu revealed a shocked expression as he did everything he could to pull back the black meteoric blade. However, the strength that he was so incredibly proud of was only like an ant trying to shake a tree in front of this mid-stage Xiantian python.

The Three-Headed Python's right head's eyes shone with a bloody light. It wanted to twist over and bite Shi Mu, but it was trapped by the icy blue tentacles of the cold yin symbol.

The middle head suddenly flung about violently, tossing Shi Mu and the black meteoric sword far into the distance.

At this moment, its entire body had already turned into a blood red color. After being affected by the yellow powder, thick scales grew at a visible place. Crimson light lingered about its body, and even the black energy turned into a bloody mist.

The Three-Headed Python released an angry roar. After sucking in a breath of air, its body suddenly grew a lot thicker. The icy blue tentacles around its body began to develop cracks, and soon after, they immediately ruptured with a loud

noise.

The vicious python's thick tail flung out abruptly, ferociously smashing apart the yellow net-like formation.

The beams of yellow net-like light immediately rang out with kacha sounds. They split apart, turning into specks of yellow light before disappearing without a trace.

Thirty or so meters out, Shi Mu was currently struggling to his feet. When he saw the scene in front of him, his face immediately became abnormally pale. Even though he had always pressed on with unswerving determination, currently, he couldn't help but feel a hint of despair.

Even though the vicious python was currently gravely wounded, after breaking free from its restrictions, Shi Mu was far from being its match. It was quite likely that fleeing wasn't even an option.

The Three-headed Python turned around and looked at Shi Mu. Its eyes erupted with vicious light, and with a twist of its body, a frantic gale was raised. Its speed was faster than the wind as it pounced over.

Shi Mu shivered inwardly. Pushing off with his legs, his body shot in reverse.

Meanwhile, blue light flickered within his hands, producing a thumb-sized bead. It was precisely that clam pearl that Xiang Zhu gifted him. Three different types of blue light swirled about, releasing a serene radiance.

He had already inspected these three blue-colored light specks with his mental awareness. There were three water attribute techniques sealed within.

Shi Mu raised his hand. The blue light within the pearl was released, and three lumps of blue light flew out from within. They swirled in the air before turning into an expanse of blue radiance. Three ice walls roughly a dozen meters in height immediately appeared, protecting his body.

After this was finished, Shi Mu immediately turned around and ran for his life.

The Three-Headed Python had already thrown off all of its restrictions,. Right now, he could only retreat.

Peng Peng Peng

A thick tail smashed into the wall of ice. The three ice walls were smashed apart in succession, turning into numerous shards of ice.

The three ice walls didn't inhibit the Three-Headed Python in the slightest!

Shi Mu's face changed greatly. Before he even turned around, a thick black shadow was accompanied by a rancid gale. In the next moment, the Three-Headed Python's incomparably thick tail had already whipped fiercely at his body.

Blood erupted from his mouth, and his entire body flew out like a sack, smashing into the jungle. Only after smashing apart many large trees did he finally stop.

His body was lying on the floor, and large amounts of blood were gushing from his mouth. The left side of his body was bent at a strange angle, and other than his arm, no one knew just how many of his other bones were broken.

If not for him cultivating of the Art of Heavenly Elephant, it would have been nearly impossible to survive. His body was far more powerful than an ordinary person, but even though there were even three ice walls that cushioned the blow, his body was now still torn and his bones crushed after suffering that attack.

At this moment, Shi Mu was at a point where he couldn't feel too much pain anymore. His entire body seemed to have went numb as his life force continuously flowed towards all areas of his body.

"In the end, I still wasn't able to fulfill my promise…" He began to mock himself.

A hong rang out!

The surrounding jungle had been engulfed by a wave of mad wind. The Three-Headed Python didn't seem to be the slightest bit relaxed as it chased after the near dead Shi Mu. Two pairs of eyes flourished with murderous intent without the slightest hint of mercy.

Its large mouth opened, and a bucket-thick beam of light shot out, blasting

towards Shi Mu!

Shi Mu's fingers couldn't budge an inch as his eyes watched the beam of light fly over.

At this moment, a figure flew over, blocking in front of him. This was precisely Silk.

Silk's eyes were currently flickering with a dull green soul flame. As it faced the crimson beam of light, it released a strange and bright radiance, not showing the slightest intent of backing off.

It raised its head, releasing a soundless cry. A layer of faint white light appeared on his right arm as he sent it flying out.

A muffled peng sounded!

After Silk's body made contact with the blood-colored radiance, it was as if it had been struck by a sledgehammer, flying out like a kite with its string cut. Its entire framework shattered in the sky, and only a small part of its body remained. After dropping into the forest, no one knew if it was still alive.

Silk was able to block a majority of the crimson light, but the remaining force smashed into Shi Mu's body.

Shi Mu's body was sent flying once again. He fell into vacant space within the woods.

At this moment, his entire body was drenched in blood. Practically all expression had vanished from his eyes.

Shi Mu's spirit entered a dormant state, and the surroundings all seemed to have become distant.

Time began to move extremely slowly. The approaching Three-Headed Lion seemed to have became extremely far, drawing closer at a seemingly snail-like pace. Even its vicious roars became barely audible.

From the corner of his eyes, he seemed to even be able to see black cloud cover the moon as it gradually diffused outwards

In the next moment, the moon seemed to have scattered down a faint silver sheen, shining down on Shi Mu's body.

Immediately, A pa ta sound rang out within Shi Mu's sea of consciousness, and the bean-sized crystal suddenly shattered, turning into a luminous full moon.

A wave of powerful and pure energy entered Shi Mu's body. He immediately trembled, and his originally hazy consciousness became clear.

Even though he was now clear-headed, he noticed that he couldn't control his body at all.

Weng weng!

A wave of terrifying fluctuations proliferated from Shi Mu's body. Within the endless silver moonlight, countless specks of light appeared.

The countless specks of light descended from the skies, converging into a silver rain of light. It was as if the heavenly sea of stars were rumbling as they dropped down, integrating themselves into Shi Mu's body.

These circumstance were exactly the same as the cultivation of moon-swallowing. However, when he cultivated the Moon-Swallowing Art before, he had never felt such an exuberant lunar essence.

An endless amount of lunar essence poured into Shi Mu's body, healing the wounds on his body with extreme speed. Even his broken bones seemed to have mended themselves back together.

This was not all. Shi Mu suddenly felt a wave of heat coming from the depths of his blood vessels. Following that, they all began to move quickly within his body.

Accompanying this warm stream was also a wave of sharp pain. It was as if countless small daggers were slicing at the blood vessels throughout his body.

Ka ka…

The surface of Shi Mu's body revealed a layer of silver radiance. Ka ka sounds were simultaneously released from joints all over his body. Following that, his body seemed to have inflated as it swelled. In the blink of an eye, he became seven or eight zhang in length.

His chest, abdomen, and limbs formed thick and sturdy muscles chunk after chunk. Countless silver hairs grew densely from his body and face. Sharp fangs

extended from his mouth, and even his fingers grew sharp talons.

Within a few breaths, Shi Mu seemed to have transformed into an enormous white ape. His arms beated his chest as he roared towards the sky.