
ROU BAO BU CHI ROU
The Husky & His White Cat Shizun
7
ERHA HE TA DE BAI MAO SHIZUN

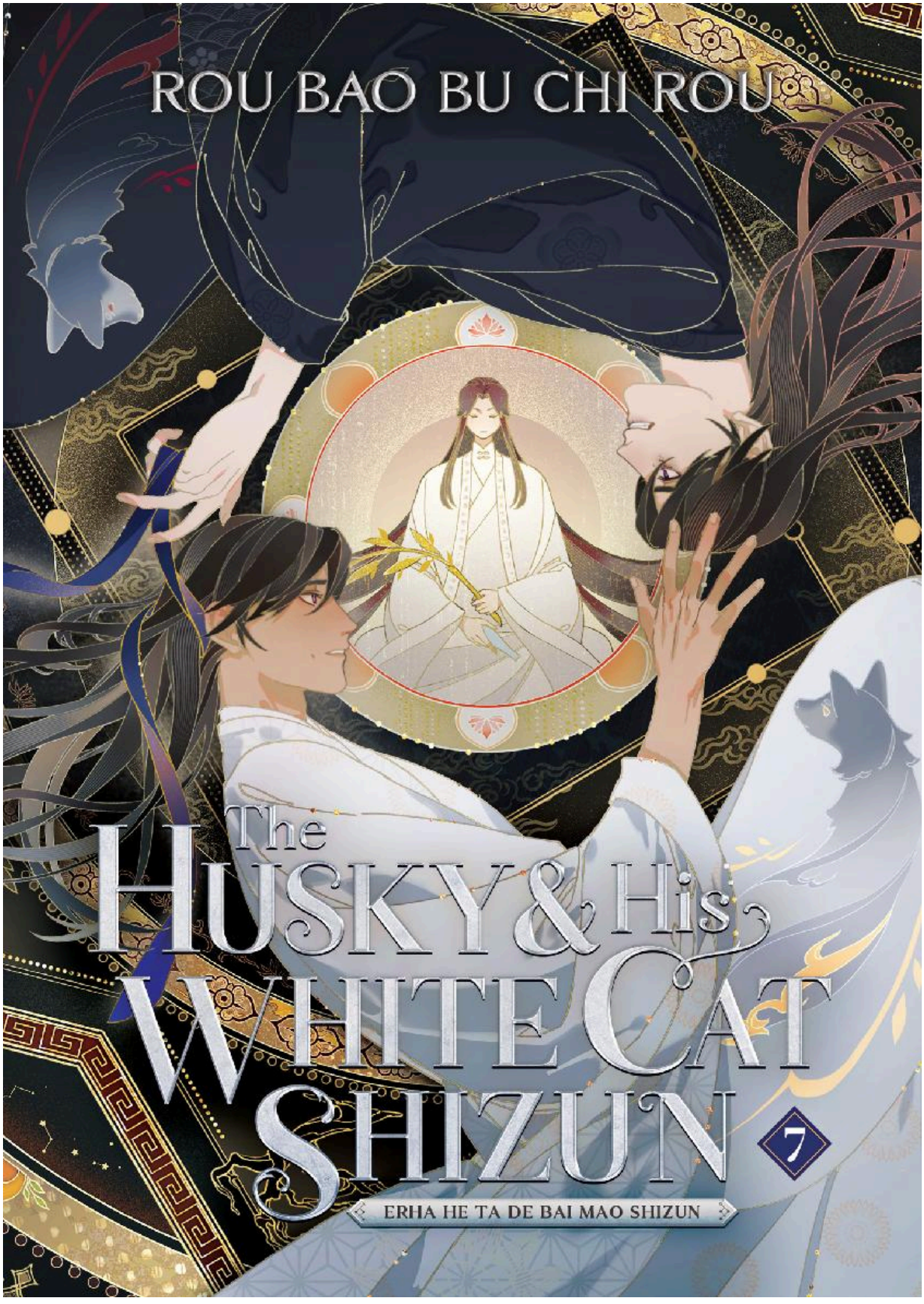
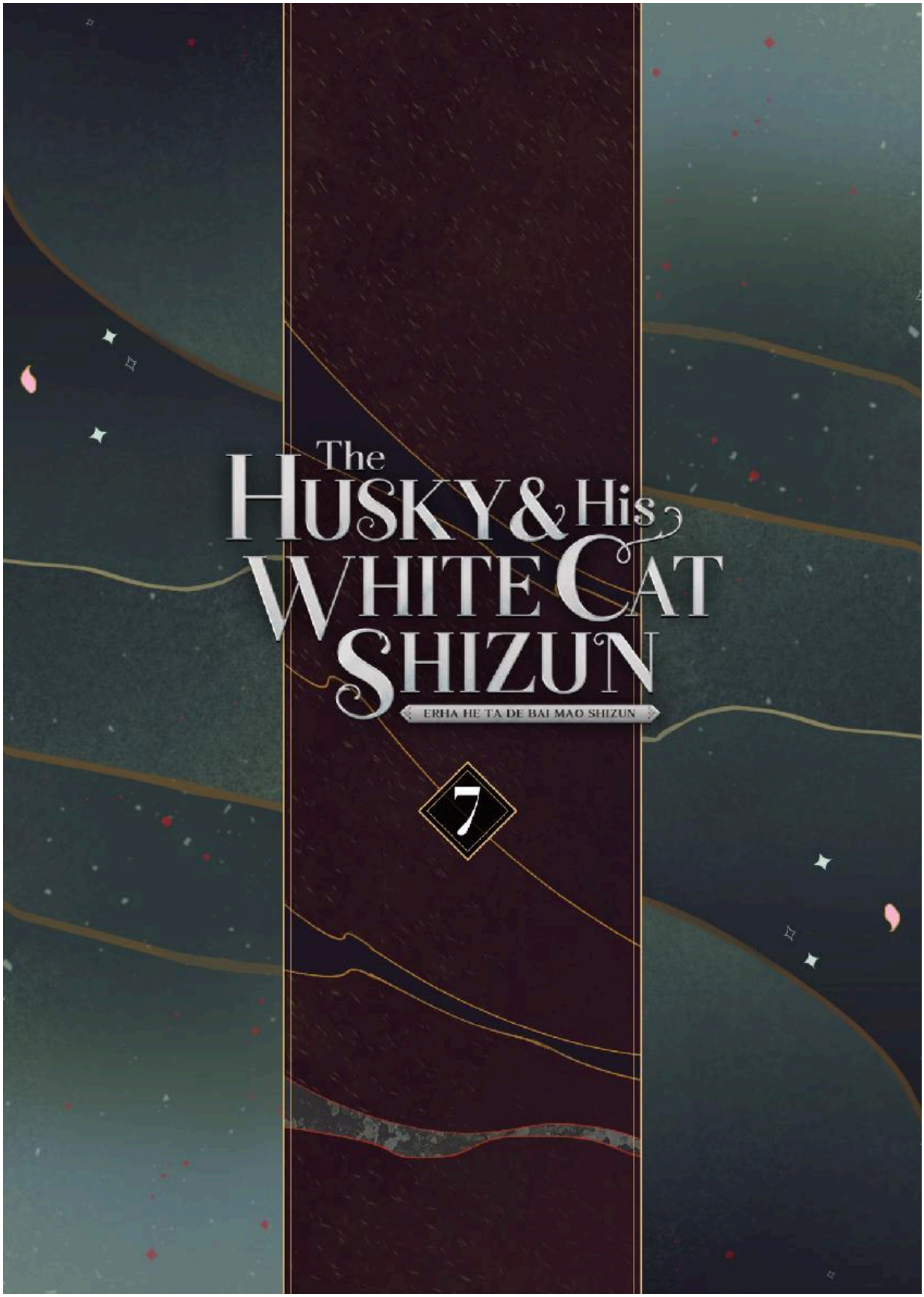

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Chapter 210:
Shizun's Only Allowed to Give *Me* a Handkerchief

HALFWAY THROUGH THE NIGHT, Chu Wanning woke from fitful slumber to find Mo Ran dressed and out of bed. He sat at the table before a single lit candle, head bowed in concentration over something in his hands. Bathed by the candlelight and the afterglow of their entanglement, all of Mo Ran's helplessness and disquiet seemed to have faded to nothing. Chu Wanning watched him for a while, gaze languid, before asking, "What are you working on?"

"Shizun, are you awake? Is the light too bright…"

"No. What are you working on?" Chu Wanning asked once more.

Mo Ran pressed his lips together and smiled bashfully.

Chu Wanning rose and draped a robe over his shoulders. He padded barefoot over to Mo Ran, leaning against the table to take a look. Spread upon the wooden surface were Chu Wanning's haitang handkerchief and three plain white ones, which Mo Ran was presently embroidering using the haitang as reference.

"You're embroidering handkerchiefs?"

"Shizun…I want the handkerchiefs you make to be just for me."

Mo Ran set down the needle and thread to wrap an arm around Chu Wanning's waist. Leaning in, he kissed Chu Wanning's bare chest where a scar lay above his heart. Chu Wanning had never mentioned how he'd gotten it, and Mo Ran had never asked. But he often kissed it unconsciously when they were pressed skin to skin.

"I'll make the handkerchiefs for the others," said Mo Ran. "They won't know who did it, anyway…" He picked up a finished

handkerchief. “See, Shizun, I copied yours—doesn’t it look identical?” Mo Ran asked, grinning.

Chu Wanning sighed. “I hardly need to look to know it will be.”

Did Mo Ran have to be quite *so* possessive? Chu Wanning ran his fingers through Mo Ran’s hair. Mo Ran tilted his head back in response, smiling up at him. The light of the candle was dim, and Mo Ran’s eyes were slightly bloodshot from strain. But the soft brilliance of his smile was undiminished.

“Is there still something on your mind?” Chu Wanning asked.

Mo Ran blinked, then said softly, “Not anymore.”

“Mn, that’s good.”

“Let’s just…take things as they come.” Mo Ran seemed to be saying it to himself as well as Chu Wanning.

Take things as they come.

Days like these were far too few. Mo Ran was no god; he was a tiny, insignificant scrap of duckweed floating through the vast mortal world. Every person had selfish desires of their own. If one were to give a cup of water to a parched man and allow him a single sip, only to instruct him to pour the rest out and die of thirst, it would be an impossible task. Who in the world could bear to do it? *Why not take one more sip of sweet dew,* Mo Ran thought to himself. If he were sent back to purgatory after today, at least he’d have this comfort—a reservoir of crystalline memories to soothe a lifetime of drought.

The next morning, all the travelers assembled outside Taobao Estate to set out for Mount Jiao. Master Ma had directed his people to ready a hardy steed for each cultivator, and hanging from the pommel of every black and gold saddle was a qiankun pouch embroidered with the motif of a black cat. From atop his horse, Xue Meng took one glance at this pouch and wrinkled his nose, nauseated.

He didn't expect to hear a soft chuckle from nearby. "Ma-zhuang-zhu's taste is really something. The cat-head logo on the qiankun pouches is one thing, but the red 'Ma' stitched onto the back? How quaint."

Xue Meng turned his head to see Mei Hanxue astride a tall white horse, toying with the qiankun pouch in his hand. He glanced up at Xue Meng, a touch of mirth in those eyes like pale jade. The teardrop ornament at his brow shimmered with a gentle light, painting a mesmerizing picture.

Xue Meng rolled his eyes. "Sleazeball."

The sleazeball flashed a small smile, his eyes crinkling without a hint of anger. "Xue-gongzi's looking rather peaked today. Missed your beauty sleep last night?" Undeterred by Xue Meng's silence, Mei Hanxue continued, "You have dark circles under your eyes and an inauspicious shadow between your brows. I've got some calming herbal ointment here that will help you sleep…"

"Mei Hanxue, have you nothing better to do?" Xue Meng had reached the limit of his endurance. He fumed, "What are you doing over here with Sisheng Peak? Did Taxue Palace kick you out?"

"My shizun sent me," Mei Hanxue replied, smile never faltering. "I've brought the concealed weapons your dad asked for yesterday."

"Then you'd better drop them and get lost."

"Mm-hmm," Mei Hanxue agreed cheerfully. "Getting lost in just a minute."

Xue Meng could only stare. Something *had* to be wrong with this man. Each time Xue Meng saw him, he was either coy as a girl or cold as a rock. He'd been aloof when Xue Meng had run into him at Rufeng Sect, putting Xue Meng down with terse jibes, yet now he was playing the gentleman and turning the other cheek. Xue Meng could hardly stand to look at him. Tugging on the reins, he turned back once more to glare at the exceedingly handsome man mounted beside him.

"Seriously, Mei Hanxue, do you have a problem with me?"

"Nope."

"Then do you think we're *close* or something?"

Mei Hanxue laughed without answering, his limpid eyes flecked with light. Under the hood of his cloak, the ends of his long, golden hair fluttered in the breeze, glowing warm beneath the sun.

At any rate, Xue Meng didn't plan on waiting for his reply. He scowled. "Once you deliver the weapons, get out of here. I can't keep you from hounding the other sects, but don't even *think* of sucking up to me so you can corrupt the little shimei from Sisheng Peak."

"*Pfft*." Mei Hanxue sputtered a laugh, then quickly concealed it with a cough into his fist. Intrigued, he scrutinized Xue Meng for a moment more before replying, "Got it."

The silver bell on his pale wrist tinkled softly in the wind as he turned his horse away. With a last smile, he cast Xue Meng a sidelong glance. "I'm off."

Xue Meng glared. "What are you waiting for? Do I need to send you off with firecrackers?"

Mei Hanxue urged his horse forward, but after a couple of steps, he turned his head once more. "Oh yes, one more thing."

Xue Meng didn't want to hear it, but his curiosity got the better of him. "What?" he grumbled.

Mei Hanxue smirked. He brought one long, fair finger to the corner of his lips, looking every bit the rogue as he laughed, "You're so saucy today."

Xue Meng's face went an alarming shade of green. "Y-you… *You!*" Overcome with disgust, he sputtered without managing a single word more.

At this point, the sect leaders were shouting orders to assemble in preparation for their departure. Mei Hanxue grinned and

waved to Xue Meng as he dug his heels into his mount and rode off. By the time Mo Ran brought his horse up next to Xue Meng, their visitor had vanished into the crowd. All he saw was Xue Meng in a state of such fury he was clutching his chest and gagging.

"Did you eat something bad?" Mo Ran asked in alarm.

"Ugh—don't talk to me right now. I got served a steaming pile of shit first thing in the fucking morning…"

"Fasting does make you hungry, but surely not so hungry you'd eat a pile of shit…"

"Fuck *off*!" Xue Meng shoved Mo Ran in the chest, sending both him and the horse stumbling back. He looked angry enough to ascend as he roared red-faced into the distance: "Ugh! Bullshit! *You're* the fucking saucy one!"

After this final kerfuffle, the crowd of thousands mounted their horses and departed Gu Mountain to begin their journey toward Mount Jiao. Such a sight was rare: most cultivators traveled by sword, which allowed even large groups to traverse long distances in no time at all. It was unusual for so many cultivators to set out together on horseback.

A good portion of their party had never undertaken such a long ride before, and complaints began to rise from the group after the first day. Luckily, Master Ma's qiankun pouches contained all sorts of useful items: from energizing pills to refreshingly perfumed hand fans, to several catalogs printed on silk featuring descriptions and prices of myriad novelties sold by Taobao Estate.

During one break along the way, Xue Meng watched Master Ma prattling away under the shade of a tree. The second-richest man in the world spared neither effort nor enthusiasm in his tireless hawking. "Distinguished sirs and madams, if you see anything you like, just put a checkmark next to the item! Once I return home, I'll personally deliver them to your manors—seven-day guaranteed refund, fifteen-day warranty! No need to send payment until your orders have arrived in full…"

Several people listening were so bored of the long ride they really did begin to flip through the catalogs. This was just what Master Ma intended—these little booklets were the only option for reading material in those spacious qiankun pouches. And if one looked at the catalogs long enough, a few items would inevitably start to seem appealing. Even Xue Meng ended up drawing a circle around "Nanping Mountain Spiritual Swallow's Nest—suitable for all ages, with a delicate and subtle flavor, this premium-quality product will fortify your spiritual energy!" It seemed Jack Ma was indeed going to make a fortune, quite as Mo Ran had predicted.

After seven days of riding, Master Ma's coffers were overflowing, while the travelers were beginning to flag. They finally reached the edge of the Panlong Range that evening.

"Dragons have their pride, prithee mark this well."

Xue Zhengyong read aloud the words carved into the massive boulder at the path's entrance. He turned to Nangong Si. "Young Nangong-gongzi, what does this mean?"

"It means we must proceed on foot from this point on," Nangong Si replied. "Also, no one may use any obscene language until we open the barrier on Mount Jiao. Otherwise, the dragon will retaliate."

The sect leaders wasted no time relaying Nangong Si's grave warning to their subordinates. Each sect had their own method of transmitting messages: the leader of Taxue Palace blew into a jade flute that she drew from her sash, while Master Xuanjing rang a silver bell. Jiang Xi didn't move a muscle; instead it was Hua Binan who waved a hand and summoned a dark cloud from his sleeve. Only upon closer examination did they see that this cloud was not smoke, but thousands of tiny insects that buzzed over to the ear of every Guyueye disciple.

The sight repulsed Xue Meng. "Hanlin the Sage is such a weirdo," he remarked. "Do you think he's covered in bugs?" A thought occurred to him, and he turned to Shi Mei. "Wait, didn't you

study on Rainbell Isle? Hua Binan didn't rub off on you or anything, did he? You'd better not whip out a swarm of bugs too—I swear I couldn't take it."

Shi Mei turned and smiled after a beat. "The young master needn't worry."

Sisheng Peak also needed to pass on Nangong Si's message. The other sects had their impressive specialized techniques, but Xue Zhengyong simply cast a voice-amplifying spell on himself and shouted, "Once we enter the mountains, don't cuss or swear! If you can't control yourself, place a silencing curse on yourself before we go in! Everybody got that?"

His booming voice rang between the peaks, resounding deep into the forests and high into the clouds. The insistent echo of his words—*Everybody got that? …body got that? …got that?*—left the crowd of cultivators dumbfounded.

Chapter 211:
Shizun, Let's Climb Mount Jiao

THE FIRST DAY AFTER entering the mountain range passed without incident, but on the second night, while everyone was meditating or resting, a mishap occurred.

One of the cultivators went into the forest in the middle of the night to relieve himself. As he was emptying his bladder, he felt an itch on his leg and looked down to see an enormous mosquito perched on his thigh, swollen with blood. He crushed the mosquito with a quick slap, then added out of habit, "Fuck off, goddamn bloodsucker."

Ominous rustling rose from the forest around him. Panicking, the cultivator abruptly remembered Nangong Si's warning. Without even bending to pull up his pants, he broke into a sprint, screaming at the top of his lungs, "Help! Shizun! Help me!"

This cultivator was a disciple of Jiangdong Hall and one of Huang Xiaoyue's attendants. His desperate shout was like a boulder crashing into a still pool, sending up massive waves. The travelers roused from their slumber to see the terrified Jiangdong Hall cultivator hurtling toward them from out of the trees. He was simultaneously sprinting and sobbing, ass out, dick swinging. At his heels hissed a horde of at least a hundred black snakes, several already wrapped around his ankles.

"My disciple?" Huang Xiaoyue gasped.

"Don't go over there!" Nangong Si cried.

The disciple wailed as he ran, but more and more snakes slithered over him. Finally he stumbled and toppled to the ground. "Shizun!" he howled. "Shizun, save me!"

Huang Xiaoyue was about to rush to him when Nangong Si spoke up: "Those snakes are made from the evil dragon's whiskers. For each one you kill, two more will take its place, and they'll never stop chasing you. If that doesn't scare Huang-daozhang, then be my guest."

Nangong Si's words frightened Huang Xiaoyue out of his wits. He quickly found an excuse to justify his cowardice. "We must keep the bigger picture in mind, the bigger picture." He looked on as his own disciple was swallowed by a tide of snakes. The man writhed in anguish as they pulled him down, covering him until all that was left was a black mass that sank slowly but surely into the earth. As the roiling snakes dispersed, all that remained was a pool of blood, without a scrap of bone or gristle.

After that, no one uttered a single unnecessary word during the last day of the journey. Everyone understood that the more they spoke, the more likely they were to slip up. Xue Zhengyong cast a silencing spell on both himself and Xue Meng, as the two were constitutionally incapable of not speaking their minds. Heaven forbid they mumbled "damn mutt" in passing and ended up snake fodder before one could blink.

The group traversed the Panlong Range with increased caution. Late at night on the third day, they finally arrived at the base of Mount Jiao—Rufeng Sect's heroes' tomb.

Mount Jiao's barrier was different from Mount Huang's. The jiao dragon abhorred deception, and thus its barrier had no masking spells—the travelers could see the mountain clear beyond it.

Looking up, Jiang Xi asked, "So this is where Rufeng Sect buries its warriors?"

Nangong Si's features were silvered with moonlight. "It is," he replied after a beat.

Mount Jiao had once been a demonic dragon. Rufeng Sect's founding leader had defeated the creature and formed a blood pact with it, after which it had transformed into a great mountain to

guard centuries' worth of Rufeng Sect's heroes and treasures, as well as its ancestral temples and memorial halls. Nangong Si had come to this mountain with his father every winter solstice to sweep the tombs and pay respects to his ancestors for as long as he could remember. Each time, he'd look up at the endless white marble steps winding to the peak, the path lined with members of the shadow guard. Their green robes fluttered in the breeze as they saluted the sect's young master. His ears would ring faintly with the calls of the kneeling crowd as he made his way to the top. There, at the highest ancestral temple, he would meet his father, already preparing the sacrificial rites.

"Nangong-gongzi, now's not the time to mope," a voice interjected. "The battle's right around the corner—open the barrier quickly so we may pass through and destroy that monster."

Nangong Si looked over his shoulder and found the speaker was none other than Huang Xiaoyue. In Rufeng Sect's glory days, a man like Huang Xiaoyue wouldn't have dared speak with such impertinence even if Nangong Si had struck him ten times across the face. But now, Huang Xiaoyue had no qualms running his mouth in sight of Nangong Si's ancestral tomb. Nangong Si swallowed down his anger, gritting his teeth so hard his molars began to ache.

"Everyone, stand back," he called out before stepping up to the gate alone.

A pair of tomb-guarding statues shaped like lions rampant flanked the gate. Carved of spiritual stone, their toes alone were the height of a five-year-old child, and their heads bore three faces, some kindly, others stern. In each raised paw was a different weapon, and vambraces encircled their arms. Such tomb guardians usually featured bulging, alert eyes, but strangely, the eyes of all these statues were closed and their brows knit. It was a disconcerting sight.

Nangong Si drew an arrow from his sleeve and, without batting an eye, pricked his fingertip. He sketched a spell array on the

statues in his own blood, then intoned, "I, Nangong Si, of Rufeng Sect's seventh generation of descendants, pay my respects."

An earth-shaking rumble answered.

"The statue!" some naïve soul among the onlookers exclaimed. "Its eyes are open!"

Mo Ran looked up from within the crowd. If not for the urgency of the situation, he would've said to that excitable cultivator, *It's not just the one statue—it's both of them.* On either side of the gate, the tomb guardians' eyes had snapped open—their irises shone amber, pupils slitted like a snake's.

"Nangong Si." The left statue spoke, its voice a deep drone. "Dost thou remember the seven taboos of Rufeng Sect?"

"As a gentleman of Rufeng Sect, I mustn't indulge in greed, resentment, deception, slaughter, obscenity, plunder, or conquest," answered Nangong Si.

Huang Xiaoyue gave a derisive snort. "Doesn't that sound lovely."

He wasn't alone—many in the crowd were silently considering that, given the present state of Rufeng Sect, these seven so-called taboos were truly ironic.

The right statue spoke next, its voice like an echo through the ages. "Nangong Si, above are the omniscient heavens, below are the boundless Yellow Springs. As thou wander'st the land, dost thou carry guilt in thy heart?"

"I carry no guilt in my heart."

Nangong Si had memorized these replies in his youth. Every member of the Nangong family, without exception, must answer these two questions before they could enter the heroes' tomb. Rufeng Sect's founder had instituted them in the hope his descendants would recall their ancestor's teachings and self-reflect when they came to pay their respects on the mountain. At that moment, Nangong Si couldn't help wondering—in all those years his

father had come here offering sacrifices and honoring his ancestors, had he never felt the slightest twinge of emotion, the slightest trace of regret? Or had he merely treated this question-and-answer sequence as a lock and key, a method to open the barrier and nothing more?

In front of him, the barrier dissolved. The two lions rumbled to life, each bending a knee in a sluggish genuflection. "We humbly invite our master to pass."

Nangong Si stood for a moment, facing away from the crowd. No one—not even Ye Wangxi—could see his expression. Naobaijin whimpered plaintively from his quiver, clinging to the mouth with snow-white paws.

"Let's go," Nangong Si said at last, and stepped over the boundary of Mount Jiao.

Xue Zhengyong lifted his silencing spell. "Do we still have to mind our language here?"

"There's no need," replied Nangong Si. "That only applies to the Panlong Range. It's meant to keep out any who wish harm on Rufeng Sect. By this point, the jiao has determined that those climbing the mountain aren't enemies, so it no longer matters what you say."

Despite his explanation, the group remained on edge as they followed Nangong Si up the mountain in silence. Every quarter mile or so, they came across a pair of zodiac animal statues on either side of the path, one male and one female. First it was two rats, then two cows, two tigers, two rabbits…

Halfway up, where the grade flattened out, the burial grounds of Rufeng Sect's warriors began. Their graves were arranged in ascending order according to merits accumulated in life. This first area held the lowest-ranking graves. An eight-foot-tall stele of radiant white jade stood before them, the words *Faithful Souls* carved at the top and countless names recorded beneath.

"I heard all the servants of the Nangong family are buried here," Xue Meng whispered to Mo Ran. "Thousands of them, if not more."

He wasn't wrong: the slope was dotted with graves as far as the eye could see.

"If all these thousands of servants are reanimated, what will we do?" Shi Mei asked anxiously. "The Nangong family's servants are all capable. They'd put up a good fight."

Xue Meng clapped a hand over Shi Mei's mouth. "*Shh*, are you crazy? Quick, take it back, don't jinx us—"

"Too late for that," Mo Ran said gloomily.

"Hey, where are you going, you damn mutt?"

Mo Ran didn't answer. Taking swift strides, he broke from the crowd and approached one of the gravestones. He dropped to one knee and carefully looked it over.

Rufeng Sect's heroes' tomb was no ordinary graveyard—there were no burial mounds. The coffins were carved from translucent jade and resembled thick blocks of ice; only the bottoms were buried in the earth, while the upper halves remained visible aboveground. The burial grounds resembled nothing so much as a row of ornamental jade belts, glimmering in the moonlight.

This sort of icy jade was of the same sort as the coffins Sisheng Peak used in Frostsky Hall. It prevented bodies from decaying, preserving them as they were in life. Mo Ran lowered his head and carefully examined the coffin before him. No burial grounds were kept fastidiously clean, and there was a thick layer of dust on the coffin. Through it, Mo Ran could make out the blurry outlines of the corpse's face. Although the features were muddled, based on the corpse's figure, it looked to be a woman. Mo Ran tore his gaze away from her and looked over the outside of the coffin once more. Something about it unsettled him, but what, he couldn't say.

He glanced around—no one was watching. He pressed a palm to the coffin, closed his eyes, and probed the flow of spiritual energy…

His hand spasmed. Mo Ran's eyes flew open, his face pale.

Dark energy was present in this coffin, but only faintly. There was no trace of Zhenlong Chess. Had he been mistaken?

"Mo Ran!" Xue Meng called, already some distance away as he followed the crowd.

"Just a moment," Mo Ran muttered under his breath. He ran slender fingers over the coffin's surface and wiped away the accumulated dust, hoping to get a better look at the woman's face without opening the coffin. But as he worked, something in the corner of his eye made him stop in his tracks.

He realized what was off—it was the dust itself.

There was something wrong with the way dust lay on this coffin. Aside from the area he had just cleaned, there was dust missing somewhere else. Four short streaks of different lengths marked the side of the coffin. After a brief hesitation, he reached over to investigate. Four streaks—precisely where someone's four fingers would land if they'd disturbed the dust climbing out.

The rest of the blood drained from Mo Ran's face. Just as he parted his lips to tell everyone to stop climbing the mountain, he felt a draft of cold air behind him.

He turned and came face-to-face with a bone-white complexion. A woman in burial robes squatted behind the gravestone, staring right at him.

Chapter 212:
Sect Founder

"EVERYBODY STOP! Retreat! Retreat to the bottom of the mountain!"

His sudden shout caught the crowd off guard. Everyone turned their heads to see Mo Ran bounding toward them, black robes whipping in the wind, with a female corpse hot on his heels, keening frightfully.

"Ran-er?!" Xue Zhengyong exclaimed. "What…what's going on?"

"Retreat! Everybody retreat!" Mo Ran's gaze was daggerlike beneath his dark brows. "Nangong!" he hollered. "Lower the Soul-Blocking Stone up ahead!"

Nangong Si leapt into action. The burial ground for Rufeng Sect's high-level disciples lay above the servants' graveyard, the two sections divided by a long wall that could separate them in the event of disaster. Nangong Si hastened toward the bulwark, Ye Wangxi close behind.

But before they reached it, Nangong Si stopped short. Above them, a group was slowly descending the mountain path, figures garbed in green robes emblazoned with white cranes, silk ribbons fluttering in the wind. At first glance, they looked like a battalion of Rufeng disciples, valiant and spirited in bearing—as though Rufeng Sect had never been annihilated.

But Nangong Si and Ye Wangxi knew it wasn't so. These disciples were unlike any they had seen in one important respect: their eyes were obscured by a green ribbon embroidered with cranes. A minor detail, but one everyone in the Nangong family understood—this ribbon was not worn by any living person. Before interring every Rufeng disciple, the sect leader bestowed this ribbon

as a burial item. It symbolized an auspicious afterlife, in which cranes would carry their soul to everlasting paradise.

The disciples coming down the mountain were Rufeng Sect's walking dead.

Nangong Si took a step back, instinctively lifting an arm to block Ye Wangxi from moving forward. "Go back," he murmured without looking at her.

Ye Wangxi didn't answer.

"Go back! We're running out of time—tell Mo-zongshi." Nangong Si took a deep breath; his voice trembled when he continued. "Rufeng Sect's high-level disciples have already been reanimated. They're making their way down the mountain."

"What about you?!"

"I'll hold them off. Hurry." Nangong Si turned his face a fraction. "Tell them to retreat to the bottom of the mountain. Once everybody's there, set off a signal firework. I'll come down right away."

Ye Wangxi bit her lip. The situation left no room for error. All she could do was untie her own quiver and toss it to Nangong Si. "Take these. You never bring enough."

By the time she sped back down the slope, a fierce battle was unfolding. The previously hidden corpses of Rufeng servants clambered out of coffins and emerged from behind gravestones like a swarm of attacking locusts. In their white burial clothes, they resembled an avalanche pummeling the riotous crowd of cultivators. It made for a dramatic sight, but at a terrible cost. The graves of Mount Jiao were transformed into a killing field, the air choked with the desperate cries of cultivators.

Ye Wangxi glanced into a few coffins that had been cracked open with spiritual energy. The clothes inside had been arranged in the approximate shape of a body. Her yifu was treacherous indeed—he had staged a peaceful burial ground of faithful souls, when in

truth he'd long roused the corpses and hidden them away. He only had to wait for the unsuspecting crowd to climb high enough before mobilizing his revenants, attacking from both upslope and down.

He had cast a net, and the fish had swum right in.

"Mo-zongshi!" Ye Wangxi cried out, spying Mo Ran in the melee.

Mo Ran was fighting five corpses at once. He whipped around anxiously. "How are things—"

Before he could finish, he saw Ye Wangxi's face. It was all the answer he needed.

Mo Ran cursed under his breath as one of the revenants bit into the flesh of his arm. Unable to throw it off, he reached into its mouth and tore out its tongue. Black blood fountained into the air, and the corpse let out a strangled yelp as it was forced to loosen its jaw. Mo Ran rammed his elbow into the creature's chest, sending it crashing to the ground.

His black eyes were terrifyingly bright, his face severe. Ye Wangxi shuddered as he turned his gaze upon her. Still, she gathered herself and called, "A-Si wants everyone to retreat with all speed and wait for him at the bottom of the mountain!"

Mo Ran nodded. His magically amplified voice echoed across the chaotic battleground. "Stop fighting and head down the mountain. Everyone, retreat to the base of the mountain!"

"We've already prepared for an all-out battle with Xu Shuanglin!" Huang Xiaoyue fretted. "These corpses here are exactly as we expected—how can we turn back now?"

Just as birds would die for food, so men would die for riches; if Huang Xiaoyue wanted to make a sprint for the mountaintop just to get his hands on the treasures in Rufeng Sect's ancestral temple a little sooner, that was the old geezer's prerogative. Mo Ran ignored him, raising his voice to repeat, "Everyone, head down the mountain if you don't want to die! Immediately! Go *now*!"

The revenant servants weren't all that strong, but they were certainly more capable than the hapless commoners on Mount Huang and terrifying in their sheer numbers. They surged up without pause, heedless of pain or injury. By the time the crowd made it back down the mountain, a dozen cultivators had perished on the slope.

Despite his protests, Huang Xiaoyue retreated with the rest. He knew full well he lacked the strength to fight his way to the top alone, but he still huffed through his mustache and snorted, "Mo-zongshi, what do you call this? *You* were the one who said we should come to Mount Jiao, yet now you're telling us to retreat without a fight. If you're so clever, what are we supposed to do now? How about you take the lead, and we can all cower behind your back?"

In his past life, a useless graybeard like this wouldn't have been worthy of carrying a pair of shoes for Emperor Taxian-jun. He wouldn't have even bothered to kill him for fear of dirtying his hands. But in this life, Mo Ran hadn't become a dark overlord but a forthright zongshi; only due to this did he refrain from backhanding Huang Xiaoyue across the face in front of the crowd, instead turning a deaf ear to his jibes.

Huang Xiaoyue had taken a breath to keep blathering on when he caught sight of a dark mass rushing toward them. Nangong Si rushed forward like a mountain gale astride Naobaijin, who had recovered his full-grown faewolf form, as hundreds of reanimated Rufeng disciples streamed after them in pursuit. Huang Xiaoyue started in fright. "Aiya, we're done for! It's a trap!"

Mo Ran narrowed his eyes. At least the old fart finally realized this much. Perhaps he wasn't hopelessly stupid.

"Nangong Si!" Huang Xiaoyue continued. "You've got some guts! Rallying this Rufeng riffraff on Mount Jiao—are you planning to attack your fellow sects?"

Never mind… Mo Ran was at a loss for words.

Nangong Si was pressed low to Naobaijin's back, the faewolf swift as an arrow. They quickly left the revenants in the dust. Only then did Huang Xiaoyue realize he had misread the situation. Rather than apologize, he glared at the mob of encroaching corpses, eyes bulging and throat bobbing.

Nangong Si rushed into the midst of the cultivators and leapt from his faewolf's back. He thrust the extra quiver into Ye Wangxi's hands. "There are still some arrows left," he panted. "Take them for now. Take everyone with you and retreat."

Ye Wangxi had relaxed at his first words, only to grow tense again with his last. Her head snapped up to stare at him. "What are you going to do?"

"Don't worry."

As they spoke, Huang Xiaoyue watched the crowd of powerful Rufeng disciples draw ever closer, his palms growing clammy at the thought of battling these centuries-old warriors. He turned and snarled, "Nangong Si, you shameless little shit! Just like your father! Why'd you lead these freaks right toward us? So we can slay your enemies for you?" When Nangong Si remained silent, Huang Xiaoyue's anger compounded. "Very well—I've seen through your schemes now," he said, voice quavering. "You were afraid you couldn't make it to the top alone to claim the treasures your old man left behind, so you goaded the rest of us into climbing this godforsaken mountain to fight the corpses for you! Nangong Si! Your evil intentions are clear to everyone here!"

The old man was growing increasingly out of line. Xue Zhengyong couldn't bear to watch any longer. "All right, Huang-daozhang, that's enough," he chided with a frown.

"Enough? I've just gotten started!"

Huang Xiaoyue thought little of the lower cultivation realm. In calmer circumstances, he might've shown Xue Zhengyong a bare modicum of respect, but he had no patience for feigned politeness now. He jabbed a finger toward Nangong Si. "A black-hearted little

son of a bitch! To think you'd exploit these distinguished cultivators to clear your way! The *nerve* of you!"

Nangong Si blinked, unsure how to respond.

But Huang Xiaoyue still wasn't done. "If you'd crawled off and died, it'd have been a fitting apology to the world," he raged. "Instead you insist on climbing out of a mountain of corpses and dragging those abominations over to us! You—"

The crisp sound of a slap rang out over the mountainside. Ye Wangxi, never anything but decorous, had backhanded Huang Xiaoyue soundly across the face. She stood with her hand still raised, fingers trembling and chest heaving as she caught her breath. She stared at the man sprawled out on the ground with fierce eyes.

"You bastard," she spat hoarsely. "Who do you think you are, speaking such obscenities before the heroes' tomb of my Rufeng Sect?"

Jiangdong Hall's cultivators turned to face Ye Wangxi, swords drawn. One of Huang Xiaoyue's subordinates, a middle-aged female cultivator, brassily cursed her out. "You freak of nature! You dare strike your elder? *You're* the bastard here! Disgusting Rufeng bitch!"

The woman rushed at Ye Wangxi. Mo Ran had already started forward to intervene when he heard a whip crack through the air.

Wreathed in golden light, Chu Wanning stepped out from the crowd holding Tianwen, his phoenix eyes narrowed in anger. Turning his back to Ye Wangxi, he faced the group from Jiangdong Hall. "I've said it before." He spoke each word deliberately, so the whole crowd could hear. "Nangong Si is my disciple. If you refuse to defer to Tianyin Pavilion's investigation, you may come to me with your grievances. Whether you intend to speak about justice, or speak with your fists…" In the ensuing silence, he finished, "I will happily answer in kind."

The atmosphere drew taut as a bowstring. Jiangdong Hall found themselves at an impasse, unable to retreat or advance—to

retreat would be shameful, but to advance… Could any of them hold their own against the Beidou Immortal, Chu Wanning? And perhaps more importantly—was it worth burning bridges with Chu Wanning and making him their mortal enemy?

Above them, the revenant horde was pressing closer…

One observer finally lost their patience. "Stop bickering! You can settle things when we get out of here! Focus! What do we do?!"

Another voice cried, "Do we fight?!"

Yet another: "Should we face them head-on? Why'd we withdraw then? Between fighting them down here and fighting on the mountain—what's the difference?!"

Fair enough, Mo Ran thought. What *was* the difference? Nangong Si wouldn't have acted without intention. He was the last descendant of the Nangong bloodline and knew the mountain better than anyone—he must have a good reason for sending them all to the bottom. Curious, Mo Ran peered toward Nangong Si, who hadn't said a word since dismounting his faewolf.

Nangong Si's eyes were flashing with an inscrutable light. Mo Ran was taken aback; a shiver raced down his spine. "Nangong!" he shouted, but it was no use—since the moment Huang Xiaoyue had begun his tirade, Nangong Si had been silently mouthing a forbidden spell. By the time Mo Ran noticed, it was too late.

Vines burst out of the ground, winding countless tendrils around everyone present—Mo Ran, Ye Wangxi, Xue Meng… A moment later, they were flung bodily beyond the boundary of Mount Jiao.

"A-Si!" Ye Wangxi cried, aghast. "What are you doing?!"

She started to run back through the boundary, but Nangong Si waved a hand. The paired tomb guardians lumbered to their feet, gravel sheeting off their shoulders. In perfect symmetry, each raised a paw, and a new, translucent barrier sprang up across the path, blocking the way up the mountain.

Nangong Si stood alone on the other side of the barrier, facing the tide of undead with his back to the assembled cultivators.

"Mount Jiao's vines are made of the dragon's sinews; they can pull anything into the earth. But none of you can remain on the mountain. It doesn't matter who you are—if Nangong blood doesn't flow in your veins, the vines will bury you alive when I cast the spell."

Ye Wangxi was frantic with grief and fury. "Nangong Si! Have you forgotten you're just one person?" She pounded on the barrier, powerless to do anything but shout: *"Nangong Si!"*

"Just one person?" Nangong Si turned his face a fraction. "Aren't you still with me?"

Ye Wangxi stared at him, dumbstruck.

As though the thought had just occurred to him, Nangong Si beamed. It was the first time such a brilliant smile had lit his features since Rufeng Sect burned. That fiery, prideful smile brought a bygone vitality back to his face, his eyes dancing like spirited horses given their heads. Just as he had in that first training illusion with Ye Wangxi long ago, he glanced over his shoulder, raised his sword, and laughed. "Girls really are useless. In the end, I'm still the one protecting you."

He turned and strode toward the seething mass of corpses. One, two, three steps. He stopped.

Nangong Si plunged his sword into the dirt. Untying the gauze bandage from his hand, he swiped it down the length of the sword. Bright blood welled up, running down the groove and seeping into the rich earth of Mount Jiao.

His eyes were cool and fearless, his gaze fixed steadily ahead. In the eyes of Mo Ran, watching from the other side of the barrier, his silhouette seemed to overlap with that of Ye Wangxi making her last stand in the past life. They merged, becoming one figure, indivisible.

"I offer my blood to the Azure Dragon for the use of your sinews," said Nangong Si. "Come forth!"

A forest of vines exploded from the earth, raining sand and mud. Unlike those that had thrown the cultivators through the barrier, these were a vivid scarlet and barren of leaves or tendrils, like thick blood vessels rising from the heart of the mountain. In an instant, they ensnared each and every Zhenlong Chess-controlled corpse.

Sweat beaded on Nangong Si's forehead, and the hand that rested on the sword shook slightly. Summoning thousands of vines sapped his spiritual energy at a rapid pace. Tendons strained as his wounds from Mount Huang burst open on the back of his hand, soaking the ground with blood. Face ashen, he gave the final command in a quavering voice. "Bury them!"

Thousands of vines began to drag the corpses into the ground, but the revenants weren't about to go without a fight. They thrashed against their bonds, howling and screaming. The dragon's sinews were animated with Nangong Si's spiritual energy; as the horde of undead fought him, Nangong Si was forced to funnel more energy into the vines and pour more blood onto the dirt. Unless he bolstered the strength of the vines, they couldn't pull the bodies underground.

The revenants' ankles disappeared, then their calves…their thighs… The teeming undead craned their necks and screeched, spittle dripping from their lips. Nangong Si panted for breath. They were buried up to their thighs, but only their thighs… He could feel his spiritual energy was nearly spent, but the corpses weren't yet buried. They still writhed furiously, trying to brace their hands on the ground to pull free. Just a bit more—their waists… They had to be buried to their waists at least… Only then could he let the cultivators through the barrier; only then would the revenants be trapped long enough to give them the time they needed.

At least… Just a little bit more…

His stores of spiritual energy were depleted; he drew power from his spiritual core itself. Nangong Si felt his heart twinge with pain. His core, prone to qi deviation to begin with, shuddered in his chest. Though he clenched his jaw against it, blood seeped from the corner of his mouth.

Just a little bit more. To their waists…

Yes—they could hardly move now. But it was too risky; dead, these cultivators were stronger than they were in life. They might still break free.

Just a little bit more!

Nangong Si doubled over, coughing. The world wobbled as he drew from his spiritual core once more. He fell to his knees, retching blood that splattered and sank into the black dirt. When he looked up through bleary eyes, he could make out, within the tremulous shadows, vines sucking the undead masses deeper into the earth, burying them up to their chests. For the moment, these monstrosities were immobilized.

Nangong Si threw his head back and laughed, his teeth stained scarlet. He heard Ye Wangxi shout through the barrier, "A-Si! Enough! Open the barrier! Open it, hurry up!"

"Open the barrier, Nangong!" Xue Zhengyong cried as well. "We're here to help!"

"Nangong! Open the barrier! Open it!"

More added their voices to the chorus. Not everyone in this world lacked a conscience.

Nangong Si laughed and laughed. Since Rufeng Sect's downfall, he'd endured every indignity without once crying. Yet now, hot tears spilled down his cheeks. "I know, I'll open it," he mumbled hoarsely, words sticking in his throat. "I'll open it…"

He raised a trembling hand to dismiss the barrier keeping the crowd from Mount Jiao. But before he could complete the gesture, the ground juddered beneath his feet, vibrating faintly.

Nangong Si froze. He looked up, disbelief etched into every line of his face. The vines he had commanded to pull the revenants down had begun to loosen. They wrapped around the corpses' torsos, pulling them up, helping them scrabble out from the dirt one after another…

"No…" Nangong Si muttered in shock. "Impossible!"

How could Mount Jiao disobey its master's orders? Even if Xu Shuanglin had given an opposing command, the dragon sinews shouldn't have heeded him. To the demon dragon's slumbering soul, all descendants of the Nangong family were equivalent. If two descendants gave contradictory orders, the mountain would remain neutral, lending its strength to neither.

Unless…

Gooseflesh rose on Nangong Si's arms as a solution crossed his mind. The very idea made him tremble all over, and the pain in his heart seemed to multiply. Gasping for air, he slowly raised his head. He cast his gaze over the interminable white marble steps, over the dense throng of corpses, toward the top of the mountain.

A tall, broad-shouldered man with solemn features was leisurely making his way down the steps. His exquisite robes were embroidered with a jiao amidst the sun and moon, surrounded by billowing clouds. With every step he took, the silver-and-gold-threaded brocade rippled like water under the moonlight.

The silk ribbon of Rufeng Sect's dead was tied neatly above his straight nose, concealing his eyes. Yet this ribbon was black, not green, and embroidered not with immortal cranes, but with a magnificent Azure Dragon.

Nangong Si was white as paper. As he watched the man's calm descent, step by step, his eyes widened with incredulity. "How…how could this be… Sect Founder…"

The moon streamed through the leaves of the forest to illuminate the man's chiseled, gallant face. It was him—the only person on earth who could compel Mount Jiao to disobey the orders

of the Nangong bloodline, who could subdue the demon dragon, who could suppress the ancient beast called the gun beneath Golden Drum Tower. The man who established the glorious sect that had stood at the peak of the cultivation realm for centuries.

Hundreds of years ago, *he* was the world's foremost zongshi. The first in history to relinquish the chance to ascend and remain on the dusty earth to alleviate the suffering of mortals. The founding leader of Rufeng Sect: Nangong Changying.

Chapter 213:
Death Match

IT HAD BEEN CENTURIES since Nangong Changying had walked the earth, but his face was sketched in countless scrolls. Many had seen Rufeng Sect's honored founder looking over its Hall of Sages as an imposing jade statue. Ye Wangxi realized at once what had happened. "A-Si! Quick, open the barrier! You can't defeat him!"

Of course he couldn't… Who could? Even the cultivation realm's most formidable zongshi Chu Wanning wasn't assured a victory.

Nangong Si was shaking, but not from fear. He was seized with grief and fury. Xu Shuanglin had the gall to make the sect founder—the *sect founder*!—into a Zhenlong chess piece. He was insane… Truly, he must've lost his mind. This was their ancestor, the very soul and lifeblood of Rufeng Sect. This was the deity worshipped by generations of disciples and descendants, Nangong Changying!

A vein throbbed in Nangong Si's neck, and a distorted roar tore from his throat like a tiger rampaging through the forest. "Xu Shuanglin! No… Nangong Xu! Come out! *Show yourself!*"

The echoes spiraled like vultures, lingering over the peak. No one answered. Xu Shuanglin didn't step out. The only response he received was from the blindfolded Nangong Changying, who tilted his face minutely toward Nangong Si, pallid fingers sliding his longsword from the scabbard that had been buried with him. He raised it, and the blade flashed in the moonlight as he took another step down the path.

Nangong Si shuffled backward. "Sect Founder…" he muttered.

Nangong Changying's gait was steady. With each step, he tapped the point of his sword against the jade, drawing a sharp whine from the stone. His eyes were covered, the ribbon secured

with an irreversible spell; he relied on sound and smell to descend the steps and locate Nangong Si.

"Who are you?" A low voice cut through the air—Nangong Changying's. "Why do you trespass upon these lands?"

Hearing his ancestor speak with his own ears, even if it was through the artifice of Zhenlong Chess, left Nangong Si thunderstruck. He swallowed. "Sect Founder, I…" After a beat of silence, he loosened his grip on his sword and fell to his knees, pressing his forehead to the ground. "This descendant is unworthy. I, Nangong Si, heir of Rufeng Sect's seventh generation, pay my respects."

"Seventh generation… Si…" Nangong Changying methodically repeated. He shook his head and lifted his sword. *"Kill."*

Blade met blade. In this single blow, Nangong Si felt his arm go numb. Nangong Changying's strength was astonishing. His bloodless face pressed close, every breath cold as ice. "Trespasser—kill him."

"Sect Founder!"

Their swords clashed again, neither holding back. Steel sang, sparks flying like snow.

Xue Zhengyong banged a fist against the barrier. "Are you crazy? You can't possibly win!"

Who didn't know of Nangong Changying's heroics? Legends told of a man so strong he could pulverize a boulder with bare hands. Who could stand against him, and how? Subduing ten men like Nangong Si was child's play for his storied ancestor.

Nangong Si's mind was a vast and utter blank. Never could he have anticipated facing the forefather of Rufeng Sect here at Mount Jiao. Their opening exchange sent him flying a dozen feet backward. If it weren't for the scrape of his blade against the ground arresting his momentum, he might have found himself sprawling in the weeds.

Nangong Changying lifted his longsword and took a ponderous step closer. Voice low, he repeated his earlier command: "Kill…"

Downslope, Xue Zhengyong was furiously pummeling the translucent barrier. Jiang Xi frowned wordlessly, lips pressed into a thin line. Master Ma had opted to cover his eyes, letting slip feeble wails of distress from time to time. Huang Xiaoyue, on the other hand, watched in apprehension, secretly grateful for his good luck. Thank goodness he hadn't captured Nangong Si earlier, he thought. If he'd tied him up and come to Mount Jiao himself, *he* would be the one facing the founder of Rufeng Sect now.

Only Chu Wanning fixated on Nangong Changying's movements. Something about this was very wrong. Who was Nangong Changying, after all? This man had subdued two evil beasts, creatures of legend—one a demonic dragon, the other a monstrous fish. His astonishing spiritual strength spoke for itself. Nangong Changying's souls had long left his body; all that remained on the earth was an empty shell. Though there were many techniques he would no longer be able to use, his raw combat abilities should have been undiminished.

But Nangong Changying's combat abilities were also near mythic. On an island not far from Flying Flower Isle in the East Sea, there was a lake Rufeng Sect had left as a show of might. It was not particularly large, and devoid of interesting scenery. One could stroll around the pool in less than an hour. But everyone knew this lake had originally not been a body of water, but a small hill. When Nangong Changying had battled the gun, the colossal fish had taken refuge behind it. Nangong Changying had rained several dozen punches upon the hill in quick succession. Though it had risen a hundred yards above its surrounds, his last blow fractured it, and it collapsed in on itself. What remained was a crater that gradually filled with rainwater, creating the present-day lake.

Chu Wanning didn't doubt Nangong Si's abilities. But if the stories were true, as soon as Nangong Changying and Nangong Si

crossed blades, Nangong Si should've been sent flying a hundred feet away, with no chance of getting back on his feet.

This corpse was too suspicious.

Like a snow-bright dagger, Chu Wanning's piercing gaze scraped over every inch of Nangong Changying's physique. After a moment, his eyes locked on Nangong Changying's sword arm. Realization bloomed like a firework going off in his mind. He knew what was wrong.

On the other side of the barrier, Nangong Si braced himself on his sword's hilt and struggled to his feet. He was just like the faewolves he raised—he might admit defeat, but he'd never turn tail and flee. He swiped blood from his lips with his sleeve. As he readied himself to charge again, he heard a familiar voice: "Strike right. The meridians in his left arm have been severed."

"Chu-zongshi?"

"Don't get distracted." From the other side of the barrier, Chu Wanning's brown eyes never strayed from their figures as they swept toward each other. "Even if Nangong Changying's left arm were completely broken, you shouldn't let down your guard."

At this, several of the nearby sect leaders followed Chu Wanning's gaze. Nangong Changying's left arm was indeed limp and feeble. Xue Zhengyong cried, "Changying-zhangmen's meridians were severed after his death?! Who did this?"

No one answered. But Ye Wangxi, familiar with the facts of Nangong Changying's life, was quick to put together what must have happened.

Who did this? Who in the world would wish to sever the sect founder's meridians? And who would possibly be able to accomplish it?

As they fought, Nangong Si stared into Nangong Changying's face. His features were identical to those of the jade statue in the Hall of Sages, as though Nangong Changying still walked upon this

earth, as though he'd never known death. And if Nangong Changying were indeed still alive, if he weren't dead, if these past few centuries had been rendered inconsequential—then this was a chance for Nangong Si to test his mettle against the legendary sect founder. Was he about to put his descendant through a trial, to teach him a lesson?

"Naobaijin! Come!" Nangong Si cried, narrowing his focus once more. He vaulted onto the faewolf's back. Eyes trained on Nangong Changying's left arm, he hurtled toward him at top speed.

A childhood memory flashed before his eyes. He was standing in front of the jade statue in the Hall of Sages. Head cocked, he gazed up at the carven features of the sect founder.

Children always saw things with fresh eyes. He whipped around and pointed out to Rong Yan, "Mom, they didn't make this statue right."

"What do you mean?" Exquisite robes trailing behind her, Rong Yan coughed quietly into a handkerchief. She came to Nangong Si's side and looked up at the statue's face. "It's wonderful. Very stirring and naturalistic."

"…I don't get it."

Rong Yan sighed. She was impatient by nature and wished for nothing more than to cram two decades' worth of knowledge into her son's brain in two years. "It means the statue looks just like a real person. Every detail is vivid. Haven't I taught you those words?"

Nangong Si pulled a face. "But it's still wrong."

"How so?"

"Mom, look." He pointed to the founder's left arm, then his right. "His left arm is twice as thick as his right. I've been staring at it for ages—one's thick and one's thin; it's not right at all! It's a mistake!" He raised his own arms and earnestly explained, "Both my arms are the same, and so are Mom and Dad's… So there's gotta be

something wrong with this statue! The sculptor should come here and fix it."

"So that's what you meant, Si-er." Rong Yan shook her head. "The sculptor didn't make a mistake—the sect founder's two arms were indeed of different sizes."

"Why? Was he born like that?"

"Of course not," Rong Yan answered. "The sect founder was left-handed. His left arm was much stronger than his right. In time, his left arm became more muscular and thicker. Far from getting it wrong, the sculptor was very faithful and attentive to detail."

Swords met with a metallic *clang*. Nangong Si and Nangong Changying's faces pressed close. Across a shower of sparks, they gritted their teeth and bore down upon each other. On one side was the sect founder who had lost the use of his dominant left arm; on the other was Nangong Si, bruised and battered but determined to fight to the bitter end. It was a brutal contest.

"His left-arm meridians. Could…" Xue Zhengyong's breath hitched in his throat as the thought occurred to him. "Could he have severed them himself?!"

Xue Zhengyong wasn't alone; many of those watching had begun to wonder the same thing. Rufeng Sect's foremost disciples were all buried with that silk ribbon over their eyes, magically sealing their sight. Was it really in the name of turning their eyes to the heavens and letting cranes carry them into the afterlife? Had Nangong Changying anticipated the world might be unrecognizably changed after hundreds of years? Perhaps, when he established Rufeng Sect, he had already anticipated the day of its downfall. He had mandated each disciple's eyes be covered so no one could harness their power to bring harm to the mortal realm. None of the holy weapons Nangong Changying wielded in life rested in his coffin; he was buried with only this single longsword. And before his own death, he had severed all the meridians in his dominant arm. This

way, even if some villain one day bent his body toward nefarious ends, they would never be able to access his full martial strength.

Perhaps it was so. Those watching could never know for sure.

They exchanged several dozen more furious blows. Nangong Si glimpsed a frown flitting across the sect founder's face. "Nangong… Si…" he muttered. "Seventh generation…"

Outside the barrier, Mo Ran studied all of Nangong Changying's movements with rapt attention. He was the former Emperor Taxian-jun; his observations were different from those of the cultivators who'd kept ever to the straight and narrow. He immediately noted signs only a skilled practitioner of Zhenlong Chess would grasp.

To Mo Ran, Nangong Changying's corpse was distinct from every other on the mountain. It was obvious the sect founder had mounted a desperate struggle, trying to recover his awareness. This had been one of Mo Ran's biggest worries back then. Though the Zhenlong Chess Formation was one of the three great forbidden techniques, no spell was perfect. If someone made into a pawn had an extremely strong will, the spellcaster would need to suppress it with a continuous flow of spiritual energy. And if the caster's spiritual energy was insufficient, they would lose control of the pawn—often violently. It wasn't unheard of for the backlash to consume the spellcaster himself. Many practitioners of Zhenlong Chess throughout history had thus either wasted away from terrible illnesses or perished abruptly, their meridians blown apart.

Face grave, Mo Ran watched Nangong Changying meet Nangong Si's blows. He was almost certain Xu Shuanglin wasn't capable of fully controlling this corpse.

There was a muffled *boom* as their swords met again. Mo Ran's hand curled into a fist against the barrier, veins throbbing. They weren't evenly matched at all—this was plain to everyone. Even if Nangong Changying had ruined his own dominant arm, he was a zongshi. This empty shell could hold its own against youngsters like Mei Hanxue and Xue Meng even without his most

devastating asset. Only sect leaders or elders stood a chance of subduing him fully.

But not a single sect leader or elder could get past the barrier. Anyone who encroached upon the territory of the Nangong clan would incite Mount Jiao's fury; they'd be more hindrance than help. This was a war waged within Rufeng Sect. No one else could intervene.

Had Nangong Si been uninjured, he might have dispatched this corpse on his own. But he had suffered through too much. As Nangong Changying thrust his sword out again, Nangong Si grabbed for Naobaijin's collar to swing up onto his back. It should have been an easy move, but the wounds on his hand were bleeding profusely. The collar slipped from his grasp.

Naobaijin howled mournfully as Nangong Si's sword flew out of his hand, landing beside the barrier with a clatter. Mo Ran stared down at the blade streaked with blood from Nangong Si's palm…

"A-Si! Stop! Come to safety! We'll find another way!" Ye Wangxi cried, pleading with him without cease. Ye Wangxi was only human. She would never beg for mercy on her own behalf, but Nangong Si was her vulnerable spot.

Tears ran endlessly down her face. Mo Ran had never seen her cry like this, even in the past life. Her tears bled through the cold, unfeeling mask Nangong Liu and Nangong Xu had selfishly welded to her face, and a shade of girlishness showed through. Ye Wangxi had thought she'd wear that mask for the rest of her life. But the moment she caught sight of that bloodied sword, it crumbled to dust. "A-Si…"

Nangong Changying's last blow had been too heavy. Drenched in sweat, Nangong Si gritted his teeth and struggled silently to climb back onto his feet.

There was a flash of cold light, and the reflection of a snow-bright sword fell over his cheek. Panting, Nangong Si lifted his face—the face that bore some small resemblance to Nangong Changying's.

He glared up at his ancestor, the coruscating light of the blade between them.

Nangong Changying’s sword was pointing right at his chest. Outside the barrier, the crowd fell silent.

Chapter 214:
Spiritual Core Shatters

MO RAN CLENCHED his fists, heart pounding like a drum, temples throbbing. A preposterous thought thundered through his mind: Nangong Changying would kill Nangong Si at any moment—was he really going to stand here and watch? Could he do it with a clear conscience?

An agonizing war raged within him, but no one noticed aught amiss. Nangong Si's precarious position drew everyone's gazes like soft sand absorbing water. Any moment now, that sharp blade would draw blood.

The forest rustled around him. Mo Ran gripped a hidden arrow in his sleeve, running his fingertip over its point. He wanted to do it, yet the thought made his fears multiply like weeds…

All of a sudden, Nangong Changying stiffened and shuddered. The abrupt movement drew everyone's attention.

"What's going on?" Xue Zhengyong cried out in alarm.

Nangong Changying couldn't see exactly where Nangong Si was standing, so his sword's aim was slightly askew. Nangong Si didn't make a sound. If he let out so much as a sigh, if any move shifted the wind in the slightest, Nangong Changying would notice.

Nangong Si stared at his ancestor, his face bloodless yet stubborn as ever. He pressed his lips together, dried blood cracking at the corners of his mouth.

"You are…Nangong…Si?"

Everyone standing near the front of the crowd—Xue Zhengyong included—shivered at these words. Nangong Changying was conscious?!

Mo Ran's expression changed at once. With a silvery flash, he tucked that arrow back into his sleeve. His back was soaked in sweat, his heart beating a chaotic rhythm. It had been a close call… He'd almost revealed himself.

His relief was quickly followed by a wave of discomfort and disgust. Standing before Mount Jiao, the souls of his past life and present self were locked in fierce battle. They wrestled and howled, tearing bloody gashes into one another. How long could he keep this up?

"Nangong…Si… Seventh…"

Within the barrier, the sword Nangong Changying held aloft wavered. Bit by bit, inch by precious inch, its aim shifted…

"Is he really conscious?" Xue Zhengyong asked incredulously.

He wasn't—not yet, at least. But as Mo Ran watched, Nangong Changying was clawing back whatever awareness remained within this corpse. Tucked away somewhere on Mount Jiao, Xu Shuanglin was like a puppeteer watching his performance slip from his control. He'd never before manipulated such a complex marionette, and would soon reach his limits. Nangong Changying was about to throw off his—

The sickening sound of a sword sinking into flesh cleaved through Mo Ran's thoughts. His scalp went numb, his pupils contracting to pinpricks.

Blood splattered over the dirt. After a terrible moment of silence, a mangled cry pierced the air like a chill blade. *"A-Si!"*

"Miss Ye!"

"Ye Wangxi!"

From left and right, the crowd rushed forward to restrain Ye Wangxi. Her eyes were scarlet with anguish. The others feared what she might do out of desperation—but upon second thought, what *could* she do? She wasn't born of the Nangong clan; no matter how

crucial she was to the family, to Mount Jiao, she was an outsider. She couldn't get in.

Nangong Changying's sword had mercilessly punctured Nangong Si's shoulder. Had he his sight, the wind would right now be blowing through a gaping hole in Nangong Si's chest.

Nangong Si went rigid, his lips parted as if to speak. Nangong Changying pulled out his sword with a spray of scarlet, and Nangong Si fell to the ground; all that came out was a great mouthful of blood. He tried and failed several times to pull himself upright before crumpling in the dirt.

Who knew what Xu Shuanglin had done—perhaps he'd tapped into the energy of his spiritual core, or simply bent all his focus to bringing Nangong Changying under control. Moments from recovering awareness, the corpse transformed again into a murderous puppet. He hefted his sword, rivulets of blood running down the grooved blade and dripping to the ground. Beneath the light of the moon, they spread into a patch of murky darkness.

Nangong Si pressed himself up again, to no avail. He could only obstinately lift his head to face his assailant.

Mo Ran's lashes trembled, his eyes fluttering shut. Why did Nangong Si have to show everyone this face of his? Those proud, high-spirited, and handsome features were a mess of blood and dirt, barely recognizable. He looked wretched; anyone with a conscience would feel grief seeing him.

But there was no grief in Nangong Si's eyes—they held only fire and light. Before Nangong Changying could strike again, a snow-white streak flew toward him. Howling, Naobaijin recklessly charged at Nangong Changying.

"A-Si…"

Ye Wangxi was on the verge of breaking down, but Nangong Si didn't look at her. He fixed his gaze on Jiang Xi, bloody lips opening and closing. He couldn't speak loud enough, but Jiang Xi watched

him form the words and understood. Hands behind his back, he trained unblinking brown eyes on Nangong Si's lips.

When Nangong Si finished, there was a pause. "Yes," Jiang Xi eventually answered. "I understand."

A pitiful howl split the air as Nangong Changying flung off Naobaijin with a single hand. The dull *thump* of the faewolf hitting the ground was much louder than the sound his master had made. His pure-white bulk crashed through a grove of trees, flattening their branches to the ground. His spiritual energy couldn't withstand such an injury; the enormous faewolf disappeared in a puff of white smoke, and a fluffy pup scampered out on unsteady legs. Scarcely as tall as a man's hand, he clamped his sharp teeth down on Nangong Changying's hem with all his might, still fighting in his juvenile form.

Nangong Si turned his head. "Leave," he hacked out. "Leave, now."

"Arf arf! Aroooo!" Naobaijin would do no such thing. But the strength of his tiny jaws was nothing against Nangong Changying. He didn't bother swatting the pup away. A twitch of his fingers set the ground shuddering—the corpses Nangong Si had previously bound were shoved up from the earth by Mount Jiao's vines.

This power was sufficient to uproot a mountain, to lay the land to waste. Nangong Si's eyes blazed with furious light. He pressed a palm to the ground, and a terrible pain shot through his chest as his spiritual core fractured.

He offered up his spiritual core, forged over the course of two decades. He surrendered years of his blood, sweat, and tears. In an irrevocable, desperate last effort, he bellowed: "Bury them!"

With perfect, singing clarity, he felt the core that had lain within his heart for twenty years shatter. The sensation was very light—like a springtime breeze over a lake, leaving a trail of gentle ripples. It was very heavy—like a mountain rupturing, sending stones careening to earth, leaving behind naught but choking dust.

Nangong Si felt a wash of hazy relief. So this was what it felt like to shatter one's spiritual core. It was painful, but not unbearably so. Then—it hadn't been such a cruel end when his mother died. It had lasted only an instant.

The evil dragon's soul shuddered with the power of his sacrifice. Those blood vines that had loosened coiled tightly around the corpses again. Nangong Changying jerked his chin up with a low hum of surprise. He strode over to Nangong Si and stopped.

Nangong Si couldn't get to his feet, much less walk away. Without his spiritual core, he was no different from any commoner; he couldn't even summon his sword. He panted for breath, face uplifted. Reflected in his eyes was Nangong Changying, and the splendid moon behind him.

"Sect Founder…"

The ribbon over Nangong Changying's eyes flapped in the wind. He stood motionless, then twitched his fingertips again. But Mount Jiao couldn't answer its first master so soon after Nangong Si had sacrificed his core. The blood vines didn't heed him as they slowly tightened around the corpses and tugged them deeper into the earth.

Nangong Si knew he was running out of time. If Nangong Changying gave a more assertive command, Mount Jiao would listen to him over anyone else—this was immutable fact. It didn't matter. Nangong Si didn't regret paying this price; he had given all he could. He carried no guilt in his heart.

Outside the barrier, Mo Ran clenched his jaw, fiddling once again with his hidden arrow. The planes of his face were taut with strain, his hands trembling within his sleeves.

Within, Nangong Si said, "Sect Founder…I'm sorry. I still…still haven't managed to accomplish anything…"

His ancestor lifted his sword once more, and Nangong Si fought the urge to close his eyes. Yet in the moment he expected the blow to fall, Nangong Changying's head swiveled around. With

much difficulty, the sect founder ground out a question. "Your name…is Nangong…Si?"

Nangong Si froze. "Sect Founder? Y-you're conscious? Can… can you understand me?"

His last question was too soft for Mo Ran to hear, but everyone could see Nangong Changying had stilled. His lips moved stiffly; he was clearly talking to Nangong Si.

"I…shouldn't…be fighting…you…" As he held his sword aloft, a halting stream of words issued from his mouth. "I still have…my memories of the past… Before I died, I worried the future would bring unexpected changes…" He had just recovered his mind, and his speech was hoarse and garbled. "But I never thought…a day like this would come."

Nangong Changying paused. "Nangong…Si. In a moment… after I speak the incantation…you must take…my bow… I…"

Bow? What bow?

Nangong Si's mind was blank when Nangong Changying let the point of his blade fall, dragging it over the ground with a low rumble like a dragon's roar. Then he leapt backward, sleeves flying, graceful as an immortal.

Nangong Changying was trembling as he fought the will of the Zhenlong Chess spellcaster. Each halting word came at grave cost. "Chuanyun—come."

A melodious cry answered from the heart of the mountain. Before Nangong Si's eyes, the ground split with a deafening *crack*. Within the shower of sand, a deep blue bow emitted a long keening noise, its glow relieving the boundless dark of night.

Jaws dropped open across the crowd. Even Chu Wanning, for all his solemnity, paled at the sight. This was the holy weapon legend said had been buried with Rufeng Sect's founder—Chuanyun!

"Quick—take it!" Nangong Changying rasped. His hands shook violently. Threads of invisible spider silk seemed to tug him toward

his holy weapon, yet he did all in his power to resist. “Chuanyun’s arrows can incinerate any body of flesh and blood… Burn it.”

On some level, Nangong Si already understood what Nangong Changying was asking. But the idea was too shocking; he croaked in disbelief: “Burn what?”

“Me!” Nangong Changying roared.

“But—Sect Founder!”

“Don’t allow my body…to be used for…what I most abhorred in life.” Nangong Changying stood tall and stately, his sleeves whipping in the wind as he uttered his final words after centuries of slumber. “Burn it!”

Chapter 215:
Burning the Corpse

COUNTLESS HEROES had come and gone throughout the history of the cultivation realm, but only ten were memorialized as those of true eminence. Nangong Changying was one of them.

In his past life, Mo Ran had found this execrable. He had crushed Rufeng's seventy-two cities with his little finger, only to find their ethereal pavilions crawling with vermin who screamed in pain and begged for mercy before the blades even cleaved toward their throats. Ye Wangxi herself had said it in the past life, just before her death: *All the gleaming cities of Rufeng, and not one real man to be found.*

Back then, Mo Ran had considered Rufeng Sect no more than a handful of loose sand, and Nangong Changying merely the man who had gathered it up. What was so special about *him*? In a single bloody instant, Mo Ran had razed Rufeng's centuries-old towers to the ground. Their steps and courtyards were strewn with corpses, innards picked by crows.

Taxian-jun had made his way up the steps, face devoid of emotion, and pushed open the door to the Hall of Sages. Black cloak trailing behind him, he stalked down the corridor lined with portraits of Rufeng's sect leaders and elders throughout the ages and came to a stop at the end of the hall.

There he looked up. His expression was unreadable beneath the hood of his cloak. Only the set of his pale jaw, cold and combative, was visible within its depths. He tilted his face upward, scrutinizing this statue that was larger than life.

He beheld the figure of a young cultivator in flowing robes, carved from white spiritual jade, riding the wind with bow in hand. The sculptor's work spared no detail—the eyes were inlaid with

iridescent gems, the robes shimmering with a dusting of finely ground crystals. From the flower lattice of the window above the statue, a bloodred dawn shone into the room, giving the statue the look of an immortal bathed in the glow of the highest heavens.

Under his hood, that shadowy half of Taxian-jun's face split into a smile. White teeth flashed, and his dimples creased sweetly as he straightened his robes and brought his hands together in greeting. Handsome features turned toward the light, he said pleasantly, "An honor to finally meet you, Nangong Changying."

The statue, of course, didn't answer. But those glimmering crystal eyes seemed to fix upon its visitor.

Taxian-jun was deeply bored; he didn't mind carrying on this one-sided conversation. "My name is Mo Weiyu. So glad I got the chance to visit you today. You're pretty impressive, Nangong Changying."

He prattled on cheerfully, a living man spouting deranged nonsense at a stone statue. "I saw your great-great-great-great-great…" He counted on his fingers, then sighed. "Too many to count. I saw a bunch of your nephews and your sect's disciples from who knows how many generations after you." He laughed brightly. "But they've all become ghosts beneath my sword. Xianzhang, if you haven't yet reincarnated, you might see them too. It's too bad though. I didn't see your great-great-great-great-great-great-grandson. He fled like a coward before I captured the cities. I don't know if he's dead or alive, sorry."

He chattered with the statue a while longer before saying, "Oh yeah. I heard you used to be a great hero back in your day, Nangong-xianzhang. People would pledge their undying loyalty to you wherever you went. Some of your fans even called you their emperor." He grinned. "Were you as mighty as I am? Honestly, everything I said earlier was just rubbish—I only came to ask you one question. Nangong-xianzhang, why didn't you take the throne back then?"

He paused, then took a few more paces forward, his gaze falling on a plaque behind the statue. It was too large to miss, but he had deliberately averted his eyes until now.

Nangong Changying had carved this plaque with his sword at the age of ninety-six. It had originally been simple and unadorned stone, but his heirs had later traced the characters in an eye-catching gold.

Mo Ran stared at it for some time. "Oh, I get it," he said with a smile. "*As a gentleman of Rufeng Sect, I mustn't indulge in greed, resentment, deception, slaughter, obscenity, plunder, or conquest?* Xianzhang, how very noble of you." He clasped his hands behind his back. "All your life, your reputation was without a single blemish, and you earnestly spread your teachings until your death. But I'm curious—did you ever imagine Rufeng Sect would end up like this?" Mo Ran pressed his lips together, searching for the right words. Finally he clapped with glee. "Like a bunch of filthy rats?"

He burst out laughing with unbridled delight, pure yet sinister. The sound reverberated in the solemn Hall of Sages like the sound of ripping silk—as if it would shred each of those gently swaying portraits, tearing up the faces of those bygone Rufeng heroes…

His laughter abruptly stopped. Standing in front of Nangong Changying's ice-cold statue, Mo Ran's smile disappeared, his features frosting over. His black eyes stared unswervingly at this eminent sage of yesteryear—this man who, like Mo Ran himself, had held the world in the palm of his hand, who'd had the power to tread every cultivator underfoot.

Time seemed to fold over itself. Within its turbulent passage, the preeminent cultivators of two eras faced one another.

"Nangong Changying," Mo Ran murmured at last, "your Rufeng Sect is a putrid swamp. There's no way you could be any cleaner."

With a snap of his sleeves, he spun on his heel and stalked out of the Hall of Sages. A wild wind rose around him, blowing the hood

of his cloak back and revealing Emperor Taxian-jun's eyes, full of madness.

His looks were second to none; he was exceedingly handsome by any measure. But those pleasing features were etched with a barbaric cruelty, vulturelike in their viciousness. His dark cloak billowed like ink spilling down the steps behind him. He was a vengeful ghost in the mortal realm, a hellish spirit prowling the earth.

Everywhere he looked he saw maimed corpses of Rufeng disciples littered over the ground. Taxian-jun hadn't conscripted any stragglers into his forces. Other than the woman Song Qiutong, he'd slaughtered the rest to a man.

In that moment, Mo Ran's heart thrummed with glee. As he gazed into the sunrise, one golden ray pierced the rosy clouds and gilded his blood-streaked face. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. His hands, clenched tightly in his sleeves, quivered with excitement.

His life had once been so paltry and insignificant, a mere blade of grass. When he was small, he had begged for food outside Linyi. He had watched his mother starve to death before his eyes, yet couldn't afford even a straw mat to wrap her body in. Back then, he'd implored a cultivator from Rufeng Sect to buy a coffin for him—the cheapest and shoddiest one would do. He'd never forget their reply, dripping with disdain: "The coffin should match the person. Beggars can't be choosers."

What was the child to do? He had intended to bury his mother in Linyi, but the city's regulations were strict. The nearest mass burial ground was outside Dai City; he would need to cross two hills to reach it. He dragged his mother's body the whole way. He had received stares of disgust, scorn, astonishment, and pity. But no one offered their help.

Mo Ran had walked for a fortnight—a tiny child dragging a woman's corpse for fourteen whole days. Not one person was willing

to aid him. He'd knelt by the roadside and begged anyone, everyone—gentry, stable boys, farmers—please, he'd said, give him and his mom a ride. But who would lift a stranger's fetid corpse onto their cart? As the days wore on, he stopped asking. He gritted his teeth and pulled his mother behind him, step by step. Her corpse stiffened, then grew soft, rotting and putrefying. Passersby gave them a wide berth, covering their noses and scurrying away.

On the fourteenth day, he reached the burial grounds. The scent of the living was no longer on him; the reek of death had permeated even his bones.

He had no shovel, so he dug a shallow trench in the graveyard with his bare hands. It was all he had the strength for. The boy dragged his mother's corpse, unrecognizably decayed, into that trench. Then he sat down next to it in a daze. Many minutes later, he said tonelessly, "Mom, it's time for me to bury you."

He scooped up a handful of dirt and sprinkled it onto her chest. Yet that single handful was finally too much; he started to sob. *How strange.* He thought his tears had run dry long ago.

"N-no, no no—once I bury you, I won't be able to see you anymore," he wailed, clambering into the trench, throwing himself onto that festering corpse.

When he finally managed to calm down, he busied himself with the dirt again. But some mysterious lacrimal scent seemed to rise from this earth; he dissolved into tears once more.

"Why did you end up like this… I couldn't even get a straw mat… Why, *why*… Mom… Mama…"

He nuzzled her, rubbing his small cheek against her body. He didn't think she was dirty or stinking; he didn't care that she was dead, that her skin had rotted, that she was oozing pus and blood, that she was crawling with maggots. He sobbed into her bosom, each cry raw and desperate, ripped from his throat. The burial grounds echoed with his raspy, confused wails. At times they

sounded human; at others they sounded like the howls of an orphaned pup.

"Mom… Mom! Someone, anyone… Help, come and bury me too! Please, bury me too…"

In the blink of an eye, two decades had passed. Mo Ran returned to Linyi. He stood atop Rufeng Sect's most exquisite edifices; he stood before a mountain of corpses and a sea of blood. That tiny pup reeking of death was sleek and grown, baring a mouthful of fangs. When he opened his eyes again, they flashed with a manic light.

As he stood here today, who would dare tell him *beggars can't be choosers*? How absurd! He could choose—he could *have*—whatever he wanted! He would make all of them, all the inhabitants of the mortal realm, kneel before him. They would knock their heads against the ground and present to him any trifle he demanded. He would tread every cultivator underfoot and rule all under the sun.

He had entered the Hall of Sages and looked upon Nangong Changying. He was more certain than ever of his desires and ambitions—yes, he *would* grind them into the dirt, he *would* rule from on high. He would hold this world in the palm of his hand; he would have all on earth in his grasp. Never again would he be that child sobbing over a corpse. Never again would he allow his loved ones to die right in front of him, to rot and turn to bones and paste. Never.

A hundred years from now, he would be a god like Nangong Changying. The people would worship him, lifting their faces skyward as if looking out at a towering mountain. His form, too, would be carved of white jade, his words etched in gold.

No—he'd be more than Nangong Changying, better. His Sisheng Peak would outshine Rufeng Sect. And he—the first ruler of the cultivation world—would garner far more praise and adulation than this weak-minded hypocrite Nangong Changying.

He'd never believe Nangong Changying had no crimes to his name. How could the freak who had founded *Rufeng Sect*, of all things, possibly be a righteous, faultless gentleman? And his maxim —*As a gentleman of Rufeng Sect, I mustn't indulge in greed, resentment, deception, slaughter, obscenity, plunder, or conquest*— what was so great about that? Anyone could learn to speak pretty words. Before his death, surely he, Mo Weiyu, could find someone to spit out some ingenious sayings worthy of the same breathless commendation. Some bootlicker to pen the scrolls of history to his liking, to expunge all the darkness from his past. After that, Emperor Taxian-jun would also be a brilliant ruler who held the welfare of the common people close to his heart, who took ultimate control in a single breathtaking move.

Wonderful. He couldn't think of a more fitting conclusion.

"As…a gentleman…of Rufeng Sect…I mustn't…indulge in… greed, resentment, deception, slaughter, obscenity, plunder, or conquest…"

The murmured words cut through the air like a thunderclap, yanking Mo Ran from his memories. But this reality, too, was a mess of sparking flames. Looking past the barrier, Mo Ran saw Nangong Changying, his chest pierced with an arrow Nangong Si had shot from the holy weapon Chuanyun. His face was identical to that old jade statue's.

"Nangong Si's been hurt so badly," someone exclaimed. "How did he manage to draw the bow?"

"Was Chuanyun prepared ahead of time?"

"Look—there's spiritual energy in the bow… It's not Nangong Si's! It—it's…"

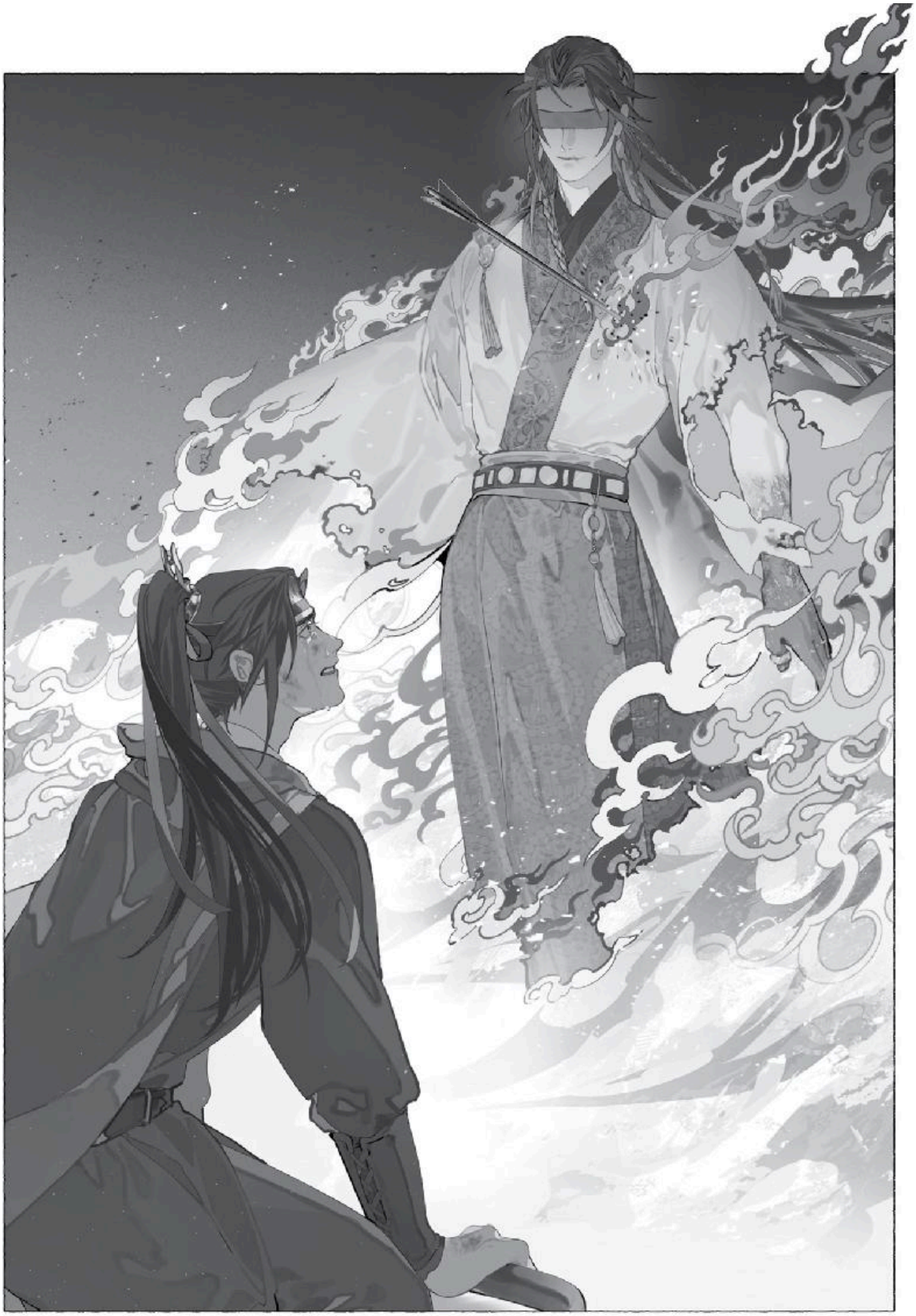
What it was, they never said, but everyone knew. It was Nangong Changying's spiritual energy. Only he could master the legendary bow Chuanyun. Its arrow was imbued with the last thread of spiritual energy Nangong Changying had left on this earth.

In an instant, flames blazed across Nangong Changying's chest. The inferno spread from where the arrow had landed next to his heart and rapidly swallowed his entire body. But a corpse felt no pain. Within those flames, his figure stood tall and proud, and his face was calm and composed, even peaceful.

Xue Zhengyong muttered beside Mo Ran, "He predicted this? He… He knew something like this would happen one day?"

No… He couldn't possibly have known. It was a coincidence, nothing more. Mo Ran trembled, pupils shrunk to pinpricks. It *had* to be a coincidence!

But could he really convince himself of this? Nangong Changying had thrown off the control of Zhenlong Chess. He had severed his own meridians. He had ordered Chuanyun not be buried with him—and there was the matter of the arrow imbued with his spiritual energy. All these painstaking details… This was not the work of blind chance.



Mo Ran took a few stumbling steps backward. He had thought they were the same. He'd thought all the world's legendary heroes merely possessed a pair of hands strong enough to blot out the light of truth. They had wiped away the trail of blood left behind in life and shrugged on a set of spotless burial clothes, presenting to posterity a pristine reputation. He'd thought Nangong Changying was no different from the Rufeng Sect Mo Ran had witnessed: a hollowed-out exterior, a beast wearing a human mask.

Had he gotten it wrong?

Mo Ran looked at Nangong Changying, consumed by the licking flames. Centuries ago, this cultivator had been like him—possessed of astonishing spiritual energy and fathomless talent.

Had he gotten it wrong?!

One's crimes were impossible to cover completely. No matter how grandiose the historical accounts, some blemishes would prove impossible to wipe clean, some gaps too deep to fill. Nangong Changying's legacy was one of great benevolence; he was known for neither seizing power nor ascending to immortality when both were within his reach. Mo Ran had assumed this tale was a fiction invented by a man at the height of his power.

Had he gotten it wrong…?

The truth could never stay buried. Just as a long winter's snow would eventually melt, endless expanses of white receding to expose the craggy landscape beneath, the truth would emerge, laying bare the filthy dirt of past misdeeds and exposing their perpetrators, hissing and screeching, to the naked light of day.

Had he…gotten it wrong…

Mo Ran slowly shook his head, staring at Nangong Changying, who now looked straight ahead. His eyes were hidden behind that dragon-embroidered ribbon. No one could see what emotions lay within, least of all Mo Ran.

He couldn’t be sure. But to him, Nangong Changying looked as if he was smiling, his eyes creased with laughter beneath the ribbon. Those traces of mirth were undaunted by the flames, impossible to extinguish. He stood steadily in the center of that inferno, surrounded by blazing light.

Even a man like him wished for a moment of self-indulgence—to leave his broken body to rest among the green mountains and blue cypresses, among the heroes who came after him. After all, the mortal realm was lovely. Who would want to leave it? But leave he must, and thus he had made a plan long ago. He had severed his meridians and hidden his bow so no one could exploit his remains for evil. This world was so beautiful. The color of its flowers was enough; there was no need for the red of spilled blood.

“Sect Founder…” Nangong Si knelt on the ground, gripping the legendary bow Chuanyun. The firelight illuminated his youthful face and shone in the tear tracks upon it. “This descendant is unworthy…”

By now, Chuanyun’s flames had reached the black Zhenlong chess piece within Nangong Changying. Hardly anything of him remained; his outline grew ever fainter within the fire. Finally his own master, Nangong Changying addressed Nangong Si: “How long has it been since the founding of Rufeng Sect?”

His body was but an empty shell, his souls long departed. Very little of his memories or awareness remained. He could only ask this one simple question.

Nangong Si didn’t dare hesitate. “It’s been four hundred and twenty-one years since Rufeng Sect was founded,” he said thickly.

Nangong Changying tilted his head back, the corners of his mouth quirking up. “That’s a very long time.” His voice was distant, like a breeze brushing through the mountaintop trees and dispersing without a trace. “I hadn’t thought it would last more than two hundred.”

His words were low and gentle as they floated over the grass and leaves of Mount Jiao. “Everything in this world has its natural

lifespan. When that time is up, no one can delay the end. Just as the young must succeed the aged, and the new must succeed the old. Used long enough, anything will wear out and get dirty. It's a good thing if someone can let it go, throw it over. Don't blame yourself, Si-er."

Nangong Si's head jerked up. He'd lost too much blood, and his complexion was white as paper. "Sect Founder!" he cried, voice shaking.

"The legacy of Rufeng Sect isn't determined by how long the sect stands, or how many disciples it has." Nangong Changying's outline was nearly transparent, his voice fading to the barest hush. "It will live on as long as there are those who remember—as a gentleman of Rufeng Sect, I mustn't indulge in greed, resentment, deception, slaughter, obscenity, plunder, or conquest."

With a slight swish of his sleeves, the vegetation on Mount Jiao rustled. Vines snaked out of the ground and wrapped securely around the corpses that had previously struggled free, swallowing them fully back into the earth.

"As long as there are those who remember and live by these words, the torch will pass on."

Nangong Changying's form splintered in the flames, scattering into motes of red-gold light that drifted into the far reaches of the woods like summer fireflies. His words seemed to echo long after his remains were gone. Inside the barrier, Nangong Si was breathless with sobs. Outside, Ye Wangxi sank heavily to her knees. The rest of the crowd slowly followed suit.

They knelt to Nangong Changying, the greatest cultivator of his age—a hero in truth, in life and after death.

Chapter 216:
Fallen into Servitude

A SILENCE FELL OVER the vastness of Mount Jiao. The blood vines retracted, and the corpses controlled by Zhenlong chess pieces sank back into the earth. The final command Nangong Changying had given to the spirit of the mountain was to die away. Even his descendants were powerless to oppose this order.

Beneath the bright moon and lapped by the crisp breeze, everything was in disorder. After shooting its last arrow, the bow Chuanyun, cut off from Nangong Changying's spiritual energy, dulled and went gray in Nangong Si's hands as the weapon sealed itself.

Nangong Si hadn't moved, letting his blood drip onto the ground. The moment the barrier opened, Ye Wangxi rushed over and knelt beside him. "Don't move—stay right here." Her voice shook. "Let me treat your wounds…"

"Forget it. I'm still alive right now—if I let you treat me, I might end up no better off than the sect founder." Nangong Si coughed feebly and pushed Ye Wangxi away. His black eyes sought out Jiang Xi. "Jiang-zhangmen, if I could trouble you…"

Jiang Xi inclined his head. "Allow me." He was the leader of the medicinal sect Guyueye; no one would object to his intervention. He bent and pressed jade-like fingers to Nangong Si's inner wrist.

The moment he made contact, his pupils contracted. He wordlessly locked eyes with Nangong Si. He could tell beyond a shadow of a doubt that Nangong Si's spiritual core had been shattered past repair. Nangong Si was no different from a commoner. Never again would he wield any magical techniques or channel spiritual energy.

Nangong Si most certainly knew this himself. But Ye Wangxi was right there—he met Jiang Xi's gaze and subtly shook his head.

"How is it? Jiang-zhangmen, how is A-Si doing?"

Jiang Xi silently withdrew his hand. Reaching into his qiankun pouch, he took out a muted red porcelain bottle and handed it to Ye Wangxi. "It's nothing major. None of his injuries are critical. Don't worry, Miss Ye. Take this medicinal powder and apply it to his wounds daily. They'll heal within ten days."

He brought spiritual energy to his fingertips and tapped Nangong Si's acupoints. Finally, he laid his palm over the gash on Nangong Si's shoulder; a moment later, the bleeding stopped. Jiang Xi straightened and addressed the crowd: "We shouldn't stay here too long. Things may change quickly. Let's go up the mountain."

So saying, Jiang Xi turned and strode to the front of the group. But he couldn't escape the conversation between Ye Wangxi and Nangong Si that floated by him.

"He said I'm fine." Nangong Si's voice was low. "I'll be better in a few days—why are you still crying? Ah, why are you always so useless—all right, all right, it's just a minor injury, that's all…"

Jiang Xi closed his eyes. He recalled what Nangong Si had mouthed to him through the barrier, when his life had hung by a thread. Sighing, he led the crowd up the winding jade steps toward the ancestral temple.

There were three more checkpoints between their position and the summit that required the blood of a Nangong descendant for passage. In his current condition, Nangong Si no longer needed to slice his finger open. Covered as he was in wounds, he dispersed the barriers with a single touch. The group met with no more obstacles as they continued their climb.

At last, Nangong Si smudged a drop of blood onto the eye of a white jade dragon statue. The final massive stone gate sank slowly into the ground, and the grand temple at the top of Mount Jiao revealed itself to the crowd.

The holy temple that rose before them had a breathtaking ethereality. Passing through the gate, they stood at the edge of a

dense forest surrounding its walls. Over the lush flora and sparkling waters, they could see a flight of stairs extending heavenward: fully nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine steps. The staircase was so long the palatial temple at its top seemed nestled amidst the clouds. Only its shimmering outline could be seen, lustrous in the watery light of the moon, a celestial vision at the blurred boundary between the mortal and the sublime.

The sight of this temple, with its grand design and exquisite craftsmanship, stunned the crowd to silence. But it took only a moment for myriad other emotions—anger, envy, greed, desire—to surge up in their hearts.

Master Ma's response was the most baffling of all. Clapping a hand to his forehead, he wailed, "Mercy me! These stairs are so long, and we're not allowed to ride swords on Mount Jiao. How long will it take us to walk up? It's like another mountain at the top of the mountain!"

A few steps away, Huang Xiaoyue laughed. "No offense, but if I may say—no wonder Nangong Changying-xianzhang didn't feel the need to ascend. If he could build a temple like this, what's the difference between rising to the heavens and staying on earth?"

"The building of Rufeng Sect's temple for sacrificial rites was commenced by the sect's third leader, Nangong Yu," a cold voice interjected. "After two generations of toil, the project was completed by the fifth sect leader, Nangong Xian. This temple has nothing at all to do with Nangong Changying."

Flabbergasted, Huang Xiaoyue turned and was met with Chu Wanning's frosty features. Mo Ran could tell at a glance he had reached the limits of his patience. If one more person were to test him, they might all be treated to a reprisal of the whipping at Butterfly Town.

"Like Huang-daozhang, I mean no offense," Chu Wanning said icily. "But let me offer a word of advice: if you haven't done your reading, it's best to watch what you say."

Huang Xiaoyue cared for very little as much as he cared for his own reputation. Listening to Chu Wanning lambast him in front of the crowd was more than he could bear. He made to shoot back a stammering reply when Jiang Xi cut in: "Huang Xiaoyue, you forget yourself."

Jiang Xi's standing and authority were unimpeachable. Huang Xiaoyue turned a crusty shade of gray and choked out a dry laugh, feigning indifference. "Jiang-zhangmen, don't take it so seriously. I already said I meant no offense…"

"Am I supposed to excuse your offensiveness because you say you meant none?" Jiang Xi rolled his eyes and shot Huang Xiaoyue a sidelong glare, unwilling to look at him straight on. "And am I supposed to tolerate your stupidity just because you're senile?"

Chu Wanning might have been a zongshi, but when all was said and done, he possessed only martial skill, not political power. Jiang Xi, however, was a different beast; his Guyueye had the cultivation realm at its beck and call. Huang Xiaoyue broke into a cold sweat and didn't dare talk back.

With a cool sweep of his sleeves, Jiang Xi strode into the forest, the rest of the sect leaders at his heels. Of those who glanced at Huang Xiaoyue as they passed, some were disdainful and some sympathetic; others ignored him completely. The abbot of Wubei Temple sighed out an "Amitabha." If the circumstances weren't so dire, Mo Ran would've burst out laughing.

A few steps into the woods, Nangong Si hummed in surprise.

"What is it?" asked Jiang Xi.

"Tangerine trees…" Nangong Si cast his gaze around, taking in the trees on all sides laden with crisp white blossoms. "Why are there tangerine trees here? These all used to be spiritual longnü trees."

"Look!" A sharp-eyed young cultivator pointed toward the mouth of the stream running through the forest. "There's someone there!"

The crowd craned their necks; a man sat beneath a flourishing tangerine tree on the banks of the burbling brook, his back turned to them. His head was lowered as he examined something in his hands.

"Is that a human or a ghost?" Xue Zhengyong asked with a frown.

"I'll take a look," Mo Ran replied. Using qinggong, he cleared the gap in a leap, landing silently in the trees nearby and creeping closer until he could see the man from the side. As soon as he got a clear look at the man's face, he stopped cold.

It was Nangong Si's father, the last leader of Rufeng Sect: Nangong Liu.

How could this be? Last anyone knew, Xu Shuanglin had fed Nangong Liu a lingchi fruit. He ought to have been subjected to three hundred and sixty-five days of torture before suffering a miserable death. What was he doing here beside a mountain stream, apparently hale and hearty—in good spirits even—washing a basket of tangerines?

Silvery moonlight glanced off rippling water and illuminated Nangong Liu's features. He had a faraway look as he drained water from the washed tangerines, which he placed in a basket, singing softly all the while. "Best are the years you come of age, seeing the world's flowers astride a fast horse."

His sleeves were rolled to the elbow, his arms unmarred as he reached into the clear stream. They bore no sign of the gory latticework the lingchi fruit should have left behind.

A furrow appeared between Mo Ran's brows. Something was clearly off about Nangong Liu—he'd been made into a Zhenlong chess pawn, but was unlike the corpses that had crawled from their graves. Nangong Liu seemed to retain much of his own awareness, moving about like a living person.

Mo Ran sped back to the others.

"Well?" Xue Zhengyong asked anxiously. "What did you see?"

Mo Ran shot a glance at Nangong Si and lowered his voice. "It's Nangong Liu."

A good number of those present held deep grudges against the former sect leader. One immediately drew his sword and cried, "That bastard! I'll kill him!"

Nangong Si hung his head in silence, his face ashen.

"Something strange is going on," said Mo Ran. "Nangong Liu's obviously been made into a pawn, but he bears no traces of the lingchi fruit. It's best to leave him be."

After a moment's consideration, Chu Wanning asked, "Is it possible to nullify the lingchi fruit's effects?"

Guyueye was best poised to address such a question. "It is," answered Hanlin the Sage. "But it's far from straightforward. Why would Xu Shuanglin feed him a lingchi fruit only to go to such great lengths to reverse its curse? It makes no sense."

"Regardless," Jiang Xi added, "if Nangong Liu is here, then Xu Shuanglin is likely in the ancestral temple. We haven't wasted the trip."

Spying movement in the corner of his vision, Jiang Xi turned, and the crowd followed his gaze. They watched as the former leader of Rufeng Sect emerged from the trees with a basket full of tangerines on his back. He tapped a roughhewn staff against the ground as he walked, taking quick, light steps. The bright smile on his face became more apparent the closer he drew.

Nangong Si had told himself he wouldn't look, but how could he resist? His lashes began to quiver like windblown willow fluff with a single glance at his father. He couldn't say what he felt—hatred or heartache, or something else entirely. He didn't know. He wanted to look away, but that figure was like a barbed fishhook snagging his gaze.

A shout rose up from the crowd; someone could no longer hold back. “Nangong Liu! Today, you’ll pay your debts with blood!” An arrow flew from the bow in their hand, streaking toward the back of Nangong Liu’s head.

No one had time to intervene—but the archer’s skill was fortunately lacking. The whistling arrow struck the basket Nangong Liu carried on his shoulders, embedding itself in several plump tangerines.

Many cursed silently. The downside of traveling in such a large party was that there would inevitably be some idiots in the mix. It was too late now to fuss over which imbecile had loosed this wayward arrow. More pressingly, Nangong Liu had slowly turned his head and taken notice of the crowd. Upon seeing the sheer number of people assembled in the forest, Nangong Liu froze. He began walking toward them, his face still plastered with a dreamy expression.

Several cultivators drew gleaming swords several inches out of their scabbards, eyes fixed on Nangong Liu’s every move. Under the weight of a thousand oppressive stares, a sense of foreboding took hold of Nangong Liu at last. His feet stuttered to a halt beneath the swaying shadows of the trees. “Ladies and gentlemen…”

As soon as Nangong Liu broke the silence, dozens were impelled to step out from the crowd. A few drew their swords fully.

Suddenly Nangong Liu’s face split into a grin. It was a familiar sight to the sect leaders at the front of the group: the same warm, simpering expression he had always shown outsiders. The Taxue Palace leader started in astonishment. “This…”

The sect leaders looked at one another, unsettled by this pawn’s bizarre behavior. As they hesitated, Nangong Liu rolled down and smoothed out his sleeves. Then he fell to both knees and prostrated before the crowd of thousands, diligently pressing his forehead to the ground. “Aiya, this servant Nangong Liu forgets his

manners! Esteemed sirs and madams, you have come from afar—welcome to our humble abode, welcome!"

Half the tangerines fell from his basket and rolled onto the ground around him. When he eventually raised his head and saw the spilled fruit, he shrugged the basket off his shoulders and gathered them up without a hint of embarrassment. Beneath countless confounded gazes, he filled the basket once more and rubbed his palms together, grinning. "Honored guests, do you wish to see His Majesty?"

His Majesty? Goosebumps rose over Mo Ran's skin. He had answered to "Your Majesty" for nearly a decade; hearing it now, he reflexively thought Nangong Liu referred to him.

The sect leaders exchanged another glance, utterly dumbfounded. Xue Zhengyong huffed out an incredulous laugh. But no one could muster a word at that moment.

Met with their silence, Nangong Liu scratched his head, perplexed. He ventured again, more tentatively this time: "Heh, honored guests…do you wish to see His Majesty?"

Jiang Xi's mouth twitched, but remained closed.

Nangong Liu seemed to deflate somewhat, but he tried one more time. "Honored guests, do you wish to see His Majesty?"

Silence.

"Honored guests—"

Mo Ran cut in evenly. "Who is His Majesty?"

"His Majesty is His Majesty, naturally!" Nangong Liu was delighted to receive a response at last. "If you want to see His Majesty, walk right this way. He's very busy though—he may not have time to receive you. He has lots of extremely important business to attend to."

Despite the tense atmosphere, Xue Zhengyong finally lost it and burst out laughing in earnest. "Extremely important business? Ha ha, what kind of important business? Managing a mountain of

corpses, playing chess against himself, puppeteering a bunch of marionettes? *That's* what you call extremely important business? Ha ha ha ha, Xu Shuanglin is quite the character."

Mo Ran's forehead creased with worry. "So he's in the temple now, and even though he's very busy, we can try to see him?"

"That's right," Nangong Liu said. "Of course you can try to see him. If his door is closed, just wait in the city; he'll come out when he's done. Enough, enough—I have to go up too. We're out of tangerines, so I have to bring more. Otherwise His Majesty will be cross."

Without waiting for a reply, he strode off toward the temple, leaving the cultivators looking at each other in confusion.

"What should we do?"

"Do we go up?"

"Could it be a trap…?"

But Mo Ran had already flitted ahead on his own. His swift footwork quickly left Nangong Liu's fruit-laden figure and the rest of the crowd far behind.

At last, panting for breath, he reached the temple gates. He had been solely focused on his ascent; not until he looked up did he realize the full scale of this palatial hall. Its pair of doors was staggeringly tall, carved with expansive reliefs, their subjects spanning from the underworld to the heavens. On the lefthand door a soaring dragon swallowed the sun; on the right a magnificent phoenix spit out the moon. The two celestial bodies gleamed brightly, their radiance interweaving across the doors. The grooves between the majestic dragon's scales were filled with pure gold, the tip of the phoenix's arcing tail inlaid with pearls and gemstones. From the temple's uppermost rafters hung thousands of intricate multitiered whale-oil lamps cast of bronze. Their undying flames dappled the towering gates in the rich light of luxury.

Mo Ran braced himself to push open the heavy doors. But at the lightest touch of his fingers, they swung ponderously inward with a sound like distant thunder, the dragon and phoenix parting to admit him without any of the difficulty he'd expected.

The instant the front hall came into view, Mo Ran froze where he stood. What kind of bizarre spectacle was this?

Chapter 217:
The Nightmare Begins

MO RAN WALKED down the long aisle bisecting the hall. The stones beneath his feet were polished to an icy mirror finish, reflecting the sharp lines of his image. Each footfall made a lonely echo in the cavernous space.

But Mo Ran wasn't alone. He was walking through a great crowd of Rufeng supplicants on either side—men and women, young and old, each face distinct. He was surrounded by what amounted to a small city.

On his right, Rufeng Sect's dead and those who had wronged Xu Shuanglin in life met with a series of sorry ends. They were tortured and grievously wounded, killed by every sort of gruesome method, only to be revived and killed again in an unending cycle.

The occupants on the other side of the hall looked peaceful and happy, reveling in song and dance. He spotted Luo Xianxian among them. But she couldn't be here—it must have been a body enchanted with her likeness, without her real souls, controlled by a black chess piece like the merfolk from Jincheng Lake. Luo Xianxian's hair was neatly pulled back, and she sat beside her husband, Chen Bohuan. They looked relaxed and at ease. Landlord Chen's youngest daughter was there too, sitting next to her older brother and sister-in-law, chatting cheerfully. Luo Xianxian nestled against Chen Bohuan, daintily covering her mouth whenever something amused her, eyes curving into gentle crescents.

It was a lovely illusion, but Mo Ran's back was drenched in cold sweat. He strode down the long aisle, hell on one side, heaven on the other. Good and evil were partitioned cleanly: to the left was laughter and cheer; to the right was anguish and suffering.

He continued to walk, through fire and water, light and shadow. He looked to the left. It was a tableau of merriment, a stream running with clear liquor burbling through. Next to the stream, some read in leisure, while others composed poetry. Children laughed and played, and women reclined in plush robes, flushed with drink and cheer.

He looked to the right. Flames licked at the bases of seething cauldrons. Misshapen forms were doused with hot oil, their tongues yanked out, their hearts run through. The inhabitants screeched at each other, locked in savage combat, eyes flashing with a bestial light. Among them, Mo Ran saw the previous abbot of Wubei Temple, the monk who had orchestrated Xu Shuanglin's downfall at the Spiritual Mountain Competition. Three others surrounded him, each wielding a short, rusty knife. They sliced into his face, legs, and chest again and again, every wound healing as Mo Ran watched. The old monk cried out with each cut, wretched, shapeless sounds spilling from his mouth—that garrulous tongue of his had long been ripped out.

The farther Mo Ran walked, the more chilling the scenes became. He hardly wanted to look at either side any longer, to bear witness to the tears and laughter, the fury and joy.

On the left, a woman's gentle voice rang out: "Parted by life and death, O lonely fate—a lover unable to rouse his love's reply…"[1]



To the right, another woman was being ripped apart by a dog, her sharp screams rending the air.

The corners of Mo Ran's vision were bright on one side and dark on the other. Both were unequivocal and absolute, like pawns upon a chessboard, black versus white, a stark line drawn down the middle. He felt like his head was on the verge of splitting open.

Mo Ran's steps slowed; he stood in the middle and closed his eyes. He didn't want to see these confused scenes of paradise and purgatory any longer. He stood waiting for the rest of the group to catch up to him. But the voices from both sides lingered in his ears, piercing as arrows, impossible to shut out.

"The falling leaves chase off my fragmented dream, I stroll over the ground dusted in fragrant petals of red…"[2]

"Don't! Don't do this to me! Please, I'm begging you! Save me… Save me…"

He heard Luo Xianxian say softly to her husband, "Chen-lang, the tangerine trees are blooming in the courtyard. Come see them with me?"

He heard Madam Qi, the former leader of Jiangdong Hall, cackling wildly. "An affair? Yes indeed, I had an affair with Nangong Liu! I'm a slut, a loose woman, a shameless hussy—I murdered my own husband, I made myself sect leader—come see who I really am! I'm just an ugly bitch, ah ha ha ha…"

They were crowded together, the living with the dead. Were they real, or were they an illusion? Were they black or white, good or evil?

The voices rose around him like a tide. He seemed to see a pair of massive dragons breach the beating waves, scales gleaming cold beneath the moon. Were they two evil dragons? No—they were his own two souls. They tangled together, roaring and spitting, clashing mightily, fangs bared. The earth trembled with the force of their battle.

The cacophony was too much for Mo Ran to bear. He clapped his hands over his ears, but he couldn't stop those garbled sounds from leaking in. In the end, he had no choice but to cast a muffling spell on himself.

When his eyes snapped open, his surroundings had vanished.

Fear jolted through him; he stood rooted to the spot. What happened? Where did the temple go—where was *he*? He was surrounded by darkness, a formless, endless darkness… Was this one of Xu Shuanglin's illusions? Mo Ran looked all around, but he couldn't see a thing.

He took a few steps forward. "Shizun?" he called out tentatively. "Xue Meng? Is anyone there?"

No one answered. There was only darkness, a darkness like death.

Regardless how much hardship he had endured, this absolute gloom struck terror into his heart. He strode forward, his arms prickling with gooseflesh; he walked and walked…

He saw a pale glimmer in the distance ahead—perhaps an exit. He turned his steps toward it. Without warning, a crowd of shadowy figures materialized around him. Their faces were indistinct, but he could hear them muttering softly. Like a wave crashing to shore, they knelt as one before him. They were lauding him, low voices running together until they merged into rushing rapids—

"Praise be to Emperor Taxian-jun, long live the emperor."

Emperor Taxian-jun? No… *No!*

He trembled and shuddered, quaking uncontrollably. He sprinted ahead as fast as his legs would carry him, but thousands of hands seemed to grab him from all sides.

"Your Majesty—"

"Taxian-jun, may the heavens favor you for all eternity."

"May the blessings upon you be unending, may you never lack for fortune or riches."

Mo Ran felt his sanity fraying. He struggled out of the grasp of those intangible hands, running toward that sliver of brightness. "No, that's not me… Go away, get out of my way!"

"Taxian-jun…"

But those voices seemed to tail him like his own shadow; he couldn't shake them off. He wondered frantically if Xu Shuanglin had captured some vengeful spirits from the ghost realm and tasked them with hunting down his escaped souls.

"Your Majesty, why are you leaving?"

"Emperor, Emperor…"

Mo Ran stumbled, white-hot light searing his vision. He wanted to leave, but these resentful spirits trapped him, crowding him in until he had nowhere to run. In his helplessness, rage exploded out of him. He spun and drew his sword, hacking those nebulous shadows back into the dark. His expression was twisted, wolfish and feral. "Leave me alone!" he roared. "Get the hell away from this venerable one! Get *out*!"

The instant he heard his own words, he blanched.

Someone snickered: *"This venerable one?"*

"He said 'this venerable one'… That's right… He called himself 'this venerable one'…"

"Emperor, were we wrong? In your heart, you know better than anyone who you are, where you came from—you can't run away."

Mo Ran raised his sword, taking a step back and shaking his head. "No, that's not true… That's not true at all…"

Those scattered wisps of darkness solidified once more, and a blurry silhouette drifted down in front of him. It pressed closer, step by step. "It's not true?" the shadow said softly.

"I'm not Emperor Taxian-jun!"

"How are you not Emperor Taxian-jun?" That voice was delicate and supple, like threads of smoke rising behind a gauze curtain in summertime. "Of course you are. Every wrong committed, every debt incurred, has its source. There's only you—you can't run away…"

"But it's over!" Mo Ran stared at that inchoate mass of darkness. "It's over! Taxian-jun died in front of the Heaven-Piercing Tower! He lay down in the grave—he's got nothing to do with me! I'm just… I'm just…"

The shadow gave a quiet laugh, tender as a flower's pistil. "You're just what?"

Mo Ran couldn't say.

"You're just a soul who found his way back?" the shadow asked. "Just a body that retained a few memories? You're just an innocent living in the shadow of Taxian-jun? Or…could it be that it was all just a dream?"

Mo Ran had been seized by fury and fear a moment ago, but now his heart iced over, the blood in his veins frozen solid. His mind stalled; his lips opened and shut, but he couldn't string together a sentence. At length, he squeezed a single broken word from his aching throat. "Dream?"

"You thought you'd been reborn this entire time. But who can say for sure? Why do you think what you perceive is the truth? Who's more real right now—you or I?" That cloud of dark smoke coiled around him, its outline growing sharper. "You said you died in front of the Heaven-Piercing Tower, but look—you're standing here right now, alive and well… Are you so sure you died?"

Mo Ran glared at the smoky figure. He wasn't shaking anymore; he only felt cold. As if he'd fallen into a cavern of ice, plummeted into a fathomless abyss. He was so, so cold.

Was he so sure he'd died?

The desolate chill of Wushan Palace seemed to seep back into his bones. The torches of the rebel army raised by the ten great sects wound around the mountain like a massive snake, writhing and hissing, ready to snap his neck.

It was like Xue Meng had just been standing before him, tearful and bereft, spitting ruthless words at him. "Mo Ran, give my shizun back to me."

Was he *so* sure he'd died?

He remembered taking the poison, he remembered agony tearing through his insides. He had staggered to the Heaven-Piercing Tower and used the last of his strength to climb into the freshly dug grave, to lie down in that coffin. The haitang blossoms had unfurled so gently, scattering their soft fragrance as the shadows danced and played with the light.

He had closed his eyes…

"You opened your eyes. You awoke the year you turned sixteen, when everything could still be turned back—isn't that right?"

As though it could read every thought in his heart, that shadow snickered softly. "You returned—Sisheng Peak hasn't yet fallen, and though Rufeng Sect burned again, you weren't the one to set the fire this time. Ye Wangxi isn't dead; neither is Shi Mingjing. You came to understand your own heart and fell in love with Chu Wanning. After you became Mo-zongshi, he accepted you. You think you've thrown off the past—you fancy yourself a righteous leader, a proper cultivator, a hero of his generation who's climbed this mountain to capture the cruel villain Xu Shuanglin—"

Silence followed. The artery in Mo Ran's neck throbbed wildly in concert with his skittering pulse. The shadow had no face, but it was staring at him nevertheless; Mo Ran knew that it was.

"You've got quite the imagination."

It was like a cold blade sinking into his heart, venomous fangs piercing his throat. Despair spread through him like poison—like the

poison he'd swallowed at the age of thirty-two. It radiated outward… seeping into his gut…his heart…

"You were never reborn. They're dead, all of them are dead. Xue Meng is still alive, but he hates you to the bone," said the shadow. "Now, you've woken from your dream. Open your eyes, Taxian-jun. You are still the lord of darkness."

"No… No, I'm not…"

Mo Ran could hear someone speaking. That voice was feeble and broken, as if it had been shattered and glued back together. In belated shock, he realized the person making those sounds was him. He summoned courage from every crevice of his bones, every drop of his blood. He opened his eyes wide, a frenzied, desperate light jumping in them—

"You lie! That's impossible! *Impossible!*"

He lunged with his sword, gasping madly for air. The dark smoke dissipated again, but its voice was steady as ever. "Lie?" A low chuckle. "Your Majesty, why don't you take a look at what's in your hand?"

Chapter 218:
But You've Returned

HE GLANCED DOWN and did a violent double-take. The blood in his veins seemed to run backward as buzzing filled his skull. In his hand was the very blade that had accompanied him in countless battles: the holy weapon Bugui!

In the darkness, the pitch-black, single-edged blade glinted with sinister light. It had no scabbard, just a slender yet sturdy hilt; on the gold band of that hilt was engraved in a strong hand: *Bugui.*

Our past lies on a vermilion bridge in emerald fields

Another year gone, yet still I wait, for you do not return.[3]

It was as though Mo Ran had been struck by lightning. The pupils of his eyes shrank to pinpricks, and his stricken face was paler than a corpse's, his expression more ferocious than a vengeful ghost's.

"No… No, it can't… No…not this!"

He flung Bugui to the ground in despair, but the holy weapon was attuned to him; it immediately returned to his waist.

"It can't be!" Mo Ran frantically summoned Jiangui, hysterically calling for it over and over, desperate for the red willow vine to manifest in his hand. But it was to no avail. Jiangui didn't answer. All he had was Bugui.

" *Now* do you believe me?"

The shadow of the restless spirit coalesced again, more quickly than before. In no time at all it formed the shape of four limbs, a torso, a head…

Mo Ran refused to believe it. He *refused*. He turned away from that black cloud and sprinted toward the source of the bright light.

This was some illusion laid down by Xu Shuanglin… It was all just an illusion…

As long as he made it to the light, this nightmare would end. He ran, dashing madly toward escape, only to be caught by a hand on his arm, tightly gripping him.

"Get lost!" Mo Ran shoved it away with a snarl. "Go away! What's real? How would you know better than me? I know what's real! He's good to me, *that's* real! He's not dead, *that's* real! All he and I have gone through these past few years, how could any of it not be real?! Jincheng Lake; Peach Blossom Springs; the ghost realm; Butterfly Town, when we were wed—"

A gentle laugh interrupted him, then words, soft as a sigh: "A-Ran, the one you wed was *me*. How could you forget?"

Mo Ran jerked around. The shadowy figure was now fully formed: an exquisitely painted face, indescribably charming, a beauty beyond compare. She sidled closer, her hairpins of jade and pearl swaying, dressed in the same scarlet wedding robes she'd worn at their wedding.

"When I could walk no farther at Dawning Peak, it was you who carried me. You wanted me to call you *A-Ran* instead of *Your Majesty*. Have you forgotten?"

Her smile was as soft as ribbon grass, but the grip of her hand was terrifyingly strong. Mo Ran jerked away from her. This couldn't be Song Qiutong. The fingers on his arm pressed tight enough to leave bruises.

He went on, one foot after another… That white light was getting closer, closer. Somehow, in the midst of this darkness, he knew this was the exit. Toward the light… He only needed to get there…

From behind him, he heard Song Qiutong laugh. "Your Majesty, where are you going? Chu Wanning is dead. *You* killed him. Are you really going back there?"

Mo Ran hesitated.

"Back there is…"

He didn't hear the rest. Mo Ran tore free from the grasping restraints of those vicious shadows and ran, shoving the sound of her voice to the back of his mind. That clean sunlight grew brighter and stronger before him. He was like a man drowning in the depths of the ocean, struggling and kicking with all his might toward the wavering, scattered light of the surface.

He broke through and the darkness abruptly vanished. His legs trembled as he panted, gulping in air like he really had emerged from the water. The sudden brightness disoriented him; he raised his arms to shield his eyes. A few moments later, he heard the sound of birds chirping and smelled the delicate scent of xifu haitang.

Mo Ran cracked his eyes open… Where was he?

The first thing he saw was a flourishing haitang tree, its branches heavy with pale-pink blossoms like an embroidered dawn. This wasn't the Nangong ancestral temple. The illusion…still hadn't ended?

But his mind was already falling to pieces. He was suddenly uncertain who he was, uncertain what was a dream and what reality. As he sat up, a withered haitang blossom that had rested on the tip of his nose drifted to land on his knee.

Wait, sat up?

Only then did Mo Ran realize he'd been lying down, as if he'd just woken from a nightmare. He glanced around and realized he was at the foot of the Heaven-Piercing Tower, sitting within an open, black-lacquered coffin.

In an instant, his entire body went cold, all the way to the tips of his fingers. He sat in a daze for a long moment, then frantically, gracelessly, crawled out of the coffin. He saw a blank tablet on the ground, along with a bowl of wontons and several other plates of

side dishes, all his favorites. He stared at the dishes, then at the coffin.

No… No, the nightmare continued.

He'd fallen even deeper, it seemed. Or perhaps he'd finally woken up. Had everything the shadow said been the truth? Had he really taken the poison and lain down at the foot of the Heaven-Piercing Tower to dream a long, long dream? Had everything in the dream been only…

Mo Ran didn't dare follow that line of thought to its end. He clambered to his feet, dashing toward the southern peak.

This didn't match his memories of the time before his death. He distinctly recalled sending everyone away that last year, but as he ran, a retinue of attendants appeared, headed by Old Liu, the same Old Liu who had served him for so many years. The old man held a box, and on his wrinkled face was a beaming smile.

"Your Majesty! The resurrection pill has been found! We've got it right here!"

Mo Ran froze.

The attendants all went to their knees, offering their congratulations. Old Liu, too, was kneeling, offering up the brocade box in trembling, wizened hands. "It's the resurrection pill," he said hoarsely, "for which Your Majesty has searched so long. The gods are gracious; here it is…"

"This isn't…" Mo Ran said numbly. "I—didn't I chase you all off the mountain?"

The attendants blanched and kowtowed. "Your Majesty," Old Liu anxiously answered. "Why would you send us away? Has…has your humble servant not served you well? Your humble servant—"

"What about the ten great sects?"

Old Liu was baffled. "Ten great sects?" He raised his head, confused. "Your Majesty, is something the matter?"

He'd never be able to explain it—instead he dragged Old Liu to the base of the Heaven-Piercing Tower to show him. As they emerged from the woods, he gestured at the grave in front of the tower. "See for yourself. I was just sleeping in that—"

His coffin and tombstone were nowhere to be seen. There were just the two solitary graves of the empress and consort, their tombstones inscribed with his own childish, dogged scrawl.

Mo Ran stared, flummoxed.

"Your Majesty," Old Liu asked once more, worry plain on his face. "What's wrong?"

"I…" Mo Ran stared at those graves in a daze, his mind all ajumble. In one moment, he could see that this was some kind of phantasm, but in the next, it felt real. He couldn't discern reality from illusion, couldn't tell where he was, *when* he was.

"Your Majesty must be very troubled indeed," Old Liu sighed. "Did you have a bad dream?"

"It wasn't a dream…" Mo Ran mumbled. He shook his head and continued, face pale. "No, it *has* to be the dream…" he muttered incoherently, then snapped around and fixed his stare on Old Liu. "Where's the resurrection pill?"

Old Liu proffered the box.

Instead of taking the box from his hands, Mo Ran opened it. Within lay a single pearlescent pill, gleaming with a gentle, jade-like luster. Swallowing hard, he plucked it out with trembling fingers, then set out for the Red Lotus Pavilion.

He was stopped in his tracks by Old Liu. Mo Ran turned back, his nerves so taut they were close to snapping. "What is it?"

"Your Majesty," Old Liu began. His face, which held its habitual affableness just moments ago, had grown dark, and something sinister glinted treacherously in his eyes. "Aren't you going in the wrong direction?"

"What do you mean, the wrong direction…"

“Your Majesty, you should be heading toward the Resurrection Platform,” Old Liu said, slow and clear. The rest of the attendants surrounded Mo Ran, pressing in. “The one Your Majesty has always yearned for, always wished to bring back to life—is it not your shixiong, Shi Mingjing?”

“I…”

“Now that the resurrection pill is in Your Majesty’s hands, why is it that Your Majesty does not make haste to the Resurrection Platform, but instead looks toward the Red Lotus Pavilion?” Old Liu continued, voice a whisper. “Your Majesty slaughtered hundreds and thousands till the rivers ran red with blood, visited chaos and disaster upon the land as far as the eye could see, all in an effort to secure this means of rebirth. After having done all that, will Your Majesty turn his back on everything he worked for and feed this pill to another person entirely?”

Mo Ran, heart in turmoil, gripped the pill tightly and squeezed out, “You don’t understand.”

“Your Majesty must go to the Resurrection Platform, not to the Red Lotus Pavilion.” The eyes of the attendants shone with a terrible light as they crowded in ever closer, their ghastly faces encircling Mo Ran as they repeated, “Your Majesty must go to the Resurrection Platform, not to the Red Lotus Pavilion.”

“Get out of my way.” Mo Ran clenched his fingers around the resurrection pill, face pale.

“Your Majesty must go to the Resurrection Platform—”

“Move!”

He drew Bugui, its hilt ice-cold in his hand, and the attendants shrank back. The pupils of their eyes narrowed into snakelike slits, and twisted smiles appeared on their faces, one by one.

“You’ll regret this…”

“Did you really think you could change anything?”

“You’ve broken your promise.”

"Hypocrite."

"Ah, how can someone so false and fickle be worthy of that pill?"

"Take it back! Seize it from him!"

Keeping a firm hold on the pill, Mo Ran tore a bloody path through them, sprinting toward the southern tip of Sisheng Peak. Whether this was a dream or reality, Chu Wanning would be there… He didn't care if he was alive or dead; he just needed to be there, by Chu Wanning's side. Only then could his heart be at peace.

Mo Ran ran through the barrier of the Red Lotus Pavilion; it admitted him but held Old Liu and the rest at bay. He shot one last glance behind him, then closed the jade bamboo door, shutting out the sight of those faces. This was the Red Lotus Pavilion; the only ones allowed in were himself, and…

"Shizun?"

His eyes widened with shock at the scene before him: Chu Wanning, standing at a table beneath a haitang tree. His hair was bound up in a high ponytail, and he wore metal gloves, his expression one of utmost focus as he examined the near-completed piece of the Holy Night Guardian in his hands. As the wind picked up, pale petals shook loose from their blossoms to flutter snow-like across the table and steps of the courtyard.

The rims of Mo Ran's eyes reddened, and he choked out, "Shizun…"

Chu Wanning raised his head at the sound of Mo Ran's voice. He was holding a file in his mouth, clearly very busy. Caught by surprise at Mo Ran's sudden appearance, he put the file away and straightened, nodding at him. "What are you doing here?"

Chapter 219:
Don’t Leave Me

MO RAN SAID NOTHING—or perhaps there was nothing he could say. He stepped forward and pulled Chu Wanning into his arms.

“What’s gotten into you?”

Holding him like this, Mo Ran could feel the warmth of Chu Wanning’s body even through the cool cloth of his robes.

“Are you crying?”

He didn’t know if this was dream or reality. He no longer knew anything with certainty, except that Chu Wanning’s cold corpse was no longer lying in the Red Lotus Pavilion. His shizun was still alive, still worrying about the flexibility of his Holy Night Guardians’ joints and whether they should be sealed with tung oil or clear lacquer.

This was enough. Mo Ran drowned himself in it, refusing to wake.

He and Chu Wanning finished the automaton together. When it was dark, he led Chu Wanning back to his room and tangled his limbs with his shizun’s, just as he had in the past life. The Chu Wanning in this dream wasn’t so easily tamed. He remained vicious in some respects, recalcitrant in others. Even as his climax crashed over him, he gritted his teeth in silence, sharp eyes misted with tears. Only the roughness of his breathing escaped his control.

The candles were lit. Their light shone upon the face of the well-ravished man beneath him. Mo Ran drank in Chu Wanning’s features with hungry, adoring eyes; he watched as Chu Wanning’s black pupils filled with the reflection of the candlelight.

The light flickered like petals fallen into a deep pond. When Mo Ran moved, those petals swirled and drifted in the waters, rippling

outward. Eventually, tears ran from the ends of Chu Wanning's eyes; Mo Ran kissed them all away.

He knew too well what Chu Wanning was like. Without the use of aphrodisiacs, he rarely made any noise in bed. His self-control was regretfully unshakeable. But what did that matter? Chu Wanning couldn't control the wetness of his eyes, nor his helpless panting. So what if he didn't moan? It was enough for Mo Ran to fuck him to the point of tears, to see his eyes glaze over, to see his chest heave with desperation.

Their night of pleasure stretched into the small hours of morning, when they finally fell asleep wrapped in each other's embrace. Mo Ran held Chu Wanning tightly in his arms. Their bodies lay pressed together, bare skin warm against bare skin, sweat-damp hair tacky on their cheeks. He planted ardent and tender kisses on Chu Wanning's ear and the pale column of his throat, then pulled him even tighter into his arms. "This is all I need, Shizun. Just you by my side."

He slept.

When he woke, he found the bed empty.

"Shizun?!"

Jolting upright, he saw Chu Wanning standing at the half-opened window. Day had broken, and a misty rain shimmered down outside. Mo Ran let out a sigh of relief and reached out a hand. "Shizun, come here…"

But Chu Wanning didn't move. His robes were neat and as white as driven snow; he looked quietly at the man on the bed. Gazing at him, Mo Ran felt a pulse of violent unease.

"Mo Ran," Chu Wanning said. "It's time for me to go."

"Go?" Mo Ran stared. The blankets were still warm. There were strands of hair on the pillow and a faint musky scent in the sheets, but Chu Wanning looked so distant he seemed to be

standing on a far-off shore. “Where are you going?” Mo Ran asked anxiously. “This is the Red Lotus Pavilion, your home. We’re already home, so where are you going?”

Chu Wanning shook his head. He turned back to the pale dawn gathering outside the window. “There’s no time. It’s almost morning.”

“Wanning!”

He blinked, nothing more. Then the room was empty, as if Chu Wanning had never been.

Mo Ran threw on his clothes and scrambled out of bed, forgetting his shoes as he staggered outside. A nighttime breeze had strewn the courtyard with a thousand snowy petals. The flourishing boughs of haitang blossoms were nearly bare, fallen flowers littering the steps, table, and chairs. A finished Holy Night Guardian lay on the stone table, with the metal glove and file tossed carelessly down beside it. As if Chu Wanning had just left. As if he would be back any minute.

“Wanning? Wanning!”

Mo Ran sprinted through the Red Lotus Pavilion as if mad, searching for him, yet avoiding the lotus pond with unerring accuracy. He subconsciously feared the place, he dared not go…

But he wandered deliriously toward it in the end, his feet bare against the freezing slabs of stone. He was still a fair distance away when he stopped. Numbness crept up his body, rising from his pale feet all the way to his face, drained of color as he gazed at the man within the lotus pond, eyes wide in mute shock.

The body in the pond looked precisely the same as it did every day of the last two years of his past life. It lay in the depths of the lotus flowers, held in stasis, robes pristine.

Lying in the depths of those flowers, body in stasis and robes pristine—what difference was there between dead and alive? *What difference was there?!*

Mo Ran took one step closer, then another.

If he kept going until he reached the pool's edge, he would see each of Chu Wanning's lashes, those sharp brows faintly furrowed even in death, the sweeping line of those phoenix eyes that would never open again. He sank down in terror instead, his knees hitting the stone as he shook and cowered.

Shivering on the ground, he remembered that pill Old Liu had given him, that pill with the powers of resurrection. Mad with joy, he dug through his qiankun pouch with shaking, contorted fingers, tossing everything out.

"The pill…the pill… I need the resurrection pill… Where is it? Where is it?!"

He went through every item in the pouch, digging into every last wrinkle and probing every inch of every seam, but there was nothing. The resurrection pill was missing; it wasn't there. Or maybe running into Old Liu and taking the pill had been a dream? No, these were *all* dreams, one after another…

He finally shattered, mind reduced to fragmented scraps as he scrubbed at his face and eyes in despair. "No, it's here…" he murmured. "I put it right here… The resurrection pill… It exists…it exists…it exists…" He began to search madly once more, hysterically looking all around where he knelt before Chu Wanning's corpse. A frightful glint shone in his eyes, but his voice grew only more hoarse and more hollow. In the end, he curled up and sobbed. "I put it there, I did!"

He flung away the items scattered around him, countless ceramic bottles clinking as they smashed. Within these fragile ruins, he hobbled forward, ignoring how they pierced the skin on his knees. He crawled toward the man lying in the lotus pond.

Mo Ran walked out of the pond with Chu Wanning in his arms, that icy corpse tightly clasped to his chest. Something he'd always wanted to do in his last life, yet somehow never did. He clutched at Chu Wanning's body. That misty rain fell unceasingly; the sky in the

east continued to brighten, but it had nothing to do with them. He clutched Chu Wanning and cried, pressing his face to Chu Wanning's and kissing his nose, lashes, and lips.

"Shizun… I'm begging you… Please pay attention to me… Please…"

In that moment, his silhouette seemed to recall that of the orphan sobbing over the rotting body of his mother in the burial grounds, the boy who'd begged passersby to bury him with his mom. He'd been only five years old. A five-year-old child who swore he'd never again watch his loved one become a pile of rot while he looked on, helpless.

Years had passed in the blink of an eye. The thirty-two-year-old Taxian-jun clung to his shizun's body and fell into fits of crazed laughter broken by bouts of sobbing as he caressed this corpse. A corpse that looked just as the man had in life. He'd done it. He could make a dead man look alive. There was almost a faint flush to the dead man's cheeks, his face so peaceful he might have merely fallen asleep.

This time, he didn't beg anyone to bury him alongside Chu Wanning. Taxian-jun had already buried himself alive. The day after Chu Wanning died, he'd drunk a jar of pear-blossom white wine. And with every day that came after, he'd sat in this mausoleum to the living dead called the Red Lotus Pavilion and drunk himself into a stupor. He had been buried six feet under since that day.

"Shizun, please pay attention to me…"

"Mo Ran!"

"Please…pay attention to me…"

He seemed to hear a familiar voice calling his name. As darkness fell around him once more, he clutched at the sound like a drowning man clutching a piece of driftwood.

A hand reached out to him. He sobbed, grabbing it tightly. "Don't go; I won't do anything bad or evil ever again, I'll never make

you angry…”

Mo Ran clung to that person’s hand, their fingers entwining. He smelled the faint scent of haitang flowers. “I have a resurrection pill, but I…I don’t know what happened, I can’t find it anymore… I can’t find it, but could you still stay with me? Please…” He blindly sought the warmth of that unknown person and held them tight. “Please, I’d rather…I’d rather I was the one who died…”

“Mo Ran! Wake up!”

But he couldn’t wake up. He was drowning in an agony deeper than the ocean; he couldn’t wake up. Sobs caught in his throat as he latched tight to the person calling his name, his eyes overflowing with tears. “I’d rather I died instead, Shizun…”

“Damn dog! What are you trying to do? Hey, you!”

He felt someone rush over and grab him. There was a brief scuffle, and a hand poured a freezing liquid down his throat. It was cold, like dark ice left frozen for a thousand years, filling him until his insides crackled with frost.

His eyes snapped open.

Jiang Xi’s displeased face came into focus, a jade bottle in his hand. It had obviously held whatever he’d just been forced to drink.

“I…” Mo Ran heard the hoarseness of his voice the moment he spoke, and fell silent.

He looked around and saw that he’d returned to the ancestral temple. He’d sweated through all his many layers of robes, and those around him watched him strangely. Xue Meng in particular—his face was awful to look at, turning greenish and pale in turns.

Mo Ran was lying in Chu Wanning’s lap, his arms wrapped tightly around Chu Wanning’s waist. As he dreamt, he’d pulled Chu Wanning’s neat robes into complete disarray; one sleeve of his outer robe had nearly come completely off his shoulder.

He paused. Had he…had he said anything he shouldn’t?

Chu Wanning's expression was unsightly as well, but he still had his composure. "Why did you rush ahead so quickly?"

"Shizun, I… I just…"

"You were caught in a nightmare." Jiang Xi put the bottle away and stood, casting his eyes downward. "Rest for a while. I gave you dreamwake frost. You'll feel cold, but it'll fade in a few minutes."

Mo Ran had not fully shaken off those layers of nightmares. His eyes were still glassy. A long beat of silence followed before he mumbled, "A nightmare? But…I was careful, I didn't… I didn't notice any trace of spells…"

"Spells?" Jiang Xi asked, hackles raised. "What use are those stupid things?"

Silence greeted that proclamation.

"You think *spells* are the world's most vicious, lethal, and invisible weapon?" This medicine sect leader narrowed his eyes, sweeping his sleeves back as he spoke in tones of purest disdain. "Wrong on all counts. The world's most formidable weapon is medicine."

He continued coolly, "The temple was filled with a type of incense known as nineteen hells. This substance is colorless and odorless, but those who breathe it sink into an illusion of their greatest fear." At this, Jiang Xi paused and looked Mo Ran up and down. "The greater the fear, the deeper the illusion. I've rescued a few people caught in a nineteen hells nightmare before, but they woke up after four or five drops of dreamwake frost. Do you know how much you drank?"

"…How much?"

Jiang Xi seemed rather vexed. "Most of the bottle. The amount required to wake you is enough to save a hundred ordinary people. Now, riddle me this, Mo-zongshi. How do you have such a deep-rooted fear at your young age? What is it that you're so afraid of?"

Chapter 220:
Side by Side

MO RAN FELL silent.

Until this dream, not even he knew the scale of the terrors that lurked in his heart. His fears of Chu Wanning dying, of being questioned about his feelings for Shi Mei; his fear that this entire lifetime was no more than an ephemeral dream.

He lowered his head. For some reason—because of the dreamwake frost, or something else—he was so cold he was shaking.

Chu Wanning got to his feet. There were too many eyes upon them. He and Mo Ran couldn't do anything to betray how close they were, especially considering how Mo Ran had clung to him and cried his name in the dream. If he hadn't fought back, Mo Ran might've shoved him to the ground right here in public. It hadn't gotten quite to that point, but Mo Ran's reaction had been so intense Chu Wanning wasn't sure what these bystanders had picked up on.

He slowly straightened his spine. He'd been sitting so long his legs were a mass of pins and needles.

Xue Meng instinctively reached out, but for some reason, he didn't go to help Chu Wanning up. It was Shi Mei who extended an arm and softly said, "Shizun, rest for a while."

Chu Wanning lowered his lashes. Without a word of excuse or explanation, he shrugged off his loosened outer robe. It fell around Mo Ran's shoulders with a flutter of fabric. "Wear this. You can give it back after the cold has faded."

Mo Ran didn't dare look at him too long either. "Yes, Shizun."

Everyone else had scattered to investigate the hall or search for triggers for hidden traps. Xue Zhengyong asked Mo Ran a few

questions and, after being reassured of his nephew's health, patted his shoulder and walked toward the other sect leaders.

Only Xue Meng stayed where he was. Once everyone was far enough away, he bent down, glancing around, and whispered in tones of suppressed wrath, "What the hell did you dream about?"

Mo Ran said nothing.

"Answer me," Xue Meng ground out.

"It was just a dream, that's all."

"Whatever it was, it's all stuff that's in your heart!" The light in Xue Meng's eyes was as scattered as his wits. "What were you thinking about? Are you… Are you…"

"I dreamt I killed people." The bone-deep cold made Mo Ran shiver. Even his lips were white. "I dreamt I killed Shizun."

"You—!"

"That's all, nothing else…"

Xue Meng's lips quivered as if he wanted to ask more, yet Mo Ran didn't sound like he was lying. But he said he dreamed about killing Shizun… Leaving aside the question of why Mo Ran feared this when he cared so deeply for his teacher… That expression on his face earlier, when he'd been clutching at Chu Wanning. Was that an emotion a disciple would display? Was there not something else there, too? Something like…

He dared not finish the thought. It felt as if he were steps away from the edge of an endless abyss.

The effects of the medicine gradually faded. Mo Ran moved to stand. After hesitating a moment, Xue Meng helped him to his feet.

"Thank you," said Mo Ran. He looked over the other cultivators. "Was anyone else affected by the incense?"

"Just you. You ran too fast." Xue Meng, although still glum, was less volatile now. "Jiang Xi recognized the eighteen-demon-something incense the minute we entered."

"…Not eighteen demons. Nineteen hells."

"Whatever, the name doesn't matter. He concocted an antidote before we came in, so it was fine." Xue Meng paused, suddenly remembering something. "But we were lucky. If the timing had been different, it would've been bad."

"What happened?"

"You ran ahead too quickly, so you didn't see it. When we were on the way up the temple, a whole bunch of venomous snakes slithered out of Nangong Liu's basket. A ton of people were bitten, and they all had to stay behind and rest. The venom was really strong. Jiang Xi told us to go on ahead while he stayed behind to help… If that had happened, all these people would have fallen prey to the incense as soon as they reached the temple," Xue Meng said. "He only has one bottle of dreamwake frost. It wouldn't have been enough to treat everyone."

Mo Ran felt a prickle of unease. "Then why didn't he stay?"

"One of his disciples said he knew how to neutralize the toxin, so Jiang Xi left him there and came up with us."

Mo Ran furrowed his brow. His eyes roved over the Guyueye group one by one, but he didn't see the silhouette he sought. If Jiang Xi's disciple hadn't known a cure for that type of venom, there were only two people who could've stayed behind. One was Jiang Xi, and the other was Hua Binan.

"Where's Hua Binan?"

Xue Meng blinked. "You suspect Hanlin the Sage?"

"It's just a question."

"There's nothing suspicious about his absence. Hua Binan got bitten too, so he stayed behind to meditate. But he's already got a lot of toxins in him; they said he just needs to rebalance himself before joining us."

Mo Ran's expression darkened. If Hanlin the Sage was so injured he couldn't move, then only Jiang Xi could have stayed

behind to help. How lucky Jiang Xi had a disciple who knew this particular venom. Otherwise, Jiang Xi might've had to stay behind to treat the wounded. By the time he came up, what kind of scene would he have encountered? Would one bottle of dreamwake frost have been enough to fix things?

"Xue Meng."

"Hm?"

"Be careful around Hua Binan."

The words hung in the air. Suddenly the ground shifted—a sound like a distant dragon's cry broke through the skies outside the hall.

One of the more skittish cultivators exclaimed, "What's happening? What was that?"

One of the brave ones replied, "I'll go take a look."

The brave man rushed outside and looked up and down. "Don't worry," he said when he turned back around. "The mountain probably just makes that sound from time to time. It used to be the spirit of a demon dragon, after all."

As he lifted his foot to head back inside, he found it was stuck —

a bone-white hand wrapped around his ankle. Stupefied, he stared down in silence.

Xue Zhengyong's sharp eyes saw it at once. "Look out!" he shouted, but it was too late. A corpse leapt out of the darkness, garbed in the crane robes of Rufeng. A ribbon bound its eyes, and the blade of its sword had cut straight through the cultivator's chest.

"I…" The man's eyes were wide and confused. He reached out, numbly touching the blade, then spat up a stomachful of blood and collapsed to the ground, unmoving.

The earth began quaking once more. Everyone looked out the hall doors to see thick bands of dragon sinew bursting out of the ground and whipping into the air, each bloody length wrapped

around the body of a dead Rufeng disciple. From a distance, it looked like a swarm of wasps that had congregated in the sky above them—one ready to smash the hall's current inhabitants to a bloody pulp.

Master Ma covered his eyes with a cry. "Oh no no no, we're all gonna die!"

Listening to this infuriating merchant's wailing, Xue Zhengyong could have spit blood. He shut Master Ma's mouth with a smack to the back of his head, then shouted at the assembled crowd, "Close the doors! Seal the fucking doors! Don't let them in!"

Xue Zhengyong rushed at the first revenant, swaying with its bloodied sword in hand. With a flick of his fan, he pushed it away from the building, then kicked it down the long steps. Taking hold of one of the great doors of spiritual stone, he strained to close it with a grunt.

But for some reason, those doors were easy to push open but impossible to pull shut. Xue Zhengyong pulled them so hard veins protruded on his forearms, but all his might had as much effect as a drop of water in the ocean.

The dragon sinews were puppeteering the corpses ever closer. "What's going on?" Xue Zhengyong roared. "Didn't Nangong Changying just seal them all? This asshole dragon is fighting its own master!"

Mo Ran and Xue Meng had both run over to help Xue Zhengyong. "It's no use!" Nangong Si shouted. "The spiritual stones for the doors were hauled here by four thousand porters at my great-grandfather's command! You can't close them by yourselves."

Smoke seemed to puff from Huang Xiaoyue's ears. "Your great-grandfather sounds like a real piece of work!"

Nangong Si ignored him entirely. He turned to the group fending off Rufeng Sect's revenants and cried, "There's a mechanism inside that triggers the hall doors! Keep them off a while; I'll activate it."

Xue Zhengyong's fan moved so fast it looked like black smoke in his hand as he wielded it. With one flick, it flung more corpses away, leaving black blood splattered across the words *Xue Is Beautiful*. But these bodies were those of mighty warriors. They stood up again as soon as they fell to the bottom of the stairs and continued their assault.

"Hurry up!" Xue Zhengyong turned to yell. "There's more of them! Fuck me… What the hell is happening?"

Mo Ran summoned Jiangui. The doors were their last line of defense; he rushed out to engage directly with the revenants on the stairs. But right away he ran into difficulty—he couldn't use all his strength on the narrow steps, and he had to be careful not to step off into thin air and tumble from the sky.

One lash of his whip knocked down a line of crawling corpses, only for the stinking dragon sinew to bring up more and more monsters around him. He was soon surrounded, lost in a sea of corpses with no way out. But Mo Ran wasn't intent on escape just yet. The revenants sought out the smell of humans, and he presented the closest target. Nearly all the corpses ran mindlessly toward him.

"Aiya," Master Ma sighed as he cowered, trembling, behind Jiang Xi. "How impressive Mo-zongshi is. How powerful, how powerful indeed."

Jiang Xi turned, annoyed. "Are you of no use beyond selling things?"

"The things I'm good at take time to develop—arrays, techniques, weapon modifications… I'm no good at hand-to-hand combat." Master Ma met Jiang Xi's freezing gaze and choked. Squirming, he tentatively said, "I could maybe…cheer you guys on?"

Jiang Xi stared. To be fair, Master Ma wasn't wrong. Each sect had their strengths and weaknesses; when facing bloody conflict, not everyone could charge into the fray and walk out alive. Some

would merely be rushing to their own deaths. Even Jiang Xi himself hung back this time: poison powders were useless on the dead.

Xue Meng stood before the doors with Longcheng unsheathed, eyes fixed on the black-garbed silhouette rising and falling amidst the sea of crane-garbed shadows. One bloody vine flew into the air, carrying a strong Rufeng disciple directly toward Mo Ran. Unable to stand by any longer, Xue Meng rushed over with sword in hand and hacked off the corpse's arm. He pressed his back against Mo Ran's, slashing another twisting vine apart. Blood sprayed into the air.

"Meng-er!" Xue Zhengyong howled. "Come back!"

"It's fine! We've got this!"

It was clear whom he meant by *we*. Mo Ran turned his face slightly to Xue Meng. "Hurry back, I can handle this alone. You be the second line of defense; once I'm tired you can—"



“Shut up!” Longcheng sang in Xue Meng’s hand as he grouched, “Who took first place at the Spiritual Mountain Competition—you or me? Who’s the young master of Sisheng Peak—you or me? Who’s stronger—you or me?”

Mo Ran said nothing. Chest blazing with warmth, he fell silent and turned all his attention to fighting back-to-back with Xue Meng, fending off the corpses pressing in on all sides.

They heard the rumble of the stone doors slowly closing inward. Overjoyed, Xue Zhengyong whooped, “They’re moving! The doors are closing—hurry up, you two! Come back! Get over here!”

Mo Ran and Xue Meng were fighting in perfect concert, the red glow of Jiangui dancing alongside Longcheng’s scarlet gleam. Metal clashed as they knocked a wave of corpses down through the clouds, bands of dragon sinew spurting blood as they were cut. They backed toward the temple as the doors groaned shut.

“You go in first,” Xue Meng said.

“We’ll go together,” said Mo Ran. Met with Xue Meng’s blank stare, he cried, “Hurry up! What are you waiting for?!”

“Hurry!” Xue Zhengyong bellowed from inside. “Get inside!”

Mo Ran grabbed Xue Meng by the lapels. “Let go!” Xue Meng raged. “Don’t act the hero here, you—”

“Who’s acting the hero? Time to go!”

Mo Ran yanked Xue Meng back and leapt up the steps, snapping Jiangui in a backhand lash and sending a last cluster of corpses flying. With Xue Meng in tow, he leapt toward the doors, still only half closed—they had plenty of time to spare. Mo Ran threw Xue Meng toward Xue Zhengyong and turned to face the horde outside. He took slow steps back toward the doors, eyes and willow vine alike sparking flame.

Suddenly, the massive stone doors ground to a halt.

“Why did they stop?” Xue Meng exclaimed.

He turned and saw Nangong Si walking out from behind one of the massive stone pillars, ashen-faced. “The winch of the mechanism has been destroyed,” he said, voice hollow. “The chain snapped. Ican’t reattach it.”

He raised his hand. Gripped in his wounded fist was a segment of bronze chain, clanking in the air.

Chapter 221:
Hand in Hand

XUE MENG NEARLY spat blood. Mo Ran didn't have the energy to spare; as soon as he heard Nangong Si's words, he turned back and resumed fighting the corpses, acting as the first line of defense.

Chu Wanning had been helping Nangong Si work on the clearly sabotaged mechanism. When he saw Mo Ran outside, fighting alone, he flew to the doors and shouted, "Mo Ran, come back!"

"Shizun…"

Chu Wanning slammed down a golden barrier, which flung the nearest corpses back down the steps as it activated. He set up barriers on the stairs, the entryway, and the gap between the doors, then dragged Mo Ran inside. "Stop fighting."

"Shizun, we're still within the bounds of Mount Jiao; your barriers won't last! There's no need for this!"

Face a maelstrom of fury, Chu Wanning gritted his teeth and shoved Mo Ran deeper into the hall. "Bleeding all over and still trying to get yourself killed out there? Go sit down and meditate! Shi Mingjing!"

"Shizun, I'm here."

Chu Wanning jabbed a finger at Mo Ran. "See to his injuries."

Shi Mei nodded. "Yes, Shizun."

Mo Ran stilled Shi Mei's outstretched hand, then said to Chu Wanning, who'd already turned his back: "Shizun, these are superficial wounds. Your barriers won't last more than half an hour here, and they'll drain your spiritual energy. You…"

Chu Wanning didn't turn to look at him from where he stood, facing the light of the barriers. "Then I'll survive half an hour."

Before Mo Ran could argue again, Shi Mei pulled him back. His cool fingers brushed Mo Ran's skin as he rolled up his sleeve and began casting healing spells over his wounds. When Mo Ran met his gaze, Shi Mei shook his head wordlessly before lowering his lashes and focusing on his work.

"Xue Meng," said Chu Wanning.

"Here, Shizun."

"Once I'm spent, you take over. Don't overdo it. As soon as you feel drained, Sect Leader, you take over next."

"Right," Xue Zhengyong hastily answered. "It's better to take turns."

Chu Wanning poured his spiritual energy into the three barriers. "There's something else I'd like to ask of you, Sect Leader."

"Go on."

"Those useless shirkers cowering in the back. Other than those of Taxue Palace and Guyueye who aren't suited to hand-to-hand combat, bring everyone who can fight over here," he said through gritted teeth.

"What if they won't come?"

"Then they can sit there and die when the doors are breached. Maybe that will motivate them."

Xue Zhengyong diligently ran off.

Nangong Si hadn't moved, still staring glumly at the broken chain in his hands, unsure what to do. Why had the sect founder's command broken so suddenly? An order from Nangong Changying couldn't be countermanded by anyone. So why would it…?

Xue Zhengyong was rounding up those who could step out and help with their defense. "I'll go," said Ye Wangxi.

Nangong Si snapped back to his senses and stopped her. "You're a girl, how can you—"

Ye Wangxi stared at the spineless herd of Jiangdong Hall disciples milling about whispering to each other. "Even if Rufeng Sect's been reduced to two," she said coldly, "there are no cowards among our number."

The women who'd mocked her for stepping up despite her gender were silent now. They slid their eyes away, avoiding Ye Wangxi's gaze.

Xue Zhengyong gathered a few more people. When he saw the next volunteer, he stared in shock. "Hanxue? Why have you… N-no, you're not used to this kind of fighting. Go back."

Mei Hanxue was icy today. "Don't worry, Uncle. I know what I'm doing, I won't mess around."

Xue Zhengyong looked to the leader of Taxue Palace, but she seemed unbothered, so there was nothing he could say. Mei Hanxue stepped up to join their group.

Jiang Xi frowned. "Should we really keep everyone here to hold them off like this? It'd be better if we sent a few fighters to see what's in the back of the hall."

"Right now, it's best to stall for time and see if we can fix the mechanism before exploring. If it can't be fixed, we'll split into two groups, one to stay here and one to go investigate," Xue Zhengyong answered.

"…That's reasonable. But does anyone know how to repair it?"

A shaking hand rose into the air. Master Ma, who'd earlier shrunk in on himself like a turtle at Jiang Xi's scathing criticism, poked his head out once again. "Um, I," he said, timid, "I can give it a try."

Jiang Xi scoffed. "Then why are you still standing here?!"

Master Ma grabbed Nangong Si's arm and scampered off, while Xue Zhengyong led his group of fighters back toward the doors.

Jiang Xi turned to look at the hall that had been split into heaven and hell, sinking into thought. He stared at those Zhenlong

chess pawns who were on one side giggling and chatting with each other and on the other enduring all manner of torture. At last his gaze came to rest on Nangong Liu, who was sitting blankly next to his basket of tangerines.

He found it all passing strange. Why hadn't Nangong Liu or any of the pawns in the hall gone berserk and tried to murder them like the corpses outside? If Xu Shuanglin took control of the pawns here to attack from within the hall, the cultivators would find themselves trapped and assailed from two sides.

Why hadn't he done so? Because he didn't want to? Or because he couldn't?

Jiang Xi wasn't sure, but Mo Ran knew. He could vividly sense that the pawns in the hall had their tempers, wishes, and even memories intact. They were completely different from the corpses controlled by the Shared-Heart Array outside. To use an inexact analogy, the corpses outside were like puppets on strings, while the ones in here were all individual actors. It was obvious why Xu Shuanglin wasn't controlling them: he'd already reached the limits of what he could accomplish with his spiritual energy.

"Chu-zongshi, a little help please!"

A soft voice came from the stone stairs beyond the barrier. Chu Wanning looked up and saw Hua Binan at the head of a dozen cultivators besieged on the steps. This was the group who'd been bitten by snakes and stayed behind to rest, and had encountered a second corpse attack on the way over. Half their number had perished on the staircase, and those remaining had sustained serious injuries as they struggled free.

Chu Wanning reached up without hesitation and cast another barrier, separating them from the revenants on the stairs behind them. Tianwen cracked through the air, driving off the corpses pressing in.

"Here!" Chu Wanning extended a hand to Hua Binan.

Mo Ran tensed. Ignoring that Shi Mei was halfway through applying salve, he shot to his feet and called out, "Shizun, be careful!"

But Hua Binan did nothing untoward. He reached for Chu Wanning with one shaking hand, and Chu Wanning hauled him behind the stronger protective barrier.

"I need some help over here!" Chu Wanning shouted back into the temple.

Those lucky survivors were pulled over one by one and taken to the main hall. They groaned and panted, faces contorted in pain and smeared with blood. Jiang Xi led the Guyueye disciples over and bent down before Hua Binan. "How did you get so badly injured…?" he asked, rare concern visible in his face.

"I'm fine. Sect Leader, please look after the others first." Hua Binan leaned back against the pillar, his veiled hat torn to shreds and his robes dyed scarlet. Jiang Xi reached out to take his pulse, but Hua Binan held up a hand. "I'm all right, they're all minor injuries. But your disciple…" He coughed. "H-he's badly injured; go attend to him. Don't mind me…"

The entire group was grievously wounded. Some had their legs completely broken in the fray, so Hua Binan had indeed been quite lucky if he could still stand. Jiang Xi swore under his breath, cast a final glance at Hua Binan, then turned to help with the other cultivators' injuries.

Fingers trembling, Hua Binan produced a bottle of coagulant powder from his qiankun pouch and moved to sprinkle it over his wounds. A hand reached out without warning and took the bottle. "Let me help," Mo Ran said.

"…No need for that."

Mo Ran looked at him, eyes dark and deep. "It's just some medicinal powder; anyone can do it."

Hua Binan snatched the bottle out of Mo Ran's hand. "I don't like other people touching me. Besides, you're not even a healer. You'd only cause trouble."

"Here, allow me."

Mo Ran turned to see Shi Mei nimbly setting his healer's pack beside Hua Binan. "Shi Mei?"

At the sight of the pack, Hua Binan pursed his lips and fell silent, offering no further resistance. Shi Mei laid out his needles and bandages. "Senior Sage, please forgive this junior for any mistakes."

Hua Binan said nothing. His wounds were so deep that his bleeding couldn't be stopped with spells; one had to staunch them with spiritual needles first. There was a cold, bright gleam as a dozen flashing needles reflected in Shi Mei's eyes—he'd placed them in a blink.

"Senior, your hat and veil…"

A hint of shadow flitted through Hanlin the Sage's eyes, but he knew there were several necessary acupoints on the face. "I'll do it myself," he said grimly.

His bloodied veil fell, revealing the face Hanlin the Sage concealed from all outsiders. It was an arresting visage. The upper half was handsome—but all the skin below his nose was a burned and twisted mess, the texture raised and spiny. Hua Binan looked up, resentment and ridicule flickering in his eyes. "What now? Mo-zongshi, will you stay to watch the show?"

"…My apologies."

Hua Binan sneered behind him. "I told you to go. You're the one who insisted on staying. Now you say you're sorry, but who knows what you're really thinking—probably that Hanlin the Sage looks like a freak, heh."

Mo Ran shook his head. There was little else he could say, so he left.

Master Ma was still fussing over the broken chain, while at the front of the temple, Chu Wanning was reaching the end of his reserves. He turned to Xue Meng. "Xue Meng, take over!"

Xue Meng immediately stepped forward, sword in hand. They changed places seamlessly; not a single corpse squeezed its way in as Xue Meng raised his own barriers.

As soon as Chu Wanning released the barrier, he stumbled backward. Mo Ran's heart ached at the sight of his pale face, but he couldn't do anything while others watched. He couldn't even take Chu Wanning's hand. "Wan… Shizun," he said, biting his tongue. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Chu Wanning coughed lightly. "I just overspent my spiritual energy."

Chu Wanning's spiritual core was fragile. Overtaxing one's spiritual energy might not be worrisome for others, but for Chu Wanning… Mo Ran closed his eyes. In the past life, when he and his teacher had fought on opposite sides of good and evil, this was how Chu Wanning's core had shattered in their final battle. This was how he'd become no more than an ordinary mortal, with a constitution more fragile than most. How could he be *fine*? Mo Ran couldn't bear it. Eyes red, he silently slid off the robe Chu Wanning had lent him and draped it back over Chu Wanning's shoulders. Only then could he gently squeeze Chu Wanning's shoulders beneath the cloth, all the love he bore him hidden in that fleeting touch.

He helped Chu Wanning away from the battle at the doors and into a secluded corner. Mo Ran pulled Chu Wanning down to sit, and in the cover of the shadows, silently took Chu Wanning's hand.

His hand was freezing. Just as it had been when Chu Wanning had fallen beneath Mo Ran's sword, when Mo Ran had stepped on his chest and reached out to take him by the chin.

Mo Ran lowered his lashes, fingertips trembling.

Chu Wanning had thought to pull away—they were in public, after all—but he, too, felt that tremble. Instead of withdrawing his

hand, he locked his fingers with Mo Ran's. "Let me see." Chu Wanning reached out and turned Mo Ran's face from side to side, examining the wounds scattered over his cheeks and his nose. "Does it hurt?"

Shaking his head, Mo Ran stared into Chu Wanning's face, stared at the man who showed him so much concern even when his own lips had gone gray. It did hurt. Not the wounds, but his heart. He'd finally learned how to lie as Chu Wanning did: "No," said Mo Ran.

"Then why are you shaking?"

Mo Ran didn't say anything; he *couldn't* say anything. Chu Wanning was left to assume he really was shaking from the pain. A faint jade glow lit up his fingertips. Mo Ran's pupils shrank to pinpricks—he grabbed Chu Wanning's hand before it could touch his face. "Are you insane? Why are you still drawing on your spiritual energy?!"

"A little won't hurt," said Chu Wanning. "It's just a minor healing spell to soothe the pain."

His fingertips brushed Mo Ran's cuts. A spell to soothe the pain, Chu Wanning had said. But Mo Ran felt his heart torn to pieces. A death by a thousand cuts would feel like this. Of course Mo Ran knew this was a tiny amount of spiritual energy—a drop in the ocean, or a cup of water scooped from the sea. Chu Wanning had given nearly everything to everyone else, and the fraction he'd left for Mo Ran was just this. In the past life, he'd hated Chu Wanning for giving the world so much and himself so little. Back then he hadn't known that, though what Chu Wanning gave him seemed insignificant, it was all he had. It was all that remained, all he could possibly give.

"It's done! It's fixed!" Master Ma's disciple appeared in the doorway, his cheeks red from exertion. "Prepare to retreat immediately; we're closing the doors!" he shouted. "We're going to close the doors!"

By this point, Mei Hanxue had taken over the barriers holding back the revenant horde. Xue Meng had sustained a few injuries after taking Chu Wanning's place, but they were minor, requiring nothing more than a bandage. He sat off to the side, one end of the gauze in his teeth as he tied the knot and watched Mei Hanxue face their foes.

Now that was peculiar. He seemed to remember Mei Hanxue had a water and wood elemental core, but he was currently using fire elemental attacks. Mei Hanxue stood at the top of the steps holding a water-parting zither, strumming the strings with an impassive mien, but what came out were scarlet barrier flames that kept the approaching corpses away.

"The doors are closing! Mei-gongzi!"

Mei Hanxue released the fretted zither, which hovered in midair, following his movements as he retreated toward the doors. Xue Meng realized something and turned. "Can you open the doors a bit more? The zither is too wide, it won't—"

"No need."

Mei Hanxue crisply cut Xue Meng off and drew the zither swiftly into its case. Without the spiritual flames from its strings, that mass of revenants charged toward them. Mei Hanxue didn't specialize in hand-to-hand combat—Xue Meng paled and unsheathed Longcheng, prepared to rush outside and help.

A gleam of silver appeared before he made it past the doors. A sword materialized in Mei Hanxue's hand, sharp and formidable. He wielded it with shocking speed, then leapt backward as he tossed the sword before him. In the instant before the doors closed, Mei Hanxue raised his hand and shouted, "Shuofeng, return!"

The sword transformed into a beam of light that shot through the crack, and Mei Hanxue caught it with a clean flourish, bringing it flush to his side.

With a *boom*, the temple doors closed.

The corpses and dragon sinews thudded as they crashed into the doors, but the sounds seemed distant through the stone. The hall the Nangong clan had so painstakingly constructed was not so easily breached.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Several inexperienced young disciples from the upper cultivation realm quietly crumpled to the ground. Some slightly more competent ones remained on their feet but howled, "Fuck… What the hell happened here…"

Mei Hanxue also let out a soft breath, though his expression of relief was scarcely different from his usual demeanor. If Xue Meng hadn't been watching him closely, he might not have noticed the slight parting of his lips, nor the subtle exhalation that followed.

Sensing a terrifying gaze fixed upon him, Mei Hanxue turned. "What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

Xue Meng's throat felt dry. "That sword of yours…"

Mei Hanxue flicked a glance at the glowing silver longsword in his hand. "Shuofeng."

Xue Meng's expression wavered. "Since when did you use a sword?" He paused. "Wait—the question should be, since when did you have a holy weapon?"

"This whole time."

"Then why didn't you use it at the Spiritual Mountain Competition?" cried Xue Meng.

Mei Hanxue was silent a moment. "I didn't want to."

"Is it because you look down on me?" Xue Meng was equally baffled and incensed. "If you used your holy weapon, you could've come in…come in second?"

Mei Hanxue shot him a fluid glance. Those icy eyes were almost mocking now; he gazed at Xue Meng, flushed with fury, for a long beat. "Third place is fine. First…" He pursed his lips, leaving his parting words to flutter into Xue Meng's ears as he walked past. "First place was too dumb."

Chapter 222:
Panicked Tumult

IT WAS A LONG, stunned moment before Xue Meng snapped back to his senses. "You bastard, who are you calling dumb?" he shouted at Mei Hanxue's back.

Xue Zhengyong tugged him back. "Meng-er!"

"That guy just called me dumb!"

"Enough, you misheard. Hanxue didn't say anything."

"He whispered it in my ear!"

Away from the hubbub, Jiang Xi was assessing the state of the wounded. He finished his inspection and ordered all the cultivators to stay put for a while and meditate or seek medical attention according to their needs. This outcome was unavoidable—they'd sent out many of their strongest fighters. Their arrowheads had been blunted before the bow was even drawn. To rashly continue would spell catastrophe if they were to meet with danger again.

After laying down his instructions, Jiang Xi approached Nangong Si. "Nangong, I have a question for you."

"Jiang-zhangmen, please go ahead."

Jiang Xi glanced at Ye Wangxi, standing beside him.

"Whatever you want to say, it's fine if she hears," Nangong Si said.

"It's best if she doesn't," replied Jiang Xi. His gaze went pointedly to Nangong Si's chest, where his spiritual core lay.

After Ye Wangxi retreated, Jiang Xi sat down beside Nangong Si. "What are you going to do about your core? Keep lying?"

Nangong Si's eyes dulled. "I haven't figured out how to tell her yet."

"You think she'd scorn you? You're overthinking; Miss Ye isn't the type to—"

"No," said Nangong Si, cutting Jiang Xi off. "I'm not afraid she'll scorn me. I just don't want her to worry."

Jiang Xi fell silent, as if jabbed by the unfathomable arrogance in Nangong Si's bones. He chuckled. "You certainly have faith in yourself."

"Jiang-zhangmen is mistaken; my faith isn't in myself. My faith is in her."

"You've been taken down quite a few notches lately," Jiang Xi said idly. "Aren't you afraid I'll make trouble for you if you don't watch your words?"

"You wouldn't."

Jiang Xi paused. "Do you have faith in me too?"

"I've gotten a good grasp on Jiang-zhangmen's character on this journey," said Nangong Si. "That's why I said what I did when I thought I was about to die."

Jiang Xi had met Nangong Si's eyes as he spoke, but when Nangong Si mentioned that moment, he glanced away. "It seems you've survived. Do those words still hold true?"

"They do," Nangong Si replied. "Once we've defeated Xu Shuanglin, I'll tell everyone."

Jiang Xi was quiet for a long interval before he spoke again. "Nangong Si, it's a shame I won't see Rufeng Sect flourish under your leadership. You would've been a worthy opponent."

"Sect Leader, you're mistaken again." Nangong Si's calm tone proclaimed his unshakeable pride. "I was already fortunate enough to learn the best of what Rufeng Sect has to offer."

It was rare indeed for Jiang Xi to refrain from a pithy retort or scathing remark. It was rarer still for him to be impressed or agree with what someone else had said. This time, he paused for a long while before responding. "Enough of this," he said at length. "I have a more important question for you."

"I know what the sect leader wants to ask." Nangong Si stroked Naobaijin, curled up inside his quiver. There was a cut still trickling blood on the faewolf's forehead. "But I don't know how Mount Jiao could break free of the sect founder's will either. I thought it was impossible."

"You have no idea at all?" Jiang Xi asked. "Think a little harder—are there no secret histories pertaining to this mountain?"

Nangong Si shook his head. "None. For generations, the Nangong clan has simply known that Mount Jiao obeys its descendants, but none more so than Nangong Changying."

"There's no one else who can override his orders?"

"No one. The first master the jiao dragon accepted was the sect founder. Nothing can change this."

Jiang Xi's expression flickered as he sank deeper into a rigid, brooding solemnity. "Then how did Xu Shuanglin do it?"

"I don't know either." Nangong Si paused. Jiang Xi thought he had more to say and turned to look at him, only to find the young man staring fixedly into the distance.

Jiang Xi followed his line of sight and found Nangong Liu, peeling a tangerine. Nangong Si had been trying this whole time to avoid looking at his father, who'd been reduced to a pawn, but as he gazed upon him now, his face twisted with pain.

In truth, Jiang Xi was of the same generation as Xu Shuanglin and Xue Zhengyong. Their cultivation methods were different, so he still appeared fresh-faced and handsome, but not so his mental state. His mind had long since lost its youthfulness. When he looked

at Nangong Si, he felt a rare compassion rise within him. “Stop looking,” he said. “Don’t look anymore.”

It seemed to take the last of Nangong Si’s remaining energy to tear his eyes from his father. When he lowered his gaze, his shoulders shook. He buried his face in his palms but was unable to hide the sound of his sobs. He hoarsely murmured, as if trying to change the subject, “I don’t know how Xu Shuanglin did it either. The demon dragon was tamed by the sect founder himself…”

But his shoulders only shook more violently.

Jiang Xi had remained stiff all this time, his face very still. But now he reached out to pat Nangong Si’s shoulder. He seemed to want to comfort Nangong Si, but he’d never comforted anyone in his life. He said clumsily, “There now. Everyone has their own fate. Despite how things ended, you were once father and son. Look at me, reaching middle age with no children at all. It could be worse.”

Nangong Si gave that statement all the due consideration it deserved, which was none at all. Even Jiang Xi himself thought his words too dry, worse than not speaking. He rose with some embarrassment. “I’ll go look around the temple. Rest here for a while. We’ll head off soon enough.”

Nangong Si didn’t look up.

“One more thing—what’s up ahead?”

“The Dragonsoul Pool,” Nangong Si replied in a muffled voice.

“What is it?”

“It’s the blood pool where we offer sacrifices to the demon dragon. The dragon’s primordial spirit sleeps within it, and the people of Rufeng Sect need to offer it sacrifices every year.”

Jiang Xi frowned. “Hopefully there’s nothing else waiting for us there.”

The group rested for the better part of an hour. The wounded and exhausted gradually recovered under the care of the healers. Jiang Xi turned to Xu Shuanglin’s dioramas, good and evil depicted in

extremes, his frown deepening. What was Xu Shuanglin doing with these puppets that couldn't fight at all? Were they just decor? Given how the pawn Nangong Liu had said *His Majesty* with every other breath, it seemed Xu Shuanglin had crowned himself king and turned these Zhenlong chess puppets, split between dark and light, into his subjects.

Jiang Xi walked down the aisle, studying them, before finally making his way to Nangong Liu. The man was sitting on his basket, slowly peeling a tangerine. Jiang Xi hesitated, then bent down and asked the same question they'd asked before. "Can you take me to His Majesty?"

Nangong Liu gave the same answer: "His Majesty is busy. I can't take you to him just because you asked."

"Useless." Jiang Xi flicked his sleeves in displeasure. "A wastrel to the end. A wastrel in life *and* as a pawn."

Nangong Liu cowered before Jiang Xi's vitriol. He clutched at his tangerine basket, then burst into frightened tears. "Why are you so mean? I *am* useless; I've always been a wastrel. What's the point of being cruel to me?"

His loud bawling drew the attention of those around them. Chu Wanning, nearing the end of his meditation, frowned. "There's something very strange about Nangong Liu."

"How so?" Mo Ran asked.

"I can't say," Chu Wanning replied. "It does seem to be him, but there's something odd about the way he's acting. He's not like the Nangong Liu I knew."

Mo Ran looked over. Jiang Xi was glaring at Nangong Liu, his face ashen, while Nangong Liu whimpered, rubbing his eyes in abject distress. As he observed Nangong Liu's movements, Mo Ran felt there was indeed something unnerving about them. An indescribable wrongness, as if he were watching a child in the body of a middle-aged man. Goosebumps rose over his skin.

Frozen, Mo Ran murmured, “A child…”

“What?”

Mo Ran whipped around. “Shizun, don’t you think he’s acting very much like a child?” He peered back at Nangong Liu and saw he was using his sleeve to mop up the snot on his face. “I’d say six years old at best.”

Chu Wanning looked at Nangong Liu again and found Mo Ran was right. Although Nangong Liu still appeared to be in his forties, his mannerisms were artless and childlike.

“Did Xu Shuanglin do something to him?” Chu Wanning murmured. “Somehow revert his mind and memories to those of his six-year-old self?”

“Shizun, wait here,” Mo Ran said. “I want to try something.”

“What are you planning?”

Mo Ran didn’t respond. As everyone watched, he walked over to Nangong Liu and picked up one of the tangerines. “Don’t cry,” he said, handing it to him. “Have a tangerine.”

“I won’t. I’ve already had one. The rest are for His Majesty.”

Mo Ran put the little fruit back in the basket. “Who’s His Majesty?”

“What use is this?” Jiang Xi huffed. “I already asked him that question, didn’t I?”

Nangong Liu gave the same rote answer. “His Majesty…is His Majesty. Who else could he be?”

But Mo Ran didn’t give up. He asked another question: “Okay, His Majesty is His Majesty. You’re so loyal and clever. I’m sure His Majesty would be happy if he knew. That’s right, I’ve been asking questions about His Majesty this entire time; I haven’t asked about you. What’s your name, little one?”

Huang Xiaoyue had grown tired of this. He scoffed and made as if to speak, but Jiang Xi held up a warning hand, shaking his

head. He'd also sensed something peculiar about Nangong Liu.

Arms wrapped around his basket of tangerines, Nangong Liu looked at Mo Ran for a while before timidly answering, "I'm Nangong Liu."

Mo Ran grinned and patted Nangong Liu's head. "Nice to meet you." Still smiling, he said, "I'm Mo Ran. I'm twenty-two years old. What about you?"

"I-I'm five…"

Silence fell over the hall. Though Nangong Liu hadn't spoken loudly, many around them had been watching quietly; these shaking words seemed to land like a thunderclap. Nearly everyone was flabbergasted. If not for the urgency of the situation, no few would have burst out laughing until tears of mirth streamed down their face. Five? *Five?* If, three years ago, someone had told them the leader of the greatest sect in the world would curl up beside a basket of tangerines and mumble *I'm five*, they would've sooner believed a sow could climb trees. But Nangong Liu had said just this, leaving everyone aghast, exchanging glances in complete confusion.

Jiang Xi stepped forward and asked sternly, "What do you do here every day?"

Nangong Liu ducked behind Mo Ran, cowering and tugging on Mo Ran's sleeve. "Da-gege, I don't wanna talk to him. This uncle is so mean…"

Jiang Xi blinked. Nangong Liu was older than he was. For Nangong Liu to call him *uncle* was offputtingly weird.

Mo Ran also found the situation increasingly absurd. It would've been one thing if this were truly a five-year-old child, but the hand tugging his sleeve now belonged to a man with crow's feet. Mouth twitching, Mo Ran cleared his throat and consoled Nangong Liu. "Okay, okay, you don't have to talk to him. You can talk to me instead. What do you do here?"

Jiang Xi's eyes widened. He really had to give it to Mo Ran. *Good going, young man. How do you keep a straight face at this?*

"I pick tangerines every day. I pick them and wash them, then bring them to His Majesty and wait for him to come out and eat them," Nangong Liu babbled. "Tangerines are His Majesty's favorite. He can eat a whole basketful. The trees at the foot of the mountain used to only have flowers, but His Majesty said they were boring, so he swapped them for tangerine trees. I also think tangerines are better—they're so sweet." At this point, his eyes darkened. "But His Majesty hasn't been feeling good recently. Even when I pick him a whole basket, he can only eat half…"

Jiang Xi latched onto the important part. "His Majesty isn't feeling well?"

But even the five-year-old Nangong Liu was good at holding grudges. Pursing his lips, he puffed out his cheeks and said, "Go away; I don't wanna talk to you."

Jiang Xi managed to keep a straight face for the barest moment before he whipped around and covered his mouth with a handkerchief.

"Jiang-zhangmen, are you quite all right?" Huang Xiaoyue asked sweetly.

"Don't talk to me." Jiang Xi wrinkled his nose in disgust, refusing to look at the pouting Nangong Liu. "It's too fucking gross."

"What do you mean, His Majesty isn't feeling well?" Mo Ran persisted.

"Um…he coughs a lot, and blood keeps coming out. He's also very skinny, but he won't eat. A lot of his body has started rotting…" As Nangong Liu spoke, tears began to roll down his cheeks like beads off a broken string. He was soon bawling again. "I'm so worried about him. What will I do if he goes away? No one will play with me or talk to me or feed me tangerines again."

"He…he feeds you tangerines?" Back at Rufeng Sect, the grudges between these two brothers had seemed to run deeper than bloody seas of hate. It was miracle enough Xu Shuanglin wasn't still torturing his brother with lingchi fruit. Feeding him tangerines? Unimaginable.

"His body has started rotting…" Jiang Xi murmured to himself.

"Sounds like backlash from the Zhenlong Chess Formation," Xue Zhengyong offered.

This was an effect of which Mo Ran was only too aware. If the caster of the Zhenlong Chess Formation lacked the required spiritual energy—or if they tried to possess too many chess pieces at once—their body would undergo necrosis. When he had first used this forbidden technique in the past life, his flesh, too, had begun to rot away. Specifically, his toe. Mo Ran had feared Chu Wanning finding out, so he immediately stopped practicing Zhenlong Chess and only continued after developing the Shared-Heart Array. In time to come, he became Emperor Taxian-jun, possessed of enough spiritual energy to control thousands of pawns even without use of the array. But that necrotic toe on his left foot never recovered.

Mo Ran found it deeply strange. The revenants outside were being puppeteered by the Shared-Heart Array. But the bodies here in the temple, allowed to do as they liked, were solely supported by Xu Shuanglin's spiritual energy, without aid of the soul-eater insects. He clearly couldn't handle so many chess pieces—why would he do something so counterproductive?

There was no use speculating. "Let's go," Jiang Xi said.

The doors to the Dragonsoul Pool opened via another mechanism, but this one was intact. The instant it was activated, the doors embedded with the septimal-star array rumbled to life, retracting into the walls. Before their watchful eyes, Rufeng Sect's ancestral temple slowly revealed itself.

The doors opened on a hexagonal chamber, its walls cold and wet. At the highest point of its ceiling was a crude dragon carved in

relief, claws bared in fury. An oil lamp dangled from its mouth, filled with a fuel that burned cool blue. A pool of foam-flecked blood occupied the center of the chamber, bubbling and steaming in the air.

"The Dragonsoul Pool," said Nangong Si. "The demon dragon's primordial spirit is sealed within it."

One of the cultivators stepped forward to take a closer look, but Nangong Si held out a warning hand. "Don't look too long. The malevolent energy around this pool is strong enough to dissolve the minds of those who gaze into it. Let's go."

Led by Nangong Si, they skirted around the pool and filed into the corridor behind it. The passage was dark and devoid of any markers, yet Mo Ran could tell they were heading uphill.

They walked for half an hour before Nangong Si stopped. A narrow door lay in front of them, bedecked lavishly with jewels.

"The exit is a little past this door. Past that is the final section of the temple, the Soul-Summoning Platform. Xu Shuanglin is probably there."

"This is the entirety of Rufeng Sect's ancestral temple?" Huang Xiaoyue piped up from the crowd. "The front hall, the Dragonsoul Pool, and the Soul-Summoning Platform?"

"Yes."

"There aren't any—secret chambers?" In his haste, he'd nearly said *treasure chamber* aloud. Fortunately he'd managed to stop himself in time. "I mean…Xu Shuanglin might be hiding in a secret chamber."

Nangong Si gave him a long, considering look, until Huang Xiaoyue began to fidget under his gaze. Finally, Nangong Si said: "Let's go to the Soul-Summoning Platform first and see."

The fresh blood of a Nangong descendant was once again required to open this door. Nangong Si smeared blood over the

stone dragon's eye, and after a series of clicks, they heard a distant sigh.

"Who's there?!" Huang Xiaoyue exclaimed. He turned to Nangong Si. "You little brat, you better not be playing a trick on us! Leading us all into a trap?!"

"If Huang-daozhang has doubts," Nangong Si said, voice flat, "it's not too late to go back and wait in the hall."

Huang Xiaoyue would of course do no such thing, but he did make sure to take a bit of insurance. He'd noticed all the important doors here required a Nangong's blood to open and guessed that legendary treasure chamber must be the same. On his way past the door, Huang Xiaoyue placed his hand innocuously on the dragon's eye and took some of Nangong Si's fresh blood.

A desolate voice filled the pitch-black tunnel. "Who comes?"

Caught red-handed, Huang Xiaoyue nearly jumped a foot in the air. Everyone else looked around.

"It is Nangong Si, seventh generation descendant of Rufeng Sect." Nangong Si said.

"Wangli…welcomes…Master…" The voice faded away.

"Wangli is the dragon's name," Nangong Si explained. "Jiang-zhangmen, if you please."

Jiang Xi peered into the tunnel. He could see white light glimmering in the distance—presumably the Soul-Summoning Platform. The earth shook again, and the hollow voice rang out once more.

"Wangli…welcomes…Master…"

"Is there something wrong with the dragon?" Jiang Xi frowned. "Why did it say the same thing twice?"

But the color had already drained from Nangong Si's face. He looked in the direction of the Soul-Summoning Platform. Shadows flickered in the distance; before he could get a good look, he heard

the hissing of countless tongues, followed by a dark mass like a surging tide pouring toward them from where the light shone.

Pupils shrinking, Nangong Si shouted. *"Run!"*

Chapter 223:
Carefree Wandering, Reprise

WHAT SURGING TIDE? The mass that poured toward them was a deluge of venomous snakes.

Chaos erupted in the narrow tunnel as the crowd turned and ran, trampling several cultivators to death in the crush. Jiang Xi pushed Nangong Si ahead. "You go first; I'll deal with things here."

He turned and scattered glimmering powder from his sleeves. The moment the snakes smelled the powder, they stopped and curled up in fear. "Everyone calm down," Jiang Xi shouted. "Retreat to the great hall—don't push!"

When he had stopped the tide of snakes, he hastily caught up to the rest at the stone doors, where Nangong Si was studying the dragon carving. "What is it?"

"The demon dragon must have been possessed," Nangong Si said. "I want to check on the Dragonsoul Pool."

Jiang Xi grabbed his arm. "What are we going to do about all those snakes? I didn't bring that much repelling powder—they'll come rushing back as soon as it wears off."

"I'll take care of it," Ye Wangxi said.

She'd been trained in Rufeng Sect's shadow city since she was small, and was more suited for fighting in dark and cramped spaces than anyone else. Even if Nangong Si was reluctant to leave her behind, Ye Wangxi's determination was written clear on her face. They had no better choices. Nangong Si laid a hand on her shoulder. "It's too dark here; I know you don't like it. I'll come back as soon as I can."

Jiang Xi and Nangong Si were last to leave the tunnel. As soon as they emerged, Huang Xiaoyue pounced with a ferocity beyond

anything a white-haired old geezer should possess. “Nangong Si! Don’t you dare say you don’t have a hand in this!”

Nangong Si had reached the end of his patience. “If I were controlling this,” he shouted, “would you still be standing here safe and sound? Get out of my way!”

Huang Xiaoyue blinked in shock, then pointed a finger in Nangong Si’s face. “Look here, the mask is finally off! Showing your true colors at last? Acting the saint all along, but now that we’re in your territory, you raise your voice at your elders. You still think you’re the little prince of Rufeng Sect? How dare you look down on the rest of us!”

“Huang Xiaoyue.” Someone else had had enough. Jiang Xi did not suffer idiots. His next words were clipped to sharpness, snapping out like whipcracks: “Do you think I don’t know precisely what you’re trying to do?”

That accusing finger darted back into Huang Xiaoyue’s sleeve. His face paled, but he maintained his composure. “I’m but an old man seeking to avenge his brother. Perhaps Jiang-zhangmen can’t empathize with—”

“Of course I can’t empathize with Huang-daozhang.” Jiang Xi fixed him with a cold stare, his eyes like two sharp blades unsheathing. “After all, I haven’t the slightest interest in Rufeng Sect’s treasures.”

Huang Xiaoyue stumbled a few steps back, staring dumbly as he gaped like a beached fish, incapable of forming speech.

“Nangong, go on ahead.” Jiang Xi said.

But the Dragonsoul Pool was right there. It was clear with one glance that there was nothing unusual about it. He paced around it several times but found no evidence of tampering. Nangong Si shook his head. “I’ll go take a look in the front hall.”

The layout of the hall was more complex, and all the Zhenlong pawns were still within. Nangong Liu, too, had been left in the hall.

When Nangong Si entered, he found him fast asleep, clutching his basket of tangerines.

He stood before his father for a while, eyes vacant and red around the rims. He didn't dare stay too long, nor wake his dad who'd been reduced to a pawn. He only looked at each face in turn, hoping to find some clue.

He hadn't examined things so closely when everyone else had been here earlier. He only knew the hall had been separated into two halves, paradise and purgatory. As he studied each puppet, he saw many familiar faces—the fourth uncle who never liked Xu Shuanglin had fallen into purgatory and was roasting over the flames, while the handmaidens who'd served in his courtyard, Farewell to Three Lifetimes, were chasing butterflies in paradise. He even glimpsed his own grandfather among the crowd. But Nangong Si had no time to grieve. He'd suddenly sensed he was about to see a certain someone, someone who…

He heard it. Through the whispering tide, he heard it. A soft and shaking murmur—

"Si-er."

Nangong Si's head snapped around as if struck by lightning, tears welling in his eyes. In the hazy fog, he saw a faint silhouette garbed in teal. He staggered toward it, shouting hoarsely. "Mom! *Mom!*"

His falling tears seemed to clear his vision. On the side of paradise stood Nangong Si's mother, Rong Yan. Like Nangong Changying, this woman's willpower was unbending, and Xu Shuanglin had left the minds of the pawns in the hall intact. Her destroyed body still recognized her son as soon as he entered her field of view, though Nangong Si was very different from the boy she'd last seen him as. Shaking, she reached one stiffening hand out toward her son. "Si…er…"

Rong Yan was wearing the clothes Nangong Si had last seen her in. He knelt before her, returning to that bygone year in an

instant—to that unremarkable night at Rufeng Sect. A mother had gone to her son's study in search of him, and the full moon had watched through the window.

Nangong Si knelt before her, looking up at her face. His chest was bursting with words he wanted to say, but what left his mouth were a few trembling syllables: "Mom… If the whole world praised him, he rejoiced not; if the whole world blamed him, he despaired not…"

Time flowed backward.

The stern mother of the past stood by the window, slender brows drawn together. "What comes before 'if the whole world blamed him, he despaired not'?"

The child stammered, unable to answer.

She had departed from this world too early. When he'd knelt before her black coffin, he still couldn't fully recite the last volume his mother wanted him to learn by heart while she was alive. Now, across the tumultuous years, this recitation was finally made whole.

He knelt just as he had on that moonlit night. Their silhouettes mirrored the scene in his memories, but his past resentment had become agonizing grief, and that long-dead beauty had become someone else's pawn.

Rong Yan patted Nangong Si's hair, his cheeks, and in the end, took hold of his bloodied hands. Her eyes fluttered shut. "Si-er, I'm under his control, completely at his mercy. I could lose my mind any time…but Si-er, you must believe me… Everything I say is true; everything I'm saying now is what I thought when I passed. I hate what your uncle has done, but I'm grateful to him…"

"Mom…"

"If it weren't for him…turning me into a pawn, how could I see you again…and tell you…" Rong Yan stiffly, slowly, bent down. Shaking, she reached out and gathered Nangong Si tightly into her arms. "When I left, my greatest regret was…" She choked and fell

mute, but it wasn't because Xu Shuanglin had taken control. She held her son so tightly, continuing in a quavering voice. "My greatest regret was that I'd never, ever, hugged you properly. I never held you like this…Si-er… I love you, too."

Nangong Si cried himself breathless. "I know… I know, Mom. I've known for a long time."

The ground quaked beneath them. Rong Yan flinched, eyes snapping open. "Wangli's blood oath is about to break…"

"What?"

"Wangli's blood oath is about to break! Here, I've seen it grow weaker every day!" Rong Yan grew agitated. "Si-er, you mustn't risk yourself. I need to stop him… I need to stop Nangong Xu…"

Wiping his face, Nangong Si held up a hand. "Mom, what did you see? What oath is going to break?"

"Listen to me." Rong Yan paused, pupils shrinking. For a moment, it seemed as if she'd fall under the sway of the spell again, but she clenched her jaw and resisted the black Zhenlong chess piece's power with her own mortal mind. "Listen. Nangong Xu has gathered five holy weapons, which have drunk their fill of the blood of thousands. Using them together, he can cut the bond between the demon dragon and the Nangong clan."

"Cut the bond?!"

"Correct. The dragon's sinew was the first bond he cut."

"So those revenants outside attacked again because the dragon's sinew was cut?" cried Nangong Si.

"Yes," Rong Yan rasped. "The second is the dragon's scales."

Nangong Si recalled the venomous snakes they'd faced; they'd likely transformed from the dragon's scales.

"Third, the dragon's tail."

"Was that shaking just now the tail?" asked Nangong Si, growing ever paler.

"Correct. After that is the dragon's head and then the body. If Nangong Xu succeeds in using the fifth weapon, we'll lose all control over Mount Jiao… It will never…never again accept the sect founder as its master…"

Her face contorted, and she fell silent. Xu Shuanglin seemed to have sensed her betrayal and was doing his best to corrode her body. Rong Yan moaned, burying pale fingers in her hair. "No…no…"

"Mom!"

"S-Si-er…" She surfaced again at the sound of his voice. Like someone dying of thirst spying a clear spring at last, she clutched him desperately to her, face written with helpless dread. He'd never seen such powerlessness in her. Heart twisting, Nangong Si wrapped her in his arms. He'd been just a boy before. His mom had always been stoic and stern; she'd rarely shown affection. Now, he could finally protect his mother. Even if this was a passing illusion—the lingering final wishes impressed on her body after her souls had gone—it was enough.

Rong Yan was bent low, shaking in Nangong Si's arms. When she finally lifted her head, her face was stained with the telltale bloody tears of Zhenlong pawns.

Bitterness pooled in the back of Nangong Si's throat. He reached out to wipe those tears away, but he couldn't do it; no matter how he tried, they only smeared across her face. He closed his eyes in pain.

"I can feel him… He's noticed me… I haven't much time," Rong Yan said. "You have to listen. He's breaking the blood oath to…to create a new bond with the demon dragon. At that time… *Ah!*"

Her mind went slack; she couldn't continue. But Nangong Si suddenly understood. "At that time," he said, face bloodless. "When Wangli obeys him alone, all of us on Mount Jiao—all of us will die?!"

"This cannot come to pass!" mother and son cried out in unison.

Nangong Si looked down at his mother. “Mom, what do we do?”

“Nangong Xu hasn’t perfected this forbidden technique…” Coldness flashed over Rong Yan’s face. “He…he can’t control the Zhenlong chess pieces. That’s why he’s facing the backlash, and that’s how…I’m somewhat lucid… I know what to do. Listen to me.”

Hands viselike around Nangong Si’s fingers, Rong Yan looked around the hall. Her gaze fixed on her husband’s body. The earlier quake had woken Nangong Liu, who was clutching his basket of tangerines and looking around in confusion. Rong Yan watched him the way an eagle would eye a snake in its den.

“Someone must die.” The words escaped her vermilion lips. “Si-er, you have to kill him.”

Chapter 224:
A Gentleman's Word

NANGONG SI flinched. "Mom?"

"The oath with the demon dragon can only be strengthened with fresh blood from the Nangong clan. It's you or him, so of course it must be him… He's just a pawn, a walking corpse… What right does he have to live on? He's an unfaithful husband; an unfit father; as a gentleman, he has no honor. He has no *right* to live. Who knows why Nangong Xu broke the lingchi curse in a moment of mercy—allowing him to live, for what? To play a fool?!"

Nangong Si stood rooted to the spot, as if he too had been made into a stiff and immovable pawn.

"Si-er, your mother has no choice; I can't do anything. You're the only one… You're the only one who can cast him into the Dragonsoul Pool. When his blood enters the pool…that ignoble… ignoble life of his will pay for everyone's safety. It will be a posthumous honor!"

Before Nangong Si could reply, he heard someone shouting by the Dragonsoul Pool. "What's going on?! Where'd these beetles come from?"

Beetles…?

The first shout was followed by a wave of screams, and the sound of Xue Zhengyong, Jiang Xi, and the others shouting orders. "Hurry," Rong Yan urged. "The bond with the dragon's tail has been broken. Only the last two bonds remain. Once they're gone, not even throwing him into the blood pool will be of any use."

Her voice woke Nangong Si from his daze.

"Why are you hesitating?!" Rong Yan shouted, "His own misdeeds brought Rufeng Sect so low, Si-er! Wake up! There's no

other choice, you—!”

Her eyes rolled up, pupils contracting as Xu Shuanglin, finally at the limit of what he could allow, exerted his most vicious spiritual energy to regain control over her.

The last of Rong Yan’s lucidity bled away, and a dreamlike expression surfaced on her face. She slowly rose and walked back to her spot in paradise, her eyes blank and unseeing. “Si-er,” she murmured. “Tell me…what comes before ‘if the whole world blamed him, he despaired not’?”

Nangong Si trembled where he knelt on the ground. No force controlled him, yet he felt stuck in a web with no hope of escape.

If the whole word praised him, he rejoiced not; if the whole world blamed him, he despaired not.

This was what his mother asked of him, but it was so hard—too hard. Whether it was making him memorize the incomprehensible *Carefree Wandering* or forcing him to shoot his bow until he could hit the bullseye nine times out of ten, it was all far too difficult. Now she was asking him to use his own father’s blood to strengthen their oath with the demon dragon.

Through the sound of screaming, he knew how terrible the dragon’s beetles were. He thought of Ye Wangxi, facing that tide of snakes alone in the dark—Ye Wangxi, who was waiting for him to return for her as soon as he could.

“Si-er…” His mother’s voice called from behind him.

He drew his sword from its sheath and walked toward Nangong Liu.

He hated him. How could he not? When Nangong Si looked at this man—how could he *not* hate him? Tearing out his mother’s heart, philandering with the sect leader of Jiangdong Hall, blackmailing Li Wuxin of Bitan Manor, demolishing Rufeng Sect overnight and leaving the ruins of sect and reputation for him and Ye

Wangxi, who had wandered in fear like stray dogs—they *were* stray dogs—how could he not hate him?

He brandished his sword, and the blade's glare shone on Nangong Liu's face. Those aged features held the simple peace unique to children. Nangong Liu looked at Nangong Si, and Nangong Si's hand shook. He turned away. "Get up."

"Who are you? Why are you asking me to get up? I wanna stay here. I'm waiting for His Majesty…"

"What Majesty?" Nangong Si shouted, his pounding heart sending blood rushing through all his limbs. "That's your little brother! What the hell are you doing, Nangong Liu?! That's your little brother!"

"He's still His Majesty even if he's my brother." Scared, Nangong Liu curled into a ball again. "Don't be so mean, you… Why…why are you crying?"

Was I crying? Nangong Si wondered. *Am I… Am I crying?*

Bitter tears streamed down his cheeks, falling to the ground alongside the point of his sword. Nangong Si crumpled to his knees, howling in misery.

Why had it come to this?

He hated him. He hated his father enough to throw him into the Dragonsoul Pool and rebuild the oath between Mount Jiao and Wangli. So why couldn't he do it? This was the man who'd destroyed his home, destroyed his family. Why shouldn't he hate him?

But he couldn't do it. When the glare of his sword shone on that face, when he saw the crow's feet at the corners of those eyes, what rose in him was a memory from when he was a little boy, stumbling after Naobaijin in Moonwhistle Fields.

In his clumsiness, he had tripped. Rong Yan stood before him and looked down at her bawling child. "Get up."

But it hurt so much. It really hurt. He tried his best, he did all he could, but he couldn't get to his feet. He reached out, pleading

for his mom to bend down, to give him a hand. Rong Yan never did. It was another pair of warm hands that scooped him from the ground, pulling him close to a broad chest. In the sunlight, he saw a face. A young, mild, and obsequious face. A face that was always gentle and conciliatory.

"Aiya, our Si-er needs help sometimes too." His father patted his hair, eyes kind. "If he could already get up by himself, what would he need Mom and Dad for?"

This was Nangong Si's very first memory of his dad. In this vast hall teeming with the walking dead, the only living man staggered to his feet without help from anyone. He stood up, then crashed back to his knees. Nangong Si kowtowed three times toward Rong Yan, knocking his head on the ground. Then he rose and turned to leave.

A hand tugged at his sleeve. Nangong Liu had stopped him.

His father took a tangerine from his basket and handed it to Nangong Si. After some thought, he peeled a segment and pressed it to Nangong Si's mouth. "Don't cry. I don't know what's wrong, but tangerines are sweet; they taste really good. I picked these myself. Try some."

Nangong Si didn't want to eat, but that orange segment was right there, in front of his lips. Nangong Liu handed it to him the same way he'd fed his son countless times in the past. The sweet tang of its juice filled his mouth. Nangong Si viciously swiped at his tears, then finally threw down the sword and strode out of the hall.

He walked right to the edge of the Dragonsoul Pool, where the fighting was in full swing.

The beetles the dragon's tail had become were ferocious. Many cultivators had already fallen, their blood winding in rivulets across the ground. The bugs were too small to target, and grandmasters like Chu Wanning and Jiang Xi could only protect the few people behind them. The room bubbled and seethed like stew in a cooking pot.

No one noticed Nangong Si's passage as he strode through the chamber.

A few hours ago, he'd lost his core and been reduced to a commoner, doomed to a life of mediocrity. Now, he thought perhaps fate knew of his aspirations. Although it hadn't treated him kindly, it had done him no wrong at the very end.

The only one he still owed a debt was…

His eyes strayed toward the tunnel that led to the Soul-Summoning Platform.

Ye Wangxi.

A smile broke across Nangong Si's face. Thank goodness he'd never had the time to thank her for staying with him, to thank her for always keeping her word. Thank goodness he hadn't had the time to tell her he finally understood her goodness, her affection, and wanted to stay with her forever. Otherwise, he'd have dragged a girl down with him for no reason. That would be…

Splash.

What would that be? He didn't finish the thought. If he had, he might've lost all his courage. He didn't finish the thought, and that roiling blood swallowed him whole. He didn't finish the thought before he became bones that dwindled to ash.

The last thing he ever did was untie the fastening at his waist and toss the quiver his mother had embroidered for him, with the howling faewolf Naobaijin inside, to the side of the pool.

In the moment he turned to dust, Nangong Si could feel everything, but nothing hurt. He seemed to hear, with perfect clarity, the quiver landing safely on the shore, Naobaijin's whining cries, even Chu Wanning's voice, raw, shouting his name in a rare loss of composure.

He wanted to respond. He wanted to say: *Shizun… I accept you as my teacher. How could I not? To be honest, I remember everything. I remember bowing to you thrice beneath the flowering*

tree. But you didn't want me then. I have my own pride. I thought you looked down on me, so I pretended I was too young and had forgotten about it entirely. And later, when you wanted to accept me, I was scared of bringing you down too…

It's fine now. I have a shizun, I recited Carefree Wandering *for Mom, and Ye Wangxi and Naobaijin are safe. Oh, and I got to eat a piece of tangerine before the end. He…peeled it himself… It tasted just like the ones he peeled for me when I was a child.*

So very sweet.

Nangong Si's soul faded. Everything faded, became a fleeting illusion, a dream of the past. All of it vanished—consumed by the blood oath.

Brilliant light shone from the Dragonsoul Pool. A dragon's cry echoed through the walls, and in the light's wake, the rot was destroyed. It reduced to dust the dragontail beetles, dragonscale snakes, and those corpses outside propped up by dragon sinew. All collapsed into drifting powder.

When Ye Wangxi rushed out of the tunnel, covered in blood, she caught a final glimpse of Nangong Si in the frozen moment before his body sank into the pool. She saw light bursting from the pool, and the cultivators staring at it. She saw Naobaijin whimpering helplessly at its edge, and Chu Wanning, who'd lunged forward to grab him…

Her sword clanged as it hit the ground.

"A-Si—!"

A scream that shook the heavens.

Ye Wangxi was heavily wounded. She staggered forward; before she could reach the blood pool, before her tears could fall, the combined pain of it broke her completely. Snake venom spread throughout her body. She was chilled all over, freezing cold.

"A-Si…" She stumbled ahead, lips green as they parted, as she choked. Her tears streamed down—she couldn't hold herself up

anymore. She crashed to the cold paving stones. Vision going dark, she crawled forward on bloodied hands, trying to drag herself toward him. Even though she knew it was too late, even though she'd seen Nangong Si step into the Dragonsoul Pool with her own eyes. Even though everything was already over. She couldn't accept it. How could she accept it… *How could she ever accept it?!*

If she persevered hard enough to reach the ledge, she thought wildly, that man would return. If she held on for another moment, Nangong Si would return to her side. He'd promised. In the snake tunnel, he'd *promised*—he said, *It's too dark here; I know you don't like it. I'll come back as soon as I can.*

Her tears fell without cease. She pressed on despite everything, deliriously, shakingly, slowly crawling toward the Dragonsoul Pool, its surface already calm, without a ripple.

I'm here. But what about you?

She saw only darkness; she felt only cold. Were vengeful ghosts closing in again? Were venomous snakes slithering toward them again? *Can't you do what you've always done—seal them off with a paper talisman, and then turn around with fire in your eyes?*



Can't you say "Stay with me, I'll protect you" again?

"Nangong Si… A-Si…" She sobbed, the sound tearing itself into a howl as she wept. "Come back! A gentleman's word, you have to keep your promise; come back!"

She wept until the poison and her wounds swallowed her. As she slipped into unconsciousness, the last thing she did was reach out to touch the edge of the Dragonsoul Pool, as if she could still take hold of his sleeve and keep him by her side.

Things were supposed to get better for them… A-Si's unruly core could be tamed, everyone's loathing would fade… They should have come out the other side. But darkness had fallen again. For her, there was no more hope of daybreak.

"A-Si," Ye Wangxi murmured. Her eyes finally fluttered shut.

The demon dragon's soul had quieted. Nangong Si had sacrificed himself to strengthen the tattered bond, and the blood pool now held Nangong Si's soul—this was not a magic Xu Shuanglin could break.

His reign here was over.

Xu Shuanglin wouldn't be able to control the smallest living thing on Mount Jiao. Nangong Si might not have had the unrivaled strength of Nangong Changying, but it was he who had destroyed Xu Shuanglin's sharpest weapon.

There was no sound but the soft cries of the wounded.

The light from the Dragonsoul Pool slowly faded. Mo Ran crossed to Chu Wanning, who sat with his head lowered and his eyes closed. The hands clutching Naobaijin were pale and ice-cold, veins protruding in a desperate attempt to stay composed.

"Shizun…"

Chu Wanning didn't say a thing. He placed Naobaijin next to Ye Wangxi, alongside Nangong Si's quiver, and rose, eyes misty. By the

time he looked toward the passage that led to the Soul-Summoning Platform, that mist had become frost. With Tianwen glowing gold in his hand, he walked wordlessly into the pitch-black tunnel.

Mo Ran followed, and the rest of the disciples of Sisheng Peak stepped forward in silence. No one asked questions, nor spoke a word. All understood what it meant to be part of the vanguard, but all of them advanced, none shirking their duty. Behind them came Taxue Palace, then Guyueye…

Before Jiang Xi entered the tunnel, he tapped a few disciples adept at healing and defense. "Stay here and take care of the wounded—particularly Miss Ye. If any of those who still live die under your care, I'll deduct a full year of your spiritual stone salary."

"Understood, Sect Leader."

The door to the platform was already open. After their long and arduous journey, they'd arrived at the final section of Rufeng Sect's ancestral temple—Rufeng's sacrificial altar, the Soul-Summoning Platform.

Chapter 225:
Mock My Madness

CHU WANNING was first to emerge from the tunnel. The cramped passage opened up to a vast and empty platform, so broad it seemed to touch the horizon. Walking onto it was like stepping into a place of purity far above the heavens.

The bright moon hung high and round above them. There was nothing at all on the platform. No plants stirred, but as the cold wind bit into their skin and parted the hazy fog, they saw a figure sitting in its center.

Xu Shuanglin.

The group filed their way out. Most fell into shocked stillness at the sight of their enemy. Xue Zhengyong was stunned into speech. "What…how… What's going on?"

"Good heavens," someone whispered in alarm. "How did it come to this?"

"Is he dead or alive?"

Mo Ran walked toward the seated figure. The closer he got, the more unsettling the scene became. Xu Shuanglin sat cross-legged on the ground, his eyes closed. The right side of his body was rotted beyond recognition, putrid fluid and pus-laced blood streaming from his flesh, creating a vile stench. Planted in the ground around him were five holy weapons wreathed in vicious energy.

Mo Ran's fingertips twitched—Bugui was among their number. The dark blade had been shoved deep into the earth, its faint green glow pooling on the ground beneath before joining the light of the other four weapons and surging into Xu Shuanglin's heart. The lines

of Xu Shuanglin's gaunt face flickered with the weapons' inconstant light.

Behind Xu Shuanglin was a maelstrom of pitch-black smoke, like a barrier about to take shape.

As the others came out onto the platform, Huang Xiaoyue murmured in disbelief, "Is this…is this Weapon Ensoulment?"

Xue Meng looked to his dad for an explanation, but turning his head brought Xue Zhengyong's bloodless face into view. Whatever this technique was, it was clear he couldn't believe anyone was capable of using it.

"What *is* this?" another junior asked quietly. It seemed Xue Meng wasn't the only one in the dark.

Studying Xu Shuanglin's face at a distance, Chu Wanning answered. "Weapon Ensoulment requires the sacrifice of one's own soul to holy weapons that have slaked their thirst with human blood. The caster creates a binding oath with the weapon, swearing to allow their soul to be torn apart by the weapon's spirit after their death and transformed into a sacrifice that strengthens the holy weapon."

"A living sacrifice to a holy weapon?" Xue Meng exclaimed. "Why do such a thing?"

"Because he doesn't have enough spiritual energy," Chu Wanning said. "This technique allows him to massively increase his own strength in a short period of time—if he offers his soul to the weapon, the weapon will let him borrow its power."

There came a faint sigh. Everyone took a step back; Xue Meng unsheathed Longcheng, eyes trained on Xu Shuanglin's face.

Xu Shuanglin slowly opened his eyes. When he looked up in the moonlight, half his face appeared as it always did. The other had rotted into stinking mush.

"Chu-zongshi… Gentlemen, you've found me after all."

Bracing himself with an arm on the ground in front of him, he rose, swaying, and looked past all those wary, disgusted, terrified faces with no change in expression. His remaining eye roved over them, a mocking, wicked malevolence flickering in its depths. But as he scanned the crowd once, then twice, without seeing the face he sought, the smiling cruelty froze and turned to anger. "Where is Ye Wangxi?!" Xu Shuanglin raged.

"How dare you speak her name?" Xue Meng yelled back.

"What have you done to her?!"

"None of your business! What right does a heartless, bloodless, fleshless person like you have to care for Ye Wangxi?"

"Care?" The word seemed to startle Xu Shuanglin. His face went blank, then he narrowed his eyes, as if he had mastered his surprise. "Why would I care? How ridiculous…"

"Why are you wasting so much breath on him? Kill him!" Jiang Xi commanded. He lifted his right hand and the sword Xuehuang appeared in his grasp.

As the blade whistled down toward Xu Shuanglin, a black shadow flashed between them and broke Jiang Xi's strike. Arching a brow, Jiang Xi snarled. "Mo-zongshi, why are you stopping me?"

"I have questions for him!" Mo Ran turned, a complex light flashing in his eyes. Pursing his lips, he seemed to consider several ways to begin, but what left his mouth was: "Where's your accomplice?"

Xu Shuanglin scratched his feet on the ground. Even now, he managed to move lazily. Mo Ran noticed he was barefoot again.

"As you say, he's my accomplice." Xu Shuanglin bared his white teeth in a smile. Somehow, it still looked bright on what remained of his face and contained a hint of mockery. "Then you should know I'll never tell. This humble one knows something of brotherhood, after all. Savior heroes and do-gooder gentlemen, don't bother trying to get it out of me."

He looked pointedly at Jiangui, coiling red in Mo Ran's hand. "Don't get any ideas, either. I'll cut out my tongue if I need to—there's no shortage of methods I could use to conceal the truth."

Xue Meng was flabbergasted. "S-someone like you…has the guts to speak of brotherhood…?"

"Oh? Why can't I speak of brotherhood? Supportive friends, harmonious siblings, kindly teachers and filial students; the good enjoying peaceful serenity while the evil are justly punished—that's how the world ought to be. Do you imagine you're the only ones who know such principles?"

His brazenness left Xue Meng stupefied. "You? Talking about harmonious siblings? Kindly teachers and filial students?" Xue Meng pointed at him in disbelief. "You gotta be joking."

"Why?" Xu Shuanglin replied.

"Are you crazy? You're the one who attacked your brother; you're the one who goaded Nangong Liu into eating Luo Fenghua's spiritual core. You've done all sorts of nasty stuff, and now you… Now you say so righteously that this is how the world *should* be?"

Faced with Xue Meng's torrent of questions, Xu Shuanglin only grinned. He neither confirmed nor denied, but instead asked, "Little Brother, how old are you this year?"

"What's it to you?"

"It doesn't matter if you tell me or not." Xu Shuanglin looked him up and down. "You look about twenty. Twenty-year-olds are always like this. Full of passion and naivete, up on your high horse and convinced of your own capabilities." He paused, smiling. "What a wonderful age to be."

The glow from the holy weapons on the ground flowed inward, passing him boundless spiritual energy. This was how he maintained control over those thousands of Zhenlong chess pieces and dealt with the backlash from the pawns. Even with the weapons' help, his skin was rotting at a pace visible to the naked eye.

Xu Shuanglin paid it no heed, as if he couldn't see his body being devoured by the vicious energy. Pacing before that swirling barrier, he continued. "Twenty… Do you know what I was doing at your age?"

"What you were doing?" Xue Meng said, indignant. "Everyone knows what you were up to! You stole the sect leader's ring and became the head of Rufeng Sect instead of your gege. Within two months, you killed two of the upper cultivation realm's sect leaders! When people sought you for accountability, you dug out their eyes—you goddamn freak, you're the perfect example of cruelty, malevolence, and ignorance! If I had done all of that by twenty like you did, it would be better I died at twelve!"

"Meng-er," Xue Zhengyong warned quietly. "Hush." The last thing he wanted was for Xue Meng to pique Xu Shuanglin's interest and bring doom upon himself.

"Nah, don't." Xu Shuanglin's ears were still sharp. Waving his hands, he grinned. "Keep going—why hush?"

His patronizing smile—as though he was watching a parrot flapping its wings and chirping on its perch—infuriated Xue Meng further. "Y-you have no shame! You're hopeless!"

"What shame is there to speak of? This history you mentioned is nothing I feel shame for. You say I stole the sect leader's ring. Who doesn't know positions of power go to those with the strength to take them? My useless gege has no talent at all, but that silver tongue helped him prosper. Those who'd never tested him thought him formidable indeed. They called us Rufeng's pair of young masters—they said our spiritual energy and skills were perfectly matched—don't you think that was ridiculous? The two of *us*?" Xu Shuanglin snorted, putting a hand to his brow. "Forget it. Even as a child, I could defeat his best attempt. Us, a matched pair? While I was practicing the sword, he was cuddled up to his mother eating tangerines! I toiled in the heat of summer and the cold of winter, while he lazed about year-round! While I poured my effort into making a name for myself at the Spiritual Mountain Competition, he

snuck around me and took the credit! And what came after? All of you named the hard worker a thief, and gave the sluggard the glorious title of the world's most outstanding talent—was that justice?"

Xue Meng hesitated but didn't falter. "But that doesn't mean you had to resort to *this*…"

"Bullshit! Of course you'd say that; there's nothing easier than lecturing other people on empty principles. Your tune would change if it were your turn. If such a thing happened to you at the Spiritual Mountain Competition, could you endure it?!"

His retort caught Xue Meng off guard, rendering him mute. If it had happened to him, could he have endured it?

"Hundreds of people on the field pointing at you, saying you have no shame, giving him all the applause and accolades, leaving you with nothing but the stain of a false crime you could never wash away—all your effort reduced to rubble in the face of his sweet-talking—is that justice?"

"I-I…"

Xu Shuanglin scoffed. "Next, killing those two sect leaders. One spent his days drumming on the temple block and reciting the prettiest sutras, while the other was known for his strength and righteousness—but they both callously shoved me into an endless hell for their own gain. I'm asking you gentlemen: why should I have spared their worthless lives?"

The cultivators from the two sects he'd mentioned went purple in the face, but neither could muster a strong rebuttal. It was Abbot Xuanjing of Wubei Temple who finally sighed and closed his eyes, hands pressed together before him. "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind…"

"That's right, it makes the whole world blind. Everyone wants to bring an end to grudges, but why does it have to start with me?" Each word was steeped in fury, but the smile remained on Xu Shuanglin's face. It was light as a breeze, slightly curled in a sneer.

"If I slapped you across the face, then said *an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind*, so you can't hit me back—would you like that, you old bald donkey?"

"Wash your filthy mouth out, Nangong Xu!" someone shouted. "How can you speak to your senior this way?"

"Hey, I'm also your fucking senior," replied Xu Shuanglin. "You better wash your filthy mouth out too, sweetheart."

The cultivator fell silent.

Stroking his beard, Huang Xiaoyue began, "Nangong Xu…"

Xu Shuanglin held up a hand, the corners of his half-rotten mouth curving. "Let's agree on one thing. Call me Xu Shuanglin. I don't like the name Nangong Xu."

Huang Xiaoyue swept his sleeves. "Even if you killed those two sect leaders for wrongs done, the debt should have died with them. Why did you gouge out the eyes of so many others?"

"See, I used to go by your principles. But no one listened to me then." He paused, chuckling. "Later on, I became a madman, and you all tried to make a madman talk principles. Oh, you righteous gentlemen…you're so funny." He started clapping, making wet sounds. "So, *so* funny."

Mo Ran, who'd been standing silent nearby, spoke up. "So you've only ever wanted justice, is that right?"

Xu Shuanglin said nothing. His gaze roved upward and fixed on Mo Ran's face. On top of that stone platform, wrapped by freezing winds, they looked at each other.

In Mo Ran's eyes, Xu Shuanglin's silhouette faded until what he saw wasn't this rotting, dying man. He looked past Xu Shuanglin and saw another shadow, one wearing a beaded crown and lavish robes of black and gold. Emperor Taxian-jun, himself from the past life.

"We met Nangong Liu on the way here. He called you *Your Majesty*—I see you've given yourself a title. You've become the emperor of this temple; you're now the judge, jury, and executioner.

Everything you say is right, or becomes right—anything you say is wrong becomes an unforgivable sin. You decide who lives or dies, who is rewarded or punished. Is this the justice you wanted?"

Xu Shuanglin paused for a moment, then sneered. But Mo Ran saw Taxian-jun sneering, that pale and handsome face filled with ridicule.

"What does it matter? You saw for yourself. I, too, once believed you wise gentlemen, believed in so-called equality of opportunity—but how did that work out?" He paused, pacing back and forth within the holy weapon array, a mad glint in his eyes. "You were the ones who put a coward on a pedestal and trampled heroes beneath your feet. You were the ones who treated hard work like dung and made altars of outhouses. You who saw flattery as friendship and pride as arrogance—you committed all your misdeeds with impunity, then shoved me into the mud! You turned and told me it doesn't matter how great an injustice I've suffered, how my brother framed and defamed me; it doesn't matter what kind of humiliation I've endured. That's my own personal business; no matter how bad it was, I shouldn't vent my anger on the innocent. Ha! What a joke!"

Mo Ran saw Taxian-jun's sneer widen into an evil grin.

"They didn't blame *you*, they didn't baselessly accuse *you* of misdeeds. Of course you have the breath for pretty platitudes! Whereas I—I was only seeking karmic justice on my own terms."

"…Karmic justice?" Mo Ran stood facing Taxian-jun. "How many did you kill for your karmic justice? You named yourself emperor atop piles of white bone and tides of crimson blood—did you never feel the slightest regret?"

"What have I got to regret? I killed all those people, but I'll give them a chance at rebirth, of course. All will become pawns in my hands, their every move dependent on my whims. Only then will black and white be made manifest, good and evil as distinct as the clear Jing River flowing into the muddy Wei. *That* is justice."

Mo Ran paused. “You’ve used your own morals as the measure for all humanity.”

“I am that measure.” Xu Shuanglin stood, clothes whipping in the wind. He was Nangong Xu to everyone else, and Taxian-jun to Mo Ran.

“Look what I did in the front hall. Did you not find it beautiful? The kind enjoy the peace they earned, while the vile are burned and cooked alive. He who wielded the murderer’s knife will bare his own neck for retribution. Every debt will be settled, every eye repaid with an eye. What’s wrong with that?”

“You have quite a high opinion of yourself,” Mo Ran said.

“Why shouldn’t I?” Taxian-jun replied. “As I see it, this is the greatest retribution of all.”

Everyone was silent in the face of Xu Shuanglin’s deranged reasoning. Before they’d come here, many expected Xu Shuanglin had done all this for power, or to settle his own grudges. None had imagined Xu Shuanglin considered everything he’d done righteous and just.

In this world, who was fit to be that fairest measure? Perhaps not even the descendants of gods, Tianyin Pavilion.

Mo Ran stood unmoving. After a moment, he regained enough serenity to turn to that Taxian-jun who stood facing him. His beaded crown had disappeared, and his handsome face turned sunken, darkening to black. Mo Ran blinked. The man before him was Xu Shuanglin, not Emperor Taxian-jun. It was just that Xu Shuanglin acted so much like the man he remembered being that he’d mistakenly believed he was interrogating himself through space and time.

“Okay. Let me see if I understand. All those pawns in the hall—despite not having the spiritual energy to sustain them, you want them to keep their living minds. You’ve built your kingdom in this temple, and now you’re their god. You’re His Majesty the Emperor.

You've split the world into two halves, where the good are good and the evil are evil. This is the justice you yearned for."

As Mo Ran spoke, a blizzard of memories whirled like a storm in his head. He remembered the Xu Shuanglin who'd died beneath falling blades to save Ye Wangxi. The Xu Shuanglin who'd stood in the courtyard Farewell to Three Lifetimes with his feet bare as he teased his parrot. The Xu Shuanglin who'd asked his brother for half a tangerine at Jincheng Lake. The tangerine trees on Mount Jiao; Nangong Liu with his mind returned to childhood; Luo Fenghua, who'd been snatched back from endless hell… Every one of these details linked together, cresting in his mind like a breaking wave.

Mo Ran looked up. His dark eyes held no ridicule nor disdain, only quiet observation. "Am I right, Nangong Xu?"

"Call me Xu Shuang—"

"No, your name is Nangong Xu." Mo Ran walked up to him, studying the rotting ruin of a man. No one could understand Nangong Xu's mindset better than he; they were both men forced to take a dark road. Taxian-jun from the past life was the same as Xu Shuanglin from this one.

He saw it with crystal clarity. He watched for the faintest changes in Xu Shuanglin's expression, catching every minute detail. Then he stopped, eyes downcast. "It's so cold out, and the ground's so chilly," Mo Ran murmured. "Nangong Xu, why aren't you wearing shoes?"

The smile on Xu Shuanglin's face froze, but he swiftly brought that flickering expression back to an impenetrable strength. "I don't want to—"

"Don't you love it when Ye Wangxi asks you that question?"

Xu Shuanglin fell silent.

"The first time I saw you in your courtyard, you weren't wearing shoes. She was the one who brought them to you. I'm sure you had no idea how smug you looked."

Mo Ran watched Xu Shuanglin's face without blinking. This was the answer he'd guessed at on the beaches of Flying Flower Isle, watching apocalyptic fire sending up roiling black smoke as it consumed Linyi on the opposite shore. "Nangong Xu, you've always hoped someone would notice your feet were bare. You hoped for someone to say—"

Fear flashed across Xu Shuanglin's smiling face. He took a step back, nose wrinkling in a snarl. "Shut up."

But of course Mo Ran wouldn't. He watched Xu Shuanglin; his erratic response had transformed Mo Ran's tentative assumption into certainty. He felt again as if he weren't seeing Xu Shuanglin but himself from the past life, trapped in an inescapable darkness. "Put on your shoes; it's cold out."

In the unsteady light, amid the clanging of the holy weapons, Xu Shuanglin leapt panther-like at Mo Ran and grabbed him by the lapels. That human hand and stinking claw clutched him at the same time. Xu Shuanglin's eyes were bloodshot. "Shut up!" he snarled. "Shut your mouth!"

"Okay. But before I do, let me say one last thing."

"Don't!" Xu Shuanglin cried in despair, like a dragon with its vulnerable inverted scale torn away, blood streaming freely from his wound. "Don't…"

"Ye Wangxi is a lot like Luo Fenghua, isn't she?"

Mo Ran's words were quiet, but they seemed to drain Xu Shuanglin of all his strength. He stood mute and dazed.

Those familiar with both Luo Fenghua and Ye Wangxi fell silent as well. They were completely different people with no blood relationship; in these rolling sands of time, one had died before the other was even born. But at Mo Ran's reminder, realization dawned. Indeed, they were alike. Ye Wangxi's mannerisms and movements, her personality and temper, poise and speech, were the spitting image of Xu Shuanglin's dear mentor, Luo Fenghua.

Xu Shuanglin released Mo Ran's lapels as if burned. Hands twisted into talons, he buried his face in his palms as his shoulders shook.

"Is he…" Xue Meng murmured. "Is he crying?"

Crying? Certainly not.

Xu Shuanglin kept his head lowered, face in his hands. As the shaking of his shoulders grew more violent, ghoulish giggles escaped between his fingers. "Ha…" The sound spread like ripples on water. He let his hands fall and cackled, "Ha ha ha, *alike*? What nonsense! Mo-zongshi, have you ever even *met* Luo Fenghua? You merely glimpsed his corpse when we opened the Infinite Hells. How are you so convinced after one look? Who thinks highly of himself now?"

"Since you've brought up the Infinite Hells and the matter of Luo Fenghua's corpse," said Mo Ran, "let me ask another question. Where is he?"

Xu Shuanglin's eyes narrowed, his smile stiffening into a leer. "What do you mean?"

"In your kingdom, good and evil are punished or rewarded at your whim. But you couldn't bear to kill Nangong Liu; in fact, you even released him from his lingchi fruit curse. I couldn't fathom why. But if he's still here, there's no way you would abandon Luo Fenghua. Your spiritual energy isn't enough to control all the pawns, so you're offering your soul to the holy weapons. But I fought you at Jincheng Lake and Peach Blossom Springs. I know you haven't reached your limits."

Xu Shuanglin said nothing.

"Other than reckless use of the Zhenlong Chess Formation, there's another reason you're flagging—the second forbidden technique you've spent all these years working toward." Mo Ran paused, letting the words strike true. "Has your Rebirth finally brought Luo Fenghua back from the eighteen hells?"

All color had fled Xu Shuanglin's face. As he took breath to speak, a wisp of white smoke rose from the black maelstrom behind him.

Xue Zhengyong, seasoned warrior that he was, was first to react. "Shit! There's something beyond his array!"

Chapter 226:
Never to Forget

EVERYONE UNSHEATHED their weapons. Xue Zhengyong pulled Xue Meng behind him, face grim. "Meng-er, don't move. Stay behind me!"

When they first saw the Weapon Ensoulment array, no one had tried to break it; if they did, Xu Shuanglin's spiritual energy would dissipate, killing him and leaving their questions unanswered. No one had expected Xu Shuanglin to be hiding another array behind Weapon Ensoulment.

What could it be? A rift in space he could use to escape? Or a vicious curse he could use as a last recourse to fight them off?

Chu Wanning raised a hand, and a barrier sprang up between their group and the mysterious array. Nangong Si had died right before his eyes; he couldn't stand to see more young cultivators lose their lives. "Be careful; don't act rashly."

The sky darkened. Clouds swirled, covering the face of the moon, and the wind kicked up sand into a blinding haze. Dressed only in his thin white robe, Xu Shuanglin stood in the wild gale and bared his teeth in a grin. "Thanks for listening to my rambling so long. Seriously, thank you. Everyone, let the *real* show begin."

As he spoke, his rotting claw of a hand pointed into the air. The swirling black array rushed into his palm like a soaring dragon, revealing the gleaming formation of the curse beneath.

"What kind of formation is this?" Xue Meng cried.

"Is it Rebirth?" Xue Zhengyong asked Abbot Xuanjing of Wubei Temple.

The man shook his head. "Huaizui mastered Rebirth, but he never used it in front of others. This old monk doesn't know what it

looks like."

The assembled cultivators stared at the array with the tension of a drawn bow, taking in Xu Shuanglin's every movement with rapt attention and perfect silence. Only the eerie whistling of that unnatural tempest wailed in their ears. They were like a pot of oil hot enough to erupt, merely waiting for that first drop of water.

And like a stone dropped, the explosion came. "The Corpse Demon Array!" came a cry.

It was Hanlin the Sage, Hua Binan, who was the first to recognize the array. "The Corpse Demon Array," he cried. "Xu Shuanglin is summoning Luo Fenghua's revenant to take us down with him! Stop him! That formation must not take shape!"

Panic took hold the instant the array was named. This was a devilish spell not far from the three forbidden techniques. It had originated from dark medicinal practices; as the foremost grandmaster of medicine in the world, Hanlin the Sage could never mistake it.

Jiang Xi had likewise heard tales of this array since he was a child. He reacted much more swiftly than others, leaping toward the array with Xuehuang in hand. With a thunderous boom of spiritual energy, the delicate sword struck toward the array's center.

With a clash of metal and falling sparks, Xu Shuanglin rushed in front of the array and parried Jiang Xi's blade. Cold light gleamed in his eyes. "This is the last wish of my life. Don't even dream of stopping me."

"The last wish of your life," Jiang Xi said, acid, "is to die with us here?"

"Bullshit!" Xu Shuanglin bit out. His sword's hilt shook in his hand, his tendons protruding and his face flushed red.

"You're falling apart. What's summoning a corpse demon going to do? Drag a few more people with you to the grave?"

“Corpse demon? Grave?! Open your goddamn eyes, how is this a—”

An arrow imbued with spiritual energy streaked toward the array, just as Jiang Xi pinned Xu Shuanglin in place.

“No!” Xu Shuanglin’s infinite composure finally shattered on a scream. *“Stop!”*

His lapse of concentration gave Jiang Xi the opening he needed. Blood misted the air. Xu Shuanglin crumpled to his knees in pain, but his eyes were crazed with despair—he wasn’t looking at his own mutilated flesh and exposed ribcage, but rather at the array.

Xu Shuanglin’s cheeks were flecked with filthy blood; his eyes bulged, and his lips trembled. Never before had he shown such fear on his face, whether as Nangong Xu of the past or Xu Shuanglin of the present. His shaking hands flew through the gesture for sending out spiritual energy, putting everything he had into keeping that arrow from piercing the array.

The arrow shattered midair.

Xu Shuanglin panted, his wounded arm dripping blood. The corners of his mouth bubbled with crimson foam, but when he saw that arrow fall, his white lips formed a quivering smile.

“But…” Mo Ran heard Shi Mei murmur at his side, “this isn’t the Corpse Demon Array.”

Overhearing, Huang Xiaoyue snorted, hand on his beard. “Youngling, are you not embarrassed? Could Hanlin the Sage be wrong?”

But Shi Mei shook his head, resolute. “The Corpse Demon Array doesn’t look like this.”

“You can’t be serious. You think you know better than the sage?”

Mo Ran cut in. “Shi Mei, don’t waste your breath on this geezer. You’re sure this isn’t the Corpse Demon Array?”

"It *looks* like it, but it's not the same thing. The Corpse Demon Array has a fish-scale gleam. This one is glowing, but its light isn't breaking in separate scales. It's continuous."

They heard Jiang Xi's enraged shout. "Nangong Xu, what the hell are you doing?!"

Xu Shuanglin ignored him. He dragged his broken body up before the brilliant glow, blood dribbling across the ground as he went. The smile on his face widened. In the light of the array, he looked almost boyish, his grin one of cheerful youth.

"Soon…" he whispered.

He reached out and tapped the array's surface. The touch rippled outward. He looked as if he was waiting to see the face of a long-lost friend, or kin he'd been apart from for years. Neither his wounds nor his rotting flesh hindered his joy. His eyes shone as he murmured, "Soon…so soon, just the last little bit…"

The roar of the wind finally quieted. The clouds parted, revealing the moon hanging round in the sky. Xu Shuanglin's eyes were wide with hope; he was shaking again, but this time not from fear. This was excitement, an unstoppable anticipation.

"Shifu…"

They saw golden light in the array, then the shape of a gleaming spiritual core. The array poured light into it, those thousands of wisps gradually taking human form.

"Luo Fenghua?!"

"It's Luo Fenghua!"

The long-dead Luo Fenghua materialized upon Rufeng Sect's Soul-Summoning Platform. A blooming tangerine tree stretched its branches within the gold array, white petals drifting down around him. He sat beneath it in the celadon robes of Rufeng Sect, playing the harp with his eyes closed. He was still a mirage, a hazy illusion. Only that ghost form's spiritual core was real, clawed back from the underworld, gleaming within that hollow specter.

"A flicker of petals on the water of the pond, the thrum of strings on the opposite shore."

A man's quiet voice emerged from the spiritual core, laden with incomparable tenderness. Beneath the tree, Luo Fenghua was singing a local song from Sichuan.

"Best are those years you come of age, seeing the world's flowers astride a fast horse…" A raspy voice joined Luo Fenghua's faint notes—Xu Shuanglin, completing the duet. His voice was awful to listen to, like a broken gong or crushed metal, yet still it answered, stubborn and resolute.

Xue Zhengyong stared. "Th-this is the Corpse Demon Array? What's going on?"

He wasn't the only one confused; even Jiang Xi had furrowed his brow, pursing his lips in silence. His eyes were full of questions.

As that golden light shone, Luo Fenghua's body slowly gained definition. His eyes, nose, and mouth took shape. Above the soothing singing, Hua Binan shouted, "Hurry! The corpse demon is forming!"

Shi Mei had kept a low profile since they'd set out from Sisheng Peak. He hadn't spoken much, aware how low his status was. But now, he turned to Hua Binan and said, voice carrying, "Senior Sage, you're mistaken! This isn't the Corpse Demon Array! It's…"

Rebirth.

Mo Ran understood at once. Shi Mei was right: this wasn't the Corpse Demon Array. It was the formation for Rebirth!

But in such a crowd, who would people believe? An insignificant little cultivator, or the famous medicine sage? As soon as Hua Binan said the corpse demon was taking shape, everyone cared only for their own safety—no matter what Shi Mei said.

A dark shadow shot past; before Xu Shuanglin could react, a swift cultivator had driven a dagger full of spiritual energy into the

array.

"No—!"

One strike shattered Luo Fenghua's spiritual core. The golden light of the barrier flickered and died, falling to pieces.

"No! No! Shizun, *Shizun*!"

Xu Shuanglin staggered to his feet, knocking the assailant several feet away. It was a Guyueye cultivator who'd obeyed Hua Binan in that critical moment. He spat a great mouthful of blood; Xu Shuanglin hadn't held anything back. Weakened as Xu Shuanglin was, that cultivator was still knocked to the ground, where he curled up into a whimpering heap and died.

But it was too late. The cultivator's death changed nothing. Luo Fenghua's ghost-form spiritual core that Xu Shuanglin had painstakingly dragged out of the eighteen hells was punctured. He crawled to Luo Fenghua's spectral feet and tugged at his robes, but the mirage had already fallen apart. Luo Fenghua's clothes were like falling sand or spilling water in his hand—eluding his grasp no matter how he tried.

"Shizun… Shizun," he began, before his voice grew louder, eyes flickering madly. "Luo Fenghua! *Luo Fenghua!*"

It was no use. Regardless how he yelled, regardless what name he used, Luo Fenghua's hazy form was disappearing. It dissolved into tiny motes of light that drifted away on the breeze, leaving nothing behind.

Xu Shuanglin knelt on the ground, dazed. His back was ramrod straight, his body stiff as a board. He didn't move, nor did he cry. He didn't even shout anymore.

Atop the Soul-Summoning Platform, in the biting wind, a cracked spiritual core lost its light and fell to the ground, dulling to nothing. The spiritual energy meant for Luo Fenghua's reborn body dispersed like so much willow fluff, drifting away in swirling sparks.

Xu Shuanglin knelt in that mirage turned to ash. After an endless silence, he spoke in soft, mocking tones. “Best are those years you come of age, seeing the world’s flowers astride a fast horse?”

A beautiful verse. He’d often heard Luo Fenghua sing it when he was younger. All those flecks of spiritual energy had become the sands of bygone time; in those flying motes of golden willow fluff, he saw the scene of his first meeting with his shifu.

He and his brother were still young the day their father brought them to Rufeng’s academy. It was mid-autumn, and an old tangerine tree stood in the courtyard, branches heavy with fruit. Two men conversed beneath it. The first had unassuming features and a bland expression: the face of someone quickly forgotten in a crowd. The second’s face was handsomely sharp and full of vigor.

Father herded them forward. “Go greet your shifu.”

His brother had rushed to kneel. “Disciple Nangong Liu greets Shizun,” he said to the formidable man.

But the man waved his hands. “I just came to ask Luo-xiansheng a question; I’m not your shifu. Little gongzi, you’re mistaken.”

Father had smiled, too. He nudged them toward that unassuming man and said, “This is your shizun, Master Luo Fenghua.”

Looking up, he’d been met by Luo Fenghua’s bashful smile. Luo Fenghua was young at that time, and looked younger when nervous. His two little disciples stood reflected in his round and shining eyes as his cheeks went pink. The old sect leader tugged at Xu Shuanglin’s hand. “Xianzhang, these two are different in temperament, so they may not be suited for the same path. Please care for them and teach each according to his aptitude.”

Luo Fenghua fiddled with a tangerine in his hand. He seemed to badly want to adopt the stern poise of a teacher, but his fidgeting fingers betrayed his inexperience and embarrassment.

Nangong Liu was a suck-up even then. He went up and cooed, "Luo-shifu, Luo-shifu."

Luo Fenghua flushed crimson all the way to his ears. "I… Y-you don't need to be so polite," he said, flapping a hand. "I'm also teaching for the first time, I don't know anything… Little gongzi, please feel free to give me pointers going forward, I…"

He stammered onward, unsure how to continue. Xu Shuanglin vividly remembered how Luo Fenghua—who seemed better addressed by *xiao-gege* than *shifu*—looked, standing beneath that tangerine tree in the bright sun of Linyi. His back was to the light, illuminating the slender green veins beneath the delicate rim of his ear, that fragile skin translucent amber in the light.

This was how Xu Shuanglin spoke to Luo Fenghua for the first time: "Luo-xianzhang, are you even twenty?"

The boy had meant to mock him; even his father could tell. But Luo Fenghua couldn't. He smiled and earnestly responded: "Nope, I'm seventeen."

Xu Shuanglin opened his mouth as if to retort, but nothing came out. He threw up his hands and walked away.

His father excused himself and pulled him into a corner, voice stern. "Xu-er, you can't measure talent just by age."

"He's not much older than we are."

"When we asked Wang-xianzhang to teach you two, you said he was too old!"

"Is he not?" Xu Shuanglin rolled his eyes. "He's ninety-seven. He's old enough to cast off his mortal form and ascend."

"Seventeen's no good and ninety-seven isn't either—young man, what exactly do you want?"

"Dad," he lazily said, "Could you at least start with someone who isn't *eighty years* younger than your first pick?"

Incensed and embarrassed by his son's backtalk, the old sect leader ground his teeth. "Even if he isn't the strongest, he's well-traveled and well-read. His martial techniques are all very good too! Just behave yourself and learn from him! If you're still unhappy a year from now, we'll look for someone else."

After that long period of cajoling, the two finally emerged from their corner and returned to the courtyard. Xu Shuanglin was surprised to see his brother easily chatting away with Luo Fenghua as if he and Luo-shifu had been friends for decades. Yet this wasn't unbelievable. Nangong Liu had always had a knack for making friends with anyone he wanted to.

Out of the two of them, it was Luo Fenghua who remained anxious and reserved. When he looked up and saw that Xu Shuanglin had returned, the uncertainty in his manner became more pronounced. He watched as Xu Shuanglin's father tugged the disgruntled boy across the floor to stand before him. After a moment of hesitation, he tried the clumsiest, most childish method to befriend this willful little disciple: he offered Xu Shuanglin the tangerine he still held.

Xu Shuanglin stared.

"It's very sweet. Try some." His seventeen-year-old shifu looked helpless and uneasy, even rather pitiable. Only then did Xu Shuanglin notice the evenly stitched patch at the hem of his robes. Was he *that* poor? No wonder he was begging for a position as the teacher of the two young scions of Rufeng Sect.

"I don't like tangerines," Xu Shuanglin said. "Since it seems Luo-shifu can't tell he's unwelcome, this is the first thing I'd like you to remember."

"Xu-er!"

As the sect leader turned to berate his son, Luo Fenghua waved his hands and swiftly retrieved the tangerine. "Don't worry,

don’t worry. Sect Leader, you needn’t bother.”

The father sighed. “This son of mine is too rude; he doesn’t show any respect for his teacher. My apologies, Xianzhang.”

“It’s nothing.” Luo Fenghua smiled. He turned back to Xu Shuanglin, eyes warm and friendly, yet still careful. “Honestly, it doesn’t matter if they take me as their teacher or not. I have a little experience, and you can just learn from me. You don’t have to acknowledge me as your shifu.”

The old sect leader replied hastily: “How could we let that…”

“Titles are empty words.” Luo Fenghua scratched his head, red-faced and ill at ease. “Frankly, I also think I’m a bit too young…” He turned to Xu Shuanglin. “If the little gongzi has objections, you can just call me by my name.”

Xu Shuanglin watched him quietly, then burst out laughing. Just as Xu Shuanglin’s behavior was about to leave this Goody Two-shoes Luo Fenghua so embarrassed he was at his wits’ end, the boy straightened his clothes and performed a very proper bow.

The tangerine tree was fragrant, the sunlight dappled through its leaves.

Xu Shuanglin looked up and laughed. His features were haughty with a devilish curve to his mouth, but he was still young, after all. When he smiled, it was with a childish sweetness like ripe peaches. This man was right, titles *were* empty. What did it matter what he called him? Xu Shuanglin drawled: “Shizun.”

A wind rose, and the leaves rustled, scattering across the ground.

Forget it, Xu Shuanglin thought. He was merely a stand-in shifu. In a year or so, there’d be another.

Back then, Xu Shuanglin believed things would always be as carefree as they were now, and that this was a day like any other—no different from all the other days of his life, before and after.

Chapter 227:
Bygone Wish

TWO YEARS passed in a blink.

It was again an autumn day. Xu Shuanglin lay on the roof of Rufeng Sect's great hall, watching dusk color the sky with eyes narrowed and a stalk of foxtail grass in his mouth.

Very rarely did anyone venture up here. It had used to be his own space entirely, but today there were two others with him—one to his left and one to his right. One was his brother Nangong Liu. The other was their Luo-shifu, only a few years their senior.

If Xu Shuanglin were to liken himself to anything, it'd be a fanged beast. He wasn't someone who let just anybody enter his territory, and thus he wasn't sure how this had happened. Somehow, some time ago, he'd changed his mind about letting these two up on the roof. They would idle together for hours here, watching dragonflies zipping low and the willow fluff drifting high.

"Liu-er! Xu-er! Where are you?"

Their father's exasperated voice came from beneath the colonnade. "Those two little brats run as fast as rabbits whenever I tell them to help tidy the courtyard."

"Aiya." Nangong Liu peeked his head over the eaves to watch his dad bustle around. After a few minutes, he withdrew. "Heh heh, he's gone."

"Stupid old man," said Xu Shuanglin. He lazily crossed one leg over the other, oozing disdain. "He never bothers to check the roof."

Luo Fenghua shifted uncomfortably. "This isn't exactly proper behavior…" He sighed. "Why don't you two go down in a few minutes? Let's not worry the sect leader."

"Why? No matter what happens, we'll be in trouble." Nangong Liu made a face at him. "Don'tcha agree, A-Xu?"

Xu Shuanglin didn't respond. He spat out the stalk of foxtail grass and stretched, sitting upright. "Melon seeds, gimme."

Nangong Liu poured the better half of the packet of melon seeds he'd brought up to the roof into his hands. As Xu Shuanglin cracked and ate them, he snuck amused glances at Luo Fenghua, who was stewing in anxiety. He spit out a piece of shell stuck to his mouth and grinned. "Scared, Shizun?"

"I just think it's inappropriate…"

"What's inappropriate?" said Xu Shuanglin. "If the old man scolds you, I'll give him hell."

Luo Fenghua blinked.

Xu Shuanglin stuck a hand out toward Luo Fenghua again. "Gimme a tangerine."

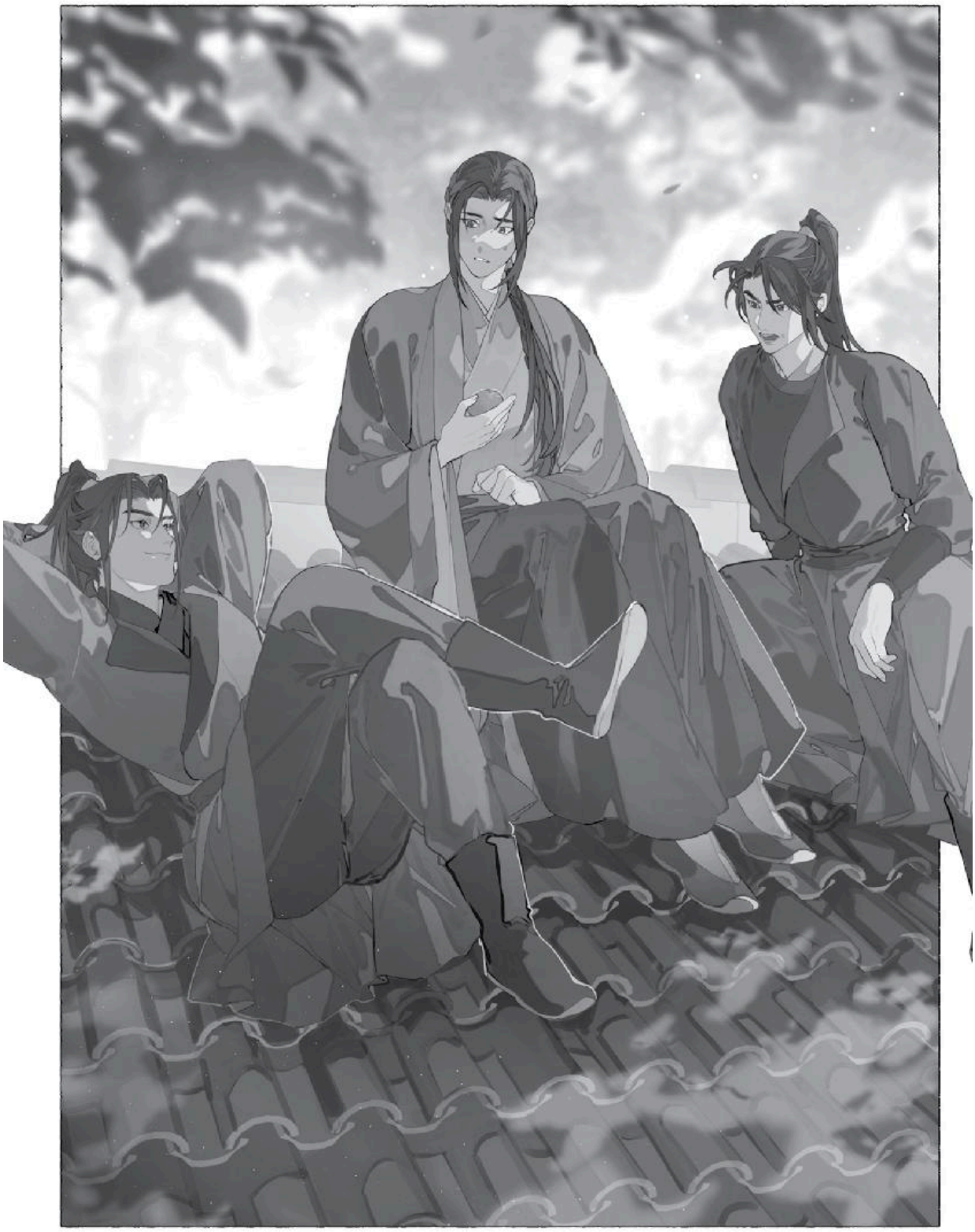
"Didn't you hate them…?"

Xu Shuanglin frowned. "Are you gonna give me one or keep jabbering? Don't make me grab you by the ankle and throw you off the roof."

His brother cut in like the brown-noser he was. "A-Xu, don't be mean to Shizun."

"Pfft, *Shizun?* That's just in front of others," Xu Shuanglin said. "What kind of shizun sneaks up to the roof to eat melon seeds with his own disciples?"

Luo Fenghua hung his head in mortification.



In truth, Xu Shuanglin loved seeing him like this; it satisfied the bully in him every time. He watched Luo Fenghua for a long while and grinned, baring white teeth. “Shizun-gege, is your disciple right?”

Shizun-gege was a nickname of Xu Shuanglin’s own creation, one that tucked a teasing intimacy within outward reverence. Luo Fenghua grew upset hearing it. “D-don’t call me that.”

“Titles are just for show, aren’t they? Shizun-gege said so himself.”

Luo Fenghua was again rendered mute.

Having had his fun, Xu Shuanglin reached out again. “Gimme.”

“You don’t like them, and I’ve only brought one. It’s for A-Liu.”

Xu Shuanglin’s eyes narrowed in a pointed stare, but it wasn’t aimed at Luo Fenghua. He’d turned to glare at his brother.

Nangong Liu had been in the process of stuffing his face with cakes and nearly choked. He flapped a hand, mumbling around a full mouth. “Um, I don’t really want tangerines today either. Shizun, he can have it.”

Luo Fenghua thought it over. “Then you can each have half.” With that, he polished the fruit with his sleeve and peeled it. He attempted to split it evenly in two, but one half still ended up bigger than the other. He looked down at his hands, vexed. Xu Shuanglin could only assume his penniless birth was the reason such simple things kept foxing him. “Aish…”

“The big one’s mine.” Xu Shuanglin cut in brazenly, making the decision on behalf of their would-be arbiter Luo Fenghua. He took the bigger half and said, “Give him the smaller one.”

“Don’t bully your ge—” Luo Fenghua said.

A segment of sweet tangerine was shoved in his mouth before he could finish. Luo Fenghua stared, eyes huge and liquid with shock.

“What are you talking about?” Xu Shuanglin chuckled. Though he lounged carelessly, his eyes were gentle. “I’m sharing my half with Shizun-gege too.”

Nangong Liu scooted his way over as well, taking the smaller half of the tangerine and counting its segments. He split it again, handing the pieces to Xu Shuanglin and Luo Fenghua.

This future sect leader of Rufeng laughed. Bathed in the rosy dusk, his silky hair fluttered like dandelion down, falling across his brow. Xu Shuanglin looked at him in amusement. “What are you doing?”

“Tangerines are for sharing.” He proceeded to split the melon seeds, cakes, and candied fruit into three piles. “So are sweets.”

“You two are really…” Luo Fenghua mustered what little sternness he had, but neither Xu Shuanglin nor Nangong Liu seemed to feel it. They merely watched him, sweet and a little mischievous. As happy as such friendly gazes made him, Luo Fenghua couldn’t avoid a pang of concern for his remaining authority. After a pause, all he managed to say was: “…masters of messing around.”

“We’re not, we’re not,” Nangong Liu said. “Even if we’re messing around, that’s for sharing too.”

At this, Xu Shuanglin finally broke into laughter. With one hand on the roof beam and the other clapped to his brow, he smiled. “All right. In the future, the three of us will share all our tangerines and split all our sweets.” He paused, looking out over the vista of Rufeng Sect’s eaves, and grinned. “And climb up the roof together.”

Scenes flashed by.

It was the Lantern Festival of that same year. Xu Shuanglin went barefoot and chewed absentmindedly at the stem in his mouth as he meandered down the main avenue of Rufeng Sect, giving orders as he went: “Hang that lantern higher—yes you, what are you

doing leaving it down so low? If your legs are too short, get someone taller to do it."

A harried voice called from behind: "A-Xu, hold on."

Xu Shuanglin turned to see Luo Fenghua striding toward him with a pair of shoes and a worried expression. "Why are you running around without shoes again?" he said.

"This entire path is paved with qi-refining stones. Bare feet are better for absorbing spiritual energy."

"It's so cold out; why bother with such a tiny bit of spiritual energy? Hurry up and put them on—look at you, your feet are all red."

"*Tsk*, you're such a nag." Despite his retort, Xu Shuanglin slipped the shoes on, though not properly. Shuffling onward, he flicked a glance at Luo Fenghua. "What's this, are you free? Wanna come browse the lantern markets with me?"

"A-Liu isn't done with his homework. I have to make him finish it—"

"If you're going to babysit my idiot brother and his homework, it'll take the entire evening." Jutting out his chin, Xu Shuanglin spoke with disdain in his eyes. "Forget celebrating the Lantern Festival."

Luo Fenghua grinned good-naturedly. "That's okay. I don't really like the crowds anyway."

Xu Shuanglin stared at him, then kicked both shoes off in a fit of pique. Watching them fly off, Luo Fenghua exclaimed: "What's wrong?!"

"I don't want them! Leave me alone."

"Put them on; it's cold."

"Don't wanna! Go away!"

"…Are you angry?"

Xu Shuanglin wrinkled his nose. "Me, angry? What's there to be angry about? You're a pauper and my brother's a moron; a

perfect pair. I'm sure you'll have a great time celebrating together. I'm off; don't bother me." He waved a dismissive hand and walked off with a swagger.

In that moment, he so hoped Luo Fenghua would run after him. Even if his feet were so cold they were chapped, he didn't care. He would kick off both his shoes and wait for someone to call his name from behind, then fussily tell him, *You'll catch a cold.*

Xu Shuanglin walked off without a backward glance, full of anticipation. But Luo Fenghua didn't run after him. Nor did he call his name. Xu Shuanglin reluctantly slowed down.

He strode down the avenue until he could see the city gates, but still no one had called to him. Xu Shuanglin cracked his knuckles. *Whatever.* He'd had few companions since he was young; he'd spent most of his Lantern Festivals alone. It didn't matter.

He took one step down the stairs, then another. Finally, he snapped his head around, face twisting as he howled, "Luo Fenghua!"

But Luo Fenghua hadn't gone. He still stood in the middle of the path, holding the shoes he'd picked up, unsure what to do or how to react. Xu Shuanglin's shout hit him like a club to the head. His eyes widened. "Ah…"

Xu Shuanglin stared at him. *Wow. Just wow.*

In the end, he and Xu Shuanglin had both kept Nangong Liu company that evening. Nangong Liu tried to stuff the scrolls into his memory in a state of complete despair. He recited, eyes rolling up in concentration, "One inch and a half beneath the sternum lies the Juque acupoint, the seat of the heart. Those wounded here will fall unconscious. To treat such an injury, aim for the acupoint to the right, beneath the lungs. Strike…strike the something?" He scratched his head. "I forgot."

"Dumbass! Death by stupidity!" Xu Shuanglin smacked his brother's head with the bamboo scrolls, fury etched across his face. "Strike another quarter inch below and they'll wake, though if they

wake without healing, they shall die within one hundred days. Above the navel lies the Shuifen acupoint, connected to the small intestine and the stomach—a severe wound will cause death in twenty-eight days. We've been over this *nine times*! How has your idiocy not killed you yet?!"

Dejected, Nangong Liu sprawled over the table and sighed. He looked up and blew an errant lock away from his eyes. "I know I'm dumb… If only I were as smart as you."

"Impossible," Xu Shuanglin pronounced. "Keep dreaming."

The curtain over the doorway lifted as Luo Fenghua, cloaked against the cold, returned with the tangyuan he'd prepared. Snow had fallen into his ink-dark hair and upswept lashes, and in the glow of the stove, his unassuming face became something almost beautiful. Like a tiny winter jasmine, transformed by the touch of snow.

"You've been at it so long now; take a break. Have some tangyuan." Luo Fenghua set down the tray, which held three bowls: one for each of them.

With a cry of delight, Nangong Liu rushed to the table and grubbily reached for the bowls—but his brother yanked him to a stop. Glowering, Xu Shuanglin asked, "What's the rush? No manners at all. How about *thank you*?"

Nangong Liu held his tongue, stunned his manners-deficient brother had suddenly changed his tune on a festival night.

"What?" Xu Shuanglin narrowed his eyes dangerously.

Nangong Liu shook his head, then decided to go all the way—he flicked out his sleeves and performed a deep, ceremonial bow. Looking up, he said in mock obsequious tones, "This lowly one thanks Master for the gift. Heh."

Xu Shuanglin snorted. Luo Fenghua stared. Nangong Liu had clearly learned this from some novel or other. "Enough. Eat."

Luo Fenghua rubbed his hands together, red and frozen stiff. As he brought them up to his mouth to blow on them, Xu Shuanglin stepped up to take his cloak.

Such treatment embarrassed him. "Ah, you don't need to."

Xu Shuanglin ignored him. "Is it snowing outside?" he asked blandly.

"Mn, just started. If it sticks, we can have a snowball fight tomorrow."

"…Shizun." The sudden change in address was most certainly sarcasm, never respect. "How old are you, honestly?"

Luo Fenghua smiled. Looking at his soft lashes made Xu Shuanglin feel warmer, too, but when he realized this, furious shame filled him. Hastily, he cast around for some excuse to work off his temper.

As usual, Luo Fenghua didn't disappoint. Xu Shuanglin pointed at a patch on his cloak and sneered. "Are you so poor? How long have you been at Rufeng Sect? Why haven't you thrown this rag away? If you wear it while out and about, people will think we're mistreating you! Are you dumb?!"

Luo Fenghua deflated. "Um, even if there's a rip, you can still wear it once it's patched. When I think about the suffering of the lower cultivation realm, I can't enjoy any finery at all. The cost of one cloak could purchase a dozen talismans for the needy. Isn't that better?"

Xu Shuanglin's finger was still trained on the patch. He glared, furious, at Luo Fenghua.

Cautiously, Luo Fenghua prompted this star student of his. "Don't you think?"

"I think you have a problem! A pauper's problem!" But he still hung the cloak up on the rack.

The three of them sat around the warming stove eating tangyuan. They couldn't see the festival lanterns from here, but this

trio had plenty to talk about when they were together. They weren't bored at all. Snow fell outside the window; frost glittered on the red lacquered frame. Firewood crackled, its light dyeing the room in warm shades of gold.

The atmosphere grew livelier with the aid of some wine. Luo Fenghua succumbed to their pestering and accepted the harp Nangong Liu brought out, his cheeks ruddy as he strummed an accompaniment to a folk song. "A flicker of petals on the water of the pond, the thrum of strings on the opposite shore. Best are those years you come of age, seeing the world's flowers astride a fast horse…"

"Shizun, Shizun, this one's nice, teach it to me. What's it called?"

"'Ode to Youth,'" Luo Fenghua replied, voice gentle. "A short song from Sichuan. I think it really suits us."

Nangong Liu grinned, face upturned. His smiles were normally a bit too warm and edged too close to flattery—but after a few cups, his face shone with frank cheer. He laughed. "That's a good name. Doesn't that describe us perfectly? Young men in the best years of our lives?"

Xu Shuanglin crossed his arms with a snort. "Do young men fail to memorize the same book nine times?"

"Aiya, everyone has their strengths and weaknesses." Nangong Liu smiled; after all his studying, he surprisingly still had the energy to contradict his brother. "Maybe you're a genius, but I have my talents."

"…You're drunk."

Luo Fenghua smiled. He raised his cup in toast. "I wish for you two to stay in your golden years all your lives. Use your own talents to be gentlemen forever."

Nangong Liu rubbed his hands together and hooked his arm through his brother's. Disgusted, Xu Shuanglin pushed him away, but

Nangong Liu didn't mind. He cackled and said, "Shizun, you reminded me of something. Even if we're not putting lanterns in the river, we still have to make a wish. Let's all make one together."

Xu Shuanglin's mouth twitched. "I think making wishes is gross."

"We'll write them on a piece of paper," Luo Fenghua said. "Once you're done, throw it in the fire. That way, it'll still come true."

In the end, each of them wrote down a wish. Luo Fenghua's was no secret; he'd already said it out loud during his toast. Nangong Liu wasn't skilled at writing either, and often sounded things out as he wrote. "I wish…to have good things to eat and drink, and to achieve great success. I wish for harmony in the world and reunions with old friends."

Xu Shuanglin felt repulsed, but underlying his revulsion, there was a feeling he couldn't explain. He was the son of his father's concubine. Few paid him any mind. Only once Luo Fenghua joined them did he have anyone he might consider a companion. He, Nangong Liu, and Shizun played together and cultivated together. Instead of saying Luo Fenghua was his shifu, it would be better to name him Xu Shuanglin's first true friend.

Because of Luo Fenghua, he even let go of his envy for his brother—his envy of how Nangong Liu had no talents yet still received so much attention by virtue of his birth. After spending their days together, he had come to find Nangong Liu cute, almost.

"A-Xu, what did you write?"

Xu Shuanglin didn't answer. He threw his wad of paper carelessly into the flames, and his wishes were swallowed by its light and heat. Sparks shone in his eyes. "Nothing, it was blank."

Nangong Liu and Luo Fenghua both looked crestfallen. Xu Shuanglin grinned, his smile wicked with a hint of sweetness. It was the smug delight that came of teasing others. *Ha ha, got you.*

The handwriting on that slip of paper had been neat and perfect, each stroke careful. It said: *I wish for Luo Fenghua, Nangong Xu, and Nangong Liu to be friends forever. Sharing the same tangerine, splitting the same sweets, and climbing the same roof.*

From our coming of age, until our hair goes white.

Chapter 228:
All for Naught

UPON THE SOUL-SUMMONING Platform of Rufeng Sect, Xu Shuanglin watched those flickering motes of golden light drift and fall like the paper he'd tossed into the flames that Lantern Festival night. Reduced instantly to ash, leaving only embers that scalded him across the chasm of time.

I wish for Luo Fenghua, Nangong Xu, and Nangong Liu to be friends forever.

But Nangong Xu was long gone. The man who stood here today was Xu Shuanglin. A madman, a demon, someone who'd crawled out of hell to slaughter all these righteous gentlemen. Nangong Xu no longer existed. He was like the willow fuzz of his namesake, *Xu*, floating alone amidst the vast heavens and the dark earth. Time's passage could crack the ridges of mountains, to say nothing of a tiny wisp of willow fluff.

So many years had passed. The willow tree had grown old, its splendor dimmed, and those drifting wisps had roamed so far. What they'd seen wasn't a beautiful world of flowers but one consumed by blood and hate.

Yet for some reason, he'd still passed on everything Luo Fenghua had taught him to Ye Wangxi. For some reason, whenever he ran into a truly kindhearted gentleman, he still restrained himself in compassion. For some reason…he was crying.

Xu Shuanglin knelt on the ground and howled his pain. Tears streamed down his gnarled and ruined cheeks; he clutched Luo Fenghua's spiritual core and finally descended into frenzied weeping, each sob as bloody as if he'd dug it from his throat.

"Shizun… *Luo Fenghua*…"

Had the plan he'd poured all his wits into, all his madness and hatred, all his twisted yearning—and all his *life*—had it been destroyed just like that?

He thought of his resentment after the Spiritual Mountain Competition, the hatred that led him to usurp the sect leader position after his father had given it to Nangong Liu. To this day he remembered his father's lined and bone-pale face, staring at him in disbelief.

"This position is mine," Xu Shuanglin had said, hands wrapped around his father's throat. He tightened his grip slowly, expression cold and vicious. A mad glint flashed in his eyes. "If Father doesn't want Rufeng Sect's decades of work to fall to ruin, the ring must go to me. You've gotten on in years; you can rest now."

"Xu-er…"

He closed his eyes and squeezed until he heard the chilling crack of his father's neck breaking.

Xu Shuanglin slid the Rufeng Sect Leader ring off his father's finger and pressed it to his lips. It was cold, but no colder than his skin. "All I wanted was justice. None of you gave it to me, so I took it for myself. Father, don't hate me in death."

He turned to leave.

Another scene from his memory: his first night as sect leader. The servants scrubbed the blood and grime from the paving stones; his father was dead, and Nangong Liu and his family were held in the water prison. All those who would stand against him were appropriately dealt with. Everything was over. For a moment, he was at a loss for what to do next. He set up a stove in the courtyard and brewed tea to sip leisurely.

He remained alone there, caressing that gleaming ring on his thumb. From today on, he was Rufeng Sect's leader. The fate of those who'd plotted against him at the Spiritual Mountain Competition was sealed—they'd be dismembered and killed as soon

as he got the chance—but he didn't know what to do with his brother, nor with Luo Fenghua.

Night was falling, and the golden sun had dipped into the west. At last, Xu Shuanglin rose to visit the water prison and see his brother and shifu.

A few attendants trailed behind him on the path. As the last glow of sunlight was swallowed by the darkness, he shuddered. He was suddenly cold and dizzy.

"Sect Leader, what's wrong?"

Xu Shuanglin waved away the servant who'd rushed forward to offer a supporting arm. "It's nothing. I just thought of something I left undone. I'll head back to the hall alone. You may go."

Suppressing pain that was growing stronger by the minute, he put on his veiled hat and strode toward the great hall. But despite his efforts, at some point he could no longer bear it and ran the rest of the short distance, shoving the door open before slamming it shut behind him.

"Sect Leader?"

"Stand guard outside. Don't come in or do anything rash; if anything happens, alert me immediately."

After giving the guards his orders, Xu Shuanglin took a breath and staggered into the depths of the hall. He tore off his hat and looked down at his hand. The skin was cracked and covered in lesions. His first thought was that his father had cursed him, but he quickly dismissed it. The old man had been ill for ages and hadn't the strength to do any magic; how could he possibly pull off a curse like this without him knowing?

Then *how*? It hurt unbearably, like his sinews were snapping, his flesh twisting. He spasmed and shook by the window, knuckles white as he dug red scratches into his own flesh on the ground. It hurt so much.

He couldn’t shout or call for healers. His position wasn’t secure; as the leader of the coup, he couldn’t show the slightest weakness. Within the great hall, Xu Shuanglin lay panting, moaning, rolling across the floor in shaking fits. In his thrashing, he accidentally yanked down the curtain, covering his body. It shielded him from the moonlight outside.

The pain suddenly faded. Bathed in cold sweat, he lay curled beneath the cloth and gasped for breath. After a moment, he thought the pain was over; he pushed the curtain aside and sat up in an attempt to stand.

But the touch of moonlight tore his skin and sent pain shooting through his nerves again. Only then did Xu Shuanglin put the pieces together. He clawed his way to his feet, desperately slamming the window shut as he retreated to the darkest corner of the hall.

Slowly, his breathing evened. The pain disappeared, and his dripping wounds healed before his eyes. Growing suspicious, Xu Shuanglin swathed himself in his hooded cloak, concealing every inch of skin, and ran to the library.

After hours of searching, he uncovered a record in his great-grandfather’s trunk. Everyone knew the first sect leader of Rufeng had once fought that great fish, the gun. Though he’d managed to defeat the evil beast and imprison it within Golden Drum Tower, he’d fallen victim to the creature’s curse.

The gun was yin by nature and linked to the cycles of darkness and the moon. Its curse afflicted all sect leaders of Rufeng with agonizing injury at the barest touch of moonlight. On top of that, every full moon—when yin energy was at its strongest—they’d endure the pain even if they hid in the darkest possible place. This had remained the Rufeng Sect’s greatest secret for centuries. Generations of sect leaders had buried this knowledge deep, afraid their enemies would take advantage of it. Even their own sons were kept in the dark until the last possible moment.

What a joke. He’d done all this for a cursed position?

The next day, Xu Shuanglin went to the water prison. One cell held Nangong Liu and his wife Rong Yan, another Luo Fenghua. He first went to his brother's cell.

"A-Xu! A-Xu! What have you done? What have you done…" Nangong Liu babbled in agitation at the sight of him, but his limbs had been sealed with a spell and he couldn't move. All he could do was kneel on the ground and weep before his brother. "Have you gone mad? Is the position of sect leader worth going to these extremes?"

Xu Shuanglin was still wan from his night of torment. "I only took what should've been mine," he sneered.

Nangong Liu fell silent.

"You stole my sword forms and blackened my reputation. I was only twenty years old, Nangong Liu." He paused, eyes like ice. "I was only twenty, but you showed me the bitterness of life."

He strode forward, the hems of his robes brushing the ground, and looked down at his brother's face. "Nangong Liu, even wastrels like you dream of power and success, so why not someone like me?" He spoke each word deliberately. "I worked harder than you, I have more talent than you—I'm better than you in all respects, save for that silver tongue of yours."

He lifted Nangong Liu's chin and pried his mouth open. He stared at that pink and slimy organ. "You'd never think something like this could be such a deadly weapon. Let's cut it out."

Nangong Liu's eyes went round with terror, but his mouth was held open, and he could not speak. He could only whimper, spittle dribbling down his chin.

"No?" Xu Shuanglin chuckled. "That's fine, too. We *were* brothers after all. A quick death still counts as mercy on my end."

The instant he let go, Nangong Liu started bawling. "Don't kill me! Don't kill me! Was it just the Spiritual Mountain Competition? L-

let me out and, and I'll tell the whole w-world the truth so you may have justice!"

"Too late." Xu Shuanglin produced a pristine handkerchief and wiped his hands. "Now they'll only think you speak from fear of me." He glanced down indifferently. "The stains you left on me will never wash away."

Before Nangong Liu could speak, a woman's knife-sharp voice cut through. "Nangong Xu! You had your grievances, but look what you've done! You've murdered your own father to take the sect leader ring, and now you want to murder your brother too—you… Can you really be so ruthless?"

"Ah, it's Rong-shijie." Xu Shuanglin smiled thinly. "If you hadn't spoken, I would've forgotten you were here."

The spell kept Rong Yan on her knees as well, but her expression was determined. The tears in her eyes would never be mistaken for vulnerability. "Truly, I was wrong about you back then."

"So what?" Xu Shuanglin grinned. "You're the one who gave me that brocade pouch, and you're the one who later married Nangong Liu. You started this, dear Sister-in-Law. How dare you bring up what was between us back then? You're not about to tell me you had no choice, that he forced you, are you?"

Rong Yan went pale. She looked as if she might say more, but she only bit her lip and slowly closed her eyes. Tears coursed down her cheeks.

When he raised his hand again, it held a knife, gleaming cold in the dark.

"No…no…A-Xu, we can talk about this… I'll agree to anything… Don't kill me, please, don't kill me…"

"Do you misunderstand your current position?" Xu Shuanglin polished the blade, that devilish smile still haunting the corners of his mouth. "Nangong Liu, I'm the sect leader now. You're a prisoner.

You have no power, yet you're trying to negotiate with me? What do you propose to use as collateral—your shitty life?"

"I'll be your servant! I can…do anything for you, I—I'll do anything! I'll give you Rong-shijie if you want!"

Rong Yan's eyes snapped open. "Nangong Liu!" she shouted in fury.

Shaking like windblown chaff, Nangong Liu ignored his wife. "Anything, if you spare me…" he whimpered at his brother. "Please, spare me…"

"As if." Xu Shuanglin lazily patted his cheek with the knife's handle. "Do you think I'd want a tangerine you've already licked?"

"Then I can—I can—" Nangong Liu tried his best, but he stuttered to a stop. All that flowed freely were his tears and snot. Finally, he wailed, "A-Xu, we said, we said we'd share all our sweets and climb up on the roof together… We've cultivated together, we celebrated the Lantern Festival with Shizun. We learned to play the qin… H-have you forgotten?"

Xu Shuanglin's expression darkened, but he only curled his lip in response. Lifting the blade, he struck.

"Ah!"

"Wait!"

The blade stilled inches from Nangong Liu's neck. Even Xu Shuanglin didn't know whether it would've gone all the way without their shouts. But his expression remained unchanged. "What now?" he asked idly. "You two sure have a lot of last words."

Chapter 229:
Stained Forever

RONG YAN DIDN'T LOOK at her husband. She wept, her almond eyes swimming with tears and her back very straight. "For the sake of what we had, will you at least let me give birth to the child?"

Xu Shuanglin glanced downward, eyes sliding over Rong Yan's belly. Nothing seemed amiss at first glance, but upon further study, one might notice a slight swell.

Rong Yan was kneeling, but her face was composed. "Please."

Xu Shuanglin said nothing.

"Their father has sinned, undeniably. But Nangong Xu, I beg of you to spare the child."

Xu Shuanglin stared at the woman, finding her words ridiculous. Spare the bastard in her belly? Whether a nephew or a niece, what did that unformed lump of flesh have to do with him?

In that hateful moment, he recalled the pain he'd felt in the night. Xu Shuanglin paused. Perhaps this was a marvelous development. The sect leader position could either be passed to an heir upon their predecessor's death or be taken by force. One could neither abdicate nor resign. Xu Shuanglin could never give Nangong Liu the position, but in a hundred years, he could hand it off to Nangong Liu's child, with all the agonies it entailed. Wouldn't that be perfect? The sins of the father borne by the son. How poetic.

A delighted grin spread over his face. Without waiting for his two prisoners to react, he turned and left the prison, cackling.

In the end, he killed neither Nangong Liu nor Rong Yan. He kept them captive in a small courtyard, planning to name their child his successor via blood oath as soon as they were born. When the

time came, wouldn't the world be forced to praise his leniency and forbearance?

But that day never came. Upon taking up his position, his many heinous acts stirred too much resentment both within and without the sect. Eventually, hatred drove one of his city lords to release Nangong Liu and Luo Fenghua behind his back.

Luo Fenghua had never been apprised of the truth of what had happened at the Spiritual Mountain Competition and still thought Xu Shuanglin had committed these atrocities solely to take the position of sect leader. Nangong Liu's clever beguilement only worsened things. By this point, he had lost all faith in his disciple. He joined forces with Nangong Liu to wrest power from Xu Shuanglin, ousting him from the position he'd barely had the chance to enjoy.

Rufeng Sect was again rocked by a coup. Hundreds were killed or wounded. Amid the raging flames, Luo Fenghua found Xu Shuanglin hiding in Moonwhistle Fields.

The moon was full that night. Xu Shuanglin was in agony, lying within the trees and slicked in blood like a flayed snake. Everywhere on him was the red of open wounds. Luo Fenghua thought he'd been injured in the battle. Even if he believed in his guilt, the sight of his previously beloved disciple in such a wretched state still made his heart twinge.

Xu Shuanglin looked up, trembling, and showed him a thin smile. "You've come."

Luo Fenghua said nothing.

"When we fight, you always take his side."

"You're the one who went too far this time," said Luo Fenghua. "Did you kill Master Tianchan?"

"Yep."

"What about Lin-daozhang?"

"He deserved to die."

"…And what about your father?"

Xu Shuanglin paused. "He was unjust; he believed I was in the wrong. He brought this upon himself."

Luo Fenghua closed his eyes, lashes damp. "How…how have you fallen so far…"

Xu Shuanglin snickered. "So they can hurt me, but I can't hurt them back? They can stab me, but I can't defend myself? Is this the gentlemanly conduct you preach?"

Face crumpling, Luo Fenghua swayed, then approached Xu Shuanglin. His tears fell before he could say any more.

"What are you crying for? What's there to cry about?" Xu Shuanglin raged. "If you want to kill me or torture me, go ahead. Spare me your crocodile tears. To you, and to the old man and everyone else—that wastrel will always be more important than me!"

Shaking his head, Luo Fenghua raised one hand and silently recited a sealing spell. "I've locked away the techniques you learned from me. Nangong Xu, from today forth, you and I are no longer master and disciple."

Xu Shuanglin felt his heart spasm. The gun's curse set fire to every nerve. But he didn't move, keeping up the pretense of ferocity. "Don't flatter yourself. I've never considered you my shifu."

Luo Fenghua stared at him in silence. Just as it looked as if he'd speak, there rose a clamor from behind.

The fighting had spilled into the field, blades gleaming in the firelight. Nangong Liu rushed over. "Shizun!" The sight of Xu Shuanglin and Luo Fenghua talking filled him with dread. "Shizun!" he shouted anxiously. "Don't listen to him! He's lying to trick you!"

Xu Shuanglin started laughing. Even now this brother of his was so adorably naïve. He thought Xu Shuanglin would cling to Luo Fenghua's robes and explain all the circumstances that led them here. But he wouldn't. To him, life was a game of chess. Once the

piece was placed, all the twists and turns and whirling storms behind the move were no longer important. Only the consequences were.

A kill was a kill. Blood spilled was blood spilled. He couldn't wash it away, nor did he want to. There was no chance Luo Fenghua would spare him. There was nothing more he needed to say.

Bracing himself against a nearby tree, Xu Shuanglin staggered to his feet. When the moonlight hit his face, the flesh split in a welter of blood.

Nangong Liu and the other cultivators took a step back. Someone exclaimed, "D-did Luo-daozhang do this? Mutilating him like this…surely that's a bit much…?"

Xu Shuanglin grinned, white on bloody red. As he stared at his brother, he realized he couldn't let this master-disciple pair off so easily. He turned to Luo Fenghua. "Send them away. There's something I want to tell you before I die. Only you."

Hands against the trunks of the pines for support, Xu Shuanglin hobbled into the darkness of the trees with Luo Fenghua following behind. The thick branches hid the moon, and Xu Shuanglin's pained expression eased. The split skin started to heal at once; though his face was still marred by tiny wounds, it was no longer so horrifying to behold.

Xu Shuanglin didn't turn around. Back to Luo Fenghua, he asked, "You really came with me. Aren't you afraid I'll kill you?"

"You wouldn't."

Xu Shuanglin said nothing.

"If you wanted to kill me or A-Liu, you'd have done it a year ago."

Xu Shuanglin snapped around, twisted light shining in his eyes. "Ridiculous! You think you know me so well?!"

Luo Fenghua's eyes widened. "Your wounds…"

"Not so scary now, right?" Xu Shuanglin started laughing. "What did you think it was? A spell? Lingchi fruit?"

He lifted his hand, showing the shining sect leader's ring sitting loose in his palm. His lips parted as he mockingly said, "This ring is imbued with a spirit. When you and Nangong Liu deposed me, it fell from my thumb. It knows I'm no longer the true leader of Rufeng Sect, but there were two masterminds behind the coup. It doesn't know whom to choose."

"You took A-Liu's rightful place. Of course it should go to him."

Xu Shuanglin grinned. "That's what I thought too." He placed the ring in Luo Fenghua's palm, patting his hand with all seriousness. "Take it; take good care of it. When you leave here, give him this wonderful piece of his heritage. Remember to put it on his finger yourself. He's the *real* leader of this sect."

He paused, staring at Luo Fenghua's expression of masked pain, then bent to whisper in his ear. "I'll tell you a secret. Don't be afraid; it's nothing dark. It's just the story of a bygone hero, that's all."

Slowly, calmly, he told Luo Fenghua the tale of Nangong Changying's defeat of the gun and the ensuing curse on generations of Rufeng Sect's leaders. He soaked each syllable in cruelty, transforming them into fangs that bit deep into Luo Fenghua's flesh.

He saw Luo Fenghua pale. Saw those round eyes widen. He pushed Luo Fenghua against a tree and watched him tremble. What a delightful result.

Ha. Didn't you love him best? All of you…each of you…didn't you all treat this trueborn Nangong like a treasure? Now you'll take this poison to him yourself.

Xu Shuanglin's smirk widened into a ghoulish smile. He stroked Luo Fenghua's cheek. "Shizun, that's the end of the story. Go on now." He beamed brighter. "Go pay your respects to the sixth leader of Rufeng Sect—Nangong Liu. Go on ahead."

That night, Xu Shuanglin fled Rufeng Sect on his sword, covered in blood. After flying for hours, he landed exhausted in Sichuan—Butterfly Town.

There he encountered a little girl sitting in her yard, who'd gone white at the sight of his wounds and bloody clothes. She'd trembled in terror, yet still brought him a full bowl of water from inside the house. As he stared at her, he realized that somehow, this little girl resembled his best friend, his dearest teacher and worst enemy. Her eyes looked so much like Luo Fenghua's.

He saw the tangerine tree over the wall laden with fruit. Suddenly he wanted one very badly. But that girl spoke of nothing but stinking principles and how gentlemen should do this or do that. He loathed it. It reminded him of that ridiculous man Luo Fenghua who'd once said with complete seriousness, *I wish for you two to stay in your golden years all your lives. Use your own talents to be gentlemen forever.*

A gentleman forever… What a colossal joke.

He knocked the tangerines all over the ground and cut the tree down before swaggering off, leaving the girl to sob her eyes out in the yard. But that wasn't enough to satisfy him; he went on a rampage killing villagers. The more times his knife fell, the further he strayed from the idea of a gentleman, the better he felt.

Then he left. He adopted a new identity, intending to live the rest of his life that way—until the day he overheard in a teashop that Luo Fenghua had usurped the position of Rufeng Sect's leader.

The customers had been chattering away. "Ah, who would've thought. Truly, you never know with some people."

"Poor Nangong Liu—risked his life in a coup, all for someone else's gain."

"He probably hates his shifu, right?"

"Greed blackened that Luo Fenghua's heart. What an asshole."

Xu Shuanglin sat before the greasy table, holding a cup to his mouth. But he didn't drink. He only listened in a daze. His vision was darkening; he felt dizzy.

He had never imagined Luo Fenghua might make such a choice. To choose infamy, hatred, the criticism and disdain of all—to take on the curse himself, enduring pain every full moon until the end of his very life—rather than push the knife into his disciple's heart.

He'd made the wrong move after all.

The echo of footsteps drew Xu Shuanglin from his memories. When he blinked his eyes, a young man's face appeared in his hazy vision. Atop the empty Soul-Summoning Platform, Mo Ran had knelt to look at him.

Xu Shuanglin found this young man's eyes deeply strange. Too much was hidden in that gaze; these weren't the eyes of a youth in his twenties.

"Nangong Xu, you did all of this to bring him back to life?"

"None of your business."

"You let Nangong Liu live, and you would have resurrected Luo Fenghua. After this, no one could've breached Mount Jiao. You were planning to live out the rest of your life here, weren't you?"

"None of your business!" Xu Shuanglin snarled.

Mo Ran picked up that shattered spiritual core. Light still glimmered within. "You changed your appearance and returned to Nangong Liu as Xu Shuanglin, then urged him to usurp the position once again. You couldn't bear the thought of Luo Fenghua in pain, night after night without reprieve."

"What right do you have to assume anything?!" Xu Shuanglin's eyes were scarlet, flashing with tearful sharpness. "You think you understand it all?!"

"I don't. I can only guess," said Mo Ran. "But judging by your expression, I'm not too far off."

Xu Shuanglin bit each word through his teeth. “The madness of the young.”

“As you say. Weren’t you just as mad when you were twenty?” Mo Ran watched him quietly. “Nangong Xu, you pushed your brother to reclaim the position of sect leader, but you never thought he’d be so ruthless on his second attempt. You never imagined he would kill Luo Fenghua after taking the seat, nipping future problems in the bud. You never thought Luo Fenghua might die.”

He stared into Xu Shuanglin’s face. “You were lost; you didn’t know what to do.” Mo Ran knew better than anyone how that kind of despair felt. He was reading Xu Shuanglin’s thoughts, and his own. “In your despair, what else could you do?”

Chapter 230:
Young Man

WHAT WOULD HE have done in Xu Shuanglin's place? Resurrection. He would have brought that man back to life.

Mo Ran looked at Xu Shuanglin, curled in a ball on the ground. "You never thought Nangong Liu would be so cold-blooded as to kill Luo Fenghua," he murmured. "In your panic, you said Luo Fenghua left the curse on the ring. You goaded Nangong Liu into dragging Luo Fenghua's body into the blood pool, imprisoning him in the eighteen hells according to Rufeng Sect law."

"What are you saying?" Xue Meng was dazed. "If he wanted to resurrect Luo Fenghua, he must have adored him. Why would he send him to the eighteen hells?"

"Because a soul cannot reincarnate from within the eighteen hells." Mo Ran looked at Xu Shuanglin with pity in his eyes. "If Luo Fenghua didn't enter the cycle of reincarnation, you would have time to learn the art of Rebirth and bring him back. You'd create your ideal world—a realm of perfect fairness with you as its god."

Xu Shuanglin said nothing. After a moment, his half-rotted face smiled. "Mo-zongshi," he said, staring into Mo Ran's eyes. "I've just realized you're a madman, too." His voice dropped to a whisper: "Only another madman would understand me."

Unrestrained laughter bubbled from his throat. The sound was like that of a withered-winged old eagle: still wheeling in vicious circles atop the craggy peaks, never showing the slightest vulnerability until its death.

Mo Ran closed his eyes, his voice still soft. "Nangong Xu, listen. There's someone else who knows Rebirth. If you're willing, I'll do all in my power to ask Master Huaizui of Wubei Temple to bring your shizun back to life." He handed that broken core back to Xu

Shuanglin. “But please, tell me…” Mo Ran clutched at that last thread of hope, the only thing that could save him. His brows knit, and his eyes showed a helplessness the others couldn’t see. “Tell me who’s been helping you. Who taught you this cruel Rebirth technique? Who taught you the Zhenlong Chess Formation?”

Memory merged with reality.

Within the smoking ruins of Rufeng Sect, Xu Shuanglin had died taking a blow for Ye Wangxi. In the past life, he hadn’t made a clear plan before he died. But everything was different this time. Xu Shuanglin had laid the trap within Jincheng Lake years and years ago. He had orchestrated the turmoil at Peach Blossom Springs and the Heavenly Rift at Butterfly Town. When he realized the sacrifice of human lives wasn’t enough, he’d swiftly changed tack and sought holy weapons across the land. He’d successfully dragged Luo Fenghua out of hell. Such methods were certainly not of his own making.

“You want to know?” Malice gleamed in Xu Shuanglin’s eyes. “It’s true, someone taught me these tricks. But I’ll never tell who.”

“You’d rather be his pawn until death?”

“Pawn?” Xu Shuanglin grinned. “You’re mistaken. He understands me, understands how I think. He and I are the same. Mo-zongshi, give up. I’ll die before I name him. After all your efforts to enter Mount Jiao and force me to the brink, what have you achieved?”

Mo Ran said nothing.

“This world will be cast into chaos, embroiled in war and death. He’ll raze the upper and lower cultivation realms and leave them ash. The righteous and wicked will receive their just rewards—the competent with power and the useless without.” Mirth brightened Xu Shuanglin’s eyes. “What a…magnificent sight that will be.”

“What do you mean, righteous and wicked, competent and useless?” Xue Meng asked, incensed. “Why do *you* decide who’s

good and evil, strong or weak? All those people you turned into pawns outside…and Nangong Changying… And…and…" Glancing surreptitiously at Chu Wanning, he lowered his voice. "And Nangong Si." Indignant and aggrieved, Xue Meng continued, "Did they ask to be under your control? Did they deserve to die?"

"Everything has its price." Xu Shuanglin flicked a look at him. "Xue-gongzi, you *are* too young."

There was a weariness in his face, as if talking to the high-strung Xue Meng had taxed him unduly. He turned back to Mo Ran, voice lazy. "You've defeated me. Go ahead and do whatever you want. I still have a lingchi fruit in my qiankun pouch. If you think torture isn't enough, you can make me eat that too." He sneered. "It doesn't matter. You noble gentlemen condemned me to death by a thousand cuts when I was twenty. Another round won't hurt."

"Nobody did that to you," Huang Xiaoyue said. "Lying through your teeth—how shameless!"

But Mo Ran understood. That death hadn't been one of the body, but of the soul. Nangong Xu had once possessed a kind heart and devoted himself to his studies. He had adhered to his shizun's teachings and aspired to be a gentleman forever, fighting off evil. That Spiritual Mountain Competition had torn him to shreds.

Mo Ran closed his eyes. Xu Shuanglin's body was ruined; he wouldn't live much longer. Despite everything he had done, Mo Ran still felt some compassion for him—he so resembled Mo Ran's past self. "Luo Fenghua's spiritual core is still here. Why don't you try that Rebirth formation again? You might be able to see him once more."

"Try it again?" Xu Shuanglin smiled. He studied the core in his hand, then looked over his flesh, rotting away from spiritual energy overconsumption. "I'm about to die," he said languidly. "Once I'm dead, fairness will be lost to the world. Why should he come back? He would still have to endure blame and bullying from all your great sects, wouldn't he?"

Eyes darkening, he crushed that core in his grip. The fragments stabbed into his skin, filling his cupped palms with blood.

Mo Ran started.

"Are you crazy?!" Xue Meng asked.

No one else understood his actions any better. Some looked on in open-mouthed shock, while others went pale. Yet more stared vigilantly at the man-shaped monster crumpled on the ground.

Xu Shuanglin ignored them all. He watched as the last scrap of Luo Fenghua in the world truly disappeared and began laughing hysterically. Tears streamed down his face as he cackled, shrill and mad. Neither of them would see the other ever again; neither of them could hate each other. All had returned to ashes and dust. He couldn't have wished for anything better.

He slowly rose, staggering toward the holy weapon array as the crowd watched. One of the weapons was a harp. He sat before it and plucked the strings with moldering fingers.

The backlash from the Zhenlong Chess Formation had intensified; blood ran from every orifice, and licking flames sprang up where his hands touched the harp. They spread over his body until he was engulfed in apocalyptic fire, yet he played on amid the blaze. He looked almost relieved, almost at ease. Whatever his expression might've been, it swiftly disappeared as his skin shrank, twisted, and dried.

Smoke rose to the sky. Xu Shuanglin's leisurely voice came from the conflagration, light and so arrogant, as if crippling pain couldn't touch him nor impending death rattle him.

"Best are those years we come of age, seeing the world's flowers astride a fast horse…"

Many of Xu Shuanglin's own generation stood amongst the crowd. At this carefree little tune, they recalled that young man who'd appeared at the Spiritual Mountain Competition. Dressed in blue, his features bright with youth. He walked out from the dark

tunnel—walked out from the wastelands of memory—and confidently strode onto the field, holding his trusty sword in hands covered in hard-earned calluses.

He was so young and handsome, so lit from within, with a confidence that bordered on haughtiness. As he looked past the sect leaders of the ten great sects and all those whooping spectators, a brilliant grin broke over his face. This twenty-year-old man came to a stop, his proud back straight, and greeted that sunlit field and his shining future with a bow. "Nangong Xu of Rufeng Sect, here for my first battle. I humbly ask my seniors for instruction."

But in the end, he hadn't lived up to the words of "Ode to Youth."

It was a long time before the flames guttered out, leaving five ownerless weapons and the remains of the Rebirth array, still spiraling in the air.

Both Luo Fenghua and Xu Shuanglin were gone.

Xue Zhengyong stared in disbelief, eyes wide. "Is this…" he murmured, "the end?"

"Amitabha, karma comes for us all." Master Xuanjing of Wubei Temple closed his eyes and clasped his hands in prayer with a sigh. "This old monk wishes for all the world's enmities to dissolve into the ash whence they came."

Xue Meng rolled his eyes. This old donkey had barely lifted a finger on the way here, but he was certainly quick to hand out aphorisms now. "What should we do next?" he asked his dad. "Are we just going to head back down? He still has an accomplice out there somewhere."

Jiang Xi's voice cut in. "Watch out—back up!"

They turned back to see the Rebirth array in the air had shrunk to the size of a palm. It stood frozen a moment, then snapped back open. It was as if a dark wound had opened in the sky, wisps of twisted black energy pouring out.

“What’s going on?” Xue Meng cried. “Shouldn’t the array have fallen apart when Xu Shuanglin died?”

Jiang Xi absently kneaded his fingers, staring at the array. After a moment, he swore. “This isn’t the Corpse Demon Array, nor is it Rebirth! We and Xu Shuanglin—we’ve all been taken for fools!”

“What?” Xue Meng exclaimed. “Not the Corpse Demon Array or Rebirth? Then what is it?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Jiang Xi said, acrid. “Our goal is to keep it from taking shape.”

Other strong cultivators reacted just as swiftly. Within that flickering instant, Chu Wanning was lunging at the center of the array, Tianwen in hand. Someone else unexpectedly followed close behind. A dark green shadow broke from the crowd, pouncing toward Chu Wanning like a hunting panther. A dagger flashed in their sleeve as they struck right for Chu Wanning’s exposed back in an attempt to stop him.

“Shizun!”

“Shizun—!”

Twin cries came from Xue Meng and Shi Mei, but they were too far away—they couldn’t possibly make it in time. They heard the wet sound of a blade sinking into flesh. Xue Meng screwed his eyes shut. When he opened them again, his face was colorless. He looked toward Chu Wanning and froze.

Chapter 231:
Dueling the Sage

SOMEHOW, Chu Wanning was unscathed. In that critical second, it was Mo Ran who'd reacted quickly enough to lunge between him and the figure cloaked in dark, billowing green. The dagger sank deep into the flesh of his shoulder, leaving only the hilt with its silver snake pattern protruding. The cloth around it was swiftly dyed red. Mo Ran grimaced, but cold light shone in his eyes—the predatory expression of a falcon finally sinking its talons into the wily rabbit.

"Hua-zongshi." He clamped a hand around Hua Binan's outstretched wrist. The man still gripped the dagger. Bracing himself, Mo Ran pulled the knife out of his shoulder with a squelching sound. Cold sweat beaded his forehead, but he still gritted his teeth and sneered. "Trying to stab my shizun in the back—as if I wasn't around?"

The night breeze rippled through the gauze once again hiding the ruin of Hua Binan's face. "Mo-zongshi. How long have you suspected me?"

"Since you were afflicted with snake venom and stayed at the foot of the mountain."

Hua Binan smiled thinly. "Oh…that couldn't be helped. After all, I was hoping to get rid of so many of you back at the main hall."

Mo Ran clenched his jaw. "Then why were you trying to stop Xu Shuanglin?"

"Why not? Was I supposed to let him discover the Rebirth formation he'd so painstakingly constructed was fake? That'd only make a mess of things."

Chu Wanning had struck the dead center of the mysterious array, but as Tianwen fell, he realized to his surprise that the formation was too powerful to be easily broken. When he turned to see Mo Ran wounded and Hua Binan behind him, he cried out in alarm. "Mo Ran—"

"Don't worry about me," said Mo Ran. "Focus on destroying the array. I've got things handled here."

Chu Wanning had no choice. Within the array was a force more malevolent than any he'd encountered, dwarfing even the Heavenly Rift at Butterfly Town in its power. Pouring all his spiritual energy into Tianwen only kept it from progressing further. There was no way he could destroy it alone.

Jiang Xi had also realized what was going on. He stood in disbelief that the strongest sage in the world had been scheming behind his back. Face white, he said at length, "Hua Binan, you…"

Mo Ran was still gripping Hua Binan by the wrist. Hua Binan didn't turn, but he did smile at Jiang Xi's voice. "Sect Leader, don't be reckless. Guyueye Sect teaches its disciples to always keep one's guard up, a rule I've engraved into memory. That is why I left heart-tunneler insects inside quite a few of you on the way here."

Everyone paled. After a moment of stunned silence, the crowd burst into murmurs and shouts. Hanlin the Sage had planted insects *inside* them? They suddenly felt itchy all over. Though no one had experienced any effects, every crevice in their bodies now felt like it could be hiding a lethal tunneler.

"Hua Binan, you're crazy!"

"Evil!"

Some grew so agitated they burst into tears, frantically patting themselves down. "Where? Where is it? Did he get me? I didn't even talk to him; maybe I'm safe…"

One of the more outspoken cultivators couldn't stay silent. "Hua Binan, you asshole! Stop lying and playing dirty tricks! Many of

us here are the best of our sects—you really think you can threaten us?”

Hua Binan waved a hand without the slightest hesitation, and the speaker froze. Eyes bulging, he clutched at his neck and collapsed to the ground, rolling as he screamed.

Pus and blood streamed from his nose and eyes, which rolled up into his skull. He spasmed and shook, releasing his bowels in a stinking mess. Within seconds, he fell quiet and lay limp on the ground. His skin shrunk and cracked. From his open mouth, still shaped around a scream, emerged a red insect gorged on human blood. It was shaped like a spider, but had ten spindly legs on either side.

It had happened in the space of a minute. Those still furiously denouncing Hua Binan went white and silent.

“It’s small, but it can kill you in an instant.” Hua Binan’s voice was gentle. “If you’d prefer to avoid more carnage on the scale of Rufeng Sect’s rather precipitous fall, I’d advise you to stay where you are. Don’t fuss, don’t make noise. Just listen obediently to what I have to say. Especially those of you from Guyueye.” His gaze fell upon Jiang Xi, then the group of green-clad medicine sect cultivators clustered behind him. “Out of loyalty to our sect, this humble one won’t harm any of you.”

Jiang Xi’s cheeks were ashen. “Hua Binan! Are you truly so brazen?”

“Ah, not quite.” Hua Binan seemed to remember something. “Sect Leader, there’s a tunneler in you as well. Those with weaker cultivation will die immediately, but your cultivation is strong. You might hold it off for a week or more.”

Jiang Xi gritted his teeth. “Over the past dozen years, Guyueye has done you no wrong. Why are you doing this?!”

“I have my reasons, of course, but I don’t necessarily care to share them.” He turned to look at Chu Wanning, then at Mo Ran,

who was still facing him in confrontation. Finally, he turned back to the crowd.

"Right. Now, none of you have the means to tell who has an insect on them and who doesn't. But this is a matter of life or death. If you're smart, I'm sure you know which side to take."

There was a gravid silence. Then a clear and gentle voice spoke up from the crowd.

"Tunnelers are drawn to fire," Shi Mei said from where he stood beside Xue Meng. "If you trigger an ignition or flame talisman in your hand, look for a bulge beneath your skin. If you see one, you've been implanted. If you don't, you're safe."

Hanlin the Sage narrowed his eyes. "Shi Mingjing, you read my books in secret?"

A faint flush colored Shi Mei's face. He was unused to being the center of attention and looked somewhat awkward now that everyone's eyes were on him. "When Shizun was in seclusion, this one sought instruction from Guyueye. I didn't read the sage's books. I discovered these bugs on my own and…did a little research…"

"Shameless thief!" Hua Binan raged.

Brows drawn low, Xue Meng swiftly came to Shi Mei's defense. "What's there to be ashamed of when dealing with backstabbers like you?!" He lit a talisman as Shi Mei said and saw nothing beneath his skin. Grinning, he tugged on Shi Mei's arm. "Awesome, all thanks to you! Look! I'm clear!"

Seeing this, the others followed suit. Cries of "I don't either!" or "Oh no, there's one in me!" echoed over the Soul-Summoning Platform.

Hua Binan closed his eyes, then curled a lip. "So what if you can figure out who does or doesn't have one? Those of you who've been implanted better listen up! Step forward, help me take down Chu Wanning and Mo Ran, and I won't mistreat you. Or end up like

that," said Hua Binan, pointing at the cultivator who'd been sucked dry by the tunneler.

The first to bow to his threats was a female cultivator from Guyueye. She leapt to Hua Binan's side as everyone watched, chin jutting in arrogance. Mo Ran was stunned the little traitor had the nerve.

"Sorry, Sect Leader," she said. "I stand with the sage—not just for self-preservation. I've always admired the sage's skill. I joined Guyueye to learn from him. Never mind the insects—even if I wasn't cursed, I would gladly serve the sage."

She shot a glance at Hua Binan. Though he was locked in battle with Mo Ran, there was a smile on his face. It seemed her little speech had satisfied him. She relaxed and addressed her fellow disciples. "Senior Sage himself said that he won't harm those of his own sect. The choice is easy."

She waited, but only three more cultivators came to stand with her. The others glared furiously at them.

The three newcomers made their own speeches. "Guyueye has declined under years of Jiang-zhangmen's leadership. Times change—if it weren't for Hanlin the Sage, I would've left a long time ago."

"The sage is powerful. We'll only follow the strong."

Some Guyueye cultivators couldn't hold their tongues anymore and snarled, "Traitors! How dare you?!"

"That's right! Traitors!"

"No backbone at all! Get the hell out of Guyueye!"

She hadn't expected so many people to stand unflinching in the face of the heart-tunnelers. For a moment shame shone on the girl's face, but even with cheeks flushed she persevered. "Say what you like! We've wanted to leave this rotten sect for ages. Go on and shuffle behind Jiang Xi like mindless corpses!" She turned to stare at her ex-sect leader. "I, Ling Biran, sever all ties with Guyueye and with Jiang—"

Jiang Xi leveled her with an icy look, face impassive. He cut her off before she could finish. "Who even *are* you?"

"I—I'm Ling Biran—"

"A name I would not remember if you recited it to me a hundred times a day," Jiang Xi said. "You're no great loss."

Despite her embarrassment, she bit her lip and continued. "Heh, I hadn't expected a sect leader to act this way."

"Have you never met me?" Jiang Xi scoffed. "Guyueye has thousands of disciples. I'm certainly seeing *you* for the first time. To be honest, if this hadn't happened, someone of your caliber would never even have spoken to me."

With that, he swept his sleeves, sending a spiral of fragrant smoke into the air as he dove toward Hua Binan. The two traded several near-instantaneous blows.

Hua Binan was already facing a difficult opponent in Mo Ran; now that Jiang Xi was here, it was clear he wasn't their match. As the fight slipped away from him, he commanded the heart-tunnelers to activate. All of those cursed immediately felt an unbearable pain gnawing at their skin.

"Ah!"

"H-help!"

Jiang Xi froze as well. But he was the leader of Guyueye. Without missing a beat, he tapped several key acupoints to halt his pain. White-faced, he resumed the fight alongside Mo Ran.

Hua Binan wasn't stupid. With a crook of his fingers, he commanded the insects in the Guyueye disciples who'd come to his side to fall still and snapped, "Fight."

Those wavering watched the cultivators who'd defected to Hua Binan freed from their pain. They rushed toward him, a good half of the crowd falling to their knees and shouting at Hua Binan.

"Sage, please! Undo the curse! We're willing to serve the sage!"

"I can't take it anymore, it hurts too much… Hua-qianbei, please…"

Hua Binan smiled at Mo Ran, who was fighting fiercely. "See, Mo-zongshi? Medicine is the strongest art of all."

Jiang Xi struck at him with Xuehuang. "Medicine? Is a master of dirty tricks like you fit to speak of it?" He turned to Mo Ran. "Help your shizun with the array. I'll handle this."

Hua Binan sneered. "Sect Leader, I see you're bent on making an enemy of me today."

"Don't waste my time."

"Trying to fight me despite the tunneler inside you? Jiang Yechen, Jiang-zhangmen, you must really be tired of living."

"And *you* should decide the length of my life?" Jiang Xi scoffed. "If I don't stop you, you'll ruin the good name of the healing arts entirely!"

The two men most skilled in medicines and poison began trading blows in earnest. Poisonous powders and hallucinatory drugs played between flashes of their blades.

Seeing Jiang Xi could hold his own against Hua Binan, Mo Ran turned to help Chu Wanning. Yet before he reached him, a dozen people garbed in tawny yellow came rushing toward him.

"Huang Xiaoyue!" Mo Ran spat.

These were indeed high-level disciples of Jiangdong Hall and Huang Xiaoyue. The man himself stood in the wind with his robes flapping and stroked his beard. "Mo-zongshi, tunneler insects are no joke. We're entirely at his mercy. This is a matter of life or death, so we must oppose you. My apologies."

It wasn't just him; strong fighters from the other sects who could no longer endure the pain came charging toward him as well.

The Soul-Summoning Platform descended into complete mayhem as the two sides clashed. Conflict sparked within each sect between those who'd been cursed and those who hadn't, those who'd turned traitor and those who stayed true. The once-united crowd faced off against each other in dozens of small battles.

Jiang Xi held nothing back against Hua Binan. But as the last line of defense between Chu Wanning and the crowd, Mo Ran was beset on all sides. He fought off wave after wave of Huang Xiaoyue's cultivators, while Chu Wanning poured all his spiritual energy into countering that mysterious array. On the other side, Xue Zhengyong and the disciples from Sisheng Peak kept the traitors from pressing closer to Chu Wanning and Mo Ran. Shi Mei was running between the cultivators who'd rejected Hua Binan despite being implanted, trying his best to destroy the insects. He knelt and clutched at a young man who was rolling on the ground. The man grabbed Shi Mei's arms and howled. "It hurts… Kill me, please, kill me! It hurts too much, I don't want to join him, I don't want to! Kill me! Please, kill me! Kill me!"

"It'll be over soon," Shi Mei comforted him, bringing fingertips to the inside of the man's wrist.

"I can't take it anymore—!"

"Look at me. Look into my eyes."

But the man couldn't hear him. His fingers were crooked into claws, spasming like a fish hauled ashore. "I can't take it anymore…" he panted.

Shi Mei was left to grab his face and turn it by force, prying his eyes open with his fingers as the man thrashed and kicked. His nails left red gashes on Shi Mei's arms and hands.

"Look at me, look at me!"

The man gasped for breath, regaining some focus as he stared, teary-eyed, at Shi Mei. Lips moving through an incantation, Shi Mei stared deep into his eyes. Suddenly, the man flinched,

feeling something rise from his stomach and crawl into his chest, then his neck, then the back of his throat.

He flung himself onto his hands and knees. As a wave of nausea broke over him, he threw up a great pool of stinking vomit. Within it lay a twisting red heart-tunneler.

Shi Mei reduced the insect to dust with the point of a finger. He rose and shouted, "The tunnelers respond to optomancy; the curse can be undone! I can help you!" He ran around shouting, "Stop fighting! It can be undone; stop fighting each other—it can be undone!"

Few people heeded him within the chaos, and his voice had never been loud. It was swiftly swallowed in the screaming clamor of clanging swords and shouting voices.

But Jiang Xi heard. He tensed—optomancy? Just as many insects were drawn to flame and light, some were also drawn to optomantic techniques. Like a moth seeking flame, they could be guided outside of the body, where their effects could be nullified.

It was clear Hua Binan had also heard. He swore, a ferocious light glinting in his eyes. "I weeded out all Guyueye's cultivators familiar with optomancy on the way here. I didn't expect shitty little Sisheng Peak to have someone capable of the art. Truly"—the blade in his hand screeched against Jiang Xi's Xuehuang, sending sparks flying—"a youth to be feared!"

Withdrawing his blade, he flew backward, bat-like, and leapt toward the surging crowd.

"No!" Jiang Xi realized too late what Hua Binan was trying to do. He swiveled to follow, but the tunneler had done its work: his heart seized. He spat up a mouthful of blood, then crashed to his knees, bracing himself on his sword to stay upright. His bloodstained lips parted as he watched Hua Binan speed toward Shi Mei. He wanted to warn him, but his voice was a murmur. "Watch…out…"

Shi Mei was removing the curse for a Taxue Palace cultivator. After heaving out the tunneler, the pain faded; she quickly rose to

help Shi Mei. “Stop fighting!” she yelled. “Come here! He can draw out the insects—it’s possible!”

Xue Meng was also trying to stop the fight. He dragged a dozen people over to Shi Mei while shouting: “Enough, enough, bear with it, stop yelling. It’ll be over soon, really soon, who do you think my shidi is? He’s strong, on par with Guyueye disciples, I—”

He turned to call to Shi Mei, but as he looked up, the words died in his throat. “Shi Mei! *Behind you!*”

Chapter 232:
Both Eyes Blinded

XUE MENG LET OUT a twisted shriek as he shot toward Shi Mei, but it was too late. Like the king of hell coming to earth or the god of death rising in the sky, Hua Binan swooped from the air and grabbed Shi Mei by the throat.

"Shi Mei!"

"Shi Mingjing!"

Xue Meng cried out in unison with the elders of Sisheng Peak. One by one, the heads of the crowd turned. Hua Binan pulled Shi Mei into the air and gazed down at the seething mass of cultivators, backlit by the brightness of the moon in the sky.

Xue Meng, mad with terror, gave chase on Longcheng, but the murderous wasps Hua Binan sent at him kept him at bay. Unable to make any headway, he returned to the ground and crumpled to his knees.

Clutching Shi Mei by the neck, Hua Binan caressed his throat. The snake-patterned ring on his hand clicked, and a sharp thorn flicked out, gleaming cold in the dark. "Optomancy is an advanced technique," said Hua Binan lightly. "Our young friend here is not a disciple of Guyueye, yet he managed to master it. He must be quite talented."

By now, the rest of those fighting on the ground had noticed what was going on. In the same moment, Xue Zhengyong and Mo Ran—
even Chu Wanning, standing before the array—looked over to find Shi Mei had become Hua Binan's captive.

Mo Ran's pupils shrank. In his hand, Jiangui sparked crimson with his rage and flung Huang Xiaoyue and the others away so

violently a few unlucky ones were tossed off the platform completely. They plummeted into the sea of clouds, so far even their screams were swallowed by silence. “Hua Binan! Let him go!” Mo Ran roared.

Shi Mei’s face was bone-pale. He looked down at Mo Ran, then at Xue Meng, and pressed bloodless lips together. “You guys help Shizun,” he managed. “Don’t worry about me.”

“Shi Mei!” Mo Ran cried in protest.

Standing before the array, Chu Wanning had also gone white. His hands shook where they were pressed to the center of the array, the tendons on their backs protruding. His whole heart seemed to hang in his throat.

Shi Mei turned, his gaze falling upon him. His eyes were shadowed faintly with grief. “Shizun…”

“What a coincidence.” Hua Binan smiled again. “Have I by chance grabbed one of Chu-zongshi’s disciples?”

Chu Wanning said nothing.

“No wonder he’s so strong at such a young age.” Hua Binan was unstinting with his praise. “I’m sure his shizun would be heartbroken to lose such a lovely student.”

“Hua Binan, if you hurt him, I’ll see that you pay!” cried Chu Wanning.

“You mean you’re not going to leap to his rescue?” Hua Binan smiled, turning to Shi Mei. “Hear that? Between saving you and sealing the array, he chooses the latter.”

Shi Mei closed his eyes. His lips trembled, but he did not speak.

Hua Binan laughed. “Now I really do feel sorry for our young friend. He picked a shizun who’s more concerned with righteousness than his own disciple’s life. Shi Mingjing, you’re truly pitiable.”

Wind gusted past them. No one spoke.

"Shizun." Perhaps the impending peril spurred Shi Mei to suddenly say into the silence, his eyes fluttering open, "I'm sorry. I know… I know you remember the selfish things I've done. Even now, I'm still not sure if I was right or wrong… I'm not fit to be Shizun's disciple, am I? So many times, I wasn't able to choose righteousness over my life…"

"Shi Mei…" Atop the platform, Xue Meng sharply recalled the night Chu Wanning died, when Huaizui asked them to go down into the underworld to save their teacher. Shi Mei had faltered, hesitating.

Mo Ran thought of that bowl of wontons. He remembered when Shi Mei had bowed low in that inn and told him that warm bowl had actually been from Chu Wanning.

And Chu Wanning? Chu Wanning thought of Shi Mei's sadness over not receiving a holy weapon at Jincheng Lake.

But beyond these, none of them could recall any other moments of weakness. Shi Mei had always been gentle, poised, and obedient. He was like an early winter snowfall, flawlessly pristine—such that the slightest fleck of mud or flicker of plum blossom was trebly eye-catching and conspicuous. His mistakes, his hesitation, his infrequent acts of selfishness or manipulation—each one was vivid and memorable.

He was only an ordinary person after all. He wasn't a stone statue or a silk painting. He too had his selfishness, yet no one had ever understood him.

To Xue Meng, Shi Mei was his friend. He thought that this friend should of course follow his lead, keep him company, agree with him and help him.

To Mo Ran of the past, Shi Mei had been the object of his affections. He thought that this person should of course be obliging, gentle, and flawless.

To Chu Wanning, Shi Mei was his disciple. He was good-tempered and easily befriended others; he was possessed of an

enviable gentleness and endurance.

It was only now that they realized that Shi Mei had always silently played the part of Xue Meng's friend and helper, Mo Ran's first love, and Chu Wanning's least noticeable, most agreeable disciple. The only thing he'd never been was himself.

Hua Binan scoffed. "Are you speaking your last words?"

"Let him go, Hua Binan!"

"Don't hurt him!"

"Sure," said Hua Binan. "If all of you stop and wait for death, what need is there to take his life?"

The array flickered before Chu Wanning's eyes; he'd reached a critical point. Whether it would be sealed away or burst into shape all came down to this. He hadn't yet pulled away, but his hands were shaking.

This wasn't like the Heavenly Rift to the ghost realm, where he didn't have the time to think. Before his eyes, a knife was pressed to his disciple's neck, staying his hand. Forcing him into the most painful dilemma.

Hua Binan pushed his chin out. "How about it?" He smiled. "If the array forms, you guys can keep fighting, but if this knife goes in, it'll be terribly difficult to bring him back. Think it over, Zongshi."

But before Chu Wanning could respond, Shi Mei spoke up. His voice wasn't loud, but it was clear and carrying. "I don't actually like tanghulu."

Hua Binan looked down at him in silent confusion. Shi Mei wasn't crying. He was smiling as he looked down at his friends and shizun.

"I don't like tanghulu, but Young master, you always made me help you eat them when you were little. The art I most wanted to learn was barrier techniques, but Shizun thought I had no talent for it and refused to teach me too much. I…" His eyes fell upon Mo Ran.

"A-Ran, actually, I knew what you wanted to say at Butterfly Town on the day of the Heavenly Rift."

Mo Ran froze, staring at him blankly. Shi Mei was still smiling, so sweet and gentle. "But after Shizun came back, you never finished your thought. At the restaurant, when I saw the look in your eyes when the two of you were eating dinner together, I knew you'd never say it again."

Mo Ran didn't know what to say.

"To be honest, I really envy the young master, and I… I really envy Shizun," whispered Shi Mei. "Please…please don't find me detestable because of my envy…"

"I've never found you so!" Xue Meng shouted, the rims of his eyes red. "I—I didn't know you didn't like tanghulu, I really didn't… Shi Mei! *Shi Mei!*"

But Hua Binan was already bored. He tightened his grip on Shi Mei's neck, eyes fixed on Chu Wanning, and snapped: "I'll count to three. Step back or I'll kill him!"

"No!" Xue Meng turned in a panic and shouted at Chu Wanning. "Shizun, step back! That's Shi Mei up there! Stop!"

"One."

The imperceptible shaking of Chu Wanning's hands had become noticeable. He stared at Shi Mei, sharp phoenix eyes meeting gentle peach-blossom gaze. Tears filled Chu Wanning's eyes.

"Two!"

Blood sprayed into the air. Xue Meng and Mo Ran's shouts were like a sword piercing the sky. "Shi Mei—!"

"…No need to count." Shi Mei's hands flew up to his eyes, covering them.

He hadn't cried this whole time, but now blood seeped between his fingers and streamed down his cheeks. When Hua

Binan had counted *two*, he'd shoved himself against that icy thorn Hua Binan held before his face. Stunned, Hua Binan loosened his grip—the thorn slanted—and the point that would've slit Shi Mei's throat scraped across his eyes, blinding him.

"The Yuheng Elder has no disciple who bows, nor…nor one who is weak."

"Shi Mei!"

"Shi Mei!"

Their cries rent the heavens.

Chu Wanning was stupefied. He'd been holding himself together, but at the sight of his disciple with his eyes ruined, blood sheeting down his face, he lost his focus. In that instant, the array lashed out; a surge of spiritual energy whipped out from the wound in the sky, striking him square in the chest and knocking him away. Chu Wanning spat out a mouthful of blood. Ignoring his injuries, he turned back to mend the crack, but it was too late.

Laughing in astonishment, Hua Binan gripped Shi Mei's lapels and dragged him closer, satisfaction flickering in his eyes. "How useful you've turned out to be. Killing you would be a waste."

"Hua Binan, what are you planning?!" shouted Xue Meng.

Hua Binan shot him a cool glance, then looked at the black array that was yawning open. "It took so many people to create this array, and now it's finally done. Gentleman-scholars and warrior-heroes, this humble one will be activating it for the first time. It's a first trial—even I don't know what may happen next."



With that, he touched down on the Soul-Summoning Platform with Shi Mei in tow. Before he disappeared into the tunnel everyone had poured out of, he left his parting words with the crowd: "You all just stay here and have fun. Mount Jiao is a brilliant place to die."

Almost simultaneously, a deafening noise shook the sky. The dark array spread in the air like ink on paper, swallowing the heavens until even the moon was blocked behind its oppressive darkness.

"What's going on?"

"What array is this?!"

"Is this the Heavenly Rift?"

"A Heavenly Rift isn't this color!"

The cultivators who'd been at each other's throats moments before became passengers on the same boat once more, all staring warily up at this ghoulish tear in the sky. And perhaps it couldn't be called a tear anymore. A good half of the sky above the Soul-Summoning Tower had been ripped open. A muted, urgent rumble echoed from its depths.

Huang Xiaoyue's face was a waxy yellow. "Is…a monster about to emerge? What's making that noise?"

Mo Ran was first to get close. He stood before the dark rip in the sky with Jiangui in his grip as a flash of lightning split the skies and thunder shook the earth.

"It's open!"

"There's something inside it! Something's coming!"

"Vengeful ghosts?!"

Seeing Chu Wanning and Mo Ran so close to that dark rift, Xue Meng scrubbed his tears away and launched himself toward his cousin and shizun—only to be caught by Xue Zhengyong and dragged back to safety.

"Dad!"

"You stay right here!"

"No! I need to go to Shizun and Ge!"

Xue Zhengyong's eyes were hard, with a rare sternness. "Do you want to die?!" he said forbiddingly. "Don't you know—"

The rest of the sentence snapped away like a broken branch. Stunned, he fell silent—Xue Meng was crying.

"Dad," he sobbed. "I need to help them. They took Shi Mei; I can't hide behind you and let anyone else get hurt! Please!"

Before Xue Zhengyong could answer, storm clouds rolled out from the black smoke and hissing lighting at the center of the array. Yet upon closer inspection, these were no clouds at all, but a group of masked, black-clad cultivators. They swept down on their swords, scattering from the thunderstorm above.

Which sect they belonged to, or who they were, no one could guess. The man leading them wore a lavish cloak of gold-stitched black, his face obscured by a terrifying silver mask. He stood in the air with an arm behind his back. Surrounded by billowing gales and gathering clouds, he spoke not a word, yet emanated an unspeakable malevolence.

"What the hell is this?" Xue Zhengyong was lost.

The less experienced cultivators among them couldn't even muster the question. They stared stupidly at the sky. Were these ghosts? No—there were no ghosts like this. More and more cultivators streaked out from the rift. Their numbers swelled from dozens to hundreds until, filling the sky in a dark cloud, they equaled those on the ground. There were thousands of them.

Xue Zhengyong shuddered. Bracing himself, he shouted: "Sir, are you a man or a ghost? Why not introduce yourself?!"

The man looked down at him. His gaze seemed to pause meaningfully on Xue Zhengyong's form.

"Say something!" Xue Meng shouted as well. "Can you not understand what we're saying?!"

The man didn’t waste his breath. He extended one bone-pale hand in a gesture that hung in the air. The downward flick was as brief as his command: “Attack.”

Chapter 233:
This Venerable One Can Change the Title If He Wants! Take That!

THE STORM of masked, black-garbed cultivators charged, diving at the wounded below like gulls quarreling over a meal.

Mo Ran realized at once what was going on. To the former Emperor Taxian-jun, it could not be clearer that these people were under control of the Zhenlong Chess Formation. But the perfection and strength of these pawns were a far cry from Xu Shuanglin's pathetic attempts.

There was no way they could face off with this man. Mo Ran turned in horror and howled at the unwitting cultivators behind him. *"Run!"*

He clamped one hand around Chu Wanning's wrist and reached out with the other for Jiang Xi, who was kneeling on the ground. He never stopped shouting, his pupils like pinpricks. "Run! *Go now!* Get off of the Soul-Summoning Platform! You can't stay here! Don't try to fight, you'll lose!"

He didn't have to repeat himself. As soon as the black-garbed pawns landed and brandished their swords, everyone could sense their terrifying power. The cultivators surged like a tide toward the mouth of the tunnel.

At their head was the cowardly Master Ma. He reached the stone doors that led to the Dragonsoul Pool and froze. People behind him piled up as they skidded to a stop. "What's going on?" someone shouted. "Keep moving!"

Master Ma's reply came out as a terrified sob from the door at the pitch-black end of the tunnel. "I-it's closed…"

"What do you mean *it's closed*?!"

"Hua Binan closed the doors behind him…" Master Ma's legs wobbled, and he collapsed to his knees. His face was wet with tears, and his body shook like a leaf. "This is Mount Jiao. Without the blood of the Nangong clan, once it closes…it will never open again."

"Nangong Si is gone, but what about Nangong Liu?" someone anxiously cried. "Isn't that pawn father of his still on the mountain? Where is he?!"

"He's in the great hall. We thought he was useless; no one bothered to bring him…"

Despair filled the tunnel. The eerie darkness chilled them to the bone.

"What do we do?"

"Go back and try our luck out there?!"

The news hadn't yet traveled; there were still more trying to come in, and many more who couldn't fit. They could only turn back and steel themselves to fight off those mysterious pawns from the rift.

In the darkness, Huang Xiaoyue hollered, "Let me through! I can open the door!" He shoved cultivators out of his way like a massive fish on its migratory journey, pushing through until he stood before the door.

Master Ma looked up through teary eyes. "Huang-daozhang?" he asked blankly.

"Move aside, let me at it!"

"But your name is Huang; you're not a Nangong…"

Huang Xiaoyue ignored him and rushed to the door. Thank heavens he'd kept that bit of Nangong Si's blood. He'd saved it in order to open the treasure chamber, and specifically enchanted it to keep it from congealing. But the spell only lasted a short time. He waved his sleeves, suddenly grateful this disaster had happened so quickly. Hopefully the blood would still work.

Huang Xiaoyue pressed his wizened old hand to the broken stone. The distant voice of the demon dragon echoed out from the tunnel. "Who comes?"

His heart pounded. "Seventh-generation descendant of Rufeng Sect…Nangong Si, pays his respects."

There was silence. Then the dragon rumbled, "Wangli…bids Master farewell…"

As the stone doors lowered, Huang Xiaoyue ran out of the tunnel, followed by the disciples of Jiangdong Hall. Master Ma scurried up and raised his hand in panic. "Wait for me! I'm coming—I'm coming—"

He found the point of a sword held to his chest.

Master Ma froze. He slowly looked up. "Huang-daozhang, what's the meaning of this?"

Huang Xiaoyue sneered. "I threw in my lot with the sage up there. If I let you leave, who's to say you won't come to this humble one seeking revenge. I'm an old man; I can't handle such excitement."

"N-no—no!" Master Ma stuttered in terror. "What are you doing? Don't mess around! Let's talk things over properly! We're all businessmen here—Huang-daozhang, quick, let me out and the goods of Taobao Estate will always go to Jiangdong Hall at half-price—no, quarter-price!"

Malice filled the creases of Huang Xiaoyue's lined face. "Half-price? Once I hold the treasures of Rufeng Sect's Mount Jiao, what will I care for your worldly goods? What the hell is Taobao Estate to me?"

He extended a hand and gave Master Ma a sharp shove backward. Ma Yun fell to the floor, bringing down everyone around him in a haphazard pile. By the time they staggered to their feet, Huang Xiaoyue and the rest of Jiangdong Hall stood on the other

side of the doorway. Greed, envy, and spiteful glee flickered across Huang Xiaoyue's face as he pulled the door's mechanism.

Behind him, the members of Jiangdong Hall wore expressions of smug conceit. Some even dared to say it out loud: "Serves you right for looking down on us!"

"Our Huang-daozhang hasn't done anything wrong, yet he's endured your criticisms this entire journey. This is blood he preserved at risk to his own life; why should he use it to help *you*?"

The stone door rumbled shut again, plunging the cultivators inside the tunnel into a suffocating darkness. There was a ringing silence. Finally, one female cultivator buried her face in her hands and began sobbing.

Her grief was contagious. The cultivators had lost all faith and courage; they could not go forward yet dared not turn back.

"Zizi…I don't want to die yet…"

"Shifu…"

"Dad, let's turn around and fight to the death. It's better than dying stuck in here!"

Their voices bounced off the walls. Suddenly, they heard a voice that had been silent for some time. It shook slightly, yet was iron with determination. "Let me."

The ashen-faced Master Ma turned, trembling, to see light flare in the tunnel. His eyes widened in shock. "Mo-zongshi?"

Mo Ran's unreadable features were illuminated by the flames in his palm. He waded through the crowd and came to a stop before the sealed door.

"Y-you kept some of Nangong Si's blood, too?"

Mo Ran said nothing. People were holding off the pawns at the mouth of the tunnel, but they wouldn't last long. Those black-clad warriors would break through soon enough.

As they'd climbed the mountain, over and over again, Mo Ran had almost stepped in when Nangong Si faced danger. But he'd never succeeded in following through. He thought fate had taken pity on him—that it would let him escape this one calamity, escape all these watching eyes.

But now he was trapped. There was no path of escape left.

"Mo-zongshi…?"

He didn't glance at Master Ma as he took out the short silver blade he wore at his belt. It sliced across his palm, filling his hand with blood.

By now, Xue Meng and Xue Zhengyong had both arrived. Chu Wanning had also come to a stop behind Mo Ran. Xue Zhengyong asked in confusion, "Ran-er, what are you doing? It's useless. Mount Jiao will only obey a Nangong descendant. Your blood won't work."

Mo Ran didn't turn. His bleeding hand was shaking—but he still reached out, still viciously smeared it against the stone. It was so cold against his palm. He closed his eyes.

The voice of the demon dragon Wangli echoed in the darkness once again. "Who comes?"

Mo Ran swallowed. Before the crowd's watchful eyes, within the stifling silence, Mo Ran slowly and carefully answered: "Seventh-generation descendant of Rufeng Sect."

Xue Meng paled. He took a stumbling step backward, shaking his head. "What…"

Xue Zhengyong's expression was even uglier than his son's. His round eyes were fixed on Mo Ran's tall, black-clad silhouette. "How could this be…?" he murmured.

Every syllable was like the point of a knife. Knowing he would bleed, knowing he couldn't take it back, that he could make no other choice, Mo Ran softly spoke the rest of the words. "Mo Ran, Mo Weiyu, pays his respects."

"Impossible!" Xue Meng shouted, eyes scarlet.

But the door opened. Wangli's voice, as faint as smoke, pierced their eardrums like a gleaming dagger. "Wangli…bids Master… farewell…"

"Ran-er…" Xue Zhengyong was stupefied into silence.

Chu Wanning, too, was completely at a loss. He grabbed Xue Zhengyong's arm and looked forward.

The stone door rumbled and slowly lowered into the ground, and the orange gleam of the Dragonsoul Pool poured into the darkness. Mo Ran stood in the doorway with his back to them, his dark silhouette so hazy he seemed scarcely real.

"Mo Ran! Mo Ran! How did you open it? What do you mean, seventh-generation descendant of Rufeng Sect? How?! How?!" Xue Meng was crazed with fear. "How are you related to the Nangong clan? Aren't you… Aren't you…"

Mo Ran paused in that eerie light. "Everyone, please go through."

"Mo Ran!" Xue Meng's voice climbed in a piercing wail.

Mo Ran's head turned, ever so slightly. He looked as if he wanted to speak, but he never did. Nor did he stop or hesitate. He walked forward, the light flickering around his broad silhouette until it consumed him at the end of the tunnel.

The rest of the cultivators of the other great sects pushed forward with all the desperation of fish out of a broken net. In this violent tidal wave, in the escape that resembled the rush of carp in a river, Mo Ran walked alone. He didn't turn. He was too afraid.

He saw Ye Wangxi, still in the hall near the Dragonsoul Pool. He went to her and lifted her over his shoulder to bring her out of this place.

It didn't have to be Nangong Si who jumped into the pool and offered up his life to the dragon. It could have been him. Mo Ran hadn't known it was possible to wrest Mount Jiao from Xu Shuanglin's control like that, but even so, he couldn't be sure—what

if he had known? Would he have chosen to die in Nangong Si's stead? He'd lived two lifetimes, eking out an existence under the weight of his guilt. Nangong Si was in his twenties. He wasn't even halfway through his life when he'd become ash, leaving nothing behind. In some rational part of his mind, Mo Ran knew Nangong Si deserved to remain in the world far more than he did.

But it was only human to cling to life.

A shriek from behind him: "The monsters—the monsters are catching up with us!"

"How could that be?!"

Mo Ran whirled around. The stone had closed again after the last wave exited the tunnel; there was no possible way for those pawns to open it. Unless…

His face went white. Unless there was someone of Nangong blood among them.

In the chaos of his mind, he saw that mysterious black rift again, and recalled the third forbidden technique: the Space-Time Gate of Life and Death. A freezing cold seemed to crawl up from his feet and coil around his body.

Could the masked man be—?

No, there was no way. Absolutely not. It would be too much. Even in the past life, no one had managed such a thing… Who could possibly have managed it?

Thankfully, Mei Hanxue had come up beside him. Mo Ran passed Ye Wangxi into his arms and rushed in the opposite direction of the crowd, eyes flashing with frantic light.

"Mo Ran!"

"Ran-er!"

Xue Meng and Xue Zhengyong shouted to him in the tide of people, but Mo Ran didn't turn. He truly didn't know how he could face these two.

No secret could stay buried forever. In that regard, both lifetimes were the same.

Someone grabbed his arm, and Mo Ran whipped around. "Shizun?!"

"You can't go that way," Chu Wanning said. "I'll hold them off. You're the only one who can activate the arrays on Mount Jiao—you need to stay with the group and make sure they get to safety."

Mo Ran stared back at him.

"Go!"

The black-garbed man was stepping out of the tunnel, those masked cultivators marching behind him.

"Hurry!" Chu Wanning snapped. "Take them and go!"

Regardless of the uncertainty and unease tearing into Mo Ran's heart, he had no choice but to retreat with everyone else. Even the struggling Xue Meng was dragged away by Xue Zhengyong. In the end, only Chu Wanning remained in the hall with the Dragonsoul Pool as those mysterious cultivators streamed in, gradually filling the room with their numbers.

The turbid liquid in the pool bubbled, throwing its orange light onto the cold stone walls.

Chu Wanning stood alone. Sparks crackled along Tianwen's length and reflected in his knifelike eyes. He watched that unknown man, who'd come to a stop inside the chamber. Through the heavy mask, that man looked back, watching him in unmoving silence.

One of the black-clad cultivators behind him, more excitable than the rest, shouted, "You think you're enough to stop us? In your dreams! Come, I'll experience your skills myself!" He sprang at Chu Wanning.

Before this impatient man could leap even a foot into the air, their black-garbed leader grabbed his neck and yanked him out of it.

"Your Majesty?!"

The man ignored him. Eyes never leaving Chu Wanning, he tightened his grip until the veins popped on his hand. He squeezed until that agitator's neck snapped with a crack, then tossed him aside.

Chu Wanning paled. This man would kill his own?

"Who are you to experience Chu-zongshi's skills?" the man drawled, stepping toward Chu Wanning. No one behind him dared move again.

Holding Tianwen out before him, Chu Wanning spoke firmly: "Who are you?"

The man stopped. He stood just a few paces from Chu Wanning, something unspeakable shining in his eyes. Finally, his laughter rang through the chamber. "After so long, this venerable one hadn't thought the first thing you'd say would be so cold."

"…Do I know you?"

"Oh, you don't recognize me? Chu Wanning, you've always been callous." The man stepped forward again and kept walking. Chu Wanning's nature was viciously stubborn; he would never retreat. The man stepped right up to him, presumptuously, dangerously close.

A chilling light flickered in Chu Wanning's palm. He raised it up to strike with the lightning speed of a lifetime of practice, but the man grabbed his wrist as easily as drawing a breath.

"You know, I've experienced this technique of yours many times." The man bent down and stared into Chu Wanning's face, absorbing every detail with naked greed. "But you seem to have forgotten."

Chu Wanning felt hair rise on the back of his neck. He'd never been one to fear a stronger opponent, but that gaze was impossibly awful and complex, as if it hid shocking truths and worse secrets. "Who…are you?!"

"Do you need this venerable one to remind you?" The man's grip on him was so tight that Chu Wanning was powerless against it. "The first time you used this technique on me, I was sixteen. You were teaching me hand-to-hand defense. You told me it was an attack that looked simple but was hard to learn, and that I should apply myself to the task and not slack off."

Chu Wanning's eyes widened as he stared in disbelief. There was mirth in the man's eyes, which were lit by a devilish gleam.

"The second time you used it was during our final battle. Your strike caught me off guard and injured me badly." With an uncompromising strength, he dragged Chu Wanning's hand to his heart.

There was no heartbeat under Chu Wanning's palm—as if this man were a corpse.

"Who…who *are* you?"

"Patience," the man whispered, savoring each syllable before sweetly feeding it into Chu Wanning's ears. They were even closer now, his lips almost brushing Chu Wanning's face.

"The third time you tried this was in my bed. I wanted to fuck you, but you said you'd had enough. You refused." He moved slowly but inexorably, his hand bruising Chu Wanning's wrist as he dragged Chu Wanning's hand down his chest and abdomen until it rested on something unmistakably intimate.

Chu Wanning flushed and yanked back his hand as if stung, struggling even harder. The man easily dispelled each strike, as if he knew each of Chu Wanning's attacks. He brought Chu Wanning into his arms. "What do I do, Chu Wanning?" he whispered, his tone itself a provocation. "This venerable one planned to kill and destroy you. So many years have passed—you've changed, and so have I. But now that I have you in front of me, now that I breathe in your scent, I still get hard so quickly."

"G-get your hands *off* of me!" Chu Wanning had never imagined a confrontation like this. His face flushed and paled in turn,

as if he might faint from sheer anger.

But he couldn't wrest himself free no matter how he tried. The man was like an inescapable trap, sticky as spider silk. He ensnared Chu Wanning, arms tight around his body. In front of all those pawns, he pulled Chu Wanning into his arms with a brutal, domineering strength, into an embrace so close and clinging. "So hard it hurts."

"I'll kill you!"

Amused, the man smiled and let go. Chu Wanning attacked with murderous intent, his movements swift and vicious, aiming for the kill. Cloak flapping, the man swiftly retreated. He glided like a paper kite and landed safely on the stone a few lengths away, but his mask was not so lucky. It broke beneath Chu Wanning's strike and shattered on the ground.

The man stood in the shadows, face still hidden within the depths of his hood. He sighed. "Your terrible temper hasn't changed a bit. Still ready to kill at the drop of a hat. But Chu Wanning, Chu-zongshi…"



He crooked his fingers, and a streak of black flew toward him from behind like a gale of dark smoke; he caught it handily. Chu Wanning saw it was the blade that had appeared at the Xuanyuan Pavilion auction, one of the blood-soaked holy weapons collected by Xu Shuanglin.

The man caressed Bugui and spoke calmly, in tones of utmost malevolence. “Do you really have the heart to kill me?”

He looked up. The hood fell back.

It was as if a pail of ice water had been dumped over Chu Wanning’s head. He was engulfed in freezing cold. His ears rang; he couldn’t feel a thing.

In that shadowed chamber, the man’s features were handsome, his face pale, and his smile curved with wicked obsession. He was a calamity, a demon. He grinned, baring white teeth.

“Emperor Taxian-jun—Mo Ran, Mo Weiyu.” Bugui slid from its sheath, its glare illuminating his eyes, so dark they looked purple. Taxian-jun smiled like a vengeful ghost, a predator opening its fanged maw. “Here to experience Shizun’s skills for myself.”

Chapter 234:
The Emperor Returns

AT THE FOOT OF Mount Jiao, all the cultivators—with the exception of the Jiangdong Hall group, who'd disappeared—had successfully made their escape.

Though they knew they were still in danger, many crumpled to the ground as soon as they stepped through the barrier. Eyes rolling back, Ma Yun collapsed over a boulder and wailed. "No-no-no more, I've had enough! Friends, let's all just go home and lock our doors—I seriously can't do this anymore!"

"Go home before we've figured out what that array was, and who came out of it?" asked Jiang Xi.

"What can we do? If we had the strength to fight them, we wouldn't have had to flee so pathetically."

Master Xuanjing added his voice. "Jiang-zhangmen, let's listen to Ma-zhuangzhu this time. Instead of heroically mounting a defense here and imperiling ourselves, we should regroup and return stronger, with better preparations."

Jiang Xi pursed his lips and looked toward the Sisheng Peak contingent. Xue Zhengyong and Xue Meng both still stared up Mount Jiao's main path, equally dazed. Finally a figure flew out from those clouds of billowing dust.

"Mo Ran…" mumbled Xue Meng.

Mo Ran was last to exit the barrier. Dark brows drawn low, he looked over the assembled group. "It's the Zhenlong Chess Formation, and maybe the Space-Time Gate of Life and Death. If that's really what it is, we don't know what caliber of person might emerge from it. All of you, hurry up and leave. Don't throw your lives away. Everyone's safety is more important."

He paused before turning to Jiang Xi. “Jiang-zhangmen, please take everyone to Rainbell Isle. With the Xuanwu barrier for defense, you can keep Hua Binan away for a while. And your sect specializes in medicine; there’s no better place for those cursed with the heart-tunnelers to receive treatment.”

“What about you?” Jiang Xi asked.

“Shizun is still on the mountain. I’ll go back and help him as soon as you’ve left and meet you back at your sect once this is dealt with.”

After a long silence, Jiang Xi bowed to Mo Ran. “We shall wait for you at Guyueye. Farewell.”

The injured, exhausted, and debilitated made ready to leave this dangerous place with Jiang Xi. Mo Ran suddenly called out again. “Jiang-zhangmen!”

“Does Mo-zongshi have other matters to discuss?”

“Miss Ye…” Mo Ran didn’t go on.

“I know. No one will harm a hair on her head; I promise you that.”

Only then did Mo Ran relax.

While Jiang Xi and the others left, those of Sisheng Peak stayed put. After hesitating, Xue Zhengyong went up with his brow furrowed and his voice hoarse. “Ran-er, what’s this about?”

Mo Ran gazed at his uncle, then at his cousin. His heart ached horribly, but he forced a smile. “It’s a long, long story. Uncle, take Xue Meng to Guyueye too. I’ll tell you everything later.”

But how could Xue Meng wait that long? Anxiety and impatience flooded him. “How could you be a descendant of Rufeng Sect? You’ve grown up at Sisheng Peak, y-you—” He stammered for a moment, but what came out as his eyes reddened at the rims was: “You’re my ge, right?”

Mo Ran looked at him. Xue Meng was shaking. He was obviously trying his best to control himself, but he was still shaking. The way he looked, dazed and miserable, was so pitiable Mo Ran tasted bitterness at the back of his throat. He didn't know what to say.

He patted Xue Meng's shoulder. "When I first came to Sisheng Peak, you didn't even want to acknowledge me." He smiled ruefully. He dared not meet Xue Meng's wide and tearful eyes. They were too clear, too passionate. And he was dirty. He was scared.

It took Xue Meng a long beat to respond, his voice almost too hoarse to understand. "Can't you give me a straight answer?"

His fingers tightened around Longcheng's hilt. Mo Ran had given him the crystal embedded in this scimitar. He clutched it like floating driftwood. In a matter of a few hours, he'd watched as Nangong Si threw himself into the demon dragon's blood pool, watched as Shi Mei was blinded and taken away, watched as Mo Ran used his own blood to open a seal only a Nangong descendant could activate. He couldn't catch his breath—he felt like he was drowning.

Mo Ran couldn't bear it. "Okay," he said. "I'll give you a straight answer." He grasped Xue Meng's shoulder more firmly. He didn't know if it was Xue Meng or himself who was trembling, but it no longer mattered. He met Xue Meng's eyes and said with perfect clarity, "Listen—I've never been part of Rufeng Sect. In this life, I've never done anything to harm Sisheng Peak. If I can, I will spend the rest of my life serving the sect."

Xue Meng's lips parted as if to speak, but his tears fell before the words could escape his mouth. He bit his lip in silent endurance, but after a moment he broke down. "Shi Mei said I never understood him. To be honest… I've never understood you either… I've been too willful. I never considered how either of you felt. I don't know anything; I'm always messing things up…but…but…"

He paused, tears coursing down his face. "But I really do care about you guys. I'll never curse at you or bully Shi Mei ever again… I

wish everything could go back to how it was… I just want everything to go back to how it was." He was sobbing so hard he could barely speak. "Ge, you better not be lying to me…"

Mo Ran couldn't bear to let him continue. He guided Xue Meng over to Xue Zhengyong, his voice low and so weighted with tears it brought to mind dawn dew lying heavy on blooming flowers. "Be good. Go with Uncle. Once this is over, I'll come find you as soon as I can."

He turned back toward the Mount Jiao barrier and released the seal. He walked through without looking back.

The chamber containing the Dragonsoul Pool was in ruins, its toppled stone pillars lying in the wreckage of a bitter fight of which only drifting smoke remained. Taxian-jun's long blade was pressed to Chu Wanning's throat, a stark red seeping from his skin and staining the pitch-black edge.

Chu Wanning closed his eyes, pursed his lips, and said nothing.

"Shizun, I don't think you were taking this fight seriously."

There was no response.

"You were *distracted*." Taxian-jun dragged him upright. The long blade Bugui disappeared with a flick of his fingers, but he'd worked the strongest binding spells in that fraction of a moment. The jade-green glow kept Chu Wanning firmly bound as Taxian-jun grabbed his chin and forced his face up. "Tell this venerable one, what are you thinking about?"

Chu Wanning's eyes fluttered open. That dear yet deeply alien face reflected in his pupils. He was afraid. This wasn't Mo Ran—but each of this man's attacks were so similar to Mo Ran's. Most terrifyingly of all, Chu Wanning had dreamed of him before. In those unthinkable dreams he'd had of himself and Mo Ran, he'd always seemed to have this pale and angular face. There was wickedness in

his handsomeness, those dark pupils filled not with tenderness but with a cruel and crazed light.

"Even if you don't say it, this venerable one knows," Taxian-jun purred. "Shizun must be wondering who I am, what I'm babbling about, why I've come." Pale fingers caressed Chu Wanning's face. "Don't worry. This venerable one…will tell you everything in due time. By the way"—he looked down at Chu Wanning's left hand —"don't bother summoning Jiuge or Huaisha. This venerable one is ready. I would never make the same mistake twice."

Chu Wanning's expression darkened at the mention of his other two holy weapons. Though his phoenix eyes were stormy, there was a confusion in them. Taxian-jun seemed to delight in this look of bafflement on his stern face; he laughed aloud. "What is it?" he said, stroking Chu Wanning's cheek. "Does it shock you that I know about Jiuge and Huaisha? I understand. This venerable one understood long before coming here. I know something of this place. My counterpart in this world hasn't yet turned everything into a sea of blood. He hasn't forced you to meet him with swords drawn. Of course he hasn't seen those two weapons."

"Your…counterpart in this world?"

Taxian-jun gave him a smile but not an answer.

Chills ran down Chu Wanning's spine. This Mo Ran looked at him as one would look at a corpse, or a mirage. His gaze was raw and feral, his pupils filled with an intensity that threatened to draw onlookers into his madness.

"The Space-Time Gate of Life and Death," he said deliberately. "Shizun ought to know this forbidden technique well."

Chu Wanning tensed.

"In a different universe, Shizun, you've been dead for many years."

He watched Chu Wanning's rapidly paling face lose the last of its color. Taxian-jun gazed at him, an inconstant light dancing in his

eyes. Like a sword unsheathing or a dragon breaking the waves, his calmness shattered. He yanked Chu Wanning closer, his demeanor dissolving into insanity. "That's right… Just like this, this exact face. This exact face… I watched this face of yours, I watched you lie in the Red Lotus Pavilion like the living dead, day in and day out… There was no color in your cheeks; your body was pristine, but you never spoke or opened your eyes—in that universe, you've been dead a long time—you had your revenge on me!"

He gulped in air, eyes blazing. They were full of despair, a wild storm gathering within. "Chu Wanning, I hate you. You left me there alone."

Despite his words, he clutched Chu Wanning tighter, crushing him in his embrace. Chu Wanning was so warm in his arms, like a flame. It burned Taxian-jun; he sighed low in his throat, tightening his grip around this long-awaited warmth, wanting nothing more than to devour it whole. Then, whether he lived or died, whether amidst searing heat or bitter cold, he'd have a companion; he'd have someone to take with him to the grave. He wouldn't be so terribly lonely.

No, *no*—Chu Wanning's scalp was prickling, his vision darkening. What was going on? He didn't understand at all—who had died? Who had left whom alone?

The doors to the Dragonsoul Pool opened again. The shadows shifted, and someone was running toward him with an anxious cry of "Shizun!"

Those hundreds of cultivators drew their swords and moved into defensive positions. At the sound of the newcomer's voice, Emperor Taxian-jun paused for a moment before smiling wanly. "And here I was wondering who would come. So it's *him*." He waved a hand, a slow and careless gesture. "Stand back," he said to his pawns. "Let him through."

Mo Ran had spent the entire trip up the mountain thinking about the Zhenlong Chess Formation and the Space-Time Gate of

Life and Death. Hua Binan couldn't be the ultimate mastermind—if all this had been Hua Binan's doing, Xu Shuanglin would have surely exposed him after he wrecked Xu Shuanglin's plans at the Soul-Summoning Platform.

Then who was behind it?

Zhenlong Chess, the Space-Time Gate, Bugui, the ancient legend of two worlds colliding—each of these things connected. A terrible notion rose in his mind, one that chilled him to the bone. He didn't believe it. He had run this whole way, refusing to believe it.

Until he arrived at the Dragonsoul Pool and saw that man's face.

Mo Ran's ears rang; blood rushed to his head. He couldn't breathe, his lips opening and closing as terror gripped him.

No…no! How could this be real?

The man in the hall stood ringed by those pawns, his face contemptuous and cold, his eyes alight with scorn and amusement. He watched Mo Ran idly. They had the same eyes, nose, lips; they had the same face and spirit, the same body and soul. The differences were barely perceptible. It was as if Mo Ran was looking in a mirror, or looking through the sands of time to see that ghoulish, shadowy version of himself.

The corners of Taxian-jun's lips hooked up, splitting his mouth into a bloodthirsty grin. He hauled Chu Wanning before him, stroking the seam of Chu Wanning's lips to spell him silent before addressing the man at the door. "Oh, it's Mo-zongshi. This venerable one has heard so much about you. Now that the Space-Time Gate has opened, we meet at last." He paused, eyes glinting. White teeth snapped around his last sweetly icy words. "It's an honor."

Chapter 235:
Nowhere to Go

"How…" Mo Ran took an unsteady step backward, shaking his head. "How could this be? It's *you…*?"

"Correct. It is indeed this venerable one." Taxian-jun looked him up and down, smiling. "Hm… This venerable one thought you would've forgotten much of your past life when you were reborn, but it seems you remember it quite well. From the look on your face, I'd say you already guessed at my existence. Perhaps you're not so stupid after all."

A thousand menacing words crowded to the tip of Mo Ran's tongue, ready to pour from his throat. But what escaped from his stammering lips was no more than a disbelieving howl: "You're already dead!"

"Oh?"

"You took poison back at Wushan Palace, a lethal poison with no chance of survival! You died before the Heaven-Piercing Tower; you were buried in the coffin beneath the tree—you're *dead*!"

Taxian-jun chuckled. "But that's not the whole story." He looked up slowly, revealing a brittle smile. His eyes were like the fangs of a most ferocious beast, ready to pierce and shatter Mo-zongshi's facade. "Why doesn't this venerable one try instead?"

His voice was smooth as silk, carefree and mocking. "That's right, this venerable one is dead. The one who knows it best is standing right in front of me," he said into the breathless silence. "Because you are this venerable one's escaped soul."

He began laughing. "The endlessly benevolent Mo-zongshi. Even across these two worlds, this venerable one has heard tell of your…how shall we put it, heroic deeds?" He grinned. "You're so

much fun. I thought you didn't remember much of the past, and that's how you could act as if nothing had happened. But you do remember, don't you?"

Mo Ran clenched his jaw.

"Oh, Mo-zongshi. Did you think no one would know as long as you stayed silent? Did you think the world would give you a second chance as long as you put down the butcher's knife? Most importantly…" Taxian-jun tightened his grip on Chu Wanning's neck, his nails sinking deep into flesh. Bruised and furious, Chu Wanning couldn't say a word through his bespelled lips. "Did you think I would be so kind as to let you bask in the light, when the fire was gone from my world?"

"Don't touch him!"

Taxian-jun snickered. "*Don't touch him?* Don't you think it's a bit rich for you to say this to me?" Still gripping Chu Wanning, he paced in slow circles, his eyes never leaving Mo Ran's. Taxian-jun stared down Mo-zongshi; Mo Ran stared down Mo Weiyu. The past locked eyes with the present.

"Have you forgotten how this venerable one touched him?" Taxian-jun taunted. "Who are you putting on this virtuous show for?"

"Don't say it!"

"Hm? Why not? Did you not think it was fun? Were you not satisfied? After so many years, across a death and a life, don't you want to take a walk down memory lane?"

Mo Ran shook his head again and again. His expression was even worse than Chu Wanning's, filled with fury and helplessness, guilt and despair. "Don't say it."

"Oh, *that's* how badly you want this venerable one to shut up? Fascinating. Our kind and heroic Mo-zongshi looks…" Taxian-jun carefully shaped the words in his mouth. "Very scared."

Mo Ran couldn't hold back any longer. The sight of Chu Wanning held so tightly in Taxian-jun's arms set his heart racing with

fear. He didn't think; all he wanted was to stop this devil from speaking, to bury every inch of that bygone ugliness in a coffin under six feet of earth.

Jiangui flared to life and tore toward Taxian-jun, its scarlet sparks crackling. Its light was brighter and more vicious than ever before.

Taxian-jun danced aside, his expression shifting. "…Tianwen?" But even as he said the word, he knew it wasn't. "Your new holy weapon certainly is interesting." He cast a thoughtful glance at the red willow vine. When he met Mo Ran's eyes again, his gaze was several degrees colder.

"If that's how it is…" He leapt backward, shoving Chu Wanning toward a subordinate before lifting a hand and summoning Bugui. "Come, spar with this venerable one. I want to know if I'm stronger wielding Bugui or a vine whip."

Taxian-jun ran his hand down the length of the long blade, and Bugui glowed green, imbued with his spiritual energy. Mo-zongshi followed suit, brushing his fingers over the willow vine. Jiangui blazed crimson, its forked flames tearing at the air.

"Fire elemental?" Taxian-jun laughed out loud. "I do have a dual-
element spiritual core, but I remember I much preferred wood over fire. Why did you change that?"

Mo Ran gave him no response. His expression was set, his mouth tightly pursed; there was a hint of sorrow in his gaze. His were the eyes of someone dangling on the edge of an abyss.

Those near-identical figures flew into the sky, matching blow for blow in pitched battle. Jiangui and Bugui screamed soundlessly, coursing with ferocious spiritual energy. Their clashing was like a dragon slamming into a whale or a towering wave crashing over a leviathan. Paving stones around the Dragonsoul Pool shattered, sending loose gravel flying. The bursts of spiritual energy sent the lava of the Dragonsoul Pool splashing high in the air and spilling

across the ground. The onlookers enchanted their feet so the oozing lava wouldn't burn them, and Taxian-jun and Mo-zongshi did the same.

The two of them rivaled each other in ferocity, the long blade clanging as the vine whip crackled. One black shadow flew at another; bloodthirsty eyes met despairing ones as each strike and every hit flared at the apex of their power. Amidst the shriek of weapons colliding, the two of them leapt into the air. The whip scraped against the long blade, sending up sparks that lit two pale faces.

One in death reversed; one in life akin to death.

Torrential waves crashed in Taxian-jun's eyes. "Bugui, Temper Spirit!" he cried, sending a surge of spiritual energy into the weapon. Mo-zongshi gritted his teeth and did the same with Jiangui. Filled with their spiritual energies, the weapons glowed, crimson dueling teal. With an earth-shattering *boom*, Bugui pierced Mo Ran's shoulder and Jiangui slashed Taxian-jun's left arm.

Both groaned and fell back to the ground, panting. Neither spared a thought for their wounds; all of their attention was bent on their opponent. They were two beasts locked in a fight from which only one could emerge victorious.

Taxian-jun's eyes darkened. "Your whip strikes look too much like his." Meaning Chu Wanning, of course.

Mo-zongshi had no time to waste on Taxian-jun. His eyes blazed. "Get the fuck out of here!"

"You mean this venerable one?" Taxian-jun scoffed. "Mo Weiyu, what right do you have? Have you worn the skin of a sheep for so long you've forgotten your teeth are stained with lambs' blood?"

They rushed at each other again, holding nothing back. Taxian-jun flew like the wind, sending sparks showering across the lava roiling beneath his feet—but how could Mo Ran not anticipate every one of his strikes? Battling Taxian-jun was like fighting his own

reflection on the surface of a lake. He withdrew before Taxian-jun's blade even fell, molten rock sizzling beneath his soles. Each of their movements and gestures were precisely anticipated; a hundred blows were exchanged in an instant, but both were evenly matched. Neither could defeat the other.

Sweat beaded on Mo Ran's forehead. Taxian-jun was also panting shallowly. They paced, wary, circling each other.

A drop of sweat slid between two dark brows, hung for a moment, then fell to the ground. Mo Ran ground his teeth. "What are you doing this for?"

"I've already said it. The fire has gone out of this venerable one's world. Don't even dream of taking this last flame for yourself."

Mo Ran's temper flared. "He's *your* last flame too!"

"But this venerable one can't have him," Taxian-jun spat. "Anyway, what difference is there between the two of us? This venerable one's hands are bathed in blood; are yours any cleaner? What right do you have to Shi Mei, to Chu Wanning, to that ridiculous uncle and cousin of yours, while this venerable one is doomed to an endless night without dreams? Why should you have him?!"

Mo Ran froze. "But you've had him before." He stared at himself from the past life. The words he'd held in his heart for so long took shape in that murmur. "You've had him before. You were the one who trampled him underfoot… *You* were the one who snuffed him out."

Taxian-jun's expression turned vicious, his nose wrinkling and his eyes flaring like an evil dragon twisted in their depths. He was so upset he dropped the imperial pronoun entirely. "I destroyed him? Ridiculous. How are you so sure he wasn't the one destroying me?"

"You don't know the truth of what happened at the Heavenly Rift!"

"I don't need to." Taxian-jun sneered. "Mo Weiyu, it's too late. Everything turned out fine, didn't it? I just need him to be alive, to be mine—to have him in my grasp. I don't care if he's happy or if he hates me. None of that matters." He paused. "As long as I can see him."

Tormented by fury and anguish, torn by all-encompassing regret, Mo Ran's voice shook. So did the rest of him. "You've already ruined him once. Are you going to ruin yourself, and him from this world, a second time…?"

Taxian-jun's cheeks dimpled brilliantly as he studied Mo Ran's expression. "What's there to ruin? It's the same for you, isn't it? It doesn't matter if he lives or dies as long as he's in my hands. Nothing else matters."

Mo Ran shook his head, his eyes falling shut. "You're wrong," he rasped. "He doesn't deserve that. He's…he's the one who treated you best."

"Ridiculous." Taxian-jun's smile froze on his face. "He's the one who treated me best? Then what about Shi Mei? Mo-zongshi, do you hear yourself? Shi Mingjing has always been gentle and thoughtful toward you—he's the one you ought to care for. Now, you're telling me that *Chu Wanning's* the best? Do you know how absurd you sound?"

"You're the one who's absurd!"

They pressed close, spiritual energy sizzling in the collision.

The rims of Mo Ran's eyes were red. "He treated you with sincerity; it's just that he's foolish… There are so many stupid things he did that he refused to tell you about. Wake up—the object of your affections isn't Shi Mei! When have you ever felt desire for Shi Mei? When you lie in your empty bed in Wushan Palace, who do you think about?"

"This venerable one won't argue that he's good for a fuck," Taxian-jun idly responded. "So what? He can never replace Shi Mei."

This man was himself, but his words infuriated Mo Ran so deeply his head seemed to ring. “Don’t talk about him like that.”

Taxian-jun narrowed his eyes. “Hm? So protective. Did you crawl into bed with him again?”

Mo Ran said nothing.

“You’ve fucked him in this life too?” He watched Mo Ran with the slitted gaze of a snake. Neither had stopped fighting for a second; some of the pawns, unable to withstand the force of their spellwork, lay curled up on the ground.

Taxian-jun flicked his eyes sideways to Chu Wanning. “Mo-zongshi,” he murmured. “This venerable one heard Shi Mei was alive and well in this world, and yet you neglect him like this.”

For a beat, Mo Ran found himself at a complete loss as to how to argue with this mysteriously revived jackass who’d stepped out of the Space-Time Gate. “What about you, then?” he managed. “You’re now in this world, where Shi Mei is alive. Why were you clinging to my shizun when I entered?”

“Your shizun?” Taxian-jun swung his gaze back to Mo Ran, mouth twisted in mockery. “Heh, you know what kind of relationship this venerable one has with your *shizun*. Tell me, do I have the right to hold him or not?”

Mo Ran only wanted him to release Chu Wanning. “Do you think this behavior is respectful to Shi Mei?”

“Someone as pure as Shi Mei cannot be profaned.” Taxian-jun didn’t take the bait. “Chu Wanning is different,” he lazily said. “He looks so high and mighty, so formidable, so self-assured, but have you forgotten how slutty he looks when he’s taking your cock?”

Mo Ran stilled. He hadn’t expected Taxian-jun to be so brazen; his words immediately conjured the mental image of Chu Wanning, moaning wantonly beneath him. His mind raced ahead despite himself, recalling that evening when Chu Wanning, under the influence of the strongest aphrodisiac in the world, had succumbed

to pleasure, raising his hips to meet Mo Ran's thrusts with unfettered fervor. He recalled the sweat-soaked, bestial intensity of their coupling. He remembered those phoenix eyes, humiliated and resentful yet brimming with tears, fluttering closed. Chu Wanning's glassy gaze and parted lips, his helpless panting…

He squeezed his eyes shut. When he opened them, they were sparking with flame. "I'm nothing like you! In this lifetime, I… I never…"

"Never what?" This time, it was Taxian-jun who was confused. He'd never cherished Chu Wanning, so he couldn't conceive of the tenderness and restraint Mo Ran had exercised in their bed. A turn or more passed before the fury and helplessness in the other man's eyes clued him in. What followed was abject shock. "Wait—you're joking, right? Have you really not…"

Mo Ran clenched his jaw so hard his teeth ached. The red halo hazing off Jiangui seemed to solidify, as if ready to destroy the entirety of the Dragonsoul Pool's chamber.

Taxian-jun burst into laughter. "Mo-zongshi, perhaps we're not so alike after all. Are we even the same person? Huh?!"

One was a mad dog, the other a loyal hound. The mad dog howled with teeth bared, while the loyal hound silently, shamefully, and stubbornly stood in his path. Faced with his colossal misdeeds, the look of powerlessness on the loyal hound's face was despairing and deeply pitiful.

But neither seemed able to win this fight. Taxian-jun gradually grew bored. "All right, I've had enough. Mo-zongshi, have a taste of my true power."

He waved his hand and those waiting Zhenlong pawns charged forth. Mo Ran was instantly surrounded, stuck without a chance of escape.

"*This* is your true power?"

Taxian-jun slipped away from the throng and wandered over to Chu Wanning, turning to show Mo Ran a sneer. "This venerable one's chess pieces are this venerable one's weapons—of course they're my true power."

Mo Ran watched as he patted Chu Wanning's face with the bloody edge of Bugui, then reached out to grip his jaw and hiss something into his ear. His vision went white with rage; he forgot Chu Wanning and Bugui shared a hostile connection. "Bugui!" he shouted.

That long blade gleamed and swayed in Taxian-jun's grip. It seemed conflicted, hesitant—it didn't know which master it should obey.

Taxian-jun frowned at his weapon. "Oh? You're going to listen to him?"

But pain burst inside Chu Wanning's skull at this call. Those dreams he had, those shattered scraps, poured into his head like a wave of sandy stone tumbling downhill. The crimson drapes, the sharp musk of the furs. Their entangled limbs. Kneeling outside the hall, hearing the snickering of the palace maids.

Taxian-jun noticed his reaction and lifted his silencing spell with a twitch of his fingers. "What's wrong with you?"

Chu Wanning made no answer. Agony consumed him; he felt as if his head would split apart—

He saw ashes blanketing the earth, smoke filling the sky, a black-robed man standing between, surrounded by corpses strewn across a desolate plain.

"Shizun." The man turned to reveal Mo Ran's face, grinning a devilish grin. Something red and slick pulsed in his hand. Upon closer inspection, it was a still-beating human heart.

"You're finally here. Did you come to stop me?" He squeezed; that heart disintegrated in his hands, exposing the dazzling spiritual core within. Mo Ran absorbed it into his own palm. He closed in, one

step after another. “We were master and disciple half our lives. I never thought things would come to this.”

Veins stood out at Chu Wanning’s temples and blood rushed through his ears. He closed his eyes. Taxian-jun watched the change come over him and reached up to touch his face, then wrenched his jaw upward. “What’s wrong? Does it hurt?”

Chu Wanning was shaking in his grip. “I didn’t injure you that badly.” Taxian-jun frowned, misunderstanding his pain. “When did you become so weak?”

But Chu Wanning was silent. He knit his brows, trying to speak, when a loud crash came from outside.

Taxian-jun’s already pallid face turned paler. “Someone broke through the Mount Jiao barrier?” He whirled around, eyes flashing.

An almond-yellow silhouette streaked in at terrifying speed, moving in an eerie frenzy like a drifting ghost. In the blink of an eye, that figure had wrested Chu Wanning out of his hands.

Mo Ran’s cry of “Shizun!” came just as Taxian-jun cried out “Wanning!” They exchanged a mutual scornful look before turning to the uninvited guest hanging in the air, his yellow monk’s robes fluttering.

Master Huaizui.

Huaizui’s expression was ugly; he seemed more shriveled than he had been five years ago, but the sharpness of his eyes hadn’t faded in the least. They still resembled light over water, rippling in ceaseless waves.

Mo Ran relaxed. He didn’t know why Huaizui had appeared, but this was the man who had used Rebirth to save Chu Wanning; surely he wouldn’t hurt him.

Taxian-jun had never seen this man before, and his expression had gone dangerous. “Oh look, a bald donkey. And where did you crawl out from? Will you oppose this venerable one as well?”

Huaizui shot him a glance before looking toward Mo Ran once more. He seemed unfazed by the presence of two Mo Weiyus, his expression closer to worry than surprise.

"Mo-shizhu." Huaizui bowed to him. There were too many present; to keep Taxian-jun from overhearing, he brought his message to Mo Ran's ears with a spell. "I cannot stay long. Come to Dragonblood Mountain at once. Find me there." He paused and repeated, "At once."

There was no more—he left with the same quickness with which he'd come and disappeared. Neither the Zhenlong pawns nor the barrier around Mount Jiao stopped him. There was an instant where Mo Ran clearly saw a cultivator grab him by the arm, but in the next, Huaizui was far beyond the chamber. The pawn's hand had caught nothing but cold air.

Taxian-jun had turned to give chase when a shrill whistle cut through the air. Freezing in place, he swore. "Now?"

The whistle kept screaming. Brows tightly knit, Taxian-jun cast a final glance at Mo Ran and reluctantly waved a hand to the black-clad crowd behind him. "Count your lucky stars. There'll be plenty of time yet for us to cross blades."

With those parting words, he led the massed chess pieces back in the direction of the Soul-Summoning Platform.

This dark army had arrived with ferocity and left in haste. Huaizui had vanished, and so had Taxian-jun. No one was left by the Dragonsoul Pool. Mo Ran sped to the Soul-Summoning Platform just in time to see Taxian-jun leap into the air and sail back through that black demonic array. His Zhenlong pawns followed, one after another, swallowed up by that endless darkness in a blink. As the last wave of cultivators passed through, the array creased and twisted, shrinking to nothingness. Only the moon hung in the night sky, tinged with bloody crimson.

The Space-Time Gate of Life and Death had closed.

Mo Ran stood atop the Soul-Summoning Platform in the howling wind. He looked up at endless night and down at the dead littering the ground, dazed and chilled to the bone. All of this felt like a dream, but he knew it wasn't. Everything that'd happened today was only the beginning.

He was a ghost who had fled from death. However slow his retribution was in coming, it had come nonetheless. His sins had ever been a blade hanging over his head. They were finally here to punish him, to claim his life.

He pictured Taxian-jun's bloodshot, ferocious eyes. "Redemption?" Taxian-jun laughed. "What redemption? You and I are the same. You can never wash away the blood you're covered in."

He saw Xue Meng from his past life, howling hysterically. "Mo Weiyu! I'll rip you apart! I'll never forgive you, not in this life or the next!"

He heard the terrifying sound of Song Qiutong's scream as she hit the boiling oil; he heard Ye Wangxi's voice as she said there was not a single man to be found in all the cities of Rufeng. He saw the determination and worry in Xu Shuanglin's face as he stepped in front of Ye Wangxi—

"Yifu!" The scream drilled into his ear like an awl, leaving a bloody wound.

At last, he saw another silhouette among those flickering shadows, that bloody path, that bygone nightmare. Pristine and composed, standing beneath the haitang tree. That figure turned, and in the light of the sun and the shade of the clouds, he smiled. "Mo Ran."

Mo Ran forgot how to breathe.

"It was I who wronged you. I won't blame you, in life or death."

Mo Ran crumpled to his knees. He had fought through the night; his clothes were in disarray and bloodied in every corner. Beneath that clear sky and bright moon, he stared ahead for a moment, then curled up like a worm. Huddled on the ground, he shook with sobs. "Shizun… Shizun…" he howled, choking on the words. "It's not like this… That's not me… Please…please…all of you… That's not me… I *want* to turn back, I want to start over, I'll pay any price… Please… I'll tear out my beating heart, just don't make me die in Taxian-jun's name. I really…really don't want to be him anymore… *Please*…"

He thought of Xue Meng, then of Shi Mei. He thought of that stick of tanghulu Xue Meng had handed him when they were young, haughtily telling him he didn't care if he ate it or not. He thought of Xue Meng sobbing as he clung to his lapels when they parted, telling him, *Ge, you better not be lying to me.*

He thought of a young Shi Mei bringing him a steaming bowl of wontons. *A-Ran,* he'd said. *I don't have parents either, so we'll be each other's family from now on, okay?* He thought of Shi Mei blinding himself on the Soul-Summoning Platform. As those bloody tears fell, he'd said, *You've never actually understood me*.

He thought of Xue Zhengyong and Madam Wang. Recalled how they'd died in the past life, and how Xue Meng's face had twisted into a mask of hate.

He thought of Chu Wanning and couldn't think anymore.

He dug his fingers into the ground with such force his knuckles split and bled. "What do I do… What do I do…" He wailed in grief and despair, like a trapped beast whipped until its skin tattered and flayed. It was only now he understood—he'd thought of Taxian-jun as someone extraneous to this world, but what about him? Wasn't he the same? Was there any safe harbor for him in all this vast world; would any of his surviving friends forgive him?

He was unnecessary.

He curled in on himself, clutched himself, racked with sobs. Just as he had all those years ago in the burial ground beside his mother's rotting corpse. He'd cried, not knowing where he should go, or where he could call home.

Now, he was almost more wretched than he'd been in his youth—he suddenly didn't know who he, Mo Weiyu, was anymore.

Emperor Taxian-jun, Mo-zongshi. Seventh-generation descendant of the Rufeng clan, the lost-and-found second young master of Sisheng Peak. The irredeemable lord of evil and the kind-hearted grandmaster of good. It took a single moment for him to shatter, splitting into slivers upon slivers, each so sharp just one would be enough to give him death—death by a thousand, ten thousand cuts—till no piece of flesh remained that could be called whole.

In death, as in life, he was alone.

"I'm not Taxian-jun…" mumbled Mo Ran. He was so cold. The Soul-Summoning Platform was freezing; every inch of him shivered. He closed his eyes, tears streaming down his face. He sobbed. "I'm *not* Taxian-jun… What do I do…? I don't know what to do anymore… Spare me… Spare me…"

Whom was he pleading with? Chu Wanning? His own past self? Those countless vengeful ghosts who'd fallen under his blade? Or his own miserable fate?

No one would forgive him, no one at all. He buried his face in his hands, and on that desolate mountaintop, finally sobbed himself breathless. "Wh-what *can* I do…?"

Chapter 236:
A Monk’s Passing

MO RAN DESCENDED Mount Jiao.

He walked, eyes glazed, in stiff and perfect silence. When he came to a fork in the road, he sank into thought.

The battle was over. The morning sun was rising in the east, its light washing away the stains of night. Only dew and the fresh scent of greenery hung between the trees as the dawn applied rosy colors to the sky like rouge.

He turned toward those lofty mountain peaks, then back toward the path before him. Going straight ahead would take him to Rainbell Isle, where Xue Meng and his uncle were waiting—waiting for an explanation, and an answer. But he couldn’t go. He had to head to Dragonblood Mountain.

Master Huaizui must know far more than Mo Ran had thought; otherwise, he couldn’t have been so calm at the sight of Emperor Taxian-jun. Perhaps that was why Mo Ran felt so lost. He had no idea what awaited him.

His mind was a mess, and he had no energy for further rumination. He only numbly knew he had to go because Shizun was there.

Dragonblood Mountain was close to Wubei Temple. In the past, the monks had gone there to meditate and reach enlightenment, but the mountain was often blanketed in thick fog. Many spoke of getting lost and roaming in circles upon its slopes, and some never returned afterward. Thus, the mountain was gradually abandoned.

Riding his sword, Mo Ran traveled an entire day without stopping and landed at the foot of Dragonblood Mountain as the sun

was sinking below the horizon. He hadn't eaten or drunk the entire day and was too exhausted to continue. As soon as he spotted a clear stream trickling between the cypress trees, he cupped water in his hand and washed his face.

What came off first was mud, then dissolving blood. Only then was his face visible, reflected in the rippling water. It wasn't a hideous one, but as Mo Ran studied his own features, he found them unspeakably repulsive. He struck the water's surface to break the reflection, then closed his eyes. Tormented, he buried his face in his palms, scrubbing at his cheeks.

Was there anything that could cleanly cut a person's past from their present? A blade that could gouge those putrid memories from his head? Could anyone save him—tell him, *You're not Taxian-jun, you're only Mo Ran; you're Mo Weiyu and no one else?*

But when he opened his eyes, the waters had calmed. The face in the stream still stared at him in resentment and despair. He had no other choice.

He rose and went up the mountain.

Halfway up, a fog rose, so thick as to be nearly solid. Mo Ran first suspected it was the work of evil spirits but didn't sense any hint of malevolent energy.

It was late now. The forest echoed with the sorrowful cries of the cuckoo; the temperature dropped, and sunlight was fast disappearing. Darkness fell around him. "Master?" His voice was hoarse as he fumbled his way forward. "Master Huaizui?"

No one answered. Strangely enough, though he was stumbling nearly blind, he encountered no obstructions. The path he walked was disturbingly smooth, as if someone had laid it out in advance of his coming. Laying a trap within the mist, perhaps, waiting for him to step in by himself.

"Is anyone there?"

The mist receded. The way before him became clear; as the fog melted, the stones and foliage of the mountain appeared distinct before him. He realized he'd walked unwittingly into a clearing; when he turned, the path he'd taken was already hidden in the fog. There was only this patch of clear sky and crisp air.

He stepped over dew-laden dried grasses, striding ahead until he sensed a human presence. Mo Ran stared, then started running. "Shizun?!" he cried.

Chu Wanning was kneeling before a mountain cave, its entrance half-hidden by vines. Master Huaizui sat in silent meditation before him, his brow furrowed.

"Shizun! You—" He fell silent as Chu Wanning turned. His lashes were dark with tears, his face streaked with their marks. "What's wrong?" exclaimed Mo Ran.

Chu Wanning didn't speak. He'd been holding himself together —for years, he'd been lofty and majestic, as if he'd sprung into the world fully grown, a powerful cultivator who'd never been young or weak. But this time, even with all his strength, he only managed two words before sobs escaped his lips. "Mo Ran…"

Mo Ran rushed to him and knelt by his side, wrapping him in his arms. "What's wrong? Why are you crying?"

He bent to caress Chu Wanning's hair. Chu Wanning was very cold, but having found him, having clutched him tight, Mo Ran felt his own heart burn very warm. Every moment of peace together was stolen. Every word he exchanged with Chu Wanning was a mistaken gift from the heavens. He cherished everything he received—he dared not waste any bit of it.

"It's okay, it's okay." Despite his own powerlessness, he pulled Chu Wanning into his warm and strong embrace. "Everything's fine," he said soothingly. "I'm here, I'm with you. I'm right here."

Mo Ran kissed Chu Wanning's temple. He discovered that, though Chu Wanning was trying to hide it, the man in his arms was still shaking, still crying. With his fingers twisted tight in Mo Ran's

lapels, he resembled very much that long-gone little shidi from Peach Blossom Springs.

No one was born strong. Chu Wanning, too, had once been young.

Mo Ran tensed, comprehension dawning. Holding the trembling Chu Wanning, kissing his face and caressing his hair, he looked toward Master Huaizui.

The old monk sat on a massive boulder, brows furrowed and lashes cast low. His half-lidded gaze was empty. In his hand, slightly outstretched as if in offering, lay a branch of haitang blossoms. The receiver must have rejected his gift—the flowers had shriveled, leaving only a few petals clinging to the tips of the wizened twigs.

Huaizui had passed away.

Even in his very last moments, this man who was the subject of myth and mystery wore no expression of ease. His face in death was lined with anguish. Even worse, he no longer had the youthful look of a man in his thirties. Death had reduced him to a shriveled husk, and for some reason, a small golden insect was eating away at his face.

"This insect…"

"It's an oath-bug." Chu Wanning finally spoke, his voice a ragged rasp. "Some who choose to change their appearance make a blood oath with this insect. It can change the host's face, and as recompense, the oath-bug will eat the host's entire body when they die."

Hearing his slow and quavering attempt to keep his voice steady, Mo Ran held him tighter. Chu Wanning must have been kneeling for a very long time. He was cold all over.

From the past life to the present, it was always Chu Wanning who was his lantern, his flame—keeping Mo Ran's darkness at bay, giving him all the warmth he could. But now, as Mo Ran held him,

he felt like Chu Wanning was made of ice. He was so cold it twisted Mo Ran's heart with pain. "I'm here. I'm here."

"He asked me to come to Dragonblood Mountain long ago." Chu Wanning sounded drained, as if all his heat and blood had been replaced with endless agony. "He knew I wouldn't talk to him or let him explain, so he left me a letter. It was sincere, but I was so stubborn. I refused to see him… I doubted his intentions."

Mo Ran stroked his cheek. He'd never seen Chu Wanning like this, not even in the past life. How could he not be worried? "What happened?"

But Chu Wanning only hollowly said, "I doubted him…"

This man who'd ever been calm and rational had finally fallen apart like the snapped string of a bow. He shook in Mo Ran's arms, trembling uncontrollably, entirely wretched. Chu Wanning was curled up and hunched over. When someone who'd been strained to tautness half their life broke down, the accumulated sorrow was enough to destroy anyone. "I should've come earlier… If only I'd listened to him, so much of this wouldn't have happened. Nangong Si wouldn't have died, Shi Mei wouldn't have been blinded… It wasn't too late… It wasn't too late."

"Shizun."

"If I'd taken that letter seriously, we wouldn't have ended up like this…"

It took long minutes for Mo Ran to calm him down, and longer after that for Chu Wanning's tears to dry up. He stared ahead, glassy-eyed. Mo Ran squeezed his fingers but found he couldn't warm them—just as he couldn't stop him from shaking.

"Why didn't I trust him, at least just once more…"

Mo Ran listened in silence. After the appearance of Emperor Taxian-jun, he'd envisioned countless ways his reunion with Chu Wanning might go. On the way here, he'd come up with every sort

of explanation and entreaty. But he didn't need any of them. He'd never expected that when they met again, it would be like this.

"He…left a memory scroll…" Eventually, Chu Wanning recovered his composure. Mo Ran stroked his face, his freezing cheeks. "Before he passed, he'd hoped to hand it to you personally."

Mo Ran's hand stilled. A memory scroll? What could be inside? How much did Master Huaizui know? He felt his own fingertips freezing; his hair stood on end. He was chilled to the bone.

"But he didn't have the chance," rasped Chu Wanning. "His time was up." Admitting it seemed to prod a terrible wound for him. Grimacing, he fell silent, as though saying any more would break him entirely. He covered his face with his arm, gathering up the coolness, reliability, and steadiness he'd left scattered across the ground. Slowly, he put those fragments back in place. He'd never been accustomed to vulnerability. Chu Wanning lifted teary phoenix eyes and produced the scroll, placing it in Mo Ran's hands. "It contains all the secrets he knew."

Mo Ran found his words after long hesitation. His voice shook imperceptibly. "Did he show you its contents too?"

"He did."

Mo Ran shuddered in his core. As he gazed into Chu Wanning's eyes, a terrifying realization rose in his mind—Chu Wanning already knew everything. His fingers closed around the jade scroll, but unease flooded him. He clutched Chu Wanning's fingers, caressing them. "Wanning…" He hesitated. "If that man on Mount Jiao…if everything he said was real. Would you hate me?"

Chu Wanning's pale face became even more so. His lips were tinged with green.

"Would you hate me?" Mo Ran gripped his hand hard, with an almost brutal force and stubbornness. In complete contrast was the piteous, pleading gaze beneath his soft lashes. "Would you?"

Chu Wanning shook his head and made no reply. He closed his eyes. "Just…look at the scroll."

The yin energy on Master Huaizui's scroll was remarkably strong. It was nothing like mortal implements but bore a stronger resemblance to the feathered tribe's illusion world in Peach Blossom Springs. Mo Ran gazed at Chu Wanning once more, then unfurled the scroll and brought the glowing jade to his brow.

Dragonblood Mountain vanished around him. In its place was endless darkness, and in that darkness, Huaizui's voice rang out. It echoed in Mo Ran's ears, filled with regret.

"Chu-zongshi, Mo-shizhu. This old monk knows his time is short. I strive to convey what little I know to you both. The world faces impending calamity. If I do not do all that I can, this old monk won't be able to bear the shame even in hell."

The voice faded, then swelled again. "The past events contained in this scroll are every one unbelievable. They include this old monk's past misdeeds. Nothing is hidden. I've spent much of my life in sin and ignorance, with a narrow mind and stupid thoughts. In these two hundred years of purposeless life, the days when my eyes were clear were paltry and my good deeds pitifully few. All my life I've borne my sins with no hope of atonement, and after death I will sink into the Infinite Hells with no possibility of reincarnation. But still I dare hope that after the two of you see this, you won't scorn this old monk as no better than a beast."

Light appeared before Mo Ran's eyes. Blinking, he saw the ruins of a city, surrounded by shriveled trees and dark-winged crows, the birds picking at the eyes and innards of corpses. He paused, finding the scene familiar yet not recalling where he'd seen it.

A group of soldiers on horseback rode in through the gates, ribbons at their brows and quivers on their backs. One of the young men yanked on the reins and tumbled off the back of his skinny steed, rushing toward one of the corpses at the gate. "Dad!" he screamed. "Dad!"

Stunned, Mo Ran felt a chill at the back of his neck. Was this… the feathered tribe's illusion from Peach Blossom Springs? The war-torn city of ancient Lin'an?

Chapter 237:
Sacred Tree

UNLIKE THE ILLUSION from Peach Blossom Springs, Mo Ran wasn't physically present in this one. He was only an invisible bystander. He walked up among the soldiers and looked down at the youth sobbing over the corpse.

Mo Ran felt a vein throb in his forehead. Cold seemed to seep into his bones, and goosebumps broke out over his skin. Looking upon this scene for the second time, he knew full well what role the youth before him had played in those tragic events in Lin'an. He had betrayed the governor's son, Chu Xun, to bring his adoptive father back to life, letting the entire city be slaughtered in the process.

"Xiaoman, he's gone. He's not coming back. Pull yourself together, all right? It's not safe here—we should go."

"No… No… I'm not going anywhere. I want Daddy… H-he died because he left the city to find food for me. It's my fault. Dad! Daddy!"

Mo Ran watched him. Who was he? Huaizui's father? Or…

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of Xiaoman's left hand. There was a dark mole between his thumb and forefinger, about the size of a grain of rice. Huaizui had a mole on his hand too—in this exact same spot, identical in size and shape.

Mo Ran went rigid with shock.

At the same time, a distant voice sighed in his ears. "I was born in Lin'an and grew up an orphan. A groom in the governor's employ took me in and raised me as his own. When I was fourteen, the Heavenly Rift to the ghost realm opened, and Lin'an was besieged. Our family ran out of rations, and I was starving. Despite

the danger, my adoptive father went out to look for food. But by nightfall, he hadn't returned."

Impossible—Huaizui was Xiaoman from two hundred years ago?

"By the time I found him outside the city gates, the ghosts had killed him," Huaizui continued softly. "His stomach had been torn open, and the crows had pecked out his eyes. I'll never forget that sight as long as I live."

Head buzzing, Mo Ran followed Xiaoman into the city. Back then, Lin'an had been beset by ghosts and demons after the Heavenly Rift opened, and the ghost king had tempted the citizens to give up Chu Xun. The events were still as tragic and deplorable as the first time Mo Ran had seen them unfold.

The night before the calamity, he watched Xiaoman beg the townspeople not to dismember his father's body. He implored the head steward to wait until Chu Xun returned, to see if Chu Xun might know a way to keep his father's corpse intact.

"Please, just let me wait a little bit longer, until the gongzi comes back. I'll keep an eye on his body, I promise—if his corpse rises, I won't let it get away. Please, I'm begging you…"

"You won't be able to do a thing to the corpse if it rises! Think of the consequences!"

"No! Don't dismember him, I beg you, don't dismember him…"

Xiaoman prostrated in the pouring rain, bashing his forehead against the ground until it bled. But in the end, the other residents yanked his father's body out of his arms. The steward dragged this corpse which might reanimate at any moment to the governor's residence, and a group crowded around it. Xiaoman couldn't see past their backs, but after a while, he watched blood seeping under the crowd's feet, a wash of pink beneath the torrents of rain.

"I was selfish back then. I was heartbroken, and I blamed the townspeople for my loss. I betrayed Lin'an and became a servant of

the ghost king. I sought revenge."

As Huaizui narrated, Mo Ran saw again those terrible scenes. He watched the mother devour her own child's heart, the citizens turn their backs on their hero. He saw Chu Xun kneeling on the steps of the City God Temple, weeping with his back bowed.

He watched the mob shove Chu Xun out of the temple, like a flock of dark vultures. For the chance to prolong their own wretched lives, none hesitated to sacrifice Chu Xun's.

He watched Chu Xun carve out his own heart and spiritual core, passing them into the hands of the wailing townspeople. He exhorted them to leave this place behind…

Xiaoman, too, had witnessed it all.

"Later on, I went to the ghost realm. Whenever I was alone, I found myself thinking of Chu-gongzi's miserable plight, how he had offered us his heart, how he had always shown us kindness. It ate away at me. More and more, I was unable to escape my own guilt."

Huaizui paused. When he next spoke, his voice was steeped in bitterness: "I was a traitor."

Mo Ran couldn't say what he felt. Sometimes, a split second was all the difference between good and evil. For some, regret came in the instant after the knife fell. But what good was that? They'd already passed the point of no return.

"Not long after, I heard Chu Xun's souls had entered the underworld. He was a good man—although his cultivation wasn't sufficient to ascend to immortality, it was enough to ensure his next life would be comfortable and peaceful should he enter the cycle of reincarnation. But he didn't. The tragedy in Lin'an had left the souls of his wife and child scattered and lost. He begged Yanluo himself for succor, offering up his next three lives of good fortune in exchange for their deliverance. But it was nowhere near so straightforward."

In the illusionscape, Mo Ran saw Huaizui rushing about in the ghost realm. Out of shame and guilt, he carefully avoided Chu Xun. But he pulled aside all the guards and workers he came across, asking for any information they would give him:

"What happened to the wife and child? Did Yanluo say anything? Is it possible to piece their souls back together so they can enter the cycle of reincarnation?"

"Can you think of a way? Please."

"I'm begging you to help Chu Xun-gongzi. Name any price; I'll discuss it, no matter how high it might be…"

One of the ghost minions had sneered. "I've heard all about your great deeds. Weren't you the one who went over to the Ninth Ghost King and killed Chu Xun's entire family? Why the sudden change of heart? Are you afraid Chu Xun's ghost will seek you out for revenge?"

Mo Ran walked behind Huaizui and watched him kneel to many people in entreaty. Or to be more accurate—many ghosts. But oftentimes, living people and ghosts were no different in nature. It was just as Chu Wanning had once said. Reincarnation might change many things about a soul: their personality, interests, or temper. But their fundamental nature remained the same.

It didn't take long for the ninth king to hear of Huaizui's interest in Chu Xun's family. The king already bore a deep grudge toward Chu Xun for taking out his eye. After learning that his subordinate Xiaoman was meddling in the Chu family's reincarnation behind his back, the king flew into a rage. He stripped Huaizui of the token that allowed him to come and go from the ghost realm as he pleased, banishing him to the world of the living. In the same stroke, Huaizui lost the eternal lifespan enjoyed by the ghost realm's underlings.

"Get your ass back to the mortal realm. Once the yin energy of the underworld dissipates from your body, you'll die, and your souls will fall into the Infinite Hells. They'll be tormented for all eternity

there without reincarnation." The Ninth Ghost King fixed his one good eye on Huaizui. "Thinking you could conspire against me with your old master—this is what you get."

The underworld's darkness lightened. Mo Ran heard the gentle patter of rain—it was springtime, and new leaves glistened green in the drizzle. He saw Huaizui, now a monk with a shaven head, making his way through the rain.

"When I returned to the world of the living, a hundred years had passed. Although the ghost king had taken away my token, I still had yin energy on me. Around midnight, when the yin energy was most concentrated, this was enough to allow me to return to the ghost realm from time to time. But it sapped my strength if I stayed more than a night. In truth, I…was still very frightened of death, and didn't dare remain in the ghost realm for long. I only went back when I had no other way of gathering information or assistance."

Mo Ran watched Huaizui walk through a bamboo forest alone, tapping a roughhewn staff against the ground. Through snow-dusted plum blossoms, through rain-laden lotuses, his solitary figure stepped onward. From the flourishing heights of spring to the frosted depths of winter, he wore out pair after pair of hemp-cloth shoes.

Huaizui searched far and wide for any records that might hold clues to restoring the mother and child he had ruined.

"This was my opportunity to atone for some of my sins," said Huaizui.

Others might have felt nothing at these words; they might have found Huaizui laughable. But Mo Ran's eyes welled with tears.

Atonement.

Anyone who'd ever done wrong, who'd ever sought to repent, would yearn for atonement like a fish yearned for water. He and Huaizui were no exception.

Neither of them was a good person. Their hands were laved in blood; with every step they trod upon shattered skulls. How could they atone for what they had done? Using those hands that had committed slaughter, they could guide what remained of their lives onto the righteous path. But would that negate the sins they had committed?

If only the mortal world could be divided cleanly into right and wrong, if only karmic reward and retribution were just—if only things could be so simple. But he knew it wasn't so.

"I walked the mortal realm for another century." Huaizui's voice was slow and sighing. "Wherever I went, I sought to relieve what hardship I came across. I knew no matter how many good deeds I performed, I was powerless to change my fate: I looked forward to endless torment after my death. I only wanted to lessen the weight in my heart. If the gongzi were still in this world, I thought that surely…he would partake of the sufferings and worries of others."

Snatches of these hundred years flowed by in the vision. Mo Ran saw Huaizui carrying a blind orphan on his back, walking through a mountain forest. He saw Huaizui toiling in a rice paddy, head bent low. He saw him mending his worn robes beneath the light of a single candle, having given all his money to rebuild a village ravaged by evil spirits.

"Chu-gongzi never reincarnated. Once, I broke off a branch from a haitang tree in full bloom. I remembered haitang blossoms had been his and his wife's favorite flowers. I summoned all my courage and, in a moment of delusion, went to see him in the ghost realm. The result was a foregone conclusion—he threw me out and told me never to return."

Huaizui stood in one of the ghost realm's alleyways, his figure small and slight, his back already faintly stooped.

"I didn't dare harass him further, and so that visit was my last. But he kept that haitang branch. I thought perhaps he was still fond of this relic of the living realm that had no match in the underworld.

I continued to pick haitang blossoms, and entrusted them to others to bring to him. I hoped they might soften his hatred toward me, if only the tiniest bit.

"Later, I heard Madam Chu's souls could be repaired with time, but the souls of the child were scattered beyond saving. Even if one scoured the highest heavens and sifted through the Yellow Springs, there would never again be another little Chu-gongzi. After I learned of this, I was overwhelmed with guilt and regret—until one day, I came upon something in my travels."

A misty river on a moonlit spring night came into view. Huaizui sat in a small boat, surrounded by the winking lanterns of fishing vessels, their scattered light glancing off an object in his hands.

Mo Ran stepped up to Huaizui and took a seat next to him. From here, he could see Huaizui was holding a peculiar-looking piece of wood. Any ordinary tree would have rough bark and fine whorls; this had neither. It was no wider than a man's palm, covered in smooth, delicate bark that gleamed subtly. Even in the illusion, Mo Ran seemed to catch the light fragrance emanating from it.

"The Flame Emperor's sacred tree."

Mo Ran drew in a breath, eyes flying wide as he stared at the luminous object in Huaizui's hands. This was…from the Flame Emperor's sacred tree?!

According to legend, this tree grew in the farthest reaches of the East Sea, which no human could reach. After two lifetimes traveling throughout every corner of the jianghu, of course Mo Ran had heard of the Flame Emperor's sacred tree. It was said this tree could bring the dead back to life and produce artifacts mightier than any ordinary holy weapon. Its influence could even help commoners ascend, allowing them to bypass the suffering of reincarnation to walk among immortals.

Huaizui evidently knew these tales as well. "The sacred tree possesses its own spirit," he explained softly. "If one refined its wood

into their own spiritual core, they would soon reach ascendence… If so, I would never have to face the torments of hell."

Mo Ran suddenly recalled a rumor he'd heard about Huaizui—that he had rejected the summons of the heavens and chosen to remain in the mortal realm. Could it be that he had failed in his efforts to refine the Flame Emperor's sacred tree?

"I had a very…strong urge to put this piece of the sacred tree toward my own ends. For a period of time, I thought it had come into my possession by the grace of the heavens, as a sign I wasn't meant to suffer in the underworld."

On the boat, Huaizui ran his fingers over the wood. Yearning flashed through his eyes, followed in turns by indecision. The voice echoing in Mo Ran's ears, too, was racked with turmoil.

"However, there was something else I had once read in an ancient text: that the Flame Emperor's sacred tree had the same properties as Nüwa's clay. This piece of wood could be used to create a living person."

Chapter 238:
Soulless

"WHAT?!" Mo Ran blurted, reeling back. If not for the fact that he was an apparition, he might have already stumbled into the nets of the fishing vessel next to them.

The Flame Emperor's sacred tree could be used to construct a *person*?

"Nüwa's clay, Fuxi's qin, and the Flame Emperor's tree are the three holy instruments the deities used to create the world. Their spiritual energy is pure beyond measure. The first immortals, with all their limitless power, were made from these instruments. I had obtained only a tiny portion of the Flame Emperor's tree, but even without a deity's awesome strength, I could easily create a person out of it. In the end, I made up my mind. Just as Nezha's teacher reconstructed the god's body from lotus roots after his death, I would carve this piece of wood into the likeness of the young Chu-gongzi."

Mo Ran felt the world was spinning before his eyes. Huaizui would carve this wood into…the young Chu-gongzi—into Chu Lan?

"I wanted to give my savior back his son."

Mo Ran's throat was dry, as though something was lodged in it. After a long pause, he muttered, "Impossible…"

Within the memory scroll, the evening bell tolled. Wubei Temple was cloaked in the red of sunset. Weary crows had returned to their nests, and monks passed beneath the colonnades with the sleeves of their loose robes floating behind them.

Master Huaizui sat in one of the rooms within the monastery, the door and windows securely shut. In the pale glow of an oil lamp, beneath the shadow of the Buddha, he whittled with painstaking

care. He knew every cut would be impossible to undo. Before touching the wood of the sacred tree, he'd carved hundreds of models, practicing until his creations looked exactly like the Chu Lan he remembered.

On this night, he finally held the wood of the sacred tree in his hands. After looking over it carefully a last time, he made the first cautious and considered cut.

Wood shavings drifted down, coating the floor in golden dust.

He poured all of himself into each stroke of the knife, envisioning those two figures from his past. A hundred years of memories ebbed and flowed beneath his knife. The old monk's head hung low, as though the weight of his sins had snapped his neck long ago.

"I entered seclusion within the temple. It took me five years to finish carving Chu Lan."

Mo Ran walked stiffly over to Huaizui as the monk set down the knife—he had made his final cut. He brushed away the last specks of bright dust. Huaizui touched the wooden child's face and clothes with shaking hands. Tears ran down his face as he knelt, kowtowing to it over and over.

Mo Ran turned his stunned gaze to the small sculpture on the tea table.

Its tiny form was carved from the sacred tree, using a blade animated by guilt. It looked just like Chu Wanning had as a child.

The evening bell began to toll once more; only a bloodred thread still stretched between earth and sky. The last ray of dusky light passed through the window and landed on the table. The low tones of the bell echoed through the temple grounds. Elsewhere in the monastery, the monks were burning cypress boughs and pine needles. A note of cool sharpness cut through the rich fragrance of woodsmoke.

Sitting in this hall as the bell sounded its final note, surrounded by twilit serenity, Huaizui gazed upon the wooden figure and murmured in a stroke of inspiration, "I'll call you Chu Wanning."

Wanning—*evening peace*.

He bit his fingertip to draw blood. A single red drop, replete with metal-elemental spiritual energy, fell onto the wood, and a flash of brilliant light flooded the room.

Mo Ran shut his eyes against the radiance, his lashes trembling. He squinted toward the light, trying to see what was happening, but between the tears blurring his vision and the blinding brightness, he couldn't make out a thing. When the light grew so brilliant he was forced to close his eyes again, Mo Ran's one wild thought was that Chu Wanning had already seen all of this. How much pain had it caused him?

He wasn't human; he had no parents to speak of. He was nothing but a chunk of wood and a drop of blood. He had spent more than three decades upon this earth, wholly in the dark about his origins.

"The wood of the sacred tree retained its own spiritual energy. After I gave my sculpture life with a drop of blood, it looked like Chu Lan in every respect, just as I'd hoped. I raised him in the monastery and taught him as my disciple. As he grew older, he began to ask me about his origins."

Mo Ran saw Chu Wanning as a child, sitting beside Huaizui with a stick of red tanghulu. "Shizun, you always say you found me in the snow and brought me back here. But where exactly did you find me?"

Huaizui was gazing at the cool shadows of the mountains in the distance. After a lengthy pause, his reply came like a sigh. "Lin'an."

"So I'm from Lin'an?"

"Mn."

"But I've never left the monastery. I don't know what Lin'an is like." Chu Wanning looked dismayed. "Shizun, I want to go down the mountain and see the outside. I…want to see Lin'an."

The illusion darkened, and the courtyards of Wubei Temple were replaced with the lush scenery of Jiangnan.

It was June, and the fragrant lotus flowers stood tall and vivid against the green and blue of the water. Chu Wanning, still a head shorter than Xia Sini, was skipping down a paved bluestone path. Huaizui followed a few steps behind him.

"Wanning, slow down. Be careful not to trip."

Chu Wanning turned and flashed his teacher a smile. Mo Ran had never seen such an innocent and carefree expression on his face. "Okay, I'll listen to Shizun."

The child wore a dusty green monk's robe. His head wasn't shaved; he wore his hair coiled in a little bun, and a lotus leaf was perched atop his head. The drops of dew glistening on the leaf made his face look all the purer and brighter.

Huaizui caught up to Chu Wanning and took his hand. "All right, now you've seen West Lake. Where do you want to go next?"

"Can we eat?"

"In that case…" Huaizui paused. "Let's go into the city."

The pair entered the city hand in hand, Mo Ran keeping pace beside them. As he watched Chu Wanning, crowned with a lotus leaf, head barely rising to Mo Ran's thigh, Mo Ran's heart swelled with pain and tenderness. He extended a hand. He knew he couldn't touch the illusion, but he couldn't stop himself from reaching out to pat Chu Wanning on the head.

At the same moment, Chu Wanning stopped in his tracks. "Hm?"



"What's wrong?" Huaizui asked gently.

Chu Wanning tilted his face up. His eyes like twin pools of sweet dew in the sunlight landed unerringly on Mo Ran.

Mo Ran froze in astonishment, pulse pounding in his ears. He knew Chu Wanning couldn't possibly be looking at him, yet a quiet frisson of excitement rippled through him.

"What's that?" Chu Wanning let go of Huaizui's hand and walked toward Mo Ran.

Mo Ran's anguish compounded—he'd never seen Chu Wanning so cheerful, nor his eyes so bright. He found himself leaning down and opening his arms to embrace this child…

But Chu Wanning stepped right through him.

Mo Ran blinked, then turned. Chu Wanning was making for a pastry stall behind him. Head tilted back to see over the counter, he watched the stallkeeper open a bamboo steamer to reveal the pale-pink, flower-shaped cakes wreathed in steam.

Mo Ran let out a breath of relief, but his heart sank ever so slightly. So it had been a coincidence, nothing more. He followed Huaizui to the stall. Chu Wanning was smiling up at his teacher. "Shizun, these cakes look so yummy."

"Do you want to try one?"

"Can I?"

Surprise flitted across Huaizui's expression. "You both have the same taste…"

Chu Wanning's eyes widened. "Who has the same taste?" he asked innocently.

Huaizui pressed his lips together. "…Nothing. Just someone I used to know."

He bought three sticky-rice flower cakes. He watched, pensive, as Chu Wanning took a bite, rising vapor blurring the child's face.

The river of his memories crashed and surged around him. Huaizui sighed, letting his eyes fall shut.

After a moment, he felt a sudden tug on his sleeve. He looked down to find that Chu Wanning had split one of the cakes into halves, the sweet and fragrant bean-paste filling gently steaming in the air.

"Half for Shizun, half for me. The bigger half is Shizun's."

"Why is the bigger half mine?"

"You're taller than me, so you need to eat more."

Mo Ran looked on as Huaizui took half the cake and stood with Chu Wanning next to the pastry stall, eating and chatting. Beneath the bright Lin'an sun, Mo Ran stilled for a moment, and a smile stole across his face. His heart ached horribly, yet it also seemed to melt. No one, he thought, could feel anything but tender fondness toward this young Chu Wanning. He was the sweetest kid in the world.

The sun-dappled streets of Lin'an faded. This time, no other scene took its place. Mo Ran heard Huaizui speak in the darkness, his faraway voice like the whispers of a wandering spirit.

"I spent all my days with him, teaching him to read and write, schooling him in scripture and philosophy. But my main focus was his spiritual development. I never forgot that I had created this child in order to give him back to my savior. From the beginning, I resolved to bring Chu Wanning to the ghost realm as soon as his spiritual powers and physical form were mature enough to withstand it."

A pause. Huaizui's voice was lower and graver when he continued. "I would bring him to the ghost realm and fuse the remnant fragments of Chu Lan's souls into his body."

Mo Ran's mouth fell open.

Huaizui's voice was hoarse. "At the time, I never thought this would be wrong. What was Chu Wanning? He wasn't a real human. He was just a piece of wood, a hand-carved figurine. I had given

him life and taught him the ways of humankind. But ultimately, the blood that flowed in his veins was not real blood, and the flesh that covered his bones was not real flesh."

At these words, Mo Ran could no longer contain his mounting despair. "That's not true!" he cried.

But what use were these words? Huaizui couldn't hear his furious shout of denial. The monk's voice swirled about him, tugging him deeper into a maelstrom of pain.

"Chu Wanning was unnecessary. He wasn't alive; he didn't have a soul."

"No! That's not true! Why wouldn't the sacred tree have a soul? He's alive! He has his own souls! He isn't anyone else! He's not like anyone else!" Mo Ran howled, trapped within the illusion like a caged beast. "Huaizui, you raised him yourself! You watched him grow up… How is he not human? How is he any different from you or me?!"

But Huaizui continued murmuring, flat and affectless, as though he were chanting sutras before the Buddha. Who knew if his lips shaped the words out of true devotion, or to numb the pain that lanced through his own heart?

"He was merely a vessel I carved for Chu Lan. He would only become a complete human with Chu Lan's souls inside him."

Mo Ran felt chilled to the bone. He had no idea what would come next; he felt like he was on the verge of losing his mind. He broke into a run, but there was nowhere to go, nothing but abyssal darkness. His repetitive murmurs became desperate shouts. "No! You can't ruin him—Huaizui, there *are* souls in his body—he's a living person, a human being…"

He fell to his knees, gripped by a terror that far outweighed his fear of the past life coming to light. He was so afraid he might see Huaizui bring Chu Wanning to the ghost realm, cut open his chest, and merge Chu Lan's souls into his body.

But what about the original Chu Wanning? The souls that belonged to the sacred tree would be forced out. He was just a block of wood—as the wheel of karma spun on, where would he go? Whether to the heavens above or to the netherworld below, whether amidst the high clouds or down among the Yellow Springs—what place would take him in?

"No, Huaizui…you can't…" Mo Ran was shaking, his lips bloodless. "You can't…"

How could he not have a soul? How could he not be human?

This child had skipped through the streets with a smile and a green lotus leaf on his head. He had carefully broken the flower cake in two and given the larger share to his shizun. He was still so little, yet he was already more compassionate and spirited than many. He was no less alive than any other creature of flesh and blood.

How could he not be human?

But no matter how Mo Ran begged and shouted, his words couldn't reach Huaizui's ears. The debt Huaizui thought he owed to Chu Xun's family had preoccupied him for a hundred years. He had gone through countless trials to craft this vessel; how could he possibly let it go?

"Day by day, Chu Wanning grew. Since he was to be the instrument of Chu Lan's rebirth, I worried for his safety and health far more than I worried about my own. Other than the time I brought him to Lin'an for a few months when he was five or six, he was never allowed to step outside Wubei Temple."

Huaizui heaved a sigh. "Sometimes I wondered if I was depriving him of the sights and sounds of the world. Up until he was fourteen, he'd never been anywhere besides Lin'an. All he knew of the heavens and earth, the changing of the seasons, was from what he saw within the confines of the monastery."

At last the illusion brightened again to show a moonlit night. Mo Ran saw Huaizui standing in the doorway of a temple, gazing out into the courtyard. He hurried over.

In the frosty moonlight, Mo Ran saw the fourteen-year-old Chu Wanning practicing with his sword, haitang blossoms swirling around him. In his white robes, wreathed in silvery light and bright petals, he was an ethereal sight.

Huaizui went on, and his words mingled in Mo Ran's ears with the sharp strokes of the sword through the air. "But I also thought it might not be such a bad thing for him to know less. After all, the world was a cruel place. If this spirit of the sacred tree wouldn't live for much longer than a decade before Chu Lan replaced him, wouldn't it be a kindness if his life was easy and straightforward, if he remained oblivious to the mortal realm's suffering?"

The dancing sword stilled, and fragmented flowers floated down. Calm and alert, Chu Wanning brought the blade behind his back and lifted his other hand, index and middle fingers raised. He caught his breath and looked up. Upon seeing Huaizui's eyes on him, he broke into a smile.

The night wind tugged at the wisps of hair at his temples, tickling him. He tried to gently blow them off his face to no avail. At last, he reached up to brush them aside. Pitch-dark phoenix eyes curved into gentle crescents as he gazed at Huaizui and Mo Ran at his side.

"Shizun."

"Mn, good work." Huaizui nodded. "Come—let me check the development of your spiritual core."

Guilelessly, Chu Wanning walked over. Brushing back his snow-white sleeve, he held his wrist out to Huaizui.

Huaizui felt for his spiritual energy flow and said, "It's already very strong, just not very stable. Keep practicing—you can make much progress before winter."

Chu Wanning grinned. "Thank you, Shizun."

Mo Ran couldn't be sure, but he thought he saw Huaizui's shoulders tremble minutely at these words. Yet Huaizui didn't say

anything further; he neither explained nor amended his words. He merely turned and went back inside. Mo Ran didn't move a muscle. He was no longer interested in following Huaizui. He only wanted to watch Chu Wanning—with a greedy hunger, with a desperate urgency, he only wanted to drink in the sight of this youth who might disappear at any moment. He was so pure and pristine, so kind and gentle. How could a child like this not have a soul?

His gaze flicked down, landing by chance on Chu Wanning's chest as it rose and fell beneath his white lapels. Suddenly, he remembered something. It came like a clap of thunder, like a boulder landing on his chest, sending waves crashing to shore.

"No… *No*…" He stumbled back a step—but what good was that? His memories had already extended their fearsome talons and pierced his steaming entrails.

Chu Wanning had a scar on his chest.

His chest had been opened up! He… He…

Mo Ran was shaking. Before his eyes, Chu Wanning's sword danced beneath the moon, his footsteps light upon the flying flowers—a gallant sight. But Mo Ran felt like he had swallowed a bucket of ice water in a gulp; his heart palpitated with chills.

Chu Wanning's chest…had been cut open…

So Huaizui had done it after all? He had brought Chu Wanning to the ghost realm and fused Chu Lan's remnant souls into Chu Wanning's heart? So then, the original Chu Wanning was already long gone? So then—

Mo Ran brought his arms over his head, curling into a ball on the ground. He shuddered and didn't dare finish the thought. His heart hurt so much. He wished he could've been the one to have his heart carved out, to have his souls torn away.

Chu Wanning… He was so, so good. Why did he have to suffer such a cruel fate? To be deemed less than human, to have his

creator treat him as a lifeless, empty shell, born for the sole purpose of sustaining the life of another?

Who was the man Mo Ran had chosen as his shizun? Was he Chu Lan, or Chu Wanning?

Mo Ran felt his sanity slipping. His head throbbed painfully, and he felt dizzy and nauseated. He had no idea how long he sat there for.

Eventually, the sky dimmed. The monastery and the flowering tree disappeared. Chu Wanning, too, faded away.

Huaizui's voice flowed out of the darkness. "After Chu Wanning turned fourteen, the time was ripe for my plan. I decided that at the end of the year, I would bring him to the ghost realm and merge him with Chu Lan's souls."

Chapter 239:
Resolve

MO RAN LISTENED, his chest hollow and numb. He had stopped yelling; now he sat, staring vacantly ahead.

"It would have all gone according to plan, if not for a severe Heavenly Rift that opened in the lower cultivation realm," Huaizui explained. "A great number of commoners became refugees, and the corpses of those who'd starved covered the land."

The illusion lit up again, revealing the lead-gray sky of early winter, scattered snowflakes drifting down. A narrow mountain path revealed itself before Mo Ran's eyes, dusted with fresh snow already marred with carriage tracks and hoofprints.

"One day, when we were coming back from collecting spiritual stones at the foot of the mountain, we unexpectedly came across a child on the verge of death from starvation."

Mo Ran watched woodenly as Chu Wanning and Huaizui appeared on the path. Chu Wanning wore a heavy cotton cloak to fend off the cold and carried a basket on his back filled with spiritual stones as he walked next to Huaizui. Without warning, the youth stopped in his tracks. "Shizun." He turned to peer at the overgrown hillside. "Is that a person?"

"Let's take a look."

The two of them walked over. Chu Wanning parted the tall weeds with slender, pale fingers. Then he started in surprise, his eyes widening. "It's a little boy…" He turned to Huaizui. "Shizun, come take a look—what's wrong with him?"

What was wrong with him? Both Huaizui and Mo Ran could tell with a glance.

The child was filthy and stinking, clad in flimsy rags so full of holes he wouldn't be able to put them on again if he took them off. Even the dogs in the monastery subsisting on leftover scraps lived more comfortably. If not for the slow rise and fall of his chest and his soft groans, this child would hardly be different from a lump of rotting flesh.

What was wrong with him? What indeed.

Time and again, humans were powerless in the face of a catastrophe. Children dying in such times was a given; it wasn't even uncommon for children to be eaten by others. Only a youth like Chu Wanning, who had grown up in a monastery, could ask such a silly question, with such trepidation.

Huaizui frowned. "Don't worry, let me take a look at him. You go back first."

Chu Wanning trusted his shizun, so he made to rise at once. But before he could step away, a grimy little hand grasped at the fabric of his cloak. Its grip was so weak, like a puppy's gentle nibble.

He looked down to see a small, dirt-smudged face. The child's voice was as feeble as a mosquito's buzz, as if a soft clump of snow from the sky might crush him completely. "Food…"

He froze, uncomprehending. "What?"

"Food…" the child whimpered, the whites of his eyes the only spots of brightness in his sooty face. He brought shaking hands to his mouth in a pantomime of eating. "Hungry…" he mumbled.

Mo Ran blinked, faint recognition lapping at the edges of his consciousness. But his brain was still numb; for the moment, he couldn't place the feeling. He only knew that this scene was vaguely familiar, as though he had seen it before. He watched unblinking as Chu Wanning stilled within the illusion. His eyes went wide with shock as he finally understood what the child wanted. First he stared in helpless disbelief. Then he hurriedly bent back down, distress stark on his face.

This youth had only ever witnessed the beauty of the world. Never before had he seen a child reduced to skin and bones like a tiny, emaciated animal. The boy huddled in the snow-covered grass, wearing flimsy rags that the cold cut right through. He tugged on Chu Wanning's cloak and said two things: *food*, and *hungry*.

"Go back," Huaizui said, his voice sharp with warning.

This time, Chu Wanning didn't listen. His heart ached to see this grimy pup of a child. Shrugging off his cloak, he swiftly wrapped it around the boy. He seemed so distraught, as though he and not the starving child was the one in agony. "Are you hungry?" he asked. "Hold on, I have some congee—I have some congee right here."

He turned to ask Huaizui for the container, but Huaizui's brow was furrowed in a scowl. "I told you to go back. This isn't your business."

"How is it not my business?" Chu Wanning was taken aback. "He… Look at him. Shizun, don't you see? He just wants something to eat. Otherwise he might starve and freeze to death." Chu Wanning was in near disbelief by this point. "What's going on?" he mumbled. "I thought the world was supposed to be peaceful. How did he…"

"Go back."

Visibly shaken at Huaizui's attitude, Chu Wanning bit his lip. But he still insisted, "I want to feed him some congee…"

Huaizui's drifting voice carried a rueful note, floating into Mo Ran's ears like the windblown snow. "I couldn't convince him otherwise, so I finally relented. I handed him the congee and allowed him to feed the child we'd stumbled across. At the time, I didn't know what emotions it would rouse in Chu Wanning, or what decision it would inspire him to make. Back then, I knew nothing."

Blankly, Mo Ran watched as Chu Wanning opened the flask of congee and raised it to the child's mouth. The boy eagerly tipped his head, but he couldn't swallow it. He was close to death; he had no strength left.

Mo Ran's throat bobbed. It was as though a tiny sprout in his mind nudged aside a layer of dirt. Suddenly, this scene seemed so familiar…

It hit him all at once, like a great dragon rising from the waves, clouds of mist tumbling after it. He jumped to his feet, hands clenched into fists—he *remembered*!

"It was you?" He rushed over to Chu Wanning in the illusion, pupils contracting. "All along, it was you? You were the one who… You…"

He couldn't continue. Throat stinging, he covered his eyes with his arm. He never could've imagined it had been Chu Wanning all along.

That starving, freezing child in the grass was none other than Mo Ran himself. After he had buried his mother and left the mass burial ground, he had nowhere to go and was forced to beg for food and shelter. The illusion overlapped with his memories. Mo Ran had never forgotten the youth who had wrapped his cloak around him on that snowy night.

"What's wrong?" Chu Wanning asked anxiously. "You can't drink it?"

Little Mo Ran could muster no more than a tiny whimper as he looked at Chu Wanning with listless, heavy-lidded black eyes.

"I'll pour some out for you, if you don't mind."

Chu Wanning removed the lid of the flask and poured some porridge into his hand. Carefully, he reached up, hesitant—perhaps he thought it was unsanitary, or that the child would disdain drinking from his hand.

His worries were baseless. This, unsanitary? Between Linyi and Wubei Temple, Mo Ran had drunk river water, rainwater, muddy dregs from a ditch. He had eaten wild berries and discarded food. At his most desperate, he had swallowed worms and ants and gulped down dirt.

Crouched on the ground, Mo Ran leaned closer to drink the porridge. Those sips tasted like heavenly ambrosia, and the person whose palm he drank from was no less than a god.

"Slow down, slow down—there's more if you want it." Surprised and saddened, Chu Wanning looked at the child's filthy head lowered over his palms, lapping up the congee so pathetically and greedily, his tongue curling like a baby animal drinking water.

"Where did you come from…" Chu Wanning couldn't help asking.

But Mo Ran only whimpered in response. He had finished all the congee save for the bits between Chu Wanning's fingers. The boy kept licking at his hand, straining for every last drop, the sensation ticklish and painful both. The tickle was in his palm; the pain was in his heart.

"Don't worry, there's more—let me pour some more." Chu Wanning filled his palm with congee again as Mo Ran stared fixedly at him. As soon as Chu Wanning extended his hand, Mo Ran shuffled over and noisily lapped up the porridge.

Handful by handful, kneeling on the ground, Chu Wanning fed him the entire bottle of congee. Mo Ran had never forgotten. Through all the tumultuous ups and downs that followed, he had wondered countless times what would have become of him if he hadn't crossed paths with this person. He entertained many possibilities, imagined many scenarios. But in the end, the answer was always: he'd be dead. He'd have starved, or frozen, or been dragged away by wolves, torn open, and devoured. If he hadn't come across this youth, he would be spending his days below the Yellow Springs with his mother.

Much later, after Mo Ran became Taxian-jun, he had once made a trip to Wubei Temple to look for his savior. But after so many years, Mo Ran couldn't remember that young man's face. Faced with a courtyard full of gleaming bald heads, he felt only an itching annoyance. In the end, he'd turned and left with a wave of his hand.

The abbot at the time had been deeply shaken. Baffled as to how Wubei Temple might have offended Taxian-jun, he anxiously waited for Mo Ran to retaliate. But the next day, the emperor ordered thousands of boxes delivered to the temple. Upon opening them, the monks were greeted with a dazzling sight—the boxes were stuffed to the brim with gold.

"His Majesty does not know the identity of his old benefactor, but in the interest of fairness, he sends ten thousand gold to each monk at Wubei Temple as thanks for saving his life."

So the savior he had searched for everywhere to no avail was the very man he had imprisoned in Sisheng Peak and humiliated day and night?

All those years ago, that youth had wrapped his warm cloak around Mo Ran's frail body. And so many years later, as fate would have it, he carelessly ripped open the now-grown youth's clothes. Time and time again, he pinned him down between the sheets and dragged him into depravity. By day, he searched far and wide for his savior. By night, he unwittingly forced his savior to kneel between his legs, to bend his neck and lower his head, enduring all manner of degradation.

Mo Ran stared at the scene before him, blood vessels spiderwebbing over his eyes. "How… How could it have been you…"

In this lifetime—in these two lifetimes—his greatest fortune had been to meet Chu Wanning, and his greatest misfortune had been to wrong Chu Wanning. Such was their fate.

Everything went dark again; all that remained was the cold wind whistling in his ears, and Huaizui's distant, disembodied voice. "I asked the child if he wanted to stay at Wubei Temple for a time. But he said he needed to go back to Xiangtan to repay a debt of kindness on his mother's behalf. I couldn't convince him to stay, so I sent him on his way with some food and money. He unsteadily made his way down the snowy slope. Wanning stood there watching the whole time, until the child's figure disappeared in the blowing snow.

Only then did he turn around to go back to the temple. When I took his hand, it was cold as ice."

Huaizui fell silent. When he continued, the sorrow in his voice was audible. "After that day, Wanning asked me if he could go down the mountain to render aid to the commoners, but I refused each time. I berated him for allowing his conscience to be so easily swayed. As punishment, I sent him to Dragonblood Mountain to reflect on his behavior, where he stayed for one hundred and sixty-four days.

"At first, he asked me to let him go. Later, he stopped speaking to me—perhaps he'd lost hope. Every day, for one hundred and sixty-four days, I asked him what new understanding he had come to. I always hoped I might change his mind. But his answer was always the same." Huaizui sighed, as wispy as falling snow. "'I want to go into the world.'"

This youth had been taught that the practice of cultivation existed apart from the earthly world. But after witnessing one child's plight, Chu Wanning willingly dove into the straits of hardship.

"Eventually, he rebelled by burning all our scriptures. I feared something even worse would come to pass if we went on like this, so I released him from confinement. I thought I would find some other way to talk sense into him. In just one more year, when his spiritual core stabilized, I'd take him to the ghost realm, and all of this would be over."

Huaizui paused. "But unexpectedly, on that very night, Chu Wanning left without a word. All I found in the monastery was a letter. He wrote that despite the passage of so much time, he still felt deeply tormented whenever he thought of that starving child. He wished to travel on his own for ten days. He thought I might detain him again, so he had left in the middle of the night. I was overcome with fury and anxiety as I held that letter in my hands, but there was nothing I could do." Huaizui let out a long breath. "I had no idea where he had gone."

The illusion lit up once more, showing one of the courtyards in Wubei Temple. Chu Wanning had returned. He was covered head to toe in filth and blood, but his eyes were blazingly bright beneath the moonlight. His keenness was undeniable—like a celestial blade, painstakingly forged, unsheathed at last from its scabbard.

Huaizui stood facing him, and neither of them spoke.

In Mo Ran's ears, Huaizui's ponderous narration continued. "Ten days later, he returned, just as he'd promised. I was secretly relieved he'd come to no harm, and figured I would just scold him before sending him to his room to rest. I wasn't ready for him to express himself so vehemently."

Chu Wanning knelt and bent to the ground in a long prostration.

Huaizui knitted his brows. "What are you doing?"

"Perhaps Shizun has remained in seclusion for too long, for the world outside is nothing like what you've described. This disciple sincerely asks that you descend the mountain and see for yourself. The mortal realm is a boundless sea of suffering—it's no longer the blissful paradise Shizun spoke of."

"Ridiculous!" Huaizui roared. "Do you know what you're saying?"

Chu Wanning thought once he described what he'd personally seen, surely his shizun would no longer turn a blind eye. Huaizui's furious reaction was so unexpected he couldn't muster an immediate response. "Shizun always told this disciple to partake of the sufferings and worries of others." He hesitated. "Over these ten days, I visited twenty-three villages in the upper and lower cultivation realms, and saw a great many terrible things. If Shizun went down the mountain to take a look, you would also…"

Huaizui cut him off. "Who gave you permission to leave the mountain?!" he shouted. "Our temple here is isolated and pristine, and you have yet to master your cultivation and ascend. What makes you think you can come and go as you please and meddle in

the affairs of mortals? Human suffering is age-old; it has no end! How could one little cultivator make a difference? How can you be so delusional!”

The more Huaizui yelled, the angrier he became, and the wider and rounder Chu Wanning’s eyes grew.

Chu Wanning watched his shizun pace beneath the moon, sleeves flying, shouting at the top of his lungs, jabbing a sharp finger at Chu Wanning’s nose. Under the dark shadows of the haitang tree, Huaizui’s countenance was incoherent, fractured. Mo Ran watched Chu Wanning’s expression flicker from confusion to vulnerability, then to astonishment, to despair, before settling at last into grief.

He closed his eyes as Huaizui asked, “Do you understand your mistakes?”

Silence.

“Speak!”

“This disciple…” Chu Wanning paused. His voice was hard as steel. “Does not.”

Huaizui slapped him across the face. “Impudent!”

Chu Wanning’s cheek bloomed red, but he squared his shoulders and faced Huaizui once more. His eyes flashed with indignant disbelief. “Shizun, you’ve always taught me to do the right thing and show compassion to others. Why is it that you’re telling me to stand back and do nothing when a real crisis is before us?”

“These aren’t the same at all,” Huaizui replied through gritted teeth. “If you left right now…what could you possibly do? You’re talented, yes, but the evil in this world is like nothing you’ve imagined. What would be the point in leaving? To throw away the fourteen years I’ve spent raising you? To martyr yourself on a momentary impulse?” His words rang harsh, like metal crashing to the ground. “Chu Wanning, you can’t even save yourself. How can you save others?”

Chu Wanning looked at his shizun, gaze filled with sorrow and fury. He raised his chin, phoenix eyes misting over. Huaizui had likely never seen Chu Wanning so close to tears. That watery glimmer seemed to quench Huaizui's rage. He blinked, then said with some hesitation, "You… Ah, forget it. Did I hurt you?"

But Mo Ran knew Huaizui was mistaken. Chu Wanning wasn't hurt by the slap—he was hurt by the fact that the shizun he had revered all his life could say something so at odds with the lofty image of him he held in his heart.

Chu Wanning slowly closed his eyes. After a moment, Mo Ran heard a sentence he knew all too well. "If you don't know how to save others, how can you save yourself?"

Huaizui froze. He looked like a wooden statue shoved in the corner of a shrine, perfectly stiff and immobile.

"The plight of the common people is right before us," Chu Wanning said hoarsely. "Forgive this disciple's foolishness, but I don't understand how Shizun can sit up here with your eyes closed, waiting to ascend."

Slowly, Chu Wanning got to his feet. His robes were no longer the pristine white they had been when he set out; they were stained with mud and blood. But his bearing was as upright and dignified as ever. "If I don't cultivate to immortality, so be it."

Huaizui's temper flared. Eyes darkening, he snapped, "You little ingrate! Do you have any idea what you're saying?"

"I simply want to do as you've always taught me." Despite the combative set of his jaw, Chu Wanning was trembling, staring back at Huaizui with a wounded look in his eyes. "You taught me everything—do your principles only exist on paper? There are a million refugees with nowhere to go, and orphans dying everywhere. Am I supposed to cultivate in Buddha's shadow instead of going out and doing what I can?"

"After you ascend, you can be as compassionate as you like!" Huaizui snarled, eyes bulging from his skull.

Chu Wanning stared at Huaizui as if seeing him for the first time. His chest heaved, his hands were balled into fists, and tumult swirled in his eyes. Mo Ran thought he might spring forward, like a great dragon breaking through the waves, to grab Huaizui by the throat and make him know the folly of his sins.

But Chu Wanning only stood there, shoulders trembling. At last, the ends of his eyes stained red, he said in a ragged voice, "Shizun, I don't cultivate so I can break free from the mortal realm. Is achieving immortality the sole purpose of cultivation? If that's the case, I'd rather fail. I'd rather give up; I'd rather go down in flames. I'd rather stay among the living, to give them everything I have, and die when I have no more strength in me."

For a moment, neither spoke.

"Shizun, go ahead and ascend. After I save as many people as possible, I'll follow you."

"Chu Wanning!"

Even in the illusion, Huaizui's towering rage was palpable. Mo Ran had a vague feeling, a bone-deep dread, that this would not end well. This wooden sculpture *dared* to oppose its life-giving creator? It didn't know its place. Huaizui's eyes were scarlet, suffused with a bloody gleam. There was no one to whom he could speak about his deep dismay, his fury and shame, the secret regret buried for so long. Those emotions festered in his heart.

Chu Wanning had reached the gate of the courtyard when Huaizui's chilling command rang out. "Stop right there, you traitor."

Chapter 240:
Selfless

HUAIZUI'S OUTBURST was like the tolling of a doomsday bell. Mo Ran was overcome with a sense of foreboding. All the hair on his body stood on end, and his blood surged wildly through his veins. He had the panicked urge to flee this illusionscape, while simultaneously wishing he could rush into the past and throw himself in front of Chu Wanning to protect him.

"No… Huaizui… You can't…" he stuttered. But there was nothing he could do. All of this had already happened. He could only watch, scalp prickling, as a furrow appeared between Chu Wanning's sword-straight brows. Undaunted, he calmly met Huaizui's eyes.

"Run!" Mo Ran blurted, unable to stop himself. *"Run!"*

Chu Wanning had trusted Huaizui his whole life—he had trusted this shizun who raised him as a sacrificial offering; he trusted this father figure who had shown him kindness. Thus, even in his despair, he couldn't recognize the undisguised killing intent in Huaizui's eyes. Mo Ran stepped between them; he knew it was useless, but he couldn't bear to stand back and watch.

"Please, run…"

But Chu Wanning didn't move. Back as straight as a pine tree, he walked toward Huaizui, step after unfaltering step. He came to a stop before his shizun. His high ponytail fluttered behind him, and the wind blew his muddied robes into disarray.

Huaizui bit out each word between his teeth. "If you want to leave the temple, go ahead."

"Shizun?" Chu Wanning's phoenix eyes widened. He didn't sense Huaizui's menace; he mistook the executioner's sickle for a crescent moon in the window. In that moment he was even

somewhat grateful, somewhat elated. He thought Huaizui had come around at last.

But the knife flashed cold, swinging down with murderous speed. "The moment you walk out of this courtyard, you will cease to be a member of Wubei Temple. We have been master and disciple for fourteen years, but going forward, we will have nothing to do with one another."

Those phoenix eyes remained wide, but the joy in them slowly faded to astonishment and hurt. Chu Wanning hadn't thought Huaizui would be so harsh. He stood unmoving for a long time before his lips parted.

Beset by horror, Mo Ran couldn't help softly reciting: "Please, please go, leave right now—stop talking and get out of here."

In the end, despite opening his mouth, Chu Wanning couldn't string together any coherent thought. Huaizui fixed his eyes on him. He was staking it all on Chu Wanning's attachment to him. For fourteen years, they had been each other's sole companions. Severing his relationship with his teacher would be like running a knife through his own heart. Surely he wouldn't—

Chu Wanning fell to his knees.

Huaizui froze. His mind snagged on one thought: *Surely he won't follow through; how could he be so stubborn, so uncompromising?*

Chu Wanning pressed his forehead to the ground, once, twice… He kowtowed nine times before raising his face once more. His eyes were clear and bright, but his cheeks were wet with tears. "The disciple Chu Wanning is grateful for Shizun's care and teaching. From now on…" He swallowed. What would follow? He didn't know; he couldn't continue.

Huaizui's figure shuddered in the blustering wind. His monk's vestments flapped chaotically, wide sleeves ballooning with cold air. His expression was grave and chilly, his lips drained of color as he stared at the youth kneeling before him.

No, not a youth—a block of wood! He'd carved him with his own hands, given him life with his own blood. He'd taught him with painstaking care and attention. He'd done so much and waited for fourteen long years all to bring this vessel to the ghost realm as a container for Chu Lan's souls—not to receive an earful of idealistic drivel about kindness and altruism. The audacity of this scrap of brushwood, this discarded kindling!

Flames of fury roared up in his chest, setting his eyes aglow and wreathing him in incandescent heat. In this mood, Huaizui was a terrifying sight. Mo Ran bent over Chu Wanning, trying to put his arms around him, to shield him with his body, but he simply could not touch him.

Chu Wanning remained on his knees, never flinching, stubborn in his principles, yet obedient in his remorse. As he looked at Huaizui's twisted mien, his chest was warm with an inexhaustible passion. This youth existed entirely for the sake of others. He was only a piece of timber, an object without a soul. As he knelt on the ground, the only person he'd never spared a thought for was himself.

"Wanning…" Mo Ran's voice caught in his throat. He reached up to touch his face with fingers that passed right through. "Please, I'm begging you… Go, please go…"

There was a soft *clang*, the sound of metal striking the ground. Mo Ran slowly turned his head. He spied a curved blade on the gray bricks—Huaizui's knife.

In the moonlight, the butcher's eyes shone with a bloody gleam. He kicked the knife across the bricks; it clattered to a stop next to Chu Wanning's knees.

"No, no no no—don't, don't do this." Mo Ran had lost his wits entirely. He scrambled to grab the blade, but it misted through his hand like a phantom. No matter how desperately he grasped at it, he couldn't move it. A slender hand reached out and closed around the knife Mo Ran could not touch.

Chu Wanning's shock had faded; his eyes were placid again. The moment Huaizui tossed this knife to the ground, even his anguish began to subside. Now, he only looked relieved.

"If Shizun wants my life, I'll give it back," said Chu Wanning. "If I must remain within the confines of these walls, there's no difference between living fourteen years and living a hundred and forty."

The look in Huaizui's eyes was nothing like the monk's usual expression. In that moment, Mo Ran saw the shadow of Xiaoman on his face. He saw that youth, on that rainy night in Lin'an, on the eve of his betrayal.

"Chu Wanning," Huaizui said, low and sinister. "If you wish to sever ties between us, I won't ask you to stay. Nor do I expect you to repay everything I've provided you these past fourteen years. But you must give back what you've learned from me." Huaizui narrowed his eyes. "I will have your spiritual core."

A cultivator's spiritual core was the most important source of their power. Even a person made from wood of the sacred tree was no different. As long as Huaizui had his spiritual core, it was possible he could create another Chu Wanning. And the next time, he would make sure not to teach him about justice or principles; he wouldn't allow him to learn kindness or compassion.

He wanted Chu Wanning's spiritual core—he wanted his beating heart.

Chu Wanning looked at him for a span. A monk was chanting in the temple's main hall, his voice rising like incense smoke on the wind.

Huaizui spoke in Mo Ran's ears again. His next sentences seemed to sap all of his courage and strength; his voice sounded infinitely aged. "As he looked up at me, I thought that perhaps, when Buddha forgave the people who hurt him, he had gazed upon them like this. He was showing compassion to his killer. The spirit

put to the blade was showing compassion for the butcher covered in blood."

"No!" Mo Ran screamed.

But the blade flashed, whistling through the air. Mo Ran closed his eyes and hunched over on the ground. "No…"

Blood splattered as flesh was parted from flesh.

With a howl, Mo Ran crawled over to Chu Wanning, shaking his head, sobbing bitterly. He tried to cover Chu Wanning's wound with insubstantial palms; he tried to staunch the bleeding with his own spiritual energy. It was all useless. There was nothing he could do. He watched Chu Wanning endure the agony, casting a swift spell to stop himself from passing out. He watched Chu Wanning cut open his own chest, inch by inch, with that knife.

There was so much blood. Hot, scarlet, flowing blood.

How could he not be alive? What the knife plunged into was flesh—crimson, coppery, carved-open flesh.

How could he not be alive? How could he not be human?

Huaizui stood rooted to the spot, cruelty and menace etched into his face. But the light in his eyes was flickering, trembling, vacillating… Was this *really* what he wanted?



The illusion wavered and blurred. Huaizui's tumultuous emotions when he created this scroll manifested as the scene warped before Mo Ran's eyes. He saw countless flashes of the past materializing out of the blood, each of them vivid, each of them gentle.

He saw the eleven- or twelve-year-old Chu Wanning, standing on the shores of Jincheng Lake, having just received Tianwen. As he made to turn away, a haitang wood guqin with a curving tail rose on the lake's surface. The moment it broke the water, Chu Wanning's figure began to glow softly, as though he and the instrument were reflecting each other's light. Baffled, he reached out to stroke the strings of the guqin. "What's going on?"

Huaizui quickly surmised this guqin must also be made of wood from the Flame Emperor's sacred tree. They shared an origin and naturally resonated with one another. Surprise and excitement flitted across his face. "This is most likely your fated holy weapon."

"My fated holy weapon?"

Once his gladness passed, Huaizui's gaze became evasive. "Indeed—some people are born with a special constitution that innately links them with a holy weapon."

Chu Wanning laughed. "I have a special constitution?"

Huaizui deftly sidestepped the question. He ran his fingers over the wood of Jiuge's body and sighed. "You and this guqin share a connection. You could probably summon it even without a spiritual core… It's linked to you by blood."

The scene changed again. Mo Ran saw two figures walking on a road outside Lin'an. Huaizui trailed behind Chu Wanning, exhorting him to slow down.

He saw the steaming flower cake, saw Chu Wanning's smiling face through the mist. He saw Chu Wanning holding a palm-leaf fan in an inn, diligently fanning Huaizui as he sat in meditation. He saw

Chu Wanning eating sweet osmanthus lotus root for the first time, his syrup-sticky lips parting as he laughed in delight with Huaizui.

The scene settled at last on a lotus pool in the summer. The water was blanketed in an endless expanse of jade-green leaves dotted by brilliant pink and white blossoms. Red dragonflies zipped elegantly to and fro on this splendid evening.

Chu Wanning, no more than five or six at this point, sat cross-legged and grinning, imitating Huaizui's posture. He watched his shizun with dark, shining eyes. "Shizun, Shizun, let's play one more time."

"No more playing," said Huaizui. "I need to recite scripture in the dining hall to soothe a departed friend."

"Can we play one more time before you go? Last time, I promise."

The boy didn't wait for the monk to answer before rolling up the sleeves of his dusty green robes. As the blossoms swayed over the pond, he reached over and cheerfully poked at Huaizui's reluctant hand. His youthful voice was sweet and clear, crisp as fresh lotus root.

"You're number one, I'm number one, which flower blossoms on the pond? A lotus flower blossoms on the pond. You're number two, I'm number two, which flower blooms in bunches true? An elm tree blooms in bunches true."

Watching his smiling face, Huaizui shook his head and reached over to clap Chu Wanning's hands to the beat of this childish game, smiling as well.

"You're number nine, I'm number nine, which flower flies in the wind? A dandelion flies in the wind. You're number ten, I'm number ten, which flower has no leafy friends? Wintersweet has no leafy friends."

Blood drenched his robes, like a rain-soaked red lotus. In the courtyard, Huaizui closed his eyes.

He…was just a broken fragment of wood.

That bygone laughter tinkled in his ears.

He was a body without a soul.

"Which flower blossoms on the pond? Ha ha, Shizun's so silly! A lotus flower blossoms on the pond, duh."

He was an empty vessel, a form he would offer to Chu Xun, the tree that would secure Huaizui's salvation, won with a century of toil! He wasn't human! He didn't have a soul!

"Shizun, take half of the cake—the bigger one's for you, the smaller one's for me."

Tears spilled from Huaizui's eyes.

He was shaking terribly, trembling with fright. He sprinted over to that child—that child with the blade buried in his heart, his spiritual core already cracking, on the verge of being dug out.

Huaizui knelt, howling in agony. He was a mirror of Mo Ran, who was still trying and failing to put his arms around Chu Wanning—his sobs seemed to draw up tears of blood, as if the blade plunged not into Chu Wanning's chest, but into his own throat, into his very soul.

How could this child not have a soul? He was the one who closed his eyes and refused to look, who sealed his ears and refused to listen. All along, he had known; in his heart of hearts, he could tell. In Chu Wanning's smile, in his earnestness; in his tolerance and gentleness; in his obstinate perseverance—he had always had evidence of a soul. But because of Huaizui's selfishness, in the name of atonement, he'd feigned deafness; he'd numbed himself.

Chu Wanning had never been a wooden sculpture, an empty shell. He was a person of flesh and blood, a human who laughed and cried…

"I had watched him grow up, day by day, since he was a child. He looked like Chu Lan when he was little, and like Chu Xun when he grew older. But I had never mistaken him for either of them."

Huaizui's voice cracked like a broken gong. "He was the one who gave me half of his cake, who tugged on my hand and called me *Shizun*. He was the one who sneaked over and fanned me on hot days, thinking I didn't notice. He was the one who kept me company for fourteen years in Wubei Temple—he smiled at me and trusted me, and said I was the kindest shizun in the whole world." As if swallowing bitter medicine, Huaizui muttered again, "The kindest shizun…"

In the illusion, Huaizui grabbed Chu Wanning's hand and severed the flow of his spiritual energy. The moment his spell was lifted, Chu Wanning fainted from the pain.

Huaizui embraced that body, so full of life, bleeding profusely. It was as though he were holding Chu Xun from two hundred years ago, after the Heavenly Rift opened above Lin'an, after he'd torn out his own heart to light the path of escape for his citizens.

But it was not the same. Chu Wanning was stubborn and prideful; he had a hundred quirks that were uniquely his own. He didn't like to sleep under the blankets, and when he was finished eating, he would bite down on his chopsticks and stare into space. He never liked doing laundry and would always shove all his clothes into one bucket to soak.

These were all his habits, his idiosyncrasies. They were unlike anyone else's.

The illusion went dark again. Mo Ran didn't mind—if he had to look at that scene a moment longer, he would fear for his own sanity. Out of the darkness came Huaizui's distant, rueful voice. "Truthfully, the moment he frowned and told me he wanted to go down the mountain to aid others, that he didn't want to sit around and wait for ascendance, I knew he was a living human being.

"I was weak and selfish; I nearly destroyed the child I had raised myself. He wasn't Chu Lan, and he wasn't an offering for my redemption. He was Chu Wanning, because I created him during the peaceful evening hour. As the temple bell tolled, he came to life

beneath the dignified gazes of many gods and Buddhas. Thus I gave him his name.

"Yet this was the only thing I had given him. Because I had created him, I assumed he belonged to me, that I could use him for my own ends and sacrifice him if I wished. It wasn't until I saw him unhesitatingly slice into his own heart for the sake of his principles, just like Chu-gongzi…"

Huaizui's voice rattled with sobs; he could barely speak. After a long pause, he continued hoarsely. "Only then did I finally realize I hadn't given him his souls or his life. Those were all his own. Because… Because a weak, filthy sinner such as myself could never create a living being as pure and uncompromising as he. Never."

Chapter 241:
Truth

THE SCROLL LIT UP on a drizzling morning. Huaizui sat in a room within the temple, fiddling with a string of moon-and-star bodhi beads as he murmured sutras. A shadow fell across the threshold, but Huaizui didn't turn. He merely struck the wooden bell, its hollow *dong* ringing through the room, and sighed. "You're awake?"

Mo Ran spun around and saw Chu Wanning standing in the doorway, his slight figure blurring into the daylight.

"Why did Shizun save me?"

"No blood should be shed in Wubei Temple."

Chu Wanning watched him in silence.

"Seeing as you cut open your heart as proof, I recognize your sincerity. You may go down the mountain on your own. From this day on, you need not return."

Chu Wanning didn't move to gather his belongings. He gazed at Huaizui's familiar silhouette amidst the incense and the chanting. "Shizun," he said eventually.

Shizun. Then what? *So this is goodbye? Thank you for everything*?

Blood had seeped through the gauze bandage around his chest. The knife was out, but his heart still throbbed with pain. After giving his teacher nigh fifteen years of blind faith, all he had received in return was that pronouncement—*I will have your spiritual core.*

This, on its own, he could accept. But for nearly fifteen years, he had believed Huaizui was kind and compassionate, that he had sympathy for all living creatures, each blade of grass and every tiny

ant. He had believed the entire world was as peaceful as Lin'an in the upper cultivation realm.

But all of it was fake; Huaizui had lied to him. The realization was a thousand times more painful than the cracking of his spiritual core.

Chu Wanning closed his eyes. Finally he said, "Farewell, then… Great Master."

He left every bit of his gentleness, trust, and innocence in that dignified monastery. Those were all things that Huaizui had given him. Now, alongside the splinters of his spiritual core and the blood that had run from his body, they were taken from him.

He turned and left.

"I knew he would hate me," Huaizui said softly. "Even if I had followed him down the mountain, he would always hold a grudge against me. So I let him go. From that point onward, I knew he would remember me as selfish and callous. He never acknowledged me again, and I no longer had the right to consider myself his shizun.

"His fifteenth birthday had just passed. Fate had allowed us to walk together for fifteen years, through summers and winters, through joys and sorrows. From that day on, nothing would be the same."

Huaizui swept the steps in the courtyard. The leaves turned from bright green to dull yellow, until the twigs were devoid of vitality. Another winter had arrived. The monk stood beneath the eaves, a thick vestment wrapped around him, squinting out at the snow-covered grounds.

His face was youthful yet, but his eyes were glazed with age. Like any elderly person, he tended to drift into thought if he sat long enough.

"I was already two hundred years old. Memories of my youth gradually grew less vivid. But for some reason, I remembered the

days I spent with Chu Wanning more clearly than ever. Sometimes I wondered if this was the sort of concern parents felt toward their children… But what kind of parent could I claim to be? I was no more than a cowardly butcher."

Huaizui continued, "My yin energy waned by the day. I resigned myself to the thought that I would never atone for my sins in this lifetime. I had no desire to go anywhere, so I secluded myself in Wubei Temple year-round. Only when the haitang trees blossomed did I emerge: I'd always pick the most beautiful branch and ask someone to bring it to Chu Xun, just as before.

"I had never been a generous person, and there was only so much I could do. I didn't trust my judgment enough to try again. I imagined the rest of my life would pass like this—until the day someone showed up in my courtyard."

It was deep in the night. A flurry of urgent knocks sounded at the door. Huaizui stood to open it, only to freeze in shock at the sight before him. "You?!"

Over his shoulder, Mo Ran got a clear look at the new arrival's face—it was Chu Wanning. He had a deeply anxious look, and his complexion was wan even in the low light. Strangest of all, though it was a cold winter day, he wore only a thin summer robe. Mo Ran's first thought was that he must've given his cloak to some other freezing refugee, but he quickly realized this couldn't be the case: aside from the lightness of his robe, Chu Wanning was otherwise neatly dressed.

At Huaizui's invitation, he entered the bedroom, flighty as a trapped animal. Without a word, he handed Huaizui an enchanted censer.

A thousand words stopped up Huaizui's throat. In the end, all he asked was, "What…what happened to you?"

"I haven't much spiritual energy left. I'm afraid I won't be able to explain everything to the great master." Chu Wanning's words came out in a rush. "This censer is extremely important. I truly don't

know whom to give it to—there are too many uncertainties in this world. I don't know what he'll become in the future, and I don't know who can keep this secret and stay out of danger. I have no choice but to prevail upon you to help me."

"…What are you talking about? Are you unwell?"

Huaizui was baffled, but Mo Ran's head buzzed with sudden recognition, and the world momentarily flashed dark. He realized what was wrong with this Chu Wanning—he had a pierced ear! This Chu Wanning wore a delicate red earring on his left ear, like a tiny spot of cinnabar.

It was such a minute detail, but Mo Ran felt he'd been struck by lightning. He found himself aghast. This wasn't Chu Wanning at all… Rather, this wasn't Chu Wanning from *this world.* He… He had to be from the past life, from Taxian-jun's timeline—it was the only possible explanation for this detail. Mo Ran remembered with perfect clarity how he had condensed this earring from his own blood, infused with his spiritual energy. It was enchanted to make Chu Wanning more sensitive whenever Mo Ran touched or violated him.

Mo Ran was absolutely certain of it. In fact, he remembered his entire debauched line of thought. After making the earring, he had fucked Chu Wanning to his climax. He'd sucked on Chu Wanning's earlobe, waiting for him to shudder as he came, then pushed the stud into his ear as he convulsed with pleasure. Chu Wanning had groaned, knitting his brows and clutching the bedsheets, but he couldn't throw off the man on top of him.

"Does it hurt?" Mo Ran had said, licking a drop of blood that trickled along the curve of his ear, eyes flashing. "Does it hurt, or does it feel good?"

This sharp earring piercing flesh had been yet another way he conquered that man. It was always painful for a foreign object to enter one's flesh, no matter what it was or where it went. Mo Ran had grown only more eager and impatient at Chu Wanning's pained whimpering. He'd stroked Chu Wanning's jaw, then pulled his face

closer to share a sloppy, infatuated kiss. “It’s just an earring,” he’d rasped. “Why are you shaking?”

But it was an answer he already knew. Without a shred of pity, he’d forced the earring through Chu Wanning’s earlobe and brushed his fingertips over the stud. “See—it’s pierced you through. It’s buried inside you.” As Chu Wanning remained stubbornly silent, he’d said: “It’s snared in your flesh and blood. From now on, you belong to me.”

Chu Wanning from the past life had once come to this world. This knowledge struck terror into Mo Ran’s heart. His scalp tingled, and his vision blurred. He could hardly catch his breath as he stared numbly at the scene before him. What was going on?

He tried to gather his wits, to attend to Chu Wanning and Huaizui’s conversation, but his shock was too great. He grasped vague snatches of what Chu Wanning said to Huaizui, words like “Space-Time Gate of Life and Death,” “destroyed forbidden techniques,” and “unstoppable.”

He saw Huaizui crumple into a chair, his face ashen, pupils like pinpricks. “How can you prove what you say is true?”

Chu Wanning hesitated. “I can’t prove it. I must ask the great master to trust me.”

“This is just ridiculous. You’re saying you came here from another world through the Space-Time Gate of Life and Death? And in that world, there’s someone called Ta… Ta…”

“Taxian-jun.”

“There’s this Taxian-jun, who’s already nearly destroyed the entire cultivation realm? You discovered his secret, so you did everything in your power to open the Space-Time Gate and come to this world to change everything?”

“Not to change everything—to prevent it from happening here. If this continues, they’ll master the Space-Time Gate sooner or later. Our world won’t be the only one that ends.” Chu Wanning paused,

his eyes flickering with hazy candlelight. “No universe will be spared.”

“This is too absurd,” Huaizui mumbled. “This is impossible… It’s completely nonsensical…”

The minutes dripped past. Chu Wanning glanced at the water clock by Huaizui’s door, urgency gathering in his eyes. “Even if the great master doesn’t believe me now, you will soon understand. Before then, I ask only that you seal this censer in the cave on Dragonblood Mountain. I’ve cast the most important spell on it—the great master can allow it to diffuse on its own. The only thing you have to do is…”

Huaizui looked up at Chu Wanning as if at a madman, or an apparition.

“The only thing you have to do is to prevent anyone from entering that cave,” Chu Wanning continued. “After you see the truth of what I’m telling you, find some way to bring myself from this world and the boy named Mo Ran to Dragonblood Mountain together. The spell on the censer will take care of the rest. You needn’t worry about anything else.”

Huaizui had opened his mouth in feeble protest when a shrill whistle sounded outside. To Mo Ran’s ears, it sounded just like the one that had called Taxian-jun back into the rift.

Chu Wanning instantly paled. He fixed Huaizui with a frantic gaze. “Please—you’re the only one in this world who can help me. There’s no one else I can trust with this.”

Hearing Chu Wanning say *trust*, Huaizui froze, his eyes clouding over with age. Hesitantly, he took the censer and gave Chu Wanning a tiny nod.

The whistle blew again, sharper than before. Chu Wanning glanced outside the window, then said to Huaizui, “Great Master, please guard the cave on Dragonblood Mountain. And—if Taxian-jun appears in this world, or…like I said, if a great Heavenly Rift opens to

the ghost realm, turmoil will follow. If that happens, the great master should realize that what I've said is true."

That keening whistle seemed to tear through Mo Ran's eardrums.

Chu Wanning gave Huaizui one last meaningful look, then turned and rushed outside into the night. At first, he thought to bow thrice with hands cupped overhead, as a disciple would to his master, but his fingers stilled halfway to his chest. Finally, he closed his eyes and merely clasped his hands respectfully before him.

Who knew how Huaizui plucked up the courage to jump to his feet. "Don't… Don't you remember what I did?" he cried. "Didn't I do the same thing to you in your world? You'll never believe me!"

But Chu Wanning only shook his head, his face indistinct in the darkness. "Great Master…" His figure grew fainter, more distant. "I'm running out of time… Please, find a way… Use any means necessary. This is too important. Please find a way to convince me, to bring the two of us to Dragonblood Mountain together."

At last, he vanished into the inky sky and glassy stars.

Huaizui ran out into the courtyard. He saw a distant flash of blackness even darker than the night. Chu Wanning was nowhere to be found; all that remained of his sudden visit was the censer in Huaizui's hand. It brimmed with spiritual energy, solid in his grip—proving that this wasn't all a dream.

The vision split and sheared before Mo Ran's eyes. Images from previous scenes cascaded down like an avalanche.

"He said I should use any means necessary, but what could I possibly do?" Huaizui exhaled. "He could never trust me again; he wanted nothing to do with me. I couldn't be certain this wasn't all part of some plot.

"It wasn't until the Heavenly Rift opened in Butterfly Town and Wanning lost his life that I decided to write him a letter after bringing him back from the underworld. I deliberated at length about

what to put in that letter—I didn't know how powerful the mastermind behind this was, so I didn't dare put the whole truth into writing. But there was no other way for me to meet with him. His abilities were formidable—after all, he had become the Yuheng Elder of Sisheng Peak. I had no chance of taking him anywhere by force. Finally, I considered that his damaged spiritual core, which had never completely healed, must be giving him some trouble. With this as an excuse, I invited him to Dragonblood Mountain.

"But I had lied to him for fourteen years. No matter how sincere my words, he was unwilling to believe me…" Huaizui huffed out a deep, frustrated sigh. "I've waited all this time. When I imprisoned him on the mountain nearly twenty years ago, I went up every day hoping his attitude had changed. Decades later, I once again went to Dragonblood Mountain every day, wishing he'd return. If only he'd given me one more chance."

The old monk's voice faltered like a kite cut from its string. "I know my days are numbered; I can't wait much longer. In my last days, I made this scroll. After many painstaking revisions, I've included within it many memories I never wanted to share. But I am ultimately still a coward. I didn't want him to see this scroll while I lived… I couldn't bear the look of pain in his eyes. I saw enough of that look for a lifetime when he was fourteen.

"So, Wanning…" Huaizui sighed softly, as though a weight had settled on his shoulders. "By the time you see this…I will already be gone. I'm still very selfish. I didn't want to see you hate me, and so it's not until now, when my death is imminent, that I dare show you the truth—you and the boy named Mo Ran. I'm sorry. Back then, it was your shifu who was wrong. You're alive, you're human; you always have been."

Huaizui fell silent for a long spell. Finally he rasped, "Chu-gongzi, can you forgive me?"

Who knew if the Chu-gongzi he entreated was Chu Wanning today or Chu Xun from two centuries prior?

Huaizui said no more. A wind rose, sending shards of memory scattering like luminous snow or long-drifting seeds, gradually blanketing the ground. Two hundred years of sin and retribution, fourteen years of joy and grief, all piled up like this—

A child grinned. "You're number one, I'm number one, which flower blossoms on the pond? A lotus flower blossoms on the pond."

A youth raised his voice. "If you don't know how to save others, how can you save yourself? If I don't cultivate to immortality, so be it."

Finally, those phoenix eyes fluttered shut. "Farewell, then… Great Master."

All these snatches of the past layered and blurred like a flashing carousel lantern. In the brightest moment, Mo Ran once again saw Huaizui bent over a low table, carving the last stroke into the wood of the sacred tree.

The evening bell tolled.

"I'll call you…Chu Wanning."

The memories battered Mo Ran like waves. He rose and fell within the surf until a sharp shove sent him flying out of the memory scroll. He landed heavily on the gravel outside the cave on Dragonblood Mountain.

It seemed time passed differently within the scroll—in the outside world, it was sunset, a vision of rosy serenity hovering between heaven and earth. As Mo Ran lay there, he could almost believe he'd traveled back to the night, so many years ago, when Huaizui had let a drop of blood fall onto the wood and there came to be a child named Chu Wanning in this world.

He sprawled on the ground, gaze unfocused. "Shizun… Wanning…"

Now he understood why Chu Wanning, always strong-willed, had sobbed so brokenly in his arms. He finally understood. But the

cost of this knowledge was too high; it felt like a death by a thousand cuts.

Was it all his fault?

Because of the evils committed by Emperor Taxian-jun, Chu Wanning had spent two lifetimes trying to stop him from upending the world.

Chu Wanning's spiritual core had nearly been carved out.

The savior-gege from Wubei Temple who had saved his life. He wasn't human… He was the spirit of the sacred tree…

Every blow landed like a brick. A single one of these truths would be enough to crush his bones, to say nothing of so many piling up one on top of another. For a moment, Mo Ran could've sworn every bone of his had fractured; he couldn't move if he tried. His heart was in chaos.

His searching gaze landed on Chu Wanning, sitting in silence with his eyes closed. All of a sudden, Mo Ran's remorse coalesced into bone, his pity into flesh, his pain into blood. His desire to protect this man gave him the strength to struggle out of his fear and confusion, to rise up from the mire of those memories. Slowly, he stood and walked over to Chu Wanning.

Chu Wanning opened his eyes and looked at him. Neither spoke.

Mo Ran bent low and wrapped his arms around Chu Wanning. "Shizun, it doesn't matter if you're human or a sacred tree, as long as you're still willing to have me." He tried to hold his tears back, but his voice broke on a sob. "I'll always…"

Always what? Stand by his side? But he wasn't worthy.

Eventually he said, self-effacing and bitter: "I'll always stand before you."

I can't stay with you; I don't deserve you. I'm low and dirty, a blight on the world. But you're pure and clean. I can't stand next to

you, Wanning. So please let me stand before you. I'll block all the blood and blades for you—all of it, until the day I die.

Chapter 242:
Consort Chu

CHU WANNING DIDN'T ask any more questions about Taxian-jun. In fact, he didn't say anything at all. The unease in Mo Ran's eyes was a better answer than he could ever get from asking. Besides, he was exhausted. After enduring blow after blow, his mind was numb.

Only after a very long time did he pull out of Mo Ran's embrace and slowly get to his feet. He didn't look directly at Mo Ran; he closed his eyes before speaking with an eerie calm. "I want to go into the cave."

Mo Ran couldn't say anything.

"Since my other self went through so much trouble to set this up, I want to take a look."

"When you learn the truth, will you hate me?" An unbearably childish question, but Mo Ran had to ask it. He answered himself in a mumble, "You'll hate me."

Chu Wanning's pupils flickered; his gaze finally came to rest on Mo Ran. "What exactly…did Emperor Taxian-jun do?"

He didn't say *you*—he said *Emperor Taxian-jun*. It gave Mo Ran a thread of hope, one so slender he hardly dared to grasp it for fear it might snap.

Chu Wanning's eyes narrowed slightly as his lips parted around another question. "Was he a killer?"

Silence.

"A mass murderer?"

Mo Ran wordlessly closed his eyes.

Chu Wanning recalled those dreams he used to have, those absurd and erotic dreams. Considering how that masked man had

treated him by the Dragonsoul Pool, he already had a faint inkling as to what their relationship must've been. But he couldn't get this question past his lips. At last, he managed, "What about me? Who was I to him?"

Mo Ran's throat worked. He wanted to answer, but he couldn't. He had been running from death for so long, and today, his sins had finally caught up to him. He was like a condemned man waiting on the scaffold, watching the executioner's shadow raise the knife as he knelt. When would his head hit the ground? When?

Suddenly he was tired of waiting, tired of running. It was taking too long for this blade to fall. He'd rather rise to meet it, even if he'd end up a bloody pulp.

Mo Ran opened his eyes. "Let's go into the cave."

His fingers twitched, as though to take Chu Wanning's hand. But in the next moment he let his arm fall, fiddling with the hem of his sleeve as he walked on ahead. At the threshold of the cave, he hesitated and turned around, flashing a grin at Chu Wanning. "Shizun."

Chu Wanning gazed back at him. That sudden smile was so brilliant, so warm, as though he were exhausting all his hope and joy in a single instant, as though he would have no more use for them in the future.

Mo Ran's smile jolted Chu Wanning back to reality. He walked over, but he didn't know what to say. His heart was tied in a knot. He could only lift his ice-cold fingers and touch Mo Ran's equally cold face.

Eyes slowly widening, Mo Ran stiffened.

Chu Wanning closed his eyes and sighed. He reached down and took hold of Mo Ran's hand, the hand Mo Ran hadn't dared touch him with. As if reassuring Mo Ran, but also himself, he said, "I've…watched you grow into the person you are today. I know you're not him. You and Taxian-jun are not the same."

Mo Ran's eyes were still curved in a smile. After a long pause, he chuckled, throat tight. "Mn."

But his eyes misted over. How could they not be the same? He was the evilest person in the world, a ghost who'd fled from his past life. For him to hear these words of confidence before the end was surely a sign of heaven's mercy, thought Mo Ran. He wouldn't begrudge Chu Wanning whatever he chose to do after he saw the memories of his other self.

Mo Ran closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Hand in hand with Chu Wanning, he walked into the cave on Dragonblood Mountain.

The instant they stepped inside, the scenery of the mountain vanished.

The cave was narrow and cramped, no larger than a Sisheng Peak disciple's bedroom. A small table occupied the center, upon which sat a tarnished censer—the one from Huaizui's scroll. Tendrils of diaphanous smoke rose from the censer and filled the space. Mo Ran disliked the smell of incense, but he found he didn't mind this one, which carried a faint whiff of xifu haitang.

"What kind of spell is this?" asked Mo Ran.

Chu Wanning shook his head and hesitated. "I don't know," he said slowly. "My other self is a different person from me. I'm not necessarily familiar with all the spells he learned. Just like how Taxian-jun wouldn't necessarily know how to use a willow vine as a weapon." His gaze drifted toward the steadily smoking censer. "Perhaps we have to touch it to let it know we're here?" He tapped its side with a fingertip, but nothing happened.

Ever since Mo Ran entered the cave, he'd been watching Chu Wanning with a tender sorrow. He didn't want Chu Wanning to see the memories of his other self, but still he said, "Since Shizun set up an illusion for both of us, maybe it's not enough for you to touch it by yourself. Maybe we have to tell it we're both here."

"…Mn. Let's give it a try."

From either side, they reached out to touch the delicate floral filigree on the censer's body. The scented smoke in the cave instantly grew denser, surging like a tide to fill the entire space and obscuring their hands from view. The swiftness of it caught Mo Ran off guard. He grabbed for Chu Wanning's hand but was swallowed by the mist.

"Shizun!" he cried in alarm.

But it was too late. The mist was infused with an extraordinarily pure and potent spiritual energy, nothing like what he'd expect from an ordinary spiritual core. For a moment, he felt he was floating on a cloud, and in the next his limbs felt like they had been frozen. His body was completely unresponsive.

Perhaps he could still use his voice—he tried to shout, "Shizun, are you okay?" But only an incomprehensible gurgle left his lips before he could move no more.

Chu Wanning's predicament was similar. He called Mo Ran's name into the mist. At first he could still hear his cries, but soon, everything went silent. "Mo Ran?" He groped blindly, feeling for the edges of the illusion, but the spell in the censer had somehow turned the small chamber into a cavernous expanse.

"Mo…"

He felt his throat close up. Like Mo Ran, Chu Wanning realized with a start that he could no longer speak. He couldn't move a muscle; he'd lost control over his entire body. It felt just like those old dreams—it was him in the dream, but he couldn't choose his words or actions. He could only experience everything happening to him without being able to change a thing. His mind, already in turmoil, became even more confused. If there was something that needed to be said, why not just make a memory scroll? Why go to such trouble?

Only after a long while did the fog slowly dissipate. When he opened his eyes, the cave was gone. Scarlet candles swayed before him, waxen tears dripping down their sides. He sat before a familiar

rosewood table, tidy and uncluttered. A deep scar ran down its surface—he had once sawed into the table by accident while making a Holy Night Guardian.

The cave had turned into the Red Lotus Pavilion. Chu Wanning sat stiffly, his body still unheeding of his commands. This illusion was much like the one from Peach Blossom Springs, except that he was powerless to act on his own. He could only passively experience the events of the past.

What was the purpose of this spell? What did his other self want him to see, to live through?

The sky was darkening outside the window. Two servants he'd never seen before stepped up and began combing his hair. Under control of the illusion, he reached up to stop them. "There's no need. I'll do it myself."

A loud *bang* sounded as someone threw open the door. Chu Wanning could sense that he dreaded seeing this person. He sat up at the table, back ramrod straight, refusing to turn his head, even letting his eyes fall shut.

"Both of you, out," a familiar voice said from behind him.

The two servants set down their combs and basins, then lowered their heads deferentially. "Yes, Your Majesty."

Chu Wanning heard them shuffle out. He still didn't turn or open his eyes, but of course he knew who had entered the room. He would know that voice anywhere. With an animalistic sixth sense, Chu Wanning felt that man walk toward him, one step after another… His breath was suddenly puffing against Chu Wanning's temple, hot and reeking of wine.

"Why haven't you gone to bed yet?" Mo Ran asked.

Chu Wanning heard his own tepid reply. "I'm getting ready."

"Hmph… I can tell." Mo Ran laughed softly into his ear. "You've taken off your outer robe and removed your hair crown—you really hated that outfit, didn't you? This venerable one commissioned the

robes with the purest gold thread, and the crown is inlaid with the most precious jade. This venerable one gives you only the very best things, better even than what the empress receives—yet you still disdain them?"

Chu Wanning pressed his lips together.

"Fine." Mo Ran didn't wait for Chu Wanning to reply. "You don't like anything I give you. You've always looked down on me in your heart of hearts." He snorted. "So what? Look—in the end, you had no choice but to be mine."

Mo Ran snaked an immodest hand around Chu Wanning's waist, pulling him into his chest. This sensation, coupled with his anger, was beyond what Chu Wanning could endure; his eyes finally flew open, allowing him to take in this scene at last—

He faced a bronze mirror, which reflected the image of himself and Mo Ran. Mo Ran wore an emperor's beaded crown and was attired in elaborate robes of red and gold—wedding robes. As he held Chu Wanning from behind, he pressed close to mouth at his earlobe and neck.

Chu Wanning shuddered in fury, but not just that. "Stop screwing around."

"Ha, all right then. Then tell me, Shizun, how would you like to be screwed?"

His admonishment had backfired, earning him only ridicule. Chu Wanning seethed through clenched teeth, "You brute!"

Mo Ran chuckled. His gaze was besotted, his handsome features suffused with an intoxicated allure. Lips ghosting over the side of Chu Wanning's face, he murmured, "So what if I'm a brute. Look at yourself—I've still claimed you…through and through…"

Chu Wanning didn't know why, but a violent impulse coursed through him. He felt his fingers grasping for something before him on the table, which he thrust into the back of Mo Ran's hand.

Mo Ran let out a muffled grunt of pain.

Chu Wanning took the opportunity to throw him off. He glared at that tall figure wreathed in lamplight. “Get the hell out.”

From this vantage point, Chu Wanning could finally see what he’d used to stab Mo Ran—it was a golden hairpin, the kind a man might wear at his wedding.

“Tsk tsk…” Mo Ran lifted his hand to examine his bleeding wound. He laughed coldly. Then his tongue flicked out like a viper’s, licking away drops of scarlet blood. His frenzied eyes gleamed with a bestial light. They somehow marred the gallantry of his features, giving him the look of a vengeful ghost.

“Your spiritual core’s already shattered—this venerable one let his guard down.” Lips dyed carmine, Mo Ran began to laugh. “Chu Wanning, your claws certainly are sharp. This venerable one has underestimated you.”



"…Get out."

"Get out, get out—is that all you can say?" Mo Ran let his hand fall, but he didn't move to bandage it. He almost seemed to enjoy the pain, a perverse satisfaction coming over his face. "You love to castigate this venerable one—so why were you so silent today in front of all our guests?"

Faced with Chu Wanning's stony silence, Mo Ran continued, "This venerable one immobilized your body, not your voice. You could've screamed at this venerable one not to touch you then." Mo Ran stepped closer, stopping an arm's length away. He grabbed the wrist of the hand in which Chu Wanning still held the hairpin, his grip startlingly strong. His mouth split into a grin, teeth stained scarlet. "But all you did was spill the water for washing our hands all over this venerable one's robes as soon as I released your hands from the spell." Mo Ran paused, then laughed. "Shizun, you were ever so furious. Why didn't you yell?"

"You… Have you no sense of shame?!"

"This venerable one is shameless indeed, but then again, who can truly claim to be a gentleman? Xue Meng? I invited him to the feast today, but he declined. What would you have done if he'd come?" Mo Ran chuckled. "Would you have started shouting when we knelt to heaven and earth; would you have begged him to take you away?"

Chu Wanning's conscious mind was still deeply befuddled by the conversation in the illusion, but he could tell this body understood what Mo Ran was saying. He ground his teeth in anger, refusing to speak.

Mo Ran watched him seethe for a moment, then leaned close and licked his earlobe with his blood-streaked tongue. Chu Wanning flinched.

"Chu Wanning, the way you glare at me with such resentment in your eyes…it's like you're begging to be held down and fucked." Mo Ran yanked Chu Wanning's hand below his waist. "If you don't

believe me, just feel right here—isn't it so big and hot? Shizun, Yuheng Elder, Chu-zongshi—" Each address was more respectful than the last, but somehow, they sounded increasingly condescending. "See—it wants you so badly."

"Get—the hell—*out*!"

"That's the third time you've said that now." Mo Ran's eyes brimmed with malevolence. "Lucky for you, today's a joyous occasion for this venerable one, to have ascended to the top of the world and married a beautiful wife and concubine… This venerable one even gave the empress the cold shoulder and came to keep you company. Why are you still so vicious?" He paused before biting out two more words, laced with venom: "Consort Chu?"

Chu Wanning, trapped in this body, started like he'd been struck by lightning. Physically, he felt his stomach churn with nausea, his limbs shaking despite his attempts to control them.

Mo Ran burst into laughter, eyes glittering. "What's wrong? Are you perhaps overjoyed beyond words to hear this venerable one address you thus? Considering how I spend every single night with you, I would have long knocked you up and made you bear a bastard for this venerable one if you were a woman. How could you be expected to continue serving me in bed if this venerable one didn't give you a title? This venerable one is not an unreasonable man." He snickered.

Chu Wanning's head throbbed with rage, but he couldn't say anything. The world flashed dark. Did this rage and disgust belong only to the memories he was inhabiting? Both his physical body and his conscious soul were overcome by revulsion. He felt he might vomit, yet some part of him was still too terrified to believe what he was seeing.

Emperor Taxian-jun… The past lifetime's Mo Ran… Just what had he done?!

He was insane! *Insane!*

Mo Ran had his fill of laughter. He gripped Chu Wanning's jaw and crushed his lips in a harsh kiss, flooding his mouth with the taste of copper. Mo Ran's other hand closed pitilessly around both of Chu Wanning's wrists. He dragged Chu Wanning to the bed, shoved him down, and leaned over—

Trembling, Chu Wanning closed his eyes. He found himself pinned beneath that hot, solid, masculine body, as immovable as a great boulder.

"Time for you to do your duty," said Mo Ran. "We're married now—you belong to me. You can't escape it."

Chapter 243:
Third

THE CRIMSON SHEETS rippled beneath him, and a pungent musk assailed his nose. Chu Wanning looked up at Mo Ran's face, the illusion overlapping with those old dreams. But they weren't dreams at all—they had all been real. Long ago, he and Mo Ran had already lain skin to skin; they had already been wed. Mo Ran had imprisoned him; he had knelt on the snow-covered ground, begging to see Mo Ran…

All of it was real.

At that moment, Chu Wanning couldn't name what he felt. Or perhaps, within the swirling incense, his mind gradually merged with that of the past life's Chu Wanning. His feelings, his thoughts—all of it aligned.

He felt his robes ripped open. As his lips were captured again, Chu Wanning closed his eyes. He felt only pain. Who was he? Was he the lionhearted Beidou Immortal, or the laughably cowed Consort Chu? Was he the Chu Wanning who'd earned Mo-zongshi's sincerity, or the shizun Taxian-jun despised?

Nothing was clear. Scraps of memories floated through his mind like vivid petals upon a running stream. He tried to dredge them up, but couldn't make them out. Eventually, only the events playing out upon the bed were clear enough to perceive.

In the illusion, Mo Ran gripped his waist and tore away his underclothes. There was none of the doting foreplay he was familiar with, only brusque subjugation.

Although their surroundings weren't real, he and Mo Ran—under control of the spell just as he was—acted out all their motions from the past life. Mo Ran pinned him to the sheets without a single kiss or caress. Chu Wanning's only warning was the rustle of robes

behind him before a blunt, scorching heat pressed against his entrance.

"Shizun, pay attention—can you feel how it wants you? This venerable one is about to bestow his imperial favor upon you."

"You…*bastard*!"

Mo Ran scoffed. "Don't you still have to spread your legs for this bastard?" Chu Wanning felt a tearing sensation. With one thrust, that throbbing cock breached Chu Wanning where he had never been penetrated before.

It hurt. It hurt so much.

He hazily remembered Mo Ran's gentle eyes in the darkness, Mo Ran kissing him in the depths of the hot springs, saying to him, "It'll hurt. Listen to me—let's wait until next time."

But Taxian-jun showed him no such mercy. When that terrifying length began to move inside him, Chu Wanning felt it might puncture his gut, as if the next savage thrust would be the one to pierce through his abdomen and impale him then and there.

Chu Wanning flailed like a fish dragged ashore, but all the comfort he received was a crisp slap across the face. "It's not like I haven't fucked you before," Taxian-jun snapped. "How many times has it been—now you're acting all pure and virtuous?"

His cheek bloomed scarlet. Chu Wanning turned his face aside, hair spilling over reddened eyes, refusing to let slip a single sound or tear. He had never been more humiliated than on this night, but he would match that humiliation with haughtiness.

Mo Ran leaned forward and looped an arm around his waist, his hips bucking repeatedly against Chu Wanning's. The place where they joined grew unspeakably hot and sticky. Mo Ran paused in his movements—he wanted to see Chu Wanning's disgrace. He drew in a harsh breath and wrenched Chu Wanning's jaw to the side, his eyes dark and distant as he looked down at his face.

"You…" He had meant to speak more humiliating words, but those restrained, long-suffering eyes were unexpectedly beautiful beneath the candlelight. Mo Ran stared for a moment, then leaned down and claimed his lips in another bruising kiss. His warm, wet tongue licked roughly into Chu Wanning's mouth. As the kiss grew more heated, his thrusts quickened into sharp snaps, sinking as deep as possible each time, his thick cock pulsing inside Chu Wanning. Sticky fluid seeped from where their bodies met, dripping down Chu Wanning's thighs with every thrust…

Mo Ran broke the kiss, but his attitude became only more infatuated. His eyes misted over; whether with primal desire or deep feeling, it was hard to say. "Don't clutch the sheets—you belong to me now; you can hold onto me."

In this entire debauched tableau, this was the only sentiment that resembled affection. But Chu Wanning didn't heed him, refusing to embrace him or willingly sink into pleasure with him. Mo Ran's face gradually grew sinister again, his thrusts becoming increasingly wild.

Chu Wanning fisted his hands into the bedding, tendons straining in his wrists. He couldn't stand up to such forceful treatment, but Mo Ran didn't relent, cruelly pinching his waist and buttocks. He had no idea how long this went on for before Mo Ran roughly pulled out with a look of deep displeasure. Chu Wanning heard himself groan as Mo Ran flipped him over. His slick, spasming entrance gaped slightly, fluids from their joining still inside him. The massive head of Mo Ran's cock pressed against the cleft of his ass, rubbing back and forth.

He heard Mo Ran ask, "Isn't it big?"

No answer.

"Your husband knows how to make you feel good, hm?"

Chu Wanning heard himself rasp, as if on the verge of falling apart: "Fuck…off…"

"*You* fuck off!" Mo Ran swore. He rummaged around beside the bed and grabbed something. Chu Wanning's legs were forced apart. Then an indiscriminate amount of some cold ointment was squeezed into him.

He heard himself choke on a sob. "Mo Ran… Mo Ran, you beast…"

Mo Ran… Mo Ran.

No. That wasn't right. Mo Ran was the one who smiled brilliantly at him beneath a tree in full bloom.

Mo Ran said, "Shizun, Shizun, I want to hold an umbrella over you for as long as I live."

Mo Ran touched his hair and said gently, "It'll hurt."

Mo Ran was the one who grinned at him across waves of golden grain, who opened his arms wide for him, who fed him toasted milk candy, who lowered his lashes and smiled because of something he said, his cheeks going pink. He was bashful and innocent.

This was all wrong.

Fear flooded Chu Wanning.

Perhaps the censer had been left in the cave too long; the scenes that followed were muddier than the earlier ones. Darkness closed in. Chu Wanning's mind was blank; he couldn't see, he couldn't speak. All he knew was that he was still restrained, and Mo Ran's cock was still buried inside him, its searing girth making his scalp go numb.

Eventually, his surroundings brightened once more.

When Chu Wanning came back to his senses, the first thing he heard was Mo Ran's distorted cursing. The stinging pain of a slap burned across his face. Something cold and hard moved inside of him, soothing the terrible, maddening ache within.

It was still their wedding night. Chu Wanning could clearly recall what had happened just before this. He couldn't stop recounting the events of the past life. He knew Mo Ran had used an aphrodisiac salve on him. The drunken Taxian-jun had become increasingly irascible and violent throughout the course of the night. Alcohol and lust had burned the corners of Mo Ran's eyes, turning them scarlet.

This youthful emperor was ruled by hatred and desire. He grasped Chu Wanning by the throat and shouted, "Chu Wanning, is *this* what you want? You won't relent? Huh? How fucking stubborn can you be? You'd rather fuck yourself to death than let me fuck you?"

Chu Wanning heard himself reply. "I don't…need you…" He sounded utterly shattered. If he hadn't felt his lips move, he wouldn't have believed it was his own voice. Hot tears flowed down his cheeks. "Mo Ran…spare me…"

The man above him roared madly, "Who's going to spare *me*? Huh? Chu Wanning, have you ever thought who's going to spare me? Who can spare me!"

He pinned him to the bed and pulled out the object that had been inside him, tossing it aside. It clattered on the ground, ringing metallic—a sword, or perhaps a candlestick—had he just been masturbating with something like that?

Mo Ran touched his face, his voice crazed. Perhaps it was Chu Wanning's imagination, but it also seemed to carry a note of sorrow. "Chu Wanning, I hate you so much. You killed the person I loved the most—what am I supposed to do? Tell me, what am I supposed to do? I can only make you pay, I can only bring you to ruin at my hands… Chu Wanning…"

The man grasped his own heavy cock. In his frenzy, his first thrust went askew—the slick, hot head slipped past Chu Wanning's hole. Mo Ran gasped for breath, then lined himself up once more. Fingers digging into Chu Wanning's waist, he pressed in.

"Ahh—" Chu Wanning heard himself moan hoarsely, stretched to his limit. The man panted roughly as his cock split him open, scraping against those aphrodisiac-smeared walls. Chu Wanning shook from head to toe, drenched in sweat, his eyes losing focus… At last, lust swallowed him up.

The scene dimmed again. When he could see once more, his only sensation was boundless ecstasy. He could no longer differentiate between the body in the illusion and his real body. He was in desperate congress with that well-built man. Mo Ran was fucking him mercilessly, pinning him down on the bed. Chu Wanning sobbed beneath him, his fingers buried in the pelts they were lying on. Each brutal thrust threatened to crush him. He could feel Mo Ran's sweat dripping onto the small of his back, collecting in the dimples at the base of his spine.

"Say it… Do you want me to fuck you? You're squeezing me like such a little slut—what's the point of denying it? Fuck—I'm going to make you come, just like this…"

By now, Chu Wanning was teetering on the brink of insanity. That all-consuming desire had wrecked his soul; only his body remained, at the mercy of Mo Ran's ministrations, every inch of him needy and sensitive, impossible to satisfy.

"Say it…" The man spoke between ragged pants as he rapturously drove into him from behind.

"Mngh…"

Mo Ran sank deep, setting an unrelenting pace. The rims of his eyes scarlet, he took a deep breath, then pulled Chu Wanning's hips higher and buried himself to the hilt, thrusting in small circular motions, drawing out Chu Wanning's pleasure in his state of unnatural arousal. But he already knew he had lost. Only after slicking his insides with half a tube of the world's most potent aphrodisiac was Chu Wanning willing to submit to him.

Mo Ran had lost. But so what? He'd gotten what he wanted. His lofty shizun had become the panting, lust-addled Consort Chu

beneath him. Nothing could be more thrilling. The mere thought of it made his cock harden inside the man on the bed.

"Tell me you need me to fuck you; tell me you belong to me. Say it."

Amidst this unending torment and humiliation, Chu Wanning heard himself mumble, dazed, "Yes… I'm yours…"

His rationality was gone, his resistance shattered. All that remained was the terrifying desire burning him up.

"Don't say you want me—say you want me to *fuck* you." Mo Ran's words were laced with spite, but he was nearing the limits of his endurance. Throat bobbing, he slammed his hips against Chu Wanning's ass, driving into him with a primal urgency.

Chu Wanning's limbs were slack, unable to support him even on his knees. He was pliant as loose mud, phoenix eyes half-lidded, moaning and panting without thought. Just a tiny dab of the Eternal Passion aphrodisiac was enough to turn a saint into a wanton slut, and Mo Ran had squeezed the contents of half a tube into him.

"Does it feel good? Do you like it like this?"

Mo Ran braced himself on the bed with one arm, his other coming up to stroke Chu Wanning's chest and abdomen. The bed creaked and swayed. Mo Ran's eyes glinted with a feverish light, erotic and intoxicated.

"Say it—tell me you need me to fuck you."

He punctuated his demands with a snap of his hips. Chu Wanning trembled under the wave of pleasure; it eroded his control, stoked his terror. Finally his mind crumbled. Hoarse, gasping sobs leaked from his throat: "Ha… *Ahhh*…"

"That's right, let it out." Mo Ran closed his eyes and let his head fall back, the jut of his throat rolling. He slapped Chu Wanning's ass. "Let me hear you, and I'll make you feel even better."

"Nghh… *Ah*… I need…"

"What do you need?"

The drawn-out torture had sapped Chu Wanning's awareness of all but this moment. Shuddering, he whined desperately, "Fuck me…"

Mo Ran's eyes darkened, and his hips drove forward with sloppy eagerness. Some of his thrusts were so wild the head of his cock slipped out when he pulled back. Each time, he hurriedly lined himself up and pressed in again in a heated, wet slide. He rasped to Chu Wanning, pinned solidly beneath him, "Shizun, you're so hot inside—so wet and hot. You're taking me so well… This disciple could get addicted to this."

"Ah… Mmm… Don't stop… Ah, harder, harder—*ah!*" Chu Wanning drew in a sharp breath. "A little faster… Deeper…"

Mo Ran grasped Chu Wanning's trembling hand where it was wringing the bedsheets, wrapping an arm around him from behind. Voice suddenly surpassingly tender, he murmured into his ear, "Wanning, today's our wedding day—I'll make you come on my cock, then I'll come inside you. I'm going to fill your belly with my seed… Shizun…you're so tight…"

"Mngh…"

"Why are you only like this when I use medicine on you?" he asked, licking Chu Wanning's earlobe. "You like it when I treat you like this, don't you?"

"I… *Ah*…"

The man's cock was so thick, so long, that Chu Wanning felt like it might run him through at its deepest. Unable to speak, he could only shake his head, tears gathering at the corners of his eyes.

"Do you like it?"

Chu Wanning couldn't muster a reply.

"You don't like it?" Mo Ran's thrusts came to an aborted halt, his cock still fully seated inside him. Chu Wanning could feel it twitching inside him, throbbing in time with their rapid heartbeats.

The subtlety of the sensation compounded Chu Wanning's torment. His throat was parched, but his souls were thoroughly chilled.

The man rolled his hips a few times, slow movements like the roots of a great tree breaking soil, like a tender seedling pushing aside the dirt. Racked with spasms, Chu Wanning sagged on the bed.

"Never mind then," Mo Ran rumbled in his ear, "if you don't like it…"

Chu Wanning's eyes flew open. His heart ached, but he'd already abandoned himself to desperation. "No… Don't…" His eyes darted wildly, his lids drifting closed. "I can't take it anymore…"

That dose of aphrodisiac was hundreds of times more potent than an ordinary person could bear.

Mo Ran's voice was so low and husky, his words were difficult to make out. "Then what do you want me to do?"

"Inside… I can't take it anymore, *save me*…"

The man behind him heaved a sigh of satisfaction. He lifted Chu Wanning up and settled him in his lap facing him, then bucked upward, driving into him aggressively from below. Never before had Mo Ran fucked him so deeply, each thrust pressing so far in that his balls strained at his entrance, threatening to push in too. Flesh melded seamlessly into flesh. Chu Wanning gasped and moaned, loose-limbed in Mo Ran's arms. Mo Ran's hips moved tirelessly as he pulled Chu Wanning's face down to kiss him hard, breaths blurring between them. His throat bobbed as he swallowed. "So good…"

Chu Wanning muttered mindlessly, as though his souls had left his body to drown in this ocean of desires. "Ahh… Don't stop… *Hngh*… So hot… Faster…"

"I won't stop; I'll give you everything… Chu Wanning… Wanning…"

Mo Ran kept up this pace so long Chu Wanning wondered if he might die in his arms like this. Fluids and salve dripped out of him,

churned to foam with their incessant motion, smearing onto his thighs and staining the sheets.

Suddenly, Mo Ran hugged him tight, shifting forward to press Chu Wanning down on the bed again. Lifting his legs, he drove into him with renewed urgency, with alarming speed and force. Chu Wanning's eyes widened, soft whimpers trailing from his lips. The man thrust into him with single-minded focus, pulling out each time until only the head of his cock remained inside, then snapping his hips forward so fiercely Chu Wanning's cries hitched with his movements.

"Wanning… Wanning…" It wasn't anyone else he wanted. He cupped Chu Wanning's face, pressing their foreheads together. "Babe, I'm gonna come. Let me come inside you…"

Chu Wanning's lips parted, gasping for air like a fish on the verge of death. He didn't even know why he was calling out. All he could do was moan in the grip of that overwhelming ecstasy, the heavy musk of sex filling his nose. "Come for me…" he whined, voice breaking. "Ah! Ahh… Mnnngh!"

Thick come spilled into him. Mo Ran closed his eyes and growled, his hips stuttering, the sheets in total disarray. Chu Wanning's head struck the bedpost, but Mo Ran kept thrusting, insatiable, making sure Chu Wanning took every last drop. The sensation sent great shudders through Chu Wanning. His pale, slender toes curled. Finally, he couldn't stop himself from wrapping his arms around Mo Ran's neck.

Their ragged breaths mingled in the air between them, Mo Ran moaning as he came, Chu Wanning crying out hoarsely beneath him. Whether they found themselves immersed in this tumultuous ocean of lust because of the potency of the aphrodisiac or because of the desires hidden in both of their hearts, unbeknownst to either… Who could say?

After what seemed like an age, Chu Wanning's awareness slowly returned to him. Somehow, along with his conscious mind

came the memories of his other life, rushing in like a tide. After his and Mo Ran's frenzied union, these recollections poured in one after another.

He remembered a heartbroken Mo Ran kneeling in the snow after Shi Mei's death at the Heavenly Rift.

He remembered Rufeng Sect awash in blood, earth and sky stained scarlet. Mo Ran was laughing in delight as he ran his sword through Ye Wangxi's shoulder.

He remembered how he'd been made into a blood hourglass, and how Mo Ran had salvaged his life in the Red Lotus Pavilion to then imprison him deep in the palace, his freedom wrested away.

All of it came to him, one scene after another.

The cave had once again appeared around them. He could feel the ice-cold ground beneath him, his robes torn away, his whole body damp and hot. Mo Ran held him tightly from behind, his arms trembling. Both were drenched in sweat, and the air was heavy with the scent of sex.

He remembered everything.

Chu Wanning didn't move. He didn't say anything; he didn't lose his temper. His head ached fit to split. He could feel that during their joining, something intangible had transferred from Mo Ran's body into his own. Whatever it was, it allowed him to take hold of these memories of his other life.

But what was it? There were too many new memories. Chu Wanning's skull felt swollen and tender. He should've known what it was that they exchanged between them, he thought, but as it was, he simply couldn't figure it out.

"Shizun." Mo Ran's voice was so hesitant in his ear, like a soft bud at the end of a branch in the first days of spring. That harsh, domineering manner was completely gone. "I'm sorry…"

Chu Wanning didn't turn in Mo Ran's embrace, but at the sound of Mo Ran's voice, he could imagine his red, teary eyes, his

miserable, remorseful expression.

"I'm sorry, I still… I still ended up hurting you…"

The censer had affected Mo Ran the same way it had affected Chu Wanning—although he remained conscious, he couldn't control any of his physical actions. When he grabbed Chu Wanning by the waist, when he took the man beneath him with such unforgiving urgency, Mo Ran only felt terrible pain.

He didn't want this at all… When he looked down and saw Chu Wanning's eyes red with unshed tears, he wanted to bend low and kiss him gently, to soothe and comfort him. But his lips shaped cutting words, and his hands carried out such fierce abuse. No matter how his heart had screamed in agony, there had been nothing he could do to stop himself.

Chu Wanning lay on the frigid stone, head throbbing, so sapped of strength he couldn't lift so much as a finger. As he listened to Mo Ran's apology, his ears buzzed and his vision flashed dark, as though he might pass out again at any moment. Chu Wanning's lips parted. His desperate screams had left his voice scratchy and hoarse. "Pull… Pull out first."

Mo Ran pressed his lips together and didn't answer. He'd come out of the illusion earlier than Chu Wanning, and had made space between them as soon as he regained control over his body. But Chu Wanning's tearing was so severe he thought Mo Ran's cock was still buried inside him.

The ache in Mo Ran's heart was unbearable. Before they'd entered the cave, he thought they might encounter something akin to the memory scroll. Never had he expected *he* would also return to his past life's wedding night on Sisheng Peak. Never had he expected to find himself dressed in scarlet and gold finery, pushing open the door to the Red Lotus Pavilion once again.

Mo Ran knew all too well what he'd done. But he'd never imagined the spell would make him relive that part of his past. He had no desire to hurt Chu Wanning ever again, to be Emperor

Taxian-jun ever again. But his body wouldn't answer to him. Even worse, throughout the entire brutal course of events, he could feel anticipation and excitement singing in the depths of his heart.

In that one respect, he and Taxian-jun were no different: they both yearned to tear Chu Wanning to shreds, to make his submission total. Why try to fight it? He was still the same Mo Weiyu. He couldn't change; he couldn't escape. In the course of that violent subjugation, Mo Ran's brain had buzzed with dizzy pleasure when he heard the man underneath him whimpering in pain. Satisfaction clashed with all-consuming guilt, sending spray flying high into the air. Suddenly, he couldn't tell who he was—was he Taxian-jun or Mo-zongshi? Was he good or evil, kind or wicked?

There between the sheets, he'd touched Chu Wanning's face and spoken those same disgraceful words he'd said in the past life. Consort Chu? Yes—in the past lifetime, out of all the acts he'd committed against Chu Wanning, three were most unspeakable. The first was using a killing move against him. The second was humiliating him by forcing him to submit in bed. And the third was to marry him.

Mo Ran had stripped him of his identity and stolen his autonomy. Acting on his own selfish desires, he'd transformed that dauntless cultivator into his rightful concubine. Not many had known the true identity of the "Consort Chu" the emperor had taken. But it was an undeniable truth that Mo Ran had forced him to don the scarlet veil and bow with him to heaven and earth before the watchful eyes of the crowd. He had foisted this unwanted title upon Chu Wanning.

Even Mo Ran wasn't sure what he'd intended with this. If he'd really wanted to cause Chu Wanning pain, he could've announced to the world that the emperor had married his own shizun. He could've let everyone know that the Beidou Immortal had been reduced to Taxian-jun's bedwarmer.

Why hadn't he done so? He'd instead guarded this secret so carefully that even his empress Song Qiutong had been ignorant of

the true identity of the mysterious Consort Chu for a long time. He had fantasized about exacting revenge, about publicizing Chu Wanning's disgrace, but in the end, he'd put on a show with no spectators at all.

Yet he'd savored every moment of it. Why?

He recalled how he'd wanted to give Chu Wanning a grave after he died, but was afraid everyone would finally see through his ploy and laugh at him. He had no choice but to wield the pick himself, digging a trench before the Heaven-Piercing Tower. Within it, he buried the red and gold robes Chu Wanning had worn at their wedding ceremony.

Taxian-jun had sat in front of that gravestone for a long time, cheek in hand. He'd wanted to write:

Grave of the Emperor's Former Teacher, Chu Wanning

But these words seemed laughably pathetic, as if he were a pining, bitter widow. It would look ridiculous. He spent a long time in contemplation with Bugui held aloft before he had a flash of inspiration, an idea both discreet and intimate. Chuckling to himself, he scraped his blade across the stone:

Grave of Consort Chu

He felt as if a great weight had been lifted off his chest, yet these four words still felt insufficient. He remembered Chu Wanning's lofty, arrogant mien, those eyes that rarely deigned to meet his own. Irritation and fondness bloomed in his heart—he'd never see that kind of expression on Chu Wanning's face again. Well then, Taxian-jun would simply end up as his bitter, pining widow, he thought maliciously.

Chu Wanning had abandoned him, leaving him to live on alone. How heartless was this man, to use his own death as his last revenge?

It was too much.

He glared, stewing in resentment until his eyes were bloodshot.

It was just too much.

No—he resolved to disgrace and bully Chu Wanning one last time. He refused to let him shut his eyes without regrets in the underworld. A century later, when Mo Ran entered hell himself, he wanted to be able to point and laugh at Chu Wanning, to taunt that man clad in white: *You lost, and I won. See? You're dead, but I still humiliated you.*

Holding his blade, Taxian-jun remained in thought in front of that grave until the sun disappeared and the curtain of evening fell, until darkness descended and the crescent moon winked down from on high.

Surrounded by watery moonlight like frost, like the whisper of white robes, Mo Ran at long last lifted Bugui and carved two more words into the gravestone.

Grave of the Esteemed Consort Chu

Dust trickled softly down the stone. Cheek propped in his hand, he sank into giggles. *What a wonderful title,* he thought. With this, it was clear to all that Chu Wanning belonged to him—only Chu Wanning would have known there was no esteem in the title at all. Perfect. Now if only Chu Wanning's rage could bring him back to life—that would be even better.

Heart brimming with anticipation, eyes flashing brightly, he cheerfully ran over to the Red Lotus Pavilion. Chu Wanning's temper was awful. How could he bear such humiliation? He might as well wake up, Mo Ran thought. Then they could have another duel, another test of mettle. This time, when he saw Chu Wanning struggling with his injuries, he would allow him a move. Hell, even ten moves—he'd be willing to entertain it.

So long as he woke up.

He stood next to the lotus pond, gazing at that unmarred body.

This venerable one's already allowed you ten moves. Be reasonable now. Didn't you see the tombstone this venerable one raised for you? Aren't you mad? Don't you want to grab me by the collar and scream at me? You were always so attached to your lofty reputation, but now, all that's left is that ridiculous line—Grave of the Esteemed Consort Chu.

Wake up.

Wake up!

His face went from placid to livid with rage. But still Chu Wanning lay there, unspeaking, unmoving.

Only after a long, long time did Mo Ran finally understand that he'd gotten what he'd always thought he'd wanted: Chu Wanning's obedience. His shizun, his mortal enemy, his companion in bed, his Chu Wanning—finally, he wouldn't talk back.

In the silent, cold cave on Dragonblood Mountain, Mo Ran embraced his wounded lover. Neither of them spoke.

Mo Ran suddenly recalled that rainy night they'd spent at the inn in Wuchang Town. The man in his arms had been so uncertain yet so eager as he touched him, his ears bright red as he quietly asked Mo Ran if it felt good.

Back then, he'd vowed to himself never to hurt Chu Wanning in this lifetime, not in the slightest measure. He'd wanted to take it slow, to stoke the flames bit by bit. He'd wanted to let Chu Wanning gradually become comfortable with him before ultimately making him shudder with the ecstasy of their joining, body and soul. He'd made many plans, come up with many ideas. He'd imagined countless times what their first real union would look like: when and where it would be, whether the sky would be aglow with rosy sunset or spangled with brilliant stars, whether haitang or apricot petals would float by outside the window.

He'd never thought it would be like this—that the first time in this life they let their desire and flesh become one would be such an absurd, painful, and deranged affair.

Both of them were deeply weary. As Mo Ran lay next to Chu Wanning, he felt a strange fluttering in his chest—as though some pure-white object was trembling mightily in his heart.

That object broke free with a great rumble, like a towering tree pulled up by its roots. That pristine whiteness seemed to be wrapped around something filthy and sinister. Both struggled outward, one white, one black, bursting from his chest with all speed.

He didn't know what they were, but he had no thought to spare for it, because Chu Wanning had said *Pull out first*. He didn't reply—he didn't know what to say. Without a word, he repressed the agony in his chest. He slowly gathered the clothes that littered the ground and silently helped Chu Wanning dress. It took a very long time, because he didn't dare touch Chu Wanning below the waist. Those purpling bruises were indisputable evidence of what he'd done, of the pain Chu Wanning was experiencing.

Nor did he dare look at Chu Wanning's face. What would he find in his eyes right now? Disappointment, rancor, desolation…? Mo Ran couldn't continue the thought.

Finally, Chu Wanning's robes were on again. Mo Ran's headache worsened, and he was drenched in cold sweat. He thought maybe his discomfort was related to whatever had escaped from his heart. Enduring the pain, he wrapped his fingers around Chu Wanning's ice-cold hand. He couldn't summon the courage to look at Chu Wanning's face, so he merely stared at his fingers. Finally, he asked in a small voice, "Shizun, do you remember everything?"

"…Mn."

Mo Ran's mind stalled. His face went blank, like an abandoned mutt that'd lost its home. After staring off into space for a long beat, he closed his eyes.

He had always feared something like this would happen. But now that his trial was imminent, he discovered, much to his surprise, that he felt calm and at peace. Like an anxious fugitive led to the

prison at last, he stood in his cheerless cell and looked around. Everything he'd dreaded, all those nightmares he'd run from—they all materialized into this new reality. The other shoe had finally dropped.

While he was fleeing death, he'd never spent a single peaceful night. But now that the walls had closed around him, he could finally sleep soundly. There was no more need to run. There was no more hope, no more fear. Only relief.

"I'm confused; many things…still aren't clear to me." Whether from screaming or the heaviness of his new memories, Chu Wanning's voice was hoarse and his complexion even worse than Mo Ran's. "It's all a mess."

Mo Ran screwed up all his courage and touched Chu Wanning's bone-white cheek with fingers that trembled terribly.

"Mo Ran…" Chu Wanning murmured vacantly. "Emperor Taxian-jun…"

Mo Ran waited numbly for him to continue, but Chu Wanning closed his eyes, lashes trembling, a deep furrow between his brows.

"Don't think about all of that right now." Eyes red-rimmed, Mo Ran ran his fingers down Chu Wanning's face, stroking the wisps of hair at his temples. "Do you want to sleep? I'll stay with you."

A shiver ran through Chu Wanning. Mo Ran felt like a knife was twisting in his heart.

"Shizun, don't be scared—it's me, not Taxian-jun… I'll never hurt you again, not ever."

Chu Wanning's eyes fluttered open slightly, dewy wetness glimmering beneath sooty lashes. Mo Ran thought he would speak. But after a moment, no sound made it past his lips. Chu Wanning merely closed his eyes again and turned his face aside, his shoulders hunching unconsciously.

"Shizun…"

"I want to ask you something."

Mo Ran remained silent, waiting.

"If…you'd found out earlier that the person who gave you congee outside Wubei Temple was me…" Chu Wanning sounded bone-weary. "Would you have spared me all those years in Wushan Palace?"

The question cut straight to the quick of Mo Ran's heart. He knew. Chu Wanning already knew.

But of course he did—when Mo Ran had searched so obsessively for his savior-gege in the past lifetime, Chu Wanning had been right there in the palace. He must've known. Chu Wanning had seen it all in the past life, but he'd never said anything… In all those years they'd spent together, Chu Wanning had never told him the truth. It wasn't until today that the accumulated weight of his suffering finally crushed him.

Mo Ran began to tremble all over. He felt a lump in his throat, and he didn't know how to answer. He reached up—he only wanted to put an arm around Chu Wanning. But the instant he touched his shoulder, he could feel it shaking.

Chu Wanning was crying. But Mo Ran knew he didn't want him to see.

After a while, Mo Ran couldn't bear the discomfort. He still didn't know why the past life's Chu Wanning had devised such an illusion, but he could no longer ignore the strange sensation in his chest.

Looking down, he discovered with a start that a delicate tendril of smoke was floating out of his chest and into Chu Wanning's. It was so gossamer-pale he hadn't noticed it before. Upon closer examination, he found that the smoke was black one moment, white the next, flowing without cease from his heart to Chu Wanning's.

What *was* this?

Black smoke was dissipating from Chu Wanning's body as well, gathering into a clump of darkness that was drawn into the censer

nearby.

What on earth? He turned to warn Chu Wanning, only to discover he had fallen unconscious again. The accumulated memories of his past lifetime were too heavy a burden to bear. They had arrived in a disordered heap, and Chu Wanning's mind was scrambling to sort and reorganize them.

"Shizun."

It hurt… Why did it hurt so much? He felt there was a tug-of-war within his heart, one side black, the other white, one side pure, the other filthy. Dark brows knitted, Mo Ran struggled to his feet and made his way over to the censer. He lifted the lid with shaking fingers.

Inside was the dark qi that had seeped out of his chest—it had coalesced in the shape of a black, lushly petaled flower. Mo Ran took one look at it before his vision went dark, and he knew no more.



THE STORY CONTINUES IN
The Husky & His White Cat Shizun
VOLUME 8

APPENDIX

Characters, Names, and Locations

Characters

The identity of certain characters may be a spoiler; use this guide with caution on your first read of the novel.

Note on the given name translations: Chinese characters may have many different readings. Each reading here is just one out of several possible interpretations.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Mo Ran

墨燃 Surname Mo, "ink"; given name Ran, "to ignite"

COURTESY NAME: Weiyu (微雨 / "gentle rain")

TITLE(S):

Taxian-jun (踏仙君 / "treading on immortals")

WEAPON(S):

Bugui (不归 / "no return")

Jiangui (见鬼 / literally, "seeing ghosts"; metaphorically, "What the hell?")

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Wood and Fire

Orphaned at a young age, Mo Ran was found at fourteen by his uncle, Xue Zhengyong, and brought back to Sisheng Peak. Despite his late start, he has a natural talent for cultivation. In his previous lifetime, Chu Wanning's refusal to save Shi Mei as he died sent Mo Ran into a spiral of grief, hatred, and destruction. Reinventing himself as Taxian-jun, tyrannical emperor of the cultivation world, he committed many atrocities—including taking his own shizun captive—before ultimately killing himself. To Mo Ran's

surprise, he woke to find himself back in his fifteen-year-old body with all the memories of his past self and the opportunity to relive his life with all new choices, which is where the story begins.

Since his rebirth, Mo Ran has realized many things are not as they had seemed in the previous lifetime, a realization that came to a head after Chu Wanning's death while sealing the Heavenly Rift at Butterfly Town. During the five years of Chu Wanning's seclusion following his return from the underworld, Mo Ran wandered the land making a name for himself as Mo-zongshi.

Chu Wanning

楚晚宁 Surname Chu; given name Wanning, "evening peace"

TITLE(S):

Yuheng of the Night Sky (晚夜玉衡 / Wanye, "late night"; Yuheng, "Alioth, the brightest star in Ursa Major")

Beidou Immortal (北斗仙尊 / Beidou "the Big Dipper," title *xianzun*, "immortal")

ALSO KNOWN AS: Xia Sini (夏司逆 / homonym for "scare you to death")

WEAPON(S):

Tianwen / 天问 "Heavenly Inquiry: to ask the heavens about life's enigmatic questions." The name reflects Tianwen's interrogation ability.

Jiuge / 九歌 "Nine Songs." Chu Wanning describes it as having a "chilling temperament."

Huaisha / 怀沙 "Embracing Sand to Drown Oneself." Chu Wanning uses it rarely because of its "vicious nature."

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Wood and Metal

A powerful cultivator who specializes in barriers and is talented in mechanical engineering, as well as an elder of Sisheng Peak.

Aloof, strict, and short-tempered, Chu Wanning has only three disciples to his name: Xue Meng, Shi Mei, and Mo Ran. In Mo Ran's previous lifetime, Chu Wanning stood up to Taxian-jun, obstructing his tyrannical ambitions, before he was taken captive and eventually died as a prisoner. In the present day, he is Mo Ran's shizun, as well as the target of Mo Ran's mixed feelings of fear, loathing, and lust. Unaware of Mo Ran's rebirth, Chu Wanning has been acting in accordance with his own upright principles and beliefs, which culminated in his death during the events of the Heavenly Rift at Butterfly Town. With the aid of Master Huaizui and Mo Ran, he returned to the world of the living, but only after five years in seclusion.

Chu Wanning's titles refer to the brightest stars in the Ursa Major constellation, reflecting his stellar skills and presence. Specifically, Yuheng is Alioth, the brightest star in Ursa Major, and the Big Dipper is an asterism consisting of the seven brightest stars of the same constellation. Furthermore, Chu Wanning's weapons are named after poems in the *Verses of Chu*, a collection by Qu Yuan from the Warring States Period. The weapons' primary attacks, such as "Wind," take their names from *Shijing: Classic of Poetry*, the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry. The collection comprises 305 works that are categorized into popular songs and ballads (风 / feng, "wind"), courtly songs (雅 / ya, "elegant"), or eulogies (颂 / song, "ode").

SISHENG PEAK

Xue Meng

薛蒙 Surname Xue; given name Meng, "blind/ignorant"

COURTESY NAME: Ziming (子明 / "bright/clever son")

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Fire

The “darling of the heavens,” Chu Wanning’s first disciple, Xue Zhengyong and Madam Wang’s son, and Mo Ran’s cousin. Proud, haughty, and fiercely competitive, Xue Meng can at times be impulsive and rash. He often clashes with Mo Ran, especially when it comes to their shizun, whom he hugely admires. His weapon is the scimitar Longcheng.

Shi Mei

师昧 Surname Shi; given name Mei, “to conceal”

COURTESY NAME: Mingjing (明净 / “bright and clean”)

EARLY NAME(S): Xue Ya (薛丫 / Surname Xue, given name Ya, “little girl”)

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Water

Xue Meng’s close friend, Chu Wanning’s second disciple, and Mo Ran’s boyhood crush. Gentle, kind, and patient, with beautiful looks to match, Shi Mei often plays peacemaker when his fellow disciples argue, which is often. Where Mo Ran and Xue Meng are more adept in combat, he specializes in the healing arts. In the previous lifetime, he died during the events of the Heavenly Rift at Butterfly Town, but in this lifetime, it is Chu Wanning who dies in his stead.

Xue Zhengyong

薛正雍 Surname Xue; given name Zhengyong, “righteous and harmonious”

WEAPON: Fan that reads “Xue is Beautiful” on one side and “Others are Ugly” on the opposite.

The sect leader of Sisheng Peak, Xue Meng’s father, and Mo Ran’s uncle. Jovial, boisterous, and made out of 100 percent wifeguy material, Xue Zhengyong takes his duty to protect the common people of the lower cultivation realm very much to heart.

Madam Wang (王夫人)

Xue Meng's mother, lady of Sisheng Peak, and Mo Ran's aunt. Timid and unassuming, she originally hails from Guyueye Sect, having once been Jiang Xi's shijie, and specializes in the healing arts.

A-Li (阿狸)

Madam Wang's cat. Not pregnant, just fat.

Veggiebun (菜包)

A new addition to Sisheng Peak, a fat orange cat with a striped forehead that only eats fish and no other meat.

SISHENG PEAK ELDERS

The names of Sisheng Peak's elders vary in origin. Most of their names come from the constellation Ursa Major, such as Chu Wanning's "Yuheng." Three elders take their names from the Sha Po Lang star triad used in a form of fortune-telling based on Chinese astrology.

Jielü Elder

戒律长老 Jielü, "discipline"

In charge of meting out discipline.

Xuanji Elder

璇玑长老 Xuanji, "Megrez, the delta Ursae Majoris star"

Kind and gentle; practices an easy cultivation method. Popular with the disciples.

Lucun Elder

禄存长老 Lucun, "Phecda, the gamma Ursae Majoris star"

Beautiful and foppish. Has a habit of phrasing things in a questionable manner.

Qisha Elder

七杀长老 Qisha, "Polis, the Power Star in Sha Po Lang"

Very done with Lucun Elder.

Pojun Elder

破军长老 Pojun, "Alkaid, the Ruinous Star in Sha Po Lang"

Forthright and spirited.

Tanlang Elder

贪狼长老 Tanlang, "Dubhe, the Flirting Star in Sha Po Lang"

Sardonic and ungentle with his words. Skilled in the healing arts, and on pretty bad terms with Chu Wanning.

RUFENG SECT

Ye Wangxi

叶忘昔 Surname Ye; given name Wangxi, "to forget the past"

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Earth

A disciple of Rufeng Sect, the adopted child of Rufeng Sect's chief elder. Highly regarded by the sect leader of Rufeng Sect, and a competent, chivalric, and upright individual. Noted by Mo Ran to

have been second only to Chu Wanning in the entire cultivation world, in the previous lifetime.

Nangong Si

南宫驷 Surname Nangong; given name Si, "to ride," or "horse"

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Fire

The only son of Rufeng Sect's leader, who in their previous lifetime died before Mo Ran's ascension. Brash, headstrong, and volatile in temperament. He rides on his faewolf, has a hearty appetite for meat and wine, and an antagonistic relationship with Ye Wangxi. Rufeng Sect's downfall thwarted his planned wedding to Song Qiutong. Now, he and Ye Wangxi, his devoted companion since childhood, are working to track down the perpetrator. His holy weapon is the jade bow, Mantuo.

Naobaijin

瑙白金 Nao, "carnelian"; bai, "white"; jin, "gold"

Nangong Si's faewolf. Thrice the height of a human, with carnelian-red eyes, snow-white fur, and gold claws.

Luo Fenghua

罗枫华 Surname Luo; given name Fenghua, "flourishing maple"

The former shizun of Nangong Liu and Nangong Xu, and Rufeng Sect's only leader from outside the Nangong family. Currently deceased.

Song Qiutong

宋秋桐 Surname Song; given name Qiutong, "autumn, tung tree"

A Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast who bears a resemblance to Shi Mei. After being rescued by Ye Wangxi, she joins Rufeng Sect as a disciple and eventually gets engaged to Nangong Si. In the previous lifetime, Taxian-jun took her as his wife and empress after burning Rufeng Sect. She also shares a name with a character in *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

Nangong Liu

南宫柳 Surname Nangong; given name Liu, "willow"

Leader of Rufeng Sect and father to Nangong Si. Rumored to be the second-richest person in the cultivation world. Has a gifted tongue for flattery. Seems to have some negative history with Chu Wanning.

Xu Shuanglin (Nangong Xu)

徐霜林 (南宫絮) Surname Xu; given name Shuanglin, "frost, forest" (Surname Nangong; given name Xu, "willow fluff")

The embittered brother of Nangong Liu and former disciple of Luo Fenghua. After faking his death, he adopted the false identity of Xu Shuanglin, under which he took in Ye Wangxi as his adoptive daughter and posed as one of Rufeng Sect's elders.

Rong Yan

容嫣 Surname Rong; given name Yan, "beautiful"

Nangong Liu's wife and the mother of Nangong Si. She passed away many years ago when Nangong Si was still young.

Nangong Changying

南宫长英 Surname Nangong; given name Changying, "lasting, hero"

The founder of Rufeng Sect.

GUYUEYE SECT

Jiang Xi

姜曦 Surname Jiang; given name Xi, "dawn, sunshine"

COURTESY NAME: Yechen (夜沉 / "deep night")

The aloof, haughty sect leader of Guyueye Sect. Rumored to be the richest person in the cultivation world. Despite his age, he looks to be in his twenties due to his cultivation method. His weapon is the longsword Xuehuang.

Hua Binan (Hanlin the Sage)

华碧楠 (寒鳞圣手) Surname Hua; given name Binan, "jade, cedar" (Hanlin, "cold, scales"; shengshou, "highly skilled, sage doctor")

An elder of Guyueye Sect. Highly skilled at refining pills and medicines, and renowned as the finest medicinal zongshi around. He wears a hat and veil that reveal only his eyes.

OTHER CHARACTERS

Mei Hanxue

梅含雪 Surname Mei; given name Hanxue, "to hold, snow"

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Wood, Water, Fire (?)

A striking cultivator with pale gold hair and jade green eyes, Mei Hanxue is the head disciple of Kunlun Taxue Palace who stayed

with the Xue family at Sisheng Peak for a short time as a child. He is skilled in various arts, including dance and playing musical instruments, and is an appreciator of wine and song. Known as "Da-shixiong" to the lady cultivators who flock around him, as well as by less flattering epithets to others, namely Xue Meng and Ye Wangxi. His weapon is the longsword Shuofeng.

Master Xuanjing (玄镜大师)

Abbot of Wubei Temple.

Master Huaizui

怀罪 Huai, "to bear, to think of"; zui, "sins, guilt, blame"

A monk of Wubei Temple. Renowned in the cultivation world for his choice to remain in the mortal realm despite having achieved enlightenment and being able to ascend to immortality. Master Huaizui has been in seclusion in Wubei Temple for over a century, and is reportedly able to wield the "Rebirth" technique of the three forbidden techniques. Despite his age, his physical appearance is that of a man in his early thirties. He wielded Rebirth, one of the three forbidden techniques, to bring Chu Wanning back from the underworld.

Heart-Pluck Willow

摘心柳 Zhaixin Liu, "Heart-Pluck Willow"

The spirit of the willow tree in Jincheng Lake, which shelters Gouchen the Exalted's arsenal of holy weapons.

Li Wuxin

李无心 Surname Li; given name Wuxin, "'an empty state of consciousness' in buddhist meditation"

Leader of the recently established Bitan Manor. A man in his fifties, with a pair of long, flowing whiskers. Smooth-talking and somewhat condescending to those he views as beneath himself.

Mo Ran's Mother (Unnamed)

Mo Ran's mother, who raised him on her own. A talented singer and dancer, she performed on the streets to earn money to keep Mo Ran and herself fed. Compassionate and kind despite the misery of her circumstances, she is described by Mo Ran as his first moral "lighthouse."

Ma Yun (马芸)

Sect leader of Taobao Estate. Rumored to be the third richest person in the cultivation world.

Fake "Gouchen the Exalted"

勾陈上宫 Gouchen, "Curved Array, part of the Ursa Minor constellation"; shanggong, "exalted")

An enigmatic figure who pretended to be the real Gouchen the Exalted, the God of Weaponry. He is in truth a corpse controlled by a white chess piece in a mysterious Zhenlong Chess Formation.

Master Tianchan

天禅大师 Tianchan, "heavenly, meditation"

Sect leader of Wubei Temple prior to Master Xuanjing.

Third Lady Sun

孙三娘 Surname Sun; title Sanniang, "Third lady"

The richest merchant on Flying Flower Isle, a lady in her fifties who seems to value money and little else.

Zhen Congming

甄淙明 Surname Zhen; given name Congming, "water gurgling, bright/clever"

The thirteenth direct disciple of Li Wuxin. Ignorant, and ignorant of his own ignorance. His name is a homonym for the phrase "very smart."

Huang Xiaoyue

黄啸月 Surname Huang; given name Xiaoyue, "whistle, moon"

Current sect leader of Jiangdong Hall, cousin to a former sect leader of Jiangdong Hall, and cousin-in-law to the previous sect leader, Qi Liangji.

Song Qiao; Song Xingyi (Jade-Hearted Lord)

宋乔; 宋星移 (化碧之尊) Surname Song; given name Qiao, "tall"

Courtesy name: Xingyi (星移, "shifting stars")

The last zongshi from the Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast tribe, who subdued a phoenix descended from the Vermilion Bird hundreds of years ago.

Sects and Locations

THE TEN GREAT SECTS

The cultivation world is divided into the upper and lower cultivation realms. Most of the ten great sects are located within the upper cultivation realm, while Sisheng Peak is the only great sect within the lower cultivation realm.

Sisheng Peak

死生之巅 Sisheng zhi dian, "the peak of life and death"

A sect in the lower cultivation realm located in modern-day Sichuan. It sits near the boundary between the mortal realm and the ghost realm, and was founded relatively recently by Xue Zhengyong and his brother. The uniform of Sisheng Peak is light armor in dark blue with silver trim, and members of the sect practice cultivation methods that do not require abstinence from meat or other foods. The sect's name refers to both its physical location in the mountains as well as the metaphorical extremes of life and death. Xue Zhengyong named many locations in Sisheng Peak after places and entities in the underworld because the sect is located in an area thick with ghostly yin energy, and he is furthermore not the sort to think up conventionally nice-sounding, formal names.

Aaaaah (啊啊啊) and Waaaah Cliffs (哇哇哇)

Where Frostsky Hall is located. Named by Xue Zhengyong as an expression of the grief he felt in the days following his brother's death.

Frostsky Hall (霜天殿)

A hall in Sisheng Peak where bodies are kept until burial.

Heaven-Piercing Tower (通天塔)

The location where Mo Ran first met Chu Wanning as well as the location where, in his past life, he laid himself to rest. It's where Sisheng Peak imprisons the spirits and demons they exorcise.

Loyalty Hall (丹心殿)

The main hall of Sisheng Peak. Taxian-jun renamed it Wushan Palace (巫山殿) when he took over the sect.

Melodic Springs (妙音池)

The communal bath of Sisheng Peak.

Mengpo Hall (孟婆堂)

The dining hall at Sisheng Peak. Named after the mythological old woman who distributes memory-erasing soup to souls before they are reborn.

Platform of Sin and Virtue (善恶台)

A platform where public events in Sisheng Peak, including punishment and announcements, are carried out.

Red Lotus Pavilion (红莲水榭)

Chu Wanning's residence. An idyllic pavilion surrounded by rare red lotuses. Some have been known to call it "Red Lotus Hell" or the "Pavilion of Broken Legs." In the previous lifetime, Chu Wanning's body was kept at the Red Lotus Pavilion after his death, preserved by Taxian-jun's spiritual energy.

Silk-Rinse Hall (浣纱堂)

The tailoring hall of Sisheng Peak, which creates and tailors clothing for members of the sect.

Three Lives Platform (三生台)

A platform in Sisheng Peak. Named after the mythological stone in the underworld located by Naihe Bridge that records a soul's past, present, and future lives.

Dancing Sword Platform (舞剑坪)

A platform in Sisheng Peak with jade railings.

Moonlight Confectionery (月晟斋)

A candy store that sells its best candy at one copper coin apiece.

Crane's Return Hill (鹤归坡)

The graveyard of Wuchang Town.

Linyi Rufeng Sect

临沂儒风门 Rufeng, "honoring Confucian ideals"

A prosperous sect in the upper cultivation realm located in Linyi, a prefecture in modern-day Shandong Province. Its seventy-two cities were burned to the ground by Taxian-jun in his lifetime, and by Xu Shuanglin in the present timeline.

Dai City (岱城)

A mildly prosperous city by the foot of Dawning Peak. Caters to traveling cultivators on their way to Jincheng Lake.

Golden Drum Tower (金鼓塔)

A tower in Rufeng Sect beneath which demonic spirits are locked up and suppressed.

Flying Flower Isle (飞花岛)

A modest, ring-shaped island located in the East Sea close to Linyi, Flying Flower Isle is remote and sparsely populated primarily by fishermen.

Panlong Range (磐龙群山)

A mountain range that surrounds Mount Jiao, and which can only be traversed on foot for travelers who wish to climb Mount Jiao.

Mount Jiao (蛟山)

One of the four great evil mountains of the cultivation realm, a relic of its bloody past. It also serves as the burial grounds for Rufeng disciples, earning it the moniker of Rufeng Sect's heroes' tomb.

Dragonsoul Pool (龙魂池)

The blood pool where a demon dragon's primordial spirit slumbers, and where Rufeng Sect makes sacrifices to the dragon.

Kunlun Taxue Palace

昆仑踏雪宫 Taxue, "stepping softly across snow"

A sect in the upper cultivation realm located on the Kunlun Mountain range. Its name refers to both the physical location of the sect in the snowy Kunlun Mountain range and the ethereal grace of the cultivators within the sect.

Guyueye

孤月夜 Guyueye, "a lonely moon in the night sky"

A sect in the upper cultivation realm located on Rainbell Isle. They focus on the medicinal arts. The name is a reference to the solitary and isolated nature of Guyueye—the island is a lone figure in the water, much like the reflection of the moon, cold and aloof.

Rainbell Isle (霖铃屿)

Not an actual island, but the back of an enormous ancient tortoise, which was bound to the founder of the sect by a blood pact to carry the entirety of Guyueye sect on its shell.

Xuanyuan Pavilion

A subsidiary operation of Guyueye, and a trading post well known in the cultivation world. Xuanyuan is a name for the Yellow Emperor, a legendary Chinese historical figure and deity, who was one of the Three Sovereigns and Five Deities alongside Fuxi.

Fragrance Inn

An inn on Rainbell Isle.

Wubei Temple

无悲寺 wubei, "without sadness/grief"

A sect in the upper cultivation realm. Disciples of Wubei Temple are monks.

Dragonblood Mountain (龙血山)

A mountain near Wubei Temple.

Bitan Manor

碧潭庄 bitan, "green pool"

A recently established and up-and-coming sect in the upper cultivation realm. Barriers are *not* their specialty.

Taobao Estate

桃宝山庄 Taobao, "Peach Treasure"

A sect in the upper cultivation realm located in West Lake.

Jiangdong Hall

江东堂 Jiangdong, the south bank of the Yangtze River

A sect in the upper cultivation realm. Qi Liangji became their new sect leader after the death of her husband, the previous sect leader.

Huohuang Pavilion

火凰阁 Huohuang, "fire, phoenix"

A sect in the upper cultivation realm.

Shangqing Pavilion

上清阁 Shangqing, "towards heaven"

One of the ten great sects, located in the upper cultivation realm. Shangqing Pavilion and Wubei Temple are the only two sects of the ten great sects to explicitly forbid sexual relationships and dual cultivation.

Tianyin Pavilion

天音阁 tianyin, "heavenly/divine sound"

An independent organization set up by the ten great sects that oversees trials and the imprisonment of criminals. They manage a prison that is reserved for criminals who have committed heinous crimes.

OTHER

Spiritual Mountain (灵山)

Where inter-sect meetings and competitions are held.

House of Drunken Jade (醉玉楼)

A high-class pleasure house in Xiangtan, famed for its theater, star songstress, and food. It burned down not long before the events of the current timeline.

Butterfly Town (彩蝶镇)

A town located near Baitou Mountain, noted for its relative prosperity compared to its neighbors. Its specialty exports are flowers, fragrance, and perfume powder. It also cleaves to the tradition of ghost marriages.

Dawning Peak (旭映峰)

A sacred mountain located in the upper cultivation realm, within the territory of Linyi Rufeng Sect. Known as the place where Gouchen the Exalted forged the Heavenly Emperor's sword, it is now a pilgrimage site for cultivators seeking holy weapons.

Jincheng Lake (金成池)

A lake at the summit of Dawning Peak that remains frozen over year-round. According to legend, it was formed by a drop of Gouchen the Exalted's blood, shed as he forged the Heavenly Emperor's holy sword.

Yunmeng Marsh

云梦泽 Yunmeng, "Cloud dream"

A marsh that was plagued by a carp spirit for many years.

Peach Blossom Springs (桃花源)

Home of the feathered tribe, located beyond the maze of Mount Jiuhua and within the land of the immortals. *The Peach Blossom Spring* is a fable written by Chinese poet Tao Yuanming, in which the eponymous setting is an ethereal utopia where people live a peaceful, prosperous existence in harmony with nature, unaware of the outside world. In popular culture, the setting has become a symbol of an ideal world, and it has been depicted in many paintings, poems, music, and so forth.

Baidi City (白帝城)

A town in Sichuan, not far from Sisheng Peak.

Mount Huang (凰山)

One of the four great evil mountains of the cultivation realm, a relic of its bloody past.

Name Guide

Courtesy Names

Courtesy names were a tradition reserved for the upper class and were typically granted at the age of twenty. While it was generally a male-exclusive tradition, there is historical precedent for women adopting courtesy names after marriage. It was furthermore considered disrespectful for peers of the same generation to address one another by their birth name, especially in formal or written communication. Instead, one's birth name was used by elders, close friends, and spouses.

This tradition is no longer practiced in modern China, but is commonly seen in wuxia and xianxia media. As such, many characters in these novels have more than one name in these stories, though the tradition is often treated malleably for the sake of storytelling. For example, in *Husky*, characters receive their courtesy names at the age of fifteen rather than twenty.

Diminutives, nicknames, and name tags

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

Da-: A prefix meaning "eldest."

Doubling: Doubling a syllable of a person's name can be a nickname, i.e. "Mengmeng"; it has childish or cutesy connotations.

-er: A word for "son" or "child." Added to a name, it expresses affection. Similar to calling someone "Little" or "Sonny." Always a suffix.

Xiao-: A diminutive meaning "little." Always a prefix.

Family

All of these terms can be used alone or with the person's name.

Bobo: Paternal uncle (father's elder brother), but also informally a term of address for someone older than one's father.

Dabo: Brother-in-law (husband's elder brother), but also informally a term of address for someone older than one's father.

Di/Didi: Younger brother or a younger male friend.

Ge/Gege: Older brother or an older male friend.

Jie/Jiejie/Zizi: Older sister or an older female friend; "zizi" is a regional variant of "jieije."

Mei/Meimei: Younger sister or a younger female friend.

Cultivation

-jun: A term of respect, often used as a suffix after a title.

Daozhang/Xianjun/Xianzhang: Polite terms of address for cultivators, equivalent to "Mr. Cultivator." Can be used alone as a title or attached to someone's family name. Xianjun has an implication of immortality.

Qianbei: A respectful title or suffix for someone older, more experienced, and/or more skilled in a particular discipline. Not to be used for blood relatives.

Shizhu: "Benefactor, alms-giver." A respectful term used by Buddhist and Taoist monks and priests to address laypeople.

Xianzhu: "Immortal lord/leader." Used in *Husky* as a respectful title for Eighteen, the leader of Peach Blossom Springs.

Zongshi: A title or suffix for a person of particularly outstanding skill; largely only applied to cultivators in the story of *Husky*.

Cultivation Sects

Shizun: Teacher/master. For one's master in one's own sect. Gender-neutral. Literal meaning is "honored/venerable master" and is a more respectful address, though Shifu is not disrespectful.

Shizu: Grand-teacher/master. For the master of one's master.

Shixiong/Shige: Older martial brother. For senior male members of one's own sect. Shige is a more familiar variant.

Shijie: Older martial sister. For senior female members of one's own sect.

Shidi: Younger martial brother. For junior male members of one's own sect.

Shimei: Younger martial sister. For junior female members of one's own sect.

Shiniang: Wife of shizun/shifu.

Zhangmen/Zhuangzhu/ Zunzhu: "Sect leader/Manor leader/Esteemed leader." Used to refer to the leader of the sect. Can be used on its own or appended to a family name, e.g., Xue-zunzhu.

Other

Gong/gonggong: A title or suffix. Can be used to refer to an elderly man, a man of high status, a grandfather, a father-in-law, or in a palace context, a eunuch.

Gongzi: Young master of an affluent household, or a polite way to address young men.

Taizi: "Crown prince." A respectful title of address for the next in line to the throne.

Yifu: Person formally acknowledged as one's father; sometimes a "godfather."

Pronunciation Guide

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of mainland China, and pinyin is the official system of romanization in which it is written. As Mandarin is a tonal language, pinyin uses diacritical marks (e.g., ā, á, ǎ, à) to indicate these tonal inflections. Most words use one of four tones, though some (as in "de" in the title below) are a neutral tone. Furthermore, regional variance can change the way native Chinese speakers pronounce the same word. For those reasons and more, please consider the guide below a simplified introduction to pronunciation of select character names and sounds from the world of *Husky*.

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com

NAMES

Èrhā hé tā de bái māo shī zūn

Èr as in **uh**

Hā as in **ha**rdy

Hé as in **hurt**

Tā as in **ta**rdy

De as in **di**rt

Bái as in **bye**

Māo as in **mou**th

Shī as in **shh**

Z as in **z**oom, ūn as in harp**oon**

Mò Rán

Mò as in **mo**ron

Rán as in **run**ning

Chǔ Wǎnníng

Chǔ as in **choo**se

Wǎn as in **wan**ting

Níng as in run**ning**

Xuē Méng

X as in the **s** in **s**ilk, uē as in **weh**

M as in the **m** in **m**other, é as in **uh**, **ng** as in so**ng**

Shī Mèi

Shī as in **shh**

Mèi as in **may**

GENERAL CONSONANTS

Some Mandarin Chinese consonants sound very similar, such as z/c/s and zh/ch/sh. Audio samples will provide the best opportunity to learn the difference between them.

X: somewhere between the **sh** in **sh**eep and **s** in **s**ilk

Q: a very aspirated **ch** as in **ch**arm

C: **ts** as in pan**ts**

Z: **z** as in **z**oom

S: **s** as in **s**ilk

CH: **ch** as in **ch**arm

ZH: **dg** as in do**dg**e

SH: **sh** as in **sh**ave

G: hard **g** as in **g**raphic

GENERAL VOWELS

The pronunciation of a vowel may depend on its preceding consonant. For example, the "i" in "shi" is distinct from the "i" in "di." Vowel pronunciation may also change depending on where the vowel appears in a word, for example the "i" in "shi" versus the "i" in "ting." Finally, compound vowels are often—though not always—pronounced as conjoined but separate vowels. You'll find a few of the trickier compounds below.

IU: as in **ewe**

IE: **ye** as in **ye**s

UO: **war** as in **war**m

APPENDIX



Glossary

Glossary

While not required reading, this glossary is intended to offer further context for the many concepts and terms utilized throughout this novel as well as provide a starting point for learning more about the rich culture from which these stories were written.

GENRES

Danmei

Danmei (耽美 / "indulgence in beauty") is a Chinese fiction genre focused on romanticized tales of love and attraction between men. It is analogous to the BL (boys' love) genre in Japanese media and is better understood as a genre of plot than a genre of setting. For example, though many danmei novels feature wuxia or xianxia settings, others are better understood as tales of sci-fi, fantasy, or horror.

Wuxia

Wuxia (武侠 / "martial heroes") is one of the oldest Chinese literary genres and consists of tales of noble heroes fighting evil and injustice. It often follows martial artists, monks, or rogues who live apart from the ruling government, which is often seen as useless or corrupt. These societal outcasts—both voluntary and otherwise—settle disputes among themselves, adhering to their own moral codes over the law.

Characters in wuxia focus primarily on human concerns, such as political strife between factions and advancing their own personal sense of justice. True wuxia is low on magical or supernatural elements. To Western moviegoers, a well-known example is *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

Xianxia

Xianxia (仙侠 / "immortal heroes") is a genre related to wuxia that places more emphasis on the supernatural. Its characters often strive to become stronger, with the end goal of extending their lifespan or achieving immortality.

Xianxia heavily features Daoist themes, while cultivation and the pursuit of immortality are both genre requirements. If these are not the story's central focus, it is not xianxia. *Husky* is considered part of both the danmei and xianxia genres.

TERMINOLOGY

Barriers: A type of magical shield. In *Husky*, a barrier separates the mortal realm and the ghost realm, and Chu Wanning is noted to be especially skilled in creating barriers.

Classical Chinese Chess (weiqi): Weiqi is the oldest known board game in human history. The board consists of a many-lined grid upon which opponents play unmarked black and white stones as game pieces to claim territory.

Colors:

WHITE: Death, mourning, purity. Used in funerals for both deceased and the mourners.

RED: Happiness, good luck. Used for weddings.

PURPLE: Divinity and immortality; often associated with nobility, homosexuality (in the modern context), and demonkind (in the xianxia genre).

Courtesy Names: A courtesy name is given to an individual when they come of age. (*See Name Guide for more information*.)

Cultivation/cultivators: Cultivators are practitioners of spirituality and the martial arts. They seek to gain understanding of the will of the universe while also increasing personal strength and extending their lifespan.

Cut-sleeve: A term for a gay man. Comes from a tale about an emperor's love for, and relationship with, a male politician. The

emperor was called to the morning assembly, but his lover was asleep on his robe. Rather than wake him, the emperor cut off his own sleeve.

Dragon: Great beasts who wield power over the weather. Chinese dragons differ from their Western counterparts as they are often benevolent, bestowing blessings and granting luck. They are associated with the Heavens, the Emperor, and yang energy.

Dual Cultivation: A cultivation technique involving sex between participants that is meant to improve cultivation prowess. Can also be used as a simple euphemism for sex.

Eyes: Descriptions like "phoenix eyes" or "peach-blossom eyes" refer to eye shape. Phoenix eyes have an upturned sweep at their far corners, whereas peach-blossom eyes have a rounded upper lid and are often considered particularly alluring.

Face: *Mianzi* (面子), generally translated as "face," is an important concept in Chinese society. It is a metaphor for a person's reputation and can be extended to further descriptive metaphors. For example, "having face" refers to having a good reputation and "losing face" refers to having one's reputation hurt. Meanwhile, "giving face" means deferring to someone else to help improve their reputation, while "not wanting face" implies that a person is acting so poorly/shamelessly that they clearly don't care about their reputation at all. "Thin face" refers to someone easily embarrassed or prone to offense at perceived slights. Conversely, "thick face" refers to someone not easily embarrassed and immune to insults.

Fae: Fae (妖 / yao), refers to natural creatures such as animals, plants, or even inanimate objects, who over time absorb spiritual energy and gain spiritual awareness to cultivate a human

form. They are sometimes referred to as "demons" or "monsters," though they are not inherently evil. In *Husky*, faewolves (妖狼) are a rare and expensive breed of wolf. Similarly, the feathered tribe are beings who are half-immortal (仙) and half-fae.

The Five Elements: Also known as the *wuxing* (五行 / "Five Phases") in Chinese philosophy: fire, water, wood, metal, earth. Each element corresponds to a planet: Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn, respectively. In *Husky*, cultivators' spiritual cores correspond with one or two elements; for example, Chu Wanning's elements are metal and wood.

Fire (火 / huo)

Water (水 / shui)

Wood (木 / mu)

Metal (金 / jin)

Earth (土 / tu)

Haitang: The *haitang* tree (海棠花), also known as crab apple or Chinese flowering apple, is endemic to China. The recurring motif for Chu Wanning is specifically the *xifu haitang* variety. In flower language, haitang symbolizes unrequited love.

Inedia: A common ability that allows an immortal to survive without mortal food or sleep by sustaining themselves on purer forms of energy based on Daoist fasting. Depending on the setting, immortals who have achieved inedia may be unable to tolerate mortal food, or they may be able to choose to eat when desired. The cultivation taught by Sisheng Peak notably does not rely on this practice.

Jade: Jade is a culturally and spiritually important mineral in China. Its durability, beauty, and the ease with which it can be utilized for crafting decorative and functional pieces alike has made it widely beloved since ancient times. The word might evoke green jade (the mineral jadeite), but Chinese texts are often referring to white jade (the mineral nephrite), as when a person's skin is described as "the color of jade."

Jianghu: A staple of wuxia, the jianghu (江湖 / "rivers and lakes") describes an underground society of martial artists, monks, rogues, artisans, and merchants who settle disputes between themselves per their own moral codes.

Lotus: This flower symbolizes purity of the heart and mind, as lotuses rise untainted from the muddy waters they grow in. It also signifies the holy seat of the Buddha.

Measurements: The "miles" and "inches" in *Husky* refer not to imperial measurement units, but to the Chinese measurement units, which have varied over time. In modern times, one Chinese mile (里 / *li*) is approximately a half-kilometer, one Chinese foot (尺 / *cun*) is approximately one-third of a meter, and one Chinese inch (寸 / *chi*) is one tenth of a Chinese foot.

Meridians: The means by which qi travels through the body, like a magical bloodstream. Medical and combat techniques that focus on redirecting, manipulating, or halting qi circulation focus on targeting the meridians at specific points on the body, known as acupoints. Techniques that can manipulate or block qi prevent a cultivator from using magical techniques until the qi block is lifted.

Moe: A Japanese term referring to cuteness or vulnerability in a character that evokes a protective feeling from the reader. Originally applied largely to female characters, the term has since seen expanded use.

Mythical Figures: Several entities from Chinese mythology make an appearance in the world of *Husky*, including:

AZURE DRAGON: The Azure Dragon (苍龙 / canglong, or 青龙 / qinglong) is one of four major creatures in Chinese astronomy, representing the cardinal direction East, the element of wood, and the season of spring.

EBON TORTOISE: The Ebon Tortoise (玄武 / xuanwu) is one of four major creatures in Chinese astronomy, representing the cardinal direction North, the element of water, and the season of winter. It is usually depicted as a tortoise entwined with a serpent.

FLAME EMPEROR: A mythological figure said to have ruled over China in ancient times. His name is attributed to his invention of slash-and-burn agriculture. There is some debate over whether the Flame Emperor is the same being as Shennong, the inventor of agriculture, or a descendant.

FUXI: Emperor of the heavens, sometimes directly called Heavenly Emperor Fuxi. A figure associated with Chinese creation mythology.

GUN: A giant ferocious fish that appears in folklore.

JIAO DRAGON: A type of dragon in Chinese mythology, often said to be aquatic or river-dwelling, and able to control rain and floods.

NEZHA: A boy with supernatural powers in Buddhist and Daoist traditions, and a symbol of filial piety. After sacrificing his original body to save his parents, he was resurrected by his teacher in a body made of lotus roots.

NÜWA: A goddess in Chinese mythology, said to have been the one who created humanity by shaping the first humans out of clay. A prominent figure in Chinese mythology, even outside creation myths.

PHOENIX: Fenghuang (凤凰 / "phoenix"), a legendary bird said to only appear in times of peace and to flee when a ruler is corrupt. They are heavily associated with femininity, the empress, and happy marriages.

VERMILION BIRD: The Vermilion Bird (朱雀上神) is one of four mythical beasts in Chinese constellations, representing the cardinal direction South, the element of fire, and the season of summer.

YANLUO: King of hell or the supreme judge of the underworld. His role in the underworld is to pass judgment on the dead, sending souls on to their next life depending on the karma they accrued from their last one.

Paper Money: Imitation money made from decorated sheets of paper burned as a traditional offering to the dead.

Pills and Elixirs: Magic medicines that can heal wounds, improve cultivation, extend life, etc. In Chinese culture, these medicines are usually delivered in pill form, and the pills are created in special kilns.

Pleasure House: Courtesans at these establishments provided entertainment of many types, ranging from song and dance to more intimate pleasures.

Qi: *Qi* (气) is the energy in all living things. There is both righteous qi and evil or poisonous qi.

Cultivators strive to cultivate qi by absorbing it from the natural world and refining it within themselves to improve their cultivation

base. A cultivation base refers to the amount of qi a cultivator possesses or is able to possess. In xianxia, natural locations such as caves, mountains, or other secluded places with beautiful scenery are often rich in qi, and practicing there can allow a cultivator to make rapid progress in their cultivation.

Cultivators and other qi manipulators can utilize their life force in a variety of ways, including imbuing objects with it to transform them into lethal weapons, or sending out blasts of energy to do damage. Cultivators also refine their senses beyond normal human levels. For instance, they may cast out their spiritual sense to gain total awareness of everything in a region around them or to sense potential danger.

Qi Circulation: The metabolic cycle of qi in the body, where it flows from the dantian to the meridians and back. This cycle purifies and refines qi, and good circulation is essential to cultivation. In xianxia, qi can be transferred from one person to another through physical contact, and it can heal someone who is wounded if the donor is trained in the art.

Qi Deviation: A qi deviation (走火入魔 / "to catch fire and enter demonhood") occurs when one's cultivation base becomes unstable. Common causes include an unstable emotional state and/or strong negative emotions, practicing cultivation methods incorrectly, reckless use of forbidden or high-level arts, or succumbing to the influence of demons and evil spirits. When qi deviation arises from mental or emotional causes, the person is often said to have succumbed to their inner demons or "heart demons" (心魔).

Symptoms of qi deviation in fiction include panic, paranoia, sensory hallucinations, and death, whether by the qi deviation itself causing irreparable damage to the body or as a result of its symptoms—such as leaping to one's death to escape a hallucination.

Common fictional treatments for qi deviation include relaxation (voluntary or forced by an external party), massage, meditation, or qi transfer from another individual.

Qiankun Pouch: (乾坤囊/ "universe pouch") A pouch containing an extradimensional space within it, capable of holding more than the physical exterior dimensions of the pouch would suggest.

Qinggong: Qinggong (轻功) is a cultivator's ability to move swiftly through the air as if on the wind.

Red Thread of Fate: The red thread imagery originates in legend and has become a Chinese symbol for fated love. An invisible red thread is said to be tied around the limb or finger of the two individuals destined to fall in love, forever linking them.

Reigning Years: Chinese emperors took to naming the eras of their reign for the purpose of tracking historical records. The names often reflected political agendas or the current reality of the socioeconomic landscape.

Shidi, Shixiong, Shizun, etc: Chinese titles and terms used to indicate a person's role or rank in relation to the speaker. Because of the robust nature of this naming system, and a lack of nuance in translating many to English, the original titles have been maintained. *(See Name Guide for more information)*

Silk-tree Flowers: Silk-tree flowers (合欢花 / hehuan hua, "flowers of joyous union") symbolize love and harmonious union, as alluded to in their Chinese name.

Soul-Calling Lantern: In the world of *Husky*, soul-calling lanterns (引魂灯) are lanterns embroidered with complex spell patterns, which can only be lit and maintained using spiritual energy. A lit lantern can illuminate the human soul of a person willing to return and will hold the human soul within to be brought back and reunited with the other immortal souls and corporeal spirits. If the wielder of the lantern were to give up or have second thoughts, the human soul would be devoured.

Spiritual core: A spiritual core (灵丹**/**灵核) is the foundation of a cultivator's power. It is typically formed only after ten years of hard work and study.

Spiritual Root: In *Husky,* spiritual roots (灵根) are associated with a cultivator's innate talent and elemental affinities. Not every cultivator possesses spiritual roots.

Three Immortal Souls and Seven Corporeal Spirits: Hun (魂) and po (魄) are two types of souls in Chinese philosophy and religion. Hun are immortal souls which represent the spirit and intellect, and leave the body after death. Po are corporeal spirits or mortal forms which remain with the body of the deceased. Each soul governs different aspects of a person's being, ranging from consciousness and memory, to physical function and sensation. Different traditions claim there are different numbers of each, but three hun and seven po (三魂七魄) are common in Daoism.

The Three Realms: Traditionally, the universe is divided into three realms: the **heavenly realm**, the **mortal realm**, and the **ghost realm**. The heavenly realm refers to the heavens and realm of the gods, where gods reside and rule; the mortal realm refers to

the human world; and the ghost realm refers to the realm of the dead.

Vinegar: To say someone is drinking vinegar or tasting vinegar means that they're having jealous or bitter feelings. Generally used for a love interest growing jealous while watching the main character receive the attention of a rival suitor.

Wheel of Reincarnation: In Buddhism, reincarnation is part of the soul's continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, known as Samsara: one's karma accumulated through the course of their life determines their circumstances in the next life. The Wheel of Reincarnation (六道轮回), translated literally as "Six Realms of Reincarnation," which souls enter after death, is often represented as having six sections, or realms. Each one represents a different "realm," or state of being, a person may attain depending on their karma: the realm of gods, asura, humans, animals, ghosts, and demons.

White Moonlight: A romantic trope referring to a distant romantic paragon who is cherished in memory long after that person is gone. Like the moon in the sky, the memory is always present, perfect and unchanging, but like the pale light by one's bedside, it is an incorporeal shine that can only be admired, not touched. The object of admiration is out of reach, and the admiration is functionally one-way.

Willow Tree: Willow trees in Chinese culture have a plethora of meanings, including friendship, longing, femininity, and more. The Chinese word for willow (柳) is a homonym for the word "stay," which has led to it being featured in many poems and stories as a symbol of farewell and a reluctance to part.

Yin Energy and Yang Energy: Yin and yang is a concept in Chinese philosophy which describes the complementary interdependence of opposite/contrary forces. It can be applied to all forms of change and differences. Yang represents the sun, masculinity, and the living, while yin represents the shadows, femininity, and the dead, including spirits and ghosts. In fiction, imbalances between yin and yang energy may do serious harm to the body or act as the driving force for malevolent spirits seeking to replenish themselves of whichever energy they lack.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rou Bao Bu Chi Rou ("Meatbun Doesn't Eat Meat") was a disciple of Sisheng Peak under the Tanlang Elder and the official chronicler of daily life at Wushan Palace. Unable to deal[redacted] after Taxian-jun's suicide, Meatbun took Madam Wang's orange cat, Cai Bao ("Veggiebun"), and fled. Thereafter Meatbun traveled the world to see the sights, making ends meet by writing down all manner of secrets and little-known anecdotes of the cultivation world—which Meatbun had gathered during travel—and selling them on the street side.

NOTABLE WORKS:

"God-Knows-What Rankings"
Top of the Cultivation World Best-Sellers List for ten years straight.

"The Red Lotus Pavilion Decameron"
Banned by Sisheng Peak Sect Leader Xue and Yuheng Elder Chu Wanning; no longer available for sale.

[redacted]
No longer available for sale due to complaints filed by Yuheng Elder Chu Wanning.

[redacted]
2019 winner of the Ghost Realm's Annual Fuxi-Roasting Writing Contest

"Twenty Years on the Forbes Cultivation World's Billionaires Ranking and Still Going Strong: A Biography of Jiang Xi"
[redacted]

[redacted]
Orig[redacted]

Dumb

"The Husky & His White Cat Shizun"
Also being sold in another world.

...and others to come. Please look forward to them.

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FROM THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE HUSKY AND HIS WHITE CAT SHIZUN

ROU BAO BU CHI ROU

Wealthy and handsome, yet mentally unstable—He Yu has returned home from overseas with one goal in mind: to win the heart of Xie Xue, the girl of his dreams. However, in his time away, he has nursed more than unrequited feelings. He must confront his long-held grudge against Xie Xue's overprotective brother, Xie Qingcheng, who doesn't think He Yu capable of love.

But history is not easily rewritten. As He Yu's former doctor, Xie Qingcheng is the only person in the world who truly understands He Yu's volatile mental state. When the two are involved in an explosive incident that exposes a dark secret, Xie Qingcheng's suspicions about He Yu are confirmed. Now, He Yu must confront his own demons...including his dark obsession with Xie Qingcheng.

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Footnotes

Chapter 217: The Nightmare Begins

[1] From The Peony Pavilion, an opera by the Ming dynasty playwright Tang Xianzu.

[2] From The Jade Hairpin, an opera by the Ming dynasty playwright Gao Lian.

Chapter 218: But You've Returned

[3] Lines adapted from Qin Guan's "Jiangchengzi: Westside Willow Branches Adrift in Gentle Spring." The characters for "not return" are the same as those used for "Bugui."

Point of No Return

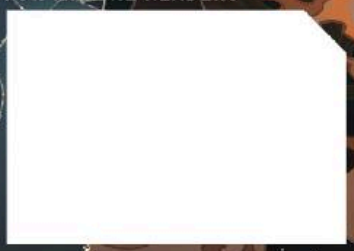
After failing in their quest to capture the treacherous Xu Shuanglin, Mo Ran and Chu Wanning pursue him to the impenetrable Mount Jiao, accompanied by the noble Nangong Si and the leaders of the cultivation realm's great sects.

There, they find the ancestral tomb of Rufeng Sect transformed into a macabre spectacle under the influence of Xu Shuanglin's forbidden magic. And their adversary's work is not done: as Sisheng Peak and their allies fight their way to the top of the mountain, Xu Shuanglin resorts to a powerful and mysterious magic that threatens to tear their world asunder.

As the combined forces of the cultivation world race to stop Xu Shuanglin, Mo Ran must finally confront the past he's been running from since his rebirth. Will Mo Ran lose everything he has gained in this life—including Chu Wanning?

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